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## **Transcultural Narratives and Religious Symbols in Mass Media—*The Fountain* by Darren Aronofsky (2006)**

**Abstract:** Researchers have identified many transcultural elements in mass media, especially in popular films. According to the *Matrix* trilogy director Lilly Wachowski, science fiction, dystopian and fantasy narratives, compared to other mass media, often have “fabulous subtext”. The use of symbols in mass media can be understood through several theories of communication: symbols are an important segment of every communicative process according to Burkart (2002); Noam Chomsky’s concept of generative grammar suggests that all humans have equal capacity for the development of language, which results in similarities among various cultural narratives and symbols. The results of research by Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss show that similar topics and stories occur worldwide, enabling intercultural and interreligious dialogues. The same premise can be applied to films. Film is a mass medium which includes references to different cultures and religions. Films by Darren Aronofsky are especially filled with religious subtext (Davidowicz, 2016). This paper aims to systematically identify and compare religious and transcultural elements by analyzing narratives and visual symbols of the film *The Fountain* (2006). The methods used include a narratological analysis according to Maša Grdešić (2015) as well as a content analysis of signs and symbols in the film. The method is interdisciplinary, based on communication sciences for the analysis of messages and signs, while also including an approach of cultural and religious studies. The paper has a pragmatic implication for communication sciences. It indicates how film as a mass medium unites different cultural contents and facilitates intercultural and transcultural communication.

**Keywords:** film analysis; religious symbols in mass media; transcultural narratives in mass media.

### **Introduction**

According to the *Matrix* trilogy director Lilly Wachowski, science fiction, dystopian and fantasy narratives, compared to other mass media, often have “fabulous subtext.”<sup>1</sup> At the level of meaning literal, fantasy and science fiction films conventionally revolve around action-oriented plots. However, on a connotative level, such films

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<sup>1</sup> Kayla Cobb, “Here’s Why Lilly Wachowski (Probably) Won’t Be Part of ‘The Matrix 4,’” *Decider*, 2019, <https://decider.com/2019/08/21/the-matrix-4-lilly-wachowski/>.

are often filled with religious elements. The genres of science fiction, dystopia and fantasy frequently combine elements from different cultures and religions.

Researchers have identified many transcultural elements in mass media, especially in popular film. Klaus Davidowicz<sup>2</sup> explores aspects of the Jewish religion and culture in popular film, while also considering influences of other cultures in mass media. His work is the starting point for this paper. Davidowicz identified various transcultural influences in *The Fountain* by Darren Aronofsky (2006). The film uses elements from Jewish and Christian, as well as Buddhist, Hindu, Mayan and Taoist theology and mythology.<sup>3</sup> It also contains elements of the New Age and Zoroastrianism.<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to systematically identify and compare the religious and transcultural elements in *The Fountain* by Darren Aronofsky (2006) through an analysis of its narratives and visual symbols.

Previous research<sup>5</sup> has been done on identifying particular religious and cultural elements in *The Fountain*. However, no study has systematically analyzed multiple signs and symbols therein, approaching them from a theoretical perspective of intercultural and transcultural communication.

## Methodology

The film is analyzed as a mass medium that conveys certain types of transcultural and religious messages to viewers. The aim is not to interpret the film as a work of art, nor to focus on its aesthetic qualities. The goal of this paper is to analyze the plot (a narratological approach) as well as signs and symbols. The method is interdisciplinary, based on communication sciences for an objective analysis of messages and signs according to visual and narrative cues of mass media contents, while also including an interpretative approach of cultural and religious studies. A narratological approach is applied according to Grdešić (2015), while signs and symbols are analyzed using the methods of Vladimir Propp, Claude Levi-Strauss and Noam Chomsky.

Therefore, film theory and media aesthetics do not constitute the primary focus of this paper. Rather, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates theories of communication sciences with cultural and religious studies in order to understand how mass media can produce and circulate transcultural meanings. Methodologically, the analysis combines narratological, descriptive, and explanatory approaches to the film's content.

The topic is socially relevant, as the paper has a pragmatic implication for communication sciences. It indicates how film as a mass medium can be used to unite different cultural contents and facilitate intercultural and transcultural communication.

<sup>2</sup> Klaus S. Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Atkinson, "The Fountain," *Sight & Sound* 17, no. 3 (2007): 56.

<sup>4</sup> Annamária Hodosy, "Aronofsky's Two Visions of the Ecological Fall," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 29, no. 1 (2023): 78–102.

<sup>5</sup> Atkinson, "The Fountain," 56.

## Theoretical approach

The unification of various cultural backgrounds in mass media can be understood through several theories of communication. The two fundamental aspects are *medium* and *message*. Language is the most important primary *medium*, while *message* relates to the content exchanged by communication partners.<sup>6</sup>

Theories of communication show that symbols and narratives, which represent certain meanings, generated by people from different cultures worldwide may be similar. Therefore, it is possible to achieve meaningful communication between various cultures.<sup>7</sup> One of the most important theories related to researching language as a *medium* is Noam Chomsky's generative grammar theory. Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss made significant contributions to the study of similarities of messages in narratives worldwide.

Noam Chomsky's concept of generative grammar explains that all humans have equal capacities for the development of language, which reflects on their abilities to create stories and utilize certain symbols to convey meanings.<sup>8</sup> So it is not surprising that members of individual cultures speaking different languages may use similar symbols in their myths and narratives. This is particularly visible in mass media products such as films.

Communication is defined as an exchange of meaning,<sup>9</sup> and religious symbols and narratives are especially useful for the creation of particular shared meanings among various cultures. Film is a particular medium because it uses visual as well as verbal language, so the content conveyed through visual aspects may differ from the narrative itself.<sup>10</sup> Thus film is a particularly useful medium for connecting different cultures and societies.

Apart from visual aspects, film as a medium utilizes a basic narrative structure, similar to written texts, so its contents can be analyzed through systematic myth analysis. Numerous studies have been done to demonstrate that Hollywood films repeatedly utilize the same type of narrative. This is consistent with Propp's research results, who had analyzed societal codes within certain cultural narratives.<sup>11</sup> Lévi-Strauss uses the methods of social sciences to analyze narratives originating from different societies. His findings suggest that similar oppositions and central conflicts recur among various cultures.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Burkart, *Kommunikationswissenschaft: Grundlagen und Problemfelder; Umriss einer interdisziplinären Sozialwissenschaft* (Böhlau, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Burkart, *Kommunikationswissenschaft*.

<sup>8</sup> Noam Chomsky, Ángel J. Gallego and Dennis Ott, "Generative Grammar and the Faculty of Language: Insights, Questions, and Challenges," *Catalan Journal of Linguistics*, Special Issue (2019): 229–61.

<sup>9</sup> Burkart, *Kommunikationswissenschaft*.

<sup>10</sup> Chomsky, Gallego, and Ott, "Generative Grammar and the Faculty of Language: Insights, Questions, and Challenges," 229.

<sup>11</sup> John L. Fell, "Vladimir Propp in Hollywood," *Film Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1977): 19–28.

<sup>12</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Strukturalna antropologija* 2 (Školska knjiga, 1988).

Mass media narratives can be deduced to certain functions and elements which are common in each society, regardless of their culture and origin. The only differences are to be found in underlying ethical systems, as all societies have certain systems of norms and values. In particular systems, the same symbols may be used in slightly different ways. According to Levi-Strauss, it is important to analyze the exact symbol utilization in these narratives in order to systematically decode the underlying message.<sup>13</sup>

Each use of symbols conveys a certain message connected to underlying norms and values of particular societies. Due to these common symbols and narratives, communication can be achieved across different cultures and languages. The structures of each society arise from the symbolic structures of the collective unconscious, but also vice versa, because changes in a society change the collective unconscious structures.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is important to analyze film content using methods that combine communication sciences with cultural and religious studies.

### **Narratological approach: plot structure in *The Fountain***

*The Fountain* has three narratives which take place in different dimensions of time and space but features the same two characters—Tom (Hugh Jackman) and Isabella (Rachel Weisz). Therefore consciousness, represented in the Male/Female pair, is set in three dimensions of time and space. This fragmentation resembles the condition of Adam and Eve after consuming from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.<sup>15</sup> A certain degree of duality between the Male and the Female principle exists in Judeo-Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Dualism is also important for Zoroastrianism, while Hinduism and Buddhism do not endorse this concept.<sup>17</sup> It is understood through the lens of a unique ability of human transcendence over nature.<sup>18</sup> In many traditions, communication between the Male and the Female is equivalent to communication between the soul and the body, the spiritual and the material.<sup>19</sup> Relations between the characters in the film display traditional dynamics between the Male and the Female, wherein the Male protects the border/territory/body of the Female; the Male is more transcendent, and the Female is more immanent.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Strukturalna antropologija* 2, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Strukturalna antropologija* 2, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Rodolfo Piskorski, "Vicious Circles: Intersections of Gender and Species in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*," *Humanimalia* 5, no. 1 (2013): 80–103.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Katz, "Against the Inevitability of Anthropocentrism," in *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, ed. Eric Katz, Andrew Light and David Rothenberg (MIT Press, 2000), 17–42.

<sup>17</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (University of Georgia Press, 1996), 3–14.

<sup>18</sup> Hodosy, "Aronofsky's Two Visions of the Ecological Fall," 81.

<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (Routledge, 2004), 388–99.

<sup>20</sup> Piskorski, "Vicious Circles: Intersections of Gender and Species in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*."

The first narrative is set in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Christian Spain. The protagonist is a knight who searches for the Tree of Life in the name of his queen. Ironically, his quest to find the lost Garden of Eden takes him to the ancient Mayan temples of Central America (and not to the Middle East, as would be logical). So, the ancient Mayan culture is obviously not seen as something separate from the Christian culture (dominant in the first narrative). In the present day (the 21<sup>st</sup> century), Tom is a rational scientist, functioning again in a dominantly Christian society, who searches for the cure to heal his beloved Isabella. His perspective is purely logical and not religious. In the 26<sup>th</sup> century, Tom is completely transcendent, existing in a kind of bubble, a microcosm somewhere in deep space. The past is thus connotated by Christianity, the present by science as the currently dominant worldview, and the future by Buddhist imagery. So Judeo-Christianity, Buddhism, Mayanism and even Science as a present-day non-religious paradigm coexist in various realities of the film. They are not clearly separated from each other. According to the director Darren Aronofsky, the purpose of the film is to show that “there’s a spiritual truth that connects all religions, a shelf underneath them.”<sup>21</sup> This singular spiritual truth converges with scientific pursuit, so the message of the film points towards overall unity of Creation, as suggested by the biblical quote used in the beginning.

The concept of Trinity is a common intercultural and interreligious symbol. Buddhism endorses the “*Trikaya*” doctrine of the Buddha being divided into three aspects, while Hinduism groups its three supreme deities into “*Trimurti*.” Their functions are creation, preservation and destruction of the world.<sup>22</sup> The three narratives in the film can be seen as the 16<sup>th</sup>-century story signifying creation, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century story signifying preservation and the 26<sup>th</sup>-century story as destruction—after which the cycle is repeated. In Jewish theosophy, the Trinity consists of the Crown (*Keter*), Beauty (*Tiferet*) and Kingdom (*Malchut*).<sup>23</sup> The Crown may be interpreted as the past, Beauty as the present (signifying the Male principle) and Kingdom (signifying the Female principle) as the future,<sup>24</sup> which suggests a correlation to the three narratives as they are presented in *The Fountain*.

The three narratives in *The Fountain* can be understood through this concept of Trinity. The past indicates the Crown (*Keter*) because Isabella is literally the queen of Spain. The second story points to Beauty (*Tiferet*), as she just wants to enjoy the simple beauty of life; she is completely immersed in the present-day reality, disregarding the past and the future. The third narrative related to Kingdom (*Malchut*) tells a story about the birth of the universe.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Guillen, “The Fountain—Roundtable Interview With Darren Aronofsky,” *Screen Anarchy* (November 15, 2006), <https://www.google.com/amp/s/screenanarchy.com/amp/2006/11/the-fountainroundtable-interview-with-darren-aronofsky.html>

<sup>22</sup> Jan Gonda, “The Hindu Trinity,” *Anthropos* 1, no. 2 (1968): 212–26.

<sup>23</sup> Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino*.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Riffard, “Sefirah, sefirot,” in *Rječnik ezoterizma*, ed. Pierre Riffard, trans. Radmila Zdjelar (August Cesarec, 1989), 343–44.

The concept of Trinity in Christianity also has a temporal aspect—the Father as the creator of the world, the Son as the Word incarnate set in a particular time and space, and the Holy Spirit as related to the eschatological future.<sup>25</sup> However, the three stories in the film are not united in the sense of Christian Trinity. The Trinity in the film is violated by the cyclical nature of time, so the ultimate goal can never be reached. The scenes are edited so that the plots seem to intertwine—action in one reality seemingly influences another reality—even though each one had already ended before the next one started (the 16<sup>th</sup> century ends before the 21<sup>st</sup> century starts; the 21<sup>st</sup> century ends before the 26<sup>th</sup> century starts).

The narratives are visually similar and the plots resemble each other. The quest for the Tree in the 16<sup>th</sup> century turns into a quest for the cure for an illness. The protagonists evolve into less physical and more spiritual beings, as implied with Tom's appearance similar to that of a Buddhist monk in the 26<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, the passage of time is implied, but there is no real ending, as the protagonist's body, uniting with the star Xibalba, gives birth to another version of the universe in a cyclical manner.

Visually, the film is dominated by circular shapes. Lights and shadows of individual scenes often portray a full circle.<sup>26</sup> A cyclical concept of time belongs to the Hindu-Buddhist cultural context. This example shows the method of intertwining different religions and cultural traditions. While the characters may be based on the Judeo-Christian tradition (the protagonists connotating the biblical Adam and Eve, banished from the Garden of Eden), the universe in which the plot takes place is modeled on the Hindu-Buddhist understanding of time as repeating itself in cycles.

The three narratives are separated by five centuries from each other, they unfold simultaneously, as though they constitute a unified whole (a trinity). The fact that each narrative ends five hundred years before the next one starts has a symbolic meaning. Exactly five hundred years is the distance from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to the Tree of Life within the Garden of Eden, according to Jewish theosophy.<sup>27</sup> After five hundred years, Tom becomes closer to Bina (the sphere of Reason) through actual physical knowledge. As a scientist, he learns a lot about life. After two five hundred years, he ultimately reaches Hochma (Wisdom), represented as a star, in Mayan mythology known as Xibalba, where the creation of the universe takes place. In Judaism, the number five hundred represents Understanding, and one thousand represents Wisdom.<sup>28</sup> In the film, Tom from the 16<sup>th</sup> century travels five hundred years into the future, where he as a scientist reaches Bina (Reason), and then another five hundred years in the future, where he finally reaches Hochma (Wisdom).

<sup>25</sup> Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Piskorski, "Vicious Circles: Intersections of Gender and Species in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*," 83.

<sup>27</sup> "The Tree of Life (...) extends for a journey of 500 years and all the waters of Creation part underneath it" (*Zohar*, Beresheet A 45, 425).

<sup>28</sup> "500 is a number of Bina, and 1000 is a number of Hochma" (*Zohar*, Acharei Mot 31, 191).

## Symbolic significance of the Tree

The mystical Tree is the central visual and thematic element of the film. Judeo-Christianity, Hindu-Buddhism, Mayanism and Zoroastrianism all have mythologies connected to the symbol of the Tree.<sup>29</sup> The Tree in religious symbology is usually linked to the ideas of life, knowledge and the ever-renewing cosmos.<sup>30</sup> In the Hindu-Buddhist mythology, the roots, the trunk and the branches of the Tree of Enlightenment symbolize the three supreme Hindu deities.

In Judeo-Christianity, the Tree of Life is contrasted with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.<sup>31</sup> The Tree of Life is composed of ten spheres (Sefirot)<sup>32</sup> which connect heaven and earth. The Tree is a medium of communication between different dimensions, Male and Female, in various traditions.<sup>33</sup> In India, the Tree symbolizes the universal substance; in ancient Greece, it signifies primordial matter; in Chinese philosophy, it represents one of the five elements; in Norse and Celtic mythology, the Tree stands for knowledge. “The general symbolism of the tree is constant: the tree hides superhuman wisdom and knowledge.”<sup>34</sup>

The Tree is a symbol of life in various societies “because it is in constant development and ascent towards the sky.”<sup>35</sup> The tree represents at the same time the linear ascent towards the sky and the cyclical character of cosmic evolution. It stands for cyclical development in the universe; especially deciduous trees that shed their leaves and gain them again every year. This very cyclicity is of crucial importance in the film.

In different religious traditions, the Tree connects the three levels of the universe: the underworld, the surface and the sky, as well as all the elements. “Water flows through its sap, the earth enters its body through its roots, the air nourishes its leaves, and fire breaks out when we touch it.”<sup>36</sup> Many cultures consider the Tree a medium of communication between the three levels of the worlds. Judeo-Christianity believes that the Tree of Life is the only remedy for the first humans Adam and Eve after their consumption from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which had brought them death.<sup>37</sup> “The Tree of Life is exactly in the middle of the Garden and receives all

<sup>29</sup> Alain Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” in *Rječnik simbola: Mitovi, snovi, običaji, geste, oblici, likovi, boje, brojevi*, ed. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (Matica hrvatska, 1989), 626–29.

<sup>30</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Payot, 1964).

<sup>31</sup> Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” 626–29.

<sup>32</sup> The Tree of Life consists of ten Sefirot: Keter (Crown—principle), Hochma (Wisdom—word), Bina (Reason/Intellect—femininity), Chesed (Love/Mercy—life), Gevura (Strength/Discipline—death), Tiferet (Beauty—emotions), Netzah (Victory—balance), Hod (Glory—law), Yesod (Foundation—birth), Malkhut (Kingdom—harmony). (Pierre Riffard, “Sefirah, sefirot,” in *Rječnik ezoterizma*, ed. Pierre Riffard, trans. Radmila Zdjelar (August Cesarec, 1989), 343–344).

<sup>33</sup> Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” 626–29.

<sup>34</sup> Françoise Le Roux and Christian-J. Guyonvarc’h, “Drvo,” in *Rječnik simbola: Mitovi, snovi, običaji, geste, oblici, likovi, boje, brojevi*, ed. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (Matica hrvatska, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” 626–29.

<sup>36</sup> Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” 626–29.

<sup>37</sup> Klaus S. Davidowicz, *Die Kabbala: Eine Einführung in die Welt der jüdischen Mystik und Magie* (Böhlau Verlag, 2009).

the waters of Creation.”<sup>38</sup> In Jewish symbolism, the Tree of Life is the Male principle (Zeir Anpin), the garden is the Female principle (Malchut), Eden is Wisdom (Hochmah), the river is Brain (Mochin) and the fountain is Reason (Bina).<sup>39</sup> “The Tree has roots in Bina and its fruits are the souls of the righteous.”<sup>40</sup> This suggests that the Tree symbolically represents the souls that have to be born in the world (Malchut) and become righteous people. Tom in the film, for example, wants to help people heal in his quest for the cure, and Isabella wants to find the Tree of Life and make it once again accessible, and so nullify Adam and Eve’s biblical error.

### Dualism of corporeality and transcendence

The three narratives within *The Fountain* are intertwined, mutually affecting each other. The plots visually merge into one another. The universe from the 26<sup>th</sup> century turns into a motif in the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which then again merges into the present day. These visual cues suggest that the characters are going through reincarnation (known as Gilgul in Judaism).

Tom is a Spanish conquistador in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a scientist in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century USA and a space traveler in the 26<sup>th</sup>-century universe. He is permanently on the quest for eternal life. Isabella is the Spanish queen in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Tom’s beloved woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the Tree/Mayan star Xibalba in the 26<sup>th</sup> century. Her societal position differs significantly. In the first narrative, she is the omnipotent queen of Spain. In the second narrative, her role diminishes as she becomes solely a “plot device” to motivate the protagonist in his scientific quest for the cure. In the third narrative, she is not even a person, but either the Tree or the star Xibalba. The evolution of the Male is diametrically opposite—in the first story, he is only a servant to the queen; in the second, he is a distinguished scientist on a quest for the cure of an illness; in the third story he becomes a Nietzschean Übermensch.<sup>41</sup>

Visually, Isabella is portrayed in soft white and silver nuances, while the colors surrounding her are usually golden (in the case of the star Xibalba) or red (the inquisitor’s clothing). Red and gold signify the sphere of Discipline (Gevura), whereas white/silver implies Loving-kindness (Chesed).<sup>42</sup> The inquisitor says that “[a]ll bodies are prisons for our souls. Our skin and blood, the iron bars of confinement (...) death frees every soul.” In Christianity, bodily pain is considered a road to salvation by reproducing Jesus’ suffering.<sup>43</sup> The same inquisitor is shown whipping himself due to his religious beliefs. Asceticism and the nullification of the self are necessary steps

<sup>38</sup> Zohar. *The First Unabridged Translation with the Sulam Commentary*, trans. Michael Berg (Kabbalah Centre International, 2016), Beresheet A 45, 425.

<sup>39</sup> Zohar, Tazria 22, 160.

<sup>40</sup> Zohar, Beresheet B 4, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Paolo D’Iorio, “The Eternal Return: Genesis and Interpretation,” *Lexicon Philosophicum: International Journal for the History of Texts and Ideas* 2 (2014): 41–96.

<sup>42</sup> Zohar, Tazria 31, 163.

<sup>43</sup> Tarja Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky* (Berghahn Books, 2015), 82.

toward freeing oneself from the physical world in Buddhism.<sup>44</sup> In the beginning (the 16<sup>th</sup> century), both characters are physically strong, whereas in each subsequent story they drift apart from the material world.

The visuals of the film are dark, with very few light sources. Light is either golden (the stars, the lights in the church and the hospital) or silver, shining from above. Wisdom is compared to light in the Bible: “Wisdom lights up a person’s face.”<sup>45</sup> Isabella loves to spend time walking and sitting in the snow, not feeling cold, as her disease is progressing. The element of snow is mentioned in the biblical book of Isaiah: “Be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow-white.”<sup>46</sup> In biblical tradition, snow signifies purification not only of individuals but also the world, allowing the protagonists to embark on a new beginning after planting a seed in the ground, beneath the snow.

### Most important symbols in the film

The film starts with a biblical quote: “Humankind was driven out; and east of the Garden of Eden were stationed the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.”<sup>47</sup> At the beginning of the film, there is a guard at the entrance of the Mayan temple, resembling an angel (Cherub) who guards the entrance to the Garden of Eden. The sword is a symbol of harsh judgment in Judaism.<sup>48</sup>

The film clearly refers to the Mayan creation myth of the First Father who sacrificed himself in order to create the Universe.<sup>49</sup> Tom hears this story from a museum guide, but it annoys him, as he is looking for a more pragmatical solution to the problem. On the other hand, Isabella likes this Mayan myth and its spiritual connotations.<sup>50</sup>

A creamy white liquid flows from the mystical Tree once it is stabbed with the “revolving sword.” After consuming it in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Tom plants the tree in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, he heals his wound, having been stabbed by the guardian of the sword, with this creamy foam. “Red flesh comes from the side of Discipline (Gevurah), whereas white skin comes from Loving-kindness (Chesed).”<sup>51</sup> The white liquid on a red flesh wound signifies the merging of the Male and the Female principle. In the 26<sup>th</sup> century, there is no more foam, only light coming from the star Xibalba.

<sup>44</sup> Nguyen Quy Hoang, “The Doctrine of Not-Self (Anattā) in Early Buddhism,” *International Review of Social Research* 9, no. 1 (2019): 18–27; Kiseong Shin, *The Concept of Self in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity and Its Implication for Interfaith Relations* (Wipf and Stock, 2017); Lynn A. Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1979).

<sup>45</sup> *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, trans. Jewish Publication Society (Jewish Publication Society, 1985), Ecclesiastes 8:1, <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Tanakh>.

<sup>46</sup> *Tanakh*, Isaiah 1:18.

<sup>47</sup> *Tanakh*, Genesis 3:24.

<sup>48</sup> *Zohar*, Acharei Mot 22, 160.

<sup>49</sup> Evrim Ersoz Koc, “The Road to Awe: Legitimizing the Anomy of Death in Darren Aronofsky’s *The Fountain*,” in *Perspectives on the Sublime in American Cultural Studies* (Dokuz Eylül University, 2018), 127–41.

<sup>50</sup> Koc, “The Road to Awe,” 134.

<sup>51</sup> *Zohar*, Beresheet A 27, 281.

According to Davidowicz,<sup>52</sup> the director intentionally used *the fountain* as a Kabbalistic symbol for Wisdom (Hochmah), envisioned as a water source from which four rivers flow. In the Kabbalistic book of *Zohar*, the universe is based on the opposition between the Male and the Female principle. The Male principle is Wisdom (Hochmah) and the Female principle is Reason/Intellect (Bina). The river connects the Male worlds (Zeir Anpin) and the Female worlds (Malchut). The fountain symbolizes Hochma, which rises in the upper world and descends to the Female world via Bina. The world is constructed in such a way that Hochma, which is creative and unregulated, has to be confined by the strict principles of Bina in order to transform it into useful and applicable knowledge (Da'at). Therefore, water not only springs up, but takes shape through these flows that pass across different worlds and finally reach our world (Malchut). In the film, Chesed is visible in Tom's motivation and desire to save Isabella, Bina in his strict scientific and naturalistic approach, and Da'at through concrete actions. Therefore, a Kabbalistic element is visible in the use of the sign of the fountain to describe the materialization of a certain immaterial goal. The Female principle collects water in order to distribute it further: "springs gush forth in torrents; they make their way between the hills, giving drink to all the wild beasts; the wild asses slake their thirst."<sup>53</sup> The verses indicate that the fountains of knowledge give life to everything, as water is a metaphor for knowledge.<sup>54</sup>

The opening quote in the film addresses the biblical topic of searching for the Garden of Eden, which was hidden after Adam's consumption from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.<sup>55</sup> Everyone is trying to find it because "whoever eats from the Tree of Life shall live forever."<sup>56</sup> However, the Tree which Tom finds turns out not to be the Tree of Life, but just a regular tree. As it dries out, the fountain is sealed. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Queen Isabella promises Tom: "together we will live forever"—if he manages to find the Tree of Life.

The Female principle is occasionally referred to as "the Queen" in Judaism.<sup>57</sup> She is "a path to the strong tree called the Tree of Life,"<sup>58</sup> whereas Queen Isabella in the film orders conquistador Tom to search for the Tree. The phrase "forever and ever" ("*le'olam ve'ed*" in Hebrew) literally means "from the world to the world"—infinity appears to point to the union between two worlds, Male and Female. In the film, it is a union of the first narrative (the 16<sup>th</sup> century, standing for Chesed) and the second narrative (the 21<sup>st</sup> century, standing for Gevurah) into the third narrative (standing for Tiferet, the central pillar).

<sup>52</sup> Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino*, 75.

<sup>53</sup> *Tanakh*, Psalms 104:10–11.

<sup>54</sup> *Zohar*, Acharei Mot 16, 105.

<sup>55</sup> Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino*, 75.

<sup>56</sup> *Zohar*, Beresheet A 22, 253.

<sup>57</sup> *Zohar*, Acharei Mot 7, 23.

<sup>58</sup> *Zohar*, Beshalach 13, 148.

According to certain scholars, Tom represents the biblical Adam.<sup>59</sup> His purpose is to discover the cure for a specific illness. As the laboratory monkey heals and becomes rejuvenated by ten years, it turns out that Tom had successfully found the cure. Unfortunately, his discovery happens a few minutes too late for Isabella. Tom's life goal is therefore based on a Jewish idea that each person should do what they can to repair the world as much as possible: "it is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."<sup>60</sup>

The protagonist's name "Tom" is taken from the New Testament as an allusion to the Doubting Thomas. Only he is not doubting life, but death,<sup>61</sup> which is for him a "disease like any other." His last name, "Creo," means "I believe" in Latin, signifying a belief in life over death.<sup>62</sup> "Isabella" means "beautiful," which is a description of the sphere of Tiferet, literally meaning "beauty" in Hebrew. The protagonists are brought from one reality to another through different kinds of passages. Gates are a very important motif in the film. Many longitudinal dark doors are shown; for example, the entrance to the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the entrance to the laboratory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The light in the shape of a cross shines through the doors whenever they are opened. In biblical imagery, gates connote the passage between the present and the future, between the current world and the Messianic era.<sup>63</sup> Gates are supposed to lead a person towards righteous behavior, which would cause them to participate more efficiently in *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world") and bring the Era of Redemption closer. The doors visually represent a passage of time, space and consciousness from one reality to another.

The characters metaphorically search for these gates of redemption in the film, but they end up back at the beginning. However, the protagonists are not giving up on their quest, so the ending is a new beginning for them.

### Anthropomorphic universe

Isabella represents the Mother (Ima) and Tom represents the Father (Abba).<sup>64</sup> The concepts of the Mother and the Father are present in Judaism and Christianity, as well as other religions. The film explicitly references the Mayan creation myth featuring the First Father. The Father in Jewish theosophy represents Wisdom (Hochma). Together with Reason (Bina, representing the Mother, Ima), He creates the Male principle (Zeir Anpin) and the Female principle (Malchut). In the film, the 26<sup>th</sup>-century Tom, becoming the Father, reunites with the Tree/star Xibalba/Isabella, who becomes

<sup>59</sup> Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*.

<sup>60</sup> "Pirkei Avot," in *Mishnah*, trans. Joshua Kulp (Sefaria, 2026), <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Mishnah>.

<sup>61</sup> Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*.

<sup>62</sup> Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*.

<sup>63</sup> *Tanakh*, Psalms 118:19.

<sup>64</sup> Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino*, 75.

the Mother. Together they give birth to the universe, including the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Tom and Isabella (the Male and the Female principles), participating in their own *tikkun olam* (“reparation of the world”). Therefore, Tom and Isabella from the future give birth to Tom and Isabella from the past. This contradiction stems from the fact that the film endorses a cyclical, rather than a linear concept of time. The Judeo-Christian logic (history as leading towards the fulfillment of a certain goal) stops here, as time in the film seems to endlessly repeat itself in circles.

The idea of the “eternal return” in contemporary Western society was popularized by Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>65</sup> However, the concept of the eternal return (palingenesis) stems from Asia and it was accepted by the ancient Greeks. The main premise is that the universe keeps repeating itself. “Eternal repetition, up to every detail, of same events, after a certain period is over (The Big Year).”<sup>66</sup> Hinduism believes in the repetition of time periods (yugas), while Buddhism views time as consisting of repetitive cycles (kappa) of evolution (vivatta) and dissolution (samvatta).<sup>67</sup> This kind of a cyclical concept of time seems to dominate the narrative of the film.

The ending is open, as Tom and Isabella both transcend physical reality. Since a cyclical nature of time is suggested, the characters may just keep repeating these same actions in eternity. Alternatively, they might reach the ultimate redemption. This remains unclear.

Imagery associated with the 26<sup>th</sup>-century narrative is particularly Buddhist—Tom resembles a bald monk-like figure dressed in simple clothing that floats through the universe in the lotus position. Gold signifies eternity (rather than judgment) in Buddhist tradition and is regarded as a typical Buddhist color. This transcendent reality is contrasted to the real-life pain and vulnerability of a lived body.<sup>68</sup>

There is an apparent duality in the shape of juxtapositions between the mind and the body, science and spirituality, finitude and infinitude, and ultimately Tom and Isabella. However, all these “contradictions” are essentially intertwined, coming from the same source.<sup>69</sup> The film shows that narratives from different cultures have similar motifs (the Tree of Life, sword, fountain, gates) in order to show interconnectedness, or unity, rather than dualism. Similarly, religion and science are intertwined. Xibalba, the Mayan legendary place where the souls go to reincarnate, is an actual physical star within the cosmos of the film. In the end, Tom’s head remains in the bubble floating around Xibalba. This “head” suggests problems of the intellect. It symbolizes a common problem of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century society: “Wisdom without Kindness.”<sup>70</sup> Too im-

<sup>65</sup> D’Iorio, “The Eternal Return: Genesis and Interpretation,” 41–96.

<sup>66</sup> Pierre Riffard, “Palingeneza, palingenezija,” in *Rječnik ezoterizma*, ed. Pierre Riffard, trans. Radmila Zdjelar (August Cesarec, 1989), 294–95.

<sup>67</sup> David J. Kalupahana, “The Buddhist Conception of Time and Temporality,” *Philosophy East and West* 24, no. 2 (1974): 181–91.

<sup>68</sup> Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*, 95.

<sup>69</sup> Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*, 73.

<sup>70</sup> Zohar, Acharei Mot 11, 75; Beresheet A 40, 378.

mersed in his scientific quest to find the cure, Tom neglects to show Isabella kindness and affection in the present moment.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to analyze *The Fountain* using theories of communication sciences in order to explain underlying similarities of narratives and symbols coming from different cultures and religions.

The paper identified the following main elements of the narrative (*message*) conveyed through the film (*medium*):

1. A Trinitarian structure;
2. Tree, Garden, Fountain (related to nature); Gates, Key, Sword (related to technology);
3. Dualistic relationships: Male and Female, Corporeality and Transcendence, Human and Nature, etc.;
4. An anthropomorphic conception of the universe;
5. Reincarnation;
6. The role of humans in: a) creation, b) maintenance, c) repairing of the world;
7. Time: linear vs. cyclical.

The concept of the Trinity exists in Jewish and Christian, as well as Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Therefore, the three narratives can be understood as consistently and consciously incorporating perspectives of different religions.

The motifs of Tree, Garden, Gates, Keys, Sword and Fountain are present in all the aforementioned religions as well. The symbols of the lost paradise and the search for a mystical Tree, in which the fountain of life is concealed, exist in multiple religions. Apart from having a mystical meaning, these elements often transmit messages about the relationship between humans and nature.

The results suggest that the stories and symbols from different cultures can be mutually consistent and not contradictory.

The first difficulty arises when considering the concept of dualistic relationships. Dualism is more strongly accentuated in certain religions than in others. Zoroastrianism in particular endorses it, while in Hinduism and Buddhism there is no strong opposition between humans and nature. Rather, humans, animals and plants seem to be on a similar metaphysical level. The opposition between corporeality and spirituality seems to be the strongest in Hinduism and Buddhism, where the ultimate goal is to escape the cycle of reincarnation through associating oneself with the soul, rather than the body. Judaism on the other hand places no contradiction between corporeality and spirituality. Christianity endorses the body, as resurrection is expected, but less strongly than Judaism. This is also the main problem regarding the anthropomorphic conception of the universe. Different religions hold different views of the position of humans in relationship to other living things. Hinduism, Buddhism and Mayanism place humans lower in the hierarchy of all living entities, equating humans

with plants and animals in an almost biocentric sense. In contrast, Judeo-Christianity holds that the human soul originates from a higher metaphysical level than that of animals or plants. This also seems to be the case with the perception of reincarnation. The film draws on both Judeo-Christian and Hindu-Buddhist conceptions of reincarnation, emphasizing the role of its human protagonists, while also allowing for the possibility of a human being reincarnating as a tree at some point in the future.

The film relies on the Judeo-Christian perspective regarding the role of human beings in the creation of the world—so Tom actively tries to improve his reality—but it also includes a Hindu-Buddhist idea that time keeps repeating itself in cycles. This is the biggest problem in the film narrative: how to unite these two opposite perspectives, how to allow the protagonists to reach their goal without being stuck in a time loop? Hinduism and Buddhism offer the only solution: the nullification of the self and distancing oneself from the physical world. No ultimate redemption in Judeo-Christian sense is shown in the film.

Using *The Fountain* as a case study, this analysis demonstrates how symbols and narratives from different cultures and religious traditions can be integrated within mass media to form a unified and consistent whole. Consequently, film as a mass medium has potential for unifying cultures worldwide and enabling an easier intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

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