

Reviewers Report of the Bachelor's Thesis "The Representation of the Absurd in The Lighthouse (2019)" by Elizabeth Coughlin

I recommend that the work be returned for revision. First of all, its goals are so ambitious that nearly one-third of the essay just lists the tasks to be done instead of bringing at least one analysis to an end. In thirty-nine pages, seven of which are spent on the redundant retelling of the film (p. 16-21) and a personal introduction (1-3), we quickly run over hot coals of semiotics, existentialism, Camus, Jungianism, Religious or Film studies.

This methodological indecision is well captured by a sentence on page 4 (emphasis mine): "Livingston & Plantinga's compilation [*which has been just introduced as a key methodical source for the bachelor essay*] includes articles about interpreting films through a phenomenological or psychoanalytical lens, **but** this thesis will use semiotics, as described by Joseph G. Kickasola (2009), as a means of examining the themes and ideas that appear in *The Lighthouse*." (p. 4). But the semiotic analysis never comes, or at least there is nothing really semiotic about it.

When E.C. states that "this thesis will therefore implement a semiotic analysis whose roots are found in De Saussure's language studies, and which was later shaped by scholars like Pierce, Metz, and Kickasola," one wonders why she did not focus on Pierce or Metz themselves – not to mention that there is no general "semiotics" – and relies on Kickasola instead. Which is a serious methodical flaw repeated in the essay on many occasions: the primary sources that should have been consulted directly are referred to only via secondary articles.

In sum, individual theoretical positions are thus presented in a cursory and simplified manner only to be abandoned and swapped for the others, including relying on mutually incompatible authorities for interpretation such as public reception, authorial background, or intertextual reading. Just one example of the general problem (emphasis mine): "The plot, or summary of the movie, suggests a connection with Camus' Myth of Sisyphus, **as** does the flow of information. The flow of information in cinema generally refers to the audience's perspective within the world of a film and how they discover new elements of it. These aspects of the film show the choices Eggers made in telling the story and suggest a possible connection with Camus' Myth of Sisyphus." (p. 7–8). One does not have to choose only one viewpoint, of course, but one also has to respect that the public resonance, authorial input/reflection, and the anachronic intertextual or iconological reading present three different perspectives of meaning that do not simply add up.

That all leads E.C. to the somewhat naïve or misleading formulations, for example, when she states that "Hays Code [was established] to try and prevent the depiction of morally dubious actions or themes. Philosophy, as understood as theories about morality, people, and knowledge, has therefore been connected with movies since its inception." Does the fact that Hays Code dealt with moral standards really imply any philosophy? For example, philosophy has also – since its beginnings – focused on conflict and love, which does not make bullies and lovers any special philosophers. Or when E.C. – right after Metz and Deleuze – refers to a book from the 1950s, stating that "film form refers to 'the overall pattern of relationships among parts of a movie'" or that "film style encompasses 'the use of cinematic techniques'" (p. 8). This definition somehow casts doubt on the actual understanding or relevance of the theoretical support engaged so far: indicated also by the fact that in Chapter 4, form, style and script are treated as separated mediums of the same "objects".

This inconsistency interferes with the conclusions themselves. For example, E.C. states that “If one interprets Tom as the older version of Tommy, then his reliance on alcohol and belief in the supernatural seems to result from the brutality of his surroundings.” (p.23) (...) “In terms of the story,” E.C. continues, “the overall repetition of the island’s daily tasks may be compared to Sisyphus’s punishment of rolling a boulder up a hill over and over. Tommy’s struggle, in particular, aligns with Sisyphus, as he is shown many times pushing coal in a cart, shoveling said coal into the furnace of the light, and eventually bemoaning the drudgery and futility of his work in his final fight with Tom.” (p. 24)

But that is not what is happening in the movie: Tommy is *commanded* to drink and obeys only when he expects to be leaving the island shortly, and even his subsequent excessive drinking has much more to do with his Oedipal tendencies, developing psychosis, and guilt trip, rather than with the harsh surroundings. Remember: he used to work as timber, and the movie explicitly indicates (twice) that the job was at least as hard as the work on the island. It is also worth reminding that Tom does not protest against work; he protests against Tommy (Tommy-as-Ephraim Winslow), against being treated as a dog or being lied to.

E.C. also concludes that “Tom/Tommy’s duties as a lighthouse keeper on an isolated island are comparable to Camus’ understanding of human existence; faced with the monotony and futility of everyday life, one may grasp for supernatural explanations that ultimately don’t exist.” (...) “Tommy-the-ego’s struggle in the film to uphold civility and social norms is similar to Camus’ view of philosophers attempting to develop metaphysical ideals – it is a futile effort that will eventually fail” (p. 24).

Again, this is not what is happening in the movie. It does not really matter whether Tommy is going mad or whether he really meets the mermaid etc. The point is that he is not grasping anything. He is being haunted against his will. Tom, on the other hand, is far from upholding civility, at least if civility does not consist of impulsive domination (all the work is just a pretext), excessive drinking, or nearly orgiastic worshipping of the light(house).

I dare say that these examples do not represent specific interpretations I simply disagree with, but misreadings of the movie caused by the purely associative and violent application of Camus’ text (notice the evasive “mays” etc.).

For its own sake – since the essay has all the potential – I recommend revising the essay and either improve the Camusian reading (i.e., without Jungian or semiotic crossovers), or refocus on the motifs of Prometheus (see p. 27–28) or on the motif of light(house) in the perspective of Eliade (p. 33), explicitly mentioned by Eggers. But in this state the essay presents only unfounded associations and mixture of mutually inconsistent allusions.

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