

PSYCHEDELIC IMAGERY IN THE HOLY MOUNTAIN (1973): AN ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF ALEJANDRO JODOROWSKY'S CULT CLASSIC.

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RESUMEN

El clásico de culto *la montaña sagrada* de Alejandro Jodorowsky se estrenó en 1973 y desde entonces ha disfrutado de un creciente estatus de culto, alimentado aún más por el reciente movimiento renacentista psicodélico. Con un tono humorístico, *la montaña sagrada* incorpora las ideas y valores de su época tales como el reto a las autoridades vigentes, y el rechazo a los cánones de vida tradicionales mediante la exploración de filosofías alternativas como las religiones orientales, la alquimia, la astrología y el tarot. Rica en imágenes psicodélicas arraigadas en la tradición psicoanalítica, la película sirve como una representación de la contracultura del momento. Con propósito de este artículo, revisaremos, analizaremos e interpretaremos el simbolismo mostrado en esta *la montaña sagrada*, que explora importantes temas pertinentes a la cultura visual psicodélica, tales como la descripción de diferentes sustancias y ceremonias psicodélicas, filosofías de la contracultura psicodélica, exploración del trauma, deconstrucción de las normas sociales y los efectos terapéuticos de las sustancias psicodélicas.

ABSTRACT

Alejandro Jodorowsky's cult classic *The Holy Mountain* was released in 1973 and has since enjoyed a growing cult status, further fueled by the recent psychedelic renaissance movement. In a humorous tone, *The Holy Mountain* incorporates the ideas and values of its time, such as the countercultural movement that rejected the establishment and traditional lifestyles while embracing alternative philosophies like Eastern philosophy, alchemy, astrology, and the Tarot. Rich in psychedelic imagery rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition, the film serves as a vivid representation of its era. For the purpose of this article, we will review, analyze, and interpret the symbolism displayed in this film, which explores important themes pertinent to psychedelic visual culture, such as descriptions of different psychedelic substances and ceremonies, different philosophies of the psychedelic counterculture, the deconstruction of society's norms, trauma exploration and healing effects derived from a psychedelic experience.

Keywords: The Holy Mountain; Alejandro Jodorowsky; Psychedelic Cinema; Psychedelic Art; Surrealism; Psychedelics; Psychoanalysis.

INTRODUCTION

The Holy Mountain is a 1973 film directed by Chilean author Alejandro Jodorowsky. The film represented the countercultural ideas of the society of its time. Despite having limited success after its initial release; it gradually became a cult film with growing popularity that continues to this day (Macnab and Jodorowsky, 1999). *The Holy Mountain* is particularly acclaimed in the psychedelic culture. The creators were influenced by this culture and ingested psychedelic substances during the filming of the movie. The film is product from the countercultural revolution of its time and incorporates its elements such as the exploration of psychedelics, critique of authority and Abrahamic religions, and the embracement of Eastern and esoteric philosophies including alchemy, astrology and the Tarot (Marques, 2014; Melnyk, 2023).

The 1960s society in the Western World saw a cultural revolution without parallel. This movement was affected by protests against the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the feminist movement. During this convulsive period, society demanded changes and challenged authoritarian behavior. Following the discovery of LSD, its use became common among the youths (McConnell, 2004). At the same time, psychiatrists studied the clinical utility of LSD in patients with neurotic and psychotic disorders in academic centers (Johnson, 1969; Brandrup and Vanggaard, 1977; Lee, Shlain and Codrescu, 1992).

The psychedelic culture of the time impacted music, poetry, and visual arts. For instance, in 1967, The Beatles released their album “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band”, containing the song “Strawberry Fields”, in which psychedelic effects are described. In the United States, The Grateful Dead became the iconic band of the psychedelic counterculture. The posters made for psychedelic rock concerts marked the origins of psychedelic art, often containing kaleidoscopic imagery. Spaniard Victor Moscoso, who graduated from Yale University, became the first psychedelic artist with an art degree (Selvin, 1999). This psychedelic cultural movement impacted cinema as well. Independent films like *The Trip* (Roger Corman, 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) depicting the effects of LSD saw light in theaters and reflected on the counterculture values of the time. A few years later, *The Holy Mountain* (1973) combined the ideas of the counterculture and the vanguard artistic tradition (Hempfill, 2007).

A psychedelic experience can vary depending on the substance used but, in general, psychedelics induce a dream-like visual, cognitive, and emotional journey. LSD for example, can cause a disintegration of one’s reality and visualization of geometric kaleidoscopic images that vary with the different music one might be listening to at the time. In psychedelic therapy, it is generally recommended to cover one’s eyes while listening to this music and embrace thoughts and emotions that might be presented during the journey. In a psychedelic experience, it is common to feel euphoria, but it is also frequent to go through mixed, conflicted feelings that can be challenging. Mystical experiences can happen, as well as a feeling of disintegration of the self. In some cases, a person may feel that they are dying or have died, an ego death. At the same time, during an LSD journey, a person may feel strong empathy for themselves, humanity, nature, and the entire universe. When the effect of LSD begins to fade off, one will gradually return to normal reality with a feeling of peace, calmness, and having filtered out negativity. In therapeutic settings, this experience will be integrated into one’s life with the help of the therapist (Fadiman, 2011; Coleman, 2017; Preller and Vollenweider, 2018).

The objective of this manuscript is to study this film from the cultural perspective of the time and to analyze and interpret the visual imagery offered in the film *The Holy Mountain*. After an introduction and a description of Jodorowsky’s work, we will review different themes depicted in the film, pertinent to the countercultural psychedelic movement. These themes vary from direct references to psychedelics and their effects, psychedelic rituals and associated philosophies and the effects that psychedelics can have in individuals such as deconstruction of the canon of beauty and hierarchy, exploration of trauma, disintegration of the ego and reintegration with new insights and revelations.

ALEJANDRO JODOROWSKY AND HIS PATH TO DIRECTING THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

The director of *The Holy Mountain*, Alejandro Jodorowsky, was born in 1929 in Tocopilla, Chile, to immigrant Jewish parents. In his youth, he became interested in theater and poetry. As an adult, he moved to Paris and became familiar with the surrealist art movement, having

the chance to meet with Andre Breton, the initiator of this vanguard art movement. While in Paris, he studied under the famous mime Marcel Marceau. In 1960, he moved to Mexico but visited Paris often and in 1962, he founded, with his colleague Fernando Arrabal, “The Panic movement”, seeking to evolve from traditional surrealist art by embracing the absurd (Santos, 2017; de la Torre Espinosa, 2019; Jaramillo, 2020; Egginton, 2024). Within this absurd and surreal Panic movement, he created a feature film: *Fando and Lis* (1968). In the film, the protagonists Fando and Lis embark on a journey in the search of a mythical place, named Tar, in which they will discover the nature of eternity. The film’s imagery seeks to depict our subconscious mind, often abundant in unacceptable desires. This imagery was viewed with controversy. After its release in Acapulco Film Festival, riots followed, protesting against the allegedly obscene imagery, and the film was banned in Mexico (Hempfill, 2007; Veloso Garcia, 2015; Cruz-Grunerth, 2021). *Fando and Lis* underscores the idea of a transformational journey that marked Jodorowsky’s subsequent film *El Topo* (1970).

El Topo became successful in the New York’s midnight movie scene. John Lennon and George Harrison became fans of the film and mediated with their manager Allen Klein to produce a third film for Jodorowsky (Macnab and Jodorowsky, 1999). *The Holy Mountain* was filmed in Mexico and premiered on November 23rd, 1973, in New York at the Waverly Theater (Today, the IFC Center in Greenwich Village) (Garcia, 2012). Allen Klein retained the rights to *El Topo* and *The Holy Mountain*, and following disagreements on a new planned film, Jodorowsky and Klein broke their relationship (Santos, 2017). Jodorowsky shifted gears and embarked on an ambitious endeavor to direct *Dune*, a film based on Frank Herbert’s famous science fiction novel. However, the film was never made due to lack of funding.

Following Klein and Jodorowsky’s fallout, *The Holy Mountain* was on the verge of being forgotten, but instead continued to gain popularity and cult status, largely due to the interest of an underground scene facilitated by a new technology: the videocassette. VHS copies of the film began circulating worldwide. Though poor quality, these new technologies kept the spirit of the film afloat. It was not until the 2000s that the film was again released into the market; a DVD version of *The Holy Mountain* became available in stores for the first time for consumers, bumping up its popularity (Santos, 2017; Melnyk, 2023). Today, the film is considered a cult classic. It continues to be a major midnight movie in many independent theaters all over the world, and it can be viewed on most online streaming platforms. In our present tense, *The Holy Mountain* is an icon of the so-called psychedelic renaissance cultural movement of our current generation.

The Holy Mountain was inspired by Spanish 16th century book *Ascent of Mount Carmel* written by Saint John of the Cross and the 20th century French novel *Mount Analogue* by Rene Daumal (Daumal and Cosman, 2004; de la Cruz, 2017; Lajus, 2023; Witte, 2023).

The film’s main protagonist is the thief, starred by actor Horacio Salinas, who has a resemblance to Jesus Christ. The thief lives in a corrupt world, dominated by oppression and marginalization of the outcasts. In this line, the thief encounters a mutilated dwarf (Burt Kleiner) who becomes his friend and companion. Eventually, the thief goes to a tower and meets with the alchemist (Alejandro Jodorowsky) who becomes his master and mentor. The alchemist introduces the thief to seven individuals from the society’s elite. Together, they embark on a journey to the Holy Mountain in search of the secret of immortality.

INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE PSYCHEDELIC IMAGERY PRESENTED IN *THE HOLY MOUNTAIN*:

For the purpose of analyzing the symbolic and psychedelic imagery in the film, we will divide the film into several parts. Initially we will discuss direct mentioning of psychedelics throughout the film. Following we will discuss the different philosophies and esoteric beliefs incorporated by the psychedelic counterculture. Finally, we will analyze the impact of psychedelic substances such as disintegration of canons and hierarchy, disintegration of the self and embracement of new insights and revelations.

1. PSYCHEDELIC SUBSTANCES AND CEREMONIES

The Holy Mountain is rich in psychedelic imagery inspired by the psychedelic culture and Jodorowsky’s own experiences with LSD. In an interview made for the documentary of his film *Dune*

(2013), Jodorowsky stated that in *The Holy Mountain*, “hice lo que quise” (I did whatever I wanted). Therefore, we can infer that he retained full artistic freedom. *The Holy Mountain* depicts an LSD experience, a “trip.” Thus, the narrative, the plot, and the imagery in the film can be seen as a majestic depiction of a psychedelic experience (Macnab and Jodorowsky, 1999; Pavich, 2013).

To prepare for the film, the actors lived together and experienced a week of sleep deprivation under the supervision of a Japanese Zen Master. Jodorowsky also hired the notable Bolivian mystic and philosopher Oscar Ichazo, the founder of the Arica Institute (Santos, 2017). Ichazo modernized Gurdjieff’s Enneagram proposing that there are nine different personality types compelled in a system. For Ichazo, each type has distinct fixations and characteristics. Under Ichazo’s guidance, Jodorowsky ingested LSD toward inner self-exploration (Ichazo, 2024).

In the film there are several portrayals of psychedelic effects. For instance, in one scene, the main protagonist, the thief, arrives at a market where there is a tall tower. The thief finds the courage to climb up the mountain with a rope, and once reaching the top, he finds a rainbow tunnel resembling the visual and colorful kaleidoscopic images that a person experience under LSD. (Fig. 1)

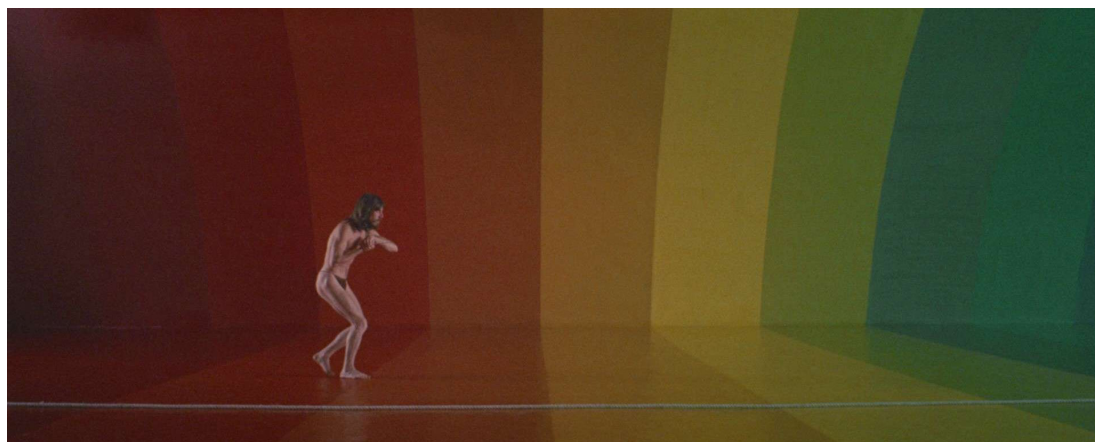


Fig. 1. The Thief passes through a kaleidoscopic tunnel, evoking and LSD experience.

In another scene, the crew begins their journey towards Lotus Island when they find themselves in nature with a Peruvian shaman who gives them a brew to drink while a woman is singing. This scene has a resemblance to an ayahuasca ritual in which members drink the brew while the shaman sings “icaros”, Peruvian ayahuasca ceremonial chants (Adelaars, 2016). The shaman instructs them to listen to the flower, supporting this idea of an ayahuasca ceremony happening here. During their journey, there is a moment in which the crew find themselves in an area surrounded by Mesoamerican ruins. It is known that the actors themselves were under the influence of psilocybin mushrooms for the making of this scene (Macnab and Jodorowsky, 1999). (Fig. 2) Upon the crew’s boarding the boat towards Lotus Island, the alchemist manipulates various polyhedral figures. These could symbolize the visual experiences one might encounter on LSD.



Fig. 2. The actors consumed psilocybin-containing mushrooms on set to perform during the initiation ceremony at the Mesoamerican ruins

Once they arrive on the island, they find the Pantheon Bar where a German Bavarian dressed person approaches them and tempts them to stay at the bar. Inside the bar, there's a party at a cemetery. There they have an encounter with a drug master who tells them that the cross is a mushroom, the philosopher's stone is LSD, The Book of the Dead is a trip, and The Apocalypse is mescaline. This is the clearest reference to psychedelic literature in the film, and it adds evidence that Jodorowsky was familiar with the psychedelic literature of the time. The cross as a mushroom refers to John Allegro's book *The Mushroom and the Cross* (1970). Allegro was a British scholar who gained notoriety by studying the Dead Sea Scrolls, but later in his career became controversial with the publication of his psychedelic theories in which he argued that Christianity was originated around fertility cults that consumed psychedelic mushrooms. For Allegro, Jesus and the Cross symbolize a psychedelic mushroom (Allegro, 2009). The reference to the philosopher's stone refers to the transmutation of metals into gold and in Jungian psychology, a symbolic passage to achieve a higher consciousness (Cobb, 2007; Noheden and Susik, 2021). Therefore, it makes sense that Jodorowsky, who had experienced LSD under Ichazo's instructions, believes that LSD is the gateway to a higher state of consciousness. The drug master mentions The Book of The Dead as a trip alluding to famous psychedelic researchers Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert who published *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964). In this book, they establish parallels between an LSD trip and the stages of birth and rebirth in the Tibetan Book of The Dead (Leary et al., 2007). Finally, when the drug expert states that mescaline is The Apocalypse, he could be bringing up the famous *Doors of Perception* (1954) by Aldous Huxley, in which the author describes his own mystical experiences on mescaline (Huxley, 2009).

2. EASTERN PHILOSOPHY AND ESOTERICISM

During the counterculture, a growing rejection of Abrahamic religions existed towards the embracement of Eastern religion. Yoga, Buddhism, Hinduism and Indian Gurus became popular in this rebelling society. These ideas became part of the psychedelic cultural movement to this date (Rowe and Jodorowsky, 2008; Breckenridge, 2015). The impact of Eastern philosophy in Jodorowsky's cinema is a constant in his filmography. For instance, at the commencement of *The Holy Mountain*, the titles and the movie name appear in Sanskrit typography. This is a reference to Hinduism. Psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who was deeply impacted by this ontological belief, read and translated texts from Sanskrit. This helped him and impacted the development of his theories of the collective unconscious. Similarly, in the concept of Brahman in Hinduism, all individuals are connected through a cosmic consciousness. Jung popularized the Hindu Mandala, as a representation of the wholeness that would permit our individuation and connection with the Big Self (Jung and Shamdasani, 1999). Jung's ontology is central to psychedelic theory. Similarly, *The Holy Mountain's* use of Sanskrit typography is aligned with the film's exploration of Eastern religion and its influence.

The Holy Mountain compiles ideas from popular esoteric beliefs during the counterculture such as witchcraft, alchemy, the Tarot and astrology.

Witchcraft's history goes back to the publication of *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches) in 1486 by churchman Heinrich Kramer. With the publication of this best seller of its time, witchcraft hysteria in Europe was reignited for centuries (Institoris, Sprenger, and Summers, 1971). The outcasts and mentally ill became common targets of false witchcraft accusations. Alleged witches were wrongly accused of using magic, toads, and other psychedelic substances to manipulate their victims and invoke the devil (Hatsis, 2015). *The Holy Mountain* has a few references to magic and witchcraft. For instance, in the scene where the thief travels through the tunnel, he meets the alchemist, who is wearing a witch hat and is waiting with two taxidermic he-goats and a tattooed woman. The rainbow tunnel goes in tune with the intense colorful visual experiences a person can go through on a psychedelic journey. The alchemist's cone-shaped hat and the two he-goats are a reference to witchcraft, another esoteric belief that regained popularity with the counterculture. (Fig. 3) In the film, the alchemist embodies these victims of the witchcraft hysteria that haunted Europe for centuries (Espi Forcén, 2017). Instead, in *The Holy Mountain*, a witch enlightens the path.



Fig. 3. In a witchcraft fashion the alchemist is accompanied by two goats and the written woman

Alchemy and psychology have been intimately connected to psychology and psychedelic therapy since psychoanalyst Carl Jung decided to study the alchemist texts and make his own psychological interpretations. In Jung's theory of individuation, alchemy can help the person's journey to become a unique and integrated individual. For Jung, the transmutation of metals in alchemy are a symbol of the individuation process. In addition, alchemy's work of opposites, matches Jung's ideas on integration of the animus and the anima. For Jung, in every person, there is a feminine (anima) and a masculine (animus) that must be integrated. Jung interpreted the alchemy's ideas as a symbol of achieving a higher consciousness (Robertson, 2017; Noheden and Susik, 2021). Congruent with this Jungian tradition, in *The Holy Mountain*, an alchemist becomes the master that prepares the mind of the protagonists and, in a way, the audience of the film.

The alchemist, played by Alejandro Jodorowsky, is one of the central characters in the movie. After the thief meets the alchemist, he challenges him to a martial art fight in which the thief is defeated. Then, the alchemist asks him if he wants gold. With a purification ritual, the alchemist can transform the thief's feces into gold. In the history of alchemy, one of the major goals was to transmute base metal into gold for the purpose of achieving wealth. This has been symbolically referred to as the philosopher's stone. The alchemist starts a ritualized ceremony with the help of the written woman with the goal of transforming the thief's excrements into gold. By this transmutation, the alchemist symbolically shows that the thief can be enlightened. As part of this ceremony, the thief breaks the looking glass, therefore destroying his self-image but cannot break a stone.

In the psychedelic counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the Tarot was seen as a tool to interpret non-ordinary states of consciousness caused by psychedelics (Semetsky, 2013; Fink, 2022). For Alejandro Jodorowsky, Tarot is a powerful tool to help personal transformation and personal discovery. This idea is emphasized in *The Holy Mountain*. After the thief and the alchemist first meet and start a ritual, the alchemist instructs the thief that the soul also has a stone, and he will need to embrace the Tarot to learn. The alchemist then introduces the thief to the four patterns in the Spanish playing cards and their meanings: the club is to know; the sword is to dare; the cup is to want, and the coin is to be silent. In the scene, we see an ox, a symbol of work and sacrifice, and a vulture, a symbol of death and rebirth, supporting the idea of transformation and enlightenment.

Like in the Tarot, astrology uses symbolic tools and imagery to gain insight into personalities and interpret events in life and anticipate the future (Breckenridge, 2015; Melnyk, 2023). Carl Jung legitimated astrology's merit in comprehending psychology, asserting that the empirical insights gleaned from horoscopes, planetary alignments, and the zodiac held significance in unraveling an individual's psyche (Rogers, 1991; Buck, 2018). In this context, astrology emerged as a tool for delving into consciousness and mystical encounters among experiences influenced by LSD and other psychedelic substances.

In *The Holy Mountain*, the alchemist selects seven individuals to accompany them on their journey to Lotus Island. The seven people represent the seven planets. Together with the alchemist and the written woman, they represent the nine planets that will embark on the journey to the Holy Mountain. In alchemy, planets were associated with certain metals. However, for obvious reasons,

medieval alchemists only considered planets that were visible to the eyesight and were not aware of Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. By including nine celestial bodies (the Sun, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto), Jodorowsky incorporates concepts from astrology, which was a popular trend in the counterculture. The seven planets are portrayed by seven characters who symbolically represent seven different personality archetypes.

3. TRANSCENDING BEAUTY CANNONS

In psychedelics, a person may start embracing a more inclusive and representative ideas of aesthetics and hierarchy. These ideas are also depicted in *The Holy Mountain*. For instance, in this first scene of the film, Jodorowsky as the alchemist shaves the hair of two Marilyn Monroe-alike women. In the 1970s, Marilyn Monroe was seen as the standard beauty icon. By shaving the two Marilyn Monroe-alike actresses, the alchemist attempts to challenge the Western canon of beauty and instead elevate the ugly and the grotesque as the protagonists (Cruz-Grunerth, 2021; Santos, 2017).

In the second scene, the thief is presented. The thief is a Jesus look-alike character presented in a coma-like state, covered by fleas, and seems to have urinated himself. A handless and footless dwarf, the third protagonist of the film, comes to save him from a group of children who attempt to stone him in a Bible-like fashion (Breckenridge, 2015). The dwarf symbolizes the marginalized and outcasts as the protagonists of the movie, representing those rejected by society such as the poor and the disabled, who are nonexistent in Hollywood cinema (Santos, 2017; Cruz-Grunerth, 2021).

4. THE REJECTION OF THE ESTABLISHMENT

Enhanced by the popularity of psychedelics, the society of the counterculture, critiqued society's hierarchical system. Congruent with this trend, Jodorowsky shows the ugliest version of the institutions holding power in society like the Church, the politicians, the industry and the police and military (Lindstrom, 2013).

In one scene, an old bishop with sunglasses who mumbles unintelligible words, eats with his hands from the face of a Jesus figure, symbolizing the terrible misinterpretation of Jesus' message by the Church. Then, we see a group of sex workers in a hermitage; one of them, a child sex workers, leaves and encounters an old man who is willing to pay for her services. In a Buñuel-like surrealist fashion, this man takes his prosthetic eye out and hands it to the child sex workers as payment. Jodorowsky denounces one of the ugliest sides in society, in which the poor are taken advantage of and forced into prostitution. Also, this scene protests against the hypocrisy of the followers of the Church, who feel they can achieve salvation through faith while misbehaving and perpetuating injustice in society (Jaramillo, 2020).

Before embarking on their journey to Lotus Island, the alchemist introduces the thief to seven industrialists and politicians who dominate the world. The film narrative goes on and presents each one of the seven new crew members. With the introduction of the seven crew members, Jodorowsky seeks an opportunity to criticize oppressive political systems that annihilate individuals' freedom of choice and comfort. He goes farther and describes the different ways in which authorities can exert this power effectively, such as sexual coercion (Venus), war (Mars), art (Jupiter), indoctrination (Saturn), genocide (Uranus), force (Neptune), and architecture (Pluto). The whole scene is a critique of power and tyranny. In the psychedelic counterculture movement, there was a rejection of traditional values and established norms, which is reflected in *The Holy Mountain* (Santos, 2017).

5. TRAUMA EXPLORATION AND PSYCHEDELIC HEALING

In psychoanalysis and psychedelic therapy, a person must explore unconscious and potentially traumatic events to experience catharsis and alleviation of their suffering. Jodorowsky's surrealist cinema is intimately connected with the idea of unconscious trauma, whether individual or collective, and cathartic exposure (Veloso Garcia, 2015). *The Holy Mountain* is rich in representations of collective traumatic events such as the conquest of Mexico, the World Wars and the massacre of Tlatelolco students.

In the film narrative, the thief and the dwarf go to the city and encounter a group of World

War I soldiers carrying crucified, peeled-off goats, followed by a scene of executed students in which birds come out of their chests while tourists come to take pictures of them. This is a depiction of the Tlatelolco Massacre of October 2nd, 1968, in which the Mexican police executed a group of unarmed Mexican students who were peacefully protesting the upcoming Summer Olympics (Santos, 2017; Lanz, 2022). In this scene, the World War I soldiers depict the brutal, faceless, and nonsensical violence exerted by those in power, and the tourists coming to take pictures symbolize the apathy and inaction of the members in society who fail to denounce the injustice.

In another scene, the spectator is presented with a circus scene in which the thief climbs down from his cross to discover a town full of attending tourists. In the scene, we witness chameleons adorned in Aztec attire on a model of Tenochtitlan, while three 15th-century boats (La Pinta, La Niña, and La Santa María) arrive with a crew of toads donning Spanish conquistador helmets and armors adorned with the cross of Saint James, a sword-like cross, symbolizing the conquest of Mexico. The circus ringmaster wears a hat with the swastika, adding a negative connotation to the scene. From the Latin American perspective, the conquest of Mexico is deeply rooted in the collective unconscious, leading to the painful birth of the nation and the new American culture. In this sentiment, every citizen in Mexico and Latin America bears the weight of the conquest, and the intrusion of the West into the ancient culture, nearly obliterating it and leaving only traces behind in the emerging society (Hernández-Tubert, 2023). The scene reenacts the moment that will haunt the feelings of Mexicans for the rest of their history, ending with an explosion that symbolizes the consequences of this particular moment. Here, Jodorowsky comprises two very important moments in Mexican history, three archetypes of injustice that deeply marked the collective unconscious of the Mexican people: the conquest of Mexico and the arrival of Catholicism to America, and the massacre of Tlatelolco.

Under the influence of psychedelics, people may experience disintegration of their egos followed by a later reintegration and a new understanding of their psychological defenses (Lutkajtis and Evans, 2023). The protagonists of *The Holy Mountain* went through a therapeutic process aligned with this type of psychedelic ritual.

After the nine members of the crew are established, the alchemist signals the Lotus Island as their destiny, but first, they must start an initiation process. In this part of the film, we see the impact of Oscar Ichazo's advice and ideas about initiation. For Ichazo, initiation involves a spiritual awakening, transformation, and self-discovery. According to him, to achieve that purpose, one must exorcise the superficial layers of the self and access the deeper layers to establish a connection with their inner self. In doing so, they will be able to perceive themselves within a larger, spiritual, cosmic context (Ichazo, 2024). In *The Holy Mountain*, the alchemist explains that they must cease as individuals, destroy their self-image. For that aim, they must burn their money and get rid of their personal belongings. Symbolically, they also destroy wax figures of themselves and begin to wear the same uniform. They become a collective being. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4. The crew must destroy their personal belongings and wax figures of themselves as part of their initiation ritual.

Under the effect of mushrooms, the alchemist instructs the crew to surrender and give up what they have and what they love: their bodies, their possessions, empty their hearts, and stay open to receiving and experiencing a rebirth. After this psychedelic ceremony, the crew is ready to go to Lotus Island in the search of the Holy Mountain. Here we see how psychedelics can change a person by disintegrating their egos and making them willing to abandon materialistic and superficial values to embrace deeper and more meaningful values.

The alchemist orders the thief to release the monster of his mind and symbolically throw his friend, the handless and footless dwarf, onto the water. Before departing from the cemetery, they encounter a man who claims he can ascend the Holy Mountain horizontally. He possesses the ability to traverse walls in a quantum manner; however, he is unable to ascend the summit vertically. This scene delves into the concepts explored in René Daumal's *Mount Analogue* and underscores the impossibility of gaining a higher perspective from a lower vantage point (Daumal and Cosman, 2004). Following the traditional path to holiness, the crew overcomes the temptations and continues with their journey to the Holy Mountain.

In one of the scenes, the crew gets ready to climb the Holy Mountain and reach the summit to meet the immortals, but attaining that goal is not easy. They will need to confront the ambivalence of pleasure and pain. For example, when climbing, one member will have to rub her clitoris against the mountain; another one loses his finger, another one must lie covered by tarantulas. The journey here becomes painful: there is a dog fight, cows having sex and an old woman holding a sword hangs on a tree with dead chickens. Once a crew member approaches the woman, he becomes castrated. In another scene, an old hermaphrodite tricks a crew member (Jaramillo, 2020). This disjointed scenery symbolizes the challenging experience a person can go through under LSD, popularly known as a bad trip. In psychedelic therapy, these challenging experiences with negative emotions and feelings pose an opportunity to maximize the healing experience if one is open to delve into it.



Fig. 5. After meditating for three hours, the crew is prepared to face the immortals.

Once they reach the summit of the Holy Mountain, the alchemist points where the immortals are sitting at a round table and instructs them to meditate for three hours before approaching them. (Fig. 5) In the meantime, the alchemist approaches the thief and informs him that now he is ready to begin to learn. Afterward, he orders him to abandon his quest and return home with the sex workers who accompanied him on the journey, along with her chimp. According to the alchemist, this woman has proved to him that she felt true love and together as a couple they can change the world. In this scene, Jodorowsky challenges the whole concept of the Messiah and the individual Hollywood hero who can save the world (Santos, 2017). The hero here is the collective. Through individual transformation and love, we all can change the world. Love can change the world, not one person. These types of insights concerning universal love are common among those who have had psychedelic experiences.

After ending their meditation, the rest of the crew approaches the immortals to discover that they all are mannequins but one: the alchemist. Soon after, laughter erupts among

them, and then the alchemist unveils the ultimate revelation: there is no secret to immortality. We are all mortal beings, yet the truth of reality eludes us. Then the camera zooms out, revealing the entirety of the camera and film crew. The alchemist says goodbye to the Holy Mountain and invites us to enjoy real life. Under the influence of psychedelic substances, it is common to feel that our ordinary reality is not as real as the non-ordinary reality presented by the psychedelics. Our ability to test reality reaches a new level (Preller and Vollenweider 2018).

Throughout history, humans have attempted to reach immortality. The Epic of Gilgamesh, the first known book, narrates Gilgamesh's journey in the search for the secret of immortality, only to find out that it is the nature of every human being to die; we are all mortals. Alchemy and science aim to achieve the secret of immortality, which is the most ambitious quest of humanity. However, one may be ready to learn and be enlightened after having a genuine understanding of our own death. The knowledge of irreversible death can awaken us and invite us to genuinely enjoy our lives and the pleasures that our world offers.

CONCLUSIONS

In *The Holy Mountain*, Jodorowsky transcends conventional aesthetic forms and provokes social commentary. The film offers criticism of established societal norms and strata, denouncing the injustices perpetrated by institutions of power. The protagonists here are the others: the poor and the outcasts. Jodorowsky transcends beauty canons by highlighting the importance of the grotesque.

The Holy Mountain compels the multiple facets of the counterculture like psychedelics, rejection of power, and the interest in esoteric beliefs and practices such as the interest in magic, alchemy, astrology and the Tarot. These values were aligned with psychoanalytic ideas that impacted the cinema of its time. In *The Holy Mountain*, the spectator goes through a visual LSD trip rich in symbolism. Jodorowsky denounces the practice of authoritarian power and its different institutions. Concomitantly, the director invites us to explore alternative ways of existing through Eastern philosophy and embracement of esoteric ideas. Moreover, he shows the spectator the steps towards initiation and transcendental transformation.

Surrealist and psychedelic cinema are impacted by psychoanalytic theory. Thus, *The Holy Mountain* is rich in symbolism and is subject to analytic interpretation. *The Holy Mountain* incorporates elements from psychoanalytic theory. In alignment with Jungian theory, Jodorowsky makes the alchemist the person that can enlighten the protagonist and the group. Jodorowsky incorporates witchcraft, alchemy, astrology and the Tarot as symbols of transformation and elucidation. It is worth mentioning that following the release of *The Holy Mountain*, Jodorowsky continued to delve into psychoanalytic theories and developed his own method called psychomagic, which combines elements of psychoanalysis and performance art. In this method, individuals use performances as cathartic rituals to theoretically alleviate psychological problems lying in the unconscious mind (LeValley and Jodorowsky, 2010).

The Holy Mountain can be interpreted as a depiction of individual and collective trauma at an unconscious and conscious level. Psychedelic therapy aims to alleviate this type of trauma. Initiation, meditation, purification, transformation and psychedelic rites help trauma healing. The director took LSD, and the actors' initiation takes place under the effects of psychedelic mushrooms, along with intense preparation following Ichazo's methods. The protagonists heal by abandoning their materialistic and superficial needs conditioned by Western societal values and embracing the collective.

The film entails the depiction of the different phases of a psychedelic trip. The protagonist, the thief, is suffering and searching for truth. After encountering the alchemist, he sees an opportunity to open his mind. For that purpose, he will have to disintegrate, forsake his narcissistic defenses, and give in to love and the collective.

The secret of immortality has been humanity's quest, parallel to their own existence (Breckenridge, 2015). Like in many other attempts throughout history, in *The Holy Mountain*, immortality is not attainable. We are all mortals, and thus, we must enjoy our present lives.

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