

Religious Symbolism in the Cinema: “One Hour Photo”

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This study aims to identify religious symbols in the film (One Hour Photo) directed by Mark Romanek in 2002. The object of the study is the film “One Hour Photo” directed by Mark Romanek (2002); the subject is the religious symbolism contained in it. The scientific novelty lies in the fact that, for the first time, this film has been examined to identify religious symbolism. In the image of the main character, Seymour Parrish, some features are characteristic of the Demiurge-Yahweh in the ideas of the early Christian Gnostics. Being separated from his “mother”, the Aeon of Sophia, the Demiurge feels his imperfection. Similarly, Seymour, being a lonely person, misses his mother. He creates his own “world” in the form of photographs of the Yorkin family, just as the Demiurge shows both mercy and anger towards his “wards.” Just like the Demiurge-Yahweh, he punishes the “chosen” family, which he considers his own. The superhero toy Evangelion, shown in one of the episodes, symbolizes the deity’s punishing aspect. One of its attributes is a sword and a sword’s analog in the scene of punishment of “sinners” is the knife with which Seymour threatens Will and Maya. The punishment for Will Yorkin is caused precisely by his adultery, which in the texts of the Old Testament is often compared to the betrayal of his god. The biblical epiphany of the Demiurge-Yahweh is often reminiscent of the tornado (“the cloud pillar”) shown after the scene of Seymour’s punishment of the adulterers. The punishment itself contains several components. First, he erases Will’s face from the photos on the stand in his room. Second, he breaks into the hotel room where the lovers are and snaps a camera, forcing them to pose naked in love scenes. This is reminiscent of the biblical episode of the expulsion from the paradise of Adam and Eve.

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The final shot of the film is Seymour's fantasy, where he imagines a photo of himself and the Yorkins as one family. This symbolizes the restoration of the original harmony marred by Will Yorkin's "sin."

Keywords: One Hour Photo, Seymour Parrish, gnosticism, Demiurge, early Christianity, religious symbolism, cinema, sin, punishment, sword

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Introduction

Religious symbolism is widely represented in modern mass culture, in particular, in cinema. This article continues several of our previous studies aimed at identifying religious symbolism in cinema.

The object of this study is the film "One Hour Photo" directed by Mark Romanek (2002); the subject is the religious symbolism contained in it.

The scientific novelty lies in the fact that, for the first time, this film is being examined to identify religious symbols.

The methodology chosen for this study is a comparative analysis that involves the selection of religious symbols in the film "One Hour Photo." In the research text, the time of the referenced episode is indicated in the format [1:08:10], which means "one hour, eighth minute, and tenth second of the film." References to the Bible are presented in a generally accepted format. Separately, we note that the question "whether the authors of the artistic work consciously invested religious symbols in their creation and why they did it" is not considered in this study; we consider the religious symbols present in the film, in the form in which they are. We also methodologically relied on Fryderyk Kwiatkowski's research on the influence of Gnostic ideas on modern cinema (Kwiatkowski, 2018).

Now the plot of the film. The main character, Seymour "Sy" Parrish, an elderly single man, works as a photo technician in a photo lab. The meaning of his life is to work in one of the shopping centres. It should be noted that he is a high-level specialist who sincerely cares about the quality of service. His clients include the Yorkin family: Will Yorkin, Nina Yorkin and their son Jake Yorkin. Over the years, Seymour studied the life of this family well through photographs, and in his way, became attached to them (in his fantasies, he considers himself a member of the Yorkin family). When difficulties arise in the lives of the Yorkins (Will cheats on his wife with a mistress), Parrish decides to intervene. Compositionally, the film "One Hour Photo" is built as a story-reflection-confession of the main character in the interrogation room at the police station. It is symbolic that everything begins with a photo (the police take a photo of Seymour) and the film also ends with a frame with a photo.

Seymour Parrish as Demiurge

The first association that comes to mind when watching the film is the parallel between Seymour Parrish and the Demiurge as represented in Gnosticism. In contrast to modern Christianity, in Gnostic systems, the material world is not a creation of a perfectly good God (this is how the Gnostics solved the problem of the presence of evil in the world: the world is evil because it was created by an evil deity). Moreover, one of the characteristics that the Gnostics attributed to this deity is stupidity: "Stupidity is the power of the Demiurge because

he was stupid and unreasonable" (Afonasin, 2002: 339). From the point of view of the early Christian Gnostics, the Demiurge is an imperfect god-creator of the world, who creates matter and imprisons souls in material bodies. Interesting in this context is the episode when the film shows a stand with photographs of the Yorkin family collected by Seymour Parrish [17:40]. For archaic peoples (for example, the Indians of North America) a photo literally means "the soul theft," and it is believed that the soul can be imprisoned in the image.

In the context of the soul, it is worth mentioning another religious symbol displayed in the film – Seymour Parrish's pet hamster in a wheel [15:12]. Nowadays, this image (a squirrel or other small animal in a wheel that spins due to its running) is associated primarily with Eastern religions ("the wheel of Samsara"). However, it should be noted that the idea of transmigration of souls is also present in Gnosticism. Souls who have not learned the truth are doomed to endlessly reincarnate in the material world (for example, Afonasin, 2002: 41-42).

In Gnostic texts (for example, the Apocrypha of John, Pistis Sophia), the Demiurge (designated by the name Yaldabaoph) comes from the Aeon of Sophia (Afonasin, 2002: 311). "He didn't even know his Mother and that's why he thought he was alone" (Afonasin, 2002: 330). It is worth noting that the Demiurge is understood by Gnostics as a solitary being who subconsciously guesses the existence of a pleroma – a collection of higher (relative to him) Aeons – emanations of the supreme God (that is why the rule "not to worship other gods" is constantly proclaimed in the Old Testament (for example Ex. 23:24; Josh. 23:16; Judg. 10:13, etc.)). Interestingly, in the film, Seymour's superior (boss), Bill Owens, tells him: "Sy, let me try and explain something to you one more time. You need to take another look at your place on the food chain. These aren't your customers, they are Save-Mart's customers" [22:20], that is, indicates his place in the hierarchy. In the context of "the lost mother", we can cite an episode from the film when Seymour, while at the "flea market", looks through old photos, and, finds a black and white photo of a woman he does not know, buys it [27:35], and then, during conversations with Nina Yorkin claims that this is a photo of his mother, who died [38:50]. The main character has a hard time experiencing his loneliness, he hides from this loneliness behind fictions and fantasies. In one of the scenes at the end of the film, during the interrogation, Seymour tells the police detective: "But I'm guessing by your answer and that ring on your finger that you are [a family man]. And that makes you a very fortunate man" [1:21:00]. Interestingly, looking at old photographs, the main character reflects: "And if these pictures have anything important to say to future generations, it's this: I was here, I existed" [27:05-24]. Similarly, Yahweh says about himself: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you" (Ex. 3:14; also about this: Hos. 12:5; Matt. 6:9; Matt. 16:17; Luke 11:2; John 8:58 and others).

In general, in Gnosticism, the Demiurge was perceived as an "evil god", creating an imperfect and sinful world of matter, and, as a rule, was associated with the Old Testament Yahweh or with Satan (depending on the situation). In this regard, we can recall the apt characterization with which Yahweh-Demiurge was "awarded" by British religious scholar James Frazer: "a hot-tempered but essentially good deity" (Frazer, 1918)). This ambivalence of the main character in the film is shown very well through the use of colours – in moments when Seymour is in a positive mood, he is depicted in a blue and white uniform, which symbolizes the colours of the sky [e.g. 4:35]. But in the episode when he learns about adultery in the Yorkin family and intends to teach the "sinners", in his opinion, Will and his mistress, Parrish has shown in red, hellish colours (this scene takes place in a photo lab, so to achieve such a sharp change in visual images was not difficult at all) [49:10]. It can also be mentioned

that the red colour is associated with blood, wounds, mortal suffering and purification (Cirlot, 1962), which fits well within the logic of subsequent events.

Gnostic-Christian symbolism

Another hint of the Gnostic-Christian symbolism of the film is the episode in the supermarket when Seymour Parrish asks Jake about the toy he is holding in his hands, and the following dialogue takes place between them: "What do you have there? – Evangelion. – Neon Genesis Evangelion... Wow, what does he do? – Well... He is a good guy. He can fly, and he has a silver sword that can kill bad guys. – Really? – Yeah. And he's 60 feet tall" [25: 25-43]. In this regard, we can mention one of the descriptions of the Demiurge, which in this case is identified with Sabaoth, one of the biblical names of the god: "Sabaoth looks, as some say, like a donkey, while others compare him to a pig, which is why the Jews do not eat pork... when leaving this world, souls fly past him, and those who do not possess "knowledge" ... cannot bypass. However, in reality, he looks like a dragon" (Afonasin, 2002: 49). A toy depicting a superhero does indeed resemble a dragon (in the aesthetic of the Japanese anime subculture, of course) (the image of the dragon in the Bible – see Miller, 2019). As for the sword, very often in biblical texts (which were undoubtedly used by the Gnostics as well), this image is used to show the wrath and punishment of God: "And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall avenge the quarrel of my covenant: and when you are gathered together within your cities, I will send pestilence among you; and ye shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy" (Lev. 26:25); "If I wield my glittering sword, and my hand take hold on judgment; I will render vengeance to my enemies, and will reward them that hate me" (Deut. 32:41); "For my sword shall be bathed in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment. The sword of the LORD is filled with blood, it is made fat with fatness, and with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams: for the LORD hath a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great slaughter in the land of Idumea." (Isa. 34:5-6; also, about the sword: Jer. 12:12; Jer. 47:6; Ezek. 21:4 and others). Later, the knife in the hands of Seymour Parrish, with which he threatens the adulterers Will and Maya, will be associated with such a punishing sword (on the interpretation of the sword among early Christians: Croy, 2019). Well, the very word "Evangelion" (the name of the Japanese anime series), derived from the Greek "euangélion," is used in the New Testament in the sense of "good news."

Just as, according to the Old Testament, Yahweh chooses Abraham's family and cares for them ("God's chosen people"), so does Seymour Parrish choose the Yorkin family. He feels his kinship with them and fantasizes that he lives with them as one family [21:35, 29:26 et seq.]; during a conversation with Nina he directly says: "You know, I almost feel like Uncle Sy" [37:25], likewise in a conversation with a waitress, Seymour shows a photo of the Yorkins, claiming that this is his family [11:30] (It is interesting that Yahweh also appears related to Israel in some prophets: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" (Hos. 11:1)).

The turning point in the life of Seymour Parrish was the coincidence of two events – his dismissal from work and the fact that he accidentally learned about Will Yorkin's adultery. First, for numerous violations (the most significant of them is the discrepancy between the number of printed photos and the number of sold ones, which is not surprising because the viewer already knows that the extra photos went to the stand in Parrish's apartment). It is also interesting, in the context of religious symbolism, the Parrish's violation: "Three disposable

cameras to customers on their birthday! That must've been your bright idea. Sure as sh** isn't company policy" [42:25] – perhaps a veiled allusion to the three Abrahamic religions. The main character is fired, and this fact negatively affects his state of mind (he coolly and formally accepts a new order from Nina Yorkin and, later, even cries in despair [46:22]). Next, Seymour finds evidence in Maya Burson's photos of her affair with Will Yorkin [48:26]. It is interesting that in the Old Testament, some prophets equated serving "other gods" with adultery: "For of old time I have broken thy yoke, and burst thy bands; and thou saidst, I will not transgress; when upon every high hill and under every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot." (Jer. 2:20; also on this topic: Jer. 3:1-3; Ezek. 16:15-34; Ezek. 23:1-21) and is punishable by death (Deut. 13:6-10). So, Seymour perceives this fact as a personal insult and decides to punish adulterers. He slips a photo of Maya and Will together into a package with Nina Yorkin's order. On the way from work, he steals a knife from a supermarket (the knife/sword was discussed above) [51:49], then follows Nina's car until she sees the photos he planted [54:00]. In the evening, while at home, Seymour is watching TV, while there is a movie (stylistically very similar to "Star Trek"), where one of the characters says: "The universe grows smaller every day. There must be security for all, or no one is secure. It is no concern of ours how you run your own planet. But if you threaten to extend your violence, this Earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Now we do not pretend to have achieved perfection. But we do have a system, and it works. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace or pursue your present course and face obliteration. We shall be waiting for your answer. The decision rests with you" [55:40-56:25]. Obviously, the decisions that Parrish makes afterwards indicate that he perceives himself as the "ruler of the planet", as a god who must punish the "sinners": Will and Maya. Seymour has a dream in which his eyes explode, he wakes up and decides on his next steps regarding the adulterers [57:10]. It is interesting that the symbolism of the eyes, before which there should be no sinful acts, is also present in the Old Testament. In particular, Yahweh addresses the Jewish people: "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil" (Isa. 1:16).

Of all the Yorkin family photos on the stand, he erases Will's face [57:46]. In Parrish's photo-world, this is equivalent to destruction (we can recall how in the Old Testament Yahweh destroys whole groups of sinners – for example, the inhabitants of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24-25), the same applies to individual violators of the Law: "... that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant" (Gen. 17:14; also about this: Ex. 30:33; Lev. 7:20-27; Lev. 23:29; Num. 15:30-31; Ps. 36:28 and others)). As a result, the series of Seymour's actions (in his intention to take revenge on Will) becomes known to the police (they find a stand with photographs in Parrish's apartment in which the adulterer's face is erased [1:03:55]), and the police, not knowing how he plans to do it, trying to get in the way. Seymour tracks down Will and Maya at the hotel where they are staying for adultery and tricks him into knowing the room where they are. Pretending to be a hotel employee delivering food to the room, Parrish breaks into the hotel room where the lovers are [1:9:14]. Threatening with a knife, he forces them to pose in the nude, while he clicks the camera. Even earlier, Seymour compares the photos to the gunshots [58:45], so it's safe to say that Will and Maya are in his crosshairs. As the photo shoot ends, the next shot shows Nina and Jake at home, under police guard, waiting for news about Will and watching TV showing a tornado [1:12:40]. It is worth noting that the pillar of the cloud is one of the variants of the appearance of Yahweh in the Old Testament, in particular, during the exit of the Jews from Egyptian captivity: "And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of

the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them" (Ex. 14:19; also: Ex. 33:9-10; Neh. 9:19).

Having finished his work, he goes to his room and stays there for some time, thinking about what he experienced [1:13:00]. At this time, police officers arrive at the hotel, and Seymour tries to escape from them. Among the places he passes through, it is worth noting a conference hall in which ophthalmological problems are discussed, in particular, the speaker says "The retinal implant is a microelectronic prosthesis that can reverse the effects of retinal degeneration" [1:15:28-31]. This episode logically ends with Seymour's dream (where his eyes explode in the dream), if the loss of vision occurred in the dream, then here it is a symbolic restoration. The next moment during the escape (that is also worth noting) is Parrish running down the multi-level parking lot (with the path he runs in a spiral) [1:16:00 onwards]. Already at the exit, he is stopped by the police [1:17:19], while the photographer says, "I was just taking pictures." At this time, a police officer finds Maya Burson and Will Yorkin in the room, [1:17:50] and it turns out that they are alive, although upset, and that Seymour has not done anything with them other than taking pictures. In general, this episode resembles the expulsion from paradise of Adam and Eve: "And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons" (Gen. 3:7). It is obvious that the experience was for them an "exile" from the paradise of their relationship, and most likely, they will not return to it. Will Yorkin returns to his family [1:19:09], and apparently, his wife forgives him.

Later, during the interrogation, Seymour tells the detective: "Will Yorkin had had it all, and he threw it all away. He's not a good father" [1:22:34-56]. It turns out that Parrish was not taking pictures of Will and Maya; he was just faking it by clicking the camera, he used film to take pictures of completely neutral things – plumbing fixtures and household items in the room he was filming [1:23:29]. The detective leaves Seymour Parrish in the room, and he fantasizes about the photo of him with the Yorkin family, which is the last shot of the film [1:25:00].

Conclusions

As conclusions, we note the following. In the image of the main character Seymour Parrish, we have a number of features characteristic of the Demiurge-Yahweh in the manifestations of the early Christian Gnostics. Being separated from his "mother", the Aeon of Sophia, the Demiurge feels his imperfection. Similarly, Seymour, being a lonely person, misses his mother (and even buys an old photo of a woman at a flea market to later claim that it is his mother). He creates his own "world" in the form of photos of the Yorkin family, just as the Demiurge shows either mercy (in the film it is symbolized by white and blue colours) or anger (red colour) in relation to his "wards." The hamster in the wheel, Seymour's pet, symbolizes the doom of souls to the cycle of births in the material world. Just like the Demiurge-Yahweh, he punishes the "chosen" family, which he considers his own. The superhero toy Evangelion, which is shown in one of the episodes, symbolizes the punishing aspect of the deity, one of its attributes is a sword. The analogue of this sword (in the scene of the punishment of "sinners") is the knife with which Seymour threatens Will and Maya.

It is clear that the punishment for Will Yorkin is caused precisely by his adultery, which in the texts of the Old Testament is often compared to the betrayal of his god. The decision that Will and his mistress should be punished, Seymour makes while watching a scene from the "Star Trek" movie ("There must be security...", the main character perceives himself as the

“god” of his “small planet,” that is, the Yorkin family. And thus, Seymour can show mercy or punish his wards.

The biblical epiphany of the Demiurge-Yahweh is often reminiscent of the tornado (“pillar of cloud”) shown after the scene of Seymour’s punishment of the adulterers. The punishment itself contains several components. First, he erases Will’s face from photos on the wall in the room. Second, he breaks into a hotel room, where he finds the lovers and snaps a camera (as it turns out later, he was faking shooting), forcing them to pose naked in love scenes. This is reminiscent of the biblical episode of the expulsion from the paradise of Adam and Eve. The scene where Seymour Parrish is running from the police and walking through a conference room where ophthalmological achievements are being demonstrated is symbol of his return to reality (as opposed to the episode, when his eyes explode). The final scene of the movie is Seymour’s fantasy. He imagines a photo of Yorkin family, where he is a part of this idyll. This symbolizes the restoration of the original harmony, ruined by the “sin” of Will Yorkin.

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The film’s website:

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