

David Vichnar, PhD
OPPONENT'S REPORT:
re "*René Daumal's Mount Analogue and Alejandro Jodorowsky's The Holy Mountain: From Pataphysics to Power*"
by Darya Kulbashna (MA dissertation, 2020)

Ms Kulbashna's ambitious MA project undertakes no lesser task than to evaluate the use and abuse of (chiefly Lacanian) psychoanalysis as interpretive tool for various cultural products, consider the limits of language and ideology, and against this theoretical background to undertake a Lacanian analysis of René Daumal's 1952 novel *Mount Analogue* and Alejandro Jodorowsky's 1973 film *The Holy Mountain*.

The thesis falls into five chapters, as detailed in the supervisor's report. Ms Kulbashna's thesis is broad in its theoretical engagement: her exposition on the Lacanian psychoanalysis, though not without its flaws (see below), is competent; her discussion of ideology via Althusser, Baudrillard, and Žižek brings up some salient points for further use in her argument; her brief overview of the extant book/film comparative criticism yields food for thought and further research. The thesis comes into its own in the final 2 chapters, with some very fine Lacanian reading of *The Holy Mountain*, and a savvy discussion of the workings of power both within and beyond the book/film.

Laudable is Ms Kulbashna's consistency with which she painstakingly defines her terms and the grace with which she employs these sources to inform her own argument, without her voice ever becoming subservient to theirs or relying on them to make her point for her. Ms Kulbashna's command of the critical discourse she employs is competent, her close readings of the primary text and film are insightful and well-argued, she is apt at synthesising concepts and drawing original conclusions.

As for critical remarks, there are a number of formatting oddities and language problems, that go way beyond what is specified in the supervisor's report – which only constricts itself to 3 pages of text. There is redundant double-spacing between footnotes; there is an unorthodox and inconsistent use of block quotations (also double-spaced); definite and indefinite articles are all over the place (e.g. Lacanian must almost always take "the"), commas are used in a standard other than English (at the start of sentences, "although" doesn't have one), and a few stylistic inaccuracies run through the text (e.g. instead of "the one[s] of", one uses "that/those of"). With only a little exaggeration one can say that what the supervisor details on the scope of 3 pages can be found throughout the thesis (esp. its first half)—see my coloured handwritten feedback marked through the first 4 chapters.

There are also a few factual errors, the most outstanding of which is the claim that Daumal "started" *Mount Analogue* "in 1952" (44), by which time of course he had been dead for ten years, the novel having been left unfinished at his untimely departure. One also wonders about the nonchalance with which, on page 9, Ms Kulbashna misquotes the famous Lacanian dictum that the unconscious is "structured like a language" as "has a structure of language". This is not to nit-pick, for there is a lot hanging on that indefinite article in Lacan's famous formulation. All of these mar the otherwise not unfavourable impression made by the overall thesis which would have benefited from an extra editing job.

More broadly and seriously, the opponent wonders about the overall structure of the thesis as coherent argument. One spends two extensive chapters on language, psychoanalysis, and ideology, by way of preparation for Ms Kulbashna's own theoretical

engagements, only to read that “theoretical connections are developed directly from the interaction with the works in question” and “the psychoanalytical approach to cultural works is discarded” (43). Why then spend the first 40 pages on a theoretical/psychoanalytical introduction? Esp. if the R.S.I. discussion is only And what else is her reading of *Mount Analogue* and *The Holy Mountain* BUT psychoanalytical approach (cf. e.g. 54: “the Lacanian theory of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary [...] allows a better understanding of the world depicted in the unfinished novel”)? The final chapter again has little to do with either Daumal and Jodorowsky and feels like a self-contained exposé on power vis-à-vis ideology and language.

One is left with the impression that rather than a coherent argument, the thesis is a series of isolated forays into less than more connected thematic areas. Again it would have benefited from some extra editing to help the argument cohere. In addition to the criticism above, 6 points deserve expanding upon and addressing at the defence:

1. To start off lightly, two personal notes: I have always found the conclusion of Jodorowsky’s film—its trite breaking of the fourth wall, and its invocation of a “real life” beyond the cinematic realm—a rather cheap copout. The thesis quotes Žižek that “stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it” (25), yet Jodorowsky’s film precisely announces that such “stepping out” is the final enlightenment. I am unsure that I agree with the interpretation (72) that what is presented here is the “realization that reality presents itself as an illusion and there is no ‘beyond,’” as it is precisely a “beyond” to which Jodorowsky’s conclusion points. How would the candidate help me dispel this scepticism?
2. I personally dislike the simplistic binary—to which the thesis subscribes and numerous refers—of Western “rationalism” and Eastern “spiritualism”. Not to get bogged down with the nitty-gritty, but faced with these New-Age shorthands and stereotypes I am always at a loss whether one should count Plotinus or St John of the Cross or indeed Alfred Jarry as proponents of “rationality,” and whether one should include within Eastern “spirituality” movements such as Confucianism, Averroism, not to speak of Indian Rationalist Movement or indeed Maoism. All simple East/West binarism smacks of orientalism.
3. There are a few theoretical issues with the discussion of the Lacanian “Real”, and the R.S.I. triad in the thesis: time and again, Ms Kulbashna makes the point that in both *Mount Analogue* and *The Holy Mountain*, the Real is found “behind the scenes” (54), “manifested” (56), and even “expressed” (72) through this text/film. This despite the fact that, as she is well aware, the Real as understood by Lacan is “that which resists symbolization absolutely,” and thus *cannot* be represented. There seems to be a (typical) confusion here between the Real as understood by Lacan and its more positive reconceptualisation in Žižek (as “distortion of reality produced by incomplete symbolization”). For Lacan at least, the Real may be gestured to in certain highly exceptional cases, but definitely not “represented” and even less so through writing, as Ms Kulbashna repeatedly suggests.
4. This brings me to Ms Kulbashna’s use of Lacan’s 23rd seminar on the *sinthome*, which she applies to “the writing of the article” and “failure of the Real” in *Mount Analogue* and conceives of as “the moving force behind the narrator’s desire” (56). As is well known but never stated, Lacan’s concept of the *sinthome* arose out of his engagement with the writings of James Joyce, esp. *Finnegans Wake*, where writing does act as supplementary cord in the subjective knot of RSI. As Lacan states throughout, the *sinthome* is something unique to Joyce’s peculiar writing project (it even puns on *saint homme*, Joyce’s purported

saintliness in refusing any imaginary solution to *jouissance* other than writing; and on the name of his scholastic preceptor, St. Thomas), and yet Ms Kulbashna sees no obstacle in applying the concept to a whole different—and far more “conventionally” written—text. This needs major clarification as I cannot possibly make sense of this “application”.

5. Regarding the issue of “applied” theory, which the thesis addresses but doesn’t quite settle: Harking back to the famous Derrida/Lacan polemic re “The Purloined Letter”, I would like to raise a final provocation and wonder if Ms Kulbashna, in treating of Daumal’s writing as an “example” of “sinthome”, might herself perform the same interpretive violence on Daumal that Derrida accuses Lacan of inflicting on Poe? Isn’t there a paradox between her insistence on the “exceptional” and “unique” (as per pataphysics) and “the exemplary” function both Daumal and Jodorowsky serve in her argument? More broadly, what is the relation of Ms Kulbashna’s theoretical apparatus to her two “texts” analysed?
6. Knowing full well that Ms Kulbashna’s thesis is not a work of literary history, I cannot keep silent about one last misgiving. To manage an entire thesis on Daumal without a single mention of his (para-)surrealist background and poetics (e.g. via his membership in the *Grand Jeu* group), borders on wilful omission. *Mount Analogue’s* humour, conception of mysticism in the everyday, its opening scene of *hasard objectif*, its insistence on collectivity as access to higher consciousness, etc. are surrealist almost to a fault—not to speak of Jodorowsky’s surrealist cinematic tour-de-force. The omission is all the more astounding given Lacan’s own surrealist beginnings in the *Minotaure* magazine. Had Ms Kulbashna undertaken at least a basic historical research into Lacan’s and Daumal’s surrealist backgrounds, her case for a Lacanian reading of Daumal would be far stronger. Leaving that aside, *Mount Analogue* is undoubtedly far more *Nadya* than *Père Ubu* – and yet it’s steadfastly (mis-)construed as pataphysical. Why?

Still, despite the points raised above, Ms Kulbashna’s thesis presents a well-researched, original contribution to critical discourse on the dynamic field of applied psychoanalysis and ideological critique. As such, it deserves **a grade of very good**, open to improvement depending upon the candidate’s ability to address the issues raised in this report at her defence.

Práci doporučuji k obhajobě.



David Vichnar, PhD
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