‘But There Are No Lions in the Scottish Highlands’: Reading the trunk in Matka

ABSTRACT
This article reads the trunk in Matka as Lacan’s objet petit a – a reminder of our desiring subjectivity and considers to what degree it might be seen as a MacGuffin. It also argues that the protagonist is an emblem of the human subject in an abstract representation of our life’s journey.

A hybrid of mysticism, inexplicability, and post-apocalyptic allegory – this is the impression I gained from my first encounter with Matka. The film seems to delineate an endless journey, an escape from a post-apocalyptic metropolis, and a redemption of the unnamed protagonist in a perplexing setting. What interests me most in the narrative, however, is the trunk carried by the protagonist throughout the film. What is in the trunk? Why he carries it incessantly? And what kind of narrative and thematic weight does it carry?

This approach first leads me to the protagonist who remains anonymous and speechless throughout the film. If anonymity and speechlessness/unavailable linguistic attribute often imply universality and commonality, it is reasonable to argue that the protagonist serves as an emblem of human subjects. Indeed, his journey on-screen seems to be a distillation of human life in the abstract. We wonder about where he comes from, what his story is,
and why he is travelling – not unlike our constant contemplation about where life comes from and where it goes afterwards, and why us, why here, and why now we are on a journey of life as members of the human species.

This understanding of Matka sheds light on reading the trunk in the film: what are we all carrying throughout our life’s journey? Here my analysis is not circumscribed by the physicality of the trunk. Rather, I intend to read the trunk as the Lacanian objet petit a, defined as something that reminds us of what we truly desire as desiring subjects. More specifically, during the formation of our subjectivity we internalize other people’s desire – what Jacques Lacan calls ‘the Other’s desire’ – on which basis we are able to constitute our own desire and our desiring subjectivity (Lacan [1966] 2006: 524–26, 689–90). And the objet petit a is something leftover in this process that helps us to differentiate our own desire from the others’ desire placed upon us and hence secure our own subjectivity.

To put it another way, Matka seems to be a story about escape as already mentioned. But, from a Lacanian perspective, we cannot escape from the Other’s desire. Instead, the Other’s desire always escapes us, in the sense that it always differs from and exceeds our own desire. When it escapes, something always remains that reminds us of and sustains us in our being as desiring subjects. This reminder is our objet petit a. The heavy trunk carried/dragged by the protagonist in the first half of Matka is such a reminder. It reminds us of the heaviness of the Other’s desire placed upon us that we have to bear throughout our life, and about the danger of confusing our own desire with the Other’s in the formation of our subjectivity.

Furthermore, the longest scene in Matka (Shots 27–41) intercuts between the silent trunk-carriers (Shots 27–28, 30, 32–34, 36, 38, 40–41) and the screaming faces (Shots 29, 31, 35, 37, 39), while the screams last throughout the scene. In this scene the trunk/objet petit a is also a reminder. In Lacanian theory, a subject always addresses itself – what am I in the Other’s desire? – and shouts, screams, and asks the Other: what do you want from me? It is during this process that a subject is able to further differentiate itself from the Other’s desire, and finally secure its position as a desiring subject.

In this scene, the trunk/objet petit a reminds us about questioning the Other – vocally or silently – as the final step to secure our position as desiring subjects in the formation of our own subjectivity. The trunk becomes lighter hereafter and the protagonist is able to lift it above his head (Shots 42–43). It reminds us that once we are able to address the Other and clearly distinguish our own desire from the Other’s, the danger of confusing the two is diminished and what remains is ‘lighter’ when the Other’s desire escapes us.

As seen in Matka, a subject can never attain the objet petit a but rather perpetually carries or circles around it (Lacan [1973] 1998: 180; see also Evans 1996: 128). And the trunk is full of nothing but screams as a means to address the Other and distinguish our own desire from the Other’s. That is to say, the trunk/objet petit a is not the desire per se, nor the object of desire, but only something that reminds us to question the Other in order to secure our own subjectivity. It is in itself a void and a lack. In Matka, the trunk/objet petit a catches our attention and arouses our curiosity, reminding us of our ‘desire-to-know’ as desiring audiences in film-viewing – the desire to understand the narrative and the characters’ motivation. But the trunk turns out to be an objet petit a, which is in itself nothing at all, and hence brings us to the notion of the MacGuffin.

The MacGuffin was popularized in film-making by Alfred Hitchcock who himself described it as the device, the gimmick, or ‘the papers the spies are
after’ in a spy story (Truffaut 1985: 138). In general, the MacGuffin is the motivator that allures the key characters to desire, pursue and fight for. It is sufficient to legitimize the characters’ motivation and arouse the audiences’ curiosity, but often with little or no value or importance of its own. In other words, it is an in-itself-nothing object petit a that sets the characters’ desire in motion on-screen and that of the audiences off-screen, like the papers that attract both the spies and the spectators in Hitchcock’s espionage films.

Hitchcock believes that the best MacGuffin is ‘the emptiest, the most non-existent, and the most absurd’ (Truffaut 1985: 139). On explaining such nothingness and emptiness, Hitchcock uses a story about ‘two men in a train’:

Man A: What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?
Man B: Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.
Man A: What’s a MacGuffin?
Man B: It’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.
Man A: But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands!
Man B: Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!

(Truffaut 1985: 138)

Thus, as Hitchcock and Truffaut both agree, there is no need for a MacGuffin to be important or serious; instead, it is preferable for a MacGuffin to be trivial and absurd. In Matka, the protagonist is intimately and inextricably accompanied by the trunk during his journey. The dramatic tension is gradually developed as we become increasingly curious about what is in the trunk. Revealed midway in the story, as often seen in Hitchcock’s repertoire, this mysterious trunk turns out to contain nothing but screams (Shots 27–41). In this perspective, it might be thought of as a MacGuffin.

However, the trunk appears in almost every shot and holds the audience’s attention throughout the film. Its transition from heavy to light after the screams are let out makes it even more interesting to us. It clearly carries more narrative and thematic weight than it would as a MacGuffin, and is of greater importance to the interpretation of the film. In these respects it differs from a MacGuffin, which according to Hitchcock should be trivial and forgotten by audiences as the story moves forward.

Taking into account its enormous narrative and thematic value as well as its constant presence throughout the film, the trunk in Matka might be considered a MacGuffin only in the sense of the nothing-in-itself Lacanian objet petit a – as a significant reminder of our desiring subjectivity. Setting the story and our desire in motion, the trunk in Matka reminds us about the heavi ness of the Other’s desire, about the need to question the Other in order to secure our own subjectivity, and about our ‘desire-to-know’ while experiencing a film. Hitchcock would say that there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands; but we can add that there exists a trunk on a snow-covered mountain in Matka.

REFERENCES

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