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Far and Away: Utopian Projections, Mythological Quest and The American Dream in Kazan's *America America*

ABSTRACT

A major contemporary storyteller, the American cinema, has constantly recycled and explicitly or implicitly reactivated classical mythological and religious patterns. The hero's journey and the initiation rituals associated with it have definitely been some of the most frequently employed such patterns. Elia Kazan's epic intentionally draws on these traditional narrative frameworks, also employing – by way of the myth of the American dream, with reference to the utopian destination – the myth of the earthly paradise as the object of the quest. Therefore, we might say that the traditional patterns of initiation are closely followed in Kazan's narrative: the protagonist leaves the familiar space, faces dangerous situations and characters, meets a mentor, escapes the temptations of wealth and love and, eventually, is symbolically reborn when reaching the magical destination: he is baptized with a new name, washing away his sins and recovering his lost innocence, while literally receiving a new identity and a new destiny.

KEYWORDS

Utopia; Cinema; American Dream; Hero's Journey; Mythology; Elia Kazan.

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The American Utopia

A privileged cinematic theme, the American Dream has taken numerous shapes in 20th century both mainstream and *auteur* cinema. One of its avatars – both within popular culture and as a representational stereotype – can be that of a utopian destination, a land where hopes and dreams can materialize. Therefore, the cinematic myth of the American Dream can be related with the cultural archetype of *utopia*: “sometimes called the American dream, that idea remains one of our most persistent and fraught utopian visions. In American culture, we now see utopianism and utopian literature intersecting with new formulations of multicultural identity.”¹ Since Thomas More's classical work, the concept has undergone a lexical evolution and several meaning shifts, being encountered in different contexts:

Utopia, as a neologism, is an interesting case: it began its life as a lexical neologism, but over the centuries, after the process of deneologization, its meaning changed many times, and it has been adopted by authors and researchers from different fields of study, with divergent interests and conflicting aims.²



As scholars have noticed, the concept of utopia itself has undergone certain metamorphoses in time, from designating an imagined perfect society to a generic term suggesting the genre, respectively the literary or cinematic “form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallized”³. It also embodies, eventually, a generic “desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in.”⁴ It is this latter meaning that the current article will be concerned with, as the American Dream encapsulates precisely this mirage of an ideal place, a sort of Promised Land of self-accomplishment and fulfillment: “from its origins, America has been conceived as the New World, a land of liberty, equality and opportunity, where both individuals and society as a whole would prosper.”⁵ This type of spatial projection or representation contains recognizable features of the utopia archetype, intertwined – as anticipated – with the biblical *topos* of the Promised Land: “The place that later became the United States has been called ‘the Promised Land’ by innumerable people in the past four hundred years.”⁶

It can also be associated with the myth of the earthly paradise⁷ recurrent in different mythologies and imaginaries (a pattern materialized, in Greek mythology, in the Fortunate Isles or the Isles of the Blessed). This can be related to the belief in the existence of a so-called Terrestrial Paradise,⁸ which became – as will later happen to the American utopia – not only the embodiment of an aspiration, a desire and a most sought after Destination, but also the object of actual mapping and attempts of locating:

The medieval Christianity displaced Eden from its central location to a peripheral site of the *mappaemundi*. The geographical information given by

Genesis 2 on the location of the Terrestrial Paradise was very poor: all we find out about Eden is that it situated *mikedem*, “towards the East.”⁹

The modern imaginary functions similarly in the case of the American utopia, with the inevitable mapping shift towards the West but otherwise preserving the religious load and the features of the myth pattern: “one of America’s most fundamental myths is expressed in what often has been termed America’s civil religion, the myth of the American Dream, which is related to the myth of rebirth”¹⁰ or “the prospect of symbolic immortality.”¹¹ Configured within this mythological matrix of the earthly paradise, the American Dream destination is also shaped by its own specific historical context and causalities. Thus, Eliade argues that the Puritan perspective led to this specific shaping of the American myth: “It is very probable that the behavior of the average American today, as well as the political and cultural ideology of the United States, still reflects the consciousness of the Puritan certitude of having been called to restore the earthly paradise.”¹² This prolongation of a biblical aspiration for the lost paradise or the terrestrial paradise was identified by Mircea Eliade in the Puritan quest for a new order within the New World:

Taking his interpretation further in *The Quest: Paradise and Utopia*, Eliade “reads” in modern America the first settlers’ “nostalgia for the earthly paradise,” the determination to build it there anew, the cult of work and of novelty, the rapid turning of landscape into a garden, the “American paradise” which “gave rise to the myth of indefinite progress and American optimism,” a lasting “religious enthusiasm” despite secularization. He detects an “Adamic



nostalgia” in camouflaged forms in the works of American writers especially in the nineteenth century, and sees everywhere “the result of these messianic hopes.” Eliade also argues that the power of the nostalgia for paradise myth and consequently the settlers’ “certainty of the eschatological mission” of bringing paradise on the new land could not be easily forgotten, and more so, can be traced even today.¹³

Another myth dimension associated to this paradisaical nostalgia is related, also in Eliade’s terms, with the very idea of “New World” and therefore with the cosmogony structure implicit in the founding of a new society or community. Not accidentally, as we are speaking about the religious-laden Puritan perspective, this reiteration of Creation made use of a religious imagery and paraphernalia

Like any space that started being organized, America was then, to borrow Eliade’s terms, “susceptible to become sacred,” as he says: “settling in a territory is equivalent to founding a world.” Assuming the responsibility of “creating” the world in which to live, the Puritans repeated the experience of the religious man in traditional societies who sanctified the small universe making it similar to the divine world. “Religious nostalgia makes man want to live in a pure and sacred Cosmos as it was when it first came out of the Creator’s hands.”¹⁴

This reiteration of the primordial Creation and therefore a transfer of cosmogonic actions probably led to the emphasis on the individual in the future American Dream stereotype of the self-made man: “the American Dream has at its core an emphasis on the individual. According to the ideology

of the American Dream, we are ‘master of our own fate’. We go ‘our own way’ and do ‘our own thing’.”¹⁵ We can therefore deduce an intrinsic connection between the religious-laden imaginary connected to the American Dream and its specific features as a myth, favoring the fulfilment of the individual, and not just an evolution or shift of emphasis.

So it was that some people with a strong sense of religious mission founded a new world they hoped would become a model for the old one. Their confidence – in themselves, in their sense of mission for their children and in a God they believed was on their side – impelled them with ruthless zeal to gamble everything for the sake of a mission. In the process, they accomplished the core task in the achievement of any American Dream: they became masters of their own destiny.¹⁶

Concerning the history of the concept, while it is believed that the genesis of the myth can be traced back to the discovery of the New World,¹⁷ the notion appeared for the first time at a critical moment, during the Great Depression, in James Truslow Adams’s 1931 *The Epic of America*.¹⁸ The coherency of this myth, which had existed prior to this process of naming, is constructed on the image of this earthly paradise of human justice and equal opportunities, in contrast with the many traditional stratified societies in which the individual’s future was conditioned by social origin as well as other external circumstances: “In the image of the American Dream, America is the land of opportunity. If you work hard enough, you can overcome any obstacle and achieve success. No matter where you start out in life, the sky is the limit. You can go



as far as your talents and abilities can take you.”¹⁹ The status of immigrants shared by the creators of this new world eliminates, at least within the myth, any potential social bias in the individual’s fulfilment and this equality and meritocracy added a component of dignity to the strife.

In a general way, people understand the idea of the American Dream as the fulfilment of the promise of meritocracy. The American Dream is fundamentally rooted in the historical experience of the United States as a new nation of immigrants[...] The ideal in America was that its citizens were “free” to achieve on their own merits. The American Dream was the hope of fulfilment of individual freedom and the chance to succeed in the “New World” ... To be consistent to the American Dream, our society would need to become one that truly creates equal opportunities to develop merit, recognize genuine merit and equitability reward it.²⁰

This dignity is precisely the essence of the urge so poetically depicted by Kazan’s film in his “American Odyssey,” as the hero is offered wealth and social status before actually reaching the U.S. Following a period of hesitation which, in any case, made apparent that he had reached neither happiness nor fulfilment, the protagonist decides to leave these behind and follow his (American) dream. By this rejection, the audiences are communicated the message that his quest was in search of this dignity and meritocracy rather than of material wealth, as at the end, although in a far less fortunate situation, the protagonist shows genuine joy and hope.

The Hero’s Mythological Journey²¹

The notion of *quest* was not accidentally mentioned in this context: one of the central cinematic myths, inherited from traditional storytelling pattern is the *hero’s journey*, “occurring in every culture, in every time. It is as infinitely varied as the human race itself and yet its basic form remains constant.”²² Therefore, this pattern can be considered universal, as it can be identified across mythologies, religions and cultures, not to mention in literary and cinematic narratives.

Despite its infinite variety, the hero’s story is always a journey. A hero leaves his comfortable, ordinary surroundings to venture into a challenging, unfamiliar world. It may be an outward journey to an actual place: a labyrinth, forest or cave, a strange city or country, a new locale that becomes the arena for her conflict with antagonistic, challenging forces.²³

As a contemporary audio-visual storyteller, the cinema and, most recognizably, American mainstream productions have recycled these successful and universal myth patterns and have centred their narratives on the hero’s quest, which eventually leads him to attain maturity. In the classical hero’s journey pattern (as Campbell, in his classical *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* emphasized), this process materializes in the protagonist’s abandonment of the familiar space (implying the key moment of the *departure*) in order to start a travel filled with obstacles, ordeals and a descent into a sort of dark world (or the underworld). The hero thus undergoes initiation and on his successful return, he has not only reached the explicit purpose of the journey but also gained knowledge and maturity.



The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. ... Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again – if the powers have remained unfriendly to him – his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).²⁴

Generally, the initial moment of the hero's journey is, as anticipated, that of the hero abandoning his familiar space as a condition for achieving his goal (including that of self-knowledge), conquering the unknown world and defeating external and internal demons. "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this

mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."²⁵

The ordeal(s) he has to face are part of the traditional initiation processes (common to many cultures, as it is found in shamanic ancient rituals as well as in Western folk tales and traditions) and while this is an "indispensable step in his initiation and identity quest"²⁶ it is also highly significant in cinema narratives as it aims to stir empathy and emotional reactions: "the Ordeal is a 'black moment'" for the audience, as we are held in suspense and tension, not knowing if he will live or die. The hero, like Jonah, is 'in the belly of the beast'.²⁷ The overcoming of the ordeal has a deeper aim: "profound self-realization"²⁸ and knowledge. The dark forces fought against can also be read as a confrontation with one's inner demons and weaknesses.

The hero's initiation through a journey or a quest involves, therefore, an exploration of the world and of the self, symbolized in the quest and in the classical prototype of Odysseus, but proving itself enduring in the sense that it takes the form of multiple avatars. Although the "call to adventure" can take the shape of different challenges and problems to solve, the common pattern mentioned above ("separation, liminality, and reintegration into society,"²⁹ resulting in transformation through a fundamental experience) remains remarkably stable and enduring.



**The Transatlantic Journey to Utopia.
Case Study: Elia Kazan's *America*
*America***

As a major contemporary storyteller, the cinema has always employed at a large scale this mythological pattern of the hero's (initiation) journey. Moreover, the American cinema has sometimes intertwined it with the utopian myth of the American dream, being itself, as already discussed, an individual-focused aspiration and quest.

He [Kazan] made explicit reference to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and to "a *Candide* with Hope." In Bunyan's seventeenth-century allegory (its full title was *Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which is to Come*) the protagonist makes a journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, while Voltaire's picaresque novel recounts its hero's adventures, including in the mythical city of El Dorado. Something of this is suggested by the episodic form of Kazan's work, in which Stavros encounters a series of characters who aid, try or tempt him along the way.³⁰

However, in many cases we can speak of the hero's metaphorical journey in "pursuit of happiness" rather than of an actual voyage. It is not the case with Elia Kazan's classic epic *America America*, in which the painful pursuit of the American dream takes the form of a traditional journey across land and sea, with all the recognizable trials and temptations of a classical *Odyssey*. Besides the recognizable pattern, there are also specific references to the ancient Greek narratives (the protagonist, as well as the filmmaker being Greeks themselves):

Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu

A number of scenes, including the first meeting between Stavros and Hohaness and the protagonist's flight from the scene of his murder of Abdul, a speck in a vast expanse of mountain-side, suggest the timelessness of Greek mythology. ... The scene also suggests something of the Aegean legends of Jason and the Golden Fleece. The visual and verbal references to memories and dreams, together with Kazan's introductory and concluding narration, and the role of Stavros's parents as a typical Kazan chorus, all enhance the status of the film story as myth and fable as much as period documentary.³¹

The voyage is placed, from the very beginning (from the director's opening comment), in the center of the story: "My name is Elia Kazan. I am a Greek by blood, a Turk by birth, and an American because my uncle made a journey."³² Moreover, this describes a multiple journey: that of the uncle, the protagonist named Stavros Topouzoglou in the film, that of his family (Kazan among them) and, most significantly, the journey in time, with the aim of retracing this family history and providing it with meaning. The main journey, that of Stavros, is obviously one of initiation and maturation: a young boy at the beginning of the film, the protagonist is fascinated with his older Armenian friend Vartan's dream of emigrating to the United States. Both belong to communities that are, at the beginning of the 20th century, minorities within the Turkish province of Anatolia: the Greeks and the Armenians. While the former assume, in Stavros's rebellious eyes, a humiliating attitude of accepting the Turkish dominance (the "Anatolian smile" referred to by one version of the film title), the latter become the target of persecution, soon turned into extermination. Thus, Vartan becomes a victim and is no longer able



to escape and fulfill his dream, desperately assumed by young Stavros. Fortunately, his aspirations to leave the village and start a new life coincide with those of his family: his father decides that Stavros should go to Constantinople with all the family goods and start a business there in order to later bring the whole family there. His own dreams go beyond, captured in his obsessive line “America America” (subtly but powerfully reiterated by the musical themes signed by Manos Hadjidakis).³³ As in any initiation, he is at first unprepared to face the trials and becomes soon a victim of swindle and theft. Reduced to poverty after being robbed of all the money and goods given by his family (all their possessions, in fact), the young man tries to gather the necessary amount for the trip to America, while not confessing the defeat to his family. Eventually, after numerous ordeals and setbacks, he seems willing to accept his uncle’s suggestion to marry a rich merchant’s daughter and start a comfortable life in Constantinople. Still, what seems to be the end of his journey, materialized in the domestic paradise described by his future father-in-law, in Stavros’s eyes looks like the abandonment of his dream and a new compromise and subordination like those he had tried to escape. Kazan himself spoke of the “people who swarmed to America at the end of the last century, leaving oppression behind, looking for freedom and the hope of dignity.”³⁴ Therefore, Stavros’s quest, as it becomes apparent, is not that of wealth and stability but of dignity, and this bears the name of America.

America America simultaneously works as the archetypal immigrant story and a specific coming-of-age saga. We see Stavros undergo the struggles and setbacks present in almost every immigration narrative – poverty, oppression, danger, plain bad luck – the kind of

trials which take on a mythical quality. ... And yet, there is something in Stavros’ journey which is unique. ... Stavros’ desire to immigrate is not simply a reaction to poverty and persecution; it is a burning need at the core of his being. ... Stavros remains impressively insensible to any other worldly desires, rejecting the temptation of women, wealth and domesticity.³⁵

He would eventually abandon all these temptations and continue his voyage to the United States, although in order to do this, he still has to violate a series of principles of honor³⁶: “central to Kazan’s thematic plan was the hunger for dignity and the terrible things people will do to get it.”³⁷ However, when, as typical of initiation patterns, the hero is born again (“the same initiatory schema – comprising suffering, death, and resurrection (= rebirth) – is found in all mysteries”³⁸) when he reaches the Promised land and is baptized under a new name: “Kazan emphasizes what his hero had lost in reaching America, and the scene of his re-baptism by the immigration officer also suggests a merging, at the end, of the qualities of Stavros and those of the much more accepting, more Christian, figure of Hohnanes.”³⁹ This baptism is anticipated by Stavros when he says to Thomna, his fiancée, that “he believes that in America he will be ‘washed clean’.”⁴⁰ Before his arrival in the United States, in a context of despair, as Stavros risked being sent back, he reiterates the dance he shared with Vartan before the latter’s death and Stavros’s travel:

Desperate but determined, the two men enact a strange dance, separately and yet in synchronization. To Kazan the two men were like crusaders taking an oath, while the incantation of the phrase ‘America America’ suggests the



mystical nature of their defiance, and their projection of their hopes for a different life.⁴¹

Reminding the audiences of Alexis Zorba's dance of both happiness and despair, as well as of a "whirling dervish,"⁴² Stavros externalizes all his despair and noble aspirations, "the intensity and the 'madness' of the quest."⁴³

Conclusions

A major contemporary storyteller, the American cinema has constantly recycled and explicitly or implicitly reactivated classical mythological and religious patterns. The hero's journey and the initiation rituals associated with it have definitely been some of the most frequently employed such patterns. This quest, with its initiation undertones, was equally important for classical mythologies and rites of passage and has penetrated fiction in both its oral and written forms.

Elia Kazan's epic intentionally draws on these traditional narrative frameworks, also employing – by way of the myth of the American dream, with reference to the utopian destination – the myth of the earthly paradise as the object of the quest. This magical destination, laden with all the characteristics of utopia, never loses its power of fascination, manifested in the bitter-sweet incantation "America, America" repeated by the protagonist. Following the dramatic journey, the audiences become increasingly aware that this destination is deeply associated with a quest for dignity and self-accomplishment, essentially present in the myth of the American Dream, which focuses on individual fulfilment and the opportunities provided by a meritocratic society. Despite temptations and trials,

despite the testimony of a fellow worker on the deceitfulness of this dream for some, Stavros desperately clings to his quest. The classical and mythical patterns are intertwined, in a rich structure, with the modern myth of the American dream, a narrative structure in which music plays a significant merging and enchanting role.

Concerning the hero's initiation, we might say that the traditional patterns of ritualistic initiation are closely followed: the protagonist leaves the familiar space, faces peril and dangerous characters (some disguised as friends), encounters a mentor, escapes temptations of wealth and love and, eventually, is symbolically reborn when reaching the magical land and kissing the ground beneath his feet: he is baptized with a new name, washing away his sins and loss of innocence, literally receiving a new identity and a new destiny. Moreover, Stavros's struggle – eventually successful – to bring his entire family to the United States establishes a balance between the ending and the opening lines narrated by Kazan, which speak of the determining role of his uncle's journey for the destiny and identity of his family. This was a journey that changed more than one destiny, providing the hero with the magical aura of traditional mythological quests and of heroic community saviours.

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¹ Charles Tedder, *Utopian Discourse: Identity, Ethnicity, and Community in Post-Cold War American Narrative*, Ph.D. Thesis, https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/Tedder_uncg_0154D_10384.pdf, accessed on September 29, 2015, p. 1.

² Fatima Vieira, "The concept of utopia", in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 3.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁵ Joanne Morreale, *A New Beginning: A Textual Frame Analysis of the Political Campaign Film*, SUNY Press, 1991, p. 58.

⁶ Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 16.



⁷ See Corin Braga, *Du paradis perdu à l'antiutopie aux XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles*, Ed. Classiques Garnier, 2010; Corin Braga, "Psychoanalytical Geography," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 7(2010), pp. 134-149; Corin Braga, "Paradis terrestre, Millénium et Utopie (II) Trois variantes du 'lieu parfait' à la Renaissance," *Transylvanian Review* 3 (2008).

⁸ *Idem*, "Psychoanalytical Geography", pp. 134-149.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

¹⁰ Joanne Morreale, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹¹ Florian Keller, *Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream*, Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. xii.

¹² Qtd in Mihaela Paraschivescu, "'We the People' and God. Religion and the Political Discourse in the United States of America," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 33 (Winter 2012), p. 24.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Stephen J. McNamee, Robert K. Miller, *The Meritocracy Myth*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2004, p. 4.

¹⁶ Jim Cullen, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ See Samir S. Gupte, "The Reciprocal Reshaping of the American Dream and American Religion", Masters of Liberal Studies Thesis, 2011, <http://scholarship.rollins.edu/mls/15>, accessed on September 28, 2015.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Stephen J. McNamee, Robert K. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 2, 18.

²¹ Fragments in this section are based on an article previously published as "The Reversed Odyssey: Identity Construction, Cultural Archetypes and Stereotypes in Contemporary American Cinema. The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (2008)", in Adrian Radu (ed.), *Proceedings of the International*

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²² Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Michael Wiese Productions, 2007 [1998], p. 4.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

²⁵ J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004 [1949], p. 31.

²⁶ Christopher Vogler, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 181.

²⁹ Jon R. Stone, "Ritual" in Eric Michael Mazur (ed.), *Encyclopedia of religion and film*, Santa Barbara, ABC-Clio, 2011, p. 369.

³⁰ Brian Neve, *Elia Kazan: the cinema of an American outsider*, I.B. Tauris, 2009, p. 150.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

³² Elia Kazan (dir.), *America America*, Warner Bros., 1963, 174 min.

³³ "Kazan wanted the song to capture the feelings of 'people who have to leave some place, a place they love and regret leaving, but one which they must now leave behind them forever'", Neve, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

³⁴ Elia Kazan qtd. in Brian Neve, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

³⁵ "Revisiting Origins of The American Dream: Elia Kazan's *America, America*," 2012, <http://kubrickontheguillotine.com>, accessed on September 3, 2015.

³⁶ Maurice Elia, "America, America d'Elia Kazan : racines", *Séquences: la revue de cinéma*, 229 (2004), p. 41.

³⁷ Brian Neve, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

³⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. by Willard Trask, New York, Harcourt Press, 1959, p. 196.

³⁹ Brian Neve, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 152.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 152.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.