

Hunting Extremities

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Bemusing the Audience: Probing the Narrative Diversions in *Symbol*

Abstract. Japanese cinema, one of the most eminent in the world, has a long history of interesting and distinctive modes of storytelling. Since the early beginnings of film viewing, Japanese audience was accompanied with the figure of *benshi* – a narrator or group of narrators “explaining” and providing an audience a “fuller experience” of what was projected on a silver screen. Considering the cinematic storytelling process, in spite of diverging from classical Hollywood narrative, the “unique” styles of the Golden Era directors – Ozu, Mizoguchi and Kurosawa have been highly commended in the West. This paper explores the extreme narrative in Japanese film *Symbol* (2009) directed by Hiroshi Matsumoto, in which two disparate storylines converge in the end. The first narrative follows a day of Escargot Man, a masked wrestler in Mexico preparing for the night’s match, whereas the other focuses on a Japanese man trying to escape from the surreal white room. Time and space of the white room narrative, cross-cut with the conventional episode in Mexico, operate as a plot device that engages the audience in the puzzle-solving cinematic experience. Examining Matsumoto’s method of associating the “real” to the mystic heterotopic scenery, this paper foregrounds both cultural and technological factors of *Symbol* (ranging from silent comedy genre to Japanese pop-cultural phenomenon of *nansensu*) which contribute to its originality of the narrative form, distinctive among the postmillennial authors who have already famously strained from conventional storytelling. Furthermore, drawing on notion of both mind-game and puzzle-solving film, proposed by Elsaesser and Buckland, I argue that *Symbol*, as a typical postmodern mixture of elements, offers a new type of referentiality when dealing with the subject of extreme storytelling and its presentation to millennial audience.

Keywords: *Symbol*, silent comedy, *nansensu*, mind-game film, puzzle film, meta-narrative.

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By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable... This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. By neglecting it, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty, like that of the time the first woman before the fall of man”

Baudelaire “The Painter of Modern Life”

***Symbol* as a postmillennial silent comedy**

In September 2009, when Mark Schilling from *The Japan Times* attended press screening of Hitoshi Matsumoto's *Symbol*, he was presented a list of film points that should not be revealed in his review. Schilling described this restraint as "annoying" since it limited his discourse on film's exceptionality. In point of fact, those rare critics who engaged in the appraisal of *Symbol* agree that it is difficult to expound. Moreover, this "categorically unexpected" film, often referred to as an amalgam of Kubrickesque (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) and Innaritiesque (*Amore Perros*) settings, is "ultimately creative, laugh out loud funny and leaving you in a slightly bedazzled trance" (Matthijs, 2010). Cross-cutting two disparate narratives, the conventional chronicle of a wrestler preparing for the night's match in Mexico and the story of a Japanese man's tireless efforts to escape from the mysterious, surreal white room, Matsumoto perplexes the audience eager to understand the relation between two storylines. The narrative complexity of *Symbol* is two-folded – in addition to separate plotlines which completely differ in causal and spatial association, the occurrences in white room are unusual to the point that perpetually engage audience's curiosity. Matsumoto, a famous Japanese comedian, in his second feature film plays the role of the trapped man himself and reimagines the silent comedy genre as a postmodern dadaesque embrace of irrationality and chaos. The sight gags and even slapstick humor have been both employed in this one-man-storyline.

Symbol's reinterpretation of traditional silent comedy genre has been established through Matsumoto's director/actor persona reminiscent of famous performers such as Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Also, if Jacques Tati's performance style can be understood as modernized take on a silent comedy, then Matsumoto's approach represents its postmodern continuation.

These filmmakers' inclination towards absurdity and body language, as well as their parodical method is also noticeably manifested in *Symbol*. I argue that the storyline following no-name character in the white room operates as direct derivative of silent comedy, whereas the dialogic plotline set in Mexico could be recognized as a unique postmillennial cinema interpretation of an intertitle. However, this postmodern "expository" intertitle (as narrative device) contributes to *Symbol's* general puzzling effect instead of providing the explanation of the characters and the events.

This paper examines *Symbol* based on a narrative theory framework – offering the interpretation through meta-narrative perspective, structured by unconventional assemblage of plots, characters and storytelling. As the narrative of the heterotopic scenery develops in an absence of either dialogue or main character's monologue, except sporadic cry for help or expression of frustration, we should first address the phenomenon of Japanese cinema storytelling – *benshi* (narrator) of silent film era and their substantial role for film narration. This chapter aims to illuminate that *Symbol's* extreme storytelling has been grounded in Japanese *nansensu* (nonsensical pop cul-

tural phenomenon emerging in 1920s Japan). Moreover, director's unconventional storytelling method places this film in the domain of mind-game and puzzle-solving cinema.

Narrating *nansensu*

Japan has a long history of interesting and distinctive modes of storytelling ranging from *bunraku* and *kabuki* theater, over *kodan* lectures and *naniwabushi* recital, to *rakugo* comic performance.

Traditional Japanese theatrical forms such as *bunraku* – puppet theatre (*ningyo joruri*) and *noh* foreground the specific style of narration which is designated by the utilization of the “silent objects” – puppets and masks. *Bunraku* puppeteers do not speak; the dialogue of the characters is performed by a single narrator seated on the stage. As the puppets are the visual focus on the stage, the narrator tries not to draw attention to himself but to contribute to overall performance experience. In *kabuki* theatre, the narrative conveyed by the actors is accompanied by vocal and musical performance of *chobo* commentators. The narrative structure of *noh* originates from religious ritual practices and was defined by famous playwright and aesthete Zeami. Unlike actors of the Western theatre, *noh* performers engage in subtle, metaphorical storytelling trying to suggest the essence of the story by visual appearance and body movement. It celebrates the allusiveness, instead of direct narration style, as its symbolism enforces the active role of audience. Seemingly simple plotline and a lack of “action” on the stage contribute to uniqueness of this theatrical performance, renowned since 14th century.

Kodan is a style of oral presentation on literary and historical topics, originally given to courts man and nobles of Heian period (794-1192). “Meiji Japan made great progress in its efforts to increase mass literacy, but during the same period saw the expansion of a thriving form of professional storytelling called *ninjobanashi* (“tales of human sentiment”).” (Miller, 1996: 301). Although *ninjobanashi* performance survived for short period of time, it gave rise for other storytelling forms. During 19th century and first half of 20th century, a traditional musical narrative – *naniwabushi* or *rokyoku* was very popular; it consisted of sad lyrics (referring to confliction between true feelings and social obligation) accompanied by traditional Japanese instrument *shamisen*. In contemporary Japan, *rakugo* – long, complex comic stories performed by a sole storyteller still has its audience.

“Borrowed” from the classical Japanese forms of entertainment performance, where the active role of narrator has been of the utmost importance, the *benshi* commented and “explained” the actions on the screen. Japanese critics referred to *benshi* as “narrator and voice actor”, “commentator-reader” and “audience representative” (McDonald, 1994: 29). In addition to summarizing film plot, the *benshi* “gave lectures” on Western culture and customs or uplifting patriotic commentaries.

As Jeffrey Dym notices in his book *Benshi, Japanese Silent Film Narrators and Their Forgotten Narrative Art of Setsumeï* (2003), from the very start, Japanese silent film has always been disrupted by the verbal commentaries and thus, imposed interpretation. The narrators influenced the film-viewing experience to that extent, that certain performances of well-acclaimed *benshi* were available as phonograph records. *Benshi* helped “the viewer to achieve a ‘fuller sensual experience’ by ‘appealing to senses other than sight’.” (ibid, 26) Donald Richie notes that extreme popularity of those narrators generated from the “unfailingly curious” Japanese who were “unfailingly disturbed lest they not understand everything” (Richie, 1971:6). Acknowledging the fact that the countries such as France or United States were also familiar with the figure of cinema commentator, Richie emphasizes the uniqueness of *benshi* in Japan’s cinema viewing:

His effect upon the Japanese film is almost impossible to overestimate, and certain aspects of even the latest movies can be traced back to the *benshi* and to the need which he satisfied. Through Japanese films can be the most subtle in the world, the most understated, the most evocative, a commentator will frequently reiterate a point already presented visually. A scene will often appear, unnecessary in the context of the film, which explains what went before. Those Japanese critics who called *Rashomon* a profoundly un-Japanese film are, in a sense, correct. That ambiguity, the questioning of all absolutes which is the assumption of the Kurosawa film, is not one which is usually associated with the Japanese audience. (ibid, 6-7)

In the similar manner as *Rashomon*, Matsumoto’s film draws on the ambiguity and puzzle solving plotline. The “unfailingly curious” spectatorship is lured into a mysterious empty room where a man with a silly looking hairdo, dressed in polka-dot pajamas is being trapped inside. The room is filled with bizarre “soft” switches which randomly appear on the walls. Whenever the protagonist presses the switch, an “oh” sigh echoes the room and nonsensical action transpires. The pink toothbrush is ejected from the wall into a room, followed by a megaphone, bonsai tree, large vase or African tribesman running through the room and disappearing into other side of a wall. If the same switch is being pressed multiple times, the number of the same objects filling the room equals the number of touching the switch. Those switches turn out to be private parts of putti¹ that contribute to the overall absurdity of the situation in which the main character finds himself.

Japan has a long history of giving prominence to the illogical and preposterous in art. During the period of excessive modernization in 1920s and 1930s, Japanese writers engaged in formal experimentation in an attempt to go beyond depicting realism of new circumstances. “Writers and critics used the term *katoki* (transitional period) to convey the fact that they were living during a historical time of unprecedented change. [...] At the same time, they were conscious that this time of transition was compelling them to produce artistic products through new media at a speed and

scale that they had never even imagined.” (Omori, 2009:76) The absurdity seemed to be the suitable method for depicting all the novelties of modernization, as well as simultaneously introducing stylistic and thematic innovations. *Ero-guro-nansensu* (erotic grotesque nonsense) expressed the challenges to state ideology promoting the culture of decadent, unpleasant and nonsensical. As we are not exploring the issues of Eros or grotesque in this paper, we should address the point of *nansensu*. The humorous absurdity of this genre opposed the conventions of dominant naturalism in Japanese literature of that time.

Probing the detective *nansensu* fiction of famous *benshi* Tokugawa Musei, Kyoko Omori points out to Musei’s definition of this term for the neologism dictionary *Saishin shingo shinchishiki*. There, kanji characters are used as transliteration from English, and as a combination of direct oppositions – *nan* (*yawarakai*) meaning soft, flexible, fluffy and *sen* (*togaru*) meaning pointed, sharp, edgy. Omori’s drawing on Oya Soichi’s claim that nonsense is “the thing most desired by the middle class, who suffer the afflictions of ‘anxiety, impatience and despair’ in their daily experience of modern times” (Omori, 81) resonates with the current global state of postmillennial era. In contemporary state of affairs, *Symbol* can serve as a fulfilment of such yearning, when consternation and agitation do not seem to decrease with all advances of new technology.

There are several Japanese authors who had highlighted the significance of *nansensu* in film medium. In his essay “Thoughts on Nonsense Films”, Kiyou Yasuda asserts that laughter and not the meaning is the only requirement of such film, as it generates “something that serious people who talked ideology could not grasp” (quoted in Silverberg, 2007:116). For Japanese director Mansaku Itami *nansensu* films were more than sheer amusement, as their stylish and smart humor “tried to negate that which was treated with respect by society” (ibid, 231) while simultaneously not affirming any ideology. In the conditions of capitalist production and state censorship, directors found a refuge in nonsensical as it was “fine, dangerous thought because of its refusal to offer respect to power” (ibid, 232). On the other hand, claiming that “the nonsense is the essence of film”, film critic Akira Iwasaki found that the most prominent feature of *nansensu* is fragmentation instead of narrating linear storyline (Omori, 83).

Through defragmenting narration, Hitoshi Matsumoto constantly shifts the attention from surrealist solipsistic physical humor to quotidian life in Mexico. Employing the typical visual and narrative conventions of social drama, Matsumoto depicts an ordinary day of an unusual character – Escargot Man. The director seems to subtly ridicule the tropes of aforementioned non-humorous genre, developing a plot around masked Mexican wrestler, juxtaposed to a white room episode which is parodying the tradition of serious art-film symbolism. In mid-twentieth century European cinema, the auteurs such as Ingmar Bergman, Luis Bunuel and Andrei Tarkovsky have developed their own unique (visual) styles and distinguished themselves through employment of symbols (iconic representations often referring to a specific religious con-

cept). As in the work of all those famous directors who incline towards visual symbolism to draw attention to universal themes of the utmost significance, Matsumoto essentially underscores the topic of life and death, the arbitrariness of existence and world as a construct of a "higher entity". Divergently, the pretentious aspects of such monumental themes are trivialized through implementation of silent comedy genre. Randomized objects, putti who giggle to protagonist's misfortune and turn their behinds to emit gas in his face and essentially a portrayal of God as a frustrated, silly-looking figure not conscious of the consequences of his actions (which will be analyzed latter) contribute to *Symbol*'s overall *nansensu*. This postmodern use of such anachronistic genre of silent comedy also contributes to the cinematic apparatus of extreme narrating.

Not so symbolic mind-gaming: metaphor of comic puzzle-solving

Symbol can be seen as both a "mind-game" and a "puzzle" film, drawing on terminology proposed by Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland.

Yet one overriding common feature of mind-game films is a delight in disorienting or misleading spectators (besides carefully hidden or altogether withheld information, there are the frequent plot twists and trick endings). Another feature is that spectators on the whole do not mind being "played with": on the contrary, they rise to the challenge. The fact that audiences are set conundrums, or are sprung "traps for mind and eye," that they are – as with von Trier's *Lookeys* – confronted with odd objects or puzzling details that do not "add up" – even though the overall experience "makes sense" – would indicate we are dealing with a phenomenon that spectators recognize as relevant to their own worlds. Mind-game films thus transcend not only genre, but also authorial signature (even though recognized auteurs are prominent) and national cinema (even though a Europe – East Asia – American independents triangle can be discerned) (Elsaesser, 2009: 14)

The extreme storytelling of *Symbol* builds the realm of disorientation and misdirection in which the audience is invited. Both storylines are based on simple premises – how to escape from the room, and the common daytime preparation before scheduled wrestling match. According to Aristotle, the complex plot supposes the reversal to the arrangement of events organized in a classical initiation-complication-resolution manner. This intervention is unexpected by the character or the audience.

In a successful complex plot, the second line of causality (which introduces recognition and reversal) is interwoven into the first, the characters' plotline. By using the term 'interwoven' Aristotle understands that, while the second plot initially disrupts the first by radically altering the hero destiny, the second plot is eventually integrated into the first, resulting in a unified, classical plot once more, in which reversal and recognition appear to be probable and even necessary actions. (Buckland, 2009: 2-3)

Buckland adds the third instance to simple – complex plot, defining it as a puzzle plot. The integration of two plotlines in puzzle films does not display as anticipated, predictable or compulsory. Rather, as in *Symbol*, it is perplexing and completely implausible.

The common characteristic of mind-game film includes a protagonist with whom the game is played, usually with him utterly unaware of game “rules” and others who are playing the game with him, as in *Usual Suspects* (1995) *The Game* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998) (Elsaesser, 14). Not being able to fully grasp the situation he found himself in, the man trapped in the room goes through initial panic, then lack of concern – passing time reading manga, a finally to the stage when he elaborates a plan which switch to press, in order to use the ejected objects and leave through the door that opens only for a few seconds. The identification of audience with trapped protagonist derives from the same circumstances Matsumoto generates – repeatedly put in a situation of not realizing what will be happening or why it happened. From scene to scene it seems justifiable to continually ask the same question – “what is happening?” The long-awaited triumph of leaving the room behind turns out to be almost counterproductive as the protagonist finds himself in a similar situation again – running through an endless corridor, reaching the darker version of the white room.

According to Elsaesser, another feature of mind-game film is that to a certain point in film, neither the hero, nor the audience, is aware that there might be “parallel universes”. However, contrary to Elsaesser’s notion, from a very beginning of *Symbol*, the audience is familiar with parallel storylines, but instead awaits the moment in the film when the both narratives will come together. Therefore, *Symbol* does not implement mistaken cognitive or perceptual premise but rather draws on uncertainty and its clarification. Here, the suspense mechanism operates on a reversible mode; the revelation emerges from the narratives’ collision instead of narrative friction. Moreover, I argue that the entire film functions as an ironic mediation on *deus ex machina* device. The only issue is the degree of its ultimate absurdity and wittiness.

After ending up in the darker, larger version of the original room with “grown up” putti, the main character presses the switch that activates Escargot Man, caught in a clinch during the match. At the moment of pressing the switch, Escargot Man’s neck immensely extends, deforming his figure/head and unstoppably knocking down all those in his immediate presence. To this moment in the film “social drama” narrative perplexed the audience unable to relate it to the nonsensical plot in the white room. Establishing the connection between two storylines, the absurdity and humor are emphasized to its greatest extent. In Elsaesser’s comprehensive analysis on mind-game films, giving prominence to other genres, comedy rarely appears to be indicative of mystifying the audience (*The Truman Show* or the quirky films created in collaboration of Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze are sole examples).

The integration of two plotlines is also followed by the implementation of the same technological aspects on both narratives. Namely, the action in the surreal room has

heavily conditioned the application of CGI technology (peculiar putti switches on interactive walls). In the scene where the protagonist comes up with the plan how to escape the room, Matsumoto playfully uses CGI technology to illustrate hero's thinking process as if it would be depicted in manga. With an adequate music score in the background, this "manga sequence" is equally unexpected as the events of the storyline. At the moment of fusing the two storylines, CGI effects interrupt the straightforward, almost-documentary style of Mexico saga and visually unify the two narratives. Extreme storytelling manifests itself through both narrative and visual aspects of the film.

Considering the issue of truth in the films, (especially those evading the conventional narrative and celebrating the contradictory premises such as *Symbol*), it is relevant to mention Elsaesser's standpoint that "films do not 'lie' to the spectator, but are truthful and self-consistent within the premises of their diegetic worlds, that permit, of course, 'virtual' worlds, impossible situations, and improbable events" (ibid, 19). Both storylines in *Symbol* can be considered as improbable as their non-classical characters follow Warren Buckland's definition of puzzle films. The characters in puzzle-films "perform non-classical actions and events" (Buckland, 2009: 5) as "these films blur the boundaries between different levels of reality, are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structures, ambiguity, and overt coincidences" (ibid, 6). The deception in *Symbol* does not manifest through illusionary trick or perspectivism (point of view of each protagonist referring to the same situation); it does not visually conceals certain aspects nor counts on spectatorship's fail to notice key points only to be latter revealed in the film. Deception is rather established through deliberate alternating of plotlines, obscurity and vagueness of the each narrative and their preposterous conjunction.

As Buckland asserts, the arrangement of the occurrences exceeds a complex manner, for "the events are not simply interwoven, but *entangled*" (ibid, 3). As the protagonist touches different switches, the audience observes random events occurring in the various parts of the world. The absurdity of two plotlines multiplies through elaborate montage sequence depicting – L.A. concert of a *Kiss*-like band where the frontman's act of fire breathing creates immense stream opening the door of concert hall, but not slightly disturbing the ticket saleswoman who calmly continues to polish her nails, then TV broadcasting of unsuccessful magician trick in Russia, or the agitation of bunch of dogs in rural China, provoked by a man's sudden bark.

The director then sets his protagonist to climb to the top of the giant wall, trying to reach the white light above, using phallic switches as stanchion for his ascension. With each touching of a switch the documentary footages emerge – birth of animals, flower blossoming, car accidents, building collapse, non-expectant successes or failures in sport matches, technological progress, wars, natural catastrophes, world history events, etc. In the end, the protagonist does not have to touch the switches any more, as events are randomly displayed while he is being uplifted to the light. The series of simultaneous events, with birth and death in a loop comes to a close when

the man reaches the third room. This time, on the dark walls only two things appear – the world map behind the protagonist (now transitioned into a Christ-like figure) and giant genitalia switch in front of him, urging to be pressed. Before the fadeout, the “future” caption materializes on the screen. Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe’s claim that “as long as humankind recklessly proceeds in the fateful delusion of being biologically fated for triumph, nothing essential will change” seem to thoroughly correlate with *Symbol*’s simple parallel narrative where main characters’ accomplishment turn to be evanescent and thus, confirming the perpetual status quo.

Hitoshi Matsumoto assigns himself the role of ingenuous God, unwillingly put into a situation where his actions affect “the reality” and circumstances, either in his surreal room or in the outside world. His choice to cast himself as the protagonist (common practice among the silent film comedians mentioned at the beginning of the text) who turns out to be an unsuspecting God generates the film’s meta-narrative. Accordingly, we can interpret *Symbol* as auteur’s auto-reflexive meditation on creation of art. Is the artist essentially unmindful in the creative process? Does it mean that the urge for artistic expression is nothing but a mere circumstantial accident? Are the effects on other people greater than the artist’s capability to comprehend it? Interested in exploration of meta-narrative in cinema, Joseph Kupfer distances himself from film theorists such as George Wilson and David Bordwell who engage in *philosophy of film* and reflections on “how film narration is achieved” (Kupfer, 2014: 4). *Symbol* allows us to subvert narrative triangular framework of “epistemic distance, reliability and authority” proposed by George Wilson. Instead of applying this epistemic tirade on the viewer-film association, we can instead offer relational comparing of two storylines within the film. Resemblance between real world and film narrative (distance) in *Symbol* operates through two storylines matching the proposed dichotomy – Mexican episode as the real world, depicted through suitable realistic framework of social drama and surreal setting as fictional narrative. The difference between viewer’s and character’s knowledge (authority) applies to both Escargot Man and “No-name God” as it is non-existent – both characters are equally unaware of things to come.

Symbol’s meta-narrative can be recognized in the “future” caption at the very end of the film implies the need for open future as a self-reflexive condition always denotes. Kupfer also points out the theoretical link between narrative and identity:

To conceive of the self (ourselves) we must think of it as enduring, with purposes, over time. Even though we change over time, there must be something that persists that confers identity. Narrative is essential as a meaning-best owning context to unify diverse episodes, events and moments of consciousness over time. Therefore, we must think of ourselves in terms of narratively shaped existence, at least to some degree. Such a deduction from the lineaments of experience, even if persuasive, does not demonstrate the objective truth of the narrative self – just as Kant’s deduction does not demonstrate the objective truth of the categories of judgment. It does, however, com-

plement the previous argument that narrative is pivotal to personal identity based on objective attributes of selfhood. (ibid, 14)

Symbol's extreme storytelling is thus conducted in a purpose of film meta-narrative. Through composite style of narration, it strays away from universal and objective truth and demonstrates the director's personal micro-narrative. The importance of Matsumoto's narrative style can also be recognized in Elsaesser's interpretation of mind-game films:

What makes the mind-game films noteworthy in this respect is the "avant-garde" or "pilot" or "prototype" function they play within the "institution cinema" at this juncture, where they, besides providing "mind-games," "brain-candy," and often enough, spectacular special effects, set out to train, elaborate, and yes, "test" the textual forms, narrative tropes, and story motifs that can serve such a renegotiation of the rules of the game. Mind-game films, we could say, break one set of rules (realism, transparency, linearity) in order to make room for a new set, and their formal features – whether we examine them from a narratological angle, from an ontological, epistemological, psycho-pathological, or pedagogical perspective (for all of which they provide credible "entry-points") – represent a compromise formation, which is itself flexible, adaptable, differential and versatile: not unlike its ideal (implied) spectators. (Elsaesser, 38)

Symbol's complex narration of two simple plotlines offers a new set of rules as it implements the nonsensical as a foundation on which metaphysical aspect of film is generated.

Embracing *nansensu* of meta-present

The narration complexity of *Symbol* enables us to detect the characteristics of silent cinema, Japanese *nansensu*, art-house cinema parody, puzzle-plots, mind-game films and meta-narrative. As a typical postmodern mixture of elements, this film offers a new type of referentiality when dealing with the subject of extreme storytelling. This does not refer solemnly to a combination of codes and clichés operating on a plot level but contrives the approach of constructing an unpredictable visual-narrative device which permanently confuses the audience, hidden behind a simplistic storyline. Kyoko Omori states that "*nansensu* ought to be understood as one among several different strategies for engaging with early stages of global modernity" (Omori, 77). Therefore, *Symbol* can be perceived as an attempt of idiosyncratic experiment satirizing the complexity of postmodern times. The main distinctive feature of *Symbol* is that it seems deceptively simple, despite of it being an evident and complex patchwork of genres, expressions and narrative strategies. The reason for this effortless comprehension is to be found in the enforcement of silent comedy as one of the oldest film genres which relies mostly on physical expressiveness. *Symbol* demonstrates that the extreme narration can also be achieved through merging of elaborate visual stylistic concept with ultimately basic, but *entangled* plotlines. As explained above, the alternat-

ing of disparate plotlines operates as a key factor of engaging the audience. Therefore, *Symbol*'s extreme storytelling should also be recognized as particularly relevant in the broader cultural context, as its narrative device corresponds to the everyday practice of technologized human. Namely, I refer to postmillennial audience routine of fragmenting their (online) experience, constantly shifting from one hyper-text to another in an endless quest for entertainment and/or knowledge. The focus on (randomized) content is measured by the users' will not to click on different link, and to stray away to the more "interesting" web territory. In *Symbol*, audience attention is captivated through the similar, seemingly illogical transference from one narrative to another. This kind of extreme storytelling in cinema offers an innovative model of attracting the audience whose perception has already been altered by environment of new media.

Note

- 1 A putto is a figure of a naked angelic boy toddler depicted in art. According to Charles Dempsey in *Inventing the Renaissance Putto* (2001), putti represented the omnipresence of God in the Baroque. They are often misrelated to the biblical angels – cherubim.

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