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Undergraduate Dissertation

The Multiplicity of Madness: Ambiguity in Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse*

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation attempts to analyse Robert Eggers's film *The Lighthouse* (2019) and offer a view on its multiple interpretations. In particular, it analyses its value as an ambiguous film that resists a unique reading on it. It is through providing the audience with an unworldly setting and symbols with different connotations that such ambiguity is achieved. The only and main two characters' descent to madness also opens to debate how much of what we see is really taking place. *The Lighthouse* works as an essay on meaning, obsession and madness that makes the audience question everything they see and know to find an answer to the questions the movie arises. In the end, the beauty of the film lies in that all of the possible interpretations are at the same time valid and not limiting one to another.

Key Words: Ambiguity – Madness – Meaning – Cinema

RESUMEN

Este trabajo trata de analizar la película *El Faro* (2019), de Robert Eggers, y ofrecer una visión de sus múltiples interpretaciones. En concreto, analiza su valor como una película ambigua, que resiste que haya una única lectura sobre ella. Dicha ambigüedad se consigue proporcionando a la audiencia un entorno casi perteneciente a otro mundo y unos símbolos con diferentes connotaciones. Además, el descenso hacia la locura de los dos únicos y principales personajes también abre el debate de cuánto de lo que estamos viendo está sucediendo realmente. *El Faro* hace las veces de ensayo sobre el significado, la obsesión y la locura y hace que la audiencia se cuestione lo que está viendo y conoce con el fin de encontrar una respuesta a las preguntas que la propia película lanza. Al final, la belleza de la película surge de que todas sus posibles interpretaciones son al mismo tiempo válidas y no limitan la existencia del resto.

Palabras Clave: Ambigüedad – Locura – Significado – Cine

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1. INTRODUCTION

After the acclaimed success of *The Witch* (2015), filmmaker Robert Eggers positioned himself as one of the new voices in the horror genre with his dark and puzzling second work *The Lighthouse*. The film, which premiered in 2019, was certainly not easy to overlook once a few seconds of it are watched. Its uncanny look, with its signature aspect ratio of 1.19:1 and black and white grading, suggested an atypical and mysterious film, and shortly after its release, it was confirmed as such. The film follows Thomas Wake (played by Willem Dafoe) and Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson), two lighthouse keepers on a small island in New England during the 1890s. The movie begins with Ephraim's arrival to the rock, where he meets his new lighthouse master Thomas. Soon after the film starts it makes the audience doubt about how sane Thomas is, and what his obsession with the beacon is about. The weather is unbearable, and the two characters only have each other to rely on while they remain on the island. Suspense grows as the line between sanity and madness, and the real and the imaginary blurs. The two characters descend into a love-hate relationship which ends up being the death of Thomas at the hands of Ephraim. In the end, Ephraim, who is revealed to be also named Thomas, is lured by the light that lives inside the beacon and, unable to hold it, falls downstairs all the way from the top. The last sequence shows him being pecked to his presumable death by a flock of seagulls. Since the first shot, the film is surrounded by an aura of mysticism and constant dread. It may be due to the island, the unforgiving weather, the creatures that haunt Ephraim, the discomfort that both characters bring to each other, or the light that keeps Thomas obsessed. Since both main and only characters share the name Thomas, and to avoid confusion or redundancy, in the analysis below Thomas Wake will be referred to as 'Thomas', and Thomas Howard as 'Ephraim', the name with which he presents himself.

However simple the plot may seem at first sight, the way in which it develops has kept many spectators puzzled until today. The possible interpretations about the story, the hallucinatory scenes

and the symbology present in the film keep an open debate on their meaning, both to the characters and the audience. Dialogue, scarce as it is in the film, works as an accurate portrayal of the way a couple of sailors would talk in 1890s New England that is at times nearly unintelligible. Robert Eggers mostly makes use of mise-en-scène and editing to convey this idea of uncertainty about what is happening in the film, to present the audience with a movie that resists all kinds of analysis. As I will develop in this BA Thesis, the main ways it does so is by providing an ambiguous setting and symbols, on which multiple readings can be performed, and by having his two main characters fall victim to madness, something that complicates even further our understanding of the film.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. THE NEW TERROR

Since 2012, film company A24 has been producing some of the mainstream films with the most unique creative visions, their catalogue growing from 5 movies produced in 2013 to 22 released and announced for 2022 (“List of A24 films”, n.d.), at a higher rate each year. Praised by both critics and audience, the company has become a synonym for filmmaking quality, one of the most recurring genres in their productions being horror. With examples such as Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019), or Robert Eggers’s *The Witch* (2015) and *The Lighthouse* (2019), the company seems to offer them a way to give voice to a new current of the horror genre. These creatives together with others like Jordan Peele, known for *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and the upcoming *Nope* (2022), are bringing a rejuvenating wave to a genre so lately crowded with the same archetype of American horror movies. With the exception of *Hereditary*, which serves as an example for a well-crafted and witty story of ghosts and possessions, the above-mentioned films have found new ways to convey terror in their audiences. While *Midsommar* tackles terrifying cultural differences, and the fear of isolation in a grimly ironic cheerful setting, *Get Out* explores racial repression and slavery in a modern-day environment. *Us*, on the other hand, takes the concept of fear of the other to an

interesting turnaround, when the others become us. Lastly, both films by Eggers have been commonly described as New England Horror, giving a historical twist to stories about black magic, the descent to madness and the impossibility to escape from your surroundings.

All these films have in common the use of the horror genre as a means to further explore already daunting concepts such as loss, repression, madness, or isolation, rather than as an end in itself. More often than not, an audience is already biased towards genre clichés and elements to expect in a horror movie. What these filmmakers achieve, instead, is a captivating experience which oftentimes does not require any jumpscare, gory murderous rampage or devilish possession, although these elements do not need to be absent from the film. This new wave of creatives who have consistently been rejuvenating the horror genre in the last decade have found ways to expand the array of resources horror films use to convey discomfort and terror in their audience. They have thus crafted compelling horror experiences rather than a checklist of elements that horror movies should contain.

2.2. MADNESS IN CINEMA

Madness has been a recurrent element in film since its birth, with early examples as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Ever since, countless other instances have broken through, some like Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) instantly becoming a cult film. There must be something that attracts the audience to a mad character, for oftentimes we find ourselves captivated by stories about psychopaths, sociopaths, or other instances of mentally troubled people that transgress what has been socially established as acceptable behaviour. It may be the personal satisfaction of finding the line of reasoning a mad character follows or trying to justify the way they behave. It could also be, similarly to what Keen et al. (2012) state about the psychological appeal of the bad guy, the sheer fascination that grants us watching a fictional character act against any social rules or logic from the comfort of our homes or cinemas. The screen in front of us certainly acts as a safeguard, a protective bulwark that

keeps us from being part of their world. Consequently, cinema seems like the perfect medium to capture such an experience. It not only brings us the closest to said characters, but also provides an endless array of resources unavailable in any different media to represent the variety of conditions madness groups. Mise-en-scène, lighting, colour, sound, music, or editing are only some of the conventions that can be used to represent a particular state of mind. However, as Fuery notes, this very medium and its language pose some setbacks to showcasing madness and the sometimes nonsensical of a mad narrative. Cinema language being, to an extent, universal, and something that can be learnt, has the audience finding a logical answer to what is happening on scene. He also puts forward that showing madness, as in providing an exact portrait of a subject's inner tainted thoughts, is utterly impossible to achieve in cinema (2004: 13). You can show the actions, other characters' reactions to them, their relationship with their world, and yet simply not be able to represent that which resists to be represented, that which resists a fixed way to be communicated.

As if applying a logical approach to something by definition illogical, and that can only be represented by already existing modes, the spectator ends up witnessing what Fuery (2004) names a self-referential madness (23), a madness within pre-existing bounds. The source for their condition, if explicit, will be recognisable to the majority of the audience, and must be a logical, to an extent, reaction to said source. The sources of madness in cinema vary. A subject may be born with psychopathic characteristics, and manifest them from an early age, such as Kevin in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), or develop them after a traumatic event, as happens with war veteran Andrew Laeddis in *Shutter Island* (2010). It could also happen that the film never says where did they come from, as it is the case with Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (2000), or not reveal them to a full extent until the end, similar to what happens in David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999). As to Ephraim, there is not a single reason for his driving him mad through all the movie. He arrives at a mentally-testing place such as the lighthouse already in a questionable state of mind, haunted by traumatic visions of the man he murdered. There he is played with by his only companion, Thomas, and the unforgiving weather that surrounds the island, only worsened by the intoxicating beverages they brew.

3. THE LIGHTHOUSE

3.1. THE LIGHTHOUSE AS A MICROCOSM

The Lighthouse itself, however small the island where it sits upon, can be understood as a microcosm of society. Just a few minutes into the film, Thomas has already set the power dynamics that will persist until the end and position himself over the other inhabitant of the island, Ephraim. Thus, in a male-dominated environment such as this, it all comes down to either Ephraim or Thomas. On the one hand, we have the old sea dog, weary and bitter, who does not take a no for an answer, eternally inebriated, and strongly superstitious, embodied by Thomas. The lighthouse keeper wards the light during the midnight shift, and early in the film forbids Ephraim to glance at 'her'. On the other hand, Ephraim is the young, strong, and handsome newcomer to the rock and the post, who is driven to the edge of his sanity and beyond by his superior. The lack of any other characters but these two, and the different archetypes they fall into make them very representative of social groups from the outside world, but it also makes them the absolute representatives of said social groups inside. Thus, the happenings to these lighthouse keepers have inevitable parallelisms to what happens to similar groups outside the lighthouse. What I mean by this is not such a general statement such as 'all sailors are drunkards', but rather 'in a relationship between an old and young man there is an inevitable game of power between them', or 'a young person who is willing to accept a job such as lighthouse keeper may be running away from something'. In a similar fashion, *The Lighthouse* presents its own rules, symbols and elements that have their own meaning within its confines.

The island is shrouded in an impenetrable veil of mystery and unworldliness that sets the lighthouse in an undisclosed place in New England. But even if the alleged setting is New England, the mystifying nature of the island creates its own locus out of time and space. A locus where mystic creatures such as mermaids haunt both Ephraim and his predecessor, or where seagulls carry the souls that seamen left behind, to the point of adopting their personas. The film quickly makes it clear that the island does not follow the rules from the world outside. During the first night in the lighthouse

cabin, Thomas serves both a drink, and Ephraim pours his into the sink, alleging that it goes against the rules. Thomas's small act of rebellion against what had been established from outside, followed by his claiming of the light can be understood as a declaration that the logic applied beyond the island's shore is of no use in there. Furthermore, it establishes himself as the one who sets the rules in their world. This is later emphasised when in two different occasions Thomas states that leaving a toast unfinished and killing a seabird bring bad luck. What in any other place would be two instances of superstitious sayings, in one such as the lighthouse they turn into a warning, for both will Ephraim ignore, and both will have terrible consequences.

Several times while dreaming or hallucinating, Ephraim sees a mermaid, a voluptuous figure that seems to embody his desires, his lust and need for company other than Thomas's. The mermaid apparition is likely originated by the mermaid-shaped wooden figurine that Ephraim finds hidden in his predecessor's mattress, and haunts him day and night. Being cut off from any feminine companion for four weeks, and potentially forever, makes Ephraim vulnerable to any female figure, as is the case with the wooden figurine, and later the light on top of the lighthouse. It also seems logical to an extent that the traditionally feminine nature of the sea, particularly violent in this island, brings the sensual, yet terrifying mermaid to life. The lack of any potential sexual intercourses not involving Thomas turns Ephraim to, in Thomas's words, "self-abuse", with the only source of excitement being the previously mentioned token. To Ephraim's tortured mind, that act saves the distance between himself and the devilish mermaid and enables a parasexual encounter between them. Not only their communication is proven impossible twice, but also sexual relations are off the table too, due to the incompatibility between the sailor and the mermaid's genitalia, which are explicitly shown. Ephraim's inability to relate to and even communicate with the only present feminine character existing in this microcosm also suggests an inability to communicate with any feminine character, which would explain his repressed sexuality.

The other source of sexual arousal for the characters is the beacon itself. Always referred to by Thomas in feminine and described as the most loyal woman he has been with, the light is his only

object of desire. It may seem odd at first seeing a lock attached to the trapdoor leading to the beacon, if the two keepers and only inhabitants of the island are taking shifts to look after the light. However, it is early stated that the light is only Thomas's to behold. Devoid of any interest by itself until then, the light takes on a central role to the characters and becomes an object of desire for Ephraim too. Be it due to its feminine nature, or as a way to challenge the only rule that has been set by Thomas, Ephraim sees himself attracted to the beacon time and time again. Thomas, on the other hand, has already been victim to the light for too long, and cannot help but try and keep her all for himself. On various occasions he can be seen up in the lighthouse embracing the light with no clothes on. The fulfilment that it brings to the old sailor has no match within the island, and the pleasure and insight that Thomas gets from watching it brings him to a point between ecstasy and trance multiple times. The insight that Thomas receives from the lamp can be understood in an erotic way, but also the enlightenment that the beacon conveys could have a religious subtext. Lighthouses have traditionally been the landmarks that guide sailors to a safe place, so it would also make sense that this one guides Thomas through his life. In addition, the high ground on which it is set makes it an object of worship in itself.

Along with faith, superstition also plays a central role in the world the keepers inhabit. As mentioned before, bad luck gains a literal meaning when Thomas warns Ephraim about the toast and the seagull. The latter is especially relevant, for, as the old sailor says, seabirds carry the souls of dead seamen. One seabird seems particularly fixated in ruining Ephraim's stay in the lighthouse, and in repeated occasions restrains him from working or sleeping. It finds Ephraim's window and pecks it to interrupt his rest, and always moves to be in the middle of Ephraim's way. When he shushes it or taunts it to move away, the seagull stays immovable, and even pecks him, always defiant, in a way in which no irrational being would act. The one-eyed seagull that repeatedly finds Ephraim and interrupts him ends up being of more importance than it may seem. It is only later in the film that we learn that Thomas's former second in charge was one-eyed as well, when Ephraim finds his head stuck in a lobster trap. What that correlation between the gull and the dead seaman suggests is the bird's

embodiment of the sailor's former personality. That, being too much of a coincidence to overlook it, also confirms in a literal way what Thomas stated about seabirds. Considering the relation between both one-eyed beings, the seagull's previous actions, which could be understood as borderline psychological harassment, suddenly take on a new perspective. Although Thomas says his previous second in charge died after losing his mind due to the influence of the light, the violent state in which Ephraim finds part of him indicates that he had instead been axed to death by Thomas. If we then think of the seagull as the lighthouse keeper, the harassment against Ephraim may have been a series of unclear and unsuccessful warnings to abandon the island and Thomas in order to save his life. When Ephraim, infuriated by the gull, and unable to understand the signs, not only kills the bird but obliterates it against a rock, ruining any chance to be warned by anyone else. After this unfortunate incident, things go only worse to Ephraim, and he starts losing his mind, something that will make the film even more obscure, more difficult to read.

3.2. RESISTANCE TO ANALYSIS THROUGH MADNESS

There seems to be something deeply appealing in an obscure story. When the information on screen is not presented in a straightforward way, it makes the audience search for answers, for a plausible explanation to what is happening. Hiding the reasons to why something is happening, or what it means turns passive spectators into active ones, trying to understand the complex world viewers are dropped into. While a closed ending certainly gives the audience a satisfactory and unique conclusion, an open or even ambiguous ending keeps them engaged with the film for longer. What the story was about, what a scene meant, or why a character acted the way they did are only some of the questions that may arise from an uncompleted narrative, and these questions may be subject to debate for decades. As Bordwell states, open and ambiguous endings are some of the most widely used resources in art film to generate multiple interpretations of a narrative (1979: 60). They offer a multiplicity of explanations to why things were as they were, or what would happen if the film lasted another few minutes.

On some occasions, the filmmaker comes forward with their interpretation, as it happened with Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and its Final Cut, released in 2007. Both the original and the international cuts were unclear about whether Deckard was a human hunting deviant androids or an android himself. The debate was further developed when director Ridley Scott and Harrison Ford, who interpreted said character, sided with opposing sides of that debate (O'Connell, 2017). On other occasions, the audience needs to come up with their own take on a story's ending, as was the case with *The Matrix: Revolutions* (2003). After the release of the third movie, fans were not either exactly happy or satisfied about the way it ended. Too abstract and convoluted at the same time, The Wachowskis' saga did not receive the expected response from the public, and diehard fans came up with their own interpretations. One of them was called *The Matrix Revolutions Decoded* (2016), a fan-made edit that removed nearly two hours from the source material and rearranged the two sequels to reinterpret both narrative and ending. The fan-made sequel was also re-edited in 2016 to improve it in a 2.0 version. These two examples make use of a set of rules and conventions from a world other than the real to make the uncanny happen. Using the science fiction genre, they detach themselves from a traditional narrative and create rules that make sense within the genre and their world. As Bordwell (2006) notes, by the end of the 90s, "viewers knew the standard moves of mainstream storytelling" (74). Potential audiences were already too versed in traditional storytelling to be surprised by it, and filmmakers and new storytellers needed to reinvent themselves. *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* are examples of new narratives available through the reinventing of the medium, and so is the narrative ambiguity in *The Lighthouse*.

The happenings in *The Lighthouse* are difficult to interpret, if possible at all. Not only does the world itself seem unsettling since the first daunting blast from the siren, but the characters' mental states also help maintain a degree of uncertainty that allows for different interpretations on what the film is about open to debate. Here madness certainly keeps the film from being fully interpreted, and the characters' behaviour is far from logical. In this sense, it really is complicated to tell what the film

is about, apart from two lighthouse keepers, questionably sane at first, their love-hate relationship, and their inevitable doom.

One possible interpretation is that the film may deal with Ephraim's fight to escape from limbo, a deceiving task which ends up dooming him beyond any salvation. If we were to stick to that reading, the story and characters seem to adapt to it in order to make it plausible. In the first shots we see Thomas, carrying Ephraim on a boat to the island as if he was a Charon-like figure, a ferryman to carry Ephraim's soul to the other side. The island as an uncanny place existing outside of any space and time also makes sense this way, for it means it is a literal place between worlds. In Christian faith, the limbo is the destination for souls who did not accept Christ in life. It was where they were sent in order to repent, and be granted access to heaven. In this New England limbo of sorts, Ephraim, sent to be purged of his sins, would need to achieve redemption for the murder he committed in his previous life. He confesses to Thomas the homicide that Ephraim is running from since it happened when he was working in a timber mill in Canada. He also says it was the reason why he went to the Lighthouse, as a means to begin a new life under the killed man's name. His purpose is to work there for four weeks and earn enough money to start fresh in some new place. All this may have a literal meaning for the character, but it can also be interpreted in said religious way. The island provides not only economical, but more importantly spiritual redemption. Thus, both Thomas and the island repeatedly put Ephraim to test through the exhausting labouring at the lighthouse and the constant striking weather, which ends up eroding his sanity. The restraint from any chance of sex with a woman could also be understood as another step in the way for Ephraim's redemption, and the mermaid appearing from nowhere, a creature sent to tempt him and make him doubt. Everything in the lighthouse seems to have been placed there to torture Ephraim. Salvation stops being an option for him after murdering the seagull, and the young sailor suddenly sees his fate turned upside down when his only way out, a small wooden boat is destroyed by Thomas. A boat which would have been of no use either way, since the raging sea that surrounds everything in sight would have made the journey impossible. Ephraim's only way to escape is to repent from his sins, and not only in the end he does

not achieve it, but ends up murdering Thomas after losing the last bit of sanity left in him, dooming himself forever when he falls from the top of the lighthouse and seagulls peck his insides until his death.

The film could also be a reinterpretation of Prometheus's myth, if he crossed paths with another mythological figure such as the shapeshifter sea god Proteus. The parallelism between Ephraim and Prometheus is suggested several times through the importance of the light at the top of the building and the journey both follow. While Prometheus sought to take the fire from the gods to humanity, Ephraim seems determined to climb to the light and see why it is as important as it is. The young sailor, as a promethean figure, may have been sent by humankind to retrieve said light from Proteus's realm and bring it back to them. Yet, it is unclear what the promethean fire that resides on top of the lighthouse really contains. The mystic nature of the beacon could be interpreted as a metaphorical source of enlightenment beyond human comprehension, and in the same way humans needed the godly fire to thrive, they would need said knowledge. The final parallelism between Ephraim and the Greek Titan results more evident when the keeper, after murdering his partner, climbs the tower to behold the light. His following fall down the lighthouse dooms him beyond salvation, and in the last remaining seconds, after what we can only assume was a slow crawl out of the house, a flock of seabirds, just like the eagles sent by Zeus, eat his guts while still alive. What about Proteus then? The old Greek god does not have a myth of his own, but appears in Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Georgics*. In them, and according to Britannica (n.d.), Proteus is described as "the prophetic old man of the sea and shepherd of the sea's flocks". He was supposed to be a shapeshifter who oftentimes was represented with tentacle feet, and who resided in the island of Pharos. The shapeshifting nature of Thomas is suggested in two occasions throughout the film, seen through Ephraim's eyes, when the old sailor becomes a tentacled creature after reaching ecstasy before the light. The second instance happens when both characters are fighting, and Thomas is portrayed as a tentacled man wearing a reef crown who holds Ephraim by the neck. While the first happens in what results to be a nightmarish dream, the second one takes place after both characters have been

through a heavily inebriating streak of days, and the vision may have been caused by the beverage made of honey and kerosene that both brewed just under the light. Also, the similarity between Pharos, which was also a lighthouse built in Alexandria, and the New England lighthouse cannot be overlooked.

The director's intention to bring both mythic characters to the discussion results clear considering the last intervention by Thomas, uttered while being buried alive, goes as follows: "O what protean forms swim up from men's minds, and melt in hot promethean plunder, scorching eyes, with divine shames and horror... And casting them down to Davy Jones". This last line suggests, not only their implied identities, but also another similarity between the old seaman and the god. Proteus was also known for knowing the past, present and future, a knowledge which Thomas could have been gifted by the light. This idea is further reinforced in another of Ephraim's dreams, where he is seized by a younger, stronger and naked version of Thomas, who with both his eyes replaced by beams of light seem to see through Ephraim's soul. This metaphor may imply that Thomas has gained such insight by devoting himself to the light. Said insight, or knowledge Proteus had, he was reluctant to give to humans, and the only way to get it was to capture him during his slumber, as he would be unable to change shapes fast enough to break free. In a scene halfway through the film, Ephraim sneaks next to Thomas while he is asleep in order to grab the keys to the light's lock. The gesture and the scene both seem to be a parallelism to the myth, only that instead of asking him about knowledge, Ephraim would use the key to go to knowledge itself. If we see Thomas as Proteus, the warning about the seabird gains another interpretation, for it is his sea flock that he would be protecting when his realm is compromised, and the same flock which in the end devours Ephraim.

But could also the film be about, in Robert Eggers's words: "what happens when two men get trapped in a giant phallus?" The unmistakably phallic figure of the lighthouse plays a role in this possible interpretation again. An aura of homoeroticism pervades the film from early on, and accounts for some moments of tension between both characters. During one of their first nights together, Thomas describes Ephraim as "pretty as a picture", while the other does not seem to feel

complimented. The lonely life of sailors had led European seafarers, unable to find any feminine company for months, to sodomy between themselves. The practice went through a ban in Britain in 1553 under Henry VIII's rule by the Buggery Act (Dryden, 2020), which was inherited by the colonies, and was punishable by death until 1861, when it was replaced by a minimum imprisonment of 10 years. It was not until 1955 that the American Law Institute suggested the decriminalisation of consensual sodomy (Weinmeyer, 2014: 917), but by that time the practice had been widely spread in male-populated places, such as jails or long-journey ships. It is no wonder then that Thomas would be eager to engage with Ephraim in such activities. The other keeper, on the other hand, sticks to heterosexuality the only way he finds himself able to, by masturbating to the mermaid figurine. The island plays its part by showing Ephraim the impossibility of what he desires when he encounters the mermaid and she proves to be an unlikely match for him. Ephraim running away from the only female character also seems to suggest a first refusal of heterosexual practices. Both characters share, after drinking plenty of rum, a couple of moments which suggest the development of a somewhat homoerotic relationship, hinted by the film's editing.

Both slowly dance in the bleak candlelight while Thomas softly sings a love ballad. Wrapped in each other's arms Ephraim starts caressing Thomas's back, who then tries to kiss Ephraim. When Ephraim pushes him back, rejecting the advance, both turn to the hands. The palpable tension between both characters is made visible here when, after the attempted kiss, Thomas throws himself on Ephraim when they fight, to which he responds by screaming. The fight scene suggests a clear intention from Thomas to dominate Ephraim, and seems to be their way to demonstrate their masculinity. A parallelism to a sexual encounter is suggested when, after the fight, Thomas rests his head, eyes closed, on Ephraim's lap, who holds his arm around the old man's neck, as if to protect him. In a somewhat post-coital situation, it is then when Ephraim reveals Thomas that they share their first name, and tells him how he is really named. He adopted the identity of the man he murdered in Canada, but Ephraim does not need it anymore. This could also be interpreted as a metaphorical way of getting rid of the man between Ephraim and Thomas, a revelation that unites them. Later on in the

film, once they run out of booze and they craft their own, they turn into animals, making monkey-like sounds and hitting their chests under the phallic structure, a behaviour which suggests a primal bonding.

One last instance of the kind of relationship hinted between the lighthouse keepers takes place at the end of the film. After the last violent outbreak between them, which ends up with Thomas whimpering on the floor, Ephraim stands beside him, dominant, with a hand on his crotch. Watching the old man defenceless seems to bring him sexual arousal, and suddenly he stops on him and tells him to turn around. Here, the frame is held for an uncomfortably long time, building tension. It is held long enough to suggest to the viewer that Ephraim is about to rape Thomas, but not enough to confirm it. Right after, Ephraim walks Thomas out on a leash to his tomb, where he will be buried alive. However powerful and absurd the image is, it is difficult to tell what is happening exactly. This embarrassing taking-Thomas out-for-a-walk suggests could be, saving the differences, a walk of shame. As Lunceford points out, a walk of shame is usually performed after sex when one of the participants returns home, and they usually are subject to scolding or humiliating comments (2008: 319). Thomas, in this case, instead of returning to his home with dirty clothes, he is walked out on a leash to the hole where Ephraim intends to put him to rest. As for the personal pleasure that Ephraim gets out of this, besides feeling as the one in control then on, he points out several times in the film that being called a dog is something he hates. It even is what motivated his murdering of the man in Canada, and now that he has finally subdued Thomas, he may feel like turning the tables, granting himself a last bit of dominance over the old sailor before claiming the lighthouse all for himself.

While all these interpretations appear to be valid, the fantastic nature of the island and the questionable mental state of both characters make the film challenge any reading, not compromising itself to a single one. The obscurity of the setting and of the characters, and the ambiguity of the happenings all add to the mystery, to confuse the spectator and to ask them to watch it again. In the end, after what feels like an eternity for Thomas and Ephraim, the line between hallucination and reality is blurred. Thomas may be the old god Proteus, Ephraim's impossible lover, or another piece

placed on the island to expiate the young lad's sins and torture him in the meantime. But he may just be another old sea dog who has fallen victim to alcohol and solitude while standing on that rock, or all of them at once. However, the beauty of *The Lighthouse* resides not in its multiple readings, but in that the individual readings do not compromise the validity of the rest, and that one can simply watch it and become mesmerised by Eggers' ability to play with meaning. While he has not given any personal explanation on the film as of today, it seems that the film is resolutely difficult to understand. It is, in the end, a film that challenges traditional storytelling, and one that requires multiple replays to be better understood.

4. CONCLUSION

Art films are more often than not difficult to analyse, and sometimes they attempt to be too esoteric. Ambiguity in *The Lighthouse* allows the film to hide its meaning, and still make it intriguing enough to keep viewers engaged with it after it ends. Audiences have been reliant on clear explanations on the interpretation of a film for too long, and in a world populated with easily-consumed and easily-understood stories, *The Lighthouse* comes to challenge them. More importantly, it does so without compromising its storytelling quality and captivating elements, something that proves Eggers's excellent craftsmanship only two major films into his career. An ambiguous movie such as this not only challenges traditional storytelling, but also the lately popular puzzle plots, which are "intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but *entangled*" [emphasis in original] (Buckland, 2009). Puzzle plots, in the end, and however complex they may result, usually have a single answer to them. But *The Lighthouse* proves it does not always need to be that way. Instead, in Fuery's words, "a part of the function of cinema's knowledge is to provide resistance to the idea [...] that every problem has a solution, that all analysis can be refined to become better at solving the enigmas" (151). Thus, *The Lighthouse* presents itself as an unsolvable enigma, a lock with no key to open it, or with multiple keys

that will not open but a part of it. But maybe the story is not to be fully understood, for it is two tortured minds that it is told through, and one simply cannot understand madness unless they become mad themselves.

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