

An attempt to open a teleport to Shangri-La

It was Christmas Eve and I was twelve years old. I had gone with my family to the country house to celebrate Christmas. It was cold and there was a lot of snow that year. We hardly ever spent Christmas at the country house, it was too uncomfortable, too much of a hassle to keep the fireplace and the tiled heaters going, but this year the grown-ups had decided that we were going to anyway. A lot of effort went into preparing Christmas: the food, the decorations, the presents – everything! We endured the ritual despite the lack of comfort and, late at night, sat down to watch TV. An old black-and-white film called “Lost Horizon” was on. I settled into my chair, my expectations weren’t particularly high, but what else was there to do in this primitive situation. The grown-ups were busy with something, trying to keep spirits high. I became absorbed in the film, which got increasingly interesting as it developed. It was set in China in 1935, with the Japanese invading the country and a group of Americans trying to flee the country in a refugee plane. Once they are airborne it turns out that the plane is being piloted by Asians and headed for an unknown destination. It ends up crashing in a Tibet-like area, high up among snow-clad mountains. The Western passengers survive, while the Asian pilots die in the crash. Dressed only in hats, coats and dresses, the survivors try to get to grips with their icy predicament. Disaster seems threateningly close. Pretty soon, however, a group of fur-clad natives turns up. They appear to know what they’re doing, and offer to help. The prospect of a monastery, not too far away, beckons. A long, dangerous and difficult journey begins. The wind and snow beats against their faces, dangerous precipices suddenly appear, avalanches lie in wait. The group makes it around a windswept rocky outcrop, like a threshold, a passageway, and suddenly a protected valley appears, a virginal place where the sun always shines and everything is all right. The enraptured Westerners, feeling happy and safe, look down over the wonderful place, a place called Shangri-La – but here my watching abruptly ends. Having been totally absorbed by the film, I haven’t noticed that the rest of the family has been discussing our stay at the country house and their worries about it; now they have packed everything again and are about to return home to the civilization. The TV is turned off, I have no choice but to head out to the waiting, heated cars and leave. I am deeply disappointed. I would really have liked to see the end of the film, but there is nothing I can do.

Twenty-four years later I got the chance to see the whole film: it was again being shown on TV, and this time I was better prepared, more in control of the circumstances. I found out that “Lost Horizon” was a film by Frank Capra, from 1937 (based on a novel with the same name from 1933 by James Hilton). It was a bewildering experience finally to see it to the end, after all those years. I have seen it again countless times since. I haven’t been able to let go of it, there is a connection between the film and my life, a connection between a certain scene in the film and a certain occurrence in my personal history, there is a parallelism, a threshold value. There is also, in the film, a dream as old as humanity, realized for the screen in a gigantic cold-storage space outside Los Angeles. The dream of a place, a condition, in which good is made manifest and offers security, shelter and solace amid the existential angst of the everyday. What remains as the crucial moment in the film is of course when the small group of people crosses the threshold to Shangri-La, when the windblown life on the other side is exchanged for the calm and warmth that envelops them when they have crossed over, passed the rocky outcrop. It is, of course, the most important moment in the film, the most important moment in life. The crossing, when the transformation happens. This has not left me any peace of mind, and in various contexts I have returned to this image of the passageway, the threshold, as a starting point, and in this case as an existing model in a Hollywood production. When I am now making what I call an attempt to open a teleport to Shangri-La, I am using the film and its story as a starting point. Can we use these basic aids to bring about a breakthrough? Art is a universal and amazing tool with whose help we can make miracles happen.

FROM ONE ROOM TO ANOTHER.

To create the basic conditions for a transition.

The source material is Frank Capra’s film Lost Horizon from 1937.

A very short sequence, only two or three seconds in the original film, has been enlarged and taken apart into a selection of a few images. These images have been put together to generate a loop. In the same way a very short sequence of the sound has been picked out and stretched out to more than 40 minutes.

An attempt to stay as long as possible at this short but so important threshold in the film, when the group of tired and frozen people are passing the border to Shangri-La.

Trying to set up an arrangement for escape, an exit for anguish and a focal point for the contradiction of fear. Trying to use this powerful sequence as a tool for a possible transition.

Leif Elggren, Stockholm February 5th, 2002