



Escaping the Ideal Self: Perfectionism and Jungian Individuation in The Menu Film

İdeal Benlikten Kaçış: The Menu Filminde Mükemmeliyetçilik ve Jungçu Bireyleşme

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Abstract: This article argues that The Menu (2022) stages a contemporary parable in which release from pathological perfectionism is achieved not by superior control but individuation. The study seeks to answer the question of how The Menu presents Jungian individuation as a means of liberation from the ideal self-image imposed by societal expectations. Methodologically, the analysis proceeds in two integrated stages. Stage 1 performs a Barthesian semiotic reading of ten salient motifs distinguishing denotation from connotation and annotation sign function to map the film's symbolic grammar. Stage 2 re-reads these outputs within an Eco-informed open-text frame while mobilizing Jungian analytical psychology and Enneagram characterography. Findings show that the film's multi-layered sign system leads the model reader to a convergent claim: The Menu (2022) critiques the culture of perfectionism and advances individuation as its ethical and psychological alternative.

Keywords: Perfectionism, Jungian Individuation, Open Text, Semiotics.

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Abstract: Bu makale, The Menu (2022) filminin, patolojik mükemmeliyetçilikten kurtuluşun "daha üstün bir denetimle" değil, bireyleşmeyle mümkün olduğunu sahneleyen bir alegori sunduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, filmin Jungcu bireyselleşmeyi, toplumsal beklentilerin dayattığı ideal benlik imajından kurtuluş aracı olarak nasıl sunduğu sorusuna cevap aramaktadır. Yöntemsel olarak çözümlenme iki bütünlük aşamada yürütülmüştür. İlk aşama, filmin simgesel dilini haritalandırmak amacıyla on belirgin motifin Barthesyen göstergebilim okumalarını üretmiştir; her öge için gösteren düzeyi ile çağrışımsal düzey ayrıştırılmış ve gerekli yerlerde ikon/indeks/simge işlevleri saptanmıştır. İkinci aşama, bu çıktıları, metnin kendi kodlarıyla sınırlandırılmış çokanlamlılığa dayanan Eco'nun "açık metin" çerçevesi içinde yeniden okumaktadır; Bunun yanında Jungçu analitik psikoloji ve Enneagram tipolojisinden yararlanılmıştır. Bulgular, filmin çok katmanlı gösterge düzeninin okuru tek bir sonuca yönlendirdiğini göstermektedir: The Menu, filminin mükemmeliyetçilik kültürünü eleştirdiği ve bireyleşmeyi bu kültüre bir alternatif olarak sunduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mükemmeliyetçilik, Jungçu Bireyleşme, Açık metin, Göstergebilim.

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1. Introduction

Perfection is dazzling when staged and corrosive when lived. *The Menu* (2022) dramatizes this tension by turning a fine-dining ritual into a laboratory of control, desire, and meaning. Rather than treating its courses as mere plot devices, the film composes a symbolic grammar in which props, blocking, and speech acts organize a world where “doing it right” eclipses being alive. Read this way, the work lends itself to a question central to contemporary cultural life: does the film merely satirize perfectionism, or does it also model a credible path beyond it?

In recent decades, cinema has evolved from a mere tool of entertainment into a powerful medium for conveying and articulating philosophical concepts. As contemporary scholars have argued, this shift in the media perception of cinema has transformed it from “simply an entertainment box” into a visual laboratory of thought, one that raises existential, social, and ethical questions (Bordwell & Thompson, 2017; Deleuze, 1986).

Within this context, the genre of dark comedy is particularly recognized as a cinematic form that employs bitter humour to present taboo and violent situations in a manner that compels the audience to engage in critical reflection on social structures. Genre studies and film analyses indicate that successful contemporary dark comedies—notably *Parasite* and *The Platform*—mobilize exaggeration, irony, and symbolic structure to foreground critiques of inequality, consumerism, and the crisis of meaning (Farahbakhsh & Ebrahimi, 2021; Atasoy, 2020). This bitterly humorous mode places the audience between the pleasure of laughter and the gravity of social suffering, thereby creating the possibility of reinterpreting deeper concepts.

The film *The Menu* (2022; dir. Mark Mylod) can be regarded as one of the most notable contemporary examples of dark comedy. Rather than merely portraying the extravagance of luxury consumerism, it employs the symbolic performance of food and character-driven narrative frameworks to construct a ritualistic structure (Gupta & Vijayaraghavan, 2024). In this way, the film reflects the dynamics of perfectionism and the mechanization of modern life.

To understand the necessity of such a reading, one must return to the social context of contemporary life. The processes of industrialization and, subsequently, techno centrism have transformed the modes of living and value system of societies. Through his concepts of “commodity” and commodity fetishism, “Marx demonstrates that within capitalist relations, social value and human relationships become concealed behind object, and human identity becomes trapped within a commodified mechanism (Marx, 1867). Additionally, within the framework of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse (1964) argued that the machinery of consumer capitalism generates “false needs,” blinding individuals to their own oppression and fostering a compliant uniformity that perpetuates the system itself. On the other hand, Marshall Berman introduces the notion of the “volatile transformation of modernity,” illustrating how the gap between the promise of progress and the destruction of human values renders the modern lived experience fragmented and anxiety-inducing (Berman, 1982). Scholars have increasingly observed that digital culture reinforces perfectionist and consumerist ideals, cultivating a digital economy of comparison and inadequacy. Through curated social media imagery, contemporary life performs what Sedera and Lokuge (2020) call a “mirage of perfection,” a spectacle that intensifies the very psychological strain noted by Curran and Hill (2019) and Marino et al. (2018). This pervasive illusion of flawless living extends beyond the digital realm, shaping not only individual subjectivities but also cinematic representations of modern anxiety and alienation.

From a psychological perspective, confronting the collapse of existential authenticity requires an inner process that Carl Gustav Jung termed Individuation. Jung conceptualized individuation as the integrative process through which the conscious and unconscious aspect of the psyche are reconciled to form an authentic self (Jung, 1966). This process offers a therapeutic counterbalance to alienation and rigid ideals imposed by mechanized modern life: instead of conforming to external demands, the individual learn to rediscover inner wholeness and autonomy.

Within this framework, symbolic narratives — whether in myth, literature, or film — provide a cultural stage on which the struggles of individuation can be dramatized. Building on this foundation, post-Jungian theorists such as James Hillman argue that myths, stories, and cultural narratives function as imaginal arenas in which archetypal forces are dramatized, rendering psychological processes intelligible through symbolic representation (Hillman, 1992). By representing the conflict between false ideals and authentic selfhood through archetypal figures and symbolic structures, cinema in particular enables audiences to witness how the psyche negotiates perfectionist pressures. In this sense, *The Menu* (2022) can be read as an example case: its ritualized mise-en-scene and character design dramatize both the destructive effects of pathological perfectionism and the possibility of renewal through a return to authenticity, modelled by the individuation process. Yet despite the potential of such symbolic readings, contemporary film scholarship often remains focused on more conventional dimensions of analysis.

In contemporary film studies, much of the scholarship still emphasize genre conventions, narrative structure, or social critique. Fewer studies undertake deep, theoretically grounded analyses of symbolic or psychological substrata of concept-driven films such as *The Menu* (2022). As Elsaesser and Hagener (2015) argue, cinema operates not merely as a narrative system but as a sensory and conceptual medium, where film language -through framing, movement, sound, and mise-en-scene- becomes a mode of thinking that generates meaning and philosophical reflection. Against this backdrop, *The Menu* offers a fertile ground for advancing film theory.

The study seeks to answer the question of how *The Menu* presents Jungian individuation as a means of liberation from the ideal self-image imposed by societal expectations. The aim of article to establish a replicable framework that bridges visual semiotics, psychological depth, and narrative architecture, thereby contributing to the expansion of “deep reading” in film scholarship. Furthermore, by decoding the symbolic architecture of *The Menu*, this study aims to reveal how the film’s narrative enacts the Jungian process of individuation as a path toward liberation from pathological perfectionism. In the subsequent sections of this article, the theoretical framework and methodology will first be outlined, followed by the presentation of findings from the analysis and finally, the discussion will conclude with the main results. r

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Peircean Semiotics: A Triadic Account of Signification

Charles S. Peirce conceives a sign as a three-term relation linking a perceptible vehicle to an object and to the meaning formed by an interpreter. In other words, signification is not a property “inside” the sign but a process emerging from the interplay of representamen-object-interpretant (Peirce, 1931). Peirce distinguishes three recurrent modes according to how signs relate to their object: iconic (by resemblance), indexical (by causal or spatiotemporal contiguity), and symbolic (by convention). Crucially, these modes are not mutually exclusive; a single cinematic detail can combine iconic appearance, indexical trace, and symbolic coding at once (Peirce, 1931; Wollen, 1969).

Historically, Peter Wollen demonstrated how this typology can organize film analysis:

“Cinematic images oscillate between iconic likeness (photographic resemblance), indexicality (recorded imprint of profilmic reality), and symbolic meaning across Mis-en-scene, gesture, motif, sound, and editing (Wollen, 1969). Building on this approach, later film-semiotics has treated cinema as culture sign-system in which visual and sonic elements articulate ideological and affective subtexts beyond plot surface” (Wollen, 1969: 59).

2.2. Barthesian Semiotics: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

Barthes conceives the image as a two-level system of signification: at the first order, denotation names what is literally shown (the message without a code); at the second order, connotation organizes culturally learned meaning, values, attitudes, and ideologies, attached to that denoted scene (Barthes, 1977). Extending this, his notion of myth describes how connotation is stabilized into a taken-for-granted “nature” meaning, thereby naturalizing culture as nature and tuning historical preferences (e.g., elitist refinement, sacrificial purity) into common sense (Barthes, 1972). In cinematic analysis, this yields a practical protocol:

isolate the denoted signifier (prop, gesture, costume, dish, spatial arrangement), articulate its connotative clusters (e.g., authority, exclusion, authenticity), and then test whether the film's recurrent codes consolidate these connotations into a mythic narrative (e.g., the myth of perfection). Barthes also details how images generate connotation through specific procedures (pose, objects, composition, lighting, trick effects) and how language (dialogue, titles) can anchor or rely visual meaning- either narrowing polysemy or opening new semantic paths (Barthes, 1977). In this study, we operationalize Barthes by first distinguishing denotation/connotation for ten motifs and where useful, tagging icon/index/symbol function (complementing Peirce) before asking whether the film's patterned uses of food, space, and ritual mythologize perfection, and how later sections reopen those myths through Jungian individuation and Eco's bounded polysemy.

2.3. Eco's "Open Text" and Role of the Spectator

Umberto Eco's distinction between closed and open texts complements this semiotic view by shifting attention to the conditions of interpretation. In Eco's account of cinema and visual codes, images are intelligible only withing learned coding system; viewers must mobilize prior knowledge to complete the work's meaning (Eco, 1970). Openness, however, is not license for anything-goes as Eco later argues, interpretations are many but not unlimited (Eco, 1990).

Seen through this lens, The Menu is structured to invite interpretive cooperation. Its symbolic density and refusal of simple moral closure generate divergent, yet defensible, reading consumerist satire, parable of artistic exhaustion, or psychological allegory. The spectator effectively becomes Eco's model reader, filling gaps and connecting sign-clusters in ways conditioned by cultural competence. Together, Peirce and Eco offer a coherent toolkit. Peirce explains how individual cinematic elements signify (icon/ index/ symbol) and how multiple modes can co-inhabit a single shot or prop. Eco explains how a film's architecture organizes interpretation, distributing cues so that meaning is co-produced by the spectator. In the analyse of the Menu, this synthesis allows a mapping from local sign-events (dishes, gestures, spatial arrangements) to global interpretive possibilities (social critique, questions of authenticity, perfectionism).

2.4. Jungian Individuation and the Quest for Authenticity

The theory of Individuation in Jungian Analytical Psychology refers to the process through which an individual integrates the conscious and unconscious dimensions of the psyche to achieve an authentic and unified self (Stein, 2016). In other word, individuation is a journey of self-knowledge and the realization of inner potentialities that leads to the discovery of life's meaning and the attainment of psychological wholeness. The outcome of this process is the emergence of a distinct and unique identity that enables the individual to live in accordance with their true self-free from the mask and socially imposed patterns that obscure authenticity (Jung, 1933).

Jung and his post-Jungian interpreters have emphasized that individuation is not merely a psychological event but a fundamental task of life and a prerequisite for mental health and spiritual fulfillment. This process offers an antidote to the alienation of modern existence and the rigid ideals of mechanistic perfection, for it encourages the individual to turn inward, reclaim autonomy, and restore inner wholeness rather than conforming blindly to external expectations (Jung, 1933; Shelburne, 1983). In essence, Jung's concept of individuation asserts that through embracing and reconciling the opposing forces within the psych, one attains unity, authenticity, and a renewed sense of purpose in life.

Within this framework, Jungian theory provides a powerful lens for analyzing the central themes of The Menu. From this perspective, the film's narrative can be interpreted as an allegory of struggle between the "pathological perfectionist self" and the possibility of rebirth through authenticity and self-realization. The character of Chef Julian Slowik embodies the perfectionist ego-an identity drained of vitality under the crushing weight of societal ideals. In contrast, Margot represents the individualized self, symbolizing a return to authenticity and inner freedom. By remaining faithful to her intrinsic desires and rejecting imposed roles, she functions as a catalyst for redemption.

Margot's behaviors and transformations throughout the film closely align with the stages of individuation described by Jung – a process that will be examined in detail in the findings section. Ultimately, *The Menu* demonstrates that liberation from pathological perfectionism lies not in achieving external standards but in undertaking the inner journey of individuation, wherein true meaning and inner contentment can be found.

To avoid terminological drift, I use Jung's terms in their standard senses. In this article, persona refers to the socially adapted mask that manages one's presentation to the world (Jung, 1953). Shadow designates the disowned or unrecognized aspects of the personality, not limited to the "negative" (Jung, 1959). Ego is the centre of consciousness that confers the sense of "I" (Stein, 2006). The Self names the psyche's organizing totality and the aim of individuation (Jung, 1959).

2.5. The Enneagram and Representation of Perfectionism in *The Menu*

The Enneagram is a motivational typology that delineates nine principal patterns by which individuals organize their perceptions of self and others; these patterns operate as dominant strategies shaping one's worldview and communicative style (Alexander, 2020). In their classic account, Riso and Hudson (1999) characterize the system as "nine dominant strategies of personality": each type is defined by a basic fear paired with a core desire or motivation and, across level of psychological health, manifests correspondingly distinct emotional and behavioral profiles. Properly understood, the Enneagram functions as a *pragmatic* instrument: it offers a roadmap for emotional self-regulation and for interpreting the behavior of others – without collapsing persons into static labels (Riso & Hudson, 1999).

Within this system, type one / the reformer is normatively characterized by conscientiousness, a principled orientation, and a sustained concern for continual improvement; however, in less healthy states it may slip into rigid perfectionism, chronic criticism, and repressed anger toward perceived imperfections (The Enneagram Institute, 2025). At the other end of the spectrum, Type Nine / The Peacemaker is normatively identified by a tendency to preserve balance and avoid conflict and – at its best – can adopt a broad, encompassing perspective that helps to repair tensions (The Narrative. Enneagram, 2025).

Within this theoretical backdrop, the characterization in *The Menu* can be read with greater precision. Chef Slowik exemplifies an unhealthy one: inflexible standards of "rightness," an obsession with order and formalism, and a mounting resentment toward any lapse – together constituting a pattern in which pathological perfectionism hardens into destructive action (The Enneagram Institute, 2025). Margot, by contrast, evokes the Nine pattern through realism, awareness of authentic needs, and capacity to maintain composure amid chaos – an orientation understood not as passivity but as the preservation of inner continuity and the reconciliation of competing forces (The Narrative, Enneagram, 2025). This point is developed further (both conceptually and empirically) in the Finding section.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design that treats *The Menu* (2022) as a primary text and analyses its symbolic grammar through a two-stage procedure. Stage 1 applies a Barthesian semiotic approach to ten purposively selected symbols and motifs (e.g., the cheeseburger, the silver door, Elsa's enforcement, the boat, the final fire). For each item, we distinguished denotation (what is shown) from connotation (cultural/thematic/value) and where analytically helpful, annotated the sign's operational mode (icon/index/symbol) to clarify how meaning is produced within the filmic code. Stage 2 re-reads the semiotic outputs within an Eco-informed open text frame – i.e., constrained polysemy oriented by the film's internal cues – mobilizing Jungian analytical psychology (ego, persona, shadow, Self, individuation) and Enneagram characterology (Slowik as a maladaptive Type One; Margot as an individuating, Nine-like counter-orientation) to articulate how the narrative models individuation, not compliance, as a pathway out of culture perfectionism. The Findings are therefore organized by method-based subsections: a semiotic decoding (Section 2.1), a Jungian-Enneagram re-reading guided by Eco's open-text constraints (Section 2.2), and a synthesis that integrates the concurrent layers (Section 2.3).

The Menu (2022) was selected because peer-reviewed and reputable criticism converge on its symbolic density and its sustained engagement with art, culture, and psychology, which together make it a strong case for semiotic and depth-psychological inquiry. A recent article in *Agathos: An International Review* reads the film's courses and ritualized mise-en-scene as "food performed within performance," demonstrating layered meaning beyond plot (Gupta & Vijayaraghavan, 2024). A Jungian study in *Litera Kultura* analyses Chef Slowik vis persona-shadow dynamics and argues the shadow non-integration motivates his extreme actions (Handika, 2025). Serious criticism likewise frames the work as a multilayered critique of art-as-consumption and the hunger for authenticity.

Sampling followed a purposive, theory-led logic: symbols were included if they (a) recur or anchor a course/turning point, (b) are central to the perfectionism/individuation problematic, and (c) exhibit clear integration with mis-en-scene, blocking, sound, or dialogue. The analytic workflow combined iterative close reading, memoing, and constant comparison across scenes to stabilize connotative claims; thick description is used throughout to keep interpretations text-bound. To enhance credibility and confirmability, we triangulated our readings against paratexts (e.g., reputable criticism and interviews) strictly as corroborative context, not as primary evidence; maintained a traceable chain from frame/line to inference; and reported negative/ambivalent cues where present (e.g., the final fire's nihilism/purgation duality). No human-subject data or statistics are involved, validity rests on theoretical fit, transparency of procedure, and reproducibility of the coding steps. Limitations include the interpretive scope of a single-film case and dependence on authorial close reading, which we mitigate through explicit criteria, method triangulation, and an audit-like presentation of examples in the findings.

Research Question: How *The Menu* presents Jungian individuation as a means of liberation from the ideal self-image imposed by societal expectations?

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Semiotic Analysis of Key Symbols in The Menu (2022)

Applying a Barthian semiotic approach, we can dissect the film's important symbols by distinguishing their denotation (literal depiction) and connotation (cultural or symbolic meaning) (Barthes, 1972). In other words, what we see on screen (the signifier) often points to deeper themes (the signified) beyond its surface appearance. Using this framework, several major motifs in *The Menu* can be analysed to reveal how the film indicates social perfectionism and the individuation as the solution (authentic selfhood). The table highlights key examples, with signifiers from the film, their denotations and connotations, and how they function semiotically. Citations from critics and film's own dialogue support each interpretation, ensuring scholarly grounding in Barthes' connotative analysis of signs.

Table 1: Key Symbols in The Menu (Barthian scheme)

Note. To preserve readability, connotative and thematic interpretations (Barthes, 1972;1977) are presented in the accompanying discussion (S1- S10).

Symbolic Element (signifier)	Denotation (what is shown)	Sign Type
S1. Hawthorn Island (the setting)	A private, boat-only island; a meticulously curated environment where sourcing, preparation, movement, and timing are fully controlled by the restaurant (Mylod,2022)	Symbol (closed system of "purity"; indexical isolation)
S2. Elsa (Slowik's assistant)	The assistant who polices rules, regulates access and speech, and physically confronts Margot before being killed in the struggle (Mylod,2022)	Index/Symbol (operationalized discipline; codified enforcement)

S3. "Bread" course (denial of bread)	A "bread course" without bread / only condiments while Slowik declares bread "for the common" (Mylod,2022)	Symbol/ Index (ornamental refinement by subtraction; exclusion)
S4. Chef Slowik's Commanding Clap	Chef Slowik sharply Claps his hands, immediately silencing the room; the kitchen staff responds in unison, "Yes, Chef!" at each clap (Mylod,2022)	Index (cause- and effect signal of authority)
S5. "The Mess" - Jeremy's suicide course	In one course titled "the Mess", sous-chef Jeremy publicity shoots himself in the head as part of the menu performance. The staff calmly presents this as the next dish (Mylod,2022)	Index (of perfectionism's lethal toll); also, Symbol (of personal ruin under perfection).
S6. Angel Wings & Angel investor	The restaurant's owner/investor, aptly called Slowik's "angel investor" is draped in large white angel wings and then drowned in full view of the guests (Mylod,2022)	Symbol (culturally ironic symbol of a fallen "angel" investor; also Icon (wings visually evoke an angel)
S7. The Silver Door (Chef's Secret Room)	A mysterious silver door in the restaurant leads Margot into Slowik's private sanctum, where she finds memorabilia: clippings of his fame, a family photo and a lone image of young Slowik proudly flipping burgers (Mylod,2022).	Symbol of Slowik's guarded ego and lost self.
S8. Margot's Cheeseburger Demand	Facing death, Margot (whose real name is Erin) boldly requests a simple cheeseburger instead of any item on Slowik personally cooks her a juicy cheeseburger with fries, and she savors a bite she asks for the rest "to go" (Mylod,2022)	Symbol (of authenticity and lost joy); also Index (evoking Slowik's nostalgia and awaking his sense of authenticity).
S9. The boat (Margot's Escape)	A small boat that brought everyone to the island is commanded by Margot to escape at the end. She leaves the island on this boat, clutching her take-out cheeseburger, while the restaurant and remaining people go up in flames behind her (Mylod,2022).	Index (pointing the way to freedom); Symbol (of a new beginning).
S10. The Puring Fire (Final S'mores course)	In the final course, Chef Slowik turns the diners themselves into components of a grand s'more (Mylod,2022).	Index (of "cleansing destruction"); Symbol (of ironic purification)

Connotation & Thematic Significance (for table 1)

S1. Hawthorne Island: At the connotative level, the island functions as a sealed microcosm naturalizing Slowik's totalizing order: a closed circuit in which every variable is disciplined toward an "ideal" outcome. In Barthes's term, the literal isolation (denotation) is connoted as the myth of uncontaminated perfection—purify by separation (Barthes, 1972).

(S2): Rational enforcement vs, authentic agency, Elsa operates as a code-enforcer within the text's system



S2. Elsa (Slowik's female assistant): Connotatively, Elsa embodies rationalized enforcement -the ritual guardian of Slowik's perfectionist code. She converts Slowik's abstract ideal into everyday coercion, transforming service into surveillance. In Barthesian terms, her clipped diction, immaculate posture, and punitive interventions are secondary signifiers that construct the myth of flawless service-discipline masquerading as elegance (Barthes, 1977). Her death signifies a crack in the code: the collapse of instrumental reason that had suppressed the emergence of authenticity (Margot's agency) and thus clears symbolic space for individuation to proceed.

S3. Bread course: Bread's cultural connotation-sustenance, community, humility, and authenticity (Barthes, 1972). Withholding it converts the course into a myth of elitist refinement that rejects the essential in favour of ornament. As a code, "no-bread" visually and narratively marks exclusion (Barthes, 1972).

(S4): Slowik sharply claps; the bridge snaps to attention and answer "Yes, Chef". Connotatively it encodes perfectionism as social control.



S4. Chef Slowik's Commanding Clap: The load clap is an Index of Slowik's absolute authority -a direct signal that triggers obedient action. It denotes a call for attention but connotes total control and regimentation. The pageantry of the synchronized "Yes, Chef!" (a ritualistic response) underscores the perfectionist discipline and hierarchy in his kitchen. Each clap build tension, symbolizing how perfectionism demands instant, unquestioning compliance. In Barthes' terms, the clap is an indexical command whose immediate obedience is ritualized into the myth of flawless service-discipline masquerading as elegance (Barthes, 1977).

S5. "The Mess" Jeremy's Suicide Course:

This shocking tableau is a symbolic demonstration of the toxic cost of perfectionism. Denotatively, it's a gruesome suicide presented as art (a choreographed "course"). Connotatively, "the mess" signifies the mental breakdown caused by impossible ideals, Chef Slowik sombrely explains that Jeremy, though talented, "will never be great" -his life is declared a mass, ending in a literal mess on the floor. The scene function as an **index** of the human sacrifice demanded by Slowik's perfectionist vision (cause: unattainable perfection→ effect: self-destruction). It's also a grim symbol: Jeremy's fate illustrates how the drive for perfection leads to despair and ruin. As the actor Ralph Fiennes noted in an interview, the film explores "the psychic pathology of perfection... the drive to perfection will make you mad" (Jakup,2023). Jeremy's death starkly visualizes that madness.

S6. Angel Wings & Angel investor

The angel wings are a pointed symbol with ironic connotations. Slowik literally sacrifices his angel, suggesting betrayal and a fall from grace -a nod to "selling one's soul" for success. The angel investor's death signifies the Chef's rejection of the commercial pressures behind his art. It's also an icon in a satirical sense: the wings visually resemble an angle yet serve as an index of Slowik's wrath toward the money-men who enable his obsessive pursuit of perfection. As one analysis notes, the investor (named Verrick) is repeatedly called "angle" and then killed while wearing angel wings, emphasizing the death of innocence or support in Slowik's quest (Macabre,2023). In Barthes' mythological reading, an angle (connoting purity or salvation) is subverted here into a morbid sign of corrupted ideals in haute cuisine. The wings iconically resemble an angle but function mythically to satirize patronage: the "guardian" is ritually offered up, inverting purity into corrupted sanctity (Barthes,1972).

S7. The Silver Door (Chef's Secret Room): As rhetoric of the image, the cool metallic surface codes distance, prestige, and closure (Barthes,1977). When Margot opens this door, it indexically foreshadows her ability to open up Slowik's repressed humanity, this symbol reinforces the film's message that behind obsessive perfection lies a void of lost joy and identity.

(S8): Margot's cheeseburger order (the cheeseburger as individuation cue



S8. Margot's Cheeseburger Demand: This climatic act is rich in connotation. Denotatively, it's a customer ordering an off-menu item. Connotatively, the cheeseburger symbolizes authenticity, comfort, and individual desire -everything the pretentious "Menu" lacked. It's an iconic piece of American comfort food and a symbol of culinary simplicity as salvation.

S9. The boat (Margot's Escape): Within the film's code economy, the boat indexes the only exit vector-the single line that breaks circular containment (Barthes, 1977). Throughout the film, the island and restaurant were completely isolated-a claustrophobic stage for Slowik's controlled "menu". The boat by contrast, is an index of the outside world and normal life; it was the only way in, and it becomes the only way out.

S10. The Puring Fire (Final S'mores course): Fire bears a double myth -purification and destruction- here weaponized as a grotesque "dessert" that collapses haute ritual into campfire kitchen (Barthes,1972). The totalizing burn stages Perfectionism's self-consumption: a system that demands purity finally incinerates creator and clientele alike. The image's rhetorical excess (costume, symmetry, flame) encodes judgment as spectacle (Barthes, 1977).

4.2. Jungian Analysis of Narrative and Character through Eco's "Open Text"

Following Eco's framework, The Menu can be approached as an open text -a work designed to activate a "model reader" who cooperates in constructing meaning across multiple, partially compatible layers, all while remaining guided by text's internal codes (Handika, 2025). In practice, this means the film's symbols are not ciphers for a single hidden message but semantic operators that permit several readings (ethical, psychological, sociocultural) without collapsing into over-interpretation. Building on the Barthesian analysis from Section 1.1, we now re-read a subset of the most revealing symbols through (i) Jung's individuation process (ego, persona, shadow, self) and (ii) Enneagram characterology-treating Chef Slowik as a pathological Type One (the perfectionist-reformer) and Margot as an individuating agent with a Type Nine- like orientation to simplicity, groundedness, and de-escalation. This combined lens will show how the film ultimately proposes individuation - not compliance or destruction- as the pathway out of a social perfectionism.

Framed by the island's seclusion, The Menu constructs what I call Slowik's "persona vault" : a closed system that functions as more than backdrop, sealing out contingency and spontaneity (S1, S7) In Jungian terms, the island symbolizes a closed ego-system fused with its persona -a carefully controlled world in which Chef Slowik's polished, perfectionist image of the "great chef" dominates, leaving no room for shadow or change. This dramatizes an ego ensnared by its own persona (Slowik's persona is that of a "leader, professional, perfectionist, and respectable" chef and unable to acknowledge its repressed contents. Slowik's inability to accept his shadow self creates intense inner, tension and fuels his extreme actions (Handika, 2025). On the other hand, a striking visual symbol of this is the silver door in Slowik's quarters- essentially a persona vault. Behind the gleaming door (amidst his curated trophies of success) Margot discovers a humble photograph of a young, smiling Slowik flipping burgers, hinting at the joyful, grounded cook he once was. This contrast between the glossy accolades and the hidden burger-cook photo performs Slowik's split psyche: a perfectionist persona on the surface versus a disowned but vital Self yearning for simple authenticity. Eco's model reader can oscillate between these coding-the pristine persona and buried real self- without choosing one "correct" meaning. The very co-presence of these opposites in the text invites us to experience Slowik's core conflict: an ego ideal that has suppressed its Eros and spontaneity in pursuit of an unattainable purity.

Against the backdrop of Slowik's closed system, Eco's open-text design allows certain moments to steer interpretations; the cheeseburger Margot cleverly orders is one such cue (S8), shifting attention from performance to need. On a surface level, it functions as an anti-elitist gesture -a simple, nostalgic dish that pointedly contrasts the pretentious haute cuisine of Hawthorne. Psychologically, this cheeseburger is an honest cheeseburger order, he momentarily reconnects with the lost "joy of cooking" and serving others

that once defined his love for craft. As one Jungian analysis notes, this humble dish “reminds Chef of his love for cooking and for actually feeding somebody who’s hungry and just wants to enjoy simple, real food” (Oris-Zora,2023). For a moment, Slowik’s steeled expression eases into a genuine smile, and the faced slips just enough to show the man beneath the ritual. In Enneagram terms, this corresponds to a Type One personality momentarily integrating healthy Type Seven or Nine qualities- embracing spontaneity, sensory pleasure, and “uncomplicated sufficiency” instead of moralistic perfection. Eco’s open text encourages both a sociocultural reading (a satire of foodie elitism being upended by a basic comfort food) and a depth - psychological reading (the Self reasserting itself through a symbolic act of nurturance) without conflict. Both layers concur that the antidote to Slowik’s destructive perfectionism is a return to authentic appetite - literal and figurative. Margot’s simple request thus operates as the film’s turning point, recentring nourishment and care over performance.

If the cheeseburger signals a crack in the sealed system, Elsa is the mechanism that seals it back up. Cast as the ego’s strict enforcer and Hawthorne’s vigilant gatekeeper -a code- enforcer in Eco’s terms – she converts rules into an instrument of containment (S2, S4), opposing the film’s movement toward lived choice. Elsa polices every boundary” she maintains the Chef’s meticulous standards, controls access (how she forbids Margot from leaving the table or entering certain spaces) and embodies the rigidity of Slowik’s world. Jungian language, Elsa personifies the managerial persona or even the critical superego that guards the persona vault. Her eventual confrontation with Margot is staged as an intrapsychic conflict: the rigid, repressive reason versus the emergent authentic self. When Margot trespasses into Slowik’s private sanctum (literally breaking the rules of his closed system), Elsa attacks her -as if the overcontrolled psyche is attempting to quash the free inner child. The struggle ends with Margot killing Elsa (impaling her with a knife), a symbolic defeat of the “tyrant within.” In effect, the barrier keeping the system closed is removed, both in plot and psyche. Jungian individuation often requires such a clash: the guard of the ego (with its punitive, perfectionist scripts) must lose its power so that new growth can occur. The film encodes this need for the rigid structure to collapse. In Enneagram terms, this is the moment the unhealthy Type One’s punitive superego loses its grip, creating space for a more Nine-like harmony and flexibility to enter. Once Elsa- and what she represents- is out of the way, individuation becomes structurally possible within the story. The text no longer enforces Slowik’s closed code unchallenged; an authentic agency (Margot’s inner-led choices) can now reshape the narrative outcome. As a Reddit Jungian commentary observes, the kitchen “workers” in the film symbolize all the energies pressed into serving the ego’s perfectionism, and “if we have a tendency to perfectionism, all our energies are under huge pressure... We tend to turn into a tyrant towards ourselves” (Oris-Zora,2023). Margot’s triumph over Elsa signals an end to this internal tyranny, clearing the path for the psyche’s liberation.

Set against the island’s self-sealing order, the film mobilizes a rite of passage: the crossing of water, where Margot’s boat serves as the exit vector that converts individuation from symbol into movement (S9). The boat functions as literal escape vehicle and a symbolic threshold operator, linking the sealed island-system to an open, uncertain horizon. Eco’s open text invites us to see scene in dual focus: on one hand, Margot’s departure by boat is a narrative turning point (the final code-switches from containment to release); on the other, it’s rich with Jungian meaning. Margot’s solitary voyage into the dark ocean represents as step into the unconscious and the broader world beyond Slowik’s tightly controlled ego-island. She has chosen a trajectory no longer dictated by the perfectionist script. In Jungian terms, this is the individuation journey setting sail- a move away from the stagnant confines of an overbearing persona into the hero’s victory so much as a quiet refusal of the system. Margot does not engage in any grandiose showdown with Slowik at the end; instead, her most powerful act is to leave, to say “I do not consent to this game.” This has an Enneagram parallel as well: a Type One pathology thrives on escalation and judgment, whereas Margot embodies a Type Nine or peacemaker’s wisdom in de-escalation – she removes herself from the moral theatre entirely. The boat crossing is simple and undramatic, yet firmly decisive. One she pushes offshore, the spell of the island is broken. We watch Margot literally sail away from the prison of perfectionism, into open water. Tellingly, an analyst notes that Margot carries “the seed for new life in the sea” by surviving (Oris-Zora,2023). This emphasizing that her inner innocence is what actually escapes to potentially grow elsewhere. The film deliberately leaves the specifics of her fate undefined -her boat may run out of fuel and

drift, as one ending explainer observes (Roy, 2023). But what matters is that Margot has stepped beyond the closed circuit of Slowik's world. She has exited the perfectionist paradigm, even at the cost of venturing into uncertainty. This notion resonates with the Jungian mandate that individuation often requires leaving the safe but suffocating "island" of our complexes for the vast sea of life's possibilities.

Having crossed the threshold, the film resolves the dilemma – purge or nihilism – by steering, under Eco's bounded openness, toward a transformative rite rather than void (S10). The climatic fire in *The Menu* is a textbook example of controlled polysemy – an image that supports multiple interpretations, all grounded in the film's established codes. On one level, Chef Slowik's decision to immolate himself, his staff, and the remaining guests in grand s'mores-themed inferno reads as nihilistic self-annihilation: perfectionism devouring itself in a final, grotesque collapse. Indeed, we watch the perfectionist ego literally go up in flames, taking all of its accomplices (the corrupted "parts" of Slowik's psyche and society) with it. Yet, simultaneously, the fire can be read as a ritual purge or alchemical transformation – a purification that burns away only what is false and rotten, clearing space for rebirth. The film's visual and narrative cues keep both readings in play (the guests willingly donning marshmallow cloaks suggests both absurdist satire and sacrificial rite). Crucially, however, *The Menu* then anchors our perspective in Margot's quiet act of survival: as the restaurant explodes, we cut to Margot at a safe distance, calmly biting into her leftover cheeseburger while the night sky glows behind her (Roy, 2023). This final juxtaposition guides the model reader away from a purely nihilistic takeaway and toward a transformative one. In Jungian terms, the ego persona complex "burns," but the candidate for the Self remains. Slowik casts himself as both priest and offering: he consigns his own being – and the shadow traits he has staged across his diners, from deceit and greed to pride – into the flames, as a purgation meant to clear space for something unspoiled to endure. A Jungian commentary on the film explicitly draws this parallel, nothing that "*the Chef is like that Kitchen God who should be burned with all his negativities (guests) so that life can be renewed...in order for the alchemical process of individuation to succeed.*" (Oris-Zora,2023). In flames, Slowik's shadow is at last confronted and cleansed – but significantly, not everything is destroyed. Read as the mind's unspoiled centre, Margot survives because genuine change burns away corruption while preserving healthy tissue. The final fire, then, is less an act of senseless destruction and more a violent integration: an extreme, symbolic catharsis that obliterates the false, perfection-bound identity and makes room for Self to emerge. The image set is deliberately ambivalent (purgation or simply nihilism?), but the aftermath -Margot alive, nourished, and free- leans the interpretation toward regeneration rather than mere despair.

4.3. Synthesis: Individuation, Not Compliance

Operating as an Eco-style open text, *The Menu* (2022) houses satire, class critique, depth-psychology- to reinforce rather than negate one another, steering the reading toward individuation, not compliance. Within this multilayered design, the film's psychological reading comes into focus as a central through-line. Chef Slowik epitomize the Type One perfectionist pathology: he has lost himself in perfection, order, and precision so much that he became destructive, moralizing from over substance and elevating his persona above all else. He is, figuratively, a man who has become his own kitchen tyrant, forcing all aspects of his psyche (and staff) to serve an impossible ideal. Margot, by contrast, mobilizes a counterforce analogous to a healthy Nine (Peacemaker) or the One's point of integration: she de-escalates the deadly game through grounded human insight, choosing sufficiency over excess and honesty over pretence. Rather than fight fire with fire, she uses authenticity as jiu-jiu -appreciating a basic cheeseburger, voicing her real hunger, and ultimately walking away from the ego's theatre altogether. In Jungian terms, Margot aligns with Slowik's anima or inner child, the part of him (and us) that retains a connection to simple joys and fundamental needs (Oris-Zora,2023). It is fitting that this is the element which survives the ordeal. The film does not left Margot "save everyone" in a conventional heroic sense, but her survival is itself the symbolic victory: the Self (wholeness) endures while the false perfectionist structure implodes. All the textual codes-culinary satire, horror, Jungian archetypes, Enneagram motifs - converge on a single pragmatic insight: the way out of destructive perfectionism is through individuation.

5. Conclusion

The study has aimed to establish a replicable framework that bridges visual semiotics, psychological depth, and narrative architecture, thereby contributing to the expansion of “deep reading” in film scholarship and, by decoding the symbolic architecture of *The Menu*, to reveal how the film’s narrative enacts the Jungian process of individuation as a path toward liberation from pathological perfectionism.

This study set out to determine whether *The Menu* merely lampoons a culture of flawlessness or whether it also articulates a practicable way out of it. Reading the film first through a Barthesian map of ten recurrent motifs and then through a Jungian and Enneagram re-reading disciplined by Eco’s open-text constraints, we found that the work does more than satirize elite taste: it builds a perfectionist myth (through ritual, space, and performance) and then reopens that myth to stage individuation as an available exit. In short, the film’s most consequential image an island sealed against contingency, a silver door curated like a reliquary or persona, a humble cheeseburger, a boat pushing off into night, terminal blaze, compose a coherent sequence from enclosure to release.

The semiotic table clarified how Hawthorn’s island naturalizes an ideal of purity by exclusion; how “no-bread” codifies ornamental refinement over substance; how the clap ritual indexes immediate, unthinking obedience; how the angel-investor and “the Mess” dramatize the human cost of totalizing ideal; and how the silver door concentrates the logical of persona: polished artifacts that conceal the living core. Taken together, these signs do not merely decorate the narrative. They organize experience into a closed system in which correctness is staged as sacred and deviation as profane. That system is not abstract: it is choreographed in bodies, gesture, mise-en-scene.

The Eco-guided re-reading then tracked where the film permits meaning to bend. Three junctures are decisive. First, Margot’s cheeseburger -denotatively ordinary- re-centers appetite and care against display. Jungianly, it signals a call of the self that interrupts the ego’s perfectionist script; Enneagrammatically, it loosens a Type One tightening by recruiting Nine-like sufficiency and de-escalation. Second, the confrontation with Elsa externalizes the intrapsychic clash between managerial reason (the code-enforcer guarding persona) and emergent authenticity: when Elsa falls, the text removes the gate that kept the system sealed. Third, the boat literalizes threshold passage: not a heroic conquest, but a refusal to keep consenting to theatre of purity. Each step is small and legible in plot terms; cumulatively, they convert individuation from concept to procedure.

The final blaze is the film’s most controlled polysemy. One reading sees nihilistic collapse, perfectionism devouring creator and clientele. Alike. Another reads the combustion as purge, an alchemical burning of what cannot be carried forward. The film keeps both readings in play but anchors the horizon in a quiet cut: Margot, alone, eating slowly, the sea open, the ritual behind her. By standing survival not as triumphal rescue but as measured appetite plus departure, the film answers the opening problem: relief from perfectionism is not a superior technique of control; it is a relinquishment of the script that demanded control in the first place. Slowik’s self-immolation is therefore not individuation, but shadow possession brought to its terminal image; the individuation the text endorses is the one that leaves the room, keeps the bread, and eats at a human pace.

Beyond its claims about *The Menu*, the article proposes a replicable way to read concept-driven cinema. Stage 1 stabilizes the code: identify signifiers, separate denotation from connotation, and (where clarifying) tag icon/index/symbol. Stage 2 tests the code’s drift: locate textual junctures where multiple but bounded interpretations cohere around a psychological resolution. That second stage is not “anything goes”: it is a disciplined plurality guided by what the film itself licenses. Practically, this two-stage design helps avoid common failures: (i) reducing rich films to plot summary, and (ii) free-associative symbolism that outruns the text.

This is a single-case design. Its strength is depth; its cost is generality. Future research can test the framework comparatively across adjacent films where perfectionist logics are staged differently. A

methods extension might formalize coder-agreement for denotation/connotation assignments or integrate shot-by-shot datasets (framing, duration, sound events) to correlate formal cues with interpretive pivots.

The film naturalizes a perfectionist myth by staging control and exclusion as “refinement” across space, gesture, and service. It then unseals that myth through small, decisive acts – reclaiming bread, refusing the script, crossing the water – that reattach meaning to bodily need and ordinary care. The ethics are practical: favour substance over display and leave closed systems.

The last image -flame behind, food in hand, sea ahead -condenses the study’s thesis. The Menu (2022) does not instruct viewers to become better chefs of themselves; it invites them to stop cooking for a system that eats them. Individuation here is not a grand revelation but a series of ordinary choices that re-humanize time and appetite. If contemporary perfectionism is a choreography of fear- measured, timed, plated-then the film’s countermovement is a choreography of release: loosen the form, name the need, exit the room. In showing that, The Menu gives contemporary cinema something more than a sharp joke at elite expense. It offers a way to live after the joke lands: imperfectly, openly, and still hungry-for the right things.

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