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Phallus Cult and Primal Rhythm

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A journalist and travel writer, René Fülöp-Miller (1891-1963) visited Hollywood in 1930 and published a critical book about his impressions which he titled “The Phantasy Maschine: A Saga of Greed.” What follows is a chapter from the book which emphasizes (following Rebecca West) the film’s capacity to create a quasi-religious cult around male and female film stars, and also speculates about film’s mythical function to express a primal rhythm of life. In the tradition of the avant-garde, the essay dismisses narrative and dramatic film as product of a phantasy machine in favor of non-fictional film that *produces* fantastic effects by focusing on overlooked details of the visible world, such as waterdrops, stars, colibris, etc.. See also Fülöp-Miller’s text about role of illusion in cinema (no. 187) in *The Promise of Cinema*.

Spirited defenders of film have advanced a theory which, despite being partially superseded by the invention and eventual success of sound film, nonetheless

appears worthy of attention today. The movies, so they argue, have effected in our entire culture a new turn toward the visual, a turn of the utmost necessity after the many hundreds of years devoted to purely abstract intellectual thought. Film will train humanity, accustomed ever since the victory of Humanism to think in the medium of words, to return to the visual-fantasies of a mythical prehistory and thereby to re-awaken in itself a capacity for images nearly buried under the jumble of all that has been thought and printed in the world. The authors of the Bible already knew that the path from the eye to the heart is shorter than the path from the ear to the heart; so it stands in Matthew 6:21: "The eye is the lamp of the body."

In periods of extreme subjective and intellectual development, the masses renew their flight into the image. If the intellectualism of the humanistic age gave rise to an immense longing for the image—one that culminated in the art of the Renaissance—then it seems as if the movies represent the beginning of a new and similarly optical culture, a new Renaissance. In addition, film appears to rediscover the all but forgotten primal relationship between form and character by concentrating the attention of the spectator on the pantomime of the actors and thereby pointing to the accord between essence and appearance.

These authors are convinced that film has resurrected the great mystical art of gesture. Since movies seem to possess the ability to depict our inner processes with corporeal means, they are said to be a unique medium of expression for the soul. Humanity is said to have lost contact with gesture, the primal region of all spiritual communication, and film, which returns it to us, therefore also leads us back to the primal harmony of all things natural. Film is said to have rediscovered the mimic capacity of the entire body, this

overflowing language spoken by all living creatures of the earth. In this way, they see film as the crowning achievement of the protracted strivings of all artists concerned with expression.

In addition, film is said to grant us new access to the symbol, that most profound form of knowledge and perception. Without becoming consciously aware of the immanent symbolism that traverses all good films, the spectator will nonetheless perceive unconsciously the feeling shining forth from the symbolic progression of images; for every frame of a film possesses a specific affective tonality that we sense instinctively. The objects and characters of every film plot are thereby said to participate in the great symbolic task of sensory edification.

Film has even been credited with the creation of a new mythology. According to the wise perspective of Rebecca West, today's general interest in the movies and their stars is nothing other than a new form of religious cult.¹ The public has directed its attention to the stars in such an intense way that the stars have become akin to divine figures. As such, they are said to have joined the ranks of those archetypes inhabiting the subconscious of humanity from time immemorial. Mary Pickford would thus play the role of the virgin goddess in the fantasy of the masses; the glorified "vamp" would usurp Aphrodite's place; and one could even say "that the extravagant Valentino-cult and the wild hysteria occasioned by the three-day wake of a dead film star were simply signs of the resurrection of an ancient phallus cult."

A high artistic value, a "new quality of expression for our times," has also been ascribed to the very particular rhythm of film. Since "we all rotate at a velocity much different from before," the movies are said to be the basis of a

new, emergent art form in much the same way that movement itself is said to form the primal matter of our entire technological era. The “new beauty of speed,” already announced by the Futurists, is said to find its most complete expression in the rhythm of film. From the dawn of time, the primal rhythm measured out by the embrace of the sexes has brought forth all art, and this primal rhythm is said to celebrate its contemporary resurrection in film.

In the course of a friendly debate, Dr. Joseph Gregor,² the eminent Viennese theater historian, contradicted my views concerning the “Fantasy Machine” with a defense of film. This defense strikes me as particularly worthy of notice and deserves to be published here as an excerpt from the letter in which it originally appeared.

“I believe,” Gregor writes, “that film levels the human psyche with its optical rhythm, because the physiological phenomenon of frame division (so-and-so many images per second which together generate the moving image) exercises a type of suggestion one can witness in every cinema presentation. How difficult it is to divert your eyes from the screen! I take this suggestion, based on optical rhythm, to be the primary matter of film, just as rhythm and tone are for music. But I would contend that rhythmic relations similar to those present in the chronology of individual images, yet higher, obtain throughout the entire film as well, in the connections between types of acting, between the organization of different scenes, etc. I believe, for example, that the symbolism permeating film (in American film: kisses, telephones, and legs; in Russian: crosses, flags, and machine guns) recurs at very precisely determined points. It is in this way, I argue, that film’s suggestive force arises. Much can be accomplished by means of such suggestion, and it provides the basis for a

dramaturgy of film. (However, only the field of experimental psychology, much maligned today, could eventually furnish the necessary proof.)

Like a rash that lies dormant under the skin, until scratching reveals it to the eye and it can finally be treated, mankind's adolescence, formerly serviced by pulp fiction alone, has stepped into the light of day for the first time thanks to the "fantasy machine." Incurable optimist that I am, I maintain my belief that old Homer himself was already able to generate in his audience a similar primary suggestion through the eternal return of his hexameter, a suggestion surely not unappreciated by man's penchant for fantasy. He too was in possession of the "fantasy machine." If we turn the whole interpretation around and assume that such suggestive optical symbolism does not destroy but rather provokes fantasy, then the question of cinema must fortunately be posed quite differently.

The joy of Byrd's dog upon the return of his master; the sailors that delight penguins with their dancing (and I do mean the sailors dancing for the animals!); the tiny humming birds on the banks of the Amazon river, no larger than a nut, that wait for their food with opened beaks; the moisture in the petals of a lily; Tibetans in the throes of a plague; the richness of the life contained in a single drop of water; the tumbling of mountain-high avalanches on Montblanc; the acrobatics of marvelous female bodies at the weekly revue in Miami; cars in the Place de l'Etoile, shot from below the asphalt; not to mention the movement of the rings of Saturn filmed from the Paris Observatory, along with a thousand other such things, have so enriched my fantasy that I, simple worm that I am, have surpassed even Goethe with the help of the "fantasy machine"! Since the days of Kepler and Brahe, and since those good old brass tubes that first

serviced our desire to see into the distance, our longing for “perspective” continues, our longing for the greatest possible comprehension of the visible world through this our mortal look. It matters little whether the microscope and the refractor and their ability to photograph all things living and moving are the actual descendants of those tubes.

There you have it. I actually dare to argue that these trifling ornaments comprise what is *truly sustainable* in film, newsreel, and documentary. The viewer of the 21st century will turn his head from our film dramas with as much horror as we do from the trashy novel. But this is not the case with those unthinkable moments of film: the drops of water and the stars; the dogs and the humming birds; the beauty of mankind; in short, the cinema as a *fantasy-producing* machine. Here is the only possible future for film as long as we are still lacking “perspective,” by which I mean television, whose precursor we already find in film and which promises finally to make us masters of space and time.

For that, the disappearance of the “fantasy machine” with its severe constrictions of time and space, is the unconditional prerequisite, one I very much hope to live long enough to see. In the mean time, it is necessary that we rigorously recapitulate everything we can know and experience about film, which has risen so quickly and unexpectedly. “

¹ See Rebecca West, “New Secular Forms of Old Religious Ideas,” *The Realist: A Journal of Scientific Humanism* (London) 1:3 (June 1929): 25-35; reprinted in *Red*

Velvet Seat: Women's Writings on the First Fifty Years of Cinema, edited by Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz. London: Verso, 2006, p. 459-466.

² Joseph Gregor (1888-1960) was the co-author with Fülöp-Miller of a book on American theater and cinema, *Das amerikanische Theater und Kino: Zwei kulturgeschichtliche Abhandlungen* (Leipzig 1931), which appeared in the same year as *Die Phantasiemaschine*. This collaboration may explain why Gregor's ideas are quoted here at such length, for more than half of the chapter.