

The Promise of Cinema

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MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL

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Start anywhere. Dip in at random. Begin with name recognition if the temptation can't be resisted. From 1925, from *Der Tag*, this, for instance, from Béla Balázs (no. 23, "Reel Consciousness") on the auto-documentary impulse of the new medium, including the record of a filmmaker's own death in certain celluloid cases. Balázs's is a reaction to motion capture extraordinary for its time and proleptic of ours: "This is a new form of self-reflection. These people reflect themselves by filming themselves. The inner process of accounting for oneself has been externalized. This self-perception until the final moment is mechanically fixed. The film of self-control, which consciousness used to run within the brain, is now transposed onto the reel of a camera, and consciousness, which has mirrored itself *for itself alone* in internal division until now, delegates this function to a machine that records the mirror image *for others to see as well*. In this way, subjective consciousness becomes social consciousness." More than film theory, a whole ambient field of psychoanalytic criticism is anticipated there. The internal circuit of "consciousness" per se "has mirrored itself *for itself alone* in internal division until now." From now on, the split is externalized, say projected—not as "screen memory" but as indexical trace, not psychoanalytically but psycho-technically. Switch the italic and the metafilmic point on which I will be closing in is comparably refracted: "which has *mirrored itself* for itself alone in internal division until now." But perhaps the most remarkable stress here is the thought that "self-control" was always an "inner film" (of imagistic self-monitoring) to begin with. From Balázs to Bernard Stiegler: a road not often travelled. Many such untrodden and often astonishing paths are sketched and cleared in these pages.

I will, as suggested, be coming back to the more-than-dead metaphoric trope of "mirrored itself" in a further dimension of its prefigurative force. One certainly doesn't need to consult Lutz Koepnick's *The Dark Mirror: German Cinema between Hitler and Hollywood* (2002) to see the visual, rather than just figurative, longevity of this term, in and beyond German cinema—nor to find oneself tempted to linger over its on-screen

manifestations. Famously, the serial killer Hans Beckert in Fritz Lang's *M*—in distantly paired secondary reframings—studies himself in a mirror, in the first case for signs of pathology, in the second for the branding signifier “M” indicating (interchangeably, in their English cognates) Marked / Man / Murderer.

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The first scene is a prolonged and solitary self-scrutiny; the second a brief moment of ratified paranoia ending in panic and recoil—its mirroring cut short when he discovers himself espied as if by us (via the POV of an underworld spy) over his shoulder.

In such a composite installation of mirror tableaux, the indexical planarity of optical manifestation becomes, in Lang, the condition of projection and its motif at once. This is a note implicitly struck in many of the earliest pieces in *The Promise of Cinema* and manifested in innumerable narrative episodes in the medium's subsequent history, including one from this very year—and with which the present “reflection” gives me the chance to catch up. But Balázs alone would have been enough to induce a productive historico-theoretical loop of rumination in the nature of record and projection. Which is only to say that any single “entry” in this densely resonant anthology is capable of entering the reader upon an entire lineage of thinking in image. The parts aren't greater than the whole; rather, in their multifariousness, their disparities and curious convergences are the whole point.

Promises, promises. Some kept, some voided, some exceeded, some betrayed. Cinema history, like history at large, is likely to fulfill certain sectors of expectation while, as we say, “going back on” other promises, other seeming assurances. And cinema historians, going back here to what German commentary saw portended by the new medium—what it foresaw as the future of vision and record both, in everything

from new focalizations of human consciousness to enhancements in forensic science—are offered by this archive a genuinely new purchase on vectors of potential, on truncated dead ends, and on many a bent trajectory in between. What *The Promise of Cinema* witnesses to, that is, by sheer force of evidence and on one technical, social, or psychological front after another, is a tacit pledge of evolution either borne out, reneged on, or technologically recalibrated.

As an author who had recently completed a trilogy on film theory with its third book launched by turning back to Fritz Lang—and, through him, to many of the issues touched on in this collection—my attention was primed, to say the least. After a first monograph on the photographic underlay of cinema, or, in other words, on the photogrammic constitution of the filmic strip and its on-screen disclosure, then a follow-up book on screen narrative's digital transformation since the end of the filmic century (roughly 1895-1995) in relation to Gilles Deleuze's early 1980s anticipation of a pending electronic redefinition for the "time-image," I next aimed attention (building on *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* and *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*) at what I saw, and traced out in *Closed Circuits: Screening Narrative Surveillance*, as a dovetailing of the material shift in postfilmic cinema both with the time-stamped image reservoir of video surveillance and with its whole prehistory (in the overlap of espionage and montage) in narrative filmmaking. The German press so extensively culled for *The Promise of Cinema* was there first in many facets of this consideration, I now find.

Without anticipating the overthrow of the photochemical substrate after computerization, of course, yet giving terms for many of these later salient effects in its own emphasis on celluloid illusionism per se, several relevant perspectives for compassing this transformation were already in play by the first decades of the last century. Given the particular tunnel vision of my own interests in looking back on this material, what stands out most sharply is the prevalent sense of illusionism—of mirage—that is located by so many writers as definitive of the new apparatus. One result is that the legendary Schüfftan mirror tricks dear to special effects lore get glossed (now worried, now self-promoted) in separate stretches of *The Promise*—and, more than that, found to signalize the cinematic apparition all told. Beyond the frequent pre-Bazinian dimensions of much German thinking, one thus finds anticipated, as well, a line of French theory running from Jean Epstein (on the "special effect" of all screen picturing) to Christian Metz (on the deep equivalence between montage and *trucage*).

Certainly, German cinema's place in the medial logic of surveillance was unmistakable for the third phase of my trilogy, right from the start. But journalism's early grasp on the question was an eye-opening surprise. To close the circuit, as it were, of my surveillance survey around a specific screen instance whose possible critical reverberation was the sort of thing I began reading for in the pages of *The Promise*, let me recall a moment, in Lang again, that I find anticipating the "surveillancinema" (one conflated technique) of recent screen editing in a distinctly emblematic way. What, I was eager to discover, would contemporaneous German writers plausibly have to say, if only by inference, that might help contextualize the prolonged

moment in *M* when the graphological analysis of a thumb-print slide, as a function of the whole manhunt plot, is projected to the scale and ratio of a film screening—so that that it becomes a fixed-frame technical microcosm of film watching at large under the compromised conditions of a relentless surveillance plot? Or what would the early press have latently foretold about the way this forensic valence of visual scrutiny evolves, through the innovative use of CCTV in Lang's last film three decades later (*The 1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*, 1960), into the aesthetic of electronic remediation in the recent spate of Hollywood surveillance thrillers in a sci-fi and sometimes 3-D mode? What might early German celebration or critique, either one, have seen coming along this route? Even with unforeseen technological innovation down the road, what initial promissory notes have been cashed out, reinvested, or defaulted on?

So down to business in these busy, dizzying, and headily suggestive pages. To characterize just some their preoccupations, or more like their open-ended speculations—and to do so in a German variation on that baseline keynote query of André Bazin (whose ontology these writers so often anticipate)—the underlying issue: *Was ist Kino?* What is its essential constitution as well as its promise? A structure of illusion in itself (several pieces with that term in their title), as well as the cause of hallucination in others (no. 16, Albert Hellwig, “Illusions and Hallucinations during Cinematographic Projections”), cinema is also understood as a tool of epistemology readied for surveillance (no. 239, Wilhelm Von Ledebur, “Cinematography in the Service of the Police”), with related forecasts of broadcast itself, the “telecinema” that will eventuate not just in “home cinema” but in CCTV (no. 270, Arthur Kron, “Why We Still Do Not Have Television: Possibilities of Electric Television”; no. 273, Ernst Steffen, “Telecinema in the Home”).

At the same time, beyond that striking anticipation in Balázs of the prosthetic instrumentation of an auto-reflective archive (with its latter-day apotheosis in the cell-phone selfie), and more frequent than the stress either on forensic record or remote transmit sampled above, is the stress on screen figments in their technologically exponential—and cognitively asymptotic—approximation of *the real*. These are just some of the gathering parameters by which cinematic process is engaged in early commentary as a proto-Bazinian ontology (and thus teleology) seen in one account, from the watershed vantage of sound synchronization, to be leading “most certainly” to 3-D, or, as phrased by its author, to “stereoscopic cinema” (no. 272, Erich Grave, “The Third Dimension”)—while also, in its slow-motion special effects, owing a backward debt, in another piece, to the chronophotography of Marey and to earlier motion imaging achieved by mirrors in the praxinoscope (no. 38, Hans Lehmann, “Slow Motion”).

Such historicized awareness of protocinematic mirror effects seems to have inflected the frequent reference to mirror trickery in connection with illusionism itself, either by metonymic association with the actual Schüfftan strategy of special effects or by synecdoche for the cinema as a whole in its role as outsize magic mirror. At times, the mirror trope is casual and passing, especially if the medium's supposed passive realism as documentary footage is the point being pressed, as in the notion that on screen “everything is real, a mirror image of nature” (no. 117, Johannes Gaulke, “Art and Cinema in War”). But the figuration of

film as retentive mirror can gain a more skeptical purchase on the screen frame all told. Singling out the simulated image within the broad category of illusory presence on screen, one critic wonders at the suspension of disbelief induced even when the audience knows that a given set is “just magnifications of toysized models? Or, according to the most recent information, they are often just cleverly photographed mirror images?” (no. 151, K.W., “What is Film Illusion”), with an editorial footnote that directs us to the Schüfftan device and the inventor’s own celebration of it (no. 269, Eugen Schüfftan, “My Process”)—a note whose lead I was eager to follow.

It is a complicated “process” indeed—hard to sum-up without diagrams, but easy enough to see as emblematic. Derived from a history of optical illusion on stage and in optical toys, the semi-transparent Schüfftan mirror captured an architectural model or transparency that was then, with human motion introduced by a trick of perspective, filmed as wholesale reflecting surface by the recording camera. In either case, whether with 3-D models or 2-D flats, the miniature’s simulated spatial surround was partly blocked out to allow for the insert of proportionately “miniaturized” actors visible through the mirrored mock-up when filmed in recess at a calculated distance behind it, with the adjusted lighting further smoothed out so as to achieve the desired look of a continuous image field. By an in-camera effect, that is, the actors could thereby seem, for instance, overborne by some towering (rather than just secretly foregrounded and exaggeratedly scaled) image. Lang again: the giant maw of Moloch devouring its victims in *Metropolis* only by the cinematographer’s having filmed them at a sufficient distance so that, within the surrounding field of a this gargantuan image, they would seem to be the monster’s dwarfed pawns; or, earlier in the same film, the racing athletes in the vast modernist stadium inset in longshot within the mirrored model to evoke their subordination to its stupendously different scale.

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Before matte or blue screen, and long before computerized imaging, here was the masked equivalent (in both senses: actions partially masked out by scenography in spaces wholly dissimulated) of Eisenstein's volumetric montage, projected instead as the spectacle of monumentality—or monstrosity. Freder's POV shot of the Moloch epiphany is also the equivalent in personal witnessing, of course, to the telescreen by which his father, the corporate overlord, accesses his only images of the proletarian underworld. Suffice it to say that special effects and machinated surveillance tactics, operating from two sides of a supposed epistemological divide, and separately estimated in their cinematic valence by early German writers, are often found wedded from then on in the history of screen narrative. In regard to verisimilitude, however, the historical reaction at stake in the Schüfftan allusions is more specific and vigilant—if also forgiving. In sampling *The Promise*, one is quick to realize why the idea of a world in realist reflection on screen was also caught up in a counter-discourse of illusionism. Mirror mirror: early re/viewers of the new film sets, seeing anything but “nature” held up to view, were not just seeing the scopic tricks of undetectable mirrors as merely part and parcel of the assembled *mise en scène*—let alone simulated or tricked mirrors that become spatial thresholds within certain fantastic turns of narrative—but were often looking directly into a partial mirror plane as the defining optic field of the entire projected spectacle. However readily overcome by suspended disbelief, such fakery came straight to mind as a synecdoche for the virtuality of screen space all told, even when no effects more special than the apparition of projected motion were entailed.

Yet this is only part of the illusionist picture, so to say. Beyond such profilmic mirrors on the set, there are, indeed, those mirror simulations induced in the lab. It is here, too, that the magic mirror becomes, in journalistic response, an implied *pars pro toto* for the framed image plane of the screen. Among recorded enthusiasms for early Expressionist cinema, there is this effusive mention of *The Student of Prague*, for instance, pitting the wondrous against the awful within the new sublimities of machinic vision: “There are magical views of old Prague; there are images that make our eyes widen in horror: as when the mysterious Dr. Scapinelli releases the reflection of the student Balduin from the mirror . . .” (no. 200, Henrik Galeen, “Fantastic Film”).

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The artificial space, the tricked visual surface: these are cinema in embryo and in essence—and, yet again, in postfilmic prospect as well, with the legacy of such effects being legion in digital cinema. The CGI (computer-generated image) or VFX (visual special effects) is the very destiny of a once-indexical registration of illusory space.

With such a mirror prototype as license, I take the liberty of indulging in a single historical leap, one isolated metamedial catapult, of the sort these pages will no doubt invite in other users of the archive. As with the journalistic writers who, faced with a flood of new visual production, singled out their favored moment for illustration, so, from our own current inundation of computer effects, I do mine. Appearing since my book on the escalating VFX dimension of surveillance cinema, the mirror shot I have in mind—can't shake from mind—comes from a thinly veiled remake of a minor masterpiece of Lang-like neo-noir by John Frankenheimer, *Seconds* (1966), originally shot in riveting deep focus by James Wong Howe.



The loose and uninvolved update by cult director Tarsem Singh, called *Selfless* (2015), finds its thematic as well as its technological matrix in a flashpoint of manifold mirror imaging only tangentially related, if at all, to Frankenheimer's film. It does so, however, in a way that tacitly rehearses many of the intuitions of German writing about the montage logic and "third dimensional" future of the medium.

In a pivotal moment in Frankenheimer's film, the mirror into which the surgically "reborn" protagonist stares blankly (Beckert-like, in baffled self-recognition) is answered by the photographic image of his former self below it. Yet this is a framed mantelpiece photo that also suspends across its surface a second transparent reflection of the revenant self, returned in disorientation to his former family home. Here, long after Balázs, is an arresting economical triangulation of the split subject, caught in the gap between lack and empty desire. Thinking to start over yet again, the hero next discovers the real "plot" of the corporation to which he has signed his life away for renewal. He has been co-opted by the mere recycling plant of subjectivity itself. Efficiently slain corpses of the already walking dead are provided as alibis for other defeated and escapist selves like them, until the subsequent failure, in the strenuous work of rebirth, of those latter and still-operational subjects—under constant eyes-on surveillance from an unacknowledged cohort of reborns—calls for these latest misfits to be repurposed in turn as surrogate corpses for new paying clients. The second chance not only requires somatic "seconds," leftovers, but renders even the new selves serially obsolescent.

Likewise, the apparent premise of *Self/less*, by which we are strung along for a good while, is that stem cell research has caught up with such a macabre gothic plot and, via recuperative sci-fi, turned it all too true.



In service to the dying body now, rather than just the alienated psyche (as in *Seconds*), the electronic process of "shedding" (rather than "rebirth") names the technological metempsychosis by which the consciousness of the dying self can be expensively computer-transplanted into a younger, abler body—no one else's really this time, no worries, just cloned from a healthy specimen. That's what we're told, the client

hero along with us. This cover story is sustained until the plot twist reveals that these proxy bodies (not in the form of disfigured corpses, as in *Seconds*, of the sort necessary to explain away the subject's disappearance) do, nonetheless, turn out to be (as in *Seconds* after all) murder victims done in when needed in the corporate scheme of things. Yet the system isn't perfect. Even after electronic brain transplant, identity traces of the formerly incarnate subjects threaten to erupt into the newly implanted consciousness, causing psychotic breakdown if medication isn't routinely administered. The lower-tech paradigm of the criminal brain transmigrated into the receptacle of Dr. Baum's remote-controlled agency, from Lang's *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, comes readily to hand as archetype.

The evil genius behind the corporate scheme of Singh's plot—who, we discover, has had his own psyche nefariously “rebooted” in this way—is at the last minute cornered by the hero in the surveillance chamber of his own laboratory, where, once before, he had trapped his client, patient, or patsy. This is a foursquare space enclosed by two-way mirrors whose bullet proof glass he has earlier and high-handedly demonstrated. The tables are here turned on Dr. Frankenstein. That's the plot twist so far, whose whole *mise en scène* now implodes in a magic mirror of confounded suture that plays between two and three dimensions in a way that inverts the entire regime of deep focus itself in its shallowest form of self-replication—and this, in a final metacinematic irony of special effects. In contrast, the Schüfftan effect seems almost easy to describe.

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Here's the way the scene breaks down, in two senses or registers: narrative and optic. In this ironic staging of their final face-off, the slick reincarnated villain can persist in languorously threatening the hero only by narcissistically staring at his own mirror image while merely imagining his interlocutor in the space beyond. With the biotech entrepreneur's enraged antagonist looking back (through) the irreversible glass interface, the protocols of suture in the shot/countershot pattern are deactivated on the spot. It is as if the riving slash of the title *Self//less* were finally marking the Absent One of such intercutting rather than just a negation of the autonomous subject. But we haven't seen anything yet. In snide conversation with his own

image, behind which waits, invisibly, the potential nemesis of his whole criminal empire, the suavely suited mad scientist notices that his wavering sight must be distorting his image in the mirror. This is a fact silently conveyed to us, through his eyes, by way of the presumed digital warping of his mirrored face (stopping just short of pixel breakup): just the effect we've associated earlier in the film with unbidden flashbacks from a co-opted body's former psychic tenant, when the proper medication is wearing off.

No problem, thinks the villain, with a confident smirk. A pill will normalize. Here, then, in a play of reverse shots alternating between already reborn subject and his undulating mirror double, the re-embodied mastermind is, we presume, only *seeing things*. Yet that presumption survives no longer than the villain himself. For what we take as the entirely subjective POV shot of the buckling mirror isn't subjective at all, but rather—as it gradually comes clear to us, by coming literally through to us—the objectively glimpsed result of a flamethrower wielded by the invisible hero and melting through the otherwise impenetrable reflective pane from its far side. The effect is almost black-comic. Non-virtual countershot at last: the immediate incineration of the no-longer reflected villain. Beyond the lethal cone of vision all but parodied here, put it this way in the longer perspectival view of cinema technique: the carefully aligned transparent zone of the Schüfftan mirror, letting the actor(s) show through, is converted here, in this version of looking glass as rabbit hole, to the gap(e) of annihilated sight per se.

Yet the scopic parable is even more technologically ingrown and baroque than it may at first seem. The Schüfftan mirror that once allowed for in-camera scalar adjustments and their subterfuges has been supplanted here, of course, by the post-indexical plane of VFX cinema in its electronic manifestations, but only then to be laid bare in a way that operates, in the upshot, as an interface for dismantling the seemingly high tech *trucage* into a slowly perceived one of old-fashioned machine ingenuity in weaponizing the image plane itself. In terms of an imagined teleology of realism leading from sound synchronization through color to stereoptic deep focus, as codified by Bazin and anticipated by the early German press, this sudden (and instantaneously obliterated) illusionism (as presumed subjective hallucination) is in fact a kind of perversely “lived”—and died—3-D penetration of an optic rectangle, where the mistaken plane of image, from within a misjudged subjective shot, ends up decimating the space of mere looking. The in-joke of this optical boomerang is a kind of cognitive double helix. Though interpreted as a biomedical glitch from the villain's literalized point of view, the shock for the supposedly knowing viewer—sharing that line of vision—amounts to one kind of low-keyed CGI simulation (of melting glass) mistaken for another sort of digital trope (the electronic return, so to speak, of the cortical repressed).

That's, at least, one version of what seems to be layered into this impacted moment. The cinematic mirror once held up to nature, however equivocally, but since then turned in on itself through technological innovations that have left direct registration far behind, returns now, from within an inverted surveillance space, to figure the new postfilmic cinema in melodramatically undercut form. The two-way mirrors installed for hotel surveillance in Lang's *1,000 Eyes*, for instance, where they served in their own right as low-tech

metonymies for the CCTV also deployed there (enacting in each case an unsutured looking without the look back) were followed by the two-way mirrors of the Stasi interrogation booth half a century later in *The Lives of Others* (von Donnersmarck, 2006). At this end of such a long postwar arc, one may further note how such rudimentary technologies of ocular access are eclipsed by those of optical manifestation in the metamorphic effects of liquid-metal cyborgs passing in and out of mirrors in the *Terminator* franchise (VFX progeny of *The Student of Prague*).

So it is that the “surveillance” potential in the German account of the new medium’s latent “police” function has been unsettled or displaced by alternate facets of its “illusionist” basis. As smoked out early on by divergent assumptions of the German press, such cross-purposes of the screen medium, in the pull between epistemology and reflexive ontology, find something like their ironized electronic vanishing point in the two-way surveillance chamber of *Self//less* and its material meltdown. As so often in genre history, the narrativized VFX logic of dystopian sci-fi can stand forth as an encoded version of cinema gone wrong, the imageering of the medium extrapolated to a violent diegetic realization—or call it, again, a technological “promise” hypertrophically betrayed in fulfilment.

As more than one German writer glimpsed, techniques like the Schüfftan mirror, however much under erasure on screen, camouflaging their own process, still spoke to the grounding (and groundless) fact of all cinema as an uncertain field of virtuality and illusion. Moreover, what can’t help but intrigue even a cursory reader of *The Promise* is how so much of that early German intuition about scopic force fields reshaped by the new motion picture medium can come bearing down on the most circumscribed, however showy, effects of postfilmic cinema. Tarsem Singh wasn’t reading German film theory before some storyboard session devoted to this climactic scene. German film theory had read his options in advance, without the least glimpse of the simulated electronic image to come.

In just this respect, there is another enfolded irony of screen history lodged at the climax of *Self//less*—an almost literal wrinkle—to which a saturation in early German film writing might also recall us. In the film most often adduced for instances of the special effects mirror of the Schüfftan process—no surprise, given the game-changing status of sci-fi *mise en scène* in Lang’s *Metropolis*—there is also the associated effect of the “ripple wipe” that suggests the clearing phobic vision of Freder, allowing the figural revelation of the devouring Moloch to return to ethical clarity as none other than the recognized factory engines of his father’s predatory exploitation. Nine decades (and a new medial substrate) later, it is as if that ripple effect has found perverse new life in Singh’s film through the simulated dissolution of the mirror shot: not just the coruscating mind’s-eye image we take it to be, but a true buckling of the surface, a purely discursive effect turned murderous. The virtual has been captured again by the real, though of course still at the narrative remove of CGI production.

Even before the legendary mirror trick of *The Student of Prague* (1913), another early intertext for Singh's climax, no doubt unconscious, comes from the first decade of twentieth-century film production. In the fable of "self-projected" evil into which Edison turned his short film of *Frankenstein* (1910), "a liberal adaptation of Mrs. Shelley's story" (as the first intertitle has it), the avenging Creature disappears from the wedding night chambers of Dr. Frankenstein when, horrified by his deformed image in a full-length mirror, he covers his eyes in the foreground space and—out of sight, out of mind—is removed by jump cut into the displaced vestige of his mirror self, his horrified moment of self-recognition wholly and terminally reified.



In a technique of matte projection comically deconstructed by Buster Keaton a decade and a half later (*Sherlock, Jr.*, 1924), the trick might as well have been achieved by having a match-cut on the mirror frame (now portal) open back into a real space, at one remove from the main set, to which the Creature's presumed reflection has been translated—as if in some curious offshoot of artificial scaling in the Schüfftan effect.

Instead, this and its immediately rhyming effect are both achieved by a shuffled inlay of secondary optic planes, little movies-within-the-movie. When Frankenstein returns to discover his attempted nemesis locked away in the realm of the virtual, his final anathematizing gesture, pointing straight at the rebuffed Creature as mirror image, triggers a second trick cut. Substituted thereby, in the ellipsis permitted by a brief flash of light (dawning), is a real mirror again: a normalized reflecting plane confirmed when Frankenstein throws himself against his own image in impulsive contact, at last, with the moral deformation he has spawned. He is for the first time, as allegory would obviously have it, looking his own megalomania squarely in the face.

By a roundabout historical circuit of exponentially sophisticated screen *trucage*, the reversible logic of the two-way mirrors in *Self/less* seems anticipated not just in advance but in reverse by kinoscopy's own inventor. In Edison's *Frankenstein*, that is, the magically imputed deep space of otherness and supernal displacement brings extirpation to the monstrous along the direct line of sight from abjected subject to usurping reflection. The other way around in *Self/less*, death for the reflected monster of self-preservation arrives from a hidden real into the reflected interface of his presumed invulnerability. Stripped of all **earnest** moral fabulation, notched back to sheer sci-fi melodrama, the moment is nonetheless digitally ratcheted up to another of cinema's recent VFX parables, as when the 2014 reboot of the *Transformers* franchise discloses the "molecularly unstable metal" that comprises the eponymous robots in the form of nothing less than pixel-like mutating 3-D cubelets.

All that early German wonder at the play between illusion and hallucination, *trompe l'oeil* and willing further involvement, helps at least this one viewer to realize the fully anomalous nature of that mirror effect in *Self/less*—as if its double effacement were the film's both e/facing and e-facing title shot. Be this as it may, it is an effect unprecedented, at least for me, in recollected screen experience. I don't think I've ever before seen a case of *fake trucage*: the trick effect itself exposed as a second-order trick, an ocular misrecognition. The familiar ruse of digital manipulation that one assumes is being paraded before us at this point, another welcome finesse of computerized illusion in sci-fi cinema, is instead *turned* upon us in a kind of technorhetorical irony when we realize that the passively accepted digital morph of the villain's mirrored face is in fact, in media-historical terms, reverse engineered so as to disclose its optical evidence as the simplest mechanical action of burn and melt across a vulnerable material surface. He thinks his vision is playing tricks on him when, instead, the film has been—on ours. As a misread symptom of somatic disintegration, whether objective or subjective, once the beam of presumed CGI projection is realized to have been routed only through the deceived free indirect discourse of the victim's eyeline match, the two-way ocular contrivance of the surveillance pane becomes, in just this fashion, a rear-view mirror on the whole techne and ontology of a long-evolving special effects aesthetic. In this montage of *trucage* de-tricked, VFX cinema stares into the face of its own prehistory. As if in an ingrown allegory of sutured illusionism, cinema's ordinary fantasy of a two-way mirror on a world elsewhere (in Stanley Cavell's famous formulation, a world present to me to which I am not present)—for all the sophisticated opacities of illusionist digital figments lately implemented—reverts here from something like the enforced narcissistic closed circuit of self-scrutiny (Balázs) to the sudden countershot of thrown light (and heat) itself.

In the process, this bizarre and arresting mirror scene further transcends its own borrowed plotline to connect more powerfully yet with the tropes and prognoses of the early German press. Here, in 2-D sci-fi, the mirror's transformation enacts a frame-breaking and space-penetrating 3-D telos in a plane of illusion simultaneously scrutinized and disavowed from within the embedded (and inverted) scene of surveilled presence. This is to say, once more, that the "mirror up to nature" held open by the uncurtained cinema screen—that indexical fact of film so often axiomatic for early commentators—has, when cross-cut

dialectically with the illusionist mirrors alluded to by other essays of the day, come down through technological and narrative history to the post-indexical interface of contemporary cinema. In Singh's extended figuration, this prototype has done so as if by a deep pun not on smoke and mirrors plural, but on a single incinerated mirror and the resultant smoke—reserved for the cremation of an already once-reanimated villain, ashes to ashes.

If I am generally right in the line of thought pursued in *Closed Circuits*, as confirmed obliquely for me by this involuted medial climax of a film released since I wrote—right in noting how the history of surveillance and the history of *trucage* are found repeatedly convergent in the new orders (and inset video relays) of espionage montage—then my claims actually seem all the more satisfying for being less original than I might have imagined: for being anticipated instead, by roughly a century, across a varied spectrum of early German response. Some medial promises, when kept, turn into belatedly recognized—and analytically renegotiated—critical debts.

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