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VICKI BAUM

The Automobile in Film

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Objects exerted a unique fascination in the silent era. For Balázs, things on film had no less of a physiognomy than human beings, and for Epstein, the cinema was a profoundly "animistic" art, which endowed things like guns and mirrors with a soul. Similarly, Fritz Lang could argue that things on film "are filled with their own life" (chapter 4, no. 59). Even popular magazines ran frequent articles on typical filmic objects. In this essay from the women's lifestyle and fashion magazine *Die Dame: Illustrierte Mode-Zeitschrift* (1911–43), the Austrian writer Vicki Baum (1888–1960) reflects on the presence of automobiles in the cinema, offering a kind of taxonomy of cars corresponding to various character types, but also discussing films in which cars become the main characters. Baum's statement that "[a] thoughtful person can have deep insights, all the while laughing until he cries" resonates with much cinephilic film theory of the period, which took seriously the power of a lowly art form to generate profound insights into modernity (see chapter 12). Baum would go on to write the novel *Menschen im Hotel* (1929), which was adapted to the screen as *Grand Hotel* (1932).

It is no coincidence that automobiles and film emerged from the world of ideas into reality at around the same time; it is a necessity. The era that requires film must also have cars. Film without the car is a pure impossibility. There is no film that takes place in the twentieth century in which a car does not appear.

Appear is the wrong word. The car does not appear; it is not a prop but rather the story itself, drama, impetus, center. The car seduces, kidnaps, flees, pursues, races, crashes; it forces its tempo onto the film—whether it lies in pieces at the bottom of the film studio's artificial stone canyon by the film's end, or whether a pair of lovers, finally united in the back seat, seem to drive off the screen and into the auditorium as the closing music begins to play.

The hero of the film always owns a car for every situation. He comes down the stairs of his villa, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, a flower in his buttonhole (by the way, it is astonishing how many cigarettes and buttonhole flowers are used in film!); he snaps his gloves, climbs in, and drives away. Simply drives away, without cranking the motor,

for this is curiously unnecessary most of the time in film. Film heroes also never have car trouble, except occasionally in the case of a comedian. And when the comedian lies under his car with twitching legs, or when he climbs out from under it all filthy, film is revealing a bit of the car's soul, of this repressed soul of the object, which can be let out only in miniature explosions, while the human subject plays the lord and master. Thus it is the comedian who, in film as in life, always appears in tragic situations that the audience can laugh about. His car falls into ditches, gets stuck in swamps, and runs over carts full of fruit and porcelain. His car always arrives too late to dates, and he stands helplessly between two street corners while the girl he is courting hurtles down a third; hurtles in a charming little white-painted car, which she knows how to steer masterfully.

Even the villain has his own car—and how could he not? The villain-car is a magnificent vehicle that drives at incredible speeds; the layman, who sits astonished before the accelerated film, would guess 120 to 140 kilometers per hour. However—and thank God for this—the villain's intriguing and malevolent vehicle always comes half a second too late; it is behind by a nose; it may pass the express train, but it cannot under any circumstances catch the film hero. Sometimes it is filled to the running boards with sinister, armed men, who are carrying away unconscious women in ball gowns. When it crashes into the sea, when it rumbles into an abyss, when a bridge collapses underneath it (and something of this kind inevitably occurs), these strong men perish, while the ladies retain their fancy coifs and painted lips, escaping in good health.

Now, these are stories and events that would be unthinkable without cars, but in which people still play the most important role. But there are also those exquisite films (most of them come from America) in which the car itself is the hero, the lead actor, and the focus. Alongside the well-proportioned, beautiful, purebred car, we see others: deformed vehicles, tragicomic figures, and risible clowns. There are some that can only drive in curves, always in a circle, around and around; there are lopsided ones, crooked ones, ones that are too tall or too short, ones that are constantly losing their bodywork, ones with uneven wheels. Ones that, despite being in a great hurry, do not move forward (slow motion!), ones that race backwards, and ones that drive into the walls of buildings. Causality falls away, expediency is turned on its head, and the gods of our era are travestied. A thoughtful person can have deep insights, all the while laughing until he cries . . .

Yes, and finally there are people in film who do not drive cars. But poverty and misery are written all over them. And if we see a person in a film who wanders to the next corner, has to wait in the pouring rain, and finally squeezes onto a crowded streetcar, we can assume one of only two things: Either he has bankrupted himself of his own accord, and it serves him right! Or—poor but gifted as he is—he will make something of himself, so that at the end of the film he can drive away in his own car, a six-seater with all the bells and whistles, a symbol of success and fulfilled wishes. In film.