

Mythification and Cinema

by Yves Bernas

M.A. in Filmmaking-Directing

*What is the role of mythification in cinema
and its effect on the psyche? Alienation or
liberation?*

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„But certainly for the present age, which prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence... for in these days illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness...“

(Ludwig Feuerbach: Preface to the second edition of the *Essence of Christianity*)

I The human condition

Perhaps the drama of the human condition is that life starts rather well and that we remember it. Childhood, for most of us is the lost paradise, where a loving mother soothed all our needs and a strong father protected us. It was a simple world. It seemed eternal, immutable and secure. There was sometime one little downside to it but thank God we encountered rarely: we had to obey, to follow the path of our great heroes, Mum and Dad, walking ahead in the great jungle of life. If we didn't, soon enough, we would feel a lump in our throat and tears would run down our cheek. Our world would crumble down to pieces until we finally did what Mum and Dad wanted, obey to our heroes and the sun would shine again. We learned that the key to our happiness, the condition not to be thrown out of the little garden of Eden, was to obey our first Gods: Mum and Dad. Some of us even learned more, that this sensation of having obeyed, having fulfilled the expectations of our Gods provided an even more enjoyable state, a greater security because we knew where the borders were, we had found a way to prolong and extend this beatitude, to turn the reprimands and the punishments, the shouting and the hits, the anger of our Gods into a sign of love and we have even learned to secretly enjoy it because at the end of the dark night all flooded in tears, we

knew that the sun would shine again on Mum or Dad's lips. We learned to love the loss because it promised the return.

II Religion

As if this archaic footprint minted early in our fragile soul was not enough, humans felt the need to be weekly reminded of it their life long and eternalised the archetype in their Book of books according to the shape of the iron they used to brand their own kettle so the sheep don't get lost: cross, star or crescent.

It was Freud (1919) who first expressed that religion was an expression of this loss: *„Thus, the totem may have been the first form of a father substitute, and the god a later one, in which the father regained his human form“*. Later Freud (1927) wrote: *„Everything is the relationship between father and son, God is the higher father, the longing for a father is the root of the need for religion“* and:

„But the helplessness of the human beings remains and thereby their longing for a father and for gods. The gods retain their threefold task of averting the horrors of nature, reconciling them with the cruelty of destiny, especially as shown in death, and compensating for the suffering and privations imposed on man by cultural coexistence“.

Freud (1930, p. 876) completes his analysis of the origin of religion, triggered by a complaint from the french novelist Romain Rolland, that one of the origins of religion, the longing for an *«oceanic feeling»* (wholeness, oneness) had been overlooked. Freud acquiesces *„The question is whether this feeling is correctly interpreted and should not be recognised as the source and origin of all religious needs“*.

III Iconophilia

Since time immemorial, all around the world and in all religions, human beings have depicted their divinities: totems, huge statues carved in stone, pocket crucifix, russian icons, stained glass windows, wall or oil paintings. They have thereby depicted the

absence, the invisibility, the missing of their gods or the longing for them. The primary role of these icons was to ease the veneration of the gods, to strengthen the belief, the faith and to facilitate praying, in the very unformulated purpose of creating this « oceanic feeling ».

This iconophilia has been in the history of mankind the subject of numerous conflicts. The reason being expressed and embedded in the very reference text of most religions, for example in the old testament:

*„Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness [of any thing] that [is] in heaven above, or that [is] in the earth beneath, or that [is] in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: **for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God**, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth [generation] of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.“*

Exodus 20:4-6

The first major manifestations of anti-idolatry iconoclasm can be found i.a. in the Byzantine and the Muslim iconoclasm (Crone, 2005), the Hinduist iconocasm (Salmond, 2004) and the Reformation Era (DHM, 2017). Judaism also prohibited any form of Idolatry, the only image of God being man (Horowitz,1979). Others iconoclasms are motivated by intolerance of other religions which is not our interest here.

To understand these recurrent conflicts, we have to dig into the mechanism of adulation or idolatry inherent to iconography. What hides behind this perhaps naive sounding threat:

« *for I the LORD, thy God am a jealous God!* » is the lurking danger of untrue faith, of not really loving God and being committed to His injunction, but being separated from him by an image. This can be commonly seen in Bigotry where the rituals become more important than the faith.

Idolatry is therefore severely condemned by the Iconoclasts as a form of perversity. Iconodulism or Iconophilism, fetishism and mythification are akin. They all find their roots in the loss of something dear and its substitution by a depiction or symbol of it. It is a form of denial, denial of the loss by its replacement with its eternal representation.

IV From Icon to Film

Since paintings are the ancestors of photography, it is no wonder that the same questions that have arisen around iconography are raised around photography.

Metz (1985) posits that Photography is a Fetish. He recalls that photography is largely used as an icon, a representation of the loved lost ones who we can thereby remember and mourn. It is thus the archetype of the fetish. He also reminds that due to their perenity, immobility and silence, photographs are much more adequate to fulfil the role of fetish than films, however films work, he reckons, as « an extraordinary activator of fetishism », i.e. through the permanent (entering and) leaving of the frame by the protagonists.

Finally, Metz (1977) adds that the material objects and tools used in cinema, such as cameras, lenses, are also fetishised and not only by the profession itself.

Other sociologists like Debord (1967) provide further aspects of fetishism in audiovisual media. His critic is focussed on the

« commodity fetishism » coined by Karl Marx, as summarised by this citation: « *the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing* »

The second substitution of « having » by « appearing » is also expressed by the following citation:

«*All that was once directly lived has become mere representation*»
Representation as fetish for being.

Morin (1957) addresses the more obvious and known aspect of fetishism and idolatry in cinema, which was at its peak in the 1940s under the name of « Star System » and lasted until the 1960s. He describes how actors became the living Gods of the century, adulated by millions of fans to the point for some of committing suicide. The stars were not only Gods in films but in real life, living in palaces between luxury and lust, receiving thousands of letters per week, mythification and divinization, from Greta Garbo to Ava Gardner, in particular women, as addressed by Mulvey (1996).

Apart from its specificity as medium, cinema incarnates fetish and myths through its content itself. A considerable part of the films produced portrays heroes and their fights against the evil, to save the planet or conquer their love. Nearly the entire Hollywood film industry designs their films according to the structures analysed and indexed by Campbell (1949, p. 28-29). He documents and develops the basic idea that Myths incarnate the story of mankind, transmitted from generation to generation and is part of our collective subconscious. He posits that the Hero or Everyman undergoes a journey and transformation which are composed of an number of steps e.g the departure, crossing of thresholds, trials, victories, initiation and the victorious return.

This archetype of Myth, not only kindles writers to write successful screenplays for Hollywood, transporting the audience in the magical realm of mythology and providing them by identification, the feeling of being a hero.

While Campbell instills the idea that Everyman can become a hero of his own life, it remains unclear if the heroes of Hollywood don't induce exactly the opposite, a neurotic effect by creating such a tremendous gap between their great mythical adventures and the everyday life of everyman. The myth of Journey of the Hero has become a fetish for life itself.

We should now be able to recognise the specific pattern from which cinema derives its tremendous attractive and mythical energy, driving half of the planet to stick its nose in front of flat screens everyday, millions of young people to film studios to beg for a role, writers to spend months writing a screenplay for studio's dustbins. The elements of this pattern are deeply rooted in our psychology. The enormous field of attraction of Cinema is its acquaintance with Myths and fetish, with their roots in a religious like longing.

With the rise of modernisation of which cinematography is a product, religion declined substantially, as foreseen by Marx, Freud, Weber, Durkheim and others, partly because it bettered the material condition of mankind, partly because it reinforced the faith in its power to master Nature through technology and sciences.

This secularisation was not a sign that the original need for a religious had disappeared. This need remained but the new God, the new fetish in charge of protecting us from all our ancestral fears such as death and enemies changed and became Science, Technology and its products: the objects, see Debord (1967) and the

commodity's fetish, including, missiles, medicine pills, four-wheel-drive cars and Wellington boots.

But this fetish was not powerful enough, it didn't protect us from mourning and grief, it did not sooth our need for unconditional love as well as religion did and we waived the usherette for more ice cream.

V Death again

„Cinema is becoming increasingly about what is past. It becomes a mausoleum as much as a palace of dreams“. Chris Petit in his video Negative Space (1999). Cited by Mulvey (2006, p.17).

It is the combination of the secularisation and the iconographic/fetish characteristic of the cinema medium that made it the mythifying instrument we know. The Gods left, the Filmmakers entered and like the Gods, the Filmmakers created a beautiful world, with beautiful and sometime lovable people whom one could adore like Gods (Morin, 1957) and above all, whom one could admire over and over again. The illusion of Eternity, of absoluteness, of immutability was perfectly conveyed by those gigantic and gracious Gods and Goddesses of silver-halide salts slowly opening their arms and lips in the silence of the screen.

Quite a few writers and filmmakers have recognised this specificity and have decided to enhance it. One was the argentine writer Casares (1940) in his novel « The Invention of Morel » . The novel depicts a convict landing on an island and discovering a small society of people (including an infatuating Faustine) who all ignore him completely, until he realises that these people are merely cinematographic-like beings having been once recorded and « reprojected » every week by a machine. The theme of the

inaccessible beautiful woman is central to the book as if all real love was inaccessible (again myth/mystification of women, particularly enhanced in hispanic culture, perhaps not unrelated to strong catholicism), the supremacy of the fetish, of the substitute over the substituted. The fetish, the absence allows to hope, to imagine more than is and is therefore chosen by many who prefer to dream and eternally delay the encounter in a masochistic and beautiful melancholia. The novel, strongly inspired Alain Robe-Grillet to write the screenplay of « *Last year in Marienbad* », directed by Alain Resnais, showing elegant protagonists walking around in the palace of Schleissheim, each more inaccessible, mysterious and absent than the other, absent like the dead. The purity and sobriety of the aesthetic, the black&white, the repetition of certain dialogues as well as the many silences convey a mythical atmosphere, a feeling of eternity, immutability and finally death. Death as the realm of peace and beauty (the film inspired Stanley Kubrik for the exceptional ball-scene in „*The Shining*“).

Tanatography 24 times per second to paraphrase Mulvey (and Dubois and Godard). Marguerite Duras in most of her films: *India Song*, *La Femme du Gange*, *Aurelia Steiner*, provides a similar aesthetic: the protagonists constantly flirt with the past, absence, repetition and death. Jean Cocteau also depicts in *Orphée* a love story with death as well as in “*The Eternal Return*”, 1943 by Delannoy/Cocteau (The british press felt that the film was full of Nazi aesthetics and that it promoted the cult of Death (Tarr, 1998)).

Fear of death, Fetish, religion, divinity, iconophilia, idolatry, mythification, adulation of eternity, immutability and death. The circle is closed, mankind is fascinated by what it fears the most.

VI Amor fati?

That many of us are more attracted to this particular form of aesthetics does not mean that there is no aesthetic in the representation of life, but often enough it has then to be glorified (thus mythified) and seems to never reach the same intensity (the tragical is more believable and intense than the comical).

This inexorable attraction and fascination has thus been shown as part of the human psyche, mirrored, rendered and used in cinema. The attractor is behind the screen which stops us from diving towards it, to follow its field lines at exponential speed, saving us indeed, but leaving us in this everlasting longing, close to withdrawal.

Amor fati, love your fate, stop mourning the past or living in the future, stop living in myths. Ironically, such a famous message is carried by Nietzsche himself (Nietzsche, 1882) who also intimates us to live our life so that we could eternally return to it (Nietzsche, 1908).

Wouldn't we be then gnawing precisely at the roots of culture and sciences? Fortunately, technology has enabled to partly implement Nietzsche's intimation and provided us with the means to at least eternally return to our favourite film.

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