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Unreeled Presence: The Film Screen as Altar

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> *The scientific man can explain away the vision [of the moving picture "prophet-wizard"] as a matter of the technique of double exposure, double printing, trick-turning, or stopping down. And having reduced it to terms and shown the process, he expects us to become secular and causal again. But of course the sun itself is a mere trick of heat and light, a dynamo, an incandescent globe, to the man in the laboratory. To us it must be a fire upon the altar.*
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> *Transubstantiation must begin. . . .*
>
> — Vachel Lindsay

- I -

The climax of Radio City Music Hall's Easter pageant occurred at the end of the film as its screen was replaced by a stage-set cathedral altar. This transformation was not an arbitrary whim of holiday programming. S.L. Rothafel, the Music Hall's founder, conceived the theater as a site of civic spectacle whose shows would "commemorate beautifully, tastefully, reverently. . . the holidays, the religious festivals, the seasons as they pass during the year." He believed that motion pictures should embody "a living idea" and that they should form one of a community's centers. Such theaters would use film as the primary element in a total spectacle that, like those presented in cathedrals, would ritually give image to basic cultural myths and norms. The publicity for Rothafel's Roxy Theater in fact heralded it as "the cathedral of the motion picture." Although Rothafel's was perhaps the most expansive vision of the potential of movie theaters, the analogy between cinematic and liturgical architecture was implicit—and at times explicit—in the design of every classic movie palace. Like cathedrals, these buildings surrounded their central spectacles with environments designed evoke an aura of more than mundane reality.

Even the hierarchical relationship between cathedral and subordinate parish church was echoed between downtown first-run theaters and less elaborately ornamented neighborhood houses. With their communal weekend sabbaths and more private daily showings, movie theaters provided a ritual space for an increasingly secularized society.

Film's ritual dimension is most extraordinarily presented in the American poet Vachel Lindsay's 1915 book, *The Art of the Moving Picture*. Reacting against a commercial society "ruled indirectly by photoplays owned and controlled by men who should be in the shoe-string and hook-and-eye trade," Lindsay demanded a cinema that would, through its hieroglyphic language, group spirit and visionary capacity, act as a prophetic instrument for a spiritual revisioning of America. Maintaining that "[h]umanity takes on its sacred aspect" at the movies, he expected the medium's "cathedral mood" to foster new cults of local and national democracy. For Lindsay, the movie screen was not so much like an altar as much as it was its specifically modern form; he thus calls upon the builders of New York's St. John the Divine to incorporate film projection as an integral part of their cathedral's architecture.

Lindsay's mass prophetic cinema could only exist in that utopian America that has often been imagined but never realized. As the film industry became increasingly integrated into the nation's economic structure, it would inevitably betray aspirations towards the use of the medium as a means of visionary redemption. Such radical visions could find their audience on cinema's cult-like peripheries, not in the mass spiritual awakenings that Lindsay foresaw. Even more commercially minded visionaries like Rothafel would eventually have to scale back their grand conceptions in the face of film's increasingly standard formats.

More than this, however, Lindsay, like a prisoner of Plato's cave, was so entranced by the shadows that flashed before him that he deeply misperceived the nature of the spectacle. For all of the intriguing analogies between cinematic and liturgical space, film's mechanisms are far less amenable to spiritualization than performed ritual processes. The betrayal of his ideas was as much a matter of film's materialism as it was of America's.

- II -

The West has long been both fascinated by the power of representational images to invoke objects not present and fearful of the dangers of illusion and idolatry associated with that power. Images have generally been excluded from philosophical descriptions of the reality and accepted into religious traditions only when carefully subordinated to linguistic control. A religion of the word, Western Christianity has generally been either actively iconoclastic or has tried to contain the power of images as instructional tools, not as objects of direct adoration.

This policy of containment has never been entirely successful. The faithful have looked to images for an experience of heightened spiritual presence, not for instructional narratives. In popular religious traditions, relics, images and relic-like images said to have been created without the touch of the human hand have provided the faithful with spiritual conduits what would otherwise be a remote spiritual world. Gazing at a holy image, the believer feels himself in direct communion with the sacred.

No representational image in this tradition can approach the status given to the Catholic eucharist, whose central place on the altar provides both the architectural and institutional church with its spiritual center. In the act of consecration, the bread and wine, despite the persistence of their ordinary appearances, are said to be transformed into the real— rather than represented—presence of the divine Christ. Mysteriously, the substances underlying the perceivable `accidents' of the eucharistic materials are replaced by the deity itself, by the primal word through whose activity all else exists. Holy images of the saints may serve to reflect the spiritual power associated with this or that finite spiritual being, but only the transubstantiated eucharist directly manifests what scholastic philosophy characterizes as being itself, that pure spiritual activity that is not limited by any specific finite form or essence. The Catholic mass commemorates Christ's mission of salvation; at its climax, however, its symbolic narrative is both fulfilled and transcended as Christ's real presence stands exposed to the gaze of the believers assembled before the altar.

After the medieval affirmation of the doctrine of Christ's real presence in the eucharist, the act of visual adoration of the host became the most important element in the Church's liturgy. Now felt to be too sacred to be consumed frequently, the eucharist was elevated over the priest's head after consecration, reserved on the altar after mass and displayed through the streets in Corpus Christi processions. The intensity of the laity's desire to gaze at this eruption of the infinite into their world is indicated in Thomas Cranmer's sixteenth century response to the Calvinist doctrine that the eucharist was merely a commemorative representation of Christ:

> What made the people to run from their seats to the altar, and from altar to altar, and from sacring (as they call it) to sacring, peeping, tooting and gazing at that thing which the priest held up in his hands, if they thought not to honour the thing which they saw? What moved the priests to lift up the sacrament so high over their heads? or the people to say to the priest "Hold up! Hold up!"; or one man to say to another "Stoop down before"; or to say "This day I have seen my Master"; and "I cannot be quiet unless I see my master once a day"? What was the cause of all these, and that as well the priest and the people so devoutly did knock and kneel at every sight of the sacrament, but that they worshipped that visible thing which they saw with their eyes and took it for very God!"

Through the spectacle of the eucharist, it became possible for all to glimpse that transcendent presence whose Platonic equivalent would have only been accessible only to the philosopher who had conquered his fascination with images.

- III -

For Walter Benjamin, the photograph's mechanical reproduction destroyed the aura that was associated with images' embodiments in unique objects and thus freed image production and use from a "parasitical dependence on ritual." However, the very presumed independence from human craftsmanship that makes this possible provides photographs with another, perhaps more primitive, aura that Elizabeth Barrett refers to when she writes that "It is not merely the likeness in such cases—but the association and sense of nearness involved in the thing. . . the fact that the very shadow of the person lying there fixed forever! It is the very sanctification of portraits I think. . ."

Like supposedly miraculously painted icons, photographs have often been popularly perceived as gaining a special representational status through their immunity from the contingencies of the artist's hand. Their aura is derived not from uniqueness, nor even primarily from their optical objectivity; as much akin to the shroud of Turin as to the post-medieval tradition of perspective images, photographs gain their hold over the popular imagination through a belief that they stand in peculiarly intimate contact with their depicted objects. That is, photographs often function more as relics than as representations.

Lindsay's dream of a prophetic cinema depends upon the possibility of using this presumed intimacy between photographs and their objects to develop a more natural hieroglyphic-like language that would bridge the gap between signs and the world they describe. Film could provide a means of expression that might, to quote Emerson's statement of this persistent aspiration, "pierce [the] rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things" and thus provide a ground for the development of an art that would blend experience and imagination into "perpetual allegories." For Lindsay, the film screen is an altar of the imagination where "visible things. . . and some that have been for a long time invisible" can be recovered "in the fulness of their primeval force." Paradoxically, through the use of technology film prophets might allow modern "machine ridden men" to renew the lost visionary power to see "thoughts as pictures in the air."

It is here that the utopianism of Lindsay's cinema is most evident. Although he, like Benjamin, finds that film's mechanical nature impedes its ritual use, he nevertheless believes that its visionary capacity might be realized if its artists engage in "a fierce struggle with the uncanny scientific quality of the camera's work." But this uncanniness—the result of the reaction created by the reflected rays of light upon the chemicals adhering to the film plane—is precisely what makes possible the seemingly hieroglyphic intimacy between image and object. Only by transcending—or hiding—the mechanisms that make possible the images that are projected on the screen can those images fulfill their prophetic function. In one of the most remarkable passages of this remarkable book, Lindsay calls on filmmakers to "[m]ake a picture of a world where machinery is so highly developed that it utterly disappeared long ago." Only within such a world would Lindsay's prophetic cinema be possible.

When Lindsay demands that cinematic transubstantiation begin, he is calling for films that would be perceived not as illusions but as real manifestations of a special realm of visionary imagination. Like the images in a church, specific film images, and the narratives built out of them, would derive a privileged status through their association with a central transcendent reality, which Lindsay identifies with light itself.

It is through their imaginative use of light that film's prophet-wizards would gain their power of cinematic consecration: "Then they will kindle the beginning mysteries for our cause. They will build up a priesthood that is free, yet authorized to freedom. It will be established and disestablished according to the intrinsic authority of the light revealed."

Here light, like the underlying divine substance of the transubstantiated eucharist, acts a source of pure energy out of which the film's visionary realm emerges. This metaphysics of cinematic light not only recalls the theological doctrine that provided the intellectual foundation for the Gothic cathedral, but also certain baroque prints of the eucharist that depict it as receiving divine rays projected down from the heaven and reflecting them out to the world. In viewing these diagrams, it is very tempting to follow Lindsay in his implicit identification of altar and movie screen.

To do so would also, however, be to follow Lindsay into a fundamental misunderstanding of cinematic reality. The eucharistic myth gains its power not through the manipulation of appearances but through the more radical claim of a substantial change that occurs despite the unchanged appearances of bread and wine. It provides a spectacle of faith not illusionism. Film's power, however, comes precisely through the presentation of appearances that have no underlying substance. What stands most essentially beneath film images is not a real presence but the blank emptiness of the white screen. Film light is not the projection of divinity, but of a "dynamo" through whose gears shadows unreel twenty-four times per second. Rather than emanating spiritual energy, the film screen is a purely passive recipient of whatever illusory images are mechanically cast upon it. If there is a metaphysics of cinema, it is not of spiritual light but of the radical divorce of appearance and substance that was condemned by the Church in the seventeenth-century precisely because it subverted the scholastic theology of the eucharist. The film screen more acts as an emblem of a world reduced to insubstantial representations than a weapon for recovering a world beyond representation. It is more an emblem of a world that has become lost in its representations than a weapon for recovering a world beyond representation.

By its very nature, film must always betray those of its artists who, like Lindsay's prophets, forget that they are playing with illusion not reality.

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