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Cinema as a Sacred Surface: Ritual Rememoration of Transcendence

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Abstract

Theoreticians of Cinema and the Sacred, like H. Agel, tend to study the representation of the Sacred in Film. But some, like S. Brent Plate, argue that cinema is sacred by essence, because it recreates the world through narrative and editing, like a demiurge god. On the other hand, this article suggests that cinema bears the traces of the Sacred simply because the physical film—particularly during the celluloid era—and the flattening of the image projected on the screen act like sympathetic equivalents of the world. Thus, film fulfills the same sacred function as the ritual engravings on temple walls, or in prehistoric caves, such as Lascaux. In the movie theatre, as in Lascaux, the Human tends to unite with the world understood here as an expression of the Divine, whose metonymy is the mural in the cave or the screen in the theatre. Therefore, movie-going is similar to what Lacan calls "rememoration": the Human at the movies remembers an archaic state going back to an era where the experience of the Sacred required a ritual placing the body in a dark space, facing a surface that represents the world..

Pour le résumé en français, voir la fin de l'article

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At the intersection of Film and Religious Studies a tradition can be traced from Henri Agel's concepts of *Sacré* and *Métaphysique* to Eric Christianson's *Cinéma Divinité*, whose premise is that cinema materializes the sacred, and makes visible the invisible Godly essences. Another tradition starts with Jean Epstein's writings on the mystique or mysticism of cinema and Edgar Morin's *Imaginary Man*, which tradition is currently represented in France by Yann Calvet's work on the sacred. It is concerned with cinema as the locus of the performance of and the connection with the sacred in our modern world.

The sacred is understood here in its broader sense, encompassing forces of nature that seem overwhelming to the human, as well as the realm of supernatural entities that transcend the world of the human, such as God, or "pagan" deities. The first end of the definition is best formulated by René Girard: "The sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them.

Tempests, forest fires, and plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred." (Girard, 2005, p.32). The other end can be summarized by Lévy-Bruhl's notion of the mystical experience which is connected to a space set apart in connection to a complexus of actors including plants and animals, but also heroes—and one might add—gods (Lévy-Bruhl, 1938, p.183).

When it comes to the study of the connections between cinema and the sacred, it is probably S. Brent Plate's work that best synthesizes the two trends above mentioned: the one that considers cinema as the materialization of the sacred, and the one that sees cinema as the realm where the sacred is performed. Plate's *Religion and Film. Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* combines a thematic approach and a reflection on the materiality of film, focused on the visual emblems of religious/ritual practices and concerns, such as death and the hereafter. Thematic inquiry is dear to scholars who pursue the uncovering of continuities in anthropological structures of narratives, rituals and other practices, and symbols, between the age of mythology—Greek or Biblical—and the age of technology. This is the Agel trend. Reflections on the materiality—or immateriality—of the filmic image and the cinematic medium from the perspective of the study of the sacred are usually preoccupied by motifs and issues such as the agency of light and shadow, the correspondence between the cinematic image and the Double, both being immaterial in a certain sense. This is the Morin trend.

Both trends inform Plate's inquiry into cinema which is even the more refreshing because he does not shy from analyzing the representation of ritual and the sacred in such blockbusters as *The Matrix* (dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski, USA, 1999) and *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas, USA, 1977), side by side with *The Passion of the Christ* (dir. Mel Gibson, USA, 2004) and *Baraka* (dir. Ron Fricke). One of his book's major preoccupations is to highlight the narrative and symbolic connections between Biblical mythology and these blockbusters. "Films such as *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* have performed the function of reintroducing the power of myth for our contemporary lives, and they succeeded precisely because they have borrowed from the powerful themes, ideas, symbols and narratives of myths through the ages." (Plate, 2008, p.31). Plate analyzes, for instance, such tropes as the symbolism of Zion, it being a biblical reference to Jerusalem as well as the name of the locus of salvation, and the object of the Resistants' quest in *The Matrix*. He also studies the agency of the colours black and white in *Star Wars*, the former being associated with Evil (Vader) and the latter with Good (Skywalker); the binary structure of Good vs. Evil being a fundamental organization of many mythological and religious worldviews.

However, what makes Plate's book most original are his reflections on the paradoxical position of the body and on the mediation process in the film viewing experience—in short, his reflections on the connections between the sacred as an anthropological category and film as media. Following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological considerations about the body's perception of/in the world, he argues that film experience puts the viewer's body in the world, of which the screen is part, yet the body keeps watching the screen in return. This paradox blurs the frontiers between what one sees and what is seen, which blurring is replicated in another dimension of the viewing experience: "[…] In sensual confrontation with the filmic image of the dead body, I suggest that a religious cinematics has a powerful potential to escape its mediated confines and bring a viewing body face to face with death. As such, images and bodies merge in an experience not unlike that of the mystical experience, when borders, divisions and media all break down." (Plate, 2008, p.61).

These remarks are confined to the specific case of viewing a film displaying images of dead bodies (Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*). I argue that Plate's metaphor of the mystical experience is actually valid in principle for the viewing experience of any film. This model that understands the dynamics of viewer/film interaction in terms of perception, identification, blurring of subjectivity and / or of materiality falls under the category of "cinematic pantheism"—as I have argued elsewhere (El Khachab, 2006). Plate suggests that both religion and film re-create the world and that in some intense experiences the body can merge with the world of film. I prefer to base this phenomenological inquiry on the paradigm of the sacred which exceeds that of religion.

My contention here is not that cinema as an institutional cultural practice recreates the world on the levels of narrative and of editing. Rather, it is that the material film—particularly in the celluloid era—and the flattened image projected on a screen are "sympathetic" equivalents of the world. Therefore, the assumed archaic attitude of the Human facing a representation of the world, such as prehistoric cave murals, residually informs the attitude of the modern viewer in the movie theatre/modern cavern facing a film projected on screen/modern mural. In both situations, the Human tends to merge with the World as an expression of the Divine or the Sacred, as metonymized by the cave mural in one case or the film on screen in the other.

The act of viewing a film is therefore a ritual that is based on "recollection" not just in the sense of piecing together images and fragments of past experience into the stream we usually call memory, but also in the sense of "rememorating" a time when one can argue that the decisive distinctions

between the Human and Nature, or between the Human and the Animal were not yet accepted wisdoms. Many theoreticians, particularly within the French tradition, consider cinema as an art or as an institution, or film as a product, to be the equivalent of the world. After a brief analysis of Vertov's *The Man With the Movie Camera*, Youssef Ishaghpour concludes: « Cette "fabrique des faits" proclame l'identité du film avec le monde et l'identité du monde avec ce qui est; l'identité du film avec la vie, avec ce qui est montré, projeté sur l'écran. » (Ishaghpour, 1982, p.35).

This identity between Film, the World, and Being is not inferred from a film whose locus is natural landscapes or breathtaking images of the sky which images may seem more effective in making the point that Human and Nature are (or used to be in a remote historical stage) one. The French theorist is insisting on the technical dimension of film and on its agency being a "manufacturing of facts" as well as an instance of restating the unity between the Human and the World. On the one hand, this understanding of film opens the door to the exploration of film as a pantheistic media, and on the other, it is a reminder so to speak that cinema is the place where the viewer's body is to experience a "return" to a past when the separation of nature and culture, or of the human and the world were not unquestionably enforced. Ishaghpour's comment is also valuable because it does not displace this debate into the paradigm of a (nostalgic?) representation of particular spaces or narrative themes that express the "Unity of Being". It rather situates this pantheistic nature of film within the very nature of the media and its mechanical workings.

Film, Hierophany and Pantheism

This article acknowledges the two approaches to cinema and the sacred that were briefly mentioned in the first paragraphs: the thematic-centered one that sees film as a space of reference to motifs, practices and structures related to the sacred and the other—centered on the media's materiality—that believes film in itself is part of an understanding of the sacred, that may have been forgotten or overlooked in many accounts of film anthropology or film theory at large, except in the works of a few scholars referred to here as the Epstein-Morin trend. However, this contribution is resolutely grounded in the latter approach.

My hypothesis is based on Pier Paolo Pasolini's insights into the parallels between the world, the sacred and film. In the following quote, I connect several of these insights and put them in an order that states my case: "Reality in itself is divine. […] Reality (can be considered as) the emanation of

God's language." Since Reality is "in fact an infinite sequence shot" and that "cinema is nothing but a hypothetical, impossible, infinite sequence shot" (Pasolini, 2005, p.44, 70, 73), one can therefore infer that cinema is the site where Reality—revered or celebrated as an emanation of the Divine—is performed and/or expressed.

Pasolini's theory is that Reality, in the sense of the World, is coextensive to a hypothetical sequence shot that becomes a film when cut (cut from reality, edited in the editing room). Thus film is a "piece" of a reality that is divine, because this reality expresses God, or because He expresses himself in the form of reality. Hence, the connection between cinema and sacred is an essential one, not just one related to a particular cinematic genre such as, say, Biblical drama.

Pasolini calls the world hierophantic. One of the best in-depth explorations of this concept applied to film theory can be found in Michael Bird's "Film as Hierophany" (Bird, 1982). Bird revisited Agel's analysis of Robert Bresson's films and underscored that Agel describes the French filmmaker's images as dominated by physicality and materiality. However, that is only part of a cinematic process which turns surfaces within the image into transfigured Christ substance, according to Agel. Based on Mircea Eliade's definition of the concept, Bird starts by emphasising that hierophany is the revelation of nature as cosmic sacrality, but concludes his chapter by narrowing this potential: film becomes hierophany, Bird argues, when it introduces "a reality that does not belong to our world" (Bird, 1982).

Instead of exploring examples that show the sacred within the profane, —within nature— Bird has chosen to focus on Agel's catholic reading of a—conveniently—catholic filmmaker. The body in pain in Bresson's films, argues Agel, is an annunciation of the advent of the Christic body, the ultimate afflicted body. It is one thing to highlight Christian themes or to do a Christian reading of films, and another one to analyze the sacred in general, regardless of the particular organized religion and specific institution one claims to represent.

However the major concern about narrowing the connection between the sacred and cinema lies elsewhere. My understanding of hierophany is that of a model where the sacred is expressed through the materiality of any physical object, motif, landscape, body in the world. Its relevance to film is precisely that the act of filming/screening and the material film with imprinted images of the world are by nature always instances of hierophany, whereas Birds' reading of Agel proposes a model articulated around the image of a vertical axis.

Hierophany in Bird's final analysis implies vertical and narrowly defined relations between a sacred being whose transcendence is located "up"

and a material element in nature upon which transcendence "descends". The concept of pantheism has a wider "scope" and therefore better accounts for the mystical dimension of cinema. It accounts for a fusion and merger of the body with the world—not just for the manifestation of the sacred in an object or a chosen body—and it refers to the coextensiveness of both the World and the Human. There is an "everywhereness" about pantheism—i.e. the world/the sacred/the human are everywhere—that replicates the potential omnipresence of the camera in the world. In that sense, after a careful reading of Pasolini's use of "hierophany", one could assert that Pasolini's conception of the dynamics involving the Human and the Divine is rather pantheistic and that film—as a pantheistic media—"mediates" between both.

Mediation in my understanding is not a reference to a physical linear process where the Human stands in slot A, the Divine in slot C and film, in the middle in slot B. Cinema is a space of mediation simultaneously "producing" the World and the place of the Human in it, manufacturing the immanence of nature, and elevating it metaphorically at once to the status of transcendence. Film appears thus heuristically as an interface between these instances, hence the concept of mediation. Film also mediates in the sense of "materializing", "manifesting", making the invisible come to being, through the camera lens, and taking shape when "wrapped" in celluloid.

Cinematic pantheism in this article is not about the representation of pantheistic images. This article does not focus on films that are deemed poetic, or visually stunning, where the scenery is dominated by impressive landscapes rendered by intensely photographic virtuosity, which attributes would be the standard aesthetic features in films described as pantheistic. In other words, my aim is not to analyze the cinema epitomized in early film histories by Alexander Dovjenko's *Earth* (USSR, 1930). It is customary to hail the cinematic pantheism expressed in the images of landscape and particularly of fields in that Soviet film. Dovjenko's camera is believed to have produced a homage to nature and to have realized a state of merger between farmer and land on screen.

More recently, the same rhetoric was used by film critics to praise the pantheism of James Cameron's *Avatar* (USA, 2009). A New York Times' op-ed summarizes the film's approach to the sacred in the following terms: "[…] 'Avatar' is Cameron's long apologia for pantheism—a faith that equates God with Nature, and calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world." (Douthat, 2009). This account of the film's pantheism does not explain the technical details that support its point, but it claims that Hollywood has long been a strong supporter of the pantheistic "faith".

Typically, establishing shots of natural landscapes, particularly of vast plains or majestic mountains, pans, dolly shots, crane shots exploring such scenery would be the technical means to produce this type of cinematic pantheism: images of overwhelming but non threatening nature, where the human is introduced in symbiosis with the world—not as a superior being domesticating the world nor as a foe in conflict with nature. For my part, I have underlined elsewhere the role played by the dissolve shot in producing pantheism within the film economy, because it literally makes the human body dissolve into nature, thus performing the unity between the Human, the World and the Divine understood as a transcendental aspect of the material world (El Khachab, 2006).

This understanding of pantheism in film is even the more compelling in the case of *Avatar*, because of the role played by digital technology. Nature in Cameron's film is not an analogue image of nature in "real life". It is the product of computer-generated imagery (CGI) and is made possible through technology. One could say that the avatar of nature in the film is essentially an immense green screen. This is a reminder that cinema is not the realm of unity between human and nature because it "reflects" nature and humans on screen. It is so because the very nature of film is pantheistic.

Film as a "Panthed" Media

Cinematic pantheism as articulated in this article is not "located" in the narrative or in the images of a film, even though—as discussed above—many films address the theme or the representation of pantheism. It is the film media itself that is fundamentally pantheistic in nature. In Élie Faure's words, cinema has a "panthed" *(panthée)* mode of functioning. A medieval Avicennian definition of the soul's relationship with the body and that of the universal spirit with the universe per se, can better explain how pantheism is envisaged here, in a way that is relevant to cinema and screen media theory:

> « L'existence de l'âme commence avec celle du corps, à l'encontre de certaine école professant que l'Âme universelle est localisée quelque part et que des fragments se détachent d'elle, chaque fragment échéant à un corps et le gouvernant […] cette âme n'est pas dans le corps de l'homme ; elle n'est pas non plus mélangée avec son corps ; elle n'est pas non plus ailleurs. Elle n'est pas à

> l'intérieur du monde ; elle n'est pas non plus à l'extérieur du monde ; elle n'occupe pas de lieu. » (Jozjani in Corbin, 1999, 4).

In this unorthodox Neo-Platonician speculation, if the soul is the instance of transcendence, it appears as part of immanence, not as a fragment located in it. The corollary is that transcendence—be it called God or Logos or other—is simply part of the world of immanence. A pantheist philosopher may say: transcendence emerges with immanence. It is not located in a specific part of the world or "mixed" with a particular body. It is not in the world, nor out of it. It simply has no location. It functions as an energy, coextensive of matter and does not belong to a separate stratum.

As much as cinema and screen media theory are concerned, cinematic pantheism is the way by which film produces equally and simultaneously transcendence and immanence, and materializes the unity of both. In cinema, all beings are equally flattened on the screen's surface and are equally submitted to the oppositional intensity of light and darkness. The act of filming renders the multiplicity of beings in a unified flattened form, where both immanence and transcendence are unequivocally the simultaneous result of that act, since both come to being when projected on the screen. It is thus safe to argue that cinema materializes the "unity of Being", which proposition is a medieval formulation of the concept of pantheism.

Cinema is par excellence the space where the Cartesian opposition between spirit and matter disappears, which opposition is seminal to a hierarchical worldview where the former dominates the latter, where transcendence acts as the organizing spirit of the matter constitutive of immanence. The mystical dimension of cinema—in fact its pantheistic nature—is framed by Élie Faure in these terms: « Qu'on n'invoque pas l'âme, toujours l'âme pour l'opposer à la matière. L'âme n'a jamais scellé sa voûte colossale qu'au croisement des nervures qui s'élancent, d'un jet, des profondeurs de la terre. C'est dans le pain et dans le vin que vivent la chair et le sang de l'esprit. » (Faure, 1964, p.68).

Cinema in that sense is more than the media of epiphany, more than the locus of the mere manifestation of the invisible. It is the realm of an activity producing simultaneously the visible and invisible, immanence and transcendence. This equalization of beings in a sort of visual unity amounts to "performing" pantheism. Élie Faure advocates this unity of the world, and cinema—according to him—is the material proof of that unity: « C'est la condition des nouvelles extases dont la mort de tous les dieux avait paru interdire jusqu'à l'espérance. Le Cinéma, si nous voulons le comprendre, doit

ranimer et porter à son comble un sentiment religieux dont la flamme mourante réclame son aliment. L'infinie diversité du monde offre pour la première fois à l'homme le moyen matériel de démontrer son unité » (Faure, 1964, p.67).

Faure does not restore a spirit, an *anima* of the world. Rather, he draws a parallel between the animation of things performed by cinema, and the animated movement of becoming. The mere projection on screen of "inanimate" things, such as a forest or a city panorama, provides them with a "murmuring animation". The latter reveals the complexity of becoming and provides evidence that cinema in the course of it "capturing life" through the camera lens, is not simply revealing a spirit that animates the world. It actually is the media that does so while confirming the merger—if not the identity—of matter and spirit, human and divine, immanence and transcendence, through mechanical reproduction.

A similar point is made by a filmmaker—and theorist in her own right—contemporary to Faure. Germaine Dulac states an obvious given about cinema that is nevertheless important to emphasize as a reminder of the materiality and the technical nature of film: « L'image est non seulement la reproduction photographique d'un fait ou d'une vision, mais aussi et plus encore, une harmonie dramatique ». She then connects this materiality to the pantheistic merger of the human with nature. According to Dulac, with the advent of cinema, the Human being « régénère ses forces au contact de la terre entière, s'il sait ressentir exactement le sens des images faites de vérité que le Cinéma lui propose, il devient un conquérant, qui s'épand dans l'univers avec la conscience de n'être pas le centre du monde. » Dulac poetically coins an expression to name this product resulting from the merger of technique, human body, life and nature, in the filmic media: « la Matière-vie-elle-même" (Dulac, 1994, p. 148, 157-158).

However, more than film content as such—whether it is the narrative, the photography, or the principle of "leveling" both the human and the world, immanence and transcendence—pantheism is the archeological substrata of movie experience. It is the situation of viewing a film—particularly in a movie theatre—that is pantheistic in essence. The main concern in the rest of this section is to base pantheism on the exposure of the viewer's body to film. In the segment, what celluloid itself, or the screen per se, fold or unfold does not matter. The focus is now on the affects experienced by the viewer's body when exposed to film. "Fundamental" cinematic pantheism lies in the setting of a viewer facing a film.

I have proposed in the above section to expand Plate's thesis about the mystical characteristics of the viewing experience to all movie experiences,

regardless of the film genre. Another theoretical basis for conceiving of viewing film as an instance of merger between the viewer's body and the film is Deleuze's contention that "the brain is the screen" (Deleuze, 2003, p.62-78). More than a fusion between the subject's body and the material of film, Deleuze is suggesting a radical model for movie experience discussed thus far. He does not conceive of the assemblage of viewer /film as two separate entities that get to interact then eventually merge. His contention is that the brain is already a screen, or—as he says in another paragraph—it is already an image itself. Not only a fundamental part of the viewer's body is already part of the cinematic assemblage, but the major "components" of bodies and solids involved are one and the same. Hence, Deleuze provocatively asserts that there is not a single difference between images, things and movement. (Deleuze, 2003, p.62)

Edgar Morin founds a similar understanding of the viewing situation on the concepts of identification-projection drawn from psychology and anthropology (Morin, 159). Morin argues that the Human projects his/herself in the world, for example through constructing the idea of the Double. He adds that the Human also identifies with elements in the world, which include the Double. Morin contends that this same process frames modern man's relation to cinema, which is based on him projecting himself in film and identifying with characters in the film. Morin's conclusion is that cinema perpetuates the process by which man sees himself in the world and identifies with it, through man's self projection in the realm of film and his identification with film (Morin, 47-49, 61).

Even though Morin's model is less radical than Deleuze's, both argue that the body or the subject in the viewing experience is not separate from the other element in the assemblage experience: film and screen. Both interact on the basis of identification or, even more radically, by literally dissolving into one another. Nevertheless, Morin's theory has an additional advantage: it frames the body's fusion in the realm of film as part of a prototypical relation of the Human to the world, i.e. transcending, blurring boundaries separating the subject from the environment, and the former blending with the latter.

A World Set Apart

Plate argues that both cinema and religion recreate the world through ritual. Both establish a distinction between the space of ritual and the sacred and that of the profane and the ordinary. The examples he introduces, however, are all

drawn from the spatial organization of some film narratives. He shows how cinema sets apart a space out of the ordinary, which he equates with the space of ritual and of the sacred. He compares this process to a similar one found in many religions, by virtue of which sacred texts set apart places such as temples or heavens. *The Matrix* opposes the space of the "real" world to one set apart, sacralised: that of the matrix. Pantheism however is not about setting spaces apart within film. It is not about the representation of a process where space is sacralised through ritual. Rather, pantheism is about establishing the "everywherness" of both the sacred and the profane (Morin, p.159).

With respect to reflections about cinema as ritual, setting a space apart within film content is not an aspect of cinematic pantheism or proof of the connection between cinema and the sacred. For the purpose of this discussion, the relevant process of setting a space apart is that of film experience being set in the ritual space of the movie theatre. In other words, what matters for the discussion of the sacred or of pantheism as conceptual categories accounting for film experience is the imaginary and symbolic frontiers between the theatre and the world, which replicate the archaic distinction between the temple and the world or—in even more archaic times—the separation between the cave reserved for ritual practices and the rest of the world.

Cinema is in essence an experience of the body's exposure to an object that purports to reproduce—or even to produce—(the image of) Reality on a surface: the film on screen. This makes it the latest avatar of ritual/visual /sacred immanentism practices. Weaving a representation of the world or the hereafter on a prayer rug; turning both the physical and metaphysical worlds into a Mandala; religious icons and paintings are all practices of what I have called elsewhere "surfacialization"—that is, producing transcendence on a surface. Within the logic of these rituals, the world needs to be reproduced in a monad set apart, so that the contemplative energy of the worshiper is focused on it. In our secular modern world, the meaning of these forgotten practices is obsolete, but it still informs our "setting" the movie experience apart in theatres.

It is not uncommon in film theory to use Plato's parable of the cave as an archetype of pre-cinematic experiences (Jarvie, 1987). The common wisdom tells the story of people in chains in a cave, exposed to a shadow play, cut from the "real world" outside of the cave, as an allegory of film viewing. Based on Morin's claim that cinema reactivates the old anthropological archetype of the Double, associated with the shadow—because the cinematic body is a shadow that bears the characteristics of the double—I suggest that Plato's myth of the cave is reminiscent of an older practice: a sacred ritual by virtue of which

"archaic" humans gathered in particular caves to gaze at murals or to watch shadow plays.

Cinema is the modern avatar of shadow theatre where the "effectuation" of this epistemologically democratic concomitance of immanence and transcendence occur, as I have argued elsewhere (El Khachab, 2003, 5). Shadow theatre materializes the unity of Being, and the unification of immanence and transcendence, since all beings are equally flattened on the screen's surface and are equally submitted to the oppositional intensity of light and darkness. In this respect, cinema acts as a modern shadow theatre, where the act of filming renders the multiplicity of beings in a unified flattened form, and where both immanence and transcendence are unequivocally the simultaneous result of that act, since both come to being when projected on the screen (El Khachab, 2003, 6).

The paradox inherent to cinema consumption is as old as pre-cinematic archaic practices. Cinema is fundamentally a practice that reminds us of pantheistic worldviews about the blurring of boundaries between the Human and the World as an epiphany of the divine. Nevertheless, cinema requires that the contemplation of this old "memory" be practiced in a space whose boundaries are quite well set: there is a clear demarcation between the inside and the outside of the theatre similar, I suppose, to the clear boundaries between Plato's—or Lascaux cave—and the world.

This ritual has always been associated with the symbolic (magic?) production of transcendence on the immanence of a flat surface. The archetype thesis may offer an explanation of the unwritten rule regarding the role played by the sacred flat surface: the archetype of cinema can be found in the Lascaux cave mural paintings or in the practice of shadow plays: both are about surfaces contemplated in the dark. Incidentally, the Lascaux one—among other Palaeolithic caves—is deemed a sacred space by archaeologists, who often refer to these as sanctuaries (Leroi-Gourhan, 1958). I assume, following Edgar Morin and Youssef Ishagpour, that the Lascaux cave murals were the archetype of film and that they were painted so that people could contemplate them in the dark, in order to connect with nature, through the act of gazing to painted natural elements (e.g. the bison scenes). However, there might be a phenomenological explanation to the connection between the pantheistic essence of cinema and the projection of images on a flat surface, which comes from film theory.

Arnheim observes that the basic perceptual process in film experience is that of a flattening of the world, of turning its nature from the three-dimensionality of solids to the flat image on screen: "[…] Since our field of

vision is full of solid objects, but our eye (like the camera) sees this filed from only one station point at any given moment, and since the eye can perceive the rays of light that are reflected from the object only by projecting them onto a plane surface—the retina—the reproduction of even a perfectly simple object is not a mechanical process but can be set about well or badly." (Arnheim, 1983, p.18). His seemingly factual account underscores that the process of flattening the image of the world, or of projecting it on a plane surface works both for the body's visual perception, where the retina plays the role of the screen, and for the "externalization" of projection onto the cinematic screen. One can now less surprisingly embrace Deleuze's statement about the screen acting as an eye (Deleuze, p.62). Following Arnheim's logic, one might say that the cinema screen acts like an external, oversized retina that "retains" images.

This almost biological account is strikingly similar to pantheistic models that place the world in the human and the human in the world, in the sense of the human being part and parcel of the world, which itself is the expression of the Divine. Other pantheistic models are more dynamic: they place the world within the human and vice versa. I would argue that this account parallels the phenomenon of the human capturing the world inside his/her own body—on the retina—and the world accepting the human as part of itself, on the grounds that this human partakes in the projection of shadows—or of films—on the screens of the world or at least of movie theatres.

Memory, Rememoration, Film

Cinema consumption thus understood is a modern way of performing what Lacan calls "rememoration". It is not a technique to remember desire in its primal mode within the unconscious. Rather, cinema is a reminiscence of archaic practices by virtue of which Humans connected with the sacred through the ritual exposure to surfaces representing the world. Consumption of film—or rather, exposure to film—is the residue of an ancient sacred practice based on the agency of the gaze. Even though Alain Chabat's *RRRrrr* (1999, France) is a comedy, his film seems to take seriously the kinship between cinema—or TV—and the prehistoric fresco. In the film, before they go to sleep at night, the kids in a family sit on a pseudo-sofa and stare as if hypnotised at a mural which strongly resembles the Lascaux cave frescoes that covers an entire wall. The father controls the time when they have to go to bed, so he puts out the flame that illuminates the screen/fresco. The scene seems to be a barely disguised reference to the pre-cinematic role played by murals in prehistoric caves.

Chabat seems therefore to rememorate heroic times, when the murals in caves used to act as mediating interfaces between the human and nature, in an effort to reactivate the idea of a blend between the Human and Nature, in relation to a recent avatar of mural paintings: film. Both practices: gazing at murals and watching a film share the archaic function of reiterating the fusion between the body and the world as a metaphor, or as a materialisation of the (re-) uniting of the human with the divine.

Jacques Lacan opposes "memory", related to a living body and to an experience in the past, to "rememoration" which seems to be more of a ritual repetition of an older or archaic mode of knowledge. Rememoration is generated by desires that are still within the unconscious and that are summarily articulated in one major signifier. The repetition of that signifier through rememoration is the only way to articulate the desire in question and to make sense of it. « L'insistance répétitive de ces désirs dans le transfert et leur remémoration permanente dans un signifiant dont le refoulement s'est emparé, c'est-à-dire où le refoulé fait retour, trouvent leur raison nécessaire et suffisante, si l'on admet que le désir de la reconnaissance domine dans ces déterminations le désir qui est à reconnaître, en le conservant comme tel jusqu'à ce qu'il soit reconnu. » (Lacan, 1999, p.248)

Cinema therefore appears to be, not so much a ritual aiming at retrieving an actual memory of times past in the cave, but rather, a ritual that repeats the homage to cinema in an attempt to articulate desires that were suppressed; chief among which is the desire for the divine through means that are not those of organized religion. The importance of repetition in rememoration may explain the fact that an average urban film viewer may watch at least a film per week. The repetition of this practice many times a month seems to be structured as part of an unconscious effort to transcend the major signifier, cinema, and articulate the reason why we are still addicted to exposure to screens.

Keywords: cinema and sacred, cinematic pantheism, mysticism, rememoration, spectatorship

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Walid El Khachab taught cinema at the Universities of Montreal and of Ottawa, and has founded Arabic Studies at Concordia University. He is currently Associate Professor and Coordinator of Arabic Studies at York University (Toronto). After writing a PhD dissertation on *Le mélodrame en Égypte. Déterritorialisation. Intermédialité*, Walid El Khachab has focused his research on the mystical and pantheistic dimensions of cinema. He has published forty chapters and academic articles on cinema, literature and pop culture, in CinémAction, Sociétés & Représentations, CinéMas and Intermédialités, among others.

His current research projects deal with cinema and the sacred, the trope of the veil in cinema and the cinema of the Arab Diaspora in the West.

Résumé

Les théoriciens du rapport entre cinéma et sacré, comme H. Agel, tendent à étudier la représentation du sacré dans le film. Mais certains comme – S. Brent Plate – estiment que le cinéma est sacré par essence, car il recrée le monde, par l'intermédiaire de la narration et du montage, comme un dieu démiurge. En revanche, cet article propose que le cinéma porte la trace du sacré simplement parce que le film physique – notamment pendant l'ère du celluloïd – et l'aplatissement de l'image projetée sur l'écran agissement comme des équivalents sympathiques du monde. Le film remplit ainsi la même fonction sacrée que les dessins rituels sur les murs des temples, ou dans les cavernes préhistoriques, tels que Lascaux. Au cinéma, comme dans Lascaux, l'Humain tend à fusionner avec le Monde conçu comme expression du Divin, métonymisé par la murale dans la caverne ou l'écran dans la salle de cinéma. Aller au cinéma est ainsi similaire à ce que Lacan appelle « remémoration »: l'Humain s'y souvient d'un état archaïque, à une époque où l'expérience du sacré passait par un rituel plaçant le corps dans un espace sombre, face à une surface représentant le monde.