

# **FILM HIEROPHANY**

**ANALYSING THE SACRED IN AVANT-GARDE FILMS**

**FROM THE 1920S TO 1950S**

**by**

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## **ABSTRACT**

I am focusing my dissertation on the concept of ‘hierophany’ as established by Mircea Eliade in order to formulate a theory of the ultimately cooperative relationship between the sacred and the avant-garde. On the outer surface, the relationship between the two seems intensely characterised by contention and conflict, due to the sacred being bound to the timeless, mythical dimension and the avant-garde being conventionally defined as a modern movement. However, I intend to re-theorise the avant-garde as being much more than a historically and culturally constrained phenomenon, that avant-garde — much like the sacred — is an inherent predisposition within the consciousness with transhistorical and transcultural qualities. And even though the sacred is normally associated with the archaic while the avant-garde is defined by a constant newness, I am setting out to establish that the archaic can indeed exhibit avant-garde aspects, and this is where my study of Antonin Artaud’s theoretical material enters to help resolve such difficulties. Apart from upholding a dream cinema that detaches from (modern) conventions of aural narrative, Artaud proposes a revival of a mythical theatre, especially in his romantic idealisations of the Balinese theatre where the playing out of images and gestures is as he posits a process of transmutation channelled by the gods. Correspondingly, with a mechanical assemblage such as a work of cinema revealing mythical images and symbols, such an idea of radically mixed connotations goes to show that film may not be exclusively modern after all. Film may in fact be essentially aligned with the primitive tendency to seek divine meaning and empowerment in everyday objects, places, and events — that through the cinematic medium, objects that are normally considered inanimate and even ordinary would come to possess sacred significance, acquiring a life force that magnifies the object’s relationship with higher dimensions. Ultimately,

my attempt to show that film inherently possesses such animistic qualities would lead to a dismantling of the dichotomy between the sacred — which Eliade so insists is a separate dimension completely alien to this world — and the profane — which predominantly characterises modernity, of which both the avant-garde and the cinematic medium are considered by conventional standards to be two of the main components. The films I focus upon either express an idealisation of Eastern philosophy — regardless of whether or not such an idealisation is directly articulated — or provide an answer, or rather a replenishment, for a vision of higher fulfillment that the modern Western cultural attitude is severely missing. My original contribution is — not exactly to play one cultural attitude against another, as that would be the greatest fallacy — but to discern, by way of the intrinsic film form, the nature of those themes, images, and symbols that profoundly resonate with the mythical/sacred imagination, so much so that such operative patterns within the consciousness can be considered universal. In that connection, I set out to examine those aspects of the sacred that are inherently predisposed towards expanding creativity, which is that intense area of hybridity where the sacred and the avant-garde converge. Apart from analysing some interpretations of Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928) in Chapter 2 — or more precisely, Artaud's ideas of this film that is based upon his original scenario — I discuss in detail specific scenes from the following films, all of which break open modern secular norms and enter completely uninhibited into the mythical realm where conventional definitions of reality become radically challenged:

- 1.) Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943)
- 2.) Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1950)
- 3.) Kenji Mizoguchi's *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954), *Ugetsu* (1953), *Utamaro and His Five Women* (1946), and *The Life of Oharu* (1952)

## INTRODUCTION

Mircea Eliade (1907 – 1986) provides a foundational definition of hierophany: ‘From Greek *hiero-*, “sacred”, and *phainein*, “to show”, is a term designating the manifestation of the sacred.’<sup>1</sup>

The universality of such a definition offers tremendous scope for analysing specific operative patterns within the human consciousness, as well as the ways in which such innate experiential capacities influence and inspire the most leading-edge examples of cinematic art. While the all-encompassing nature of universal structures allows for enormous latitude in making certain generalisations with less or even minimal susceptibility to being contradicted, I am using a phenomenological approach as I will later explain to show that in order to successfully analyse such an abstract concept as the sacred, there are some aspects to it (as presented by Eliade) that must be protected from being shredded apart by the disputing of every last component. However, because Eliade expressed minimal interest in cinema, it becomes essential to establish the concept of film hierophany<sup>2</sup> through the works of filmmakers and film theorists (e.g. Antonin

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade and Lawrence E. Sullivan, ‘Hierophany’, in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Bryan S. Rennie (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2006), pp. 116 – 127 (p. 87).

Also published in Eliade and Sullivan, “Hierophany”, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6.

<sup>2</sup> There are two previous studies directly concerning film hierophany: Paul Schrader’s *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* and Michael Bird’s *Religion in Film*. I am not discussing Schrader’s text at length because it only contains brief mentionings of hierophany here and there. I am providing two quotes from the text that give a clear indication of what the text concerns:

‘Yasujiro Ozu in Japan, Robert Bresson in France, to a lesser degree Carl Dreyer in Denmark, and other directors in various countries have forged a remarkably common film form. This common form was not

Artaud, Maya Deren, Jean Cocteau, Kenji Mizoguchi) who were extensively devoted to discussing the sacred as revealed through the intrinsic film form. Such masterpieces — whether cinematic or theoretical — demonstrated such innovativeness and originality, certainly during the time in which they were produced, earning those artists avant-garde status.<sup>3</sup> To begin with,

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determined by the film-makers' personalities, culture, politics, economics, or morality. It is instead the result of two universal contingencies: the desire to express the Transcendent in art and the nature of the film medium. In the final result no other factors can give this style its universality.' (*Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, p. 3)

'The Transcendent is beyond normal sense experience, and that which it transcends is, by definition, the immanent. Beyond this truism there is little agreement about the nature of the transcendental in life and art...Part of the confusion is semantic; the term "transcendental" can have different meanings for different writers. It can mean, directly or indirectly: (1) the Transcendent, the Holy or Ideal itself, or what Rudolf Otto called the "Wholly Other", (2) the transcendental, human acts or artifacts which express something of the Transcendent, or what Mircea Eliade in his anthropological study of comparative religions calls "hierophanies", (3) transcendence, the human religious experience which may be motivated by either a deep psychological need or neurosis (Freud), or by an external, "Other" force (Jung).' (p. 3)

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky provides one of the most direct interpretations of the sacred aspects of avant-garde cinema in his initial suggestion that cinema has the potential to portray the human condition as a revelation of higher meanings. According to Dorsky, the fact that one can be profoundly affected by the lighting shifting from image to image shows that inner transformation can be inspired by exposure to image sequences exhibiting seemingly subtle content:

When I first encountered avant-garde films in the early 1960s, the works I found most interesting were those that were discovering a language unique to film, a language that enabled the viewer to have the experience of film itself and, at the same time, allowed film to be an evocation of something meaningfully human. I began to notice that moments of revelation or aliveness came to me from the way a filmmaker used film itself. Shifts of light from shot to shot, for instance, could be very visceral and affective. I observed that there was a concordance between film and our human metabolism, and that this concordance was a fertile ground for expression, a basis for exploring a language intrinsic to film. In fact, film's physical properties seemed *so* attuned to our

the concept of avant-garde<sup>4</sup> must be understood in terms of the military metaphor which directly applies to the co-existence between the undesirable old and the more desirable new — and that is the phalanx, a formation constituted of a leading-edge vanguard and a supporting rearguard which remains a secondary yet essential background. In the *Iliad* where Ajax ‘broke a phalanx of the Trojans’<sup>5</sup>, the purpose of the phalanx is to show such compact solidarity as to possess a

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metabolism that I began to experience film as a direct and intimate metaphor or model for our being, a model which had the potential to be transformative, to be an evocation of spirit, and to become a form of devotion.’ (‘Devotional Cinema’, in *The Religion and Film Reader*, p. 407.)

<sup>4</sup> The following is an earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century conception of avant-garde by Henri de Saint-Simon:

It is we artists who will serve you as avant-garde...the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas...What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the [vanguard] of all the intellectual faculties... (Cited in Kirsten Strom’s ‘“Avant-Garde of What?”: Surrealism Reconceived as Political Culture’, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62/1 (Winter 2004), p. 38.)

<sup>5</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, Book 6, trans. by Samuel Butler, p. 103.

Writing in the 1920s, Germaine Dulac states the unjust ways in which cinema had been made to serve as a derivative of the other arts that came before, a derivative in a sense that it is seen as a kind of copy, only that it is presented in a different medium:

Every art bears within itself a personality, an individuality of expression that confers upon it its value and independence. Until now, the cinema was confined to the task, simultaneously servile and splendid, of drawing its life’s breath from the other arts, those ancient masters of the human sensibility and spirit. Regarded in this way, it had to abandon its creative possibilities in order to be cast, as demands required, according to traditionalist comprehensions of the past and to lose its character as the seventh art. Now (the cinema) is proceeding resolutely and gradually through adverse elements, occasionally stopping to do battle, and moving to surmount the obstacles in order to appear in the light of its own truth before the eyes of an astonished generation.

semblance of unbreakability.<sup>6</sup> Antonin Artaud (1896 – 1948) saw the acute contrast between conventional cinema (the rearguard) and true cinema (the vanguard) — true cinema which he also refers to as ‘raw cinema’<sup>7</sup> (I shall explain in Chapter 2 how this *true* cinema is synonymous to his notion of sacred cinema). According to Artaud, the modern Western status quo has reduced cinema to being artistically under-nourished. Conventional cinema as a form of entertainment focused upon the popular approval of the masses is so driven by the pressures and rapid changeability of technological progress, that the true essence of cinema becomes lost as conventional cinema comes to acquire the function of just another exhibition of the current technological advancements. Artaud characterises the true essence of cinema with what he refers to as ‘stability’ and ‘nobility’<sup>8</sup>. These are terms that need extensive defining if we are to properly decipher what he means by a raw cinema completely imbued with sacredness to the point where

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(Germaine Dulac, ‘Aesthetics, Obstacles, Integral *Cinégraphie*’, in *French Film Theory and Criticism* 1, p. 389. Translated by Stuart Liebman in *Framework* 19 (1982). The original French version first appeared as “Les Esthétiques, les entraves, la cinégraphie integrale”, *L’Art cinématographique* 2 (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1926).)

The military metaphor can be found in Dulac’s statement that the cinema must ‘battle’ mainstream attitudes in order to nurture any further growth as a uniquely expanding art.

<sup>6</sup> The metaphor of the phalanx was very openly applied in 1901 when Vassily Kandinsky founded the Munich art society called the Phalanx. The mission of the Phalanx was, as cited in Peter Selz’s *German Expressionist Painting*, “to further common interest by close cooperation. Above all it [the Phalanx project] wants to help overcome the difficulties which young artists encounter in getting their work exhibited.” (p. 177)

<sup>7</sup> Antonin Artaud, ‘Witchcraft and the Cinema’, in *Collected Works Volume Three: Scenarios on the Cinema, Interviews, Letters*, trans. by Alastair Hamilton (London: John Calder, 1961; repr. 1999), p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Artaud, ‘Witchcraft and the Cinema’, in *Collected Works* 3, p. 65.



the art form and the sacred quality become inseparable, causing the art form in question to be entirely characterised by the sacred as an essential definition. In other words, true cinema *must* be sacred, and the same applies to true theatre. Thus, it is important to initially define ‘stability’ and ‘nobility’ as a *constancy* inherent within the art form itself, without which the art form would lose its meaning and identity altogether:

There is no doubt that it [the cinema] is a means of expression that has not yet been materially perfected. There are several ways, for example, in which it could be given a stability and a nobility which it does not possess. One day we shall probably have a cinema in three dimensions and even in colour. But these are accessory devices which cannot contribute greatly to the substratum of the cinema which is a language, as much as music, painting and poetry.<sup>9</sup>

He never properly spells out what he considers to be the characteristics of conventional cinema. However as his film theory and theatrical philosophy are inextricably linked, what he considers to be the characteristics of conventional cinema and those of conventional theatre would be near-identical versions of each other. The definition of conventional cinema — or rather the definition of *conventional* in general — not properly offered in his writings on film is then offered at great length in *The Theatre and Its Double*. In fact towards the end of “Witchcraft and the Cinema”, he states that he sees *no differentiation* between what he considers to be the idealistic cinema and

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<sup>9</sup> Artaud, ‘Witchcraft and the Cinema’, p. 65.

the idealistic theatre. Since he sees no differentiation between the *idealistic* aspects of these two media, he should correspondingly see little differentiation, if any, between the definitions of *conventional* cinema and conventional theatre. And it hardly needs emphasising that by laying out the acute contrast between Artaud's definitions of conventional cinema and sacred cinema, the qualities of the latter — in view of the uninviting character of its opposition — would push itself forward all the more as a means of fulfilling a basic human need to embrace the mythical imagination. Correspondingly, Michael Bird presents an interpretation of Amédée Ayfre's theory of a cinema that attempts to access what can be referred to as the mythical level of consciousness, not the mythical in the sense that it is so outrageously fantastical that it inevitably removes itself from what is familiar, but rather this cinema extracts elements from everyday life to construct a transcendent reality where those same everyday elements are imaginatively *re-assembled*. The analogy implied here (not that it is at all articulated) is the difference between 1.) green-leaf vegetables that are rinsed and plainly presented as a side dish, and 2.) green-leaf vegetables that are dressed into a salad, tossed with other ingredients that in turn enhance the freshness and texture of the vegetables. Clearly, it is the analogy of the latter that applies to the sacred experience situated in the everyday, as this is an instance where ordinary components are transformed into a concoction that is simultaneously special and (freely) accessible:

One of Bazin's disciples, Amédée Ayfre, has developed what is possibly the most succinct and formidable exposition of a cinematic theology. As opposed to contrived "dramatizations" (the Hollywood religious film) on the one hand, or strict documentary records of daily reality on the other hand, Ayfre suggests that there is a cinematic approach to the sacred that discloses not only its surface appearances but also its inner strivings that point to its depth. "Genuinely" religious films, by no means restricted to

explicitly religious subjects, are those in which the cinematographic recording of reality does not exhaust reality but rather evokes in the viewer the sense of its ineffable mystery. This cinematic realism confronts the spectator with a reality “in which there is more than that of which it is the image.” A fundamental criterion for such a cinematic realism is that it explores the real by means of the real. It should transcend the every day precisely through the every day.<sup>10</sup>

Bird’s idea of ‘inner strivings’ has double-edged implications for the experience of the sacred/mythical in everyday life. On the one hand, seeing the sacred/mythical in the everyday should not be difficult, precisely because the everyday is the area of most familiarity requiring little to no effort by way of navigation. In this respect, ‘striving’ is not an accurate characterisation of such an experience primarily because aligning with the everyday is not generally qualified by the struggle to adapt (otherwise the process would not be considered familiar and habitual); *smooth swimming* would be a more appropriate characterisation. On the other hand, it is left ambiguous as to the kind of culture in which the everyday is situated. If it is a modern, secular society we are considering, then the sacred/mythical would be buried under such a hard but scattered (as in, not unified) cultural surface. This is the kind of case that would indeed require ‘inner strivings’ to access the sacred that is being repressed by norms and standards that hardly even acknowledge its existence. This dissertation extensively discusses both cases, fully bringing out the valuable qualities of striving and not striving.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Bird, ‘Religion in Film’, in *The Religion and Film Reader*, p. 393.

## *Eliade and Artaud*

The idea of hierophany as a manifestation of the sacred raises two questions: 1.) Does the sacred manifest *itself* into hierophanic form out of its own volition?; 2.) Is hierophany merely a status assigned by an external agent, such as an individual or a collective? If it is the former, then that means the absolute sacred source possesses the free will to transform itself into a concretised extension of its own non-physical nature. The fact that someone would consider something to be a hierophany would only go to show that the sacred as a self-determining, self-directing force is influencing that person's consciousness. The process of selecting a hierophany then would not so much be operated by the individual's or the collective's own intentions and faculties of decision-making, but rather the hierophanic selection would be a matter of the sacred channeling itself through the agent's consciousness in order to *inspire* the agent to assign something a hierophanic status. However, if the latter case applies — that is, if the hierophanic status is externally assigned — then the individual or collective bestows whatever significance and meaning upon the object, place, or person; and if it so happens that the object becomes meaningful enough to be considered sacred, then it can pass as hierophany. Eliade's approach combines both perspectives in his theory that the sacred is an embedded structure within the consciousness, thus causing the sacred to operate *through* the human being and consequently influencing their attitudes, behaviour, and experiential capacities. At the same time, he does say that the sacred constitutes only a *part* of consciousness rather than its entirety, leaving a significant remainder of the human consciousness free reign to decide whether to uphold the sacred in a dominant position or to occupy only a minor role or even to not be acknowledged at all:

In a series of lectures at Boston College in 1968, Eliade declared: “In discussing the sacred, we always return to viewing it as a structure of the human consciousness rather than as a set of historical data.” This does not mean that Eliade reduces the sacred to the structure of human consciousness; rather, more precisely, he claims that the sacred is “*part of the structure of human consciousness.*” However, Eliade never developed much in the way of the theory of consciousness. So it is difficult to determine exactly what he meant by these statements.<sup>11</sup>

John Dadosky observes that Eliade does not extensively discuss sacred consciousness, and the implications here are two-fold. Firstly, considering that Eliade places sacred consciousness in a position of supreme importance, leaving this concept largely undefined implies that, for the most part, sacred structures can be intuited without the need for systematic explanation. Secondly, considering that Eliade does not adequately elaborate upon sacred consciousness, it then becomes essential to look for such an elaboration elsewhere. Antonin Artaud’s bedrock philosophy lies in the ‘rejection of the usual limitations of man and man’s powers, and infinitely extend[ing] the frontiers of what is called reality.’<sup>12</sup> With the determination to radically transform external reality from an idealistic standpoint that the imagination reigns supreme — that we should cultivate *inner worlds* that would make external factors seem like mere

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<sup>11</sup> John Daniel Dadosky, *The Structure of Religious Knowing: Encountering the Sacred in Eliade and Lonergan* (State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Artaud, ‘Preface: The Theater and Culture’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958), p. 13.

supporting characters in life's grand scenario — Artaud's film theory and theatrical philosophy provide extensive answers to the questions raised by Eliade's statement that 'the sacred is an element in the structure of human consciousness, that it is a part of the human mode of being in the world.'<sup>13</sup> Such questions include the following: 1.) Since the sacred constitutes a *part* of human consciousness, does the part occupied by the sacred belong under sacred control *alone*? 2.) Or does the individual also play a role in governing the sacred structures within the consciousness? Saying yes to the first question would mean that the individual does not have the creative capacity to direct sacred structures. If that *part* of the consciousness is governed by the sacred alone, it very much means that the individual's original perspectives cannot be generated nor developed nor expressed through that specific part occupied by sacred structures. And indeed, Eliade's theory of *illo tempore* or primordial time confirms that hierophanies, especially those that come in the form of ritualistic activities, are re-enactments of divine occurrences — products of reminiscences over a mythical time, operating outside of and independently from historical time<sup>14</sup>, which can be accessed by the more profound levels of consciousness:

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<sup>13</sup> Eliade, 'The Sacred in the Secular World', in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, 58.

<sup>14</sup> 'The key feature of synchronicity to be found in myth is repetition. In following the admonitions of the myth, which is supposed to present exemplary models for life, e.g. models for fishing or hunting, for working the land, for getting married, etc., one always repeats something which was revealed from the beginning...If man goes again to the mythical event which is being re-actualized, he does not go back in historical time, but rather he goes out of his profane time to the sacred, mythical time when the gods or the heroes were with him.' ('The Sacred in the Secular World', p. 61)

...religious man periodically becomes the contemporary of the gods in the measure in which he reactualizes the primordial time in which the divine works were accomplished. On the level of primitive civilizations, whatever man does has a transhuman model; hence, even outside of the festival time, his acts and gestures imitate the paradigmatic models established by the gods and the mythical ancestors. But this imitation is likely to become less and less accurate. The model is likely to be distorted or even forgotten. It is the periodical reactualizations of the divine acts — in short, the religious festivals — that restore human knowledge of the sacrality of the models.<sup>15</sup>

So from a perspective of following the patterns established during *illo tempore*, humanity is only repeating the ways of the gods. The sacred is a non-physical divine state that was already in operation during the pre-human era when the gods had embedded certain patterns, agreements, and instructive blueprints within the cosmic order, all of which would become followed by humanity. Thus, the sacred is a fundamental source of seminal energy whose powers — ranging from the most turbulent to the most subtle — were exercised by the gods who in turn established paradigmatic structures within the cosmos that laid the foundation for sacred phenomena. The example of the boat ritual re-enacting a certain occurrence *in illo tempore* suggests that the gods had left instructions for humans over unverifiable periods of time. *Illo tempore* became a grand intentional source that staged certain imprints left by the gods upon the cosmic order which then became interpreted by humanity. Ritualistic hierophany constitutes a re-actualisation of what had been taught by the gods, restoring sacred knowledge upon humanity which means that such

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<sup>15</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, pp. 87-8.

knowledge had been latent within the consciousness all along, waiting to be re-activated and practiced through the imitation of divine precedents.

We can see here that the retrieval and resulting re-enactment of primordial memories — the methods of access being largely subject to the consciousness's level of reception — rather minimise the role of human originality and creativity. However, we can still step outside Eliade's immediate framework to pose the following question: if the individual can indeed play a role in governing the sacred structures within the consciousness, can the sacred's power to inform, influence, and constrain the human experiential capacity *effectively cooperate* with the individual's originality? — keeping in mind that this is an instance where the individual is just as much of a *creator* as the sacred source. Saying yes to this question would generate a wide range of implications concerning the sacred aspects of avant-garde art, as the cooperation between the sacred and the individual's originality would mean that the sacred is intent upon expressing itself through uniqueness and ever-expanding states of newness. Artaud's theoretical material offers a full response to the above questions. His idea that the sacred is a *life force* operating from a non-physical realm of purity constitutes the bedrock of his film theory and theatrical philosophy, as the principle itself suggests that the sacred is a primary inspirer (co-creating with the artist who themselves are the primary inspirer of their own work; Artaud makes this point in his statement that 'man fearlessly makes himself master') as well as an inspiration (the sacred serving as a usable device sought by the artist) all by itself. It is this sacred life force that drives forward the human inclination to continuously seek beyond the current state of things. We will find that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to separate this life force from the consciousness, as both refer to



sentient energy in motion that can be focused and moulded to the point where concrete consequences arise from the direction of such energy. Even if consciousness and life force are not one and the same, they certainly do overlap at significant points:

We must believe in...a sense of life in which man fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and brings it into being...

Furthermore, when we speak the word “life”, it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach. And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames.<sup>16</sup>

Originality truly is at the centre of Artaud’s philosophy, as he places emphasis upon the manifestation of ‘what does not yet exist’. It is this principle of originality that solves the problem created by Eliade’s insistence that hierophanic rituals are an *imitation* of divine models. For if the sacred life force operates through originality and uniqueness, then Eliade’s concept of imitation cannot at all hold a monopoly over a human’s relationship with the mythical/sacred dimension. Indeed, imitation may have its place within very specific ritualistic contexts, but it is not at all a primary qualifier of hierophanic art. Furthermore, Artaud’s presentation of such a violent metaphor of being burnt at the stake conveys the most extreme transformation from the

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<sup>16</sup> Artaud, ‘Preface: The Theater and Culture’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 13.

core, as fire symbolises an annihilation of redundant forms that are no longer serving the sacred life force. The purpose of the life force is to create from the purest level — meaning to imaginatively conjure from the most authentic state that can be considered one of *nothingness*. Artaud rather implies that this nothingness is not actually constituted of nothing as such, but contains the potential to make the artist a ‘master’ — a creative expert — at moulding non-physical energy, as if moulding clay. There is an undeniable correspondence to the fire that transmutes soft clay (a seminal state) into a solid, durable sculpture (a concrete embodiment of imaginative ideas), even though there also an allusion to the unbearable pain that fire brings, simultaneously destroying the status quo and purifying the consciousness from old, stagnant remnants. The sacred life force then becomes a spiritual cleanser — burning all obstructions to its grand purpose of unlimited creation.

Artaud does however refer to an inner core that cannot be reached by an attitude of intensely clinging onto the concreteness of physical forms — as in, the attitude of viewing physical forms as more real than the non-physical nature of the imaginative moulding that had given birth to such forms to begin with. Placing more importance on the concrete extensions than on their non-physical source of origin is an attitude that is severely misaligned with the creative life force. Again, the fire metaphor conveys the idea of artificial forms being burnt down while the inner essence, which is the sacred life force, remains eternal. An avant-garde principle subtly implied here lies in the notion that the creative life force is ‘signaling [itself] through the flames’<sup>17</sup>; we must keep in mind that each flame is unique in shape, size, colour variation, glow, and

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<sup>17</sup> Artaud, ‘Preface: The Theater and Culture’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 13.

movement as the flames together play out the fire dance. Thus, the life force is always given to expressing itself in innovative and ever-changing ways, so much so that even when the fire is put out, the life force awaits a new medium of ignition so that it can once again express itself through constantly original perspectives. A similar idea is suggested in Leonard Pronko's 'revolution of the spirit' where he first points out that it was precisely because of the surrealists' obsession with physicality that had caused Artaud to harshly criticize them, eventually leaving the group (although the surrealists' clinging onto the physical form as a means towards accomplishing a revolution — the most inappropriate means in Artaud's eyes, as stated by Pronko — was only one among many reasons for Artaud's abandonment, or for being abandoned, however one chooses to see it):

Artaud allegiance to the East was stronger than his allegiance to the surrealists, and it was inevitable that so strong-minded an individualist should leave the group — or be expelled. He fustigates them energetically a few years later for their political affiliations, their efforts to bring about a social revolution, their commitment to the physical, whereas, according to Artaud, the great revolution must be a revolution of the spirit, a metamorphosis of what he called the soul.<sup>18</sup>

While he seems to be such a proponent of self-liberation through the preservation and nurturing of an individual's creative and intellectual potential, Artaud's concept of the soul's revolutionary mission entirely surpasses the normally desired freedom to pursue one's personal interests and

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<sup>18</sup> Leonard Cabell Pronko, *Theater East and West: Perspectives Toward a Total Theater*, p. 10.

curiosities. Although he is upholding the imagination as forefront in his vision of a societal reform where the mythical is to become a normal standard,<sup>19</sup> not just *any* kind of imagination would pass as demonstrating mythical qualities. The earlier fire metaphor already shows that he would only favour the burning down of all artificialities which do not serve the life force, to the point where only the (non-physical) core essence — independent of and remaining beyond worldly hindrances — is left to carry forward the most passionate of creative expressions. Creative passion very much refers to a radical transformation not dissimilar to a spiritual upheaval where wounds and burns are freshly cleansed, leaving scars that may become viewed as artistic masterpieces incorporating a state of grace attained by initially sinking into the depths of a purifying pain. This is where Artaud seeks ‘that fiery purification, that unification and that emaciation (in a horribly simplified and pure sense) of the natural molecules...that operation which permits, by sheer force of destructive analysis, the reconception and re-constitution of solids according that equilibrium of spiritual descent by which they ultimately become gold again.’<sup>20</sup> There is a suggestion here of heading down a path of spiritual decline collecting every resistance to creativity, but ultimately the purpose of such a decline is to meet with a momentous destruction which then inspires the *proportionate opposite* of the accumulated resistance (i.e. a greater rebirth of expanded potentiality). Artaud implies that the *destruction* of the previous baggage serves as a platform for an infinitely more precious outcome.

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<sup>19</sup> Concerning the transformation of the social status of the mythical into a commonly accepted norm, Artaud idealises ‘the organic hierarchy of the Aztec monarchy established on indisputable spiritual principles. From the social point of view, it shows the peacefulness of a society which knew how to feed all its members and in which the Revolution had been accomplished from the very beginnings.’ (‘The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 127.)

<sup>20</sup> Artaud, ‘The Alchemical Theater’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, pp. 49-50.

## *The Problem of Dichotomy*

This is where Artaud describes a sense of ‘equilibrium’ to counter the ‘spiritual descent’.<sup>21</sup> And when the conditions become ripe and ready, all the elements of creative ascension manifest into a creation of such an elevated order, that he refers to such a product of sophistication as ‘gold’. Significantly, Douglas Allen provides a similar interpretation where the destruction is fully operative in Eliade’s notion of *bursting open* an ordinary plane so that a transcendent reality can arise from an otherwise homogeneous mode of existence: ‘By means of...sacralization, the ‘closed’ profane world is ‘burst open’. A natural object, such as a tree, while remaining a tree reveals something ‘other’. ‘No tree or plant is ever sacred simply as a tree or plant; they become so because they *share* in a transcendent reality, they become so because they *signify* that transcendent reality...’<sup>22</sup> Allen’s interpretation as it stands does not actually favour the dichotomisation between sacred and profane,<sup>23</sup> as he is describing hierophany as a metaphorical bridge where the distance between sacred and profane becomes irrelevant,

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<sup>21</sup> Artaud, ‘The Alchemical Theater’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion*, p. 137.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Among the cosmic polarities, one may discern those of spatial structure (right/left, high/low, etc.), of temporal structure (day/night, the seasons, etc.) and finally those expressing the process of cosmic life (life/death, the rhythms of vegetation, etc.). As to the dichotomies and polarities related to the human condition, which somehow serve as a cipher of this condition, they are more numerous and, one could say, more “open”. The fundamental pair is that of male/female, but there are also ethnic dichotomies (“we”/the foreigners), mythological dichotomies (the antagonistic Twins), religious dichotomies (sacred/profane, which, as a matter of fact signifies a total dichotomy, relating concurrently to cosmos, life, and human society; gods/adversaries of gods; etc.), and ethical dichotomies (good/evil, etc.).’ (Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, p. 174.)

especially as there is an *open channel* interlinking the two dimensions. Defining the *pre-hierophanic* stage as dimensional isolation (i.e. the separation between sacred and profane) is problematic in itself, because the two worlds would be excluded from each other with no sign of establishing a relationship, if it were not for the hierophanic process that is. Positing the pre-hierophanic profane world as one that is ‘closed’<sup>24</sup> is also a reflection of a cultural attitude in which limitations are imposed upon the concept of dimension itself. Here, Eugene Eoyang presents an example of contrasting cultural attitudes towards the relationship between literature and painting, arguing that in China, Korea, and Japan, there is minimal differentiation, if any, between the two media. While such media classification does not apply to such Eastern methods of beholding aesthetics, the West<sup>25</sup> generally considers literature and painting to be separate media (with some exceptions which can be found in attempts during the modern era to incorporate the visual/spatial dimension into poetry<sup>26</sup>):

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<sup>24</sup> Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion*, p. 137.

<sup>25</sup> ‘[East and West] is a Europocentric distinction, in which the West has usually denoted some, often rather small, part of Europe, and the East has meant Asia, the Middle East, and quite frequently most of Europe. For at least 500 years it has been apparent which the better half is — where “half” means the far smaller section not even of the globe but of that very limited portion of it known as the Eurasian land mass...In the continental United States this Western European ideology is reinforced by glad realization that we after all inhabit the *Western Hemisphere*.’ (Walter Cohen, ‘The Concept of World Literature’, in *Comparative Literature East and West: Traditions and Trends*, vol 1, pp. 3-4.)

<sup>26</sup> ‘In its simplest definition concrete poetry is the creation of verbal artefacts which exploit the possibilities, not only of sound, sense and rhythm — the traditional fields of poetry — but also of space, whether it be the flat, two-dimensional space of letters on the printed page, or the three-dimensional space of words in relief and sculptured ideograms.

Whereas in the West, the arts of literature and of painting are separate, in China, Korea, and Japan, they are one. The adept at painting was equally — and naturally — adept at literature, because the same instrument, the brush, was being used. The intellectual difficulties of the systematic and meaningful study of the relationship between literature and the other arts, which has occasioned such controversy and such irresolutions in the West, and the “avant-garde” attempts to integrate seemingly disparate arts within one new art form (whether “concrete poetry” or “word-pictures”) would seem odd to the Chinese aesthetician, who is not surprised to see a poem inscribed in a painting; indeed, he would consider a painting without an inscription unfinished.<sup>27</sup>

A painting-poem or a painting-prose upholds artistic hybridity — the composite nature seamlessly integrating the visual and the aural in such a way that even if the differentiation between literature and painting is recognised, the differentiation is maintained on a harmonious foundation. The diversification of elements (the co-existence of different artistic media) is not considered a problem of incompatibility, but rather an expression of mutual interdependence

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Taking advantage of the extra impact which can be given to words by visual lay-out is, of course, a common device in journalism and advertising. This is one of the skills of the graphic designer and the newspaper compositor, the literary equivalent of which is to be found in such devices of visual presentation as are used by George Herbert in “Easterwings”, by Lewis Carroll in the mouse’s tail poem from *Alice in Wonderland*, and by Apollinaire in his *Calligrammes*. All of these have been widely cited as precursors, along with Mallarmé, the Futurists, Joyce, Cummings, and others, of the more recent concrete poetry movement.’ (R. P. Draper, ‘Concrete Poetry’, in *New Literary History* 2/2 (Winter 1971), p. 329.)

<sup>27</sup> Eugene Eoyang, ‘Polar Paradigms in Poetics: Chinese and Western Literary Premises’, in *Comparative Literature East and West: Traditions and Trends*, vol 1, p. 12.

always birthing new variations of cross-media combinations. Secondly, the unity between literature and painting is analogous of inter-dimensional fusion, especially as this is a very literal demonstration of *a painting that speaks and a poem that paints*. However, the conventional Western difficulty with even allowing painting and literature to occupy one and the same exhibited surface (e.g. paper, canvas, primed board which can be wooden or metallic, and even collage) reflects a way of thought that is intensely defined by dichotomisation. A more unified approach would consider different qualities as components of one and the same whole *web* — a web that interweaves unique, certainly contrasting, but cooperative threads, as opposed to tearing those threads apart only to emphasise their imposed isolation. The analogy of the Chinese (and Japanese) unification between literature and painting provides significant insight into an art form which ultimately does not separate between the visual and the aural, the written and the painterly. The interactions between artistic media (in this case, image and writing) also offer some clear indications concerning which cultural attitude is more conducive and effective as an analytical position in the study of sacred art. While it is a fallacy to make a sweeping generalisation that one cultural attitude is superior to another, the analogy of the painting-poem or painting-prose has shown that if we are seeking to explain inter-dimensional relationships through the observation of art, the Western habit of dichotomisation remains a poor choice due to its cross-cultural unviability. In order to further establish the case for this unviability, it is of great value to investigate Eliade's usage of dichotomisation, whether it is between sacred-profane or supernatural-natural (which according to Eliade, constitutes synonymous relationships). There is a significant instance where he posits that the 'natural' and the 'human' are inferior to the 'supernatural' and the 'superhuman':



...the ideal of humanity that the primitive wishes to attain he sets on a superhuman plane. This means: (1) one does not become a complete man until one has passed beyond, and in some sense abolished, “natural” humanity, for initiation is reducible to a paradoxical, supernatural experience of death and resurrection or of second birth; (2) initiation rites, entailing ordeals and symbolic death and resurrection, were instituted by gods, culture heroes, or mythical ancestors; hence these rites have a superhuman origin, and by performing them the novice imitates a superhuman, divine action. It is important to note this, for it shows once again that religious man *wants to be other* than he finds himself on the “natural” level and undertakes to *make himself* in accordance with the ideal image revealed to him by myths.<sup>28</sup>

What remains consistent in Eliade’s theoretical framework is the way in which he equates the paradoxical relationship inherent in hierophany<sup>29</sup> with the dichotomised structure (natural-supernatural) which characterises the initiation rites of primitive humanity. Without hierophany to bridge the gap between the natural (which is profane) and the supernatural (which is sacred),

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<sup>28</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 187.

<sup>29</sup> ‘By appearing in the concrete form of a rock, plant, or incarnate being, the sacred ceases to be absolute, for the object in which it appears remains a part of the worldly environment. In some respect, each hierophany expresses an incomprehensible paradox arising from the great mystery upon which every hierophany is centered: the very fact that the sacred is made manifest at all... The same paradox underlies every hierophany: in making itself manifest, the sacred limits itself.’

— Eliade and Sullivan, ‘Hierophany’, in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, p. 89.

the natural all by itself cannot attain spiritual, and hence sacred, value.<sup>30</sup> The initiation rites described above directly reflect this idea that the natural is subject to its own limitations and deficiencies, and that ultimately the natural needs to be bestowed with a means towards salvation, which in this case is the hierophanic initiation. The fallacy in such an idea lies in the inferiority imposed upon humanity and the physicality in which humanity is clothed so to speak. Eliade implies that the status of being ‘natural’ and ‘human’ is a form of entrapment or at least a confinement that hinders the spiritual advancement of those inhabiting such a status (i.e. *homo religiosus*), to such an extent that they must reach towards ‘the ideal image revealed...by myths’<sup>31</sup> in order to prove their worth. The cause of such a hierarchical structure that belittles and almost invalidates the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’ very much amounts to the rigid division between the natural/profane and the supernatural/sacred.<sup>32</sup> Again, it is important to envision how

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<sup>30</sup> ‘...for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality.’ — *The Sacred and the Profane*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 187.

<sup>32</sup> Rudolf Otto’s ‘numinous’ as described in *Das Heilige [The Idea of the Holy]* significantly influenced Eliade’s theory of the sacred (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 8). The term ‘numinous’ has its roots in the Latin *numen*, meaning ‘god’, (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 9) although it must be noted that Eliade’s interpretation of Otto’s ‘numinous’ presents the divine as being completely distinct from the human, as opposed to alluding to any recognition of the possibility that the divine may reside in human nature. In other words, between the human and the divine is a barrier, or at least a gap emphasising an incompatibility between the two. The numinous experience offers ways and means for such a gap to be closed by the human, although Eliade does suggest that the numinous sense of awe and inspiration can be so immense and overwhelming, that the experience even devalues the human: ‘The numinous presents itself as something “wholly other” (*ganz andere*), something basically and totally different. It is like nothing human or cosmic; confronted with it, man senses his profound nothingness, feels that he is only a creature...’ (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 9-10) The numinous asserts its superiority by setting itself apart

such a relationship between the natural/profane and the supernatural/sacred would be radically transformed, *if* the dichotomised structure constraining the relationship were to be dismantled altogether (given also dichotomy's cross-cultural unviability that I had attempted to establish earlier). In order to construct an alternative interpretation of such an inter-dimensional relationship (natural/profane and supernatural/sacred), I am presenting an analysis of Saler Benson's "Supernatural as a Western Category" in order to help resolve the problem of dichotomy, thus developing a much more inclusive, nuanced model of hierophany that is cross-culturally viable. Saler observes that many social scientists who use the term 'supernatural' have a tendency to over-step the important task of defining what it actually is.<sup>33</sup> Writing in 1977, he suggests that there may be certain loose and general presumptions within the social science community as to what the term means.<sup>34</sup> Even so, definitions of 'supernatural' are rarely articulated, if at all. In the light of what is lacking in qualifying the supernatural, Saler then puts forward what he considers to be one of the major applications of the term: 'supernatural is employed as a broad cover term for a variety of postulated entities, forces, or "beings"... whose effects surpass those possible of achievement by ordinary human capabilities.'<sup>35</sup> Here, Saler presents a differentiation between the ordinary and that which surpasses it. And even then, this differentiation is by no means defined by a clear-cut line drawn between one class of entities and

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from the human status, but ironically presents itself within the realm of human experience. And even though Eliade follows Otto's steeply hierarchical approach in his sacred-profane dichotomy, Eliade still presents the sacred as a pure universal source which is much more open to human access.

<sup>33</sup> Benson Saler, 'Supernatural as a Western Category', in *Ethos* 5/1 (Spring, 1977), pp. 31 -53 (p. 34).

<sup>34</sup> Saler, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Saler, p. 34.

another. If anything, this differentiation is much more fluid in nature, the transition from the ordinary to what surpasses it not at all demarcated. In order to demonstrate an example of that which surpasses the ordinary, Saler provides a brief study of gods as understood by Greek philosophers and poets, sorting the gods into two main categories. He observes that the supernatural was neither used by philosophers nor poets, a commonality demonstrated by both even though they fell into rival camps<sup>36</sup>:

One sort of god is anthropomorphic being. He (or she) is filled with purpose and very often passion. We meet such gods in Hesiod, where we find that they themselves are created, engendered, or generated. We meet them also in Homer where it becomes clear that the gods are part of nature, not outside of it. They differ from men in being deathless — this is the hallmark of the divine — and in having greater powers.<sup>37</sup>

The process of anthropomorphising in a sense unites the human with the divine, eliminating the possibility for the application of the supernatural-natural dichotomy. The gods may only occupy a status superior to humans because they do not undergo physical death and possess powers that ordinary humans do not. Even so, the gods remain part and parcel of nature, as Saler implies that all such powers surpassing ordinary human capacity are still included within the natural realm. As for the case of Saler's second category of abstract gods that are not anthropomorphised,

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<sup>36</sup> Saler, p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> Saler, p. 41.

which he refers to as ‘a depersonalized verity’<sup>38</sup>, they are considered ‘gods’ because of their longevity which surpasses that of humans. And they are by no means ‘supernatural’ in the culturally bound Western understanding of the term:<sup>39</sup>

The classical Greeks, philosopher and poet alike, sometimes made use of the adjective *hyperphuēs*. It is tempting to gloss it ‘supernatural’ — it could conceivably be used to mean that. In classical usage, however, it means (depending on context) ‘overgrown’, ‘tangled’, ‘enormous’, ‘monstrous’, ‘outlandish’, and so forth — even, in some contexts, ‘superior’. It has the primary sense of ‘growing above ground’.<sup>40</sup>

Even translating the Greek *hyperphuēs* into ‘supernatural’ is highly problematic in itself. If we respect its classical usage, *hyperphuēs* may signify an elevation or expansion from what is considered ordinary, perhaps even a radical diversion from the ordinary if indeed the term could also mean ‘monstrous’ and ‘outlandish’. However simplifying such qualities into the culturally bound category of ‘supernatural’ is unwise, as such qualities are not excluded from the natural realm as the supernatural is understood to be. The same contention also applies to the Latin expression *supra naturam excedens* ‘employed rather like the Greek *hyperphuēs*’<sup>41</sup>, argues Saler, as ‘we have little reason to suppose that they [the Romans] drew a sharp boundary between a

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<sup>38</sup> Saler, p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> Saler, p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> Saler, p. 42.

<sup>41</sup> Saler, p. 42.

natural realm and a preternatural-that-is-supernatural realm.<sup>42</sup> Even attempting to translate the term ‘supernatural’ into other languages can become a near-impossible task. Such an attempt of translation necessitates that the cultural attitude being translated *also* distinguishes between the natural and what lies outside of it. This simply cannot be expected to be a cross-culturally viable concept, as suggested by Stewart Guthrie:

First, the notion of “supernatural” upon which so many influential definitions of religion rest is itself, like the term it is meant to distinguish, a Western folk category, not a cross-cultural one. It often is not found in non-Western religions... In my own fieldwork, for example, the Japanese term for “supernatural” (*chōshizenteki*, possibly a translation of the Western term) seemed unknown to most people, some of whom said that it might mean “extremely natural”.<sup>43</sup>

If it is the case that the Japanese term *chōshizenteki* means “extremely natural”, this only goes to show that the realm *outside* of nature is not given much consideration at all. On the contrary, the meaning *amplifies* naturalness, magnifying and exaggerating the significance of nature as opposed to diminishing it as the term ‘supernatural’ tends to do. Considering that Eliade associates the natural with the profane and the supernatural with the sacred, it follows that this

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<sup>42</sup> Saler, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> Stewart Guthrie, ‘A Cognitive Theory of Religion’, in *Current Anthropology* 21/2 (April 1980), pp. 181 – 203 (p. 185).

structure of dichotomy seems to fall apart on its own ground.<sup>44</sup> Douglas Allen's further interpretations of Eliade's hierophany continue to show that dichotomisation — much as it has a stronghold over the secular Western perspective — cannot prevail:

Living in the modern world, artists have found it impossible to express their experiences through traditional artistic and religious language. “This is not to say that the ‘sacred’ has completely disappeared in modern art. But it has become *unrecognizable*; it is camouflaged in forms, purposes and meanings which are apparently ‘profane.’ ”

Eliade finds that some of the characteristics of modern art can be given religious interpretations based on hidden mythic and symbolic structures. The “destruction of the language of art” and the sense of destroying all forms and structures need not be interpreted simply as an expression of the chaos, alienation, and meaninglessness of the modern world. What may seem little more than nihilistic expressions of secular modern

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<sup>44</sup> Eliade wrote of Roger Caillois, author of *L'Homme et le sacré (Man and the Sacred)*, acknowledging his admiration for Caillois' work (Eliade, *Journal III 1970-1978*, 356). Here, Caillois' influence upon Eliade's dichotomisation is undeniable: ‘Every religious conception of the universe implies a distinction between the sacred and the profane and is opposed to the world in which the believer freely attends to his business and engages in activity heedless of his salvation... To be sure, such a distinction is not always sufficient to define the phenomenon of religion...’ (Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, p. 19) Even Caillois himself, whose work laid the foundation for Eliade's, was not bold enough to claim absolute universality for his own concept of the sacred and profane. Caillois points out that there are indeed certain religious phenomena that the sacred-profane dialectic cannot adequately define.

life may conceal deeper mythic and symbolic structures, meanings, and significance. In much of modern art, there is more than simple destruction; there is a reversion to chaos in which the artist seems to be searching for something new that hasn't yet been expressed. Comparing the attitude of many modern artists to archaic mythic religion, Eliade senses that this destruction of artistic language may be the first phase of a complex process of recreation of a new universe. Death is precondition for rebirth. The destruction of the old world is necessary in order to create a new, more meaningful world. In this regard, some creations by modern artists may anticipate radically new, cultural creations.<sup>45</sup>

The idea that the sacred has inevitably *become* profane very much suggests that the sacred has the *freedom* to transform itself into another state — quite ironically violating the dichotomised structure which is a modern Western construct (dichotomy means a permanent *split*; the notion that something can transform into something else with relative ease goes to show that such a split is redundant). Allen presents Eliade's views on the sacred's capacity to *camouflage* itself into the profane fabric of modern existence, suggesting here that the metaphorical hard surface of secularisation still maintains some porous areas for the sacred to permeate. Any such area that is porous would mean that there can be no constriction imposed upon the interaction between two (or more) qualities which has every tendency to absorb into each other. Significantly, the avant-garde principle underlying Allen's interpretation is the destruction of the old and unwanted which occurs in modernity's attempts to rebel against the authority of the outdated. Such

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<sup>45</sup> Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1998), pp. 276-7.



destructive phenomena featuring in the modern art scene constitutes the playing out of mythical patterns of destruction and renewal, hence Allen's interpretation that this innovative creation embodies 'a new, more meaningful world.'<sup>46</sup> Thus, there is no escaping from the cosmic universe, as everything — even the most seemingly secularised expressions — possesses the potentiality to be interpreted as hierophanic:

By focusing on Brancusi, Chagall, nonfigurative painters, and other modern artists, Eliade interprets the destruction of artistic languages and forms as revealing a desire to return to a primordial plentitude; a desire to rediscover and experience the deeper structures underlying phenomenal appearances. In this he sees similarities between modern art and archaic cosmic religion. And by using initiatory and other mythic and symbolic structures, Eliade interprets "the end of the world" in modern art not as a final nihilistic phase but as a first phase necessary for rebirth, renewal, and new creativity. Eliade compares the modern artists' "destruction of worlds" (traditional artistic worlds) to "primitive" and paleo-Oriental ritual scenarios of the need for the periodic destruction and recreation of the cosmos. "The *religious* necessity for the abolition of old, tired, inauthentic forms ('illusory,' 'idolatrous'). All this corresponds in a certain sense to the death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche. But there is more: the passion for matter resembles the pre-Mosaic cosmic religiosity. The modern artist who can no longer believe in the Judeo-Christian tradition ('God is dead') is returning, without noticing it, to 'paganism,' to cosmic hierophanies...".<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, p. 277.

<sup>47</sup> Allen, pp. 277-8.

Significantly, Allen observes that — at least symbolically or as a result of (unconsciously) following certain mythical patterns — modern artists are forsaking the Judeo-Christian God and returning to paganism. This (artistic and intellectual) return to an ancient era is only coming into fashion so to speak, not because it is old, but because paganism is more accommodating of certain idealised qualities which remain independent of the historical period in which they are normally placed (the fact that paganism historically precedes Christianity becomes quite irrelevant). If modern artists were concerned with the historicity of such pagan qualities or indeed turning such historicity into a problematic issue, those artists would not incorporate those qualities into their new creations which they would spare from things that are outdated and outworn. The transformation of an ancient era into a novelty goes to show that the cultural trend of conforming to a monotonous order (Judeo-Christianity) that sets itself up as an exclusive class is disintegrating; it must also be noted that modern secularisation bears a similar kind of monotony to Judeo-Christianity, at least in Allen's conception of it, as secularisation dictates a homogeneous meaninglessness that does not recognise sacralised distinction. This qualitative convergence between Judeo-Christianity and secularisation conveys an ultimate principle that nothing can ever be separated from its inherent religious aspects, again implying the redundancy of dichotomy. The dichotomy between the modern and the archaic falls apart on the grounds that Eliade is attempting to extract archaic properties from modern phenomena, as if the archaic or the mythical is a latency waiting to be re-discovered and re-activated. This mythical dimension contains what Allen refers to as 'a primordial plenitude', meaning that the potential therein of generating newness and originality is indeed endless.

### ***The Phenomenological Approach***

Douglas Allen begins with a frank statement that Eliade's theoretical material is full of empirical fallacies, that it simply cannot pass as a sound and substantiated analytical project. For the most part, Eliade presents an idealistic vision of how modern cultural attitudes can be transformed without actually providing adequate data to prove the viability of his vision. However, as Allen comes to insist, there remain areas of valuable insight in Eliade's works, much of which concern his ability to theoretically compensate for any possible shortcomings in the available empirical evidence:

We must acknowledge that Mircea Eliade himself lends considerable credence to the view that he has never really dealt with the crucial phenomenological issues and consequently lacks a critical systematic methodology. When asked how he arrived at his frequently unexpected and bewildering interpretations, this scholar is apt to reply that he simply looked at his religious documents and this was what they revealed...

Now it is our thesis that Mircea Eliade does in fact have an impressive phenomenological method. We would submit that this is precisely why Eliade is a methodological improvement over the other phenomenologists of religion we have examined. As one studies a major classic in the field, say, Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, she or he cannot help but be impressed by the vast amount of data which have been collected and classified. What invariably disturbs the philosophical

phenomenologist is that van der Leeuw and his colleagues never appear to have formulated a critical methodology. On what basis do they make their comparisons and generalizations, guard against subjectivity in their interpretations, defend their specific classifications and typologies? What we shall attempt to show is that underlying Eliade's approach is a certain methodological framework which allows him to deal with many of the central phenomenological concerns.<sup>48</sup>

From the above passage alone, we can already discern Allen's position that the accumulation of data would amount redundancy if a valid methodology to qualify the data cannot be systematically constructed. He does not discount the importance of data, but there seems to be an implication that data without direction remains close to meaningless. According to Eliade, even among historicists who rely upon physically verifiable and quantifiable data, there is still more to analysing a phenomenon than being utterly dependent upon the empirical. While there is great value in collecting empirical data, one must not overlook the value of intuitive theorising — which is to seek and evaluate the core meaning of a phenomenon that encompasses those aspects that cannot be empirically proven. The sole consideration of empirical evidence all by itself is to take the hierophany very much out of its own sacred and therefore irreducible context, as the likelihood of the information being fragmented and incomplete would be especially high:

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<sup>48</sup> Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion*, p. 107.

We see here the need for a historian of religion to go beyond mere accumulation of data. Rather, he must try to grasp the center of a religious belief, the meaning of it — just as I have been discussing the meaning of mythic time — in order to do justice to the religion itself and also to do justice to ourselves, to enrich ourselves with meanings that are new for us, rather than passing off all myth as superstition. As an illustration, let us consider the following. Despite the many differences and historical developments in Christianity, almost everyone would agree that its center is the notion of the Incarnation, God made man, and man's subsequent redemption. But let us say a Chinese came to Europe to understand Christianity and applied the methods of sociological or anthropological field work in a village in France or Italy. He stays six months, watches the people, sees a church, an occasional process, and a man called a priest reading from some large book. He will make a scientific description of what the people in that village do, but he may well miss the meaning of Christianity or even of those peasants in that place. This has happened with so many anthropological monographs, the work of men who do wonderful field work and description, but miss the meaning of what they describe and give us fragmentary information which makes the religion appear to be nothing more than a superstition.<sup>49</sup>

If we are considering empirical data all by themselves, we can make an immediate observation that hierophanies are most susceptible to embodying contradictory meanings, especially if one and the same hierophany embodies meanings assigned by diverging cultural collectives, even

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<sup>49</sup> Eliade, 'The Sacred in the Secular World', in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, pp. 74 – 91 (p. 62).

more so if the hierophany is being considered by collectives from varying and certainly widely spaced apart historical periods. And yet, Eliade does manage to construct a universal definition of hierophany. It is only when we begin to investigate the more minute, circumstantially constraining details associated with individual hierophanies that contradictions inevitably arise as a result of such specific focus. Thus, it is the more general definition that remains the most consistent and harmoniously aligned with the core meanings. The above example of a Chinese studying Christian traditions a village environment in France or Italy is another case of a possible over-reliance upon the limited availability of immediate resources — such resources constituting an empirical factor whose availability and therefore accessibility remains beyond the control of the scholar. Furthermore, empirical data are always prone to contradicting each other, such as the example Eliade puts forward of using an already established scientific method to analyse the ways of the local villagers. Gavin Flood suggests that Eliade's resistance to reductionism constitutes a resistance to a categorically specific reductionism — the kind of reductionism 'that seeks to explain religion in non-religious terms.'<sup>50</sup> For instance, Eliade does not consider it to be an adequate method of analysis when the psychologist reduces religious expression to a psychological state, when the sociologist reduces religious expression to sociological data, or when the anthropologist reduces religious expression to be one among other cultural expressions of a human collective.<sup>51</sup> Such reductions translate religious or sacred phenomena inaccurately and even disrespectfully, as the disciplines of psychology, sociology, or anthropology — at least

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<sup>50</sup> Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), p. 71.

<sup>51</sup> Eliade, 'Historical Events and Structural Meaning in Tension', in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, pp. 441 – 445 (p. 322).

those that Eliade had experienced in his immediate environment — do not necessarily take into account that the sacred exists independently of belief and acknowledgment. Edmund Husserl's concept of *epoché* must be brought into the equation. *Epoché* displays clear similarities with Eliade's rejection of reducing religious data into non-religious terms while upholding the reduction of religious data into observations that preserve the transcendental nature of the sacred. Husserl's *epoché* would describe this latter kind of reduction as an attempt to express the purest essence of a phenomenon. What *epoché* would be opposed to is a socialised interpretation of that phenomenon (which, in a manner of speaking, is a regurgitation of externally imposed instruction which in turn fails to acknowledge that such phenomena exists independently and autonomously from socialised interpretations of them):

...Eliade's methodological principle of irreducibility is really an insistence upon a phenomenological *epoché*. One recalls that Husserl's phenomenological *epoché* was directed against reductionism. By 'bracketing' or suspending the interpretations we normally place on phenomena, the phenomenologist attempts to consider phenomena 'just as phenomena', 'to disclose and clarify the meaning of phenomena, that is of whatever presents itself.'<sup>52</sup>

In his *Paris Lectures*, Husserl presents *epoché* as the most naked observation of the data in question — naked in a sense that all judgments, conditioned biases, and critical assumptions are suspended especially for the sake of freely carrying out such an observation:

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<sup>52</sup> Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion*, p. 115.

...I may freely abstain from entertaining any belief about experience... This simply means that I refuse to assert the reality of the world... I must similarly abstain from any other of my opinions, judgments, and valuations about the world, since these likewise assume the reality of the world.<sup>53</sup>

It is the relinquishing of judgments that allows the phenomenologist to observe religious or sacred phenomena with accuracy. A problem does arise, however, as Husserl would assert that sacred phenomena are situated in an 'alien world', implying a separation between such a world and the phenomenologist observing it. According to Gavin Flood's interpretation, 'For the phenomenology of religion the 'religious world' is the field which is, in Husserl's term, an 'alien world' (*ein fremde Welt*) to be understood and penetrated by the phenomenologist who stands outside of it.'<sup>54</sup> A separation between the 'alien world' and the phenomenologist is an artificial construct which does not at all produce effective results. For if such a separation is ever-present, the 'alien world' would remain impenetrable to the phenomenologist who, as Husserl claims and as Flood interprets, stands outside of it. Positing this 'world' as 'alien' necessitates that there must be a point of entry for the outsider to experience within it. Without this point of entry, any understanding on the part of the outsider-phenomenologist would remain an impossibility. So let us assume, only so that I can further clarify my point, that such a separation between the

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<sup>53</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Paris Lectures*, trans. by Peter Koestenbaum (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), pp. 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion*, p. 112.



phenomenologist and the ‘alien world’ does exist (even though I am ultimately arguing against it). More precisely, let us even *impose* this separation. Even if a separation between the two were to be imposed, the phenomenologist can still develop an understanding of the so-called ‘alien world’ through an attitude of sympathy:

...if Historians of Religions are to understand religious phenomena ‘on their own plane of reference’, they must attempt to place themselves within the perspective of *homo religiosus*, and such a capacity for participation must be grounded in a sympathetic attitude. By means of the *epoché*, phenomenologists attempt sympathetically to grasp the meaning of the experiences of the other.<sup>55</sup>

With sympathy as a primary tool of the phenomenologist, any claim that a certain world is ‘alien’ loses its validity. Sympathy conducts a process of intuitive interpenetration which dictates that while different worlds may display the most drastic divergences, there is no such thing as an ultimate separation between worlds. Eliade’s claim that we all possess aspects that inherently belong to *homo religiosus* means that we have an innate capacity to understand a phenomenon to which we have never before been exposed. This dissertation relies almost entirely upon a sympathetic approach, as my analysis of cinematic portrayals of the sacred have caused me to question how I would interpret certain image sequences *if* I had never before been exposed to their immediate cultural context, as this tends to be the most freshly intuitive approach.

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<sup>55</sup> Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion*, p. 115.

### *The Sacred in Avant-garde Cinema*

An interview with filmmaker and film theorist Jean Cocteau (1889 – 1963), whom I discuss in Chapter 3 (especially his film *Orpheus*), contains significant implications concerning his own definition of the avant-garde, or at least those aspects of it he identifies with. I will later show how his rebellious perspective has influenced his ideas on film poetry — the concept itself constituting his vision of the sacred aspects intrinsic within the film form. To begin with, Cocteau makes clear that he is radically opposed to over-organisation, micro-management, and anything that is forcefully deliberate; yet the principle of equal importance lies in his association of such burdening characteristics with institutions of authority (more than anything else, he favours the opposite of such unnecessary tediousness, and that is the sophisticated spontaneity characterising his ideals of film poetry):

*Cocteau:* I will recount one thing; then you must let me rest. You perhaps know the work of the painter Domergue? The long girls; calendar art, I am afraid. He had a *domestique* in those days — a “housemaid” who would make the beds, fill the coal scuttles. We all gathered in those days at the Café Rotonde. And a little man with a bulging forehead and black goatee would come there sometimes for a glass, and to hear us talk. And to “look at the painters.” This was the “housemaid” of Domergue, out of funds. We asked him once (he said nothing and merely listened) what he did. He said he meant to overthrow the government of Russia. We all laughed, because of course we did, too. That is the kind of time it was! It was Lenin.

*Interviewer:* Your position as by far the most celebrated literary figure in France is crowned by the Académie Française, Belgian Royal Academy, Oxford *honoris causa*, and so on. Yet I suppose that these are “faults”?

*Cocteau:* It is necessary always to oppose the avant-garde — if that is enthroned.<sup>56</sup>

Cocteau seems to sympathise with artists of limited financial means, hence his noticing of Domergue’s housemaid who was an impoverished painter. There is an implied admiration of the persistence of creativity despite the overwhelming challenges of the immediate circumstances. But then of course, Cocteau distinctly contrasts this admiration for the struggling artist with his despising of governmental authority. This rebelliousness is equally expressed in his following statement that if avant-garde artists come to rely upon the awards, accolades, and recognition from those various academies mentioned by the interviewer, then the avant-garde itself would become an enemy of the true artist. Such a position goes to show that Cocteau only identifies with those aspects of the avant-garde that remain independent of set criteria as dictated by sources of authority that he considers to lack both sympathy for and relevance to the true artist who may be forced to survive under unpleasant circumstances. This is where he dismisses rules and regulations issued by an external authority (some of which are provided in the above interview) — especially concerning the judgment of adequacy (or inadequacy) imposed upon something by an authority that does not prioritise familiarity or even compassion — in favour of an entirely intuitive approach where something *happens to* qualify a certain status in a

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<sup>56</sup> ‘Jean Cocteau, The Art of Fiction No. 34’, interviewed by William Fifield, in *The Paris Review* (Summer – Fall 1964, no. 32).

synchronistic (near-coincidental) manner. His ideas of film poetry adventurously express such a principle of concentrating unpretentiously upon creating the work of art, while relinquishing the expectation of any specific outcome:

Indeed, whatever of our shades, our darkness and, in a sense, our poetry we put into a film is not our concern and should only be uncovered by those who judge us. The cabinet-maker's viewpoint is not that of the medium. The one ensures that the table is firm, that it stands up and its drawers slide properly; the other makes it turn and speak. And, just as tables speak, in other words establish a mysterious link between the darkness and light within us, so a work of art should also be a work of craftsmanship that yields its secrets without in the slightest having sought to put them across. So I would distinguish clearly between a film that tries to be poetic, and a film where the poetry is incidental.<sup>57</sup>

Cocteau suggests that the process of creating film poetry should not at all be self-conscious, that it should be allowed to unfold as authentically as possible without an over-attentiveness to carving out a particular result. There is a temptation to leap to a conclusion that his ideal of film poetry is an art form that *just sort of happens*, although a careful analysis would show that this is not the case. His proposition that film poetry should be 'incidental' suggests that such a state of poetry is a product of assembled patterns within the profound levels of the consciousness ('Poetry

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<sup>57</sup> Jean Cocteau, *The Art of Cinema*, ed. by André Bernard and Claude Gauteur, trans. by Robin Buss (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1988; repr. 1992), pp. 37-8.

is a product of the unconscious<sup>58</sup>), and these patterns are allowed to emerge into the manifested work of art without that struggle to *make it happen*. Nor does poetry seek desperately to impress. There is almost an implication here that the poetry simply *streams through* the metaphorical pores of the work of art, which is why Cocteau puts forward that the masterpiece should naturally release its secrets without the artist being required to meddle with such subtleties. Similarly, filmmaker and film theorist Maya Deren (1917 – 1961), whom I also discuss in Chapter 3 (especially her film *Meshes of the Afternoon*) also puts forward that the magical element in cinema is very much a product of effortless manifestation, almost as if the camera is an animistic entity leading the vision of the artist/filmmaker to the seemingly destined images:

Maya Deren, criticizing the way photographers overplay their part in the success of an image, recounts Kodak's advertisement: "You push the button, IT does the rest!" Yet it, the camera, she remarked, "creates, at times, the illusion of being almost itself a living intelligence which can inspire its manipulation on the explorative and creative level simultaneously"... The depersonalization of the camera — its itness — is for Deren, following Epstein, one of the magical features of cinema as a whole. She writes this passage upon the arrival of "L'Intelligence d'une Machine" by Epstein, which she had not yet read but nonetheless recommends "for those who share, with me, a profound respect for the magical complexities of the film instrument"...<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Cocteau, *The Art of Cinema*, p. 38.

<sup>59</sup> Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 93.

There is an implication here that the camera has a will of its own that can align the artist's imaginative perspective with corresponding images. Rachel Moore however imposes a depersonalisation of Deren's idea of the camera. Still, such a depersonalisation can be interpreted to mean that it can detach itself from any limitations of the human perceptual faculties, whether such limitations are caused by in-built structures or external instruction (as in, the kind of instruction to perceive in limited ways). There may indeed be significant reasons as to why the human perceptual faculties have limited access to certain things, such reasons even leading to further philosophical questions. Yet these are reasons which do not apply to the camera, this independence transforming the camera into a magical being free from the terms and conditions of the physical senses. Kenji Mizoguchi (1898 – 1956) whom I discuss in Chapter 4 succeeds in transforming the eye of the camera into an elaborate vision of a magical entity who has orchestrated the image components from a higher dimension converging with our own. Terrence Rafferty's interpretation is perhaps one of the most effective descriptions of Mizoguchi's ability to work the camera in ways that express its animistic qualities, to such an impressive extent that the camera appears to possess the capacity to imagine, sympathise, and evaluate strategy. Rafferty even suggests that Mizoguchi's camera *has delicate manners*:

His camera seems to glide in and out of people's lives with exquisite tact, observing them at their best and (more frequent) worst, but rarely intruding on them with an emotionally charged close-up or a sternly analytic cut. His movies just *flow*, stately and inevitable as rivers. But there comes a moment in every one of his pictures when you might also begin to feel a little disturbed by the intensity of the aesthetic pleasure he provides, unnerved by an apparent disconnect between the movie's gorgeous, sensuous manner and its often

unbearably painful matter. And that is where both the difficulty and the amazing richness of Mizoguchi lies.<sup>60</sup>

Mizoguchi's portrayals of certain alarming realities about pre-modern culture present, however indirectly, profoundly sensitive methods by which such realities can be improved and even revolutionised.<sup>61</sup> The avant-garde qualities of such methods lie in the fact that Mizoguchi's creation of the new is not at all rigidly forward-looking. In fact, an unwaveringly forward direction of thought would become a hindrance and even a crippling limitation, due to such a direction's prevention of lateral thinking: 'Mizoguchi...always failed when he tried to simply be new. He needed to grapple with the old in order to discover the new, and this engagement with the old world made him really love it...'<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Terence Rafferty, 'Kenji Mizoguchi's Movies Seek Beauty', in *The New York Times* (September 3, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> 'Japanese cinema began as a 'presentation of performance', a commentary on what was socially appropriate rather than an imitation of life. Mizoguchi's earlier films therefore have discourses valorizing traditional values even while acknowledging the attendant distress. *Sansho the Bailiff* begins by making one expect its message to be reassuring in some way but, as it unfolds, the world intrudes so insistently that its moral affirmations are actually undermined. That Zushio screams out his pleas instead of articulating them suggests deafness of the traditional order to persuasion. In the final analysis, it would appear that the film attains extraordinary power not because of its righteous moral viewpoint but because it is unrelentingly 'realistic' — it admits that the real world will not submit to any kind of moral order, owing either to Japanese tradition or to the liberal-democratic West.' (Raghavendra, 'Kenji Mizoguchi and the Post-War Transformation of Japan', in *Phalanx: A Quarterly Review for Continuing Debate*)

<sup>62</sup> Tadao Sato, *Kenji Mizoguchi and the Art of Japanese Cinema*, trans. by Brij Tankha, ed. by Aruna Vasudev and Latika Padgaonkar (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1982; repr. 2008), p. 101.

## *Chapter 1*

### *Eliade's hierophany and its application to avant-garde studies*

The placement of hierophany into an avant-garde context at first appears like a marriage of opposites. And as seems to be the way things are for marriages of opposites, there is an emphasis placed upon the peculiarity and even awkwardness that come with such an oppositional relationship, far more so than a recognition that opposites do in fact complement each other — such a complementary relationship revealing the valuable common ground underlying the union. Even within the avant-garde structure, differentiating between vanguard and rearguard is no simple task due to the fact that there are specific cases where the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ virtually exchange places. This is especially so when traditional components become used in new and inventive ways, as in the case of avant-garde sacred cinema — the sacred itself being an ancient concept relating even further back to the idea of divine origination. Eliade repeatedly argues that the primordial roots of the sacred are not recognised by mainstream modern culture, causing the forward movement of the avant-garde to sit oddly with the sacred which is much more harmoniously aligned to the cyclical patterns of a mythical time that remains independent of linear, historical time. In fact he does not at all describe mythical time in terms of an action-reaction structure that produces what we would normally consider to be sequences of events characterising historical patterns. Rather he associates mythical qualities with ‘the ultimate



reality of things'<sup>63</sup> that encompasses the meanings/meaningfulness of cosmic phenomena — universal phenomena generating qualities, consequences, and blue-prints all taking place on a vast, immeasurable scale unquantifiable by physical standards. So we must begin with Eliade's foundational argument that mythical phenomena transcend temporal and spatial factors governing the laws of physicality and historicity. In other words, his theoretical model dictates that the sacred is not bound by temporal and spatial constraints. Here, it is important to specify that the vessel or the form embodying the hierophany *is* localised — meaning that it *does* occupy a specific locality. *However*, there are also certain qualities more *broadly* defining the hierophanic structure that cut across historical, cultural, and geographical divergences. This is where hierophany embodies both the empirical (which Eliade would refer to as the profane) and that which remains beyond empirical verification (in this case, the sacred):

How far — considering the diversity and tenuousness of our evidence — are we right to speak of different “modalities of the sacred”? That those modalities exist is proved by the fact that a given hierophany may be lived and interpreted quite differently by the religious élite and by the rest of the community. For the throng who come to the temple of Kalighat in Calcutta every autumn Durgā is simply a goddess of terror to whom goats are sacrificed; but for a few initiated *śāktas* Durgā is the manifestation of cosmic life in

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<sup>63</sup> ‘The premodern or "traditional" societies include both the world usually known as "primitive" and the ancient cultures of Asia, Europe, and America. Obviously, the metaphysical concepts of the archaic world were not always formulated in theoretical language; but the symbol, the myth, the rite, express, on different planes and through the means proper to them, a complex system of coherent affirmations about the ultimate reality of things...’ — Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 3.

constant and violent regeneration. It is very likely that among those who adore the *lingam* of Śiva, a great many see it only as an archetype of the generative organ; but there are others who look to it as a sign, an “image” of the rhythmic creation and destruction of the universe which expresses itself in forms, and periodically returns to its primal, pre-formal unity, before being reborn.<sup>64</sup>

This is where hierophany becomes the foremost embodiment of uniqueness, or rather a wide range of uniquenesses. Hierophany is not just approached from the viewpoint of personal uniqueness, but also cultural, historical, and environmental uniqueness (involving for instance such factors as class, education background, and invested interests). Still, Eliade insists that the pure sacred source must be inclusive of *all* such uniquenesses:

Which is the true meaning of Durgā and Śiva — what is deciphered by the initiates, or what is taken up by the mass of the faithful? In this book I am trying to show that both are equally valuable; that the meaning given by the masses stands for as authentic a modality of the sacred manifested in Durgā or Śiva as the interpretation of the initiates. And I can show that the two hierophanies fit together — that the modalities of the sacred which they reveal are in no sense contradictory, but are complementary, are parts of a whole.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958; repr. 1979), p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, pp. 7-8.

Here, Eliade's idea of what is 'contradictory' (or not) merits careful explanation. His example of the perspectives of the initiates and the masses ultimately conveys a fluid and receptive model of the sacred that is widely encompassing enough to contain data which may seem contradictory or incompatible *on the surface level*. Surface contradictions, as the name suggests, are only contradictory to a limited degree. Yet surface contradictions are *not ultimately* contradictory, as he would argue, because what we are considering here are different aspects of a greater unifying whole. Thus, hierophany may be associated with any manner of diverging perspectives, yet the pure sacred source itself must remain consistent in its capacity to *include* and *incorporate* surface inconsistencies, to the point where any so-called inconsistency would become transformed into 'complementary...parts of a whole.'<sup>66</sup> If the sacred source cannot be consistently receptive in such a manner, it would then cease to be a source of pure potentiality, and in turn cease to be the sacred itself. For the sacred does not *deny* personal, historical, cultural, and environmental divergences; it *cannot* deny them, because it is an encompassing source. The sacred does however remain independent of temporal and spatial constraints (constraints which include the conditional divergences just described),<sup>67</sup> precisely because the sacred is *pure* by nature:

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<sup>66</sup> Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>67</sup> Eliade places an enormous emphasis upon the sacred as a universal creative structure that remains *beyond* the susceptibility to being categorised into historically, culturally, and even geographically specific terms. Hierophanies certainly have that susceptibility, but the sacred source does not:

The structure of the sacred in the human consciousness is built on the structure of synchronicity, as opposed to the diachronic structure of radical historicism. Yet we have seen...that even among the historicists there are allowances for a synchronic structure. When I discuss the time structure

...in his “Notebook of a Summer Vacation (1937)”, Eliade observes how his fellow travelers experience the passing of borders for the first time and the intensity of the first hours of a journey, of even the most insignificant happenings. He regards this “spectacle” as very reassuring: “The thirst for the fantastic, for daydreaming, for adventure has remained as unquenched as ever in the soul of modern man.” “The adventure of which each one dreams, and which for some has begun with the crossing of the border, is, in any event, a desire for transcendence, for an anchoring in significant reality, in certain ‘ontological centers’. People want, at all costs, to get out of neuter, non-significant zones. If I had the courage to carry my thought to its logical conclusion, I would say that people today, as always, long to go out of the ‘profane’, neuter zones and attain the ‘sacred’, that is, ultimate reality.”<sup>68</sup>

Allen’s interpretation of the sacred significance which Eliade bestows upon seemingly ordinary occurrences has numerous avant-garde implications. The example of the intense curiosity and passion for adventure experienced during a first journey shows that there is a much more profound level of human consciousness (a mythical consciousness) that views ‘significant

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of the sacred, I am no longer related to temporal differences in a diachronic context; I have the right to jump from the ancient Neolithic Near East to India and Africa in examining the world of the agriculturalist, although it arose at different times in these places.

— Eliade, ‘The Sacred in the Secular World’, in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, p. 273.

reality' (which is essentially *sacred* reality) as lying *beyond* known borders. The issue of whether the *new* experience will be a positive one is secondary to the idea that there is an innate structure within the consciousness that is constantly driving the individual's experiential capacity towards *expanding* and *advancing*. In fact this example of Allen's interpretation and Eliade's notion of experience expansion quite clearly places the 'neuter zones' of the stagnant status quo in the area of the rearguard, while the 'ultimate reality' — lying *beyond* the 'neuter' and the 'non-significant', and therefore constituting the vanguard in its progressive and forward movement — naturally invites the human consciousness to participate, as the ultimate reality possesses an *infinite* mystery or 'cosmic sacrality' awaiting (hierophanic) revelation.<sup>69</sup> The argument to follow in this and subsequent chapters proposes that the *timelessness* of the sacred, mythical dimension and the progressive direction characterising expressions of originality and newness in fact co-exist in highly imaginative ways through portrayals of the sacred in avant-garde art.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> 'A *sacred* stone remains a *stone*; apparent (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany.' — *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Another instance where Eliade arrives the closest to associating hierophany with avant-garde is in his theory of kratophany where he states that kratophanies embody 'the unusual, the new, and the strange.' Kratophanies manifest ambivalent qualities where the powerful aspects of the sacred are at their most intense and most concentrated. He places such undesirable things as corpses, criminals, and the sick as examples of kratophanies because the associated taboos and restrictions are the means through which the powerful qualities of the sacred magnify the strangeness of the kratophanies concerned. Thus, kratophanies embody the most potent contentions between an authoritative semblance of normality and the forceful drive to challenge organised boundaries. So in order to substantiate further the structural correlations between hierophany and avant-garde through their leading-edge inclination to push through

### ***The archaic and modernity in Eliade's theory of the sacred***

*...for religious man nature is never only natural. Experience of a radically desacralized nature is a recent discovery; moreover, it is an experience accessible only to a minority in modern societies, especially to scientists. For others, nature still exhibits a charm, a mystery, a majesty in which it is possible to decipher traces of ancient religious values. No modern man, however irreligious, is entirely insensible to the charms of nature. We refer not only to the esthetic, recreational, or hygienic values attributed to nature, but also to a confused and almost indefinable feeling, in which, however, it is possible to recognize the memory of a debased religious experience.<sup>71</sup>*

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boundaries of familiarity, briefly discussing kratophanies may serve great value as they constitute the aspects of hierophanic phenomena that hold the most potentiality for expressing creative newness, especially through their characteristic divergences from what are considered established norms:

A second type of hierophany may be termed as kratophany, a manifestation of power. Kratophanies preserve the sacred in all its ambivalence, both attracting and repelling with its brute power. The unusual, the new, and the strange frequently function as kratophanies. These things, persons, or places can be dangerous and defiling as well as sacred. Corpses, criminals, and the sick often function as kratophanies. Human beings in powerful or ambivalent circumstances (such as women in menses, soldiers, hunters, kings with absolute power, or executioners) are hedged around with taboos and restrictions. People approach sacred foods with etiquette and manners designed to ward off defilement, sickness, and pollution. The precautions that surround saints, sacrificers, and healers stem from fear of confronting the sacred. Kratophanies emphasize the extent to which the manifestation of the sacred intrudes on the order of things.

— Eliade and Sullivan, 'Hierophany', in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, p. 90.

<sup>71</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 151-2.

Modern cultures have come to regard humans as being separate from nature — although Eliade suggests here that such a disconnection is a societal construct at best, because a total disconnection between humanity and the sacred can never come to pass. All *homo religiosus* have within them the capacity to keep developing a relationship with the sacred, despite all forms of resistance: ‘I am convinced that whatever modern, secularized man might think of himself, he still occupies a sacred dimension.’<sup>72</sup> Carl Olson suggests that Eliade is setting a new trend by bringing his theory to a wider audience, in turn drastically diverging from modern societal norms which oppose the idea of this innate capacity for sacred experience:

...Eliade interpreted modern Western culture as areligious, suffering from alienation, desacralization and demythologization. In one sense, Eliade wanted to reintroduce religious mystery into modern human life. This implies that much of his work was soteriological. In order to achieve his goal of alleviating modern alienation, Eliade returned to religious history for a remedy. The search for meaning and new modes of being in the historical past was a religious experience because the historian of religions must relive the experiences of past cultures. By following this procedure, Eliade wanted to reintroduce religious mystery into the lives of contemporary humans lost in the destructive labyrinth of the twentieth century.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Eliade, ‘The Sacred in the Secular World’, in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, p. 58.

<sup>73</sup> Carl Olson, *The Theology and Philosophy of Eliade: A Search for the Centre* (London: MacMillan, 1992), p. 7.

There is a suggestion here that what is new and improved does not necessarily rest upon futuristic foundations or indeed the annihilation of the value of the past. This is where it must be noted that Eliade does not *specifically* associate the sacred or the mythical with the past, although because both (which are one and the same) are transhistorical, the sacred/mythical then becomes ‘timeless’. Qualities that are not subject to external changeabilities replenish — in other words, breathe new meaning into — an internally impoverished, secularised culture. Even Olson’s interpretation implies that Eliade rather views the desacralised modernity as an ‘old’ mental construct where the sacred lies dormant as a potentiality waiting to be pushed forward into greater recognition. In so being, Eliade is essentially using the sacred as an avant-garde method to heal and restore such cultures from spiritual undernourishment. Imagination — which is the capacity to envision *beyond* the status quo of external realities — is a primary component in the sacred experience, for without it there can be no creation of hierophanies. Douglas Allen provides an interpretation of Matei Calinescu’s argument that it is through imagination that we can access the innate memory of our mythical origin. The important point here is that the recollection of primordial times constitutes a ‘new’ approach to discerning the meaning of life — an anamnesis leading to creative expansion, breaking free of the monotony of physicality — while modernity is a metaphor for *spiritual amnesia* where severe limitations are placed upon the imaginative capacity to access dimensions that transcend materiality:

In his analysis of Eliade’s “Nineteen Roses”, Calinescu states that the central question of hermeneutics is linked with the broad question of memory as a way to mythical truth. After describing Eliade’s literary techniques of anamnesis, such as attempts “to translate



the dialectic of mythical unrecognizability into concrete, situational symmetries and oppositions”,...Calinescu concludes that Eliade’s fantastic of interpretation is a hermeneutic of trust and optimism.

*Eliade’s fantastic of interpretation persuades the reader to look at images, symbols, metaphors, stories, or inventions as possible bearers of epiphanies or remembrances. By means of these devices the imagination breaks out of the amnesia in which modernity has trapped it to recall and revive lost worlds of meaning. The larger message of Eliade’s fantastic prose is, in brief, that interpretation remains our best hope for an anamnesis of mythical truth.*<sup>74 75</sup>

The underlying avant-garde principle here is in the idea of recollection as a means of *revival* — an activation of mythical memories as an initiation towards gathering the pieces of a paradise lost, although we must keep in mind here that it is the *imagination* that creates such a paradise. Thus, paradise in this sense is self-created, operating a pluralistic existence determined by uniqueness and variation, hence Calinescu’s description of ‘lost worlds of meaning’. The notion that modernity constitutes a form of amnesia means that modern cultures are discouraged from considering the human consciousness as occupying multitudes of dimensions — dimensions

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<sup>74</sup> Italicised by myself. Quoted from Matei Calinescu’s “Introduction: The Fantastic and Its Interpretation in Mircea Eliade’s Later Novellas”, in *Youth Without Youth and Other Novellas*.

<sup>75</sup> Allen, ‘Mircea Eliade’s View of the Study of Religion as the Basis for Cultural and Spiritual Renewal’, ed. by Bryan S. Rennie, in *Changing Religious Worlds*, pp. 204 – 234 (p. 215).

operating *beyond* the obvious and outwardly physical one. In an effort to establish the viability of multi-dimensionality, Bryan Rennie brings together the two main principles that compose Eliade's theory of hierophany: 1.) his positing of the sacred as being 'real', and 2.) his complementary assertion that it is imagination that entirely defines this sacred 'reality':

...Eliade seeks to increase the ontological impact of religion in general both by his insistence on the sacred as the real and by his stress on the imaginary as effective. For example, he has said,

no conquest of the material world was effected without a corresponding impact on human imagination and behaviour. And I am inclined to add that the reflections of the objective conquests upon such imaginary Universes are perhaps even more important for an understanding of man. ("Notes on the Symbolism of the Arrow", 465)

...He clarifies this in his *History of Religious Ideas*, where he states that the empirical value of [practical] inventions is evident. What is less so is *the importance of the imaginative activity inspired by familiarity with the different modalities of matter*...The

imagination discovers hitherto unsuspected analogies among the different levels of the real. (vol. I, 34)<sup>76</sup>

Imagination's primary role in the sacred experience is to access other dimensions that do exist, despite the possibility that their existence may not satisfy the system of proof as determined by empirical criteria. Eliade covers this in his acknowledgment that the empirical aspects of an invention may well be evident. But what is not as empirically evident is the imagination's role as non-physical inspirer that brings forth every detail of the invention. This is where the imagination takes on a role near-equivalent to that of the sacred, and that is the role of *creator* magnetising all the circumstances and details that could transform what is imagined into greater concreteness — hence Eliade's idea of imagination's '*familiarity with the different modalities of matter*', a familiarity which leads to imagination's power to attract all cooperative components bringing about the corresponding manifestation. Imagination's attracting and over-reaching qualities create access into other dimensions that Eliade refers to as 'imaginary Universes'<sup>77</sup>. This means that the state of multi-dimensionality itself must be aligned with imagination's over-reaching quality, which is essentially the expansion into new levels of newness. Does this mean that there are new dimensions emerging all the time, in correspondence to the over-reaching nature of the imagination? Eliade only partially answers this question, as we shall later see, by stating that hierophany itself constitutes the birthing of a new hybrid dimension resulting from

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<sup>76</sup> Bryan Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 206-7.

<sup>77</sup> From *Notes on the Symbolism of the Arrow*, 465. Quoted in Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, p. 206.

the intersection between sacred and profane. He does also suggest however that without recognition of imaginary universes, human existence would be divided and fragmented at best, as that would mean that we are not acknowledging our multi-dimensional nature:

Eliade constantly, if rather quietly, insists on the importance of the imaginary realm. For example, in *The Quest* he points out that initiatory motifs and symbols “partake of an *imaginary* universe, and this universe is no less important for human existence than the world of everyday life” (121). And in *Images and Symbols*: “that essential and indescribable part of man that is called *imagination* dwells in realms of symbolism and still lives upon archaic myths and theologies” (19). On a slightly different note which serves to explain his meaning somewhat further, he states that

*the novel must tell something, because narrative (that is, literary invention) enriches the world no more and no less than history, although on another level.*<sup>78</sup> (*No Souvenirs*, 205)<sup>79</sup>

Here, Eliade puts forward that artistic (literary) inventions make an equally important contribution as much as history, this suggested contrast with history further alluding to the idea that artistic inventions operate transhistorically from their core. The transhistorical suggestion becomes even more pronounced in his following statement that such inventions enrich the world

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<sup>78</sup> Italicised by myself.

<sup>79</sup> Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, p. 224.

‘on another level’. The avant-garde idea of ever-expanding and ever-increasing states of newness and originality is implied here, especially with imagination as the determining principle.

Significantly, *homo religiosus* has an innate capacity to interpret sacred phenomena imaginatively. Eliade puts forward that *homo religiosus* is a powerful potentiality within any individual, and that it operates through the ‘unconscious’ — a level that lies far deeper than the surface consciousness (this latter, Eliade simply terms ‘the conscious’). He describes the unconscious as ‘far more “poetic” — and, let us add, more “philosophic”, more “mythic” — than the conscious’<sup>80</sup>, suggesting that the human unconscious has been so poorly nourished, overlooked, and unacknowledged by modernity:

The psychologists, C.G. Jung among others of the first rank, have shown us how much the dramas of the modern world proceed from a profound disequilibrium of the psyche, individual as well as collective, brought about largely by a progressive sterilisation of the imagination. To “have imagination” is to enjoy a richness of interior life, an uninterrupted and spontaneous flow of images.<sup>81</sup>

This idea of a latent fertility of imagination provides valuable insights into what Eliade considers to be the unconditionally embedded qualities composing the level of consciousness possessed by *homo religiosus* — namely the unconscious. He puts forward that the modern secular individual is occupied by hindrances which cause difficulty in experiencing the sacred. However, he also

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<sup>80</sup> Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Harvill Press, 1952; repr.1961), p. 13.

<sup>81</sup> Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, p. 20.

uses terms such as ‘disequilibrium’ and ‘sterilisation’ to describe the general status of such hindrances, in turn implying that the original state of human consciousness is one of *equilibrium* and *abundance*. Without obstructions, the human consciousness would naturally return to a perspective of poetic/mythical inspiration, just as it is designed to do if we are to hold to the perspective that *homo religiosus* reigns over any blockage to the activation or practice of the sacred experiential capacity. Apart from the infinite potential of the diversification of hierophanies, it also important to note that hierophanic newness also lies in the notion that the sacred all by itself is imbued with the potential to constantly and continuously generate newness:

What matters is that a hierophany implies a *choice*, a clear-cut separation of this thing which manifests the sacred from everything else around it. There is always something *else*, even when it is some whole sphere that becomes sacred — the sky, for instance, or a certain familiar landscape, or the “fatherland”. The thing that becomes sacred is still separated in regard to itself, for it only becomes a hierophany at the moment of stopping to be a mere profane something, at the moment of acquiring a new “dimension” of sacredness.<sup>82</sup>

What is distinctly avant-garde about the *emergence* of hierophany is the birthing of a new hybrid dimension that *adds* to the current status of things. While the pure sacred source remains constant in its qualities — among which Eliade would identify as ‘strong, powerful, because it

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<sup>82</sup> Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, p. 13.

[the sacred] is *real*; it is efficacious and durable'<sup>83</sup> — the emergence of every new hierophany means that the creative potential of the sacred is expanding into infinity (because the newness of every hierophanic addition becomes a *constant*). Correspondingly, Robert Baird's essay suggests that it is in the nature of *homo religiosus* to seek hierophanic newness:

...*homo religiosus* is not an historical but an archetypal religious man. Historical persons participate in this archetype to varying degrees, even though no one fully embodies it nor does anyone entirely cover it. Hence the statements of religious men about the meanings of their rites or symbols is secondary to the way in which the symbols fit into universal structures. And, individuals are understood in terms of these universal structures and not in terms of their religious individuality.

While no one person is the complete embodiment of *homo religiosus*, archaic man comes closest to this model of authentic existence. Eliade begins by convincing us that we should be prepared to admit that *homo religiosus* has had a tendency to extend hierophanies indefinitely.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Reality*, trans. by Philip Mairet (Collins: Fontana Library of Theology and Philosophy, 1957; repr. 1968), p. 130.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Baird, 'Normative Elements in Eliade's Phenomenology of Symbolism', in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Bryan S. Rennie (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2006), pp. 153 – 162 (p. 154).

Baird's interpretation is not exactly contradictory, but it does present quite conflicting connotations. He first states that for *homo religiosus*, any sense of individuality remains secondary to alignment with universal structures. So there are universal hierophanic criteria and there are also cultural and even *individual* hierophanic criteria, and it is the former that takes precedence in the capacity to inform and constrain the ways and predispositions of human consciousness. However, Baird then states that *homo religiosus* has a potential to experience hierophanies *indefinitely*. Such a capacity to experience in increasingly innovative and original ways would then transcend the subjection to temporal, spatial, and cultural constraints. This inherent tendency to seek newness and to bestow such newness with sacred significance constitutes an avant-garde principle, as it affirms that there is no final destination to creativity, causing hierophanic creative potential to be constantly *expanding* and *advancing*.

Correspondingly, Eliade does suggest that mythical images and symbols have every potential to constitute *new trends* in the arts. Eric Jozef Ziolkowski further interprets that Eliade seems set upon using the emergence of the mythical dimension into the literary scene as a means of radically altering the filters through which the arts are perceived:

As early as 1952, when the original French edition of *Images and Symbols* appeared with his claim in the foreword that he had written it primarily for the use of psychologists and literary critics, Eliade expressed his belief that the history of religions had much to contribute to literary criticism. By extension, as reflected in the following journal entry of 1960, he also considered the history of religions of great value for creating literature: "I am more and more convinced of the literary value of the materials available to the historian of religion. If art —and, above all, literary art, poetry, the novel — knows a new Renaissance in our time, it will be called forth by the rediscovery of the function of



myths, of religious symbols, and of archaic behavior.... It could be that someday my research will be considered an attempt to relocate the forgotten sources of literary inspiration.” Eliade later tried to substantiate these intuitions. In one essay, he seeks to show how the history of religions can be useful for deciphering hidden meanings in contemporary philosophical and literary vogues, while, in another, he documents how literary critics, especially in this country, eagerly made use of such findings from comparative religion as the “myth and ritual” theory or the “initiation pattern” in their interpretation of modern fiction and poetry.<sup>85</sup>

Eliade’s referral to the revival of the sacred and the mythical as a ‘new Renaissance’ — and further still Ziolkowski’s later description of the featuring of mythical themes in philosophy and literature as a deciphering of the veiled and the concealed — go to show that it is more of a norm than not for the sacred to be hidden from plain view in one way or another. The more important point here is that when the sacred becomes revealed, there emerges a sense of *renewal* and expanded originality within each hierophanic expression. In the arts especially, hierophany embodies that which has never before been conceived in the physical — a pushing forward of dimensional territory — hence Ziolkowski’s referral to the “initiation pattern” underlying certain works of prose and poetry. And still, Eliade’s hierophany cannot avoid modern characterisation, so long as there remains an insistence upon a sacred-profane dichotomy. Modernity has a tendency is to divide things into isolated compartments, so that whatever is partitioned off can

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<sup>85</sup> Eric Jozef Ziolkowski, ‘Between Religion and Literature: Mircea Eliade and Northrop Frye’, *Journal of Religion*, vol 71/4 (October 1991), pp. 498 – 522 (pp. 507-8).

then take its own individualistic course. Even when the sacred and the profane do become bridged through hierophany, the hierophany itself carries on the separation pattern — demarcating and even *alienating* itself from all else that is profane to the point of complete exclusion: ‘The thing that becomes sacred is still separated in regard to itself, for it only becomes a hierophany at the moment of stopping to be a mere profane something, at the moment of acquiring a new “dimension” of sacredness.’<sup>86</sup> Andrew Hass describes the further self-development of an individual component through separation from the integrated whole as the point where the modern phenomenon contrasts itself from the pre-modern inclination to bind branching disciplines to a centralised source of knowledge:

One of the distinguishing features that separates us moderns from our forebears is precisely our conceptions of knowledge and its appropriation. In a wholly integrated and self-contained cosmology, such as the ancients and the medievals constructed, knowledge, though still vast and variegated, remained within a single unified system, and any point of entry would necessarily lead to or intersect with all other possible points of entry. A medical doctor could just as easily end up consulting astronomy as, say, botany, or an astronomer just as easily philosophy as, say, geometry, and all would eventually end up at theology, especially if educated within the context of European Christendom or the Ottoman Empire. But with the modern turn, knowledge lost any such integration and harmony. The moment the universe turned outward, with a centrifugal force of infinite measure, knowledge lost its self-containment and univocacy, and was forced into segregated spheres of autonomous or semi-autonomous understanding. This is not

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<sup>86</sup> Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, p. 13.

because a sense of the whole was completely abandoned — the ‘universe’ still turned on a notion of aggregated oneness. It is just that the whole, as one, no longer had a structural centrality, no longer had centripetal lines of force unifying its every movement.<sup>87</sup>

*At first glance*, Eliade concept of the sacred does appear to have unifying qualities, especially in his proposition that the sacred is an inherently non-physical structure unconditionally embedded within the consciousness: ‘If the sacred means being, the real, and the meaningful, as I hold it does, then the sacred is a part of the structure of human consciousness.’<sup>88</sup> But then, Eliade contradicts himself by implying the sacred’s *inability* to encompass all things related to it. Instead of allowing the sacred to embrace the profane which just as much constitutes the basis of hierophany, he turns against the sacred’s unifying potential by dichotomising it with the profane:

For religious man, nature is never only “natural”; it is always fraught with a religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness. It is not simply a sacrality *communicated* by the gods, as is the case, for example, with a place or an object consecrated by the divine presence. The gods did more; *they manifested the different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena.*<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Andrew W. Hass, ‘Discipline Beyond Disciplines’, in *Literature and Theology: new interdisciplinary spaces* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2011), pp. 19 – 36 (p. 20).

<sup>88</sup> Eliade, ‘The Sacred in the Secular World’, in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, p. 58.

<sup>89</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 116.

On the one hand, Eliade is saying that *everything* contains sacred potential, that there is nothing that lies *outside* of this all-embracing sacredness as the world itself is a living manifestation of it. The world being created from a centralised power goes to show that the basic universal law is one of unity, not division. However, Eliade contradicts himself by saying that the sacred is “wholly other”, that a hierophany reveals qualities that are *unrelated* to its immediate physical structure. He is here saying that the sacredness of an object has nothing to do with those (profane) components that have come together to compose the object as it stands:

The sacred manifests itself as a power or force that is quite different from the forces of nature. A sacred tree, for instance, is not worshiped for being a tree. Neither is a sacred stone adored, in and of itself, for its natural properties as a stone. These objects become the focus of religious veneration because they are hierophanies, revealing something that is no longer botanical or geological, but “wholly other”.<sup>90</sup>

Here, Eliade rather has his foot quite clearly placed in the modern attitude of dividing concepts into separate units that are left to take their own unrelated directions. This scattered pattern of individualistic self-direction operates without even the inclination to reach back to any such core quality that could potentially interlink different units in a familial manner. In saying that the sacredness of a tree has nothing to do with the fact it is a tree or the sacredness of a stone with

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<sup>90</sup> Eliade and Sullivan, ‘Hierophany’, in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, p. 87.

the fact that it is stone, he is suggesting that the sacred is completely and utterly alien. So the idea now is to juxtapose the object with the sacred, and from thereon virtually force them to have a hierophanic relationship. Furthermore, separating the sacred into an isolated category dissolves the possibility that it is the sacred source that births the manifestation, that the sacred has always been imbued in nature itself. Again, isolating the sacred with such an unyielding barrier dictating a permanent otherness contradicts his earlier statement that ‘For religious man, nature is never only “natural”.’<sup>91</sup> This earlier statement *does* suggest that the sacred potential is contained in all things, but only to be cut short in another statement that ‘The sacred manifests itself as a power or force that is quite different from the forces of nature.’<sup>92</sup> Because of such a major contradiction in Eliade’s theoretical framework, I am setting out to resolve it by proposing that his initial theory that the world is impregnated with sacredness by divine beings can still be maintained if and only if the sacred-profane dichotomy is dismantled altogether. But even before attempting such a dismantling, the following questions need to be posed:

1.) Does hybridity mean the intersection of qualities that would *otherwise* be completely separate, if it were not for the hierophanic ‘bridging’ between such qualities? Or does it mean a manifested embodiment of qualities that latently overlap (in other words, do such contrasting qualities *already* overlap in the more intangible level of *potentiality*, and then later come to acquire a more tangible *embodiment* of their points of overlapping through some transformative process such as hierophanisation)?;

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<sup>91</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 116.

<sup>92</sup> Eliade and Sullivan, ‘Hierophany’, in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, p. 87.

2.) If hybridity is an embodiment of a new state ('new' due to the newly acquired state of inter-dimensional fusion), does that mean that the *individual* components of the hybrid structure must then become 'old'? For instance, do the sacred and the profane considered *individually* all by themselves simply become old, due to the fact that they would *lose* their individuality once the hierophanic fusion between them occurs? If so (and it would be so if we are *only and exclusively* following the way of dichotomy), can the new embrace 'old' components without its own foundation of newness being severely disrupted?

Eliade's interpretation of Hegel's Universal Spirit does answer such questions in very round about ways. Historical events constitute the Universal Spirit's self-revelation in increasingly new and progressive ways, almost as if the Universal Spirit is continuously perfecting itself through historical expressions. Thus, the Universal Spirit contains an overriding inclination to keep expanding infinitely (as there would be no end to historical events that show states of improvement), in turn offering insight into the nature of the sacred source as one which expands in much the same way through hierophanic expressions: '...for Hegel, an event is irreversible and valid in itself inasmuch as it is a new manifestation of the will of God... Thus, in Hegel's view, the destiny of a people still preserved a transhistorical significance, because all history revealed a new and more perfect manifestation of the Universal Spirit.'<sup>93</sup> Thus, the Universal Spirit upholds both constancy (the steadfast principle serving as a common denomination underlying all things) and variation (uniqueness and diversity) without having to make the two qualities mutually exclusive. If such an allowance can be applied to the sacred source, the sacred would incorporate an element of infinity — a quality of creative continuation without end.

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<sup>93</sup> Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, pp. 148-9.

## *The Problem of Dichotomy*

The problem arises however when the newness of hierophany forcibly converts *all* the components within its own structure into *old* states, as dichotomisation does not recognise the interpenetration of contrasting qualities. The old and the new may co-exist with a barrier between them, but they cannot actually mix in permeating ways, turning the concept of a hybrid structure on its own head because hybridity by its nature necessitates a thorough mixing of contrasting qualities. The hierophanic fusion — which is problematic in itself so long as there is an insistence upon dichotomy — can *only* maintain its status of newness to the *exclusion* of all else within its own structure. In other words, dichotomy dictates that the *individual* components operating within hierophany cannot possess a newness that could possibly compete with newness of the *assembled* hierophany. Yet despite the problems presenting major contradictions within Eliade's theory, the fact remains that his concept of hierophany does hold great potential as a primary tool in analysing sacred art. The ultimate viability of hierophany much depends upon the way in which it is re-interpreted, especially so that the modified model of hierophany can embrace both unification and diversity. And again, despite his general insistence upon dichotomy (which essentially means a permanent split), there remain instances where Eliade would suggest the idea of open passages and channels interlinking different dimensions so that such dimensions cooperate to create other new dimensions resulting from the fusion, in turn showing that dichotomy does not have such a stronghold over his theory of transformative hierophany after all. Here, he uses terms connoting enormous structural contention and radical shifts in the fabric of co-existing multiple realities, such as 'irruption' and 'break in plane' to describe the *intersection* between contrasting dimensions, indicating that the demarcation and disconnection qualifying dichotomy are being severely undermined:

...the irruption of the sacred does not only project a fixed point into the formless fluidity of profane space, a center into chaos; it also effects a break in plane, that is, it opens communication between the cosmic planes (between earth and heaven) and makes possible ontological passages from one mode of being to another.<sup>94</sup>

While it is true that Eliade's centre and chaos constitute a relationship between dimensions that seemingly oppose each other, the inter-dimensional passageways cause the different dimensions concerned to *integrate* with each other, as opposed to behaving individualistically as if they are completely unrelated. Despite Eliade's efforts in making a case for the sacred-profane dichotomy, his arguments ultimately seem to lead to a sense of absolute unification where contrasting dimensions — no matter how seemingly incompatible — are made to interpenetrate each other, here again Hegel's influences showing through quite clearly:

The change must take place in a definite way. Between one phase and another of that development there must intervene an active principle, and Hegel suggested that this principle was actually one of opposition and interaction. That is to say, to produce any new situation (i.e., any departure from an existing condition of equilibrium) there must previously exist two elements so opposed to each other and yet so related to each other that a solution or resolution is demanded; such a solution being in effect a new phase of

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<sup>94</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 63.



development (temporary state of equilibrium) which preserves some of the elements of the interacting phases, eliminates others, but is qualitatively different from the previously existing state of opposition.<sup>95</sup>

Herbert Read's interpretation of Hegel's idea that a new dimension is born from the simultaneous clash and cooperation between opposing dimensions very much constitutes the bedrock of the avant-garde as a state of consciousness. There appears to be a suggestion that there is a kind of escrow that keeps a record of the *proportionate opposite* of undesirable occurrences — such an opposite meaning the preferred or even the idealistic resolution that could possibly counter the unpleasantness — and what had been deposited into the escrow then becomes delivered into the *new and improved* dimension upon fulfillment of certain conditions. Correspondingly, Bryan Rennie incorporates into his interpretation of hierophany the condition of *hierarchy within autonomy*, this hierarchy manifesting in the form of an acquisition of a distinct status *ahead of the rest* — which is a concept bearing much resemblance to the avant-garde or the vanguard as a distinguished status emerging forward from the rearguard:

Although the starting point for an understanding of Eliade's sacred is its dialectical opposition to the profane, it becomes apparent that the conclusion is not one of simple opposition but one of complex interdependence. Having pointed out that “anything man has ever handled, felt, come into contact with or loved *can* become a hierophany”

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<sup>95</sup> Herbert Read, ed., *Surrealism* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1936; repr. 1971), pp. 39-40.

(*Patterns*, 10f.), Eliade is quite aware of the difficulty this raises. If anything at all can reveal the sacred, can the sacred/profane dichotomy stand? The answer is affirmative because while all things *can* reveal the sacred, not all things *do*. Not only is there no culture which recognizes all the manifestations of sacrality which have been detected in various times and locations, but also “while a certain class of things may be found fitting vehicles of the sacred, there always remain some things in the class which are not given this honor” (13). Thus there is still a real and meaningful distinction here. The sacred is still *perceived* as distinct from the profane.<sup>96</sup>

The term ‘profane’ all by itself is highly problematic, for there are numerous instances where Eliade directly associates the profane with the secular. Secularising the profane intensifies the barrier which marks the already sharp division within the sacred-profane dichotomy: ‘the sacred and the religious life are the opposite of the profane and the secular life.’<sup>97</sup> Apart from this emphasis upon such an oppositional relationship, Eliade does not acknowledge any qualities that could possibly stand for the varying degrees of differentiation between sacred and profane. They are extreme opposites, yet there is no qualitative spectrum connecting them. The fact remains that just because something is not sacred, it does not mean that that non-sacred thing must always be an obstruction or even an opposition to the sacred. In other words, distinguishing the sacred from the profane by means of rigid severing will not result in a viable method of determining the foundational hierophanic structure.

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<sup>96</sup> Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 1.

### ***Redefining the Avant-garde***

Even though terms such as ‘tradition’ and ‘convention’ possess connotations that seem to be severely at odds with the avant-garde, there seems to be a predominant tendency to place the movement as distinctly belonging to modernity, to such an extent that binding the avant-garde to modernity has become very much of a ‘traditional’ practice. Rosalind Krauss uses postmodernism as a counter-argument against reducing the avant-garde to a mere phenomenon attached too firmly to the strings of modernity, implying a disservice in stubbornly positioning the avant-garde into a *historical box*. She is almost alluding to the idea that to define the avant-garde as a modern movement is to literally impose its forthcoming termination even as early as its budding stages, as the modern era itself is bound to come to an end due to the inevitable conditions of historical patterns:

In deconstructing the sister notions of origin and originality, postmodernism establishes a schism between itself and the conceptual domain of the avant-garde, looking back at it from across a gulf that in turn establishes a historical divide. The historical period that the avant-garde shared with modernism is over. That seems an obvious fact.<sup>98</sup>

Krauss rather views modernity as a separating tool hindering the avant-garde from any capacity to continue on as a movement that could possibly progress beyond the parameters of modernity

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<sup>98</sup> Rosalind Krauss, ‘The Originality of the Avant Garde’, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1986), pp. 1 – 41 (p. 19).

itself. It is important to identify the limitations that modernity has imposed upon the avant-garde as well as the sacred, so that we can then remove those limitations in order to establish a concept of the sacred in avant-garde art — a new concept that can stand securely and compatibly as a qualitative juxtaposition. Douglas Allen’s interpretation of Eliade’s dichotomisation between the sacred and the modern offers some insight into what modernity includes and excludes:

Mircea Eliade distinguishes archaic, “traditional”, mythic, religious human beings from “modern”, nonmythic, nonreligious human beings. Eliade does not claim that every contemporary, Western human being is a “modern” person. He refers to two, general orientations or human modes of being in the world: two radically different ways of conceiving of human nature, the human condition, and how human beings are existentially, temporally, and historically related to reality. In presenting these two essential types, Eliade formulates clear-cut traditional versus modern contrasts and dichotomies: affirming or rejecting the reality of the sacred; affirming the mythic and living myths versus identification with a demythologized reality; devaluing or abolishing time and history and upholding atemporal, nonhistorical, exemplary, mythic and religious modes versus identification with the temporal and historical dimensions of existence.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, p. 267. Allen further observes that

He [Eliade] makes highly normative judgments in which he attacks the modern rejection of the sacred reality and the identification with the temporal and the historical for denying the essential mythic and symbolic structures of reality and even for being inhuman or antihuman. He makes ontological moves in which he affirms a mythic religious orientation, not only as rejecting major

Modernity includes the avant-garde and excludes the sacred by eliminating all chances for avant-garde phenomena to feature, incorporate, or even allude to mythical elements as Eliade sees them. The modern avant-garde must only be secular. If we are to hold onto Eliade's dichotomisation of the sacred and the modern, the sacred in avant-garde art would in fact not be able to emerge as a possible theory, because the mere presence of dichotomy would cause the sacred and the avant-garde to cancel each other out. Until modernity's confining methods of assessment are debunked, the sacred and the avant-garde cannot expand beyond them. According to J. T. Harskamp's essay, there is an implication that avant-garde is dragged into the status of a 'tradition' along with modernity that has lost its own cultural applicability:

One of the military metaphors contemporary criticism has borrowed from the nineteenth century is the notion of avant-garde. The metaphor of course is closely connected with the idea of modernism in art. In fact, modernism and avant-garde have become interchangeable terms. It has been argued that modernism has lost its sting and vitality, because it is no longer a critical attitude but a codified convention... Avant-garde itself has become tradition and as such has lost its *raison-d'être*, because it has no longer any radical function to perform. The epoch of modernism has become the domain of the historian and the critic.<sup>100</sup>

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characteristics of modernity, but also as more in touch with human nature and the transhistorical nature of reality. (p. 268)

<sup>100</sup> J. T. Harskamp, 'Contemporaneity, Modernism, Avant-garde', in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol 20/3 (1980), pp. 204 – 214 (p. 207).

The conditions of historical time necessitate that modernity would eventually become an era that we *look back* upon. And therefore if there was anything that was once progressive and forward-thinking about modernity, such qualities would inevitably become placed in the archives of history with the passing of time. The only way that avant-garde could possibly *not* become susceptible to the changes brought about by history is to be *unconditionally* progressive and forward-thinking, which means that avant-garde must become a self-preserving *constant state* that *transcends* the conditions of historical time. The avant-garde association with modernity means that avant-garde too would disappear as if there is no trace of its origination, since its modern qualification does not see it as being rooted in any constant source beyond the confines of historical specificity. Modernity would view avant-garde as not having a broader transhistorical status, which in turn means that modernity does not recognise the importance of a ‘centre’ or the ultimate interconnection between things. The modern avant-garde would then become a mere isolated fragment that happened to be placed in the passing of historical events, grasping onto whatever is new at the time without much concern for the appropriateness of the new thing, as there would be no grounding criteria that avant-garde would otherwise use to assess the qualities of that new thing. With the following definition provided by Krauss as a platform for construction of a transhistorical definition of the avant-garde, I intend to put forward that originality does not necessarily constitute a severing of ties with the past, but embraces innovative potential *regardless* of the historical period in which such potential can be found:

One thing only seems to hold fairly constant in the vanguardist discourse and that is the theme of originality. By originality, here, I mean more than just the kind of revolt against tradition that echoes in Ezra Pound's "Make it new!" or sounds in the futurists' promise to destroy the museums that cover Italy as though "with countless cemeteries." More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth. Marinetti, thrown from his automobile one evening in 1909 into a factory ditch filled with water, emerges as if from amniotic fluid to be born — without ancestors — a futurist. This parable of absolute self-creation that begins the first *Futurist Manifesto* functions as a model for what is meant by originality among the early twentieth-century avant-garde. For originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life. The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition because it possesses a kind of originary naiveté. Hence Brancusi's dictum, "When we are no longer children, we are already dead." Or again, the self as origin has the potential for continual acts of regeneration, a perpetuation of self-birth. Hence Malevich's pronouncement, "Only he is alive who rejects his convictions of yesterday."<sup>101</sup>

The concept of 'self-birth' where ancestral roots have been eliminated remains inadequate in defining the sacred in avant-garde art, as Eliade's theory of the sacred unwaveringly declares the constant influences of primordial roots — constituting a source of origin situated in mythical time (outside of and independent from linear, historical time). However, there may yet be a way

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<sup>101</sup> Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant Garde', pp. 6-7.

to resolve the seeming contradiction between Krauss's interpretation of self-birth and Eliade's *illo tempore*. This resolution lies in the fact that Krauss's self-birth operates on a predominantly cynical level and Eliade's mythical origin operates on an archetypal level (a realm of potentiality characterised by abstract patterns of relationships that do not take into account the undesirable details of physical everyday life). Even though there are mythical allusions in the idea of Marinetti coming out of a factory ditch in a manner resembling emergence from amniotic fluid, the cold severing of ties with any and all aspects of the past motivated by extreme rebelliousness constitutes *reactionary behaviour* or a dialectical response, and therefore cannot even be closely aligned to the archetypal level. Furthermore, while it is the past organised in accordance to the linear concept of time that self-birth is intending to delete from memory, mythical origin does not actually take place within that chronological structure of linear time. Thus, the two points of origin (1. self-birth which severs ties with the past, and 2. mythical origin which remains beyond the dualistic notion of beginning and end) operate quite independently of each other. If we begin by acknowledging such differentiations, Krauss's self-birth and Eliade's mythical origin may not be mutually exclusive after all, as they operate on different levels, leaving little by way of comparison, so that technically speaking, they cannot contradict one another. The archetypal level does not bind itself to reactionary behaviour motivated by the dramas of everyday injustices, unlike self-birth. In other words, the archetypal level is not given to *micro-management*. According to Eliade, there is an internal source holding the potential for certain experiential capacities — a source which originates during the pre-human era of *illo tempore*. So whether he is referring to 'archetype', 'exemplary model', or 'paradigm', all such terms describe instructive blueprints encoded in the consciousness that inform, constrain, and direct certain human attitudes and perspectives:



In the course of the book I have used the terms “exemplary models”, “paradigms”, and “archetypes” in order to emphasize a particular fact — namely, that for the man of the traditional and archaic societies, the models for his institutions and the norms for his various categories of behavior are believed to have been “revealed” at the beginning of time, that, consequently, they are regarded as having a superhuman and “transcendental” origin.<sup>102</sup>

What Eliade refers to as archetypes, exemplary models, and paradigms are essentially innate guides assisting *homo religiosus* in their interpretation of sacred phenomena. The interlinkage that archetypes do have with avant-garde lies in the remedial potential and positive aspects that arise from the avant-garde’s observation of what is undesirable. In other words, where there is an awareness of the unwanted, a proportionate registering of what is wanted emerges in its place, although this emergence of the desirable equivalent at first takes place in the archetypal level of pure potentiality. The archetypal level then contains the presence of very real positive elements, even though the presence of such ideals rests at a pre-manifestational stage. Douglas Allen suggests that these ideal structures do manifest themselves during the most creative moments where an individual’s consciousness is aligned with the pure, archetypal *homo religiosus*:

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<sup>102</sup> Eliade, ‘Preface’, in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. xii. Eliade clarifies that ‘In using the term “archetype”, I neglected to specify that I was not referring to the archetypes described by Professor C.G. Jung. This was a regrettable error. For to use, in an entirely different meaning, a term that plays a role of primary importance in Jung’s psychology could lead to confusion.’ (pp. xii-xiii)

In the dialectic of hierophanies, *homo religiosus* intuits that which is paradigmatic, ‘perfect’, the ideal structure, ‘the pure case’. The ideal religious structure is not found in the particular, spatial, temporal, historical, conditioned facts... What ‘verifies’ the sacred model, the paradigmatic structure, for *homo religiosus* is that he or she can use it to illuminate the nature of the particular existential situation; to give meaning to the chaotic, isolated, finite, ‘impure’, ‘imperfect’ facts of his or her profane existence.

...Eliade’s position seems to be that the ideal religious structure is actually experienced by *homo religiosus* in at least a few cases. The religious structure is not revealed in the profane facts *qua* profane facts. And it is not revealed fully in the vast majority of religious phenomena. But at certain highly creative moments in the history of humankind, *homo religiosus* did conceive fully the ‘pure case’, the ideal religious meaning of ascension, of agriculture, of the moon, etc.<sup>103</sup>

So we can see that Eliade’s idea of a mythical origin is not actually contradicting Krauss’s idea of self-birth, primarily because the two are driven by very different sets of qualities that are not always comparable. Or more simply put, mythical origin is positively driven while self-birth is negatively driven. Eliade’s archetypal level of consciousness rests consistently in an idealised state — especially as the mythical origin is situated within a divine realm — and the

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<sup>103</sup> Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion*, pp. 199-200.

imperfections and suffering so typical of profane existence only go to show how far the profane has diverted from the sacred. Krauss's self-birth is essentially dialectical, that is, motivated by an opposition, the intention to achieve victory over an opponent, and an ideal or greater cause that is meant to overcome the opponent. While Eliade's *illo tempore* upholds a divine past, Krauss's self-birth is intent upon the cleansing of every trace of the past, precisely because the past represents an authority external to the individual (Krauss uses the metaphor of 'ancestors' to describe this authority in her example of Marinetti's Futurism) that has inhibited freedom of expression. The more important point however is that while Eliade's mythical origin and Krauss's self-birth are both driven by their own ideals, the former seems to be upholding the archetypal level as a holder of *higher solutions* developing at a stage of pre-manifestation (hence Allen's interpretation that archetypes and paradigms shed insight and meaning into the extremities of the undesirable constituting a major characteristic of profane existence; it is the equivalent opposite of such unpleasantness that the archetypal level is registering in its constant state of purity). Yet Krauss's self-birth — even in its focus upon the ideal of forward movement — remains attached to the problem and the negativity that had motivated the vision of self-birth to begin with. If the focus upon the initial problem was significantly reduced, there would be no need for such an obsession with annihilating every single trace of the past.

In order to effectively analyse the sacred in avant-garde art, the task then is to construct a definition of avant-garde that embraces both mythical origin and self-birth, while focusing as little as possible upon the negative status quo that had initially motivated the intention of rebellion. In other words, the new definition of avant-garde must *restore the remedial aspects*

that self-birth in its radical spirit of rebellion is essentially seeking. That is because over-thinking the problem that had given rise to such avant-garde sentiments would have a tendency to exaggerate the scale of the problem to the extent where even the notion of mythical origin taking place in primordial time is turned into a problematic status quo, for it must still be noted that self-birth is a metaphorical elimination of all ancestors. And yet, it is the symbolic death to ties with the past that may quite ironically hold a greater potential towards a more inclusive definition of avant-garde. Here, we must return to Krauss's quoting of Romanian-born patriarch of modern sculpture, Constantin Brancusi: "When we are no longer children, we are already dead."<sup>104</sup> Such an idea bears much resemblance to Rob Halpern's theory of 'the new' where he suggests that even though the new is a child of the old — the old constituting a greater whole from which the new is a branching extension — the new is still very much an independent child who has been alienated to the extent that the new no longer wishes to return to its roots:

Unlike "the newest thing," or *nouveauté*, which like "the news" gives way to its own obsolescence and substitution, "the new" as such appears abstract in its very concreteness, cut-off from its own history and everything familiar. A materialist conception of "the new" might find an unexpected homologue in the fragmented part produced by the factory worker whose divided activity maintains the most abstract relation to the total process in which it functions. The part alone, in its inaccessible relation to the whole, appears irreducible to what is known; it resembles nothing familiar, even as it bears the imprimatur of an entire system of production that extends beyond

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<sup>104</sup> Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant Garde', p. 7.

cognition's reach. Its sudden appearance *as if* from outside that system might then suggest a species of "the new". Put somewhat differently, "the new" can be said to be alienated from the conditions that make it what it is, while simultaneously registering those conditions in an unprecedented way.<sup>105</sup>

Halpern's analogy of the disconnected part of a large-scale system of factory production sheds insight into the mechanical character of the relationship between the more preferable new and the undesirable old, alluding to a cold and unsympathetic perspective that the new would have towards the entity that had birthed it. Here, the new does not seem to want to acknowledge the influences of its own roots, possibly due to its singular determination to transform itself into an original assemblage whose qualities should not at all resemble those of its roots. Yet, the new is far from superficial. It is not a fast-food throw-away commodity that is always going to become outdated upon being replaced by another attention-grabber, hence Halpern's specification that the new cannot be equated to 'the news'. The new is a state that is always renewing and even reinventing itself into endless variations — a creative constant. The new may in fact open up wider avenues towards a consideration of the old in progressively critical ways, as opposed to resting upon a blank judgment that the new is just another stubborn child callously rebelling against a parent. Halpern describes this illuminating potential of the new as a 'registering [of] those conditions [of the old] in an unprecedented way.'<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Rob Halpern, 'Baudelaire's "Dark Zone": The *Poèmes en Prose* as Social Hieroglyphs; or The Beginning and the End of Commodity Aesthetics', in *Modernist Cultures* 4 (2009), pp. 1 -23 (p. 15).

<sup>106</sup> Halpern, p. 15.

## ***The Mummification Metaphor***

*If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex. The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. It was natural, therefore, to keep up appearances in the face of the reality of death by preserving flesh and bone.<sup>107</sup>*

The death of the new from the old then leads to a symbolic convergence between the plastic arts and mummification, as expressed by film critic and theorist André Bazin (1918 – 1958) who suggests that visual creations constitute an escapist form of immortalisation. Mummification is a renewal — and indeed a reinvention — of the body into a symbolically frozen state transcending the maneuvering hands of time. Preserving the body into a semblance of physical permanence after the last breath had been drawn constitutes a progressive aspect of avant-garde in that such a preservation 1.) elongates the materiality of the body — inevitably causing the body to compete with linear time, as the mummy’s purpose is precisely to *outwit* time — and 2.) conducts the body to take a direction completely divergent to, almost violating of, the irreversibility of time.

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<sup>107</sup> André Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray (University of California Press, 2005), pp. 9 – 16 (p. 9).

The image of what was once a living and breathing body is captured into what resembles an eternally sleeping status where it can be kept and cared for, as if the spirit that had once inhabited that body is not actually treated as a memory but rather as an eternal presence, especially since the spirit's own image (the mummy) is here to stay in a supposedly permanent manner. The body no longer reflects the imperfections of the human to whom physical death was an absolute certainty. On the contrary, the mummified body must have attained a certain level of perfection — after all, among the many reasons to mummify a body is the fact that it must have belonged to person who was distinguished in some way — in order to be worthy of being preserved through methods especially designed to prevent decay.<sup>108</sup> Whether the mummy symbolises the reversibility or transcendence of time, it is living proof that time's linear determinant has been snatched away. Time no longer has the power to age something nor to deteriorate it into inevitable perish. Viewing painting, sculpture, and other plastic arts as metaphors of mummification is to recognise that an image of a certain moment in time has been extracted and preserved — saved even — from the passing of time. The physical dimension may indeed be governed by the very fact that time cannot be stopped; but in the consideration of the mummification metaphor, time truly must come to a stand-still, as the plastic arts bring forward a *new dimension* that is always branching away from time's irreversible, yet conventional, behaviour. The mummification metaphor turns the forward movement of time into an *old pattern*, while the mummy's preservation of the body — which is a very literal packaging of a

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<sup>108</sup> 'In some groups such as the Incas, Egyptians and (via effigies) the Romans, mummification acted to enhance the power of a central, governing authority. In others the population gained physical security by granting status, reflected in mummification. Still others employed mummification to exploit the power of, or to appease, the deceased's spirit.' — Arthur C. Aufderheide, *The Scientific Study of Mummies*, p. 36.

moment in time — constitutes a *new interpretation* of how time can be manipulated. It then comes as no surprise that the mummifying aspect of the plastic arts becomes even more exaggerated in photography and cinema:

Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model.<sup>109</sup>

Rather than viewing images as reproduced imitations of reality, Bazin suggests that photography and cinema constitute models of a deep-seated need to keep reviewing memories, as though they are not memories of times past but more like captured moments concurrent with the actual moment in which the individual is being exposed to the images. The flaws and deficiencies in photographic images remain secondary to the fact that those images serve as an embalming of memories — concretised transformations of moments that would normally and even worse, helplessly, pass by otherwise. Thus, Bazin does not consider the external quality of the images to be as important as their innate meanings, causing him to relate an image's inner essence to the

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<sup>109</sup> Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema?*, p. 14.



enchantment of old family pictures. Evidently, he was writing in an era when photography and cinema were mostly monochrome. Yet it is this precise quality that shows what the normal naked eye cannot do, and that is to interpret the world in black-and-white with a very wide range of greys incorporating all manner of subtleties and contrasts. Because of this differentiation between monochrome photography (and cinema) and the coloured nature of external physical reality as translated through the senses, he interprets family portraits as ghostly, strangely captivating, and transcending naked vision:

Hence the charm of family albums. Those grey or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not, however, by the prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption.<sup>110</sup>

Ultimately of course, there is no separation between photography and the rest of the arts, for it is the concept of eternity we are considering, photography just as much as the other arts has every capacity to imprint itself upon that aspect of memory which remains detached from linear time (e.g. *illo tempore*). What does distinguish photography (and in that connection, cinema) is its recording mechanism that captures far more than the external appearances, causing photography

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<sup>110</sup> Bazin, p. 14.

to constitute much more than plain imitation. Photography retains the intertwining of mental and emotional states — all the subtle energies that have assembled to create that unrepeatable moment — that very strangely connects the spectator with the subject of the photograph, regardless of whether or not the subject (be it person, place, or object) still carries on a physical existence. Thus, nostalgia comes in to play a significant role in the basic need to treat specific moments in the past not as an actual past, but rather as cherished records that can be re-played over and over indefinitely. Photography and cinema prove that (captured) models of those moments can be *selected*. The selection of images and the methods by which they are composed determine the nature of photography and cinema, further showing that these are media where the exhibition and sequencing of images are subject to control or at least to deliberate creative organisation. Such media convey preferences and ideals that have undergone processes of selectively sifting and sorting through — the editing process being the clearest example (and of course in our contemporary times, photographic manipulation is possibly at its height). And still, everything boils down to the element of ultimate simplicity, and that is the recording function — the proof that nostalgia cannot remain a mere yearning for the more idealistic aspects of the past, but is instead transformed into a visual embodiment of a temporal ‘pause’ — a pause in every sense of the word because the flow of time is halted in a photographic image. The allusion here to Eliade’s concept of paradisiac nostalgia becomes all the more evident:

...Eliade finds that ‘the paradisiac myths’ all speak of a ‘paradisiac epoch’ in which primordial beings enjoyed freedom, immortality, easy communication with the gods, etc. Unfortunately, they lost all this because of ‘the fall’ — the primordial event which caused

the ‘rupture’ of the sacred and the profane. These myths help *homo religiosus* to understand his or her present ‘fallen’ existence and express a ‘nostalgia’ for that ‘prefallen’ Paradise.<sup>111</sup>

Significantly, the symbolic return to the primordial occurrence — which is through ritualistic hierophany — resembles the mummification metaphor in many aspects, especially in the intention to step outside of normal time in order to enter into another dimension where the rules of linearity and sequential chronology do not govern. Physical death of the body is evidently a ‘fall’, but what mummification does is return the body to its ‘pre-fallen’ state. Does it follow though that the physical life that had once inhabited the mummified body can be considered a symbolic equivalent to the state of pre-fallen paradise? There is no straight-forward answer, as there is nothing to guarantee the quality of the life that had once inhabited the body, while ‘paradise’ would always refer to an idealised state (‘freedom, immortality, easy communication with the gods’<sup>112</sup>) that is generally consistent and not bound to the suffering of loss and grief. A round-about answer however is that the mummification metaphor stands for an eternal state of *intactness*, a description which can just as easily apply to the idea of paradise. Thus, the mummified body symbolises that state of paradise towards which the life that had left it is destined. If the mummification metaphor constitutes a *new interpretation* of how time can be manipulated considering that its powers of irreversibility are now stolen from it, then paradise — an elevated state situated in *illo tempore*, which is a mythical time eternally resting *outside* of

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<sup>111</sup> Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>112</sup> Allen, p. 129.

ordinary, linear time — would just as easily be subject to new interpretations. Bazin's association of the mummification metaphor with the plastic arts goes to show that the predisposition to progress *beyond* any and all imposed changeabilities and consequences dictated by time is certainly a pre-modern one, which also means that the avant-garde tendencies inherent in the mummification metaphor are just as pre-modern. Forward movement as a general principle of progressing beyond known borders therefore does not necessarily comply nor align with the incessant forward movement that is bound to the specifications of time. We must keep in mind here that linear time constitutes the 'rules of the game' governing the physical dimension, causing such linearity to become a very rigid construct. And it is not in the nature of avant-garde to conform to rigidity of any order, again considering that avant-garde can essentially be defined as creative rebellion. Bazin's mummification metaphor deeply reflects a much broader, more encompassing definition of avant-garde, especially since mummification constitutes an *exception* to the consequences of linear time, and the avant-garde is about creating exceptions to the rules. Just as mummification expands our conceptions of how time can affect us and the rest of physicality, being an exception to the consequences of linear time opens up endless possibilities as to how *illo tempore* can encompass newness and originality. The fact that the ways of the archaic are much more closely aligned with mythical patterns is almost irrelevant to the avant-garde principle that newness and originality (even as they take the form of influential movements) can be found in a vast range of phenomena, regardless of the historical period in which they take place. Forward movement, within a more inclusive definition of avant-garde, would mean progressing beyond certain conventional and indeed limiting terms and conditions in order to seek new and improved states that are constantly expanding in themselves, for the newness itself must become a constant.

## *The Cross-cultural Avant-garde*

The majority of literature concerning avant-garde still places avant-garde in a solely Eurocentric context.<sup>113</sup> If we are to hold to the definition that avant-garde is creative rebellion, a Eurocentric restriction that suffocates intercultural exchange does not at all align with such a definition which proposes a constant expansion of creative boundaries. In the Introduction to *Not the Other Avant-garde*, James Harding and John Rouse clearly lay out that the name of their anthology is designed to question conventional sources of authority, especially to establish a new

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<sup>113</sup> Correspondingly, Yoo Yo-han observes Eliade's mission to present perspectives that push outside conventional parameters of Western scholarship:

Paradoxically, those opponents of Eliade who criticize Eliade's theories as Western constructs simultaneously attack Eliade's refusal to accept the dominant West-centered perspective. It is interesting that the criticisms of the three scholars are quite contradictory to each other: Dubuisson claims that Eliade was an elitist; McCutcheon alleges that he was fascistic; Wasserstrom argues that he was anti-cultural. However, they have in common the attempt to explain Eliade's refusal to adapt himself to the dominant West-centered perspective. Eliade's opponents who stick to this perspective strictly disapprove of any approach that alludes to that which falls outside of "the empirically observable world of happenstance, material objects, and social interactions"...which constitutes the object of Western scholarship. However, this limitation of the field of academic study, which Western scholarship has adhered to since the Enlightenment, radically denies the longstanding Eastern academic tradition, without leaving any room for the consideration of the Eastern intellectual capability.

Most of all, they are denying the longstanding intellectual tradition of the East by implying that the concept of religion used in the East is merely Western transplant...East Asians have always subjectively and actively accepted, filtered and developed the Western concepts: they were never simply passive. If the concept of religion had been totally Western, it could not have been accepted by East Asians.

— Yo-han Yoo, 'The Hidden Intentions of Eliade?: Re-reading critiques of Eliade from the perspective of Eliade's expectation of the history of religion', in *종교와 문화*, 11호 (2005), pp. 223 – 244 (p. 231).

avant-garde model operating *beyond* Eurocentric biases: ‘...this title suggests new cultural directions and invites a consideration of the work of experimental artists from around the globe. Playing upon the notion of “the Other”, it suggests that we reconsider the cultural boundaries that have historically demarcated scholarly conceptions of the avant-garde, for in doing so we can lay the foundation for a substantially retheorized notion of the avant-garde.’<sup>114</sup> The task is to accomplish a greater inclusiveness expanding avant-garde territory:<sup>115</sup> ‘Our aim is to move from

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<sup>114</sup> James M. Harding and John Rouse, eds., *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 1-2.

<sup>115</sup> Considering such erratic tendencies that sway the meanings of the label, it would then come as no surprise that the term ‘avant-garde’ has always been confronted with skepticism which questions what exactly such labels actually stand for. Charles Baudelaire’s criticism of the label describes avant-garde as a lame linguistic construct imposing a brainwashing effect on the masses — an inept positing of a category that is intellectually impotent, repetitively bland, and almost gratuitous:

On the Frenchman’s passionate predilection for military metaphors. In this country every metaphor wears a moustache...

All these resounding expressions are applied, as a rule, to tavern pedants and idlers...

More militant metaphors:

‘The poets of combat.’

‘The vanguard of literature.’

The weakness for military metaphors is a sign of natures that are not themselves militant, but are made for discipline — that is to say, for conformity — natures congenitally domestic, Belgian natures that can think only in unison. (Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, p. 48)

Baudelaire’s insertion of satirical mockery that every metaphor wears a moustache clearly shows an annoyance with the distorted usage of the metaphor. Making fun of the moustache as symbolic of a uniform packaging of every metaphor in the country, it can be interpreted that underneath such societal insults is a demand for a constructive definition of avant-garde that can actually be put into practical use,

a Eurocentric to a transnational conception of the avant-garde — one which recognizes that the sites of artistic innovation associated with the avant-garde tend to be sites of unacknowledged cultural hybridity and negotiation.’<sup>116</sup> Thus, it becomes even more important to discern the *constant principles* governing the vast range of phenomena around the world considered to carry the avant-garde signature.<sup>117</sup> Harding and Rouse’s suggestion of experimentation and contestation<sup>118</sup> in avant-garde phenomena means that boundaries must be translucent, allowing open channels of permeation so that components belonging to both sides can freely meet without obstruction, and from thereon combine to produce a transformative outcome. Correspondingly, Eugene Eoyang’s essay ‘Polar Paradigms in Poetics’ offers a rarely acknowledged perspective concerning the extreme contrast between the Chinese inclination to use soft, even porous-looking lines to compose paintings and the Western tendency to be oriented towards inflexible and

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rather than merely remaining a sweeping label to be applied to fleeting attention-seekers. Furthermore, he gives a fair indication that metaphorical militancy should not be restricted to discipline, conformity, and narrowness which characterise the literal military code of following orders.

<sup>116</sup> Harding and Rouse, *Not the Other Avant-garde*, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> ‘Essays in this anthology demonstrate that Indian, Middle Eastern, Mexican, Argentinean, Japanese, and African cultures have co-opted European text and performance traditions not in moments of deference to or affirmation of those traditions, nor in moments of subordination to a literary culture that “govern[s]...from a distance”, but rather in gestures that have taken great and irreverent liberties with those traditions, that subvert their governing authority, and that have radically modified and adapted them to their own cultural and political ends.’ (*Not the Other Avant-garde*, p. 11.)

<sup>118</sup> Harding and Rouse, p. 3: ‘As a site of experimentation, contestation, and indeed as a mark of hybridity, the term *avant-garde* is less fixed than in flux, and its contested status invites a discussion about whether the avant-garde is fundamentally and ideologically tied to a Eurocentric cultural sensibility or whether the existing histories of the avant-garde have privileged a Eurocentric framing of practices that were always already present in a variety of unacknowledged forms across the spectrum of world cultures.’

confining categorisations. In Chinese ink painting, the contrast between the painted area and the unpainted is characterised by widely varying degrees of darkness/concentration and dilution/lightness in ink application, and even then the boundary is defined by blurred, indistinct edges, unlike the case for the sharp, clearly cut lines used in Western writing and drawing media. The water agent integral to ink painting ensures that the degrees of dilution and concentration are characterised by infinite diversity and subtlety, with those varying degrees constantly overlapping to produce increasingly new combinations — perhaps the most sophisticated transformative quality uniquely possessed by the water element:

In the West, since the introduction of papyrus,<sup>119</sup> writing has involved a sharp edged, beveled instrument, which scratches the hard surface of the bark to make an impression. The lines it draws are incised, with only limited latitude in the width of the stroke. In China, however, the instrument from at least the Shang Dynasty has been the brush, and the “tablet” on which writing takes place is not a smooth surface, like bark or papyri, but textured and absorbent, as in rice paper, or silk cloth. The lines of the brush are flexible, and the action of the writing instrument is flowing and requires little pressure. Where the pen requires force and pressure to make an impression and to make a mark, the action of

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<sup>119</sup> ‘Papyrus was used among the early Greeks but it did not come into general use until after the time of Alexander the Great, when it was exported from the ports of Egypt. It is not known when papyrus was first used in Italy, but under the Empire there was a great demand for it. It was then employed not only for making books, but for domestic purposes, correspondence, and legal documents. It is said that during the reign of Tiberius the failure of the papyrus crop almost caused a riot.’ — Adèle M. Smith, ‘Materials Used by Ancient Peoples: Papyrus, Parchment, and Vellum Paper’, *Reader in the History of Books and Printing*, ed. by Paul A. Winckler (Englewood, Colorado: Information Handling Services, 1978; repr. 1980), pp. 37 - 50 (p. 42).



the brush is quite the opposite: the slightest contact with the surface leaves a mark. The modulations of the line are much more varied with a brush than with a pen, and the rhythms of a brush stroke are much more expansive: they admit of more stylization than is possible with a pen.<sup>120</sup>

In the Western example, the binaries have a pronounced barrier between them, and there is no latitude for interpenetration. The barrier does not even allow for a semblance of being porous, which goes to show that even though the binaries *co-exist*, there is no permissiveness for an *interrelationship* as such. Furthermore, the barrier is distinctly narrow due to the pointedness of the pen. This inflexible instrument must then scratch or cut into the surface of the bark, causing inevitable friction, thus presenting the whole process of writing and drawing as a pressurised application where the materials used are harshly rubbing against each other. The angles and contours of each line and letter are made distinct, as the pen hardly allows any leeway for more subtle designs due to the exposure of hard objects. In the Chinese example, differing qualities do not actually have a barrier between them, but more of a metaphorical membrane composed of pores and passages allowing the smooth flow of information exchanged between both sides of the membrane. An ink painting of a black coat for instance would not actually be completely black, although of course one can say much the same thing about European oil paintings of black coats. The significant difference lies in the way in which an ink painter would use varying amounts of water to create a wide range of ink dilutions and concentrations. The different mixtures would then be used to create a painting of a very richly layered black coat, where there

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<sup>120</sup> Eoyang, 'Polar Paradigms in Poetics: Chinese and Western Literary Premises', p. 12.

are subtle contrasts between the shades, contours, folds, and even the lighting falling upon the coat from different angles — subtle in a sense that these details seem to be flowing into each other due to sophisticated manipulation of ink dilutions and concentrations. Even the instruments exposed to each other to produce ink paintings do not have any hardness about them, as the brush and the easily permeated texture of the paper or cloth both embody and generate such pliability that the painting process unfolds through lightness of contact. Whereas the pen cuts narrow lines into the bark distinguishing the shape of what is drawn or written with sharp engraving, the effect of the brush fluidly captures the shape of a character no matter how complex the form. Significantly, the Chinese example constitutes an accurate metaphor for the new avant-garde model. Just as the ink and the absorbent material upon which it is painted interact intimately to create transformative effects unique to such a fusion, the new avant-garde model views intercultural interactions as literally and metaphorically ‘melting into each other’. An example of such an avant-garde phenomenon can be found in the writings of André Breton and Antonin Artaud, where they propose a solution that lies in the East for many deep-rooted problems of intellectual and emotional blockage poisoning the modern Western cultural mentality:

Orient, victorious Orient, you who have but a symbolic value, do with me as you will, pearl-colored Orient! In the flow of a sentence as much as in the mysterious wind of a jazz tune, let me recognize your projects for the coming Revolutions. You, the dazzling image of my dispossession, Orient, beautiful bird of prey and innocence, I implore you

from the depths of this realm of shadows! Inspire me, so that I may be the one who no longer has a shadow.<sup>121</sup> (September 1924)

Correspondingly, Artaud regards the modern West as an ultimate enemy, all the while exalting the traditions of the East as the saviour of the West: ‘Grant to us, address to us with your wisdoms, in a language which our contaminated European minds can understand, and if necessary change our Spirit, fashion for us a perception wholly attuned to those perfect summits where the Spirit of Man suffers no longer.’<sup>122</sup> His sweeping idealisation of the perfecting of the Spirit as a detachment from the turmoils of the external world — a tradition taught by the East —

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<sup>121</sup> André Breton, *Break of Day*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti and Mary Ann Caws (University of Nebraska Press, 1934; repr. 1999), p. 20.

‘André Breton’s declarations and the numerous political views pronounced by the surrealists during the Rif War (1919-26) in Morocco marked a turning point in their thinking and awareness of the Orient, which partially explains the central place that the Orient occupies in the surrealist imagination. The Orient, like Artaud’s Mexico, is a magical realm and part of the “new myth” proclaimed by Breton and his group in the text *Rupture inaugurale*, on June 21, 1947...

...For Breton, the Orient will henceforth be at odds with the rational West; he proposes an idealized form of Eastern thought as an antidote to the evils of Western civilization. Breton’s prophecies echo those of Artaud who contributed to the same myth opposing the rational mind to the culture of the Other. Artaud and Breton, like many other intellectuals between the two World Wars, pondered the question of the Other; they responded to the “call of diversity” which...corresponds to the first steps leading to a reflection on alterity in the West.’ — Martine Antle, ‘Surrealism and the Orient’, in *Surrealism and Its Others: Yale French Studies* ed. by Katherine Conley and Pierre Taminiaux (Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 4 – 16 (pp. 4-5).

<sup>122</sup> Artaud, ‘Address to the Dalai Lama’, *La Révolution Surréaliste*, no. 3 (April 1925), in *Surrealism*, ed. by Herbert Read (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1936; repr. 1971), p. 59.

only goes to magnify Artaud's hostility towards the modern secular West. And still, despite the intensely discordant nature of his proposition, the Chinese ink painting constitutes an effective metaphor for the intercultural exchange<sup>123</sup> that he had envisioned, essentially because he is re-conceptualising cultural boundaries to be entirely characterised by the fluid, transparent motions that can be likened to abstract lines constantly susceptible to absorbing into each other.

Moreover, the fluid nature of such boundaries means that they are completely open to being moulded and layered into an infinite variety of shapes and forms, forms that are characterised still by a wider range of complexities in interrelationships. Thus, Artaud's message may have been predominantly motivated by his oppositional position towards the culture that had conditioned him, but the message itself remains one of seamless fusion of components that may outwardly seem to conflict against each other.

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<sup>123</sup> Correspondingly, Hannah Higgins explains the Fluxus philosophy of intercultural exchange:

Where one set of modern movements might be identified by their ability to express a national gestalt (German Expressionism, American Painting, Italian Futurism, etc.), the other trajectory is rightly described in opposition to these. The other stream, which might be called the avant-garde and which routinely dips into and out of the other (much as a stream bends around stones), is self-consciously transnational, doing its best to transgress and ignore national boundaries, nationalist gestalts, and the other sundry forms of centrist political and economic organization that characterized the modern era. (Higgins, 'Border Crossings: Three Transnationalisms of Fluxus', in *Not the Other Avant-garde*, p. 265.)

...Fluxus artist and resident historian Ken Friedman describes Fluxus in transnational terms...: "When it came time for America to stand on its own in the international art world, however, politics, economics, and political economics dictated that Abstract Expressionism be treated as some kind of uniquely American triumph," which was rejected by Fluxus artists. Friedman continues, "It is the other tradition that influenced Fluxus, a tradition that has inevitably been neglected because it is antinationalistic in sentiment and tone and practiced by artists who are not easily used as national flag-bearers." (Higgins, pp. 265-6)

## Chapter 2

### *Artaud's film theory and theatrical philosophy*

*The mind moves beyond the power of representation. This sort of virtual power of the images probes for hitherto unused possibilities in the depths of the mind. Essentially the cinema reveals a whole occult life with which it puts us directly into contact. But we must know how to divine this occult life. There are better means than a succession of super impressions for divining these secrets of the depths of consciousness. Raw cinema, taken as it is, in the abstract, exudes a little of this trance-like atmosphere, eminently favourable for certain revelations.*<sup>124</sup>

Artaud's 'raw cinema' — his idealistic cinema which is synonymous to sacred cinema or mythical cinema — is entirely defined by the principle that existence is multi-dimensional, and that each dimension influences the one intersecting into its fabric, much like a cooperative web of interconnectedness where corresponding imprints (not necessarily identical, but conveying some sense of equivalence) are produced across dimensions. An image from this raw cinema should convey the intense power and meaningfulness of a filmed object, in such a spontaneous yet precise way that the non-physical streams of information that have converged to bestow the object with such power can actually be *intuited* by an audience. This process of intuiting revolves around the images' *resonating powers* of generating symbolic correspondences that truly do

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<sup>124</sup> Artaud, 'Witchcraft and the Cinema', in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 66.

move an audience without them having to be instructed that they must be affected in any way. Intuition must forego those suspicions arising from the intervening faculties of logic as to what the image is *supposed* to mean or what kind of response is it *supposed* to produce. Artaud's ideas concerning his scenario *The Seashell and the Clergyman* suggest that the meanings of an image should be *latent*, coming forth from *within* the filmed object, as opposed to attaching themselves to acquired meanings externally imposed by societal standards of comprehensiveness:

When writing the scenario of *The Shell and the Clergyman*, I considered that the cinema possessed an element of its own, a truly magic and truly cinematographic element, which nobody had ever thought of isolating. This element, which differs from every sort of representation attached to images, has the characteristics of the very vibration, the profound, unconscious source of thought.<sup>125</sup>

Artaud first alludes to a conventional system of acquired symbols that becomes exhausted through over-usage, as there are limits to the extent to which misaligned information can impose itself upon objects (or persons or places) that already have far more *authentic* symbolic potential bound to an infinite mythical source. He states that 'The mind moves beyond the power of representation'<sup>126</sup>, suggesting that once a certain status quo has served its purpose, there is an innate predisposition to transgress those long established boundaries, as an individual who must

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<sup>125</sup> Artaud, 'The Shell and the Clergyman', in *Collected Works*, vol.3, p. 63.

<sup>126</sup> Artaud, 'Witchcraft and the Cinema', in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 66.

always refer to such a system of acquired representations would more than likely tire of it with time. With that, Artaud presents the mythical or the ‘occult’ level of consciousness — a predominantly uncharted realm (‘hitherto unused possibilities in the depths of the mind’<sup>127</sup>). He proposes a dream cinema that operates from an innate tendency to continuously reach beyond immediate physicality in order to attain a self-defined freedom where phenomena can be magically conjured through creative direction of the imagination:

It [the magical cinematographic element] surreptitiously breaks away from the images and emerges from their association, their vibration and their impact, not from their logical, connected meaning. I thought it was possible to write a scenario which ignored knowledge and the logical connection of facts, and would search beyond, in the occult and in the tracks of feeling and thought for the profound motives, the active and obscure impulses of our so-called lucid acts, which always *maintaining* their evolutions in the domain of sources and apparitions. It is to show how far the scenario can resemble and ally itself with the *mechanics of a dream* without really being a dream itself, for example. It is to show how far it restores the pure work of thought. So the mind, left to itself and the images, infinitely sensitised, determined to lose nothing of the inspirations of subtle thought, is all prepared to return to its original functions, its antennae pointed towards the invisible, to begin another resurrection from death.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Artaud, ‘Witchcraft and the Cinema’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 66.

<sup>128</sup> Artaud, ‘The Shell and the Clergyman’, in *Collected Works*, vol.3, p. 63.

A cinema conveying the structure of a dream ‘without really being a dream itself’ remains a highly ambiguous concept. It seems to imply that the dream *itself* — likely to be referring to the dream which occurs during sleep — has certain limitations that the dream cinema should forsake in order to establish its own definition of an authentic dream-state. Afterall, the dream which occurs during sleep — while clearly a product of what the deeper levels of the consciousness have extracted from waking life — is predominantly uncontrollable, and far less subject to the deliberate direction of the individual experiencing such a dream. So if interpreted in this manner, the dream cinema may favour spontaneity but tends to exclude the disruption of creative control. And yet there are still certain aspects of the dream structure that are imaginatively liberating, so it is *these* aspects that *should* be adopted in the dream cinema. Perhaps the most effective method of interpreting such a contentious ambiguity would be to decipher the following phrase concerning this cinema’s capacity to restore ‘the pure work of thought’. Emphasis upon the *purity* of the dream cinema means that there would only be a selection of those cooperative components that are aligned with the powerful mythical patterns. Here, we must look to Artaud’s theatrical philosophy for further elaboration on the differentiation between mythical purity and the redundant information clogging up the passage between the physical and higher dimensions. There is an important instance in “The Alchemical Theatre” where he uses the behaviour of dolphins as a metaphor for the opening — however temporary or fleeting — towards the oceanic depths of the mythical realm, yet also suggesting that such depths would be unreachable by a cultural construct dictating the dominance of the physical over the non-physical. In other words, the state of consciousness must release itself from falsity that the physical is more real than the non-physical, as it is the belief that the latter has no existence that cripples the imagination:



Where alchemy, through its symbols, is the spiritual Double of an operation which functions only on the level of real matter, the theater must also be considered as the Double, not of this direct, everyday reality of which it is gradually being reduced to a mere inert replica — as empty as it is sugar-coated — but of another archetypal and dangerous reality, a reality of which the Principles, like dolphins, once they have shown their heads, hurry to dive back into the obscurity of the deep.<sup>129</sup>

Whether we are considering Artaud's sacred cinema (which can also be referred to as true cinema, mythical cinema, raw cinema, and dream cinema) or sacred theatre, the bedrock principle governing the philosophies of cooperative inter-dimensionality is that physical creation begins from a non-physical level, not the other way round. While dolphins momentarily emerge from the depths, alluding to the idea that a grand mythical creation extends forth into manifested physicality, the ephemeral nature of such an enchanting materialisation goes to show that mythical elements would tend to hide from an external reality (often intensely secularised) that is incompatible and conflicting with the archetypal/mythical level of consciousness. Then again, if we consider the more general concept of hierophanic art (which is precisely what Artaud is describing here), the very structure of hierophany necessitates that the mythical dimension must to some degree conceal itself from the physical, rather than always displaying itself in full view. That is because if there is no concealment whatsoever, there can be no revelation. There is even

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<sup>129</sup> Artaud, 'The Alchemical Theater', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 48.

an implication that the convention of reproducing the mainstream ways of society resembles an artificial shell that does not contain any substance underneath that could possibly hold a connection with the mythical consciousness residing. Artaud's description of conventional theatre as 'empty' and 'sugar-coated' suggests that such theatre conveys a falsity, regurgitating pedestrian content that serves as mere tautology for societal mundaneness. And yet from another alternative point-of-view, perhaps there is still philosophical value in recognising and intensely feeling the acute contrast between the mythical and its most unpleasant oppositions. Here, Daniel Frampton describes possibly the most traumatic aspects of Artaud's early life that had given rise to the escapist fantasies inspiring his film theory and theatrical philosophy:

Antonin Artaud was born...in Marseille in 1896, and suffered throughout his life from neuralgia and depression (sparked by a severe attack of meningitis when aged four). He spent much of youth in a sanatorium — only interrupted by a spell in the army in 1916 (he was apparently discharged due to sleep-walking). He moved to Paris in 1920 and became an actor, playing Jean Paul Marat in Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, and the monk Jean Massieu in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Artaud's writings of this period trace an uneven progress from identifying a hidden life or waking dream in film, to finding an expression of the mind, and then the realisation that film is more a 'disruption' of normal thought and an escape from the mind. Artaud conceived of three kinds of cinema, and his version of 'pure cinema' (actively experimental) was the only one that took the form of the mind (if lacking emotion). The other two were narrative cinema, from basic psychology, executed along literary lines — a sort of 'venial hybrid

art’; and ‘true cinema’, a combination of narrative and pure cinema (way ahead of his cinematic time, the surrealist and actor was asking for a cinema that was a mix of plot and abstraction — as pure abstraction has little relation to the human).<sup>130</sup>

Frampton’s interpretation that ‘pure cinema’ lacks the element of emotion — which would mean that pure cinema exercises pure and exclusive mentation — is quite a point of interest, as such a state of lack is being used here to describe the kind of abstraction which cannot be identified as anything significant (i.e. no identification, which means that it bears minimal to no relation to the innate predisposition within the human consciousness to seek meaningful identification). It then follows that if there *is* to be a means of identification, emotion must then become a primary foundation in the accomplishment of success in identification, not *exclusive* emotion as such but emotion that is accompanied and qualified by mentation. Here, we must acknowledge the fact that the separation of emotion and mentation remains a specifically Western cultural attitude:

Another fundamental modal difference between Western and Chinese poetics relates to the “instrument” of feeling and the “instrument” of thinking, the seat of the emotions and the faculty of reason, generally regarded in the West as conventionally separable between the organ of the heart and the entity known as the mind. In the West, it is axiomatic to believe that the mind thinks, and the heart feels. . . In this premise, there are two possibly

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<sup>130</sup> Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy: a manifesto for a radically new way of understanding cinema* (Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 53.

factitious assumptions: 1) that emotion and mentation are separate or separable; and 2) that each can be assigned to either the head or the heart. . . These distinctions are left meaningfully vague in Chinese, which regards “*hsin*” as the seat both of emotion and of thought.<sup>131</sup>

Pure abstraction (which requires pure mentation) is not a viable option because it is not desirable to merely perceive an assemblage of shapes and forms without any consideration for what such an assemblage would stand for, as qualified by emotional understanding. There seems to be an implication here that human consciousness has an innate tendency to seek higher meanings (again, relating back to Eliade’s *homo religiosus*), and that if certain shapes and forms do not lead to this greater recognition (qualified by emotional upliftment or illumination), then those shapes and forms are just as good as redundant. Pure abstraction, as described by Artaud and as interpreted by Frampton, is not likely to be conducive towards any significant measure of meaningfulness, as the purity of shapes and forms standing for themselves alone would predominantly constitute a homogeneous surface — a state of qualitative sameness (which amounts to this pure abstraction) that does not invite deciphering and further contemplation. If

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<sup>131</sup> Eoyang, ‘Polar Paradigms in Poetics’, p. 13. Eoyang further explains that

There is, in Chinese aesthetics as well as in Chinese ethical teaching, a distrust of both pure mentation and pure emotion. In Western terms, the heart is a check to the coldness of the mind; the mind is a check to the fervency of the heart. But, even in this formulation there is a bias, for it assumes that two prior entities must somehow be brought together in a symbiosis, when in the Chinese view, the situation is quite the opposite. The two faculties are not two, but one, and it is their separation, either in abstract or concrete terms, that violates the wholeness of things and creates distortions that disrupt the natural order. (p. 13)

there is no path towards identification operating within the art form, the perceptual experience cannot be one where pleasure can be derived — this pleasure entirely assessed by an emotional guidance system which resides within all humanity (I will explain in the Conclusion that emotional subjectivity remains a determining foundation of the ways and attitudes of *homo religiosus*). The art form needs a certain degree of identification potential to serve as a conceptual anchor that would prevent the associated meanings from slipping into nowhere. In Artaud's true cinema (synonymous to raw cinema, sacred cinema, and mythical cinema), there is no such thing as an image without an objective meaning, which is why Frampton describes this cinema as a combination of 'plot and abstraction', as it is the plot that constitutes the core structure interweaving the relationships between things. Thus, the plot or the comprehensible narrative is the inspiring agent that transforms the abstraction into a system of qualities that makes sense, very much in alignment with the principle that there should be a balance between mentation and emotion. Pure abstraction all by itself cannot accomplish this balance, as 'pure abstraction has little relation to the human'<sup>132</sup> in its incapacity to generate emotional resonances. According to Frampton, Artaud's concept of true cinema — which is the balance between narrative and abstraction — is an attempt to convey the state of consciousness that uniquely operates within cinema (Frampton describes this state as 'how film can think'). True cinema sets the stage for the plot/narrative to *mould* the abstraction into a powerful manifestation:

In his essay 'Witchcraft and the Cinema' Artaud considers that the direct affect of images on the mind may be the key to understanding how film can think:

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<sup>132</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 53.

*the cinema is made primarily to express matters of the mind, the inner consciousness, not by a succession of images so much as by something more imponderable which restores them to us with their direct matter, with no interpositions or representations... There will not be one cinema which represents life and another which represents the function of the mind. Because life, what we call life, becomes ever more inseparable from the mind*<sup>133</sup> <sup>134</sup>

Through the film form, the non-physical is transmuted into what can be physically sensed (Artaud describes this inter-dimensional oneness as the ‘life’ that is ‘inseparable from the mind’). What was formerly not filtered through the perceptual faculties becomes interpreted through the *poetic sight*, as opposed to the plain sight. Only a transcendent state of consciousness, referred to as ‘trance’<sup>135</sup>, can truly experience the inspiration that the higher dimension is offering to the physical dimension — an instance where physicality becomes a tangible receptacle of the revelation. More importantly however, the revelatory qualities of raw cinema would necessitate it to possess a seductive style that can in fact transform the state of consciousness of whoever is watching into one that is more illuminated and open towards receiving information delivered across dimensions. Artaud describes this transformative quality as the ‘imponderable which restores’ mythical images and symbols to our receptive faculties ‘with no interpositions or representations.’ He is here proposing that the human consciousness already possesses a latent

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<sup>133</sup> Italicised by myself.

<sup>134</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 53.

<sup>135</sup> Artaud, ‘Witchcraft and the Cinema’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 66.

mythical level that can become activated through this raw cinema (and in this connection, through his idealistic vision of sacred theatre). Art becomes sacred art, as is the case for Balinese theatre, where the art form itself is influenced by, inspired from, and even channeled from the perspective of the gods. His writings on Balinese theatre uphold the kind of art that cannot be separated from the divine, meaning that there can be no art which lies *outside* of divinely inspired art; so non-sacred art then cannot be considered art:

It is a theater which eliminates the author in favor of what we would call, in our Occidental theatrical jargon, the director; but a director who has become a kind of manager of magic, a master of sacred ceremonies. And the material on which he works, the themes he brings to throbbing life are derived not from him but from the gods. They come, it seems, from elemental interconnections of Nature which a double Spirit has fostered.

What he sets in motion is the MANIFESTED.

This is a sort of primary Physics, from which Spirit has never disengaged itself.<sup>136</sup>

Artaud proposes a lack of distinction between the artist's creation and the divine creation. He specifies his definition of a divinely inspired creation as one which is directed by forces of nature operating with extreme directness in such a way that shows the unseen intensely accumulating its

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<sup>136</sup> Artaud, 'On the Balinese Theater', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 60.

energy to transform itself into the seen. These forces of nature possess an infinitely broader intelligence — its perceptual range far broader than the physical human senses. Artaud insists upon referring to such an intelligence as a ‘double Spirit’ whose powers of creation are significantly more magnified in efficiency than the normal human efforts to make things happen. Or more precisely, he is attempting to put aside the human *struggle* to make things happen as well as the human tendency to only monitor the concrete manifested results, rather than practice at being sensitive to the intuition that constitutes an important component of divine guidance — although of course the state of consciousness must adjust itself to become receptive to such guidance, hence Artaud’s referral to the ‘origins [of a theatre that are] alike in a secret psychic impulse which is Speech before words.’<sup>137</sup> In other words, this receptiveness can be accomplished by a withdrawal into a state that has virtually emptied itself of any acquired information and external conditioning that could hinder the divinely inspired intuition — very much like unlearning the unnecessary. He is not writing off the human as *inferior* as such, but there is an implication that the artist must *get out of the way* — as in, *put aside* the baggage of mental/emotional resistance — in order to be fully inspired by the relevant forces of nature. The artist then becomes a cooperative component to such a design whose intricacies reflect that of the interconnected web of nature, to such an extent that the word ‘channeling’ may be appropriate in describing this process by which the artist interprets such grand patterns of organisation, much of which cannot be seen by the naked eye. Leonard Pronko provides an account of how such an inter-dimensional process plays out in a Balinese performance:

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<sup>137</sup> Artaud, ‘On the Balinese Theater’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 60.



The Balinese performer, like the creators of the dances and dramas themselves, is in a sense anonymous. There are no stars..., and when the dancer takes the stage — which in Bali is anywhere — he becomes possessed by his part. Although occasionally he may dance for hours without realizing what specific character he is portraying (since the stories are sometimes decided upon only after the performance has begun), the dancer always serves as a vehicle for the dance; he never expresses himself. After having watched certain patently magical or ritualistic dances, one will be told that a god or a demon was dancing in the performer, who was entirely possessed. There are, indeed, little girls who, without ever having received dance training, perform the most complicated dances while in a state of trance, sometimes standing on the shoulders of male attendants.<sup>138</sup>

The question then is how avant-garde qualities can be discerned from such a phenomenon where a god or a higher power is being channeled through a medium, especially since Artaud's theory of revelation through sacred art and Pronko's supporting description do suggest that the medium loses their individual capacity through acting as a channel. The answer lies in Artaud's statement that 'They [the Balinese] victoriously demonstrate the absolute preponderance of the director (*metteur en scène*) whose creative power *eliminates words*.'<sup>139</sup> Here, he is associating the power to *transcend* conventional narrative with artistic originality, while conforming to such conventions constitutes a severe lack of originality. While the most meaningful of imaginations

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<sup>138</sup> Pronko, *Theater East and West: Perspectives Toward a Total Theater*, p. 13.

<sup>139</sup> Artaud, 'On the Balinese Theater', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 53.

may incorporate some elements of the linear structure of action and reaction, linear narrative would come far secondary to the innate predisposition to transmute mythical images and symbols into innovative manifestations: ‘an image, an allegory, a figure that masks what it would reveal have more significance for the spirit than the lucidities of speech and its analytics.’<sup>140</sup> He then presents an analogy of the ephemeral setting sun, hence inspiring the imagination to cooperate with the memory especially to continuously recreate such a transitory occurrence: ‘This is why true beauty never strikes us directly. The setting sun is beautiful because of all it makes us lose.’<sup>141</sup> The setting sun is a mythical symbol of a cyclical transition into a nocturnal phase which the world undergoes on a daily basis; so the actual occurrence is undeniably repetitious. However, despite the fact that the memory of the setting sun is being replayed, the fleeting aspect of a phenomenon which takes place during the transition from one part of the day to another is all the more cause for the imagination to continuously recreate *variations* of such a majestic and richly colourful nature-scape. This is so that the memory of an otherwise common and assured phenomenon (such as a sunset) can be kept alive, or more precisely can be kept in a constant state of *renewal*. Thus, the setting sun — or more precisely, the imaginative interpretation of the setting sun — constitutes an analogy for the imaginative aspect of the mythical level of the consciousness which remains inseparable from the broader perspective of the divine. In other words, the mythical consciousness is not *strictly* repeating its own archetypes and symbols, but is designed especially for imaginative interpretation. Artaud’s concept of a mythical consciousness suggests that the individual has an innate capacity to become a divine creator: ‘...far from believing that man invented the supernatural and the divine, I think it is

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<sup>140</sup> Artaud, ‘Oriental and Occidental Theater’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 71.

<sup>141</sup> Artaud, ‘Oriental and Occidental Theater’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 71.

man's age-old intervention which has ultimately corrupted the divine within him.'<sup>142</sup> He uses the idea of an 'inner consciousness' to describe that profound level of the consciousness which has limitless access to information from a transcendent source: 'To use it [raw cinema] to tell a story is to neglect one of its best resources, to fail to fulfill its most profound purpose. That is why I think the cinema is made primarily to express matters of the mind, the inner consciousness...'<sup>143</sup> He is not proposing to do away with story-telling altogether, although he is clearly encouraging an alternative approach to expressing the most meaningful imaginations with more poetic accuracy.<sup>144</sup> This means a greater detachment from societal standards of content organisation (i.e. the presentation of content in ways which society deems as proper and comprehensible):

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<sup>142</sup> Artaud, 'Preface: The Theater and Culture', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 8.

<sup>143</sup> Artaud, 'Witchcraft and the Cinema', in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 66.

<sup>144</sup> If for instance a certain film is to entirely feature a reciting of a religious text, there would be no denying that this particular film features sacred *content*. However, it would be a far stretch to consider the actual form as a *sacred film form*, precisely because of the entirely textual nature of the recording which hardly makes any use out of the cinematic visuality. Thus, the reciting of the religious text may as well be recorded into a non-visual medium, and there would be no denying that the recitation is fully delivered. Artaud indeed proposes that form *does* include content; content is a supporting component of form, but form itself is composed of unique properties that are not dependent upon the contribution of content (content which for all intents and purposes is not specific to any one form). If the unique properties are not present, the form would lose its identity, and thus no longer be the form that it is meant to be. An example can be found in Artaud's proposition to reduce the role of speech and the dominance of the written text in theatre (and also in film), precisely because these aural aspects are not at all medium-specific. The over-usage of aural aspects can come to diminish the authenticity and uniqueness of the respective medium in which they are featuring: 'It is not a matter of suppressing speech in the theater but of changing its role, and especially of reducing its position, of considering it as something else than a means of conducting human characters to their external ends...' ('Oriental and Occidental Theater', p. 72)

The film image, in its interlocking with the reality of the mind (as envisaged by Artaud), radically undermines the type of visual experience which can be associated with the mode of inscription characteristic of appearance... Artaud used the cinematic visual signifier in order to achieve a direct, immediate access to things, interrupting the mechanism of mediated representation and of reference. In fact, the unique cinematic quality, so closely related to the possibility of generating thought (according to Artaud), can neither be found in the indirect mode, the referential character of the appearance, nor can it be described in terms of 'semblance', i.e. 'a modification of the manifest, of something manifest which it pretends to be but is not.' In its ideal, unique manner, which Artaud endeavoured to disclose, film image eliminates both the *semblance* — i.e. only pretending to be, rather than actually being — and the mode of *appearance* — i.e. that of reference, of mere representation.<sup>145</sup>

Fotiade in fact succeeds in simplifying the main components of conventional cinema, according to Artaud: *semblance* and *appearance*, both of which are based upon an acquired comprehension previously instructed by societal norms concerning how things should or should be understood. There is a significant implication of the limitations associated with indirect methods of *imposing* meanings or rather indirect representation, again entirely characteristic of conventional cinema. On the other hand, Artaud proposes that the idealistic theatre (and in that connection, the

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<sup>145</sup> Ramona Fotiade, 'Pictures of the Mind: Artaud and Fondane's Silent Cinema', *Surrealism: Surrealist Visuality*, ed. by Silvano Levy (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1996; repr. 1997), pp. 109 - 124 (pp. 111-2).

idealistic cinema) arises from a latent mythical state, as though the performance itself (or in the case of cinema, the power of the images, their relationships, and the methods by which the images are composed and arranged individually and collectively) constitutes a creative interpretation of primordial memory. From this idea alone, we can already see the inspiration behind Eliade's *illo tempore* — the grand intentional source where ritualistic patterns are embedded. Paul Stoller traces Artaud's sacred theatre to a pre-manifestational dimension referred to as the 'pre-theatre' where a non-physical stage had already been set, especially to provide a basic structure — a system of meanings — for the manifested performance: 'He [Artaud] wanted to revert to what André Schaeffner called the "pre-theater", a ritualized arena of personal transformation, a project for a ritualized stage.'<sup>146</sup> This statement does imply that conventional theatre does not recognise such ritualistic patterns as carrying any validity, even though Eliade himself would be of a position that the mythical remains beyond resistance and contradiction resulting from analytical reasoning, an idea I had alluded to in Chapter 1. It must be specifically contextualised here that analytical reasoning is *not entirely* a hindering process that violates mythical intuition and imagination. However, analytical reasoning does have certain disruptive aspects that complicate the intuitive process that is always trying to reach into the mythical level of the consciousness. This innate yearning for a glimpse into one's mythical origins goes to show that there is a certain level of human consciousness that *does* indeed realise its own divine aspect, despite any and all external conditioning against this realisation.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 125.

<sup>147</sup> Artaud envisioned a revolutionary sacred cinema that rejects what he considered to be acquired symbols. These are socially constructed representations — visual, aural, and textual — that were a widespread component of Western mainstream culture of the 1920s. He refers to acquired symbols as

### *Mythical origin and sacred life force*

*The library at Alexandria can be burnt down. There are forces above and beyond papyrus: we may temporarily be deprived of our ability to discover these forces, but their energy will not be suppressed. It is good that our excessive facilities are no longer available, that forms fall into oblivion: a culture without space or time, restrained only by the capacity of our own nerves, will reappear with all the more energy.*<sup>148</sup>

Artaud suggests that there is a life force that can never be destroyed, even though its physical manifestations extending forth from the mythical origin undergo their own transitory phases of creation, growth, decline, and destruction. His description of an ancient culture, such as the library of Alexandria, that continues an even more purified existence after its physical destruction goes to show that he is a believer in the reincarnation of civilisations (i.e. the

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‘clear thought’ (‘Witchcraft and Cinema’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 66) which is subject to the fickleness of societal change and instruction — ‘clear’ in this sense very much read as shallow, lacking in originality and insight due to its dependency upon the trends of societal norms. *Acquired* symbols do not come with the recognition that meaning reaches any deeper than the externalised surface of social conditioning. On the other hand, *innate* symbols extend from an ‘imperceptible substance’ (‘Witchcraft and Cinema’, p. 66), which is essentially the pure sacred source:

Clear thought is not enough. It allocates a world which has been utterly consumed. What is clear is what is immediately accessible, but what is immediately accessible is the mere skin of life. We soon realise that this over-familiar life which has lost all its symbols is not the whole of life. And today is a time for sorcerers and saints, a better time than ever before. An imperceptible substance is taking shape, yearning for light. The cinema is bringing us nearer to this substance. (p. 66)

<sup>148</sup> Artaud, ‘Preface: The Theater and Culture’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 10.

reincarnation of collectives altogether, not merely the reincarnation of individuals). A destroyed civilisation making a return to the physical plane with even more power than before means that the non-physical dimension possesses a potent restorative quality. If the non-physical is a source from which physical manifestations emerge forth and to which their life force returns upon disintegration of the physical form, it follows that such a source would naturally compensate for what was taken away during the physical incarnation. Artaud further states that when the civilisation comes to *re-emerge* into a physical state, it will do so with even greater excellence in artistic and intellectual method and expression,<sup>149</sup> because the non-physical source to which such a civilisation had returned had fully replenished what this civilisation was previously deprived of, having undergone a cataclysm during its physical existence. According to Ofelia Ichim, the idea of a latent source containing powerful mythical patterns from which sacred manifestations arise (and withdraw into/return to when the time comes) has entirely influenced Eliade's *illoc tempore*: 'Artaud's innovative ideas manifested in many different forms of experimental theatre, like Living Theatre, Open Theatre, The Performance Group, Environmental Theatre are accepted by Mircea Eliade and find their way, with a real enthusiasm for this type of theatre, into the novel *Nineteen Roses* as well as short stories like *General's Uniforms*, *Incognito at Buchenwald*, *Adieu!*...Eliade — the novelist — also theorizes on the essence of performance art in *The Forbidden Forest* (we must not forget that he was also a playwright).'<sup>150</sup> Ichim further observes:

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<sup>149</sup> This *extreme directness* of creative expression constitutes the foundation for Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty: 'This Cruelty is a matter of neither sadism nor bloodshed... philosophically speaking what indeed is cruelty? From the point of view of the mind, cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination.' ('Letters on Cruelty', p. 101)

<sup>150</sup> Ofelia Ichim, 'Dramatic Elements in Two Novels by Mircea Eliade and John Fowles', in *Philologica Jassyensia*, an. II no. 1 (2006), p. 129 – 134 (p.129).

‘Mircea Eliade’s work is a retrieval of the mythical memory; two possibilities of reaching the primordial reality are religion and the theatre performance.’<sup>151</sup> Ichim also suggests a chronologically backward movement *on a linear timeline* in order to retrieve and creatively resurrect what had long been lost. This chronological backwardness does not at all mean that it is *qualitatively* backward; on the far contrary, the recollection of themes and images from a mythical past comes to generate artistic progress more than anything else: ‘The theatre performance is a sort of a catalyst for obtaining the anamnesis effect. Everything that happens on the stage is aimed at reintegrating the routine life into the sacred, thus revealing some essential moments from *illo tempore* or forgotten feelings.’<sup>152</sup> Within the idea of reintegration is an underlying avant-garde principle that even a *re-assemblage* of old components would produce a new result. An ‘old’ thing always contains potential for newness — as in, we may indeed find new seeds in old soil. The expression of originality and innovation through anamnesis also implies that there is a significant difference between the ‘old’ and the ‘outdated’. Even though the ‘old’ cannot be chronologically retrieved, the quality of being ‘old’ does not necessarily mean that it is also ‘outdated’ — meaning no longer a viable option to be put to further innovative use. It must be noted however that mythical/primordial time is not necessarily situated in the ‘past’ in the *linear* sense, although Ichim’s association of *illo tempore* with anamnesis (creative recollection) means that direct exposure to the mythical dimension would come as a result of well-practiced introspection — a direction of the focus inward, precisely to discover what had formerly seemed to be externally lost.

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<sup>151</sup> Ichim, p. 133.

<sup>152</sup> Ichim, p. 133.



### *Artaud's Animistic Cinema*

Artaud's ideas on film and theatre present both media as potential revelations of a higher intelligence, one which is both human-like and transhuman (as in, transcending the scope of human perceptual faculties). This animistic principle implies, if not directly proposes, that the divine life force resides in all manner of manifestations — people, objects, and places — causing such manifestations to have a greater purpose which expands beyond ordinary identification. Artaud's idealistic cinema not only makes no distinction between animate and inanimate, but whatever qualities of *life* normally assigned to the former, cinema may directly attribute them to the latter without any considerations of socially constructed restraints (restraints that would normally separate the animate from the inanimate):

In the cinema I have always distinguished a quality peculiar to the secret movement and matter of images. The cinema has an unexpected and mysterious side which we find in no other form of art. Even the most arid and banal image is transformed when it is projected on the screen. The smallest detail, the most insignificant object assume a meaning and a life which pertain to them alone, independently of the value of the meaning of the images themselves, the idea which they interpret and the symbol which they constitute. By being isolated, the objects obtain a life of their own which becomes increasingly independent and detaches them from their usual meaning. A leaf, a bottle, a hand, etc., live with an almost animal life which is crying out to be used.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Artaud, 'Witchcraft and the Cinema', in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 65.

The dullest, most commonplace thing is but one example of a depiction of an ordinary object, although of course not all things ordinary are ‘arid’ and ‘banal’. Such descriptions convey ordinariness to a certain extremity (perhaps to the point where the very *extremity* of the ordinariness quite inevitably places the ordinariness outside of its conventional ordinary terms) where the meaningless, the most devoid of interest, and that which is mundane to the point of incapacity to captivate are being extracted from their usual associations of unremarkability (in fact, boredom). In Artaud’s idealistic cinema, such extreme forms of ordinariness are sharply (and rather ironically) contrasted with *their own* potentiality to be transformed into images and film sequences imbued with sacred significance. The implication here is that the sacred potential lies latent in all things, even amongst those things that do not outwardly appear to carry any special or distinguished meaning about them (Artaud refers to such pedestrian, monotonous things as ‘the most insignificant object’<sup>154</sup>). If an object normally considered inanimate such as a bottle can be shown through the film form as possessing and expressing an animistic life force (Artaud also refers to this force as ‘an almost animal life’<sup>155</sup>), then sacred cinema has accomplished its purpose. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis implies that to convey an inanimate object in such a powerful way as to make it express the authentic ‘life’ within itself is also to extract it from its mainstream secular context, erasing from it all societally constructed (i.e. profane) associations which no longer serve the object’s ultimate sacred purpose:

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<sup>154</sup> Artaud, ‘Witchcraft and the Cinema’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 65.

<sup>155</sup> Artaud, ‘Witchcraft and the Cinema’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 65.

The important thing to note here is Artaud's intuitive sense of the cinematic apparatus as a mechanism which confers upon the film image the ability to signify non-referentially. Not a simple-recording — or even reproducing — device, the film apparatus isolates objects out of their habitual context, and giving them to us with a “singular force”, enable their representations to take on a life of their own, generating new meanings, meanings apart from conventional signifying systems or symbolization.<sup>156</sup>

Flitterman-Lewis's interpretation implies that the sacred life force of an object must be *allowed* to express itself through the film form, that it is not at all something that can be forced. The idea that Artaud's animistic cinema is entirely based upon intuitive understanding as well as *non-referential* signifiers goes to show that such directness and spontaneity in meaning-making do not necessitate any effort that would counter natural creativity. This is the kind of effort and control that would normally be involved in the (socialised) process of constructing *referential* signifiers (the *external* instruction that A must mean B, regardless of whether such instruction aligns with *intuitive* interpretation). Intuiting the innate meaning of an object (i.e. non-referential meaning-making) is an allowing of the life force to reveal itself without any need for external instruction. Eliade presents a similar perspective that — in an environment where the *overt* display of religious symbols and ceremonies is not commonplace (usually in a modern, secular

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<sup>156</sup> Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, 'The Image and the Spark: Dulac and Artaud Reviewed', in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, ed. by Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1987; repr. 1996), pp. 110 – 127 (p. 120).

setting) — the sacred remains latent (it can never possibly disappear altogether) yet *camouflaged* amidst appearances that are otherwise not known to constitute obvious exhibitions of sacredness:

The sacred and mythic are camouflaged in the banalities of everyday contemporary life. Eliade compares this with the traditional Japanese tea ceremony which — “like all other ‘paths’ (*do*): painting, poetry, floral art, calligraphy, archery, etc. — also constitutes a spiritual technique, for it places he who practices it in a ‘nirvanic’ state in his everyday life.” After providing some of the Japanese Buddhist context and how “the most natural and insignificant gestures become soterial actions,” Eliade concludes with the contemporary character of such conceptions and techniques. “It has never been more essential than it is today to reveal the transhistorical meaning and importance that is hidden in the depths of an existence condemned to be carried out *exclusively* in immanent and opaque banality. Its spiritual and religious significance, and thus the ‘salvational’ message of all experience, is camouflaged in the profane, in the flow of daily activities. To discover a transhistorical significance in them would be to decode them, to decipher the message they conceal.”<sup>157</sup>

The focus here is not so much upon the exposure of the physical senses to those things that *outwardly display* religious qualities in a manner that sets those sacralised objects and events *apart* from the surrounding ordinary environment. While we can normally differentiate between the more subtle hierophanies and the obvious hierophanies that are more distinct due to specific

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<sup>157</sup> Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, p. 274.

external properties, we must also recognise that hierophanies of the former kind tend to blend themselves into ordinariness much more smoothly, almost as an adaptive measure to minimise cause for disapproval and resistance from secular societal norms. However in the more subtle hierophanies (which Eliade and Allen are describing in the above quote), the metaphorical ‘ripple’ that the sacred creates upon the fabric of everyday life is comparatively calm and quiet with gradual effects. Thus, Artaud’s animistic cinema and Eliade’s idea of the sacred’s camouflaging capacities both dictate that there is no such thing as something that is inanimate. The sacred life force permeates all, and is constantly seeking to be expressed in infinite diversity. So without the construct of the inanimate (in fact, the very idea of the sacred life force would very much reduce the inanimate to a false construct), there can be no separation as such between animate and inanimate, and by extension sacred and profane (for there is no way that we can make a blanket assertion that the profane is ‘lifeless’). *Nothing* can be completely absent of sacred/animistic potential, precisely because everything that is anything exists in a reality that — in one way or another — can come to be described in cosmic terms. Eliade sums up the inherent — in fact, unsusceptible to being severed — relationship between an ordinary experience and a higher cosmic sacrality as ‘the ‘salvational’ message of all experience.’<sup>158</sup> In fact, the keyword here is ‘all’, referring to the foundational principle that the embedding of the sacred potential cannot be divided in such a way that favours imbuing sacred qualities into one area while discriminating against another. After all, Allen’s interpretation and Eliade’s theory (however contradictory within itself) may not fully articulate the idea of an all-pervasive, omniscient sacred life force, but the above passage certainly implies it, while Artaud remains the champion of the theory of such a life force.

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<sup>158</sup> Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, p. 274.

## ***Redefining the “Dream”***

*If the cinema is not made to interpret dreams or what pertains to the realm of dreams in conscious life, it does not exist...It [the cinema] must come closer and closer to fantasy, to a fantasy which appears ever more real, or else it does not exist.*<sup>159</sup>

Artaud's true cinema suggests an exclusive class of fantasy — exclusive in a sense that if cinema does not convey this class of fantasy, it cannot be considered true cinema. The important point then is to decipher what he means by the term 'real' which he uses to describe this idealistic fantasy. This is where it must first be noted that if the fantasy conveyed in true cinema is considered *real*, then the fantasy conveyed in conventional cinema would be considered *unreal*, keeping in mind that conventional cinema and the idealistic cinema are opposites. One way of interpreting this opposition between the *real* and the *unreal* is that the *real* is a constant value. The *real* remains so regardless of any and all external variables, while the *unreal* has no constancy and is loosely subject to and pulled into whatever directions dictated by external variables. Thus, the most significant point of contrast between conventional cinema and the idealistic cinema is that it is extremely difficult — if not impossible — to determine the foundation of conventional cinema, while the idealistic cinema does have a solid foundation that is *constant*. This oppositional relationship between the real and the unreal inevitably leads to Eliade's very similar position on the matter:

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<sup>159</sup> Artaud, 'Witchcraft and Cinema', in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, pp. 66-7.

We will limit ourselves to the statement that, among the “primitives” as among the moderns, the sacred is manifested in a multitude of forms and variants, but that all these hierophanies are charged with *power*. The sacred is strong, powerful, because it is *real*; it is efficacious and durable. The opposition between sacred and profane is often expressed as an opposition between the *real* and the *unreal* or pseudo-real. Power means *reality* and, at the same time, *lastingness* and *efficiency*.<sup>160</sup>

Ultimately, the nature of the mythical would come to offer thorough insights into the meaning of the ‘real’.<sup>161</sup> Here, it is important to discuss the extensive description of the idealistic theatre’s ‘absolute’ qualities (the absolute being synonymous with the true and the real), this considering that Artaud’s idealistic cinema and idealistic theatre are inextricably linked (‘There is no

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<sup>160</sup> Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, p. 130.

<sup>161</sup> ‘Myth has been studied not only by the historians but also by various other scholars of religion. For example, some anthropologists and sociologists have defined myth from the point of view of its social function. Scholars of religions belonging to the so-called Myth and Ritual school define myth from its ritual function. Some philosophers have defined it from the point of view of the evolution of human consciousness and related it to the development of man’s cognitive function or capacity. Other scholars have simply defined *myth* as a *false story*.

As a phenomenologist of religion, Eliade attempts to describe myth in such a way that it will, as far as possible, do justice to the “beliefs of the believers”, since the latter take their religious stories (myths) very seriously, i.e. as true, regardless of what the scientifically minded scholar may say about this attitude.’ — António Barbosa da Silva, *The Phenomenology of Religion as a Philosophical Problem* (Uppsala: CWK Gleerup, 1982), pp. 113-4.

difference between the cinema and the theatre'<sup>162</sup>). The idealistic theatre that Artaud upholds with exaggerated passion comes in the form of the Balinese theatre where the orchestration of images and gestures resonates so profoundly on the intuitive level that he seems to be alluding that such theatrical components become manifested extensions of that which has already been arranged and choreographed on a higher mythical level — the 'dream' level:

There is an absolute in these constructed perspectives, a real physical absolute which only Orientals are capable of envisioning — it is in the loftiness and thoughtful boldness of their goals that these conceptions differ from our European conceptions of theater, even more than in the strange perfection of their performances.

Advocates of the division and partitioning of genres can pretend to see mere dancers in the magnificent artists of the Balinese theater, dancers entrusted with the representation of unexplained, lofty Myths whose very elevation renders the level of our modern Occidental theater unspeakably gross and childish.<sup>163</sup>

Artaud suggests that the Balinese dancers serve as direct interpreters of powerful primordial patterns that unconditionally influence and inform the human consciousness, regardless of

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<sup>162</sup> Artaud, 'Witchcraft and Cinema', in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 67.

<sup>163</sup> Artaud, 'On the Balinese Theater', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 65.



whether we are consciously aware of it (Balinese theatre uses this very awareness to transform their performance into an avenue for the channeling of information between dimensions).

Psychological drama, when confronted with such moving expressions of mythical phenomena, becomes trivial.<sup>164</sup> The idealistic theatre (and in that connection, the dream cinema) conveys images and symbols that *echo* certain patterns within the mythical consciousness, causing such echoing to be immediately intuited by the spectator without the need for empirical justification:

Artaud wanted to break the hold of narrative film on the spectator's gaze and consciousness through a brand of cinema that would preserve the emotionality, passion, and spirituality of the creative process within the artifact, the completed film. As critic Sandy Flitterman-Lewis writes, Artaud wanted his films:

to create the impact of the dream instead of simply reproducing its irrationality. For him, then, the representation of a 'dream state,' in which the spectator's involvement was one of active participation, was the primary aim of his scenario [for *The Seashell and the Clergyman*].

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<sup>164</sup> Artaud's idealising of the Balinese theatre in exceedingly lofty proportions can be considered a tool which he uses to idolise the East *especially* as an attack against the West (conventional Western theatre of the 1920s being but one aspect to which he is aggressively opposed): 'Psychology, which works relentlessly to reduce the unknown to the known, to the quotidian and the ordinary, is the cause of the theater's abasement and its fearful loss of energy, which seems to me to have reached its lowest point...Stories about money, worry over money, social careerism, the pangs of love unspoiled by altruism, sexuality sugar-coated with an eroticism that has lost its mystery have nothing to do with the theater, even if they do belong to psychology.' ('No More Masterpieces', p. 77)

This marked for Artaud a return to a primordial moment that precedes symbols and the grammar of formal language. His cinema was concerned most specifically with the original source of the symbol, the primordial state in which image, thought, gesture, sound, sense, and emotion have not yet emerged in a definitive, symbolic form of linguistic expression, have not yet taken shape within a tightly ordered logical grammar, or language, of the “narrative” film.<sup>165</sup>

The clinging on to constructs of ordered language is presented here as an artificial, hindering, and even distorting practice that obstructs the directness that should characterise dream images in all their authenticity. The kind of language that Artaud undermines falls into the category of *socialised* language around which everyday dramas and disputes revolve.<sup>166</sup> Socialised language is not a programming that is (predominantly) exercised by those in the most preliminary stage of their development (e.g. newborn infants). To deny or suffocate the primordial mythical state which had existed *prior* to all such external instruction is to damage the imaginative consciousness at its base (‘a primordial moment that precedes symbols and the grammar of formal language’<sup>167</sup>). The impoverishment of pre-verbal (or pre-aural) reality deprives the human

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<sup>165</sup> J. M. Magrini, ‘Towards an Understanding of Antonin Artaud’s Film Theory: *The Seashell and the Clergyman*’, < <http://www.urn.org/magrini/artaud.pdf> >

<sup>166</sup> ‘Speech in the Occidental theater is used only to express psychological conflicts particular to man and the daily reality of his life.’ (‘Oriental and Occidental Theater’, p. 70)

<sup>167</sup> Magrini, ‘Towards an Understanding of Antonin Artaud’s Film Theory’.

from being a *whole* human being — one who is not only defined by surface occurrences and interactions, but who embraces their own multi-dimensionality, encapsulated here in the term ‘life’: ‘To break through language in order to touch life is to create or recreate the theater... This leads to the rejection of the usual limitations of man and man’s powers, and infinitely extends the frontiers of what is called reality.’<sup>168</sup> Correspondingly, Ramona Fotiade observes that ‘According to Paul Romain, another film critic of the 1920s, the identical nature of dreams and cinema finds theoretical support in Freud’s remark that dreams remain ‘untranslatable in words, [and] can only be expressed by means of images’.’<sup>169</sup> For while socialised language operates according to linear chronology (this is especially so that it can make sense of a wider audience), imagination operates in a manner resembling frames roughly marking the boundaries of film images. Those frames are not necessarily organised according to a linear timeline but can be shuffled about freely and arranged into diverse combinations. Linda Williams cites a small segment from one of Artaud’s film scenario’s, describing an actor who has sunken into a state of mental incoherence where the capacity to organise images and events into a linear chronology has diminished:

Artaud’s own attitude toward film is encapsulated in the fate of the hero of his first published scenario. In it an actor “has been stricken by a strange malady. He has become incapable of keeping up with his thoughts... He is at a loss for words; they no longer answer his call, and all he sees is a procession of images, masses of contradictory, disconnected images.”...

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<sup>168</sup> Artaud, ‘Preface: The Theater and Culture’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 13.

<sup>169</sup> Fotiade, ‘Pictures of the Mind: Artaud and Fondane’s Silent Cinema’, in *Surrealism*, p. 111.

This failure of words and the reasoning thought processes carried out by language is central to all of Artaud's work, not only his work in films.<sup>170</sup>

According to Williams' interpretation, what Artaud is attempting to undermine is the *linearity* of content more than anything else. Linearity in this sense refers to the way in which content — especially as verbally and aurally constructed — is organised according to a set of markers, all of which constrain the direction of time into a rather inflexible mode of past, present, and future. What Artaud is proposing however is an art form composed of images and occurrences that are concurrent, where linear time does not apply or applies only minimally. A certain thing is not merely a consequence of something that came before, but a certain thing affects multitudes of other things in a manner resembling liquid absorbing through any number of delicate, translucent layers. The former phenomenon of an effect logically following a cause undoubtedly conforms to the sequential nature of linear time. However, if we are considering the latter phenomenon of concurrent images in completely linear terms, the images would not make sense and may even appear to contradict each other, as can be seen in the case for the character's experience in Artaud's scenario. Since linearity does not provide all the answers to how such images should be interpreted, it is to the intuitive level that we must look. Here, Artaud's ideas on *The Seashell and the Clergyman* suggest that a film experience should seek the fusion between the objective meaning of an image and the resonating meaning generated from the intuition:

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<sup>170</sup> Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1981), p. 20.

*The Shell and the Clergyman* plays with created nature and tries to make it yield an element of the mystery of its most secret combinations. So we must not seek a logic or a sequence which things do not contain, we must interpret the intimate meaning of the images, the inner meaning which moves inwards from without. *The Shell and the Clergyman* does not tell a story, it develops a sequence of states of mind deduced the one from the other, as thought is deduced from thought without this thought reproducing the reasonable sequence of facts...Nothing exists except in terms of shape, volume, light, air — but above all in terms of a detached and naked sentiment which slips between the paths paved with images and reaches a sort of heaven where it bursts into bloom.<sup>171</sup>

An object depicted in an image should not be confined to the status of an ordinary object, but should be used to convey a greater state of being, hence his metaphor of the film image embodying a state of ‘heaven’. Thus, we must not view such an object as limited to its immediate shape and form, but rather we should consider the object’s *expanded*, multi-dimensional purpose. While the object depicted in an image serves as a vehicle through which a higher state of being reveals itself, the depiction almost places such an object in a position similar to that of a hieroglyph which conveys a sophisticated seamlessness between the outward structure and the inner essence. That is why Artaud insists to not impose meanings upon depicted images, but to seek the ‘inner meaning’ that lies latent within the object, waiting to be revealed.

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<sup>171</sup> Artaud, ‘Cinema and Abstraction’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 61.

## *Mythical Poetry*

Artaud associates conventionality with a confinement of application where only aural compositions produce poetry,<sup>172</sup> without any consideration of the aesthetic methods by which the actual written form is created. In other words, conventional writing does not take into account the possibly correspondence or disparity between the *internal meaning* of the writing and the *external structure* of the written form (e.g. the arrangement of letters, the organisation of the syllables in words as well as the length of each word). Artaud however does propose the imaginative expression of the innate convergence between structure and meaning, alluding to it in his analogy of Chinese acupuncture where affecting certain points in the physical body directs the course of the most subtle energies, much of which cannot be seen by the naked eye:

I propose to return through the theater to an idea of the physical knowledge of images and the means of inducing trances, as in Chinese medicine which knows, over the entire extent of the human anatomy, at what points to puncture in order to regulate the subtlest functions.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> 'It is in the light of magic and sorcery that the *mise en scène* must be considered, not as the reflection of a written text, the mere projection of physical doubles that is derived from the written work, but as the burning projection of all the objective consequences of a gesture, word, sound, music, and their combinations...the author who uses written words only has nothing to do with the theater and must give way to specialists in its objective and animated sorcery.' ('Oriental and Occidental Theater', p. 73)

<sup>173</sup> Artaud, 'No More Masterpieces', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 80.

Artaud is here attempting to translate such an idea of *physicalised spirituality* into theatrical terms (and in that connection, cinematic terms). He also uses the analogy of hieroglyphics where the supreme importance is placed upon the artistry of their written forms. His idea of hieroglyphics rests upon an idealisation of the succinct way in which a pictorial character observes the phenomenon it is encapsulating by displaying seemingly self-evident details directly associated with the respective phenomenon. He establishes a convergence between hieroglyphics and a theatrical language such as the pantomime, which he asserts should be a gestural reflection of the corresponding inner state:

By “unperverted pantomime” I mean direct Pantomime where gestures — instead of representing words or sentences, as in our European Pantomime (a mere fifty years old!) which is merely a distortion of the mute roles of Italian comedy — represent ideas, attitudes of mind, aspects of nature, all in an effective, concrete manner, i.e., by constantly evoking objects or natural details, like that Oriental language which represents night by a tree on which a bird that has already closed one eye is beginning to close the other.<sup>174</sup>

The written character representing night is an example of the fusion between poetry and intuition, as the character shows an outwardly simple depiction while alluding to night as a transitory phase placed along a grand temporal continuum. The poetic quality in this depiction (a

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<sup>174</sup> Artaud, ‘Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*’, in *The Theatre and Its Double*, pp. 39-40.

bird with one eye already closed and is beginning to close the other) lies in the way in which the bird retains a partial openness of one eye, suggesting that in its immediate state expressing all the subtleties of drifting between being awake and falling asleep, the bird is not completely closing itself to the outside world. The transition between dimensions has not yet been sealed. And so, the nocturnal phenomenon represented by such a written character is not at all defined by a temporal isolation severing the night from the other transitory phases which together compose a single day. Thus, it is the sense of soft and serene interconnection with the rest of the temporal realm — a partial but relaxed retaining of the remains of the day — which determines the poetic quality of the hieroglyph. In his application of this principle of physicalised spirituality, Artaud then proposes a ‘superior idea of poetry and poetry-through-theater which underlies the Myths told by the great ancient tragedians, capable once more of entertaining a religious idea of the theater (without meditation, useless contemplation, and vague dreams)...’<sup>175</sup> Such an idea of mythical poetry may sound as though it belongs to a distinguished order, as in being practiced in defined intellectual and social classes. Artaud does make a reference to the status of the ancient tragedians from whom myths were distributed among the greater community, so the idea of mythical poetry taking its place in higher intellectual life cannot be discounted. However, he does not at all turn such a powerful method of expression into a form of snobbery (unless of course, his position of using mythical poetry to undermine modern societal norms can be considered snobbish discrimination against the mainstream). Quite the contrary, he is significantly proposing that mythical poetry is *within us all*, and that there is no need for any imposed mediation for such poetry to be accessed intuitively.

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<sup>175</sup> Artaud, ‘No More Masterpieces’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 80.



## Chapter 3

### *The Sacred in Film Poetry*

*To change the role of speech in theater is to make use of it in a concrete and spatial sense, combining it with everything in the theater that is spatial and significant in the concrete domain; — to manipulate it like a solid object, one which overturns and disturbs things, in the air first of all, then in an infinitely more mysterious and secret domain but one that admits of extension, and it will not be very difficult to identify this secret but extended domain with that of formal anarchy on the one hand but also with that of continuous formal creation on the other.*

*This is why the identification of the theater's purpose with every possibility of formal and extended manifestation gives rise to the idea of a certain poetry in space which itself is taken for sorcery.<sup>176</sup>*

I am using Artaud's concept of spatial poetry as a theoretical platform for this chapter, especially to first establish that there is no differentiation between the sacred life force and the essential state of poetry. The idea that spatial poetry generates concrete consequences goes to show that hierophany is essentially poetic, and therefore must be experienced using a poetic approach,

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<sup>176</sup> Artaud, 'Oriental and Occidental Theater', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 72.

regardless of whether the experiencer is consciously aware that this is the approach they are taking. The notion that poetry must be confined to written and aural usage is *conventional* and outdated, as well as constituting a barrier between the written/aural medium and visual inter-dimensionality. This latter is a sophisticated ideal that Artaud intends to uphold, although it must be noted that visual inter-dimensionality as he conceives of it affects far more than the physical sense of sight, that it also reaches towards multi-sensory as well as extra-sensory awareness. The written and aural form does not at all need to be isolated, but can in fact extend itself to interact creatively with other media (without the need for each medium to lose its own unique properties), especially so that poetry becomes a mythical state that can be revealed and expressed through multitudes of perceptual faculties. Mythical poetry then is a conscious energy — a non-physical intelligence at its core — possessing a certain capacity for self-determination and self-direction in its potential to be shaped and moulded in such a manner that fills up a certain concrete space, while at the same time bestowing the respective occupied space with a life force that can be ‘felt’. The poetic force vibrates itself into a physical manifestation that can be seen and touched, and upon such a manifestation remain circulating in its own poetic manner within a concrete space. An artist who creates a poetic art form by using the components of mass, volume, and width of spatial relations is essentially harnessing a poetic force that is already available to be accessed from a non-physical dimension.

Maya Deren is perhaps one of the earlier filmmakers and theorists who sought to make use of the non-linear nature of poetry by expressing it in a medium entirely conducted by the arrangement of shifting frames and moving images. I will later show that this poetry not only

reveals a very unconventional notion of time, but it is also a chronology-defying poetry that has full capacity to allude to mythical or sacred time which, according to Eliade, does not operate linearly and therefore has no beginning nor end. This does not at all mean that non-linear poetry does not convey any sense of past, present, and future; it is not as literal as that. The more important point is that when considered in very general terms, poetry places time in a position of being primarily defined by perception rather than by objective reality: ‘Deren developed with the *Anagram* a unique theory on film form in which she describes the modern film image in terms of poetry, i.e. in relation to a poem’s vertical structure and significant depth (*profondeur signifiante*).’<sup>177</sup> Julie Beaulieu attempts to explain what is referred to as the *vertical structure* of Deren’s film poetry, in acute contrast to the horizontal structure which is the linear descriptive narrative — a convention that Artaud also persistently undermines throughout his writings. The vertical structure is unified by a core concept rather than a chronological sequence. It is a centralised structure that operates very much like a web interconnecting themes, images, and symbols from widely differing corners and directions. Thus, this metaphorical web exhibits images that may seem temporally inconsistent, even though the determining core concept remains a constant interwoven throughout the interplay of dreamlike images:

Deren’s investigation of poetry clearly influences her vertical conception of the modern filmic image. It is during the ‘Poetry and the Film’ symposium held in 1953 by Cinema 16 that Deren reveals to the audience her reflection on the vertical image: ‘In a *vertical* development, it is a logic of central emotion or idea that attracts to itself even disparate

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<sup>177</sup> Julie Beaulieu, ‘The Poetics of Cinematic Writing: Marguerite Duras and Maya Deren’, in *In the Dark Room: Marguerite Duras and Cinema*, ed. by Rosanna Maule and Julie Beaulieu (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 135 – 156 (p. 138).

images which contain that central core, which they have in common.’ Deren relates poetry to film in terms of both media’s relation to the lived experience of the artist who sees, feels, and understands the world from a unique point of view. She therefore pays less attention to the rules of classical poetry; she puts her emphasis on the point of view, a key element in her conception of the modern filmic image:

*Now poetry, to my mind, consists not of assonance; or rhythm, or rhyme, or any of these other qualities we associate as being characteristic of poetry. Poetry, to my mind, is an approach to experience, in the sense that a poet is looking at the same experience that a dramatist may be looking at.*<sup>178</sup>

In Deren’s mind, the poet embraces the same reality as the dramatist or the novelist, but the way reality is depicted definitely changes with the medium and the artist’s subjectivity. Like symbolist poets, Deren believed that the poetic image can be a synthesis of intellectual and emotional qualities, emerging from its own structure. That is to say, the form is of utmost importance for the form is intimately linked to its content. For Deren, the vertical organization of a work (a literary text, a film, etc.) does not correspond to a logical or a linear series of events characteristic of a linear and dramatic development (A to B to C, etc.) — these things mainly constitute a horizontal development in Deren’s mind. Poetry, however, proceeds via resonances that are deeply

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<sup>178</sup> Italicised by myself.

grounded in a vertical structure or line. The repetition and variation patterns in Deren's film *Meshes of the Afternoon (MA)* offer an illustration of this vertical structure, the hallmark of which is non-linear narration.<sup>179</sup>

That is not at all to say that poetry which is bound to rhyme and assonance is lesser in status as an organised written and aural form, for there are always going to be instances where such specific methods of composition generate profound effects upon those reading or listening. The more important point is that Deren views poetry as being far more expansive than such rules of aural composition, especially since to translate poetry through visual images would most likely mean a shedding away of such rhymes and assonances, potentially profound as their aesthetic effects may be. As Deren suggests and Beaulieu interprets, the essential state of poetry is entirely defined by freedom of subjective expression, which means that such expression does not need to take into account societally imposed rules of how things should be presented (and that includes the incorporation of rhyme and assonance into poetic compositions). Freedom of subjectivity also means allowing the non-linear aspect of personal experience to reveal its dream structure, which is clearly a structure that remains independent of conventional chronology, again a temporal concept corresponding to Eliade's mythical or sacred time. Furthermore, it must be noted here that there is no way of quantifying the diverse directions that the creative consciousness can possibly take — except to say that even though chronological sequencing is one valid method of recording the ways and means by which occurrences take their course, chronology constitutes but *one* method of thought, one among an infinite variety. The inner

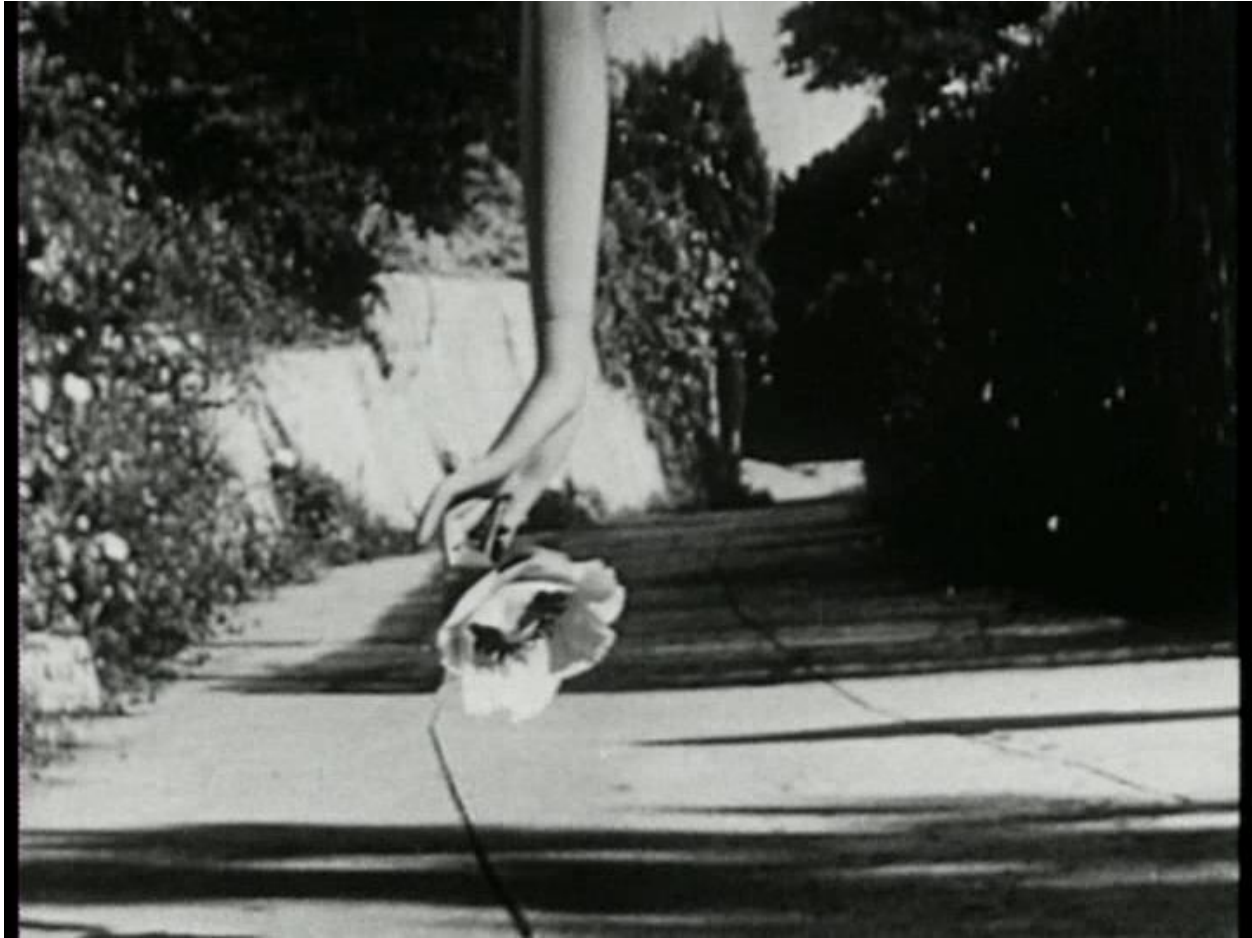
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<sup>179</sup> Beaulieu, pp. 139-40.

imagination, especially as Deren conceptualises it to be in *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), not only does not show any recognition for linear arrangement, except to occasionally allude to the passing of time. Here, the imagination operates according to a network of images, none of which reveal where the depicted persons and objects come from, nor the destination towards which they are headed. The storytelling appears fragmented due to the extreme ambiguity concerning how things came to be the way they are. At the same time, the storytelling remains unified by the core concept of a brief moment one afternoon whereby both day-dreams and dreams occurring during sleep activate the latent meanings behind the way things are on the surface. Objects that appear ordinary are in fact not ordinary at all, for they embody a sacred significance — or more precisely a sacred life force orchestrating the placements of such objects and the events that follow on as a consequence of such placements.

A clear example at the beginning of the film comes in the form of a hanging arm whose hand is holding a flower. While the hanging arm does not appear to be at all attached to a body, we remain unsure of whom the arm belongs to or how the arm came to be hanging down the middle of the image, slowly lowering itself. Deren herself stars in the film, but there is no indication that it is her arm — or even a representation of her arm — that we are seeing in this particular image, especially as it is not a human arm. It is an artificial arm attached to an artificial hand — the arm, hand, and fingers purposely elongated and hanging stiff and solid in such a way as to make clear that it is not a human subject that is lowering the flower onto the paved road. The sacred significance here lies in the unusual method by which the flower lands on the ground. To begin with, the sight of flowers lying on the ground outdoors is always going to be commonplace and

relatively ordinary, especially if the immediate environment is allowing of such occurrences. The most common ways for a flower to land on the ground would be via the winds that have carried it from the tree/plant of origin, or if a passerby drops a flower regardless of whether it is intentional. However, this image of the artificial arm and hand lowering the flower upon the ground shows a non-human or rather transhuman orchestration. The arm and hand are shaped just like those belonging to a human, causing them to be *human-like*, but they remain non-human nevertheless — even though from a technical standpoint, an *actual* human arm and hand could just as easily have been used to compose the image, but such actual human limbs were purposely *not* used to convey the higher direction of transhuman influences. So the otherworldly medium that is placing the flower upon the ground is both human-like and non-human. The anthropomorphising of the vehicle (composed of the *artificial* arm and hand) mobilising and relocating the flower has important implications. We can quite confidently say that it is non-human precisely because we already know it is artificial; but because it is human-like, this *likeness* personifies certain invisible forces that have conducted the flower's materialisation upon the road. The invisible forces embodied by the artificial arm and hand deliberately place an object upon a chosen position. The importance lies in the deliberation which seemingly involves strategic planning as to how the flower will rest upon the ground, as well as a calculation of the occurrences associated with the flower thereafter. If we consider other ways and means by which the flower could have landed on the ground, such as the wind or even an accidental dropping by a pedestrian, neither occurrence could have exercised such deliberation of purpose and action. It may be too far-fetched to say that the artificial arm and hand personify a near-omnipresent force, although the suggestion of higher intervention is very much present. The unknown origin of the hanging arm further magnifies the idea of an invisible conductor.



Immediately after the flower is placed on the ground, the hanging arm and hand instantly vanish without a trace. We then see the shadow of Deren walking towards the flower to pick it up. The symbols have such an ordinary appearance that rather diminishes their supposedly distinguished status. However, the assemblage of the image components creates an unusual quality of extreme proportions, imbuing such ordinariness with a sense of wonder, an idea also alluded to by Michael Bird: ‘...in order for cinema to have a means by which it can open us to the dimension of the sacred, this means would have to be directed to the discernment of the holy *within the real*, rather than leading away from the real as in the case of art that abolishes reality.’<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Bird, ‘Religion in Film’, in *The Religion and Film Reader*, p. 392.



## ***Rethinking Poetry***

*I say that the stage is a concrete physical place which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak.*

*I say that this concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of speech, has first to satisfy the senses, that there is a poetry of the senses as there is a poetry of language...<sup>181</sup>*

Artaud was intent upon exposing the extreme fallacies of restricting poetry to any one form. Even though this aspect of his theory mainly concerns the visual and spatial dimensions of theatrical poetry, they do elaborate in fine detail using effective metaphors the sacred nature of poetry that can be considered near-omnipresent due to its capacity to reveal itself through an unlimited range of sensual phenomena. His example of theatrical poetry only goes to show that the essential state of poetry can be moulded and sculpted into a concrete form which occupies a quantifiable space, a principle which also applies to film (only that he articulates the same principle much more soundly and elaborately in his theatrical philosophy). In his metaphorical statement that the stage ‘asks to be filled’, there is an implication that the state of poetry which is essentially non-physical has the capacity to *vibrate* itself into more tangible physicalised forms. Just as importantly, the space in which that poetry is vibrating itself into concreteness is *also vibrating in active interaction* with the poetic life force, almost as if there is an inter-dimensional

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<sup>181</sup> Artaud, ‘Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 37.

law dictating that in order for different components to participate in a process of co-creation (especially one where both, or more, are on equal standing in terms of their willingness and focus), those components involved must be vibrating on compatible frequencies: ‘it [concrete poetry] combines with the other means of expression; and the consequences of these combinations, of their reactions and their reciprocal destructions, are easy to perceive.’<sup>182</sup> If poetry is filling in a concrete space, such a process of *filling in* necessitates that some of the poetry’s properties transform themselves into something that can be physically quantified, while maintaining its core essence of a metaphorical fluid that can be poured into many different vessels. In other words, poetry is a very *broad* energetic force vibrating at multitudes of varying frequencies, each frequency allowing the state of poetry to manifest itself into a *specific* form. Artaud does not so much undermine poetry in the written, recited, and spoken forms, but he does emphasise that such a medium-restrictive practice does not fully use the potential resources that poetry has to offer. One of the main purposes for human to possess the range of physical senses that they do is so that they can experience and hence formulate perspectives through those senses that are available, and such perspectives include the cultivation of poetry through such a palpable sensory range. He continues to list many other forms that poetry can take, although the following list is by no means an exhaustive compilation of poetry’s more tactile potential: ‘This very difficult and complex poetry assumes many aspects: especially the aspects of all the means of expression utilizable on the stage, such as music, dance, plastic art, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, intonation, architecture, lighting, and scenery.’<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Artaud, ‘Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 39.

<sup>183</sup> Artaud, ‘Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 39.

The manifestation of poetry in such select forms goes to show that the conventional attitude that poetry can only take on textual and verbal forms must be put aside due to the severe limitations such an attitude imposes upon the avant-garde creative process. Poetic qualities are essentially *felt* without any need to be explained in words, which is why Artaud suggests that poetry transcends aural language in every respect ('this solidified, materialized language by means of which theater is able to differentiate itself from speech'<sup>184</sup>). While there certainly is such a thing as *genuine* aural poetry (Artaud distinguishes this class of passionate aural expression as being far superior to the aural content which he considers to be excessive and redundant), the essential state of poetry is by no means dependent upon aural expression as a specific channel. He openly states that confining poetry to a specific form — while ignoring or omitting the fact that this state of poetry also expresses itself through multitudes of other forms — is no different from suffocating the infinite potential of poetry. He even goes so far as to suggest that restricting the poetic form is a very outdated approach with which we would inevitably become dissatisfied, due to the fact that we have an innate predisposition to recognise the universality of this state of poetry that also determines the nature of the sacred:

We must get rid of our superstitious valuation of texts and *written* poetry. Written poetry is worth reading once, and then should be destroyed. Let the dead poets make way for others. Then we might even come to see that it is our veneration for what has already

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<sup>184</sup> Artaud, 'Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 38.

been created, however beautiful and valid it may be, that petrifies us, deadens our responses, and prevents us from making contact with that underlying power, call it thought-energy, the life force, the determinism of change, lunar menses, or anything you like. Beneath the poetry of the texts, there is the actual poetry, without form and without text.<sup>185</sup>

We cannot take Artaud completely literally when he says that written poetry is not worth reading more than once. The more important point is that the poetic life force residing in such a vast range of phenomena holds the potential for poetry to be revealed through infinitely diverse expressions. While Artaud lays out the sacred/poetic life force as a constant principle (he even associates the life force with universal cycles such as the moon and menstruation), he puts forward with equal significance that the diverse expressions of the life force are brought forth from the very principle that the life force is one of *commonality*, not exclusivity in the sense of being snobbishly discriminating.<sup>186</sup> The life force in turn has the capacity to *poeticise* the vessel in which it resides. The poetic life force becomes magnified and manipulated through those key elements constituting the foundational film form — in other words, what the film form cannot do without: the recorded image, camera angles (including the heights at which the camera is

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<sup>185</sup> Artaud, 'No More Masterpieces', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 78.

<sup>186</sup> 'If we are prepared for war, plague, famine, and slaughter we do not even need to say so, we have only to continue as we are; continue behaving like snobs, rushing en masse to hear such and such a singer, to see such and such an admirable performance which never transcends the realm of art (and even the Russian ballet at the height of its splendor never transcended the realm of art), to marvel at such and such an exhibition of painting in which exciting shapes explode here and there but at random and without any genuine consciousness of the forces they could rouse.' ('No More Masterpieces', pp. 78-9)

placed), lighting, image composition, edited lengths of shots, cuts, and fades. The camera's distinct accuracy is assessed by the automatic quality of its recording process — an automatic quality that serves to captivate the poetic life force with exceptional spontaneity, a spontaneity possibly absent or minimally present in the pre-cinematic arts such as painting, drawing, sculpture, or even the literary arts. I am now presenting a scene that seamlessly fuses different dimensions with ordinary-looking components that at first glance would not at all appear out of place in an ordinary environment, although the sacred significance of such components lies in their capacity — the special quality of such a capacity lying in its modest, down-to-earth semblance — to come together to create otherworldly results.

In Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1950), the Lady of Death takes Orpheus's wife Eurydice to 'the other world'.<sup>187</sup> This scene is almost entirely composed of ordinary components placed into the setting: a dead-looking woman lying on her bed, another woman who is an authority figure watching over her body, and a mirror. However, certain cinematic techniques are executed in such a radical yet simple-looking manner that transforms any and all ordinary components within the scene into a dream. Such a dream is liminal — as in entirely characterised by 'in-between' qualities — because it conveys a rite of transportation from Orpheus's bedroom to another world

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<sup>187</sup> 'The legend of Orpheus is known. In the mythology of Greece, Orpheus sang songs in Thrace. He charmed even the wild beasts, but his songs made him forgetful of Eurydice, his wife. Then Death took her. He went down into Hades and charmed its forces, obtaining her return on condition that he never look at her again. But he did look and was torn to pieces by the Bacchantes.

Where does our story happen? And in what year? It is the privilege of legends to be ageless. Therefore, as you like it.' — From Jean Cocteau's preface for his film *Orphée* (cited in Robert M. Hammond's "The Mysteries of Cocteau's *Orpheus*", in *Cinema Journal*, vol. 11/2, Spring 1972, p. 26)

operating through different laws, a world designed to receive those who have undergone their physical death. At the same time, this scene clearly shows an inter-dimensional moment that remains grounded within those habitual things that constitute everyday life. Thus, the ordinary becomes poeticised in such a manner that allows us to see the enchantment beneath the coldness and meanness displayed by the Lady of Death. Those everyday things such as bed and mirror are transformed into revelatory vehicles carrying out the active intersection between the normality of a domestic bedroom and another much darker dimension inhabited by guardians of the dead.



Here, Eurydice appears dead, and is about to be summoned by the Lady of Death who commands her: “Arise!” Eurydice does not get up naturally as one would normally do after waking up.

Upon Death’s orders, Eurydice suddenly stands upright, without giving her own limbs any time

to adjust to her newly adopted robotic position. The drastic, unnatural shift from lying asleep to erecting oneself into a soldier-like stance goes to show that her body no longer belongs to the physical human dimension as we know it. It is almost as if her life force has withdrawn from the physical world, even though the exact same body and dress are retained to depict both the living and the dead Eurydice. Thus, the inter-worldly transition is more than evident while outward appearances remain unchanged. Yet her manner and personality show that Eurydice is transformed into a walking corpse robotically following the Lady of Death's orders.



This simple instance of an unnaturally erected body all by itself shows an intensely magical moment taking place amidst ordinary surroundings. Even the inhabitants from 'the other world' look completely normal by the standards of the immediate culture into which they have

presented themselves. In fact Cocteau is among the few film theorists who suggest the avant-garde nature of the magical, especially in the context of such a cultural environment where the magical/fantastical remains a marginalised way of thinking. He describes a poetic approach to the filmmaking or indeed the film-watching experience whereby mythical/sacred ideas are treated as an everyday occurrence rather than as something which remains outside the realm of normality. Thus, it is the *normalising* of the sacred/mythical that becomes an avant-garde phenomenon, especially amidst a modern cultural environment where the sacred/mythical is not normally recognised as having any significant bearings by the mainstream. The sacred/mythical then becomes the *new normal*, not merely to be incorporated into the everyday but to actually become the core essence conducting everyday life: ‘The cinema-poet’s first concern should, therefore, be to treat a tale or a legend as an everyday device and to believe in acts of magic as he does in the most routine actions.’<sup>188</sup> Such a principle of uniting the magical with the ordinary to the point where the relationship between the two becomes seamless is just as much expressed in Eurydice’s transportation to ‘the other world’ via the mirror in her bedroom. The Lady of Death first breaks the mirror with her fist, and then leads the way into what has now become a ‘doorway’ into the afterlife. Eurydice and another ‘guardian of the dead’ — whose appearance is not in the least different from any normal everyday person — follow into the dark space. This simple-looking act of destroying part of a piece of interior furniture, especially to form an opening that can be put to further use, is possibly a very normal occurrence in a site of architectural construction or interior re-decoration. Thus, there is nothing outwardly alien or removed about this inter-worldly transition.

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<sup>188</sup> Jean Cocteau, *The Art of Cinema*, p. 38.





Once all have entered into the dark space, the broken pieces of the mirror magically reassemble themselves into one and the same whole. The mirror now returns to its intact state, sealing the passageway into 'the other world'. In the mirror's reflection, we now see Eurydice asleep on her bed, all the while knowing that only a very brief moment ago, Eurydice had just risen from her bed and followed the Lady of Death into the mirror. Here, there is a much more significant implication than the mere phenomenon of one and the same person being in two places at the same time. The scene shows great deliberation in cutting to a close-up of a sleeping Eurydice immediately after she herself has entered into the inter-dimensional 'doorway', especially so that she embodies the seamless interconnection between the physical human world and the world of

the afterlife, seeing that her body is present on ‘both sides’. The mirror itself is an exceptionally expressive form of liminality — in this scene, a very literal ‘threshold’ serving as a boundary, at once transparent but solid, which simultaneously defines the reaches of both territories concerned but also dismantles the artificial construct of demarcations. In fact, the mirror *reverses* the constructs of ‘here’ and ‘there’, causing ‘the other world’ to lose its sense of ‘otherness’.



A mirror’s function is to double an image, and here we see that such a function is exaggerated and far-reaching to the point where even Eurydice’s own body is ‘doubled’. Eurydice herself has become a symbolic mirror embodying the potent intersection between dimensions that normally run parallel to each other. Like the mirror that is at once a virtual space and a reflection of

another clearly tangible space, she is in two places at the same time, and so becomes quite ‘placeless’ as her consciousness is focused in multiple locations — a translocal phenomenon that, in full avant-garde form, defies any and all conventional definitions of a physical place.



This scene also puts into practice Cocteau’s vision of an art form that causes one to believe in what is formerly unbelievable by portraying ‘the other world’ and its inhabitants (in this case, the guardians of the dead) as having full capacity to blend into the immediate human culture that they are literally and symbolically intersecting with. Not only do the otherworldly inhabitants appear as normal-looking people, but even their relationships with each other directly reflect human social hierarchy, especially that of authority figure and follower. This principle of inter-

dimensional assimilation is even more magnified in the above image's power to capture the inner warmth of a face and body to which we remain unsure whether to consider a corpse or a 'sleeping beauty' waiting for her spirit to return to her body. The close-up whereby the light is resting peacefully between two sides of dominant-looking shadows almost causes Eurydice's face to glow, warming her presence on the bed and pillow to such a point where one has to wonder whether her passage into the afterlife only a moment ago was actually for real. Yet again, this physical human side of the mirror is just as real as the other side of the mirror where the soul of the dead woman is being transported. The scene very much succeeds in challenging any definition of *reality* that would normally confine it into a combination of time and space as well as whatever happens within such a chronotope. Cocteau's vision further emphasises the idea that the magical/fantastical does not at all need to be considered abnormal as a mainstream secularised culture would dictate it to be. Normalising the magical/fantastical is only a matter of activating certain inclinations within the consciousness that are latent and waiting to be explored:

In the long run, mankind has accorded itself the right to create a world that is superimposed on the visible one and to make visible a world that is ordinarily invisible. I believe that this world not only exists in the same sense as the other and constrains the incredulous to be wary, disquieting them to the point of revealing dormant senses within them; but also that it precedes manifestations that are still abnormal, and are likely to become normal with time.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Cocteau, *The Art of Cinema*, p. 38.

According to Cocteau, the physical *extends forth* from the non-physical; and therefore if the non-physical dimension has every capacity to make the magical/fantastical a predominant norm, then it follows that the physical dimension has just as much capacity to do the same. However, as cultural conventions impose severe restrictions upon imaginative expression, the avant-garde must then break through such intellectual and artistic confines. The cinematic potential to normalise the magical/fantastical constitutes a forefront method in dismantling such conventions. In fact, André Bazin discusses similar ideas in his essay “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage” where he begins by presenting children’s films of the time (1940s) as examples of cultural limitations rather than as expressions of the inner child latent within the consciousness:

In fact, anyone wishing to set up a film library or to compile a series of programs for young children would be hard pressed to find more than a few shorts, of unequal merit, and a certain number of commercial films, among them some cartoons, the inspiration and the subject matter of which were sufficiently childlike; in particular, certain adventure films. It is not, however, a matter of specialized production, just of films intelligible to those on a mental level under fourteen. As we know, American films do not often rise above this level.<sup>190</sup>

Bazin’s discontentment with the available children’s films of the time leads him to compare such unsatisfactory creations with children’s literature whose quality, however rarely it reveals itself, he very much idealises. Such literature conveys a purity of imagination resembling that which is

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<sup>190</sup> Bazin, ‘The Virtues and Limitations of Montage’, in *What is Cinema?*, vol 1, pp. 41 – 53 (p. 41).

constantly practiced by an innocent child who sees magical beauty in even the most ordinary of things. This imagination of the *inner child* — that he suggests should be just as much conveyed in a wanting medium such as film — has not yet met with resistance acquired through social conditioning as well as observation of the societal dictates of what is appropriate and what is not. The *inner child* — if considered in the context of certain innate structures embedded within the consciousness — remains an unconditional state that can never be outgrown, and therefore can be accessed if one makes an effort to peel through the layers of contradictory conditioning. An example of such conditioning is what Bazin terms as the state of being ‘puerile’ that is normally assigned to the childlike imagination. That is why he makes a point of stating that such an imagination is not at all childish and silly in the way that mainstream society has dictated it to be:

It is obvious that [children’s] films of this sort are in no way comparable to children’s literature properly so called, and of which there is anyhow not a great deal... All the same, it is certainly not necessary to employ psychoanalysis to discover the delicious and terrifying profundities that are the source of the beauty of *Alice in Wonderland* and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. These authors had a capacity for dreaming that was equal in kind and intensity to that of a child. There is nothing puerile about that imaginary world. It was pedagogy that invented harmless colors for children, but to see the use they make of them is to find your gaze riveted on green paradises peopled with monsters.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Bazin, 41-2.

Bazin's metaphor of green lands inhabited by monsters and its application to the usual colours taught to children as part of their education together suggest that seemingly ordinary things can be composed into combinations that are far beyond ordinary. To see the wonder within such colour combinations is much like seeing the world through the lens of a child who has not yet been conditioned with resistant thought patterns, such as 'monsters don't exist' for example. If such resistant conditioning can be peeled away or rather completely unlearned, we would return to a primordial state of consciousness where what is conventionally considered to be impossible may become recognised as a possibility. Bazin suggests that authors of the most influential children's literature do have an intense recognition that fantastical phenomena, such as green lands inhabited by monsters, do exist in dimensions that may not be immediately accessible by the physical human senses — or at least exposure to such dimensions may be obstructed by resistant social conditioning. If the human consciousness can remain open, there may develop a recognition that such fantastical phenomena constitute a *reality* in their own dimension — a dimension that could potentially expand conventional definitions of what reality actually is. Small children seem to be able to naturally intuit that such phenomena as green lands inhabited by monsters are waiting to be accessed via the most allowing channels within the consciousness that conduct the exchange of information between different dimensions. This is possibly the reason why fairy tales such as *Alice in Wonderland* and those of Hans Christian Andersen are so well-loved, for they express without inhibition the abundance of childlike imagination that mainstream society normally discourages (hence, the artistic poverty displayed in the children's films of Bazin's time). If green lands inhabited by monsters can become a predominantly accepted idea within society (adult society, especially) — instead of being sidelined into the

restrictive category of unrealistic fantasy with no relevance to everyday life — then the poetic imagination which always possesses the childlike purity would be allowed to enrich many areas of intellectual and creative expression<sup>192</sup>: ‘The authors of genuine children’s literature, then, are only rarely and indirectly educators... They are poets whose imagination is privileged to remain on the dream wavelength of childhood.’<sup>193</sup> Thus, Bazin’s notion of poetic imagination does not at all focus upon what is impossible, but instead offers a much broadened vision of *possibilities* of other existences. He proposes an extreme *malleability* of reality — assisting the consciousness to become much more pliable and adaptable — more than anything else. Clare O’Farrell provides a similar interpretation of Artaud’s poetic imagination, further relating it to a profound recognition of things that modernity does not instruct to actually have an existence at all:

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<sup>192</sup> Here, Bazin is fully proposing the concept of *homo ludens* or ‘the human as player’:

In remarkable contrast to Greek with its changing and heterogeneous terms for the play-function, Latin has really only one word to cover the whole field of play: *ludus*, from *ludere*, of which *lusus* is a direct derivative. We should observe that *jocus*, *jocari* in the special sense of joking and jesting does not mean play proper in classical Latin. Though *ludere* may be used for the leaping of fishes, the fluttering of birds and the plashing of water, its etymology does not appear to lie in the sphere of rapid movement, flashing, etc., but in that of non-seriousness, and particularly of “semblance” or “deception”. *Ludus* covers children’s games, recreation, contests, liturgical and theatrical representations, and games of chance. In the expression *lares ludentes* it means “dancing”. The idea of “feigning” or “taking on the semblance of” seems to be uppermost. The compounds *alludo*, *eolludo*, *illudo* all point in the direction of the unreal, the illusory.

— Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*, pp. 35-6.

<sup>193</sup> Bazin, ‘The Virtues and Limitations of Montage’, in *What is Cinema?*, vol 1, p. 42.



The modern version of a ‘useful’ and ‘truthful’ imagination requires that it must somehow mirror and reflect back on an existing physical and social reality not radically recreate and reform those rules and certainly not refer to a dimension which appears different from those realities. Artaud proposes a return to the ‘mentality of the Middle Ages’: a reactivation of an older poetic and spiritual imagination, free of the dreary necessities of restricting itself to ‘improving our social lot’, free of the idea of art as completely bound by the dictates of ‘social work’ and political reform, in other words an imagination of the fantastic, of other worlds, of non-material existences. It is also an imagination, which as the historian Jacques Le Goff suggests in his fascinating book *The Medieval Imagination*, is not simply limited to the world of books and literature. It weaves itself into the very fabric of the everyday. Medieval scientists were quite happy to include strange and imagined or semi-imagined plants, animals and places in their scientific classifications. Such things were regarded as marginal and exceptional phenomena but were not untrue for all that.<sup>194</sup>

Artaud’s proposition of a return to the collective imagination of the Middle Ages is only another example of his more general intention to incorporate the idea that there are multitudes of dimensions to the universal existence. This idea of multi-dimensionality defies the modern attitude that is so deeply anchored into the concreteness of physicality, to such a point where physicality seems to have a monopoly over existence in general. It may be true that the medieval cultural attitude places boundaries between what is considered normal and what is strange and

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<sup>194</sup> O’Farrell, ‘Unacceptable Imaginings: Artaud’s Medieval Revolution’, p. 4.

unusual, but Artaud's theoretical material as well as O'Farrell's interpretation do suggest that such boundaries are fluid and transparent more than anything else. Even scientific classifications include things that have been imagined, but this only goes to show their openness towards the notion that the poetic imagination has the power to channel information from dimensions beyond the physical, while modern science would strictly ban such an outlandish idea. Johan Huizinga also suggests that there is a source of power whose constant and perhaps unconditional purpose is to bestow 'life' even upon objects that are normally considered inanimate, causing us to have to rethink what the concept of 'life' actually means. The idea that certain inanimate objects possess a personified aspect goes to show that they incorporate another dimension that can potentially reveal the fantastical content beneath the immediate surface appearance:

To represent the incorporeal and the inanimate as a person is the soul of all myth-making and nearly all poetry. Strictly speaking, however, the process does not follow the course just indicated. There is no question of first conceiving something as lifeless and bodiless and then expressing it as something that has body, parts, and passions. No; the thing perceived is conceived as having life and movement in the first place, and such is the primary expression of it, which is no afterthought. Personification in this sense arises as soon as the need is felt to communicate one's perceptions to others. Conceptions are thus born as acts of the imagination.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*, p. 159.

Significantly, Huizinga clearly suggests that animism is at the heart of myth and poetry, and so it is mythical poetry that has the capacity to establish a new definition of ‘life’ in a way which encompasses its multi-dimensionality and potential to be expressed in vast diversity, instead of restricting the notion of ‘life’ to those obvious beings that have active sense perceptions.

Animism very much contributes to defining mythical poetry as the art of revealing the stream of conscious energy from which the more tangible forms arise — as if to say that despite obstructions to perceiving such a conscious stream, whether such obstructions are caused by social conditioning or personal resistance, the stream of ‘life’ as an all-pervasive force should not be something that is considered hidden from plain view. Correspondingly, Rachel Moore provides an interpretation of Sergei Eisenstein’s theory that cartoons are projections of human-like characteristics upon *living drawings* — many of which do not depict human figures — imaginatively designed to please and perhaps even to nurture the *inner child*:

Reusing and rethinking material with which he had been occupied since his trip to Europe, America, and finally Mexico, Eisenstein points to the way the cartoon awakens and momentarily satisfies the human desire to become something else with its metamorphosing drawings. Like the playful nature of his subject, Eisenstein’s text consists of fragments and free associations around myriad examples taken from a wide cultural and temporal range of images. Key features of this unfinished monograph are the child, the phenomenon of fire, and animism.

...Disney's figures, neither entirely animal nor certainly not human, are free to move, grow, and transform beyond "once and forever prescribed norms of nomenclature, form and behaviour." Animated cartoons are totally irresponsible; there are no actors, no biological or physical laws. "Like the sun, like trees, like birds, like the ducks and mice, deer and pigeons that run across his screen," Disney simply is, Eisenstein puts it, "beyond good and evil."<sup>196</sup>

Cartoons are given a *virtual* yet fully alive physical form, allowing the artist (i.e. the cartoonist) generous opportunity to create qualities, behaviour, and activities that a *virtual body* would be inclined to perform. Cartoons embody an intensely liminal state of being simultaneously bound to and free from a physical body. Still, they are not at all determined by physical laws — causing cartoons to embody ideals where the artists as well as those watching cartoons have complete freedom to imagine what it would be like to step outside the immediate body, but still inhabit a virtual body all the same. Eisenstein's description of Disney cartoons implies that animism fulfills our most elementary instincts, and that mythical poetry — far from being an intellectual luxury — is in fact a basic need. Cartoon characters' independence from moral and social responsibilities deeply reflects our desire for a means of escapism from a routine life that is predominantly defined by all such responsibilities and constraints. Through experiencing the lives played out in cartoons, the bindings to such societal terms and conditions are temporarily relaxed. We can relate to the cartoons, as they are to a certain extent designed to be human-like, yet we also desire to embrace the fantastical liberties so prevalent in the cartoon existence.

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<sup>196</sup> Moore, *Savage Theory*, p. 123.

### *Cinema's relationship to sacred time and spatial poetry*

There may be substantial productivity in discussing the case for poetic architecture, as it is one of the most evident examples of spatial poetry. Defining spatial poetry becomes an important step towards establishing poetry's application to cinema, especially as film images are always a recording of things that occupy visual space more than anything else. Once the poetry of physical space is properly defined, we can then proceed to define the poetry governing spatial relations within a filmic scope. If one is examining the poetic nature of a piece of architecture, one would intuitively absorb the atmosphere created by the assemblage of interior and exterior components. An example of a more subtle form of poetic architecture can perhaps be observed in the placing of a bathtub in oasis-like surroundings where, for instance, a very large clear sheet of glass window is placed between the interior bathroom space and the garden outside — possibly a window that is substantially larger than normal. While there is a boundary marking the contrast — at least the *functional* contrast — between interior and exterior, the absolute transparency of the glass window serves to show that the differentiation between indoor qualities and outdoor qualities is significantly blurred, conveniently allowing for the imagination of poetic metaphors interlinking the interior and exterior. An atmosphere such as this is especially conducive towards poetic imagination because the bathtub itself is a contemplative area — almost like a microcosm — designed for rites of relaxation and cleansing. Here, spatial poetry (and even poetry in general) can be defined as an imaginative establishment of metaphorical interconnections — connections that are latent, but are then revealed through the articulation of the peculiar aspects of otherwise hidden relationships. Quite invariably, poetry becomes an appropriate way of describing hierophanies because such embodiments of inter-dimensionality require an imagination of the state of things *beyond* their surface appearance. Hierophany interlinks

multitudes of physical and non-physical dimensions, but there must also be a recognition that the perceptual faculties are not restricted to the physical senses. Larry Shiner's interpretation of spatial hierophanies emphasises the metaphorical interconnections between the divine world and the world that is perhaps less than divine (or possessing a *dilution* of divine qualities):

Techniques of orientation are particularly important in the selection or construction of high holy places such as central ceremonial grounds, sanctuaries or cities. Here an additional aspect in the consecration of sacred space comes into play, since these ceremonies are seen as a repetition of the work of the gods. By repeating "the archetype of the sacred space *in illo tempore*" the chaos of the unknown or uncultivated territory is transformed into a cosmos, a world. The chief symbolism in all these consecrations, according to Eliade, is the symbolism of the Center. Whether village or city, grove or mountain, house or sanctuary, any place consecrated by the hierophany may come to be honored as the navel of the cosmos, the junction of heaven, earth and underworld. In Eliade's interpretation then, the principle characteristics of sacred space are that it (1) marks a *break* in the homogeneity and amorphousness of hitherto undifferentiated space, (2) these breaks provide a spatial *orientation* especially when they bear the symbolism of the Center as almost all major breaks do, (3) the Center is also an *axis mundi*, a break in plane which creates an *opening* between cosmic levels...<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Larry E. Shiner, 'Sacred Space, Profane Space, Human Space', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol 40/4 (December 1972), pp. 425 – 436 (p. 426).

In order to analyse spatial poetry's application to hierophany — especially visual hierophany such as that occupying the composition of and relationships between film images — I am organising my analysis into two parts, all of which are initially based upon Shiner's interpretation of Eliade's spatial hierophany. The first part of my analysis concerns poetry's intimate relationship with Eliade's *illo tempore*. It is important to note here that it may be appropriate to consider the concept of gods completely literally in some instances, but not so much in others. Shiner's interpretation and perhaps even Eliade's immediate usage express gods very much as a metaphor — as a divine *state* or even as cooperative collectives of divine energies more than anything else, rather than as *literal* godly figures possessing whatever manner of appearance and personality. During *illo tempore*, divine energies referred to by Eliade as 'gods' imprinted patterns of meaning within the cosmic order that paved the path for the establishment of sacred meanings: '...as the rite always consists in the repetition of an archetypal action performed *illo tempore* (before "history" began) by ancestors or by gods, man is trying, by means of the hierophany, to give "being" to even his most ordinary and insignificant acts.'<sup>198</sup>

The second part of my analysis focuses upon the idea that the poetic imagination views the structure of existence as full of interplay between the different strata — or rather, patterns of intersections very much resembling Eliade's *axis mundi*. There is no need to approach *axis mundi* as completely literally as to always define it as a conjoining pivot between Heaven and Earth, or whatever labels one cares to assign to such cosmic planes. It is important to note however that spatial poetry, which is essentially a consideration of sacred space, views space as a

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<sup>198</sup> Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 32.

*porous fabric* — an entirely penetrable network of inter-dimensionality — as opposed to a flat surface whereby physical locations are marked (in fact this latter approach is very secular). Larry Shiner offers an interpretation of Eliade's spatial hierophany, suggesting that the human consciousness is innately programmed to conceive of space as interwoven concentrations of sacred energy patterns. The concept that different segments within a spatial area are interwoven through a system of seemingly invisible relationships goes to show that what may at first appear to be a literal disparity (e.g. the societally assigned distance between the toilet and the garden) can in fact be re-aligned symbolically (e.g. the garden serves to compost and recycle waste, symbolically returning digested matter to the earth from whence it came). And even if one would choose not to use proper symbols to make sense of the relationships between persons, places, and objects, the recognition that certain phenomena are a manifested result of the convergence between invisible forces exists as an embedded structure on an archetypal/mythical level:

Homogeneity means that every point is of equal value to every other point, that no direction has any privilege over any other, that space is continuous and infinite. Human spatiality will be presented as if this view represents less a faithful account of our native experience of space than a special kind of abstraction. Of course, there is no doubt that even the unreflective everyday spatial experience of literate Westerners is strongly influenced by this concept of space as a homogenous and qualityless medium... Yet if we look more closely and without prejudice we will discover riches of spatial orientation and conception which do not fit the conventional geometricized approach. The variegated phenomena of territoriality in men and animals, the spatial explorations of architecture



and painting, the differences in social distance and urban organization from society to society, the temporalized space of relativity theory — all these suggest that within Western culture there is more to space than meets the measuring eye. And when we turn to cultures quite different from our own, whether to a non-linear archaic society such as that of the Trobriand Islands or to traditional Japanese culture which treats the interval (*ma*) not as a characterless void but as possessing form and significance of its own, we are forced to admit that the “common sense” view of space does not represent the essential spatiality of our world.<sup>199</sup>

Whether we are considering hierophany or avant-garde — both of which embody the contrast between that which is superior (or in some instances, supreme ideals) and that which is lesser (lesser in this instance can mean anything ranging from ordinary to conventional to even downright unpleasant) — there is no place for homogeneity in what Eliade describes as ‘being, the real, and the meaningful’<sup>200</sup>. Furthermore, as avant-garde essentially means *that which has not been created before*, such a definition completely necessitates that the system of meanings and meaning-making cannot operate in a uniform manner. So if anything can be considered conventional (the opposition to avant-garde), it would be *homogeneity* (the counter-state of hierophany) — the monotonous area where no innovativeness can break through the hard surface of unquestionable conformity. As Shiner suggests and as Eliade would uphold, even the modern,

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<sup>199</sup> Shiner, p. 427.

<sup>200</sup> Eliade, ‘The Sacred in the Secular World’, in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Bryan S. Rennie (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2006), pp. 74 – 91 (p. 58).

secular Western organisation of space is not as homogeneous as it outwardly presents itself to be. A modern city still associates specific areas with higher purpose (e.g. the urban garden that is the centre for relaxation and communion with nature) and certain other areas with the most ordinary purpose (e.g. traffic lights). The multiple levels of meaningfulness constitute an initial platform for seeing things in a layered, complex manner — that such things have far broader inter-dimensional consequences that are not confined to surface interactions. Shiner's mentioning of the Japanese *ma* leads to a further consideration that the poetry characterising architectural forms applies just as profoundly to theatre, music, and film. *Ma* constitutes a sacred poetic moment in which there is an oasis-like space exempt from the normal course of linear time. *Ma* significantly alludes to Eliade's *illo tempore*, as *ma* captures that precise moment which cleanses itself of the pressures and obligations normally attached to the irreversibility of linear time, causing the conventional view of time to completely dissolve without justification. The creative potential held by *ma* almost has an infinite quality about it (as in, constituting a component of spatial relations but not at all governed by space). The emphasis here is upon a transcendental divine state that *as yet* has no need for a manifested embodiment or vessel. *Ma* remains a contemplative 'gap' until the timing becomes appropriate for the invisible qualities held by *ma* to reveal themselves in a perceivable embodiment during the course of the art form. Such a divine state is primarily composed of silence and nothingness that are as deeply buried roots giving rise to eventually manifesting consequences:

The word *ma* basically means an "interval" between two (or more) spatial or temporal things and events. Thus it is not only used in compounds to suggest measurement but carries meanings such as gap, opening, space between, time between, and so forth. A room is called *ma*, for example, as it refers to the space between the walls; a rest in music

is also *ma* as the pause between the notes or sounds. By the same token it can also mean timing, as in the comic recitation art called *rakugo* where *ma* is quite explicitly a part of the craft and skill.<sup>201</sup>

*Ma* then can be described as the nothingness that holds all poetic potentiality. If linearity (the logical reactionary construct of cause and effect) is considered the opposite of poetry, then *ma* offers a resting place where all such bindings to linearity are released, especially so that the poetic creations emerging from such a restful interval become all the more powerful precisely through the act of stepping outside of normality. Thus, *ma* holds a supreme position of formative creativity where things arise and eventually return to, hence *ma*'s allusion to Eliade's *illo tempore* defined as the pre-human era 'before "history" began' and 'the dawn of the universe.' Both *ma* and *illo tempore* rest upon the principle that time is perceptual, that its irreversibility is one of the rules of the physical plane of existence, causing linear time as we know it to also be a product of the perceptual faculties — systems of processing information that had already undergone intensive, long-term programming, also very deeply anchored in the accustomed physicality (Eliade would refer to such means of sensory perception as profane). So due to time's association with such habitual patterns bound to the denseness of physical conditions, the fact that habitual patterns can always be *released* means that time can be exited from no matter how binding the conditions of linearity may be.

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<sup>201</sup> Richard B. Pilgrim, 'Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan', in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, ed. by Charles Wei-hsün Fu and Steven Heine (Suny Press, 1995), pp. 55 – 77 (p. 56).

### *Sacred Cinema and the “Ma” Interval*

*...as the rite always consists in the repetition of an archetypal action performed in illo tempore (before “history” began) by ancestors or by gods, man is trying, by means of the hierophany, to give “being” to even his most ordinary and insignificant acts. By its repetition, the act coincides with its archetype, and time is abolished. We are witnessing, so to speak, the same act that was performed in illo tempore, at the dawn of the universe. Thus, by transforming all his physiological acts into ceremonies, primitive man strove to “pass beyond”, to thrust himself out of time (and change) into eternity.<sup>202</sup>*

Both *ma* and *illo tempore* can be described as an exception, a moment of origination, a poetic pause. Considering the significant qualitative convergences between the two, it then becomes more appropriate to consider the divine as a *state* that holds sacred patterns, rather than as a reference to literal godly figures as such. We must keep in mind that as far as *ma* is concerned, a system of nomenclature as applied to the gods would be considered artificial constructs at best and distractions at worst, seeing that the attribution of set labels and personality traits would become a confinement or a constraint more than anything else. So it may suffice to describe hierophanies as extending from a primordial divine source, rather than *literally* saying that they are inspired by godly figures — simply due to the fact that this is a case where literal references are far less relevant than the *essential state* which *stores* sacred blueprints. *Ma* is also a state of nothingness that *invisibly stores* the information of all things that precede and follow (*ma* is

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<sup>202</sup> Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 32.

essentially beyond chronological sequencing; however, for the sake of analysing an art form, we still have to resort to discussing compositional components in terms of what comes before and after, if only so that our explanations can make sense as much as possible to a wider audience). Thus, *ma* resembles an ultimate source of creation. The in-between space that constitutes *ma* allows one to return, whether literally or symbolically, to that oasis-like place where those things that come together to create the art form remain latent and serenely composed:

In Japanese linked verse (*renga*), for example, it is less the scenes depicted than the space-time between the linked verses that produces its aesthetic effect. “Put your mind to what is not said,” the poet Shinkei (1406 – 1475) said...Zeami Motokiyo (1363 – 1443), the founder of Noh theater, argued that it is “the moments of no-action” (*senu tokoro*), which occur between (*himu*), that are most enjoyed in Noh... “What [the actor] does not do is of interest” (*senu tokoro ga omoshiroki*) (Komparu 1983, 73).

The Japanese refer to these interstitial spaces or times as *ma*. *Ma* is said to have come from the Chinese, the character for which shows the sun in the middle of an open gate. It was originally used only for space but came to refer to time as well. It may be translated as “space, spacing, interval, gap, blank, room, pause, rest, time, timing, or opening” (Komparu 1983, 70)...Roland Barthes (1982) has attempted — in an overly mannered and deeply French (and therefore ethnocentric) way — to figure the *ma* within his poststructuralist understanding of Japan. He uses expressions like “pregnant nothing”, “a

dismembered decentered, dislocated reminiscence”, an “emptied sign” left over from the “fissure of the symbolic” to evoke what he does not name. Japanese artists, scholars, and architects have argued that it resists translation. They stress its ambiguity, the fact that it has to be understood from within a uniquely Japanese configuration of space and time that cannot be separated from each other, and a sense of spiritual energy or power (*ki* or *ch'i*) that resonates within the space-time between and among. It is a negative, albeit fecund, chronotope — a stillness, an emptiness — that anticipates (and is anticipated by) the “positive” space-time of action, say, in a Noh play.<sup>203</sup>

*Ma* becomes a source of sacred poetry precisely through the determining principle that — while it contains the virtues of non-physicality and meditation that remain independent of material constructs — *ma* remains a potent seminal energy that exists especially to be moulded into manifestations of widely varying degrees of tangibility. *Ma* is the space where the art form in question is literally and metaphorically ‘taking a rest’, as *ma* allows the art form to *withdraw* into its source of origin where all the potentiality that would come to compose the art form *surrounding ma* rests in an interval of peaceful repose. At the same time, *ma* is an ungraspable *non-locality* (I am using this term to express the contrast with the more conventional idea of spatial locality) where nestles the highest concentration of liminal qualities, as it is simultaneously creative in nature as well as being a state of material non-existence. Thus, *ma* symbolises a gestation period where occurrences are allowed to be contained within a dormant

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<sup>203</sup> Vincent Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 51-2.

state. This momentary inactivity is a place of stillness and poise so that the components of the art form can come to replenish, restore, and develop further. Here, Eric Brannigan establishes a direct correspondence between Maya Deren's vertical structure of film poetry and Gilles Deleuze's 'time-image', this correspondence qualified by a *ma*-like detachment from those perceptual faculties that normally organise the chronological sequencing between events. Deleuze especially seems to be conveying a *placeless place* where the relevant aspect of the consciousness regresses or rather escapes into during those moments when the physical and mental capacities become overwhelmed by the unmanageable intensity of the content:

Deren's articulation...of an alternative to the narrative drive of classic fiction film anticipates Gilles Deleuze's definitive treatment of the issue in his cinema books (Deleuze 1986 & Deleuze 1989). His model of the "movement-image" describes the basis of the linear progression of an action-reaction filmic structure while his "time-image" was the result of a perceivable "slackening of the sensory-motor connection" of the central protagonists in post-war fiction films (Deleuze 1989, 3). Instead of anticipated responses from the actors and logical repercussions, the time-image is characterised by "purely optical and sound situations" that fill the space where something is, for example, "too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful, and which henceforth outstrips our sensory-motor capacities" (Deleuze 1989, 18).<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Erin Brannigan, 'Maya Deren, Dance, and Gestural Encounters in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*', in *Senses of Cinema* 22 (October 2002), < <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/22/deren/> >

Brannigan's description of Deren's vertical structure and Deleuze's time-image as a relaxing of physical filters — as well as mental filters for that matter — goes to show, first of all, that there is such a thing as a *physical mind*, as in that aspect of the consciousness that is predominantly tied to concrete physicality. This physical mind — so tightly bound to the physical senses and so deeply anchored in the denseness of external circumstances — has a limited capacity, hence Deleuze's qualification of something which may be 'too powerful' or 'too beautiful' for the physical mind to handle. It must be noted however that while the physical mind can certainly be trained to perceive beyond physicality, mainstream norms of a secularised society do not at all assist in such an expansion. The time-image then serves as a receptacle for those qualities that are possibly too extreme or too grand to be processed by the physical mind. This role of highly selective receptacle very much resembles *ma* in the time-image's containment of the sublime amidst immediate factors that are over-burdening (e.g. those experienced by the protagonists of post-war films). However, again very *ma*-like in its operation, the time-image transcends what Brannigan describes as the 'action-reaction filmic structure'<sup>205</sup>, causing the transcendent qualities contained within the inherently harmonious receptacle to further magnify their own sublimity due to such acute contrast with the surrounding oppositions. Just as Vincent Crapanzano explains that the Chinese character for *ma* shows the sun in the middle of an open gate, while there is a threshold indicating the transition between one area and another, the passageway between dimensions is open for selected information to stream through. *Ma* then becomes a period of retreat allowing inter-dimensional information to be exchanged. The reason such information is 'selected' is because *ma* is the ultimate purity, and therefore cannot be on the same wavelength

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<sup>205</sup> Brannigan, 'Maya Deren, Dance, and Gestural Encounters in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*'.



as, say, intellectually toxic data that would otherwise contaminate the haven-like interval, again relating back to Deleuze's idea of such lofty or even splendourous information which 'outstrips our sensory-motor capacities.'<sup>206</sup> Suppose if *ma* were an architectural structure within the interior of a residence, it would be very much womb-like, especially if it is an enclosed space that is purposely designed to remain independent and perhaps even oblivious of the outside world. Being womb-like suggests an extreme form of protection and concealment, yet open for the most nourishing elements to pass through so that the content within continuously increases in positive abundance. Richard Pilgrim puts forward that the Chinese character for *ma* indicates an opening for cosmic light — such as that offered by the sun or moon — to shine through, suggesting that that which is contaminated or polluted and therefore *not of* the light cannot enter *ma*:

Perhaps the most appropriate way to begin... is to create an image out of the Chinese characters that constitute the written word *ma*. It is made up of two elements, the enclosing radical meaning gate or door... and the inner character meaning either sun... or moon... The visual image or character, therefore, suggests a light shining through a gate or door. If we were to take the gate itself as representing the things or phenomena and events of the world, the opening in the gate becomes a *ma* or interval between things. Yet *ma* is not a mere emptiness or opening; through and in it shines a light, and the function of this *ma* becomes precisely to let that light shine through. A literary example of this image can be found in the twelfth-century novel, *The Tale of the Genji* by Lady Murasaki: "It was the fifteenth night of the eighth month. The light of an enclouded full-

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<sup>206</sup> Brannigan, 'Maya Deren, Dance, and Gestural Encounters in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*'.

moon shone between the ill-fitting planks of the roof and flooded the room. What a queer place to be lying in!, thought Genji, as he gazed around the garret, so different from any room he had ever known before”.<sup>207</sup>

Although there is nothing new and unusual about moonlight flooding a garret, what *is* new and unusual is the moonlight’s transformation of the space that Genji is inhabiting, causing him to experience an original poetic impression that had never occurred to him before. Such an atmosphere of spontaneous illumination constitutes a *ma* moment, as the moonlight is streaming through the roof’s loosening planks rather than widely flooding through without any components concealing some parts of the entering light. The significant point here is that while *ma* symbolises an open passageway, it is only *partially* open especially so that the sense of mystery is constantly preserved. It is not at all because *ma* must be confined as such, certainly not confined in meaning. In fact it is quite the opposite, as the metaphor of light streaming through a partially concealed space means that there is a fusion between the transparent and the hidden, causing new directions of multi-layered meanings to expand forth from such a fusion. As *ma* is an interval *between* things, it comes to symbolise the intersections and crossings between phases or dimensions, causing *ma* to embody extreme fluidity and flexibility to the point where it becomes a moldable abstraction. It is an intangibility that can be molded into concrete manifestations as well as constituting the invisible space to which such manifestations dissolve back into during those moments of meditative repose. The example of the moonlit garret where an ordinary setting is transformed into a completely new experience for Genji goes to show that

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<sup>207</sup> Pilgrim, ‘Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time’, p. 58.

*ma* holds potential for unexpected communion between oneself and the higher dimension. The higher dimension in this case is the celestial moon itself, although the quality of ‘higher’ does not necessarily mean physical height. More precisely, it refers to an inner ascension — a constant development in seeing the sacred or the magical in ordinary things. Significantly, *ma* may have boundaries, but those boundaries are not at all fixed nor are they clearly defined. The idea that *ma* seeks to dismantle the distinctions between space and time, and even between objectivity and subjectivity, goes to show that *ma* does not recognise such categories to be anything more than artificial constructs. *Ma*’s non-material status as the unifying source where all manifestations forsake their concreteness means that dualities — such as space-time, objectivity-subjectivity, and reason-emotion — are no longer dualities as such. Those so-called dualities that are labeled as space-time and the like affect each other in such penetrating ways that they overlap each other as varying points on the same continuum.

Furthermore, Daniel Frampton provides an interpretation of Jean Epstein’s *lyrosophy* of the camera lens (which Frampton later relates to *photogénie*) that fuses reason and emotion in such an original, in fact socially independent manner that such dualistic constructs (often a product of societal imposition) do not apply to the vision of the lens. The fusion between reason and emotion then leads to the consideration of a corresponding fusion between subjectivity and objectivity. Both dualistic relationships concern analysis of a situation by stepping outside of it (a process that uses reason and objectivity) as well as sympathetic involvement entirely based on a personal point-of-view (a process that uses emotion and subjectivity): ‘But most presciently, Epstein saw a future of film where subjective and objective viewpoints could be shown together,

as one.<sup>208</sup> So in such a fusion, subjectivity becomes a primary creator of objective reality, while the objective reality that accomplishes a rendezvous with the subjective position becomes a manifested result of corresponding subjective patterns of thought and emotion. There is no such thing as a separation between subjectivity and objectivity, and cinema's purpose is to maintain an independence from such a hindering construct of separation. Epstein proposes and Frampton interprets that the camera lens remains independent in such an elevated way which does not recognise the differentiation inherent within the dualistic structure:

He [Epstein] drew a theory of *lyrosophy*, a singing of knowledge, producing reason and emotion in one fell swoop. For Epstein film has that unique quality, 'that of *being an eye independent of the eye, of escaping the tyrannical egocentrism* of our personal vision...*the lens is itself.*' And when he notes that '...Truly, the cinema creates a *particular system of consciousness limited to a single sense,*' he is not finding a duplication of the work of the eye, but searching for a way to understand cinema's *neo-eye* quality...Epstein also included the concept of *photogénie*, being that sublime, indefinable, ineffable quality given by film to the objects and people within it (and found most readily in close-ups and slow-motion).<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 52.

<sup>209</sup> Frampton, p. 52.

Frampton's observation that Epstein sought a *neo-eye* quality inherent in cinema does suggest *ma*-like tendencies, especially in the camera's vision of unity where objective reality comes to serve as a reflection of the individual's (subjective) imaginative patterns. The principle here is that an objective reality cannot come to be immediately exposed to an individual if such a reality is not *already* somehow germinating *within* the individual's consciousness in the first place: '...this idea of simultaneously showing subjective and objective viewpoints brilliantly sums up the power of film-thinking in many ways — that film offers *another* view...For Epstein film breaks free of human perception and moves towards revealing an omniscient eye — perhaps revealing the workings or 'logic' of the subconscious.'<sup>210</sup> Ultimately, such a perspective that sheds away the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity would lead to an alternative line of questioning as to whether it is the subjective imagination which governs *all* the objective reality to which the individual comes to be exposed. If so — in other words, if it is the case that 'as the within, so the without' — then the camera lens becomes an overseer orchestrating the playing out of the objective components: 'Film *sees* transsubjectively: one 'eye' seeing objectively and subjectively.'<sup>211</sup> Thus, Frampton observes and Epstein proposes that cinema should be as an elevated director who is not confined by the filters of the perceptual faculties, whose vision is so broad and quite possibly near-omniscient in the cinema's capacity to *imagine* how something is operating, regardless of whether that something can be immediately accessed by the physical senses<sup>212</sup> — '*an eye independent of the eye*,'<sup>213</sup> a quality which corresponds to

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<sup>210</sup> Frampton, p. 52.

<sup>211</sup> Frampton, p. 52.

<sup>212</sup> 'In Jean Epstein's essay, "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*", he delivers a full account of cinema's phantasmagoric transformation of dead things to live objects, ripe with alien but nonetheless

the *ma* principle. Significantly, *ma* is a symbolic encounter — a translocal place where cooperative components have gathered and melded into whatever assemblage before any manifestation corresponding to the potentiality within the gestating interval is actualised outside of *ma*: ‘*Ma* refers at once to “something” and the experience of that something. It is neither objective nor subjective but a coalescence of the two, for, insofar as *ma* deconstructs all boundaries, so it has (I suppose) to eliminate those between the objective and the subjective.’<sup>214</sup>

Crapanzano’s earlier suggestion, however, that *ma* cannot be understood from outside a Japanese cultural context proves inaccurate. In fact Maya Deren’s theoretical material does show that there are poetic states identified as non-linear *moments* which focus upon the ways in which a phenomenon embodies expansive dimensions transcending the surface appearance of that respective phenomenon. Annette Michelson’s interpretation of Deren’s theory focuses upon this precise point of the *poetic moment* that develops without the need for coherent organisation, as opposed to linear drama characterised by a chronological sequence of events. Deren refers to this

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necessarily meaningful power, power that itself derives directly from the alien nature of the sensibility that delivers it to us: “I would even go so far as to say that the cinema is polytheistic and theogonic. Those lives it creates, by summoning objects out of the shadows of indifference into the light of dramatic concern, have little in common with human life. These lives are like the life in charms and amulets, the ominous, tabooed objects of certain primitive religions. If we wish to understand how an animal, a plant or a stone can inspire respect, fear and horror, those three most sacred sentiments, I think we must watch them on the screen, living their mysterious silent lives, alien to the human sensibility.” ’ (Moore, *Savage Theory*, p. 73)

<sup>213</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 52.

<sup>214</sup> Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons*, p. 52.

linearity as a 'horizontal structure' — quite apt as the linear organisation remains flat and inflexible, serving as a temporal marker of occurrences that does not allow for those occurrences to be re-organised or 're-shuffled'. The poetic moment, on the other hand, is referred to by Deren as a 'vertical structure' precisely because it not only counters such linearity but also remains independent of it. The vertical structure rather presents the irreversible timeline as occupying a very minor segment of universal existence, even going so far as to allude to the possibility that most dimensions do not operate through such a timeline and that only very few do:

The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by “a poetic structure”), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a “vertical” investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned in a sense not with what is occurring, but with what it feels like or what it means. A poem, to my mind, creates visible or auditory forms for something which is invisible, which is the feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of the movement. Now it also may include action, but its attack is what I could call the “vertical” attack, and this may be a little bit clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the “horizontal” attack of a drama, which is concerned with the development, let's say, within a very small situation from feeling to feeling. Perhaps it would be made most clear if you take a Shakespearean work which combines the two movements. In Shakespeare you have the drama moving forward on a “horizontal” plane of development, of one circumstance — one action — leading to another, and this delineates the character. Every once and a while, however, he arrives at

a point of action where he wants to illuminate the meaning to this moment of drama, and at that moment he builds a pyramid or investigates it “vertically”, if you will, so that you have a “horizontal” development with periodic “vertical” investigations which are the poems, which are the monologues.<sup>215</sup>

Considering that Deren is so intent upon developing the inter-dimensionality of a poetic moment, it would be more accurate to define such a moment as a *magnification* of feelings, however fleeting or subtle such feelings may be. The poetic moment is more accurately a *microcosm* whereby a convergence of expanding patterns of meanings is captured in an intuitively moving instant. Deren’s concept of a poetic moment closely resembles *ma* in that the subtle method by which the moment is composed causes the invisible to be felt on levels that transcend all surface appearances. This is not an instance where the content is spelt out obviously and instructively, but more of a very lateral expression where multi-layered meanings branch out and extend into many possibilities that are not necessarily presented in a straightforward manner. Such an idea of a poetic phenomenon designed to reach far into those dimensions that normally slip through the filters of the physical human senses becomes especially evident in her example of the ‘vertical’ moments in Shakespeare’s works. These are contemplative interstices — that, metaphorically speaking, may be ‘physically empty (as in, empty of the action-reaction structure) but non-physically luxuriant’ — offering the forward-moving narrative a *resting place* from its own drama, which may prove exhausting if there are no such poetic breaks to distract from the linear

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<sup>215</sup> Interview with Maya Deren, ‘Poetry and the Film: A Symposium’, in *Film Culture* 29, ed. by Willard Mass (1963).



momentum. The poetic moment in turn gives the audience an opportunity to take a mental and emotional step back from the linear drama in order to formulate alternative perspectives — possibly even to seek and allow spontaneous moments of inspiration to unfold — before the drama resumes. In a dramatic piece where there is a relatively balanced combination of ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ elements, the vertical moments allow the segments just played out a completely unrushed opening to reflect and mature, much like a nourishing period for the soil to rest especially so that what is planted can grow abundantly thereafter. In a manner of speaking, the poetic moment is an interval of creatively fecund meditation that purposely steps outside of the temporal narrative setting and even the time constraints of the dramatic piece. Deren does not go so far as to say that the vertical structure constitutes a form of time travel, but there does appear to be a rather close implication. Her ideas on the poetic moment suggest somewhat of a contortion against the conventional timeline. Very much resembling *ma* in many significant ways, the poetic moment is a culmination of that which has already been and that which can potentially be, all the while omitting the consideration of past, present, and future as well as their conventional irreversibility. Deren herself recognises that while film has the capacity to operate both ‘horizontally’ and ‘vertically’ in her terms, a film where the horizontal structure of sequential chronology is predominant would in turn cause any vertical qualities present to suffocate, and perhaps even vice versa — a film that shows poetic moments almost entirely would not be able to preserve with any substance the linear drama: ‘[Distinctions are] important in the sense that they give an audience, or any potential audience, a preparation, an approach, to what they’re going to see. In the sense that if they’re thinking they are going to see an adventure film, and if they are confronted with a poetic film, that’s not going to go very well.’<sup>216</sup> In so

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<sup>216</sup> Interview with Maya Deren, ‘Poetry and the Film: A Symposium’.

being, Deren's most widely studied short film *Meshes of the Afternoon* does not feature a single moment of conventional logic. And even if there is an attempt to squeeze in an instance of linear drama, it would prove to be severely out of place. In fact the scene that conveys the most inventive *ma* qualities is the moment where the main character played by Deren rests on a couch and closes her eyes before a pathway outside the window.



Considering the *porous fabric* of existence that is the primary property which makes inter-dimensionality possible, eyes that are closed may cease the usage of the physical sight. Yet it is important to note that a closed eye is not actually *sealed*. Here, the intimate close-up magnifies a closed eye that remains ever-fluid, its temporary detachment from the waking world serving as

an increasingly selective filter as to what the vision is inclined to process. With the closing of her eyes, the world perceived through the physical senses takes a rest with her. This inter-dimensional transition is conveyed by a darkening of the image of the pathway outside her window, as if a shadow is descending upon the image in a manner resembling the dropping of a veil. The same symbolic veil washes over the close-up of her eye. Even the close-up is rather landscape-like with the contours of this carefully captured area of her flesh and its varying shades. Thus, the closing of her eyes becomes symbolic of a *shift* in landscape — a radical transformation from vision through the physical eyesight to an *inner* envisioning of the unbridled way the imagination creatively processes images.



Following the close-up, the camera appears to draw away from the image of the pathway, just as a tunnel-like structure — very much resembling a telescope — imposes itself onto the image. A figure in a black cloak then appears, her origin unknown. The tunnel stands for a smooth process of detaching from the waking world, especially as the camera appears to be drawing *backwards*, gliding solemnly away from the pathway just as the black figure walks into the framed circle. The black figure is clearly not of the waking world, characterised by extreme anonymity and thoroughly covered in a nocturnal colour from head to toe. It seems purposeful that such an exceptionally dark figure is materialising openly on a pathway in clear daylight. The fact that it is culturally out of place is not even taken into account.



The above cinematic moment conveys sacred poetry through seamlessly overlapping the waking world with the dream world. It is important to note here that Deren's dream world is not temporally bound to the individual's outward activity, such as sleeping, napping, or being awake. Even sleeping is made to symbolise an inter-worldly transition, rather than remaining as a mere withdrawal of consciousness from the waking state. The close-up of the closed eye conveys the eye as an autonomous organism — significantly enlarged, inviting focused interaction, and even seemingly breathing all on its own — rather than as a small segment of the human anatomy. Correspondingly, Epstein elaborates upon what he describes as a divine perspective — an intimately attentive eye — assumed by a detail-capturing technique such as the close-up, exercised extensively in Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*:

Moreover, cinema is a language, and like all languages it is animistic; it attributes, in other words, a semblance of life to the objects it defines... There is no need to stress the extent to which the language of cinema remains primitive in its terms and ideas; so it is hardly surprising that it should endow the objects it is called upon to depict with such intense life. The almost godlike importance assumed in close-ups by parts of the human body, or by the most frigid elements in nature, has often been noted. Through the cinema, a revolver in a drawer, a broken bottle on the ground, an eye isolated by an iris, are elevated to the status of characters in the drama. Being dramatic, they seem alive, as though involved in the evolution of an emotion.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Jean Epstein, 'On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*', in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939* (vol. 2: 1929-1939), ed. by Richard Abel, pp. 316-7.

The transformation of an inanimate object into an emotional being does not necessitate that the usual state of the filmed object must be changed (for example, a broken bottle can remain just that, yet certain film techniques can cause the broken bottle to take on dramatic significance all the while remaining on the ground). What must be changed is the perspective one takes towards the filmed object, as the investigation of an emotional aspect of something is an attempt to define very fluid but powerful elements that originate in an invisible realm. The following are some examples of the technical uniqueness that film possesses, bestowing the medium with the power to radically transform the spectator's visionary capacity: the moving nature of film determined by edited shots and cuts and even fades, the immense influence that editing has upon the way a subject is portrayed, the manner in which the length of a shot can range from a single second (or less) to even the entire duration of a film, the camera's capacity to move in whatever way and at whatever speed and even at varying heights, as well as the camera's inclination to magnify or distance itself from the filmed objects. Objects otherwise considered inanimate are transformed — in other words, poeticised — into living and breathing characters, revealing an emotional life that the object is *already* experiencing, only that such an emotional life may normally be overlooked by the naked eye. Epstein then uses poetry to qualify his animistic cinema, except here he places emphasis upon uniqueness of expression as a determining criterion. Without this uniqueness which is a direct reflection of the artist's individuality, an art form would be devoid of what he refers to as a 'soul', which is in turn synonymous to poetry:

Of course a landscape filmed by one of the forty or four hundred directors devoid of personality whom God sent to plague the cinema as He once sent the locusts into Egypt looks exactly like this same landscape filmed by any other of these locust filmmakers. But this landscape or this fragment of drama staged by someone like Gance will look nothing like what would be seen through the eyes and heart of a Griffith or a L'Herbier. And so the personality, the soul, the poetry of certain men invaded the cinema.<sup>218</sup>

Epstein offers an analogy of filmed landscape presenting itself in near-identical versions (near-identical due to conformity to standardised norms of how landscapes should be filmed), and then contrasts such conventional presentations with a landscape piece filmed in such an original way that truly does express the unique 'soul' of the artist. This idea of contrasting originality with what appears to be common mediocrity is a distinctly avant-garde position in that there is

- 1.) an observation of a rearguard trend composed of mass-produced versions (or at least the equivalent of being mass-produced) conforming to conventional standards of how landscapes are normally filmed, almost as though such landscape versions serve as film-recorded commodities rather than as authentic art forms; and
- 2.) an upholding of a vanguard trend composed of unconventional landscape presentations utilising methods that can be classed as truly original.

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<sup>218</sup> Epstein, 'On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*', p. 318.

Translated by Tom Milne in *Afterimage* 10 (Autumn 1981). The original French text first appears as "De quelques conditions de la photogénie" in *Cinéa- Ciné-pour-tous* 19 (15 August 1924).

The former does not have a unique ‘soul’ and therefore has no poetry, while the latter genuinely does embody the poetic perspective of the artist:

Now we are approaching the promised land, a place of great wonders. Here matter is molded and set into relief by personality; all nature, all things appear as a man has dreamed them; the world is created as you think it is; pleasant if you think it so, harsh if you believe it so. Time hurries on or retreats, or stops and waits for you. A new reality is revealed, a reality for a special occasion, which is untrue to everyday reality just as everyday reality is untrue to the heightened awareness of poetry...since we can see the clear thread of thoughts and dreams, what might or should have been, what was, what never was or could have been, feelings in their secret guise, the startling face of love and beauty, in a word, the soul. “So poetry is thus true, and exists as truly as the eye.”<sup>219</sup>

Apart from suggesting a synonymous relationship between poetry and the ‘soul’, Epstein further proposes that poetry is that self-created state of wonder where matter is molded by thoughts and dreams, with no or minimal space for random or accidental interventions falling outside of such self-direction. Poetry constitutes a higher vision that remains ‘true’ on the level of pure potentiality, regardless of manifested evidence to the contrary. In other words, such a *poetic reality* does not need empirical justification to prove its own ‘realness’. It exists in an autonomous realm entirely regulated by the artist’s imagination, independent of those factors

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<sup>219</sup> Epstein, ‘On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*’, p. 318.



which we would class as uncontrollable. Even the idea that the course of time can be manipulated to the artist's own ends means that this poetic reality does not operate according to the laws of physicality. It is a reality that creates its *own* laws; and if poetry is to be lawless, then this lawlessness would be subject to the artist's own regulation, which is why Epstein describes poetry's detachment from everyday reality that remains bound by those laws of physicality. The 'soul' is defined by this poetic reality in a sense that one cannot be a *whole* human being unless this potential of the 'soul' is embraced — that so long as one is not immersing oneself in that poetic dimension where the imagination reigns supreme, one is only living half a life. This idea bears much similarity with Artaud's vision of using the Theatre of Cruelty to balance the upper and lower strata of the consciousness: '...the Theater of Cruelty will address itself only to total man. And it will cause not only the recto but the verso of the mind to play its part; the reality of imagination and dreams will appear there on equal footing with life.'<sup>220</sup> Although Artaud does not exactly specify what he means by 'recto' and 'verso', there is still an implication that the former is the surface consciousness that regularly interacts with everyday occurrences while the latter is very much identical with Epstein's poetic reality or indeed the 'soul' where 'the movement and gestures of characters [are] enlarged to the statures of gods, heroes, or monsters, in mythical dimensions...'<sup>221</sup> The Theatre of Cruelty then becomes a conglomeration of sacred qualities in their most concentrated forms, which is part of the reason why grand symbols standing for wild and unrestrained states of consciousness (symbolised by monsters, for instance) are given so much importance. Furthermore, 'These gods or heroes, these monsters, these natural and cosmic forces will be interpreted according to images from the most ancient sacred texts and

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<sup>220</sup> Artaud, 'The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 123.

<sup>221</sup> Artaud, 'The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 123.

old cosmogonies,<sup>222</sup> again emphasising that the most profound poetry would extract and creatively express mythical images and symbols that reveal cosmic sacrality.<sup>223</sup> Significantly, Jean-Luc Godard, upon the death of Kenji Mizoguchi on 24 August 1956 in Kyoto, also describes Mizoguchi's film poetry as expressing a 'cosmogony': 'If poetry is manifest in each second, each shot filmed by Mizoguchi, it is because...it is the instinctive reflection of the filmmaker's nobility...the director...can describe an adventure which is at the same time a cosmogony...The art of...Mizoguchi is to prove that real life is at one and the same time elsewhere and yet here, in its strange and radiant beauty.'<sup>224</sup> The portrayal of life as simultaneously here and elsewhere also shows convergences with Epstein's poetic reality, as 'here' in this case would mean the immediate physical reality while 'elsewhere' would mean the imaginative reality. Being in these two places all at the same time suggests that while the latter is always extracting information from the former especially to refine its poetic creations, the only reason the former has any existence at all is because it originates from the latter. Here, Godard is not proposing that Mizoguchi is forcibly making the surface reality and the poetic reality interact, but there is certainly an implication that poetry is a life force that manifests itself 'in each second, each shot'. Thus, the idea of being both 'here and elsewhere' necessitates recognition that what is 'elsewhere' is creating what is 'here' from the most seminal level.

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<sup>222</sup> Artaud, 'The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 123.

<sup>223</sup> 'Besides this need for the theater to steep itself in the springs of an eternally passionate and sensuous poetry available to even the most backward and inattentive portions of the public, a poetry realized by a return to the primitive Myths, we shall require of the *mise en scène* and not of the text the task of materializing these old conflicts...' ('The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)', pp. 123-4)

<sup>224</sup> *Speechless: The Magazine* (Spring 2007), < <http://www.speechlessthemagazine.org/modiano.htm> >

## Chapter 4

### *Mizoguchi's Film Hierophany*

The most critically acclaimed masterpieces of Kenji Mizoguchi's sacred cinema (namely *Ugetsu*, *Sansho the Bailiff*, and *The Life of Oharu*) led to international praise that not only placed him on the same wavelength as the European masters, but also exalted him as a master of his own medium: ' "Like Bach, Titian, and Shakespeare, he is the greatest in his art," enthused the French critic Jean Douchet; and not far behind were Jean-Luc Godard, who declared him "the greatest of Japanese filmmakers, or quite simply one of the greatest of filmmakers," and the *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby, who extolled him as "one of the great directors of the sound era."<sup>225</sup> Such superlative pronouncements arose from the fact that his films compensated for some highly elaborate qualities of historical and artistic depth that mainstream modern Western culture was lacking. Mizoguchi's films quenched a cultural thirst, granting him an equal status amongst international auteurs (according to Phillip Lopate, 'Mizoguchi belongs in the same exalted company as Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, Carl Dreyer, Alfred Hitchcock, Max Ophüls, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Bresson, and Akira Kurosawa').<sup>226</sup> Yet it is important to note that even though he may bask in the company of the European and American auteurs, the primary reason Mizoguchi joined such ranks in the first place was because he crafted works of dramatic and artistic splendour that did not at all resemble those of the other auteurs. And it is much more than

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<sup>225</sup> Philip Lopate, 'From the Other Shore', in *Ugetsu* (a booklet included in the Criterion DVD set), p. 4.

<sup>226</sup> Lopate, p. 4.

the identifiable cultural differences that were the cause of such distinctions. It is the methods by which he transforms historical themes into lavish artistic compositions full of mythical undertones. According to Jacques Rivette, Mizoguchi's *mise en scène* constitutes a universal language reflecting certain innate structures within the consciousness. Even though aesthetic preferences are entirely a matter of subjective tastes, there remains something about *mise en scène* that profoundly resonates with the core mechanics of the human imagination:

...these films — which tell us, in an alien tongue, stories that are completely foreign to our customs and way of life — do talk to us in a familiar language. What language? The only one to which a film-maker should lay claim when all is said and done: the language of *mise en scène*. For modern artists did not discover African fetishes through a conversion to idols, but because those unusual objects moved them as sculptures. If music is a universal idiom, so too is *mise en scène*: it is this language, and not Japanese, that has to be learned to understand 'Mizoguchi'. A language held in common, but here brought to a degree of purity that our Western cinema has known only rarely.<sup>227</sup>

Even though Rivette does not offer a precise explanation of what is meant by *mise en scène*, it is still important to elaborate upon how the term is generally used. Critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* specify the term as a somewhat opposition to editing which means that they tend to favour the

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<sup>227</sup> Jacques Rivette, 'Mizoguchi Viewed from Here' ('Mizoguchi vu d'ici'), in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 81, March 1958.

association of the long-take with *mise en scène*, although this is by no means a clear-cut standard. If we are to interpret Rivette's ideas, however, entirely binding the term to the long take is much too confining, because the capacity to affect the universal imagination is certainly not unique to the long take which places an emphasis upon that segment which remains *uncut*. What is present *within* the images, both visual and aural, and the ways in which such internal components are arranged are equally of great importance:

Auteurist criticism forced much closer consideration of the films, regarding not so much the explicit subject matter but the ways the films had been transformed by the director's personality, the themes which recur within and across films, or the themes' presentation in the visual style on the screen. To support the notion of transformation, a key concept used by the auteurist critics was *mise-en-scène*.

As a descriptive term, *mise-en-scène* is taken from the theater and literally means "staging" or "placing on the stage." As applied to the cinema it relates to aspects of setting, lighting, costume, and the behaviour of figures. Implicit in the transference from theater to film, however, is the deliberate nature of the act: the director stages the event for the camera. This distinction is important, for in the literal sense of the term, *mise-en-scène* does not include all aspects of the representation; it would not include, for example, durational or photographic qualities of the shot or editing. The *mise-en-scène* critics focused upon the profilmic event (the event staged for the camera) as the director's site for expressing mastery over the material. A *Cahiers* critic wrote in the 1960s, "*Mise en scène* is nothing other than the technique invented by each director to express the idea

and establish the specific quality of his work.” *Cahiers*’ conception of mise-en-scène complemented the *politique des auteurs* in a transformative manner. As Caughie describes this interchange, “It is with the *mise en scène* that the *auteur* transforms the material which has been given to him; so it is in the *mise en scène* — in the disposition of the scene, in the camera movement, in the camera placement, in the movement from shot to shot — that the *auteur* writes his individuality into the film.”<sup>228</sup>

Even though there is an emphasis upon the staging of components and their relationships with each other within the scene, *mise en scène* does not exclude the editing process, especially in Caughie’s statement that *mise en scène* includes ‘the movement from shot to shot’, a transitional method which completely hinges upon editing itself; in fact this is where Kiriwara contradicts himself in a minor way. *Mise en scène* does however tend to favour a *reduced* usage of cutting. The greater emphasis is upon what is presented *within* each shot, and this is where the *auteur* expresses their signature style. Even so, it is not just *any* kind of presentation that can be applied to *mise en scène*, but a presentation that profoundly resonates with the archetypal/mythical level of consciousness, especially if we are specifically considering Rivette’s proposition that *mise en scène* is a universal language that needs no translation or mediating explanation. To explain it more precisely by analogy, the universal language is very closely aligned with such ideas as ‘the eyes must see in order to believe’ and ‘it is experience rather than words that teach’. Very much along the same lines as Artaud, Rivette is suggesting an *intuiting* of Mizoguchi’s *mise en scène*

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<sup>228</sup> Donald Kiriwara, *Patterns of Time: Mizoguchi and the 1930s* (Wisconsin Studies in Film) (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p. 20.

that should remain independent of external explanatory mediation, which in turn means that an intuitively open audience does not need to be informed at any aural length of the cultural particularities featured throughout the films.

Rivette even compares the inter-cultural or rather the transcultural qualities of Mizoguchi's *mise en scène* to African fetishes that have the power to move modern artists, quite purely by their sculptural forms rather than by the meanings assigned to them by their local cultures — acquired meanings that would not be immediately comprehensible to modern artists, yet the sacred sculptures naturally affect the mythical imagination nonetheless. Just as the sculptural forms express a potency that can be *felt* through the details of their compositions, so *mise en scène* expresses a similar kind of power through its cinematography, lighting, the arrangement of set design, the selective inclusion of the accidental and the improvised, and even the panning and zooming methods characterising each shot. The cotton field scene near the beginning of *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954)<sup>229</sup> is a *mise en scène* masterpiece set in a field of tall cotton grass that is

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<sup>229</sup> *Sansho the Bailiff* may also be considered avant-garde because of its activist perspective: 'Seen from a political point of view, the film seems to expound the purest liberalism. Against tyranny it sets law; against captivity, freedom. The story takes place, as the opening caption informs us, in "an era when mankind had not yet awakened as human beings," and charts imaginatively (perhaps even anachronistically) the first stirrings of protodemocratic consciousness. All viewers remember the words that Zushio's father teaches him before being sent into exile: "Without mercy, man is like a beast. Men are created equal. No one should be denied happiness." The lesson, beautifully shot, in one of the film's finest scenes, is delivered over a miniature effigy of the goddess Kwannon that is then entrusted to the boy as his parting gift. Kwannon is a Buddhist deity, and *Sansho the Bailiff*, we ought to remind ourselves, is also a religious film — one of the few truly great films about which such a claim may meaningfully be made.' (Mark Le Fanu, 'The Lessons of *Sansho*', in *Sansho the Bailiff*, pp. 13-4.)

graceful and aesthetically pleasing in many ways that can be poetically described, almost possessing a quiet majesty due to the slow pace woven into the grandeur. Four characters are placed between both sides of the field, walking along a narrow pathway that rather belittles humans, even though the section of the cotton field framed within the image does not seem to be so expansive. What distinguishes this instance of *mise en scène* from other scenes of a similar standard of cinematography is that it is primarily created by simply placing four people on an in-between pathway. The rest is just a matter of ingenious framing.



The principle feature of this scene is the silky white hair of the cotton tufts set in contrast to the much darker background, causing the travelled path to be abundantly populated on both sides



with widely spread white clusters that are fragile-looking and perhaps even innocent-looking but certainly taking on a prominent presence. The choice of using cotton grass as a primary component to literally carpet this scene has significant implications. The colour contrast plays an important role in elevating the cotton grass to a status of a living, breathing character, especially as the plants are rather human-like with heads of loose hair almost kowtowing to the wind. Furthermore, if the cotton field were to be replaced by, say, a corn field, the effect would be nowhere near as soft and willowy — and it is these more tender qualities that are most conducive towards inter-dimensional fusion, as I will later show is the driving factor of this scene.



As the camera pans slowly across the field, it looks as though the four characters are walking through waves of clouds, as the seed heads of the cotton grass display fluffy white masses that have a delicate appearance, in turn contributing to the light, swaying motions of the vertical yet very supple-looking plants standing together in a bounteous blanket formation. The extreme pliability of vertical structures such as these constitutes a liminal quality that determines the inter-dimensional nature of this scene. The emphasis here is upon the qualities extending forth from the slender cotton grass, such as the cloud-like feathery cotton flowers gently fanning the way for the travellers, as well as the rushlike plants swaying in a collective movement of waves upon waves. Such qualities are determining components of the *ma* moment entirely conducting this scene, *ma* being the poetic space-time interval that I had discussed extensively in Chapter 3. The significance of *ma* lies in its archetypal or mythical meanings that will then relate the moment back to Rivette's idea of *mise en scène* as a universal language. If we can establish the ways in which the cotton field scene constitutes a *ma* moment, then the idea that the scene resonates with a universal level of consciousness may not be a theoretical leap at all but rather a logical conclusion, as I had shown in the previous chapter that *ma* is an inter-cultural, in fact transcultural, phenomenon. The scene is significantly composed of a narrow pathway serving as an in-between space for the characters to walk along as they make their way through a sea of fluffy cotton flowers. The determining feature here is the *in-betweenness*, for if the pathway was located anywhere else — say, alongside the cotton field as opposed to running through it — it would then be difficult, if not impossible, to interpret this scene as a *ma* moment. That is because it is essential that the characters are conveyed as simultaneously blended into and distinguished from the rest of the cotton field, causing the characters to be *neither this nor that* — obviously shifting between states. With the pathway running through the field, all other components in the

scene harmoniously fall into place. Here, it is important to properly define *ma* as a network of in-between spaces that allow the flow and exchange of energy between physical persons, objects, and places — this energy being essentially invisible, but can still be felt as well as producing proportionate consequences directly reflecting the operative patterns within the invisible:

...*ma* also means “among”. In the compound *ningen* (“human being”), for example, *ma* (read *gen* here) implies that persons (*nin, hito*) stand within, among, or in relationship to others. As such, the word *ma* clearly begins to take on a relational meaning — a dynamic sense of standing in, with, among, or between. Related to this it also carries an experiential connotation, since to be among persons is to interact in some dynamic way. The Japanese phrase *ma ga warui* (“the *ma* is bad”), which has overtones of being embarrassed, well illustrates this nuance.<sup>230</sup>

This relational aspect of *ma* entirely characterises the cotton field scene where not only are the spaces in-between the slender cotton grass constantly shifting in response to the wind, but the cloud-like feathery cotton tufts also convey a sense of simultaneous floating and being grounded from a unified base. Such liminal qualities magnify the current status of the four characters as symbolic inhabitants of an invisible Centre that conducts and regulates the flow of energy between things. This Centre can very much be likened to the core of a flower that is the central connecting point of many petals — the core where multitudes of directions simultaneously

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<sup>230</sup> Pilgrim, ‘Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time’, p. 56.

converge and spread out into different paths. The cotton field symbolises a unified field of consciousness where separation is only an illusory construct, and where even things that appear to be light and airy (such as the cotton tufts) are like everything else that is interconnected by a web of invisible pathways. In many ways, the cotton field scene can be considered an example of Eliade's *axis mundi* — the symbolic point of interconnection between Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld — especially as the scene begins with an inclusion of an island in the middle of the sea in the distant horizon. From the island downwards, there is the sea which is layered between the sky and the cotton field, clearly showing that the island interlinks the three planes that would normally be considered individually had their not been any intention to frame the image in such a territorially inclusive way. Even the pathway running through the cotton field identifies the field into three layers, directly reflecting the triple planes in the upper portion of the image as well as Eliade's principle of the 'three cosmic levels':

Where the break-through from plane to plane has been effected by a hierophany, there too an opening has been made, either upward (the divine world) or downward (the underworld, the world of the dead). The three cosmic levels — earth, heaven, underworld — have been put in communication... Here, then, we have a sequence of religious conceptions and cosmological images that are inseparably connected and form a system that may be called the "system of the world" prevalent in traditional societies: (a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space; (b) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld); (c) communication

with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the *axis mundi*...; (d) around this cosmic axis lies the world (= our world), hence the axis is located “in the middle”, at the “navel of the earth”; it is the Center of the World.<sup>231</sup>

If we are applying the idea of an Underworld to this scene, it is important that this Underworld remains highly symbolic, as in standing for the lower part of the inter-dimensional relationship, but *not literally* taking on the connotations provided by Eliade, such as the reference to ‘the infernal regions’<sup>232</sup> for instance. Because there is initially an island in the distant horizon of this scene, there is an allusion to a dimension that operates *below* the surface appearance of things (especially as most of an island is below sea level). But that is not to say that the island has a literal infernal reference, considering the general serenity of the scene’s atmosphere.

Furthermore, the cotton field’s status as an invisible Centre cannot be restricted to a vertically oriented interconnection between Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld, but must be inclusive of a web of relationships and passages that all converge with the primary position of *axis mundi*. The field’s relationship with the skyline shows that the field itself (which is placed in the lower position) embodies the potential to expand into greater realms, if only on an invisible level of creative expansion seeking the diversity and contrast that breaks through the homogeneity of space. Furthermore, geographical boundaries remain far secondary to the symbolism of the wind as a wild and free agent that can carry itself boundlessly without any prevention from possible physical barriers. The wind is in fact an important character equivalent in the scene — almost

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<sup>231</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 36-7.

<sup>232</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 36-7.

anthropomorphised — for however invisible it may be, its clear effects are shown in the noticeably deferring motions of the cotton tufts. From the inclusion of the island in the middle of the sea onwards, the camera slowly pans across the field, gently zooming towards the fluffy cotton flowers while retaining a vision of their collective blanket-like appearance. It is iconic inter-dimensional scenes such as this one that inspired André Bazin to propose the idea of richly layered films that directly reflect the artistic civilisation in which they are made — a quality which he initially contrasts with the lack of traditional identity so typical of Western art. It must be noted that he is not so much associating tradition with imitation, but rather he is proposing that a work of art should possess certain aspects that bear admirable accuracy with and alignment to the collective traditional spirit:

The evolution of Western art, its divorce from the people and its exacerbated individualism have combined to mean that the quality of anonymity has progressively disappeared from our society since the eighteenth century. The style is that of the man; it is no longer that of civilization. We have great painters, great writers and even great filmmakers. But we really have no great literature and, even less, great cinema. By this I mean no common style, no minimum language of which the most mediocre artist can blunderingly make use...Perhaps the cinema has gone through a primitive stage (or should we say 'classical'?) in every country, the high point of its High Middle Ages. At that time, works were often anonymous. In any case, film existed as an entity in spite of the talents of its craftsmen. Today, perhaps only Hollywood still offers us — up to a certain point — the example of a cinema that is valuable not just in its individual works

but also for the language of its 'commercial' productions. There, the cinema is homogenous to the civilization that it satisfies and expresses. But in Europe, the cinema no longer exists. There are only good and bad films, like books or paintings.<sup>233</sup>

Although Bazin's view of Japanese films is idealised, he points out the profound cultural expression of Japanese films — regardless of positive or negative content — in distinct contrast to European films which he criticises for being one among many art forms trapped in the mainstream attitude of modern secularised individualism: 'Yet it seems that Japanese films differ both from ours as well as from those of Hollywood. A country with an old culture and strong traditions, Japan seems to have assimilated film with the same ease that it used to assimilate all other Western technology. This technology did not destroy their culture but was immediately integrated into it, and cinema effortlessly moved over to the level of Japanese art in general.'<sup>234</sup> Bazin is implying what I had referred to earlier as a 'cultural thirst' in the West that must be quenched by exposure to certain means of expression that defy secularised trends; in fact, such means of expression must take the complete opposite direction to secularisation, here alluding to a continuation of traditions deeply rooted in a mythical past — traditions that can compensate for the West's spiritual poverty. Much depends upon how the term 'spiritual' is defined, and here Bazin does offer a valuable perspective. He puts forward the idea of a *collective spirit* governing an artistic civilisation, and that Western individualism dictating separation as a norm is

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<sup>233</sup> Cited in Mark Le Fanu's *Mizoguchi and Japan*, p. 171.

André Bazin, 'The Lesson of Japanese Cinema Style', in *Arts*, March 1955, trans. by Sabine d'Estrée.

<sup>234</sup> Bazin, 'The Lesson of Japanese Cinema Style'.

suffocating that collective spirit, depriving individuals of an internal foundation from which they can create with clarity in a centred manner. The analogy here is that a tree with unhealthy roots cannot possibly produce quality fruit.

Even though he is upholding the *idealistic* aspects of a culture such as Japanese, Bazin is not blinded by such an idealisation of a cinema that is homogeneous to its local culture to the point where there is no recognition of uniqueness of individual expression. Before one would completely write off Bazin's ideas as going against the avant-garde cause, it must be noted that he *does* convey admiration for uniqueness, which is why he fully acknowledges that the West *does* have talented artists, but no traditionally grounded art to speak of. He may indeed uphold anonymity, putting the work of art *before* the artist, but that does not at all mean that the artist's individuality is being violated. He suggests in a later passage that it is the collective spirit in Japanese cinema that lays a fine foundation for composition, camera techniques, set design, intuitive symbolism, and other ritualistic incorporations that can potentially give a cinema its firm cultural identity. It must be noted that Bazin was writing this essay in the 1950s, so it does make sense for him to assert that the current trends of Western art did not support the solidifying of roots into traditional methods, regardless of the possibility that such traditions may possess some creative ingenuity about them which may benefit any artistic media. Bazin appears to suggest that this cultural attitude of seeking out the new only for the sake of newness has produced such damaging consequences upon even the most positive aspects that hold together an artistic civilisation, to the point where being modern is fast becoming a rather dead-end path towards a habitual robotic existence that cannot see passed the individual's surface personality.



Here, he asserts that the modern West views the artist as taking on a far more important status than the more collective meanings of the artwork: ‘The style is that of the man; it is no longer that of civilization.’<sup>235</sup> Thus, modernity sees the artwork as belonging to an artist, much more so than belonging to a cultural tradition. In fact, as far as modernity is concerned, the latter may not even deserve a mentioning. Secular individualism becomes isolationist in many ways, thickening the barriers between individuals and consequently loosening the ties between them. Artistic civilisation, however, is the complete opposite of such chronic individualism, especially as a civilisation considered to be age-old as well as possessing a mythical past is always upheld by teachings that are collectively inherited. This heritage of knowledge passed down through the generations causes a traditional art form to retain its own unique essence. In so being, an artistic medium should already be well settled in its own long-established characteristics, this medium identity being secure and solid enough in its own specialised skin not to become dependent upon the quality of individual craftsmanship. Individual skill fluctuates to say the least, whereas an artistic medium remains grounded within its own set of constant properties. For this reason, Bazin rather idealises the anonymity of art as a way towards reducing the negative side of individualism, considering as well that he cites specific historical periods such as the Middle Ages where preserving the anonymity of the artist was more of a norm.

The avant-garde nature of Bazin’s ideas lies in the fact that he is attempting throughout to posit modern Western art — in all of its obsessions with being new and ‘unrooted’ — as something that is rather conventional in itself. The conventionality becomes evident in the very

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<sup>235</sup> Bazin, ‘The Lesson of Japanese Cinema Style’.

superficiality of its blind obsession with newness, causing modern art to suffer from severe lack of complexity — a complexity that would certainly gain some substance if traditional methods were to be given some measure of importance in the artistic creation. Because modern art's predisposition towards the new only for the sake of being new is considered by Bazin to be so shallow, his views on traditional art then acquire a rather unexpected twist — a non-Western traditional art, Japanese being a primary example, then becomes the new avant-garde. Here, the capacity to create profound expressions of the collective traditional spirit becomes new and original quite ironically through its complete lack of desperation to be superficially new. The composition of Japanese films in accordance to some of their finest artistic traditions has done nothing to diminish the collective spirit of their civilisation. On the contrary, there seems to be an implication that the inclusion of a modern technological medium has considerably enriched Japanese artistic culture, as idealised as Bazin's perspective may seem. Yet such an idealisation becomes almost beside the point when considering the overriding idea that Japanese cinema is viewed by critics such as Bazin as an intellectual and artistic compensation for the historical nuances and multi-layered meanings that modern Western art has long been depriving itself of. Thus, the modern nature of the cinematic invention remains far secondary to the fact that it has been thoroughly incorporated into the culture's richest traditions whose far-reaching roots comfortably place such traditions in the area of *second nature* — that artistic refinement and its inherent grace and elegance have been so intensely absorbed into the Japanese cultural fabric that those qualities become a widespread spontaneous habit:

It would be difficult to find a director so uncouth and unpolished that he would not spontaneously compose his shots according to the best plastic traditions of Oriental art. In the same vein, there is not one Japanese who could drop a cup of tea on a straw mat, nor, in the archipelago, is there a badly pruned cherry tree. And what I say about cherry trees and *mise en scène* is true, quite naturally, of their dramatic expression.<sup>236</sup>

Bazin's metaphorical comparison of *mise en scène* to tea-drinking and cherry trees is far more than a characterisation of *mise en scène* as poise and suave expertise in ordinary things. Here, the prioritised refinement of a modern medium such as cinema has become just as much of a second nature in Japanese culture as the consistent cultivation of the other arts that are comparatively ancient. Yet even though Bazin emphasises Japanese cinema's assimilation into the lofty standards of their other fine arts, he is not at all doing away with the contribution of the artist's individuality, which is why he refers to the director's skill of composition: 'Perhaps the cinema has gone through a primitive stage (or should we say 'classical'?) in every country, the high point of its High Middle Ages. At that time, works were often anonymous. In any case, film existed as an entity in spite of the talents of its craftsmen.'<sup>237</sup> Instead of undermining individual talent, anonymity sends a clear message that the artist remains beyond any labeling. An artistic masterpiece should have an autonomous standing in terms of its own qualities, and should not have to be associated with the artist's name (a name which more often than not has been manipulated by the culture by whatever proportions).

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<sup>236</sup> Bazin, 'The Lesson of Japanese Cinema Style'.

<sup>237</sup> Bazin, 'The Lesson of Japanese Cinema Style'.

## *Painting and Mizoguchi's Sacred Cinema*

Cinematography remains a primary determinant in whether film's incorporation of painting is at all appropriate. Here, appropriateness refers to whether the fusion between cinema and painting does any justice at all to both media in light of the fact that they individually possess their own unique properties. Even Bazin claims that the cinematic depiction of painting is a betrayal of painting itself, because to view something through a camera is a radically different experience from the naked eye's direct exposure to the perceived object. Assessing from this initial criticism, film already has a tendency to undermine the integrity of painting:

Not only is the film a betrayal of the painter, it is also a betrayal of the painting and for this reason: the viewer, believing that he is seeing the picture as painted, is actually looking at it through the instrumentality of an art form that profoundly changes its nature. This was true from the first of black and white. But even color offers no solution. No one color is ever faithfully reproduced; still less, therefore, is any combination of colors.<sup>238</sup>

If we are thinking in accordance to Bazin's argument that a cinematic depiction of a painting is a betrayal of the painting itself, it may indeed be unwise and problematic to assess such a cinematic depiction as if it is an *imitation* of a direct exposure to a painting. In other words, it may be quite pointless to treat the cinematic depiction as if it is a resemblance of the actual experience of immediate observation of a painting without mediation from another viewing

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<sup>238</sup> Bazin, 'Painting and Cinema', in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, pp. 164 - 172 (p. 165).

instrument such as a film camera. Once we come to a realisation that imitation undermines cinema's creative potential, we can then progress to think of cinematic portrayals of painting as far more than depictions as such. We can come to consider such portrayals as an emergence of new aspects to film as an art form where the experience of viewing a painting is radically transformed through the creative execution of film techniques. The significant point here is that these techniques are adapted *especially* to present painting in ways that would be quite impossible to experience through the direct exposure to the painting. Bazin then suggests the seeming disparities between how time operates in film as opposed to how it operates in painting, Bazin is laying out the difficulties in combining 1.) time that moves forward horizontally through the filmic organisation of one frame following another, and 2.) a centred time that focuses itself into an individual framed painting that invites prolonged depth of attention: 'the sequence of a film gives it a unity in time that is horizontal and, so to speak, geographical, whereas time in a painting, so far as the notion applies, develops geologically and in depth.'<sup>239</sup> Here, Bazin is referring to the normal presentation of paintings that involve proper framing, whether it be a frame that is *imposed upon* the painting after the painting's completion or a frame that is used to stretch the painting canvas to mark the canvas borders which determine the size of the canvas: 'the frame of a painting encloses a space that is oriented so to speak in a different direction.'<sup>240</sup> He is not referring to alternative forms of presentation such as cave and mural paintings that do not conform to the above description of framing, nor is he even considering calligraphy scrolls that are unrolled and then rolled up as they are being read. The lack of consideration of such

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<sup>239</sup> Bazin, p. 165.

<sup>240</sup> Bazin, p. 165.

alternative presentations means that his conventional definition of picture framing is much more easily contrasted with the frame of a film image which he claims does not actually count as a frame. An individual film frame captures but a mere segment of the entire film itself. So a film frame does not separate nor isolate an image from the rest of the film; on the contrary, a film frame serves to interlink an image with other images. The conventional frame of a painting, however, demarcates clear boundaries between the painting and the area surrounding the painting (which is usually the wall). While film frames allow flow and continuity within the film, conventional picture frames draw a barrier of instructed discontinuity:

The outer edges of the screen are not, as the technical jargon would seem to imply, the frame of the film image. They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality. The picture frame polarizes space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe.<sup>241</sup>

What Bazin is not considering is the fact that pictures frames are not even a determinant in such paintings that do not conform to the conventional framing system. Nor does Bazin elaborate upon the possibility that film scenes and images can indeed be composed in a manner resembling certain alternative forms of painting that are arguably ‘unframed’. The painterly style of Mizoguchi’s films — which does not limit itself to mere *depictions* of paintings — certainly does not conform to Bazin’s concept of picture framing. In fact, the most ‘painterly’ of

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<sup>241</sup> Bazin, p. 166.

Mizoguchi's films (as in, those that express the most painting-like qualities) bear no relationship nor resemblance to the conventional method of framing described by Bazin.<sup>242</sup> Rather some of Mizoguchi's films exhibit *living paintings* — existences transformed into metaphorical paintings complete with residents and even visitors who come and go from such painting environments, whether at will or by accident. These *living paintings* significantly correspond to Béla Balázs's idea that the film experience should resemble that of *entering into* a painting that lives, moves, and shifts according to its own moods and emotions. The visitor then *travels into* the painting, acquires something from deep within it, and then transforms that acquisition into a unique creation which causes both the painting and its visitor to no longer be the same again:

The distance that exists between spectator and work of art is, to Balázs's mind, culturally specific to Europeans. "The Chinese of Old", writes Balázs, "regarded their art with a different eye." He then recounts a tale in which the spectator is so taken by the beauty of a Chinese landscape painting that he enters the picture, follows the path to the mountains, and is never seen again. "Another story tells of a young man who saw a beautiful picture of lovely maidens disporting themselves in a meadow full of flowers. One of the maidens caught his eye and he fell in love with her. He entered the picture and took the maiden for

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<sup>242</sup> 'André Bazin and the realists championed the notion that the screen was a "window" on the world, implying abundant space and innumerable objects just outside its border. But to Eisenstein, Arnheim, and the formalists, the screen was a frame whose boundaries shaped the images appearing on it. The frame constructed meaning and effects; the window displayed them...Jean Mitry holds that cinema's particular advantage and appeal lies in maintaining the implications of both these metaphors. The cinema is at once a window and a frame.' — J. Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory*, p. 134.

his wife. A year later a little child appeared in the picture”... This literal absorption by the picture serves Balázs as a general model for film identification throughout his *Theory of Film*.<sup>243</sup>

Apart from the fact that dichotomy is completely non-existent in this relationship between spectator and work of art, Balázs’s fusion of the experiences of both film and painting as well as Moore’s interpretation of such a fantastical idea present a clear case of interpenetration between dimensions, in such a seamless manner that the differentiation between subjectivity and objectivity simply dissolves. The film medium is inherently characterised by the obviousness of movement — whether it is movement captured by the recording function, or movement created by the actual camera, or movement that the editing process creates upon the interactive relationships between images and sequences. Yet the sense of movement in a painting must be predominantly *imagined*, regardless of the skill and clarity with which the painting methods actually depict such movement. After all, we cannot escape the fact that a painting tends to only capture a singular moment in time — a movement frozen and entirely recreated — while film has full capacity to capture a far wider range of moments. Balázs metaphorically juxtaposes the two media especially to show that film should generate as much imagination as painting normally would. The qualitative fusion between film and painting transforms both media into an escapist microcosm in which the spectator has the unconditional freedom to immerse themselves, causing the spectator’s imagination and the scene in the painting to have an interactive, deeply involved relationship. The animistic qualities bestowed upon the painting means that the

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<sup>243</sup> Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*, p. 51.



interactions between spectator and work of art produce proper consequences, as in the idea of a little child appearing in the painting a year after the father entered into the painting to marry the mother who has always been part of the painting. Stories such as these intensely express the *reality* of imagination, that the seeds of imagination have the power to manifest themselves into actuality provided that those seeds are nurtured with care.

The child's appearance in the painting — a manifestation of inter-worldly co-creation — causes the painting (represented by the mother) and the surrounding world outside the painting (represented by the father) to completely overlap without inhibition. Here, the boundaries between the two worlds are made ambiguous and transparent; an appropriate analogy would be a constant flow of water that makes no distinction between a main river and its tributary. Even the fact that the painting is a mere flat surface is unashamedly ignored. The idea of a spectator entering a painting — seemingly outlandish as it sounds — bestows the painting with a multi-dimensional aspect, transforming it into part of the time-space continuum which normally characterises the physical world in which we live. Such a transition (embodied in the spectator's entry) conjoins and blends the worlds inside and outside the painting, immediately taking away the painting's so-called physical flatness, clearly conveying that the painting itself as an animistic entity is not at all confined to the surface upon which it is displayed. Perhaps the most evident example of Mizoguchi's presentation of characters literally and symbolically entering into a living painting can be found in the scene at Lake Biwa in *Ugetsu* where misty formations resembling ink-wash envelop the characters, drawing them into a veiled world of constantly shifting boundaries, removing them however momentarily from the surrounding war-torn reality.

In the 1970s, director Kaneto Shindo made a documentary whose translated title is *Kenji Mizoguchi: The Life of a Film Director*, presenting nearly 40 interviews with those who worked closely with Mizoguchi. The documentary provides very few interviews with Mizoguchi himself, offering the impression that the director was not given to the habit of making himself available. Much of what we discover about his thoughts and ideas are offered through the perspectives of those who worked with him. In all the attention given to *Ugetsu* (1953) which is an indisputably refined work, little is actually based on the director's own words. The closest we come to the director's own view is by way of the instructions he gave to his cameraman Kazuo Miyagawa:

For him, a film was like a picture scroll, with successive images moving steadily forward, never turning back. You follow the story all the way to the end. Some parts are intense and exciting, some are touching, and there are parts you should just skim through. He said, 'I want my films to be like picture scrolls'.<sup>244</sup>

Lyla Dusing provides an interpretation of Mizoguchi's method of collaboration with cameraman Miyagawa, suggesting that there are specific film scenes that are structured in alignment to long horizontal scrolls so that an individual scene may play out literally and metaphorically in a rolling manner with no cuts and no breaks:

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<sup>244</sup> Interview with Kazuo Miyagawa, from Kaneto Shindo's documentary.

In Mizoguchi's films, traditional Japanese painting strongly influenced Miyagawa's work. The emakimono or long horizontal scrolls were used to illustrate important works of literature. The emakimono were 'read' sequence-by-sequence, as the viewer unrolled the scroll in his hands while rolling up the portion that had been viewed. This narrative technique in painting inspired Mizoguchi's one-scene-one-shot style of shooting a film.<sup>245</sup>

The scene that epitomises the emakimono style appears towards the end of *Ugetsu* (1953) where Genjuro arrives into an empty home, exits the hut to encircle it, then re-enters the same space where his wife awaits him — all this occurring within a space of less than a minute. Here, the *metaphorical* horizontal scroll becomes unrolled upon Genjuro's first entry. He exits through the back door, which is where the 'read' portion of the scroll is metaphorically rolled up, seeing that the empty space accommodating Genjuro's first entry is now symbolically cleared of the initial anxiety generated. He encircles the house as the metaphorical scroll continuously unrolls itself into new segments. All the while, the camera remains indoors, panning to the window as we see him walk passed the window. He finally makes a second entry into the same space that was previously empty of living persons where he is now overjoyed to see his wife miraculously appear before him. He has just walked a 180-degree arc around the hut, all captured by the camera from indoors even though half of the walking was done outdoors. Not only does this

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<sup>245</sup> Lyla Dusing, 'Kazuo Miyagawa honored by A.S.C.', in *American Cinematographer* 5 (1981), p. 450.

encircling resemble the rolling motion of an emakimono, but the rolling metaphor becomes all the more effective through the long-take composition of an empty space that ‘rolls itself’ into a transformed space where a ghost-wife awaits her husband. The ghostly presence is in a sense ‘layered over’ the empty space, with the audience being unnoticeably deprived of the actual process of layering (as in, the process whereby the visiting presence is gently placed into the hut’s interior). Thus, the same space literally and symbolically rolls into new dimensions that become completely inclusive of physical and non-physical elements, almost without having to posit any differentiation between them — resulting in a cinematic emakimono where transitions are executed seamlessly and with the sophisticated simplicity of very down-to-earth set design. With the apparition of his wife before him, time is no longer linear and irreversibly forward-moving. In fact, time metaphorically rolls into a rather cyclical pattern, as not only does the dead come back to life, but Genjuro’s inability to notice the transformation means that there is hardly any differentiation between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Grateful to see his wife safe and sound, he does not notice the miraculous nature of this apparition — miraculous in that we do not see her entry into the scene, only that the suddenly manifested phenomenon of her cooking in a furnished kitchen has unknown comings and goings. Yet for this scene to be profoundly moving in the sense described, it is essential to also examine the background of what has happened previously in the film. After Genjuro parts from his family, his wife Miyagi is speared by soldiers of a defeated army while travelling with her young son on her back. We are unsure of her condition, until towards the end of the film when we finally learn that she is dead. However, before this final realisation, the audience is presented

with a series of occurrences leading to an initial belief that she is still alive, only so that we come to discover later on that what we have just seen is a warm homecoming where the living and the dead are made to interact normally on the same plane of existence. This is the image we see upon Genjuro's return home. He looks around for his wife and child, but they are nowhere to be found.



It is as though two different pieces of reality are metaphorically sewn together, and Genjuro does not notice the patterns of stitching. There is here such a fine line between a dream that one experiences in the sleeping state and a dream that is the product of imaginative conjuring in the waking state. Upon his arrival to the front door for the second time, he sees his wife cooking in a kitchen with a well-lit fire — components of the set design that were not present upon Genjuro's

first arrival. The *ma* qualities here manifest themselves in the form of an intensely liminal area embodying the convergence of an uninhabited space long deprived of the warmth of a home and its direct opposite which is an overjoyed family reunion. The same cold, desolate space transforms itself within less than a minute — which is roughly the length of time Genjuro takes to walk the 180-degree arc around the hut — into a fire-lit space accommodating his wife cooking and mending his kimono, as if the emptiness only a brief moment ago never existed. So even though we notice the oppositional nature of the two states preceding and then following Genjuro’s encircling of the hut, the duality construct is gently made to dissolve. This phenomenon of an entirely self-generated renewal defies the logic of physical reality, causing the hut’s interior to become a point of inter-dimensional convergence where a ghostly figure resumes the roles she once had while she was still alive. It is as if the physical body she once had was never destroyed, and the seamless continuity from her previous life never disrupted. Here, Richard Pilgrim provides an interpretation of *ma* as a receptive source for entry of *kami*, which is a widely encompassing term inclusive of ghosts and other such non-physical entities. What makes such receptivity possible, however, is the state of consciousness of the human participant that must be open and fine-tuned to a compatible wavelength with the *kami*:

An “atmosphere” of sacred presence, after all, depends in part on the person who experiences it as such. As Isozaki explains it, “MA is the way of sensing the moment of movement. Originally the word *utsuroi* meant the exact moment when the *kami* spirit<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> ‘Summarized briefly, it may be said that *kami* is essentially an expression used by the early Japanese people to classify experiences that evoked sentiments of caution and mystery in the presence of the

entered into and occupied a vacant space... Later it came to signify the moment of *kami*'s sudden appearance... [This] gave birth to the idea of *utsuroi*, the moment when nature is transformed, the passage from one state to another... MA is the expectant stillness of the moment attending this kind of change."

*Ma* as a "way of sensing" and an "expectant stillness" implies *ma* as a particular mode of experience or sensitivity, one that is highly attuned to the immediacy of sensual experience; one that can, for example, hear the faint sounds of *kami* presence (*otozureru*)... This sensitivity has become, as Matsuoka claims, "an archetype of 'knowing' " that has informed Japanese consciousness, that is, a religio-aesthetic paradigm.<sup>247</sup>

While the apparition scene applies to such a description of *ma*, the scene conveys much more than a *kami* spirit occupying a space. In order to become the emptiness and stillness constituting the ideal conditions that could accommodate the *ma* moment, the state of consciousness of the

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manifestation of the strange and marvelous. Like numerous other concepts discoverable among ancient or primitive people, *kami* is fundamentally a term that distinguishes between a world of superior beings and things which are thought of as filled with mysterious power and a world of common experiences that lie within the control of ordinary human technique. Often the best translation is simply by the word "sacred". In this sense it has an undifferentiated background of everything that is strange, fearful, mysterious, marvelous, uncontrolled, full of power, or beyond human comprehension.' (H. Byron Earhart, *Religion in the Japanese Experience*, p. 11.)

<sup>247</sup> Pilgrim, pp. 69-70.

human participant, in this case Genjuro, is the determining factor. Upon his first entry into the hut, the seeming absence of his family sets off his anxiety, and so this first entry cannot be considered a *ma* interval. In the process of encircling the hut in a literal and symbolic search for what he thought he had lost, he very briefly steps outside that initial space that had caused the anxiety, partially relieving himself from the baggage of tenseness. Genjuro's temporary removal from such an uncomfortable space allows the opportunity for such a space to clear itself from what we would have thought would become an episode of heart-breaking lamentation. So the *ma* interval here is that oasis-like space between search and grief — the restful space that perhaps successfully relieves the burden from both states where sorrow is intensified.





Upon learning that she is dead after he has woken from his sleep, there remains a slight ambiguity as to whether her apparition was altogether a dream — as in, one that was experienced while he was asleep. Although we had indeed experienced some elements of a dream, there is no distinction here whatsoever between waking life and the dream world. The scene reveals an example of a fantasy that is completely coherent with reality — coherent in that the ghostly apparition resembles the normality of everyday life without a single detail out of place. The smoothness and tranquility of the wife cooking goes undisturbed, and even with the incorporation of specific emotional heights that characterise their home life, the rhythm of peaceful regularity is maintained. By way of architectural structures, the doors and windows are completely open, especially so that we can see Genjuro walking in, out, and around his hut without any obstructions, hence the transparency between his world and the world of his dead wife as well as the spontaneity and sympathy with which the two worlds fuse and interact. The apparition scene is perhaps a prime example of the demarcation between the living and the dead being almost forsaken. As I had explained in the Introduction, the term ‘supernatural’ is a modern Western construct which forms half of the dichotomy between the natural (which is profane) and the supernatural (which is sacred). Yet this dichotomy cannot be considered an operative concept that is recognised cross-culturally. For this reason, I proposed that the terms ‘ordinary’ and ‘sacred’ are much more effective in describing the relationship between the multitudes of worlds which intersect and fuse, especially as such terms openly accommodate a cross-cultural model of hierophany with minimal discrimination, if any. This modified model of hierophany embodies the differentiation between the ordinary and the sacred as varying points on the same qualitative spectrum, as opposed to presenting the relationship between the two qualities in dichotomised terms constrained by clear-cut demarcations, oppositions,

contradictions, and incompatibilities. Another example of the fact that dichotomised classifications cannot apply with any measure of viability can be found in an iconic scene in *Utamaro and His Five Women* (1946) where the living flesh that serves as a canvas is one of the most important components of the painting ‘performed’ on the flesh. There is no attempt whatsoever for the painting to hide or disguise the surface being painted upon, unlike the case where there is a clear division between painting and medium. On the contrary, the complete incorporation of the flesh with the painting shows an intimate interaction with the medium, so much so that the painted skin becomes a living, breathing organism in itself where the flesh is very much treated as sacred ground.



Here, Utamaro considers the naked flesh that he intends to paint with a sense of wonder. “I’ve seen many women’s bodies, but none of them were as beautiful as yours”, he says to the courtesan. Even Utamaro’s kimono as well as the painting of the egret on the shielding screen

next to the courtesan are purposely dark, especially to contrast with the paleness of her skin that appears to be glowing. Mark Le Fanu almost alludes that her flesh is considered by the artists in the immediate scene to be so sacred that not just any artist can paint on it:

Against the law, the lady in question has expressed her wish to be tattooed, but the tattooist is so awed by the beauty of the pale expanse of skin he has to operate on that he's inhibited from initiating the enterprise. At which point Utamaro appears, and without hesitation sketches live on the woman's back the perfect design — the *only* perfect design (a depiction of the infant prodigy Kintoki with his long-haired nurse) — that 'fits' the unique curves of her body.<sup>248</sup>

Yet it must be noted here that an exceptional design can only be painted on an exceptional body, and this scene does go to great lengths to convey the supreme beauty of the flesh on the courtesan's back. After asking for her permission and before painting, Utamaro touches her back as though it is a delicate sculpture that seems to fulfill his fantasy of both beholding and touching her seductive flesh. He does however touch her with the kind of tenderness that clearly shows his absolute realisation that the naked flesh he is about to paint on is infinitely more precious than the glowing porcelain that it resembles. Even the previous artist — who is considered to be one of the best tattoo artists in the city, as informed earlier by a character from a previous scene — fails to carry out the task of tattooing her body in the first place. While bending forward with his

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<sup>248</sup> Le Fanu, *Mizoguchi and Japan*, p. 12.

face towards the floor in a gesture of shame, he tells Utamaro that the unexplainable beauty of her flesh is far too elevated for his skill: “I can’t draw a design that would do her body justice.” Significantly, this scene puts forward that body painting uses a surface that is the complete opposite of any mass-produced media, which in the case of this film come in the forms of paper and silk. Body painting is performed on a living person who never was and never can be mass-produced. The painting must adapt itself to the body’s contours, causing the medium to hardly bear any point of comparison with the consistent flatness and thinness of paper and silk. And while the body does possess the three-dimensional qualities similar to those of a sculptural form, the body’s texture shows wide-ranging degrees of hardness or softness, whereas a sculpture normally has a predetermined degree of hardness. Such complexities mean that even the body’s possible resemblance to a sculpture is restricted to outward appearances, while an individual’s bodily texture already proves the absolute uniqueness of the painting surface, all this taking into account the diverse properties of the body’s shape and form.

So the process of tattooing the ‘living texture’ of the human flesh has important implications as far as the unviability of dichotomy is concerned. The fact that tattooing causes the paint to penetrate the flesh — while remaining an important argument *against* the dichotomisation between the painting and the painted surface — is not actually a phenomenon unique to tattooing, as there are certainly other media that also allow the paint to penetrate the porous surface. What *is* unique about tattooing is the fact that the painting becomes a constant witness to whatever happens to the body upon which it is painted as well as an unconditional companion to the person for as long as the tattoo remains on their body. The idea that the tattoo ‘experiences

life' with the person further suggests that art is not merely about how things look, as the tattoo comes to take on the life of the person who carries it. Thus, the tattoo comes to possess animistic qualities as it acquires the position of seeing the world through the person's eyes, literally moving with the person's body for the entire duration that the tattoo remains upon it. The tattoo then becomes a constantly moving art as it aligns in unison with the body's voluntary and involuntary motions throughout life. The purpose of this scene, however, is to show that the tattoo and the body upon which it is painted must share a similar standard of splendour and beauty, causing both the process and the finished product to truly constitute sacred art:

Tattooing is only tattooing, of course: a 'minor art form'. But for the purposes of our discussion the scene is an exquisite allegory. For what Utamaro is engaged in doing, it seems, is abolishing at a stroke the traditional distinction (with all its strange longing and poignancy) between *looking* and *touching*; the 'live-action painting' he has just pulled off looks and touches, so to speak, at one and the same time; marries, in some utopian way, the respective qualities of desire and possession. And moreover the tattooist's art (metaphorically speaking) lives, breathes, moves as painting has never done in its existence. So the finished design, Utamaro tells Takasodé, will 'live' on her skin, and during her lifetime (she is to be tragically short-lived) 'share the heights and lows of all your passions'.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Le Fanu, *Mizoguchi and Japan*, p. 13.

Le Fanu places an emphasis upon Utamaro's spoken line concerning the tattoo's status as the courtesan's faithful companion throughout all the fluctuations of her life's passions, here implying that she is indeed a woman who has her own dedications and ideals despite her human imperfections. She is certainly not an individual of plain and mundane tastes, nor is can she be classed as an ordinary woman whose lifestyle and choices must conform to mainstream society's expectations. The fact that Takasodé is violating the norm that strictly instructs courtesans not to be tattooed clearly shows her exceptional and non-conformist character. Utamaro is idealising and even idolising her, especially through sight and touch. But then again such sensationalised perspectives that uphold the courtesan to rest on a pedestal of artistic superiority constitute an important aspect of her sacred qualities — qualities that are not at all limited to the outward beauty of her body. The courtesan's inner grace radiates through her skin causing those who behold her to revere her as a living masterpiece. Even the way she sits for Utamaro to touch and paint her is characterised by statuesque poise and elegance that come from within, especially so that such qualities express themselves as part of her composure. So what causes her naked flesh to symbolise sacred ground is not merely its beautiful appearance, but also includes the inner qualities she has developed over a lifetime that contribute to the ethereal luminescence which her complexion is emitting. Utamaro does not just see the external cover of the flesh; he also sees — much more so with the 'inner eye' than the naked eye — the rich layerings of accumulated qualities vibrating beneath as well as through the pores of the courtesan's flesh. Through the entire process of painting on her skin, he is demonstrating *live* the skill of his 'intuitive sight' more than anything else. So even the outer flesh and the inner qualities are completely inseparable from each other — especially as far as the examination of a person's aura and refined manner is concerned. Angela Dalle-Vacche, however, suggests that the fusion between the two is

like a double-edged sword. The tattoo cutting into the courtesan's skin is symbolic of the beauty that comes to betray her in the end, as it is such an elevation of her already unreachable beauty that fuels the motive for her murder. The tattoo stands for the danger that invades and spreads through her body — almost like a kiss of poison — causing her to emit invisible signals from her being that attract such vicious attacks from the one who is jealous of her. We see here a metaphor of a goddess figure becoming a vulnerable target for an evil demon:

Just as the cinema can lead to freedom or constraint, tattooing in Utamaro is a double-edged medium. In marking the body, it is a form of violence, penetration, and possession. Mizoguchi seems to signal the links between tattooing, cutting, and the patriarchal order he rejects, by having the tattoo bleed, so to speak, across the narrative, which develops along a chain of deadly betrayals. While tattooing can be seen as one of the ways in which phallocracy leaves its mark on the individual's psyche, this controversial aesthetic practice may also exalt the body as art in order to make a highly personal statement of fantasy and desire. Utamaro's decision to paint the body of Tagasode is not only a radical gesture against the Kano school, which often worked on silk, but is also antithetical to the reduction of art to commerce. Unlike any other image, which can be serialized and sold again and again since the advent of mechanical reproduction, the tattoo cannot be separated from the body, and for this reason, it asserts that the individual is unique, while it violates important conventions of markets and prices in the institutional art world.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Angela Dalle-Vacche, *Cinema and Painting: how art is used in film* (University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 215.

Dalle-Vacche's interpretation suggests then that the value of the tattoo is almost entirely determined by the individual carrying the tattoo, that unlike other mass-produced media, body painting cannot be considered a commodity whose prices are adjusted by market trends. Because it is the nature of the person as well as their life experiences that adjust and continually modify the value of the tattoo, it is the person's individuality that makes the tattoo unique, even though there is always a possibility that the design all by itself may be one that has been and will be painted over and over many times. For indeed the design may be imitable, but the person is not. This is the image that shows Utamaro finishing off the tattoo, and even here the composition of the image reflects the courtesan's inner state. She is poised before the painted screen depicting an egret in the background. Her profile is suspended between the egret's feet and wings, causing the dark portions of the egret to blend with the neatly combed shape of her hair. It is as though the various parts of the egret's anatomy are extending forth from the courtesan's upper part from the shoulders upwards. She becomes symbolically endowed with a bird's limbs,<sup>251</sup> clearly showing

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<sup>251</sup> A discussion of Japanese mythology and folklore concerning the swan, which is another water-bird:

In...Japan, swans are not so anciently recorded, though they do appear as early as 712 AD in the *Kojiki* and in 720 AD in the *Nihonshoki*, among the earliest of Japanese literature. Heavenly swans flying overhead were credited in the *Nihonshoki* with having helped the mute son of Emperor Suinin to learn to speak and so began the tradition of the imperial court capturing and rearing swans...From the indigenous Ainu in the north of Japan...to the Okinawans in the south (where any swans are accidental...) there are stories relating to reverence for swans. Their qualities were seen as including courage and strength and people offered prayers to them in the hope of emulating their virtues. Remnants of that reverence are retained at a handful of "Shiratori" (literally white bird) shrines in Tokyo, Nagoya, and Miyagi Prefecture where altars exist to honour swans as protective deities.

— Mark Brazil, 'Swan Culture', in *Journal of Rakuno Gakuen University*, vol. 28/1 (2003), p. 80.



the sense of liberation that she seems relieved to attain upon the completion of her tattoo — the taboo masterpiece that she had been forbidden to carry upon her body. Significantly, this also becomes a sacred avant-garde moment, as body art in this case is much more than a symbol of freedom to rebel against unjust authority. The fact that the right to paint on the body had previously been taken away means that even the individual who owns the body (or at least comes closest to owning it) cannot do as they please with their birth-given property. From a mythical perspective, the body had been assigned to the individual as a *pre-birth agreement* and as a vehicle through which their life force would be operating. The courtesan taking back that right to exercise free will upon her body suggests that she is re-claiming her power to symbolically return to that (pre-birth) primordial time to finally embrace her body's mythical status (i.e. the agreement between her individual life force and the cosmic universe) entirely through creative means. All this is finely executed in spite of prevention from oppressive societal norms, magnifying the avant-garde nature of this moment to the extreme.



While *Utamaro and His Five Women* portrays body painting as an anthropomorphised art form, *Ugetsu* uses the absorbent nature of ink painting to create mysteriously melding effects that transform an entire lake scene into a metaphorical slow-moving painting. Cameraman Kazuo Miyagawa explains the challenges encountered in executing Mizoguchi's instructions: "He wanted a subdued effect with very little contrast, like in the southern school of Chinese painting, with the delicate greys of diluted ink. It was difficult, and we didn't entirely achieve it. When we printed the negative, it came out flat. We couldn't get a deep, warm grey. The negative had to be overdeveloped by one or two points."<sup>252</sup> Miyagawa explains the director's vision of smooth transitions between the different kinds of greys in the lake scene — smooth in a sense that there is a resemblance to ink washes that absorb into each other. The relationship between ink washes must be translucent, meaning that the different ink washes depicting each individual shade of grey exchange properties diffusely so that the result of such interpenetrations are harmonious as opposed to looking like a combination of incompatible properties. Hence, the director's intention for minimised contrast between the greys, while maximising the semblance of dilution. The intention for minimised contrast may not have been considered successful, even though the mist's resemblance to absorbent ink washes was certainly effectively executed. While the mist does have a physical presence, it does not solidly locate itself upon any specific point which is why the mist can be moved passed and travelled through as though it is not actually there. Yet the mist clearly does produce visible effects creating a majestic cloud-scape surrounding the travellers, with cloud-like layers spilling over upon the water's surface. Ironically, one would expect to see such a phenomenon in a mountain environment or at least a position of great

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<sup>252</sup> Interview with Kazuo Miyagawa, from Kaneto Shindo's documentary *Kenji Mizoguchi: The Life of a Film Director* (1975).

height, but this lake scene has a setting that is contrary to that for there is no indication of height whatsoever. Thus, the lake scene displays an unexpected celestial environment, all the while not showing any geographical features that could suggest that the boat is still sailing through an earthly environment. The range of greys absorbing and flowing into each other even causes the scene to convey an abstract sense that the characters are obliviously slipping back and forth between the transcendent dimension that remains unaffected by physical vulnerability and the physical dimension where human victims are doing what they can to escape war and suffering.

The scene at Lake Biwa begins with a boat slowly approaching the camera from the far side of the water. Even though — according to Miyagawa's account — it was the director's initial intention to reduce the contrast between the varying degrees of greys applied to the presentation of the mist, the actual result where the darker greys are rather blackened creates an effect of increased reflection between the upper and lower strata of the scene, namely the sky and the water. The water symbolises the physical world that is carrying the vessel, while the mist that is floating before the sky symbolises the transcendent world in its resemblance to a veil that is both parting and concealing. The mist, which very much amounts to a collection of ungraspable vapourous formations, cannot be quantified in any kind of physical containment all the while being directly exposed to the characters. This simultaneous exposure to and escaping from the physical touch qualifies the mist as a metaphor of heightened liminality for the transcendent world that is constantly enveloping the human being, very literally through *thick and thin*. But upon the slightest attempt to locate, quantify, or even collect examinable data of this transcendental world, it slips through any effort to hold it for identification. Fragments of the

dark sky — the sky that unconditionally remains above the human world — reflect the equally dark water, and vice versa, suggesting that the transcendental world still bears some resemblance to the physical world, and that it is impossible to completely separate the two. Significantly, the lake scene constitutes that elevated opening — very *ma*-like in every respect — amidst the film’s narrative where the celestial and the earthly (i.e. Heaven and Earth) become one, this despite the surrounding war invading people’s homes up and down the land. Even the delicate nature of the misty environment prevents the boat carrying the travellers from being isolated as an individual vessel, as the boat is subtly melded into the elements that are themselves quite indistinguishable from each other due to the aquatic nature of mist and lake alike.



This harmonious melding is further emphasised as the mist collects itself more heavily upon the water's surface, so that as the scene progresses it truly does appear as though the characters are travelling through a thickening blanket of cloud-like formations. Here, the celestial and the earthly become one, as the characters are literally sailing through an accumulating coverage of clouds. The mist hovers in the air like a hanging curtain and also settles upon the lake, this simultaneous defiance of and submission to gravity goes to show that the transcendental cannot be defined solely in straightforward linear terms. Here, the transcendental allows for the co-existence of things that initially may appear like opposites (in this case, things that hover and things that settle down). This gentle co-existence rather dismantles the construct of oppositions. Because of such interpenetration between dimensions, the relationship between physical and non-physical comes to resemble *overlapping* points on the same qualitative spectrum. This spectrum stands for the full breadth and range of the degrees of quantifiability by the physical senses, with the transcendental (or the *overlapping* into the transcendental) being the point that operates beyond the capacity of the physical senses to reach. In other words, the less quantifiable it is by the physical senses — and the more it slips through physical filters — the more transcendental it becomes. It is these overlappings that lead to a conclusion that the dichotomy between what is considered 'natural' and 'supernatural' is no longer viable as a qualification for things that cannot be empirically explained.

Still, Phillip Lopate's interpretation of the lake scene uses the term 'supernatural', while the actual meaning of the term is hardly ever made clear: 'Edited to create a stunningly uncanny mood, it [the lake scene] also prepares us for the supernatural elements that follow. The dying

sailor on the boat is not a ghost, though the travelers at first take him for one; he warns them, particularly the women, to beware of attacking pirates, another ominous foreshadowing.<sup>253</sup> Even in the scene's foreshadowing of the tragic events that will soon follow, Lopate recognises that there are certain fragments of the future that are already playing out in the present moment, as the future is being partially revealed through a sailor who — dying — is about to cross over to the transcendental world, if only symbolically. This metaphor of *crossing over* is conveyed by the lake as serving as a means of transportation for the living and the dying to cross paths, hence narrowing the gap between the living and the dead which remains a dominant theme throughout the film.<sup>254</sup> As the two boats meet, the mists part as if swept by a gentle brush stroke. “A ghost of

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<sup>253</sup> Lopate, “From the Other Shore”, in *Ugetsu*, p. 10.

<sup>254</sup> It hardly needs mentioning that cross-cultural mythical/religious symbols transform rivers and lakes into means of transportation for the souls of the dead, the example of the River Styx in classical mythology being possibly the most written about aquatic symbol that is tied to the afterlife. Edward Schafer provides an interpretation that sheds insight into what makes the lake scene in *Ugetsu* so profoundly affecting. Even though this example concerns Chinese classical literature of the T'ang Dynasty, we can still see universal value in certain human perspectives — that seas and oceans may indeed be too wide for souls of the dead to cross over, and streams and brooks may be too easy and narrow, but rivers and lakes are an appropriate scale that is has its own epic quality and not too majestic as to disrespect the grief and loss brought about by physical death:

Most T'ang writers thought of the nature goddesses as the glorified spirits of ladies long since dead who had seized, legitimately or not, particular lakes and rivers as their private domains, and so were able to have important effects on the lives of men. As they literary men of T'ang made their interminable journeys toward new country posts, or into exile, or on recreational excursions, they prayed to these transformed divinities. But they were not addressing eternal natural spirits at all — their prayers aimed to move ghostly survivals, supernatural relics of prominent persons of the past who had the good fortune to be immortalized in classical literature. The Lo River goddess was typically thought of as the earth-bound soul of a dead queen. The goddesses of the

the lake!” anticipates Ohama. As the boat draws closer, they learn that the man in the boat is dying: “No, I’m not a ghost. I’m a boatman from Kaizu. Wherever you’re headed, watch out for pirates. If they see you, you’ll lose your cargo and your lives. Watch out for your women.” The boat carrying the two families then disappears into the curtain of mist, as if to slip into another world like fleeting ghosts returning to their origin. Both Phillip Lopate and Keiko McDonald observe the fusion between multitudes of dimensions, respecting the ambiguity and transparency of dimensional boundaries as opposed to plainly asserting that such boundaries are simplistically posited without any allowances for diffusion: ‘The most famous proof of Mizoguchi’s visual mastery is the lake scene — beginning with a long shot that exquisitely blends boat and hovering mist. Ohama sings monotonously while a drum beats somewhere in the distance. These sounds add deft, suggestive touches to the scene in a way reminiscent of the supernatural moods created by Japanese *suiboku-ga*, monochromatic painting in India ink.’<sup>255</sup> The term ‘supernatural’ here may refer to a predominant ghostly atmosphere with all its wondrous and uncanny undertones. Yet there is still no indication of demarcated boundaries between the ‘natural’ and the ‘supernatural’. On the far contrary, McDonald describes the lake scene as a painterly long-take that *blends* boat and mist. While the mist itself clearly does occupy space, it literally cannot be stored in any container; it becomes one of the extra-fine elements not subject to categorisation. Even the thickest mist is a demonstration of the most intensely liminal qualities. While the naked eye would consider the thickest mist to be impenetrable by the physical sight, the mist can still

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Hsiang River were the corporeal spirits of two lovely widows whose good luck it had been to have gained the affection of a great prehistoric king.

— Schafer, *The Divine Woman: Dragon Ladies and Rain Maidens in T’ang Literature*, p. 147.

<sup>255</sup> Keiko McDonald, ‘Ugetsu’, *Current*, < <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/966-ugetsu> >

be travelled through, primarily because it is physically insubstantial. For no matter how thick the mist, it remains an element that is entirely vapourous, meaning that it may obstruct sight but it cannot obstruct movement (the fact that people get lost in the fog all the time means that fog leads to navigational disasters, but even then the fog cannot prevent any physical being from moving around within the area it is blanketing). The mist then becomes a potent embodiment of in-betweenness that cannot be penetrated by the sight, but can still be penetrated by the body, causing the blankets and curtains of mist to resemble indefinable ghostly bodies that the naked eye does not have full access to while the physical flesh can intersect with. While we are certain of the *presence* of the mist, its *substance* remains something that escapes being pinpointed.





Lyla Dusing further discusses cameraman Kazuo Miyagawa's training in 'sumi-e, a Japanese artistic technique of ink-painting'.<sup>256</sup>

The sumi-e painter creates a subtle atmosphere with only black, white and gray. One of the tenets of the sumi-e style which Miyagawa enjoys quoting holds that there is an infinite variety of color in the range of 'gray'. The sumi-e painter does not fill the entire surface of the paper, nor does he arrange his composition symmetrically. Instead, he uses the borders of his surface to create separate planes within the space.

This technique has earned Miyagawa the title 'master of framing' by his associates. The framing is rarely symmetrical, but is perfectly balanced. The creation of a pattern is often based upon objects or people, and with an unusually deep focus he brings the very near and the very far into visual alignment.<sup>257</sup>

Again, the lake scene epitomises the minimalist style of a sumi-e painting in that significant portions of the scene are virtually 'empty'. As I had explained, the mists elude containment, and symbolically embody that rather indefinable area where the boundary between physical and non-physical is at its most transparent. The scene rather anthropomorphises the mist into a living and breathing character whose enveloping omnipresence seems to have the power to observe the characters' every move. Yet the fact remains that the mist cannot be physically grasped, here

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<sup>256</sup> Dusing, 'Kazuo Miyagawa honored by A.S.C.', in *American Cinematographer*, no. 5, 1981.

<sup>257</sup> Dusing, 'Kazuo Miyagawa honored by A.S.C.', in *American Cinematographer*, no. 5, 1981.

causing it to identify much more easily with non-physical dimension, for the mist is much too fine to be firmly placed as a quantifiable physical substance. If the scene is to be literally depicted into an actual ink painting (rather than playing itself out in a cinematic *metaphor* of an ink painting), the space on the paper where the mist features would very likely be left blank or at least the mist would be conveyed with such diluted ink that the paper showing through comes to play a much more significant role than the actual layered ink. Such an idea is suggested by Eugene Eoyang, as I will later explain, but before embarking upon such elaborate theorising he first provides a brief footnote that ‘In the course of this study, the statements made about China can also be variously applied to Korea and Japan, to the extent that these cultures followed Chinese models.’<sup>258</sup> While it is true that Korean and Japanese ink painting followed Chinese models, such a following is certainly not as simplistic as to be thought of as plain imitation. Joan Stanley-Baker’s detailed study that traces the evolution of Chinese and Japanese ink painting in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries presents the Chinese *yipin* which means ‘idealist painting of the highest order’.<sup>259</sup> It was during this time that the Japanese equivalent, which is *ippin*, idealised the ‘brushless’ inkwash, favouring the spontaneously absorbent and spreading effect that requires minimum intervention from brushwork. Correspondingly, the scene at Lake Biwa in *Ugetsu* epitomises this abstract style that reduces the compositional role of solid structures, hence the importance of briefly studying this particular period of inkwash that seems to have had such a profound influence upon the film’s use of the ink painting effect:

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<sup>258</sup> Eoyang, ‘Polar Paradigms in Poetics: Chinese and Western Literary Premises’, p. 242.

<sup>259</sup> Joan Stanley-Baker, *The Transmission of Chinese Idealist Painting to Japan: Notes on the Early Phase (1661 – 1799)* (Ann Arbor, Center for Japanese Studies: University of Michigan, 1992), p. 19.

However, in eighteenth-century Japan, although *yipin* (J. *ippin*) was associated with idealist painting, the image evoked by the term *ippin* was hardly linear. It was rough, abbreviated, and wet, an inspired rendering that was linked, through Chinese texts, to the Tang master Wang Xia (or Wang Mo of “spattered ink” fame) and Wang Wei, progenitor of *pomo* (broken ink or inkwash) styles... The growing prestige of Yujian (Rofen)-style abbreviated inkwash style in sixteenth-century Japan is evidence for a predisposition toward a brushless, moist, and abbreviated image long associated with *ippin*, which, as Shimada points out, “disregarded the law of ‘bone method’... and whose forms had no distinct boundaries”.<sup>260</sup>

Stanley-Baker then states in a later passage that *yipin* (the idealist painting) in China became associated with the precision of lines, the distinct boundaries between juxtaposed shapes and forms, and therefore a significantly reduced usage of the absorbent and uninhibited qualities of inkwash. The Japanese *ippin* (the Japanese equivalent of idealist painting) took the opposite direction in the usage of widely varying degrees of ink dilution to *suggest* objects, persons, and places (as opposed to making them look obvious through the use of distinct thickened ink lines), as well as using ink dilution to establish relationships between near and far. This is where, according to Stanley-Baker, there came to be a noticeable contrast between Chinese and Japanese styles. Therefore, we cannot proceed to make a simplistic blank statement that Japanese (or Korean) styles *consistently* followed Chinese models. In other words, there was certainly a *following*, but such a following was *by no means* consistent. Stanley-Baker’s study of this

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<sup>260</sup> Stanley-Baker, pp. 19-20.

specific historical period alone (17<sup>th</sup> century onwards) already shows that the tendency to express idealistic principles in drastically divergent ways was ever-present, and that the specific style of one cultural art form may easily play against that of another for all manner of reasons. The influences of Chinese models have always been an accurate observation, such as the inspiration that Wang Mo's "spattered ink" and Wang Wei's "broken ink" had upon the Japanese *ippin*. But influence must never be mistaken for imitation under whatever circumstances (relating back to Bazin's idea of the collective traditional spirit that does not necessitate actual imitation, but instead inspires artistic expressions to be profoundly aligned with the greater spirit); quite the contrary, the Chinese influences served as a creative platform for divergent inkwash styles to develop in Japan. Furthermore, the popularity and unpopularity of certain brushstroke and inkwash trends as featured in *wenren* (literati) literature must also be taken into account, especially as Stanley-Baker's following observations quite clearly mark the inkwash style as being rather unfashionable specifically in China from the 5<sup>th</sup> century through to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, even suggesting that inkwash was a rather wayward practice associated with artistic rebels. Thus, the inkwash trend that came to acquire enormous popularity in Japan would be considered in China at the time (in fact spanning at least 13 centuries) to be branching *against* Chinese ideals, rather than branching *from*:

*Yipin*, in short, became associated in China increasingly with dry, linear works while in Japan it remained associated with wet, amorphous, nonlinear works of the Muqi and Yujian styles, and with Rinpa, which is the antithesis of linearity. In this light it is appropriate to compare the respective perceptions of inkwash in China and Japan. The

word *mo* (ink) does not appear in Xie He's Six Laws (ca. 490). And although Jing Hao promoted ink as one of the Six Essentials in his *Bifaji* (ca. 920), he did not elaborate on potentially reasonable concepts such as *mofa*, or *shuimofa* (ink or inkwash method). These terms virtually do not occur in Chinese critical or technical literature, whereas the term *bifa* (brush method) has been ubiquitous in wenren literature. Inkwash is represented in the terms *ran*, as in *xuanran* (inkwash used to enhance a form already defined by *bifa*). However, works relying mainly on an adroit use of ink are called *wubi* (lacking in brush), as said of the Tang master Xiang Rong; or *jianbi* (reduced and/or abbreviated brushwork or strokes) as when Huang Xiufu defines *yige* (sublime class) or *cubi* (coarse brush) or *fangbi ru caoshu* (unleashed brushlike cursive script) as in Tang Hou's description of drapery lines (*Huaji*, ca. 1170). Tang terms such as *pomo* (spattered or broken ink) are usually associated with undesirable personal traits like *qi* (unusual), *guai* (bizarre), or often *kuang* (demented) or *feng* (mad). Although Song literati described their own efforts as *ximo* (inkplay), later followers inevitably emulated their *biyi* (brush-spirit), but never their *moyi* (ink-spirit). This testifies to a built-in discrimination in China that upholds what was to calligrapher-writers the more familiar discipline of linear expression, or *bi*, as against the less often studied techniques of controlling inkwash, or *shuimo*. Techniques developed by late-Ming painters introducing freer uses of inkwash, such as Xu Wei who added glue to ink for controlled seepage, or Daoji (1641 – ca. 1710) who stroked ink or color across water-wetted paper, were not dignified with names in China. Indeed, these painters were hardly accepted and were considered as heretics in their own times.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Stanley-Baker, pp. 20-1.

Stanley-Baker's observations indicate that the brush method had constituted a mainstream Chinese discipline from as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, while inkwash was very much a marginalised art that was perhaps considered much too free-style and nebulous to be considered of a 'high order' by the mainstream literati. Here, it is important to specifically contextualise that there were indeed far lesser acknowledged artists throughout those many centuries of Chinese history who pursued the inkwash as a signature style, and undoubtedly their works had come to influence the Japanese inkwash. Yet, for inkwash to be associated with heresy in one culture while becoming a widespread accepted practice in another goes to show that the idea of a Chinese model (at least by Eugene Eoyang's usage of the term which implies that a model is followed as a straightforward formula) must be adjusted to include any manner of complexities, the Chinese discrimination of inkwash constituting an example of such complexity. This means that the model should stand as one that comes to generate significant influences (domestic or abroad) *regardless* of whether the model was generally accepted within its own local context at the time of its execution (and in the case of Chinese inkwash, it was not generally accepted within its immediate cultural context, even though it gained increasing popularity abroad). In fact inkwash constitutes a distinguished avant-garde case proving the idea that an initially marginalised phenomenon (in China) can transform itself into mainstream status (in Japan):

In Japan, however, wash-based, nonlinear methods were appreciated, developed, and identified. Techniques acquired names such as *tarashikomi* (the pooling of dense ink or color onto a still-wet surface of lighter wash), *bokashi* (shading from dark to light), and

*katabokashi* (half charging the watered brush with ink for a bitonal effect of light and dark in a single stroke). Japanese painting is replete with misty spaces that rather than enhance a mountain's height or the depth of a farther plane as in Chinese painting, tend to serve as conveyors of poetic emotions. Moods and poetic sensibilities include pathos engendered by signs of autumn or the impermanence of things, signs of lovers' parting or fleeting encounters, etc., where clouds, like shadows cast over rippling waters, suggest both a quickening of the life-pulse and the presence of indefinable, unutterable, and yet unbounded feelings.<sup>262</sup>

Stanley-Baker describes the inkwash — entirely determined by the amount of water in the mixture as well as the point at which the water actually enters into the spreading process — as an emotionally-charged technique whereby the details of the method indicate the nature of the emotion. There appears to be a suggestion here that the varying degrees of thickness or dilution of the ink and the ways it is allowed to spread upon a watered surface have an innate correspondence with the subtleties within the range of poetic emotions. She is careful not to be referring to *any* kind of emotional state, as she seems intent upon focusing towards nostalgia, feelings that are too expansive for words to encompass, and the sorrow brought about by the waning aspects of seasonal changes. Significantly, the delicate ways in which different washes of ink dilutions and concentrations meld into each other — literally and symbolically fading any construct of distinct outlines and boundaries — accurately convey what Stanley-Baker refers to as

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<sup>262</sup> Stanley-Baker, p. 21.

‘indefinable, unutterable, and yet unbounded feelings’<sup>263</sup>, as the inkwash tends to melt away those hard definitions, in turn encompassing those areas that are so sensitive and so profound that words cannot seem to access them, let alone describe them. Thus, an inkwash does have an *emotional life* due to the ebbs and flows involved in the process of its spreading.

Such a principle can be directly applied to the lake scene in *Ugetsu*, especially in Stanley-Baker’s observation that Japanese painting is saturated with the mistiness that evokes a heightened poetry which remains independent of aural explanation. In the lake scene, the transcendental world is expressed in a dreamlike manner through the mist which is the element that is the least subject to the pull of gravity. For even though the mist is a vapourous earthly substance, it does not behave in an earthly way, especially when its vapourous nature defines its physicality but its ungraspable, elusive qualities cause it to rest in the non-physical side. The mist then becomes a metaphor for physical and non-physical exchanging places. This metaphor is one of the factors determining the avant-garde nature of the film, that is if the argument rests upon the observation that the film entirely attempts to break down the dichotomy between physical and non-physical — a dichotomy that is steeped in the modern Western cultural mentality. The lake scene epitomises the idea of the ultimate inseparability of physical and non-physical through the image of the ghostly mists that, in accordance to traditions of inkwash painting, possess an emotional life of their own — causing the scene to be a depiction of travellers surrounded on all sides by animistic forces (the mists) hovering above and spreading blanket-wise beneath them.

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<sup>263</sup> Stanley-Baker, p. 21.



If we also consider Artaud's ideas concerning the painting of "The Daughters of Lot", we can then see that the notion of the *emotional life* of a painting — or in the case of *Ugetsu*, the emotional life of a *metaphorical* inkwash painting — has contributed to a cross-cultural history of rebellion against the rigid linearity of *flat* standards. I use the term 'flat' to describe the reduction or even lack of nuance, as well as the lack of recognition that there is a *range* of differentiations between multitudes of dimensions as opposed to plain demarcation. In the case of the Japanese inkwash, there is a branching *against* the mainstream Chinese practice of distinct lines that identify the concreteness of objects (or what Stanley-Baker refers to as dry, linear brushwork which can easily be considered *flat* when compared to the imaginative abstractions of inkwash that are also associated with animistic qualities). Here, an interlinking with Artaud's ideas on animistic painting can prove an illuminating task, as the painting "The Daughters of Lot" seems to express telepathic powers that are distinctly human-like. According to Artaud, the painting is vibrating an energy affecting the aural faculties, which is clearly a capacity operating outside the externally silent medium of painting. In other words, Artaud is bestowing sacred significance to a painting that 'speaks':

This painter is Lucas van Leyden and in my opinion he makes the four or five centuries of painting that come after him inane and useless. The canvas I speak of is entitled "The Daughters of Lot", a biblical subject in the style of the period. Of course the Bible in the Middle Ages was not understood in the same way we understand it today, and this canvas is a curious example of the mystic deductions that can be derived from it. Its emotion, in

any case, is visible even from a distance; it affects the mind with an almost thunderous visual harmony, intensely active throughout the painting, yet to be gathered from a single glance. Even before you can discern what is going on, you sense something tremendous happening in the painting, and the ear, one would say, is as moved by it as the eye.<sup>264</sup>

The impression of a painting has full capacity to profoundly affect an individual's consciousness, even before the painting undergoes close examination. While Artaud is not undermining the physical materials and technical aspects that have assembled the detailed visual composition, the implication here is that the painting is generating its own energy or rather its own *life force* that is not at all confined to its own physical structure. Here, Artaud is suggesting the transcendence of the physical senses, or at least the capacity of the consciousness to omit the usual barriers distinguishing between each individual sense (e.g. sight, sound, touch). This idea is especially emphasised in his assertion that even before proper identification of the subject, multitudes of our senses are affected by the status of great importance that the painting seems to be generating, almost in the form of signals transmitted vibrationally. As figurative as such an idea may be — for taking it completely literally may be considered highly questionable by empirical standards — the meaning of the statement does not escape the trans-sensory message that not only can the painting be looked at, but it can also be *listened to*. The notion that the effect of an artwork can reach beyond the conventional visuality of its own medium goes to show that if the painting does not have consciousness to speak of, it would have no capacity to transcend its most conventional property as an object that can only be experienced through the visual functions. The significant

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<sup>264</sup> Artaud, 'Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 33.

point here then is the extremely fluid relationships between physical senses, even though there is an acknowledgment on an outward level that those individual senses of sight, sound, and touch are differentiated by the usual functions that they normally perform. These fluid relationships that conduct the metaphorical free-flowing exchange of certain qualities between individual senses take us back to the idea that it is those art forms where water is used as a predominant directing agent — whether literally or symbolically — that are most generative of animistic qualities. Even in Artaud’s description of the above painting, he makes a point of emphasising the immeasurable life force of the emotionally-charged water element: ‘A drama of high intellectual importance seems massed there like a sudden gathering of clouds which the wind or some much more direct fatality has impelled together to measure their thunderbolts’<sup>265</sup> and ‘The sea in the background of the canvas is extremely high, at the same time extremely calm considering the fiery skein that is boiling up in one corner of the sky.’<sup>266</sup> Although inkwash painting remains on a very different wavelength from the epic grandeur of the painting “The Daughters of Lot” especially in regards to their dramatic scale, what they do share is their usage of the water element to express the subtle aspects of the interconnected nature of things. I use the term ‘subtle’ to refer to those seminal components that are too fine to be perceived by the naked eye, and as a consequence are melded into the water agent that expresses those extra-fine components in ways that allude to the most poetic of emotions.

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<sup>265</sup> Artaud, ‘Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 33.

<sup>266</sup> Artaud, ‘Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 34.

As Artaud appears to be suggesting, Lucas van Leyden's painting is a *living being*; he conveys this idea by equating the painting to a conscious being with the power to interact with other conscious beings (for instance, those individuals studying the painting). If we posit both the work of art and the observing individual as conscious beings, the 'glance' is then a conscious exchange occurring on the level of *impressions*. By the term 'impressions', I am referring to pure intuition independent from the faculty of reason normally used to analyse. Impressions are very much a sensing of the *overall* energy of someone or something — metaphorically speaking, that cloud-like or mist-like essence that precedes the concretisation of a certain form — and do not at all involve the analytical examination that would closely take apart the components of the object or person in question. Thus, impressions constitute a broader perspective and can occur from a distance — distanced objects in a painting often depicted with heavily diluted inkwash, as Stanley-Baker would very likely suggest. And so, the point of harmony between the painting and the observer is predominantly the area of intuition where the emotional effect is completely spontaneous and does not necessitate empirical verification to prove the existence of the *life force* within the painting. The fact that this example concerns a painting rather than a work of film or theatre is completely secondary to Artaud's philosophy that a work of art, regardless of the medium, *should* be an interactive conscious being with the power to profoundly affect the consciousnesses of those exposed to it. Correspondingly, Stanley-Baker further elaborates upon the emotional life of inkwash paintings, this time directly relating back to the cloud-like formations created by the flooding of the mist in the lake scene in *Ugetsu*:

By the eleventh century there evolved in Yamato-e painting the inconstant and poetic cloud-form, or *kumogata*, which is imbued with powerful, welling emotional content and which I have termed emotional cloud. It appears as background motifs for decorated calligraphy papers, in wet pools or sprinkled pigment in Yamato-e, Rinpa, and Tosa traditions. A favorite feature in Heian gardens, the *kasumigata* mist-formed island, comprised cloudlike islands placed as if floating in the man-made sky-reflecting ponds, built up entirely of white sands (Tachibana 1094), 793b). The role of ink, and of wet inkwash in particular, is in Japanese perception intimately related to such free-form, emotive-expansive imagery and expression. Conversely, the relatively peripheral significance of such forms in Chinese perception may account for China's comparatively underdeveloped wash-related "brushless" traditions. This difference is reflected in contemporary scholarship in the West where the counterpart to the term brushwork, i.e., "inkwork", does not exist. In Japanese art history, a whole category of medieval painting (of the Muromachi period) is known as *suibokuga* (inkwash painting).<sup>267</sup>

Stanley-Baker's 'emotional cloud' suggests that such subtle but generous forms (generous due to the spontaneously spreading nature of inkwash on wetted paper) contain the seminal source of emotional nuances. Inkwash expresses those seminal qualities, as the water-directed nature of the style reduces the concreteness of painted forms, and therefore places much more of an emphasis upon that preliminary phase of emotional development that is metaphorically still shifting and swirling in fluid potentiality. In other words, the inkwash style touches upon that nebulous stage

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<sup>267</sup> Stanley-Baker, pp. 22-3.

where emotional patterns have *not yet* taken on a distinct, solid guise (examples of such solid guise would be facial expressions as manifested emotional displays or even bodily gestures that express accordingly). Stanley-Baker makes another important observation that the linear style which upholds distinct lines depicting the solid guise (summarised in the term ‘brushwork’) remains a predominant feature in the Chinese traditions (while Japanese traditions upheld the ‘brushless’ techniques). But more significantly is her further observation that Western scholarship concerning brushwork does not recognise the counterpart to such a method which is inkwork, clearly reflecting a general attitude which dismisses the more subtle, delicate aspects of artistic creation — those aspects that border into the non-physical realm of origination that the naked eye cannot reach but the imagination can encompass. The most thickened brushstrokes (i.e. the least diluted) show the most acute contrast between the paper and the applied ink. However, no matter how clearly defined the contrast between paper and applied ink, the fact remains that a medium such as Chinese or Japanese ink painting on rice paper or silk *ultimately* does not conform to the Western construct of dichotomy that demands the barrier between binaries to be completely sealed off, forbidding interpenetration as a consequence. Here, Eugene Eoyang discusses the drastic contrast between traditional Western painting which is intent upon painting over the entire surface and traditional Chinese (and Japanese) painting which is known to leave segments of the paper unpainted:

The characterization of painting as an art that makes everything visible — and, by inference, that it is not able to render anything that is invisible — is based on the presumption of Western painting, in which the surface is totally painted over (in a

finished work): even empty spaces must be painted. Chinese painting, on the other hand, does not adhere to the principle of technical explicitness; it leaves blanks untouched by ink. Indeed, a Chinese painting can be said to be as much *unpainted* as painted...a good deal of the aesthetics of Chinese art is to suggest what is not visible. There is a contrast in Western and Chinese approaches to representation: traditional Western requirements of painting require that even empty spaces be painted — that a canvas, even one depicting an unpopulated and unoccupied landscape, must be covered in paint or else it is considered unfinished. In Chinese painting, however, not only is much of the surface of the paper unpainted, but some of these blanks “depict” real objects — whether sky, or water, or clouds, or air. (Here one might observe the irony that, even when they share the same instrument, the brush, Chinese and Western painting differ radically in their aesthetics, a function, of course, of the preference in the West for oil and in China for ink.)<sup>268</sup>

Whether we are considering the linear style of thickened brushstrokes with minimal dilution or the inkwash style where dilution constitutes a predominant directing agent, the fact remains that it is a norm for ink painting regardless of style to make significant use of the paper whose various uncovered segments can either be left blank or be showing through as part of the abstract effect in the very light inkwashes. Even an ink painting that makes no use of the dilution method at all must show some segments of the paper virtually untouched, otherwise for the paint to thoroughly cover the paper without revealing any blank corners would possibly defeat the

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<sup>268</sup> Eoyang, p. 244.

purpose of ink painting. Eoyang's argument seems to be referring just as much to the 'inner sight' as the physical sight, especially in his example of the blank segments of paper depicting such flowing and subtle elements as water and air. The blankness operates upon the principle that it is naturally understood what the blankness actually depicts. The implication here is that the blankness, which symbolises the non-physical, must be expressed as a *precursor* to the physical, almost as if the non-physical must be revered as such.

Even the reunion scene in *Ugetsu* where Genjuro walks the 180-degree arc around the hut directly alludes to the principle that an empty space (which in ink painting terms would refer to an unpainted segment of the paper) does indeed accommodate a non-physical presence, only that in the case of the film that non-physical presence does not make an *immediate* apparition. Thus, the emptiness is not actually 'empty' as such, but serves as a receptive interval for the individual's consciousness to converge with a non-physical energy should there occur a spontaneous compatibility between the vibrational frequencies of the two realms. Because the seemingly empty receptive interval must be a direct reflection of Genjuro's state of consciousness at the time of his reunion with his ghost-wife, there is a further suggestion that there is no such thing as plain emptiness or blankness (and again, such an idea is derived from ink painting principles), but more of a potentiality that is building up its capacity to manifest into tangible form. Even the blank spaces in ink painting normally depict *something*, whether it be sky or air or even water forms, clearly showing that the differentiation between physical and non-physical is very much shifting and adapting itself depending upon the imaginative perspective which remains a primary determinant.



Eoyang then presents the traditional Western preference for oil and the Chinese (or Japanese) preference for ink, which again has far-reaching implications concerning the drastically contrasting ways in which certain cultural perspectives view the translucency and diffusion between differing qualities. The surface upon which oil is painted, whether it be canvas or wood or even metal, offers oil paints little to no absorption. And so, the boundary between paint and painterly surface cannot be considered ‘porous’ in the metaphorical sense, as such a boundary allows little to no interpenetration. On the other hand, ink is naturally absorbed into paper and silk, causing Chinese (or Japanese) painting methods to allow maximum interpenetration between paint and painterly surface. Between the two styles of painting, it becomes very clear as to which style is structured according to the separation and dichotomisation of binaries (the two qualities running along both sides of a single boundary), and which style softens boundaries to the point where substances constituting the binary absorb each others’ qualities inclusively. If the principle of the latter style is to be applied to *Ugetsu*, hierophany cannot at all be analysed in terms of the sacred-profane dichotomy based upon modern Western constructs. If dichotomy is to be applied to the scene at Lake Biwa for instance which is a metaphorical ink painting, it would be near-impossible to actually identify the difference between sacred and profane, let alone to categorise them accordingly, as the scene’s components — tangible or otherwise — are made to meld into each other as thoroughly as diluted ink on wetted paper. We simply cannot make blanket statements of separation to describe the hierophanic nature of the scene, such as the sky is sacred and the boat is profane, or the mist is sacred and the lake is profane; in fact, such lame observations would be an insult to the scholar making them, betraying their lack of recognition of the most subtle, complex levels of existence.

### *Other avant-garde qualities in Mizoguchi's film hierophany*

The avant-garde nature of Mizoguchi's films primarily lies in the fact that they fulfilled a desperate cultural need for the renewal of a mythical past. His films featuring the most elaborately crafted historical settings compensated not merely for the imaginative abundance that the modern West was severely lacking, but also for the spiritual replenishment that the West may have been asking for in a manner not so much different from a crying child — that is, on those levels far below the mainstream surface consciousness. Before proceeding to discuss the cultural remedies believed to have been provided by Mizoguchi's films, it is important to lay out the basis of the cultural problem so that what then follows as a creative solution would unfold logically. Artaud was among the pioneering theorists who thoroughly addressed the problem of a cultural thirst. We cannot however discuss this perspective of his separately from the Surrealist usage of the Orient as an ideological weapon, as it is more than likely that Artaud's idealisation of the East was partially inspired by the Surrealists:

For the Surrealists, the Orient was an extravagantly abstract myth that provided an oppositional stance against everything they despised in Western civilization. Artaud reiterates this mythic ideology when he invokes the Indo-Tibetan Schools of the Buddha as a war machine that will spread from East to West so as to destroy the latter's dualistic cleavage of the Spirit between the "two terms" of spirit and flesh...<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Joshua D. Gonsalves, 'The Case of Antonin Artaud and the Possibility of Comparative (Religion) Literature', in *Modern Language Notes (MLN): Comparative Literature*, vol 19/5 (December 2004), pp. 1033-1057 (p. 1037).

According to Joshua Gonsalves, the Orient constituted an idealised myth that the Surrealists used to attack those undesirable aspects of the modern West, all this regardless of every possibility that the idealised versions constructed of the Orient may not at all be accurate reflections of their many complex realities. Artaud, who himself had a most ambivalent relationship with the Surrealist movement<sup>270</sup>, became one such idealist. That is why in order to partially resolve some of the inaccuracies within such idealistic perspectives, the study of Mizoguchi's films then proves to dismantle some of the idealistic overstatements concerning the Orient. Mizoguchi almost counters Artaud's idealism, for instead of completely avoiding historical feudal themes, Mizoguchi presents resolutions to the damaging effects of the feudal system of the past by bluntly exhibiting such damages. By no means does he nostalgically idealise the past, but rather he acknowledges the value of the unpleasantness characterising certain aspects of history as a platform for the diversity of new resolutions that could potentially counter such unpleasantness. Thus, Mizoguchi's avant-garde style thoroughly embraces historicity, even its more undesirable aspects. In fact, *Ugetsu*, *The Life of Oharu*, and *Sansho the Bailiff* — the three period masterpieces of his later career that earned the director the most international praise — are harsh social critiques, reflecting the horrors and cruelties that co-exist with the aesthetic refinements of the very class of people from whom such inhumanities arise. Yet as far as idealising the Orient

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<sup>270</sup> 'He [Artaud] rejected without hesitation the charge of the surrealists that he was only interested in leading an isolated interior existence without reference to the physical world. 'Any spiritual action if it is right', he declared 'becomes material at the right moment. The interior conditions of the soul! These carry with them their rayment of stone, of true action.' There was no doubt in Artaud's mind that Revolution is necessary, but it was not the Revolution supported by the surrealists.' (O'Farrell, 'Unacceptable Imaginings: Artaud's Medieval Revolution')

was concerned, addressing such tragedies was not part of Artaud's vision of cultural reform. His constant purpose was to bridge and harmonise the dichotomised properties (e.g. sacred-profane, reason-intuition, flesh-spirit, form-essence) into which the Western cultural attitude was so deeply steeped: 'to resolve or even annihilate every conflict produced by the antagonism of matter and mind, idea and form, concrete and abstract, and to dissolve all appearances into one unique expression which must have been the equivalent of spiritualized gold.'<sup>271</sup> Here, Artaud is not at all doing away with the existence of dualities, but rather he is proposing their ultimate fusion. And despite such a position against dichotomy, Artaud himself aggressively dichotomised the relationship between East and West:

Logical Europe endlessly crushes the mind between the jaws of two extremes: it opens and recloses the mind. But now the strangulation is at its peak. We have suffered too long under the yoke. The spirit is greater than the spirit, life's metamorphoses are manifold. Like you, we reject progress: come and tear down our houses.<sup>272</sup>

So if the modern West was suppressing the creativity that should flow forth freely from the sacred source — consequently causing the West to earn a status of spiritual oppressor — the East then would be loftily idealised for the opposite qualities: the placement of imagination in a

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<sup>271</sup> Artaud, 'The Alchemical Theater', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 52.

<sup>272</sup> Artaud, 'Letter to the Buddhist Schools', *La Révolution Surréaliste*, no. 3 (April 1925), in *Surrealism*, p. 60.

superior position to external circumstances, the full incorporation of the sacred into ordinary life, and the importance attributed to the areas of emotion, intuition, and sensibility. The degree of accuracy such qualities possess in accordance to certain factual realities becomes quite irrelevant. For it is far more important, especially for Artaud, to portray the East as offering the power within its philosophical traditions to resolve the problems of materialism and intellectual meaninglessness that were constraining the West. Éric Rohmer was one of many film critics who also sought cultural solutions by looking to the ethereal but genuine qualities in Japanese films, especially in his statement concerning ‘the superiority of the Japanese film-makers over the likes of us, products of the West, incapable of projecting the enchantment of fairy tales onto the screen. Our period films smack of masquerade, our fantastic films of trickery.’<sup>273</sup> Rohmer is alluding here to the complete opposite of the lamely composed historical and fantastical films typical of the mainstream Western movie industry of the time<sup>274</sup> — such an opposite then referring to the *seamlessness* between the fantastical world and everyday life. A brilliantly executed example again would be the homecoming scene towards the end of *Ugetsu* where the use of the long take conveys the completely uninterrupted flow between dimensions. The use of theatrical techniques to compose the scene is also considered to be one of Mizoguchi’s genius methods, especially as such borrowings from theatre hardly necessitate the use, if any, of even the most basic tools of film editing such as cuts and dissolves:

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<sup>273</sup> Cited in Le Fanu’s *Mizoguchi and Japan*, p. 174. Rohmer, in *Arts*, 25 March – 2 April 1959.

<sup>274</sup> We must note however that Rohmer was writing in the late 50s, and therefore we must take into account that there are certainly *exceptions* to his assertion that mainstream historical and fantastical films are fake-looking and redundant. Such exceptions would include King Vidor’s *War and Peace* (1956), Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), and William Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* (1959), although whether Rohmer would agree to those exceptions would entirely be a matter of subjective taste.

When Genjuro arrives at his empty hut, walks around it and reenters to find Miyagi (Kinuyo Tanaka), this is strikingly evocative of the *mawari-butai* in *kabuki* staging. What is involved is the use of a stage on wheels that revolves to present a new set while the performers enact a transitional scene. So when Genjuro completes his circle, it is as if a new hut has slid in to replace the old one. The other theatrical device is used after Genjuro falls asleep and the ghost of Miyagi waits for daybreak. In terms of screen time, it is roughly a minute, but the changes in the light penetrating the house from outside suggest that several hours have passed in story time. In cinema this is usually accomplished through dissolves or other types of editing within the scene, but the discipline of the long take requires the use of this theatrical device, common in a medium that, as mentioned, routinely tells its stories in a series of long takes.<sup>275</sup>

Even the second long take depicting the transition from night to dawn where the ghost-wife quietly watches over her family succeeds, in the gentlest way, in making the transcendental seem completely ordinary, almost as if the two qualities have become interchangeable. For over the course of about a minute as witnessed by the audience, beams of light stream through the cracks in the doors and walls of the hut, showing that the temporal passing within the film's setting has in fact occurred on an hourly basis. This second long take is rarely discussed in analyses of *Ugetsu*. Nevertheless, it remains a classic long take without any cuts and dissolves, nor even the slightest disruption, seamlessly bridging the early morning that is no longer accommodating

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<sup>275</sup> David Hanley, 'Theatrical Elements in Mizoguchi's Cinema', in *Offscreen* 16/8 (August 2012)

< [http://www.offscreen.com/index.php/pages/essays/theatrical\\_mizoguchi/](http://www.offscreen.com/index.php/pages/essays/theatrical_mizoguchi/) >

ghostly entities with the night immediately passed where the physical world and the transcendental world interact as if they are one and the same. The same sense of seamlessness even applies to the sacralisation of a prostitute-beggar in *The Life of Oharu* (1952) where the lowliest in society is bestowed hierophanic significance, further showing that the distinction between high (the sacred) and low (the prostitute) does not actually exist. The woman's sacrifice is portrayed in such a heightened way that her forbearing virtues become associated with a religious solemnity. Such sacred qualities arise from insurmountable difficulty and conflict causing Oharu to suffer in unresolvable despair. The climax of the film occurs when Oharu is given permission to see her teenage son, even though she is not allowed to be physically near him. She had been used as a procreative instrument by a feudal lord, and was thrown out of the house soon after she gave birth. The film is not religiously specific, or rather it is not religiously *limited*. It is a revelation of an innate predisposition to seek the most illuminating positive solutions amidst the most acutely negative circumstances. The impulse to withdraw into a non-physical source that has the power to rise above the most unmerciful of external limitations is certainly not a determinant of any one specific religion. In fact Eliade would argue that this *inner grace* — the capacity to experience oneness with a higher power — is an unconditional quality of *homo religiosus*, and Artaud would further argue that inner grace reveals itself when external conditions and the individual's state of consciousness converge in ways that are *conducive* for this grace (which is a creative life force in itself) to be channelled forth. The task then is to analyse a scene that captures the dignity and humility as ritualistically expressed by a fallen woman in such a way that we can intuit the gesture as being innately graceful, in a sense that it is operating from a sacred source *within*.



The last scene then becomes one of the clearer exhibitions of the sacralisation of a lone woman who has not only come to have no value in the eyes of society but has also been completely disregarded by it. Reduced to a streetwalker without possessions, Oharu spends her later days begging from door to door. She walks passed a backdrop of architectural silhouettes while a chorus sings a prayer to accompany the solemnity and poignancy of the scene. The camera pans slowly along with her pace. She then ritualistically clasps her hands to pay her respects to what appears to be a temple, and the camera ceases to move as she performs her gesture. She proceeds to walk on, the camera starting again to pan slowly across the architectural silhouettes, still observing her pace. One begins to receive the impression that this gradual panning is much like a



metaphorical unrolling of a widely horizontal calligraphy scroll as it is being read. Then quite subtly, the camera stops moving, especially so that she walks passed the screen, disappearing thereafter. The film ends precisely with the still image of the architectural silhouettes, with Oharu having already left the camera behind. The anonymity with which she finally disappears from the edge of the frame alludes to an ultimate detachment from societal standards. It must be noted here that the gesture of quiet reverence and its interactive relationship with the elevated background setting (almost as if the set is living and breathing in response to the prostitute-beggar's meditative walk) are very much aligned with Artaud's concept of intuiting the animistic aspects or rather the inter-dimensional nature of a gesture. Although the following passage is immediately referring to actors in Balinese theatre, the same principle of considering the organic wholeness of the gestural fusion with the set still applies to the ending of *The Life of Oharu*: 'These actors with their geometric robes seem to be animated hieroglyphs...these spiritual signs have a precise meaning which strikes us only intuitively but with enough violence to make useless any translation into logical discursive language.'<sup>276</sup> Significantly, Artaud mentions the dress of the actor performing the gesture, and it is here that we must note that the dress constitutes a central contribution to the animistic power of a gesture. The very loose nature of Oharu's clothes, especially the shawl that serves as a sheathe for the bag she is carrying on her back, causes her to look very bulky — all the more a metaphor for all the emotional burdens she has had to endure throughout her life. This last scene — characterised by its gradual pace and peacefully sympathetic observation of a destitute, unbearably oppressed woman — shows that even one of lowly status such as herself can perform a gesture of grace before a grand backdrop resembling a lengthy horizontal painting scroll.

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<sup>276</sup> Artaud, 'On the Balinese Theater', in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 54.

## CONCLUSION

I have attempted to show that sacred cinema reflects the most profound inner need within human consciousness to continually seek interpretations of images, and symbols that cause us to feel that we are not at all isolated packages of flesh and bone, that we are extensions of a higher source of pure potentiality that is always inspiring us towards expanding creativity. Cinema is an example of an artistic interpretation that we inherently seek whose intrinsic form and structure reflect the operative patterns of our imagination, or more precisely the mythical aspects of our imagination. The fact that cinema can portray events spanning years and years, all within a space of, say, one minute goes to show that the cinematic structure corresponds to an individual's free will to consciously slip into an imaginary time where the physical law of starting point-destination (in other words, having to undergo certain sequential points in order to get from A to B) does not apply. Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to hold to a position that we as *homo religiosus* have an innate cinematic imagination — an imaginative capacity to consistently create visual and aural scenarios that help us to feel aligned with the greater purpose of a cosmic universe. This position significantly converges with that of Rachel Moore whose last paragraph in the Conclusion of *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* conveys magic as the most deep-seated need, as can be seen in the attitudes and behaviour of small children who strive to believe in its existence, constantly seeking ways to assure them of that *magical reality*:

Most of us can recall, somewhere in the pockets of childhood memory, the time when someone, not without a small amount of glee, exposed magic as a sham. The confirmation that magic really works, incessantly tested by children, is inevitably denied one disenchanting day. Mine was when Miss K. informed me that Mary Poppins was all a movie trick; she couldn't really fly. My daughter's was when she looked out at Sydney Harbour for the fairies I had assured her would glide across the water and all she saw were ferryboats. Could not the question of credulity of the spectator, of the degree to which seeing is believing, take part in the same enchanted desire to determine the efficacy of magic so worried by children? Unlike most cultures, our culture operates with a remarkably inelastic spirit world and is the only one in which people don't devote a fair amount of time and money to some magical form of ritual healing, a divination, or spirit possession. The camera is our one magical tool flush with animistic power to possess, enchant, travel through time and space, and bewitch.<sup>277</sup> In light of this, our theoretical speculations about the cinema are akin to the child looking furtively behind the curtain or checking out Santa's beard, whether to debunk the magician — or to conform that there

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<sup>277</sup> 'In 1926 Jean Epstein warned: "But the young black who used to kneel in worship before the headlights on explorers' cars is now driving a taxi in Paris and New York. We had best not lag behind this black." Cinema appeared as a magical god, not to the primitive this time, but to the civilized. Cinema, whose power was evident but not understood, threatened or, alternatively, promised to recast the enlightened as archaic once again. Early theoretical writing on the cinema often enacts an encounter with the primitive wherein the audience is poised wonderstruck before the screen's bright lights. But this example goes further upstream. Here, "the black" shares an affinity with technology. The anxiety here is that the camera may well be that primitive, and it is the civilized who must hasten to avoid the headlights' blinding glare. Technology, an attribute of civilized society against which those upstream define those who live downstream (and in so doing, themselves), becomes, in the case of the image-producing machine, the very mark of their own primitiveness.' (*Savage Theory*, pp. 22-3.)

is such a thing as magic. The question of the degree to which cinema affects real life, like the issue of whether or not magic really works, is moot. The point remains that we, now, do not work without it.<sup>278</sup>

Whether the trusting nature of children would lead to positive or negative consequences, the importance lies in the trust that they place upon the inter-dimensionality of existence, that the deep anchorage into the construct of *exclusive* physicality is for a credulous child a limitation which can have near-crippling effects upon the imagination (in fact, this crippling can be equated to modern secularisation's obstruction of mythical/sacred imagination). Considering that the capacity of our physical senses is something that we instinctively know (e.g. we know from a very early age that if we touch something that is too hot, we will get burnt), children remain ignorant of the difference between that which is empirically verifiable (that which can be physically quantified and assessed) and that which is not. Children already know what their physical senses can access (e.g. they know through experience that they cannot see something that is too far away, without having to be taught), in other words they know their own physical limits simply by *testing it out* as they grow up. It follows that they should also know the difference between that which *exists* as a reality and that which does not. But no, they do not seem to register such a difference. Moore's example of her daughter's disappointment at not seeing fairies glide across the water goes to show that seeing fairies may indeed be a child's expectation. Regardless of whether her mother had told her that she would see the fairies, the child still expects to see, hear, and feel things which adults and mainstream secular culture write

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<sup>278</sup> Moore, *Savage Theory*, p. 163.

off as being completely and utterly non-existent. This expectation that predominantly characterises the elementary stages of human development may be a reflection of certain innate predispositions within our consciousness that do not demarcate between the realm of physical possibility and that which lies outside of it. Correspondingly, the mythical dimension does not at all exclude physicality, but presents an alternative reality that can offer relief and even escape should physical reality prove to be too burdensome. Here, Eliade fully acknowledges the child's very spontaneous ease of entry into a state of consciousness that is at one with *illo tempore*:

At the very beginning of his *Autobiography* he quite candidly tells of an event when he was four or five years old, walking with his grandfather on the Strada Mare in Tecuci, when his eyes met those of a fellow toddler, also walking with her grandfather.

*For several seconds we stared at each other before our grandfathers pulled us on down the street. I didn't know what had happened to me; I felt only that something extraordinary and decisive had occurred. In fact, that very evening I discovered that it was enough for me to visualize the image from Strada Mare in order to feel myself slipping into a state of bliss I had never known...For years the image of the girl on Strada Mare was a kind of secret talisman for me, because it allowed me to take refuge instantly in that fragment of incomparable time.*<sup>279</sup> (*Autobiography*, vol. I, 4)

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<sup>279</sup> Italicised by myself.

Shortly thereafter, although the occasion seems to be chronologically earlier, Eliade relates another incident in which he entered a room into which he was not normally allowed to go:

*the next moment I was transfixed with emotion. It was as if I had entered a fairy-tale palace. The roller-blinds and the heavy curtains of green velvet were drawn. The room was pervaded by an eerie iridescent light...As was true also of the image of the little girl from Strada Mare, I could later evoke at will that green fairyland...I practiced for many years this exercise of recapturing the epiphanic moment, and would always find again the same plenitude. I would slip into it as into a fragment of time devoid of duration — without beginning and without end.*<sup>280</sup> (7)

The very phrases are obviously meant to recall his theory of *eternal return*; the “fragment of incomparable time”, the “epiphanic moment”, “devoid of duration”, which he can later “evoke at will” is evidently an echo of *illud tempus* which later animates his apprehension of religious life. This is not to say that Eliade’s theories are based on mere subjective experience, grotesquely expanded to subsume all of the spiritual experiences of humanity. Eliade did not begin writing his memoirs until the 1960s, and these events were supposed to have taken place in 1910 or 1911. It is rather the vocabulary of his theories which shapes his later descriptions. Nor would Eliade, after a lifetime of

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<sup>280</sup> Italicised by myself.

academic involvement, be ignorant of the accusations such a description could evoke. I believe that he is quite deliberately revealing that he considered this subjective experience of re-actualizable, non-chronological time to be an elementary human experience, and furthermore that subjective experience is not “mere” but is in fact the source of hierophany.<sup>281</sup>

Bryan Rennie’s interpretation that subjectivity is integral to the hierophanic experience has significant implications, especially concerning the absolute inseparability between subjectivity and objectivity. In fact, objectivity is implied here as a direct product of subjectivity itself. The supremacy of subjectivity means that there can be no external experience that does not converge in some way to certain operative patterns within the consciousness — or to put it more colloquially, there is no such thing as an ‘out-there’ that is completely out *there*. In other words, there are no ‘victims’ as such to undesirable circumstances (despite the fact that on the surface the action-reaction structure between victim and perpetrator does seem like a sound and valid identification), but there are ‘volunteers’ who on a very profound level (some would even call it a ‘soul’ level) have made an agreement to participate in whatever unwanted experience for specific reasons. By extension, there is no such thing as experiences that randomly assert themselves into our lives, but instead there are occurrences that again coincide with whatever (so-called) invisible signals that we are transmitting from within (e.g. Suppose if we find ourselves waiting for an airplane flight that is very badly delayed, we may not have actually caused the delay ourselves. But there are certain operative patterns within our consciousness that

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<sup>281</sup> Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, pp. 100-1.

have caused us to rendezvous with a delayed flight.) Subjectivity, as Rennie conceives of it (he refers to subjectivity as a ‘source’<sup>282</sup>), then becomes a primary attractor of whatever occurrences we encounter — an grand attracting mechanism operating within a cosmic universe that in itself is a unified, magnetic field. Following Jean Epstein’s theory of animistic cinema that I had discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Moore suggests much the same thing about the subjectivity of the lens that not only manipulates, but also extracts and generates poetic interconnections between the essences of things, transforming a thing into a person and a person into a thing:

The lens has a subjectivity of its own...The lens itself seems caught in the never-ending spiral twisting people into things and things into people...The lens has the guile of an ingénue, the emotions of an executioner.<sup>283</sup>

To transform a thing into a person is to cause the life force within the object to emerge and display itself through the images that play out, although the reverse process — which is to transform a person into a thing — is another matter altogether. This latter almost become a commodification of the person, in turn reflecting what Moore refers to as the ‘guile’ of the lens to be able to take away the gift of aggrandising the life force that it had initially bestowed upon what it is filming. From a broader perspective, the lens is a giver and a taker — a liminal entity that simultaneously brings out the inner qualities of what it is capturing in such an intimate way,

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<sup>282</sup> Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, p. 101.

<sup>283</sup> Moore, *Savage Theory*, p. 94.



yet at the same time it may coldly distance itself at any moment, causing the lens to be *neither here nor there*, breaking the mould of localised identity. The analogy of the Chinese/Japanese ink painting that I had discussed in various important places throughout this dissertation becomes an accurate metaphor for the animistic camera whose purpose appears to be the loosening and even the transformation of the ways in which boundaries between individuals, collectives, and geographical regions are drawn. The lens does not actually draw boundaries between the filmed images and the spectator, for being ‘drawn’ means that the mark is made without much leeway for perspectives to shift. Rather, boundaries laid out by the animistic lens are *considered and re-considered* in completely open-ended ways while catering for creative uniqueness and diversity that are always subject to change. Even the degree of intensity characterising the manner in which the lens is focusing upon its subject can be metaphorically ‘thickened’ and ‘thinned’ — a process of interweaving different points of transition that is also prevalent in an artist’s treatment of ink. For although decisions concerning the concentration or dilution of the ink are made prior to the brush’s contact with the rice paper or silk cloth, there is always a significant degree of unpredictability as to how the paint and the painting surface would interact, considering also that the surface’s manner of absorption of the paint cannot actually be controlled, but can only be gently directed by the artist. Correspondingly, what happens in front of the lens is always characterised by varying degrees of spontaneity, and there are certainly elements that do not operate according to any rule-book or control measure. Moore’s statement that the lens has its own subjectivity suggests that whatever is being experienced (e.g. the seemingly objective reality in front of the lens) cannot be excluded in any clear-cut way from the state of consciousness of the one experiencing the phenomenon (e.g. the artist operating the camera), just as the mirror and whatever it is reflecting remain inseparable — an idea that becomes all the more pronounced

when contrasting qualities are closely interacting with each other in fusion more than anything else, as in the case for ink painting. The implication here is that things that are interacting must share certain likenesses, however subtle; one cannot say that this thing has such and such qualities and that other thing does not have them at all under any and all conditions, because if those two things did not share some degree of similarity, they would not be interacting with each other. Thus, the lens does have mirror-like qualities reflecting the imaginative perspective of the artist — a focus that shifts between inner and outer worlds with unnoticeable ease, almost causing these two worlds to become interchangeable in the poetic sense. This state of in-betweenness profoundly converges with the *ma* interval that I had discussed extensively in Chapter 3 and to a lesser extent in Chapter 4. Richard Pilgrim’s interpretation presents *ma* not only as constituting an interstitial moment identical to *illo tempore*, but also as a fusion between subjectivity and objectivity that births a new dimension — ‘a third place’ very much resembling the avant-garde hybrid creation that is birthed from the fusion of vanguard and rearguard. It must be noted however that not every avant-garde phenomenon can be considered *ma*-like, especially if the respective phenomenon is situated within a secular context that does not recognise the inter-dimensionality of existence, the example of Futurism which I had briefly mentioned in Chapter 1 being one such case (although the hierophanic moments in the avant-garde films that I have analysed in this dissertation are certainly *ma*-like; in fact, their *ma* qualities determined my selection criteria). Pilgrim continues:

Jean Herbert...reports that “Shinto insistently claims to be a religion of the ‘middle-now’, the ‘eternal present’...”

...Such is the case with the *kehai* [signs] of *kami* [sacred beings] as well, where *kami* come and go into the interstices of being but leave their faint signs, and where sensitive humans, by emptying themselves into the midst of now (*naka ima*) may directly experience the time/space gods embodied — however fleetingly — in the signs, sounds, and sights of the world. It is an “experiential, mysterious place” created as a third place between all other places and as an accumulation of experienced *ch’i* beyond all distinctions, boundaries, orders, and descriptive constructs.<sup>284</sup>

Pilgrim’s interpretation offers the following descriptions of the “*ma*” interval that can be equally applied to *illo tempore*: the ‘middle-now’, the ‘eternal present’, and even ‘faint signs’. These descriptions suggest the experience of eternity through a point in time where temporal irreversibility is no longer a constraining factor within the immediate moment — in other words, *ma* is the re-discovery of an eternity that lies latent beneath that marker on the timeline. The implication here, especially if we are consistently keeping Eliade’s *illo tempore* in mind, is that it is the eternity characterising mythical (non-linear) time that gave birth to its extension, which is linear time. So mythical time and linear time may *outwardly* appear like opposites, but *ultimately* they cannot be opposites, precisely because a certain source cannot give birth to something without that something carrying at least *some* properties of its own source. The experience of an interval of eternity necessitates a receptive state of consciousness where the world’s troubles are

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<sup>284</sup> Pilgrim, ‘Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time’, pp. 70-1.

temporarily forgotten, as can be seen in Chapter 4 where the character Genjuro re-unites with his ghost-wife (who herself is a form of *kami*). Yet even before the re-union, he had been invited into the mansion of another ghost woman (Lady Wakasa), an instance described by Mark Le Fanu as a transition that hardly even presents itself as a transition, due to the detached but fascinated way in which our absorption into a ‘dream’ (here alluding to Artaud’s dream cinema) causes us to lose conscious awareness of the actual passing of events (we must note that *illoc tempore* is also a detachment from the passing of linear time). The implication here is that the other world and the immediate physical world are metaphorically *rolled into one*:

Granted, then, that the lady who materialises out of nowhere, as the peasant is selling his pots in the marketplace, should dazzle him out of his wits, it is not an additional surprise (indeed it is a positive aspect of the enchantment) that she should come from literally another world and another age. Everything about the lady is old-fashioned: that is here rarified charm. Few things in the finished film are handled more suavely, I think, than the way Mizoguchi governs the transition between the real, present-tense world of war of survival and making a living, and the archaic imagined world of art and luxury and erotic reverie into which Genjuro is irresistibly drawn. The viewer does not feel (any more than Genjuro does) the sudden break or sharp contrast that might be felt to exist between the marketplace and mansion-house. For it is part of the magic of dreaming that distinctions of time — distinctions of epoch — have no special meaning or significance.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Le Fanu, *Mizoguchi and Japan*, p. 58.

### *Architecture and Film Hierophany*

This episode in *Ugetsu* has helped me to conceive of the possibility that a further area of research that this dissertation could lead to is the intimate relationship between architecture and the intrinsic form and structure of sacred cinema. An effective example is shown upon Genjuro's entry into Lady Wakasa's mansion that is also a world inhabited by ghosts. The following image depicts two servants ritualistically lighting candles, viewed diagonally from across the garden.



Despite the dominance of squares (the garden itself is a square, although we only see a small segment of it in this image), rectangles, and right angles in this image, it does not at all convey any sense of rigidity or sharpness about it. What softens the clean, hard shapes are the very

serene and quiet nocturnal atmosphere as well as the gentle, light-footed way in which the servants are kneeling and walking. Even the accompanying flute music is light and fleeting with many breaks and pauses; indeed if illustrated children's literature depicting an escape into a fairy world were to have music accompanying every page, this would be the kind of music to be selected. From a symbolic standpoint, the three windows directly correspond to Pilgrim's interpretation of *ma* as 'a third place' in a sense that this immediate moment constitutes a hybrid dimension birthed from the fusion between subjectivity and objectivity, even between home and displacement: 'It is an "experiential, mysterious place" created as a third place between all other places and as an accumulation of experienced *ch'i* beyond all distinctions, boundaries, orders, and descriptive constructs.'<sup>286</sup> The three sliding windows serve as a latticed veil between this ghostly residence and the human world outside — the latticed pattern itself metaphorically constituting a grid of many, many windows within a larger window (or in this case, three windows), the notions of extra-sensory vision and widely multiplying perspectives becoming inevitable associations. Corresponding, Larry Shiner offers an elaborate interpretation of architectural hierophany that bears many points of resonance with the above image, as he incorporates the role of hard machinery into the discussion which evidently converges with the theme of angularity in Lady Wakasa's residence:

Although modern building, siting, and town planning has produced much that reflects mere economic and political expediency, there are places and buildings which do embody and define spaces of great power. To take an unlikely example, consider the ascent in the

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<sup>286</sup> Pilgrim, 'Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time', pp. 70-1.

Eiffel Tower, that product of mechanical industry and pure engineering. As a result of the interplay of inner and outer space through the open framework, the lightness of the whole as compared to the massive steel beams, the constantly changing perspective as we move to a vantage looking over the whole of the city lying astride the Seine, we look down on the order and unity of the city like gods and we find this most mechanistic of structures on which we stand, to be an expression of spirit, of light, of air, of constantly interpenetrating spaces. Or consider Frank Lloyd Wright's famous "Falling Water" where the chthonian resonances are countered by the abundance of light and the plasticity of interior spaces while its massive stone and concrete exterior forms bespeak endurance. It uses the products of the machine to triumph over the merely mechanical and functional, to reinstate the spirit of the waters, of the earth and woods, and to shelter and give free space for the spirit of man.<sup>287</sup>

Similar to my interpretation of the latticed pattern on the sliding windows, Shiner also describes the 'open framework' of the Eiffel Tower serving as a central point interconnecting the infinitely diverse avenues and vantage points throughout the entire city. Walking along any street in Paris with a view of the Eiffel Tower standing tall behind an alignment of old apartment buildings, one does feel that the steel structure composed of web-like criss-crossings of beams is quite omnisciently watching over us. Shiner also suggests that Frank Lloyd Wright's "Falling Water" is mechanical structure that has transcended its own mechanical nature, precisely because it is nestled within a forest environment, rather resembling a deep basin built into the bottom of a

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<sup>287</sup> Shiner, 'Sacred Space, Profane Space, Human Space', in JAAR XL/4, p. 431.

hollow hidden away in an innermost garden. Similar to the case of the smoothed angularity in the image set in Lady Wakasa's residence, the strength and mass of Wright's architectural structure are neutralised by the waterfall as well as the abundant greenery that appears to reach forward to cradle the house, transforming architecture into something far beyond a mere construct with the function of a dwelling place: 'An amazing animism is restored to the world. We know now, once we've seen it, that we are surrounded by inhuman living things.'<sup>288</sup> Epstein is proposing here that other living things can also possess human-like characteristics, and that being 'human' is not at all a quality that should be limited to those who are biologically human. But of course, the concept of film hierophany that I have attempted to put forward throughout this dissertation encompasses far more than those things that are *conventionally* considered to be 'living', which is why the idea of *living architecture* as portrayed in sacred cinema becomes a new direction that is full of potential. This principle — that there are things normally considered inanimate that also have a latent interactive life force — is directly applied in Ron Fricke's *Baraka* (1992), a non-narrated experimental documentary that puts into practice the ideas on film poetry and spatial poetry that I have extensively discussed throughout. *Baraka* is possibly one of the most grand and splendourous cinematic portrayals of hierophanic architecture to date, other masterpieces of a similar dedication being Luca Guadagnino's *I Am Love* (2009) and of course Nathaniel Kahn's documentary *My Architect: A Son's Journey* (2003). Yet *Baraka* remains one of the most profound expressions of a *universal poetry* beyond words (very literally, as there is not one word of spoken narration throughout the film) — not only beyond words, but perhaps even *prior* to words, referring to that pre-cultured state where acquired information has not yet taken a

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<sup>288</sup> Epstein, 'Photogénie and the Imponderable', in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939* (vol. 2: 1929-1939), p. 190.



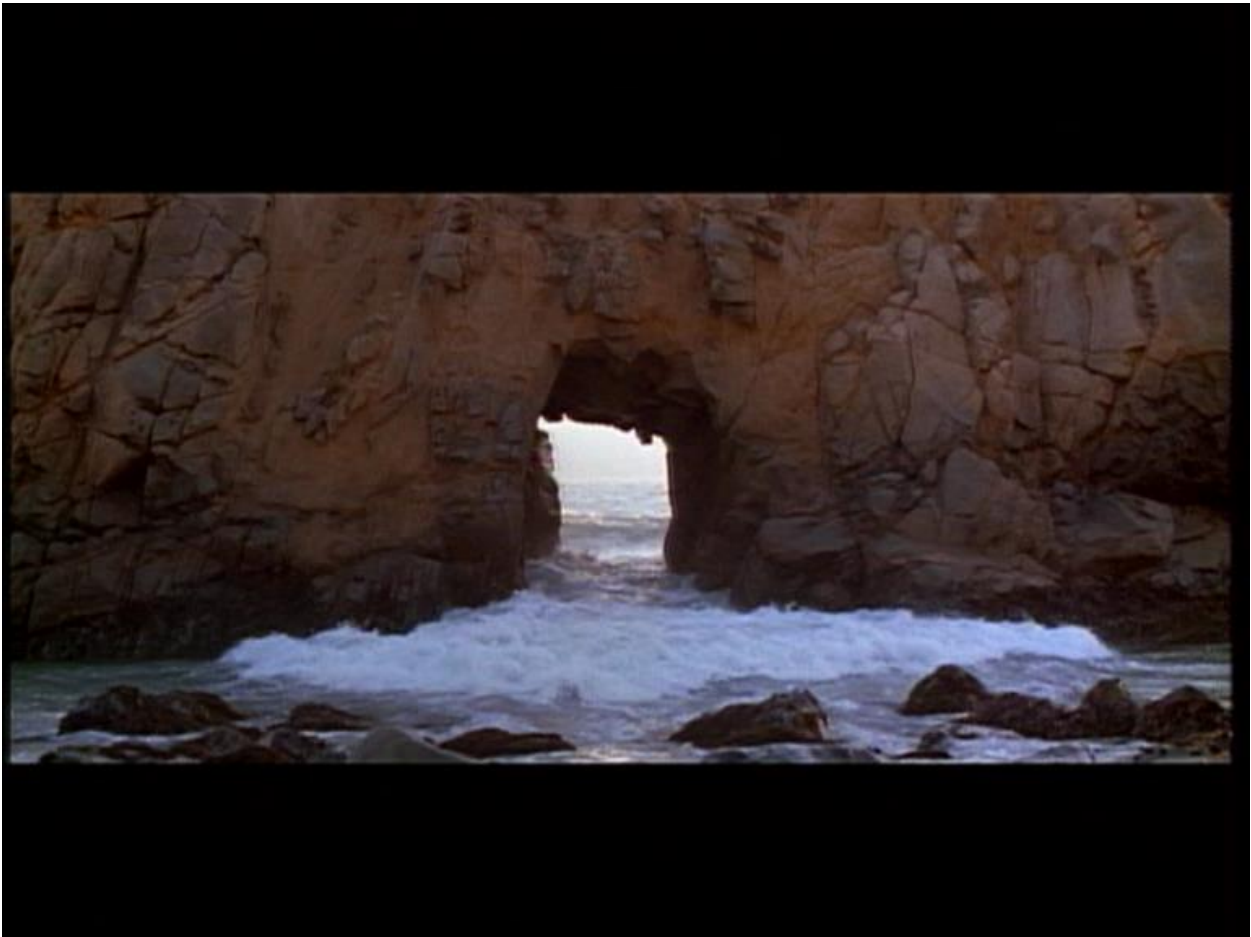
dominant hold of individual attitudes and behaviour; so this is a creation of doco-poetry that Artaud would have been proud of, most likely. *Baraka* is filmed on location in 24 countries, which does support its underlying foundation of universal poetry, although I would argue that even if the filming was done in only one country, the artistry with which the film is composed would still demonstrate those same universal qualities.



There is a very brief but momentous segment in the film where *ma* architecture is poetically fused with a natural formation, the quality that makes such a fusion so impressively executed is the very fact that the architecture and the natural formation do not even belong in the same image, and are most certainly located in different countries. It is the intrinsic film form that

entirely determines this poetic fusion between nature's creation and human-made structures. The image of a monk with his back to the camera takes place in Tokyo, Japan. He sits at an opening between two sliding doors, looking out towards what appears to be an elevated extension of a building with a traditional-style roof with ash-coloured tiles rather resembling dragon's scales. Evidently, this image is not completely symmetrical, but it does seem to generate a sense of being perfectly proportioned, especially so that the *ma* state of in-betweenness is constructed in a manner that seems to be carefully staged and even mathematically aligned. The monk sits in meditation, perhaps contemplating upon other realities that expand beyond the immediate architectural structure before him — although this causes us to consider alternative possibilities, that for instance if the elevated building extension were not there, this image simply would not express this elevated state of grace and serenity. For there would be nothing outwardly present for the monk to contemplate upon, causing this very brief sequence to be quite bland. And suppose if the building did not have such a height to it, we would not be able to see it because the monk would be blocking the view. In fact, the relationship between the height of the building extension and the height of the monk himself as well as his positioning appears to be perfectly calculated. The crown of his head rests just immediately below the lowest line of the roof; if the head was any lower or any higher, this image would not have accomplished such sophisticated balance. There is a cut to a close-up of the back of the monk's head, again poised perfectly in the middle of the opening of the sliding window. There is then another cut to a mid-shot of an opening in a massive rock formation, this time located on a sea-shore in Big Sur, California. The camera slowly zooms closer and closer to the opening through which the waves are channeling through and splashing against the rock's surface. This zooming magnifies the poetic convergence between the opening in the rock formation and the previous opening between the sliding doors

only a moment ago in Tokyo. There is a final cut to a wide-shot of the opening in the rock formation where we see the water spread passed the opening, expanding upon the shore in a manner not dissimilar to a release.



The waves have grown tired from travelling immeasurable distances. They channel through this small opening — nature's interval — which serves as a final transition to the shore. Although contrasted from the previous *ma* moment — composed to accomplish high standards of *internal* framing (using certain components within the image to aesthetically frame certain others) — the sequence successfully transforms architecture into a living being whose consciousness experiences moments of rest and release from its normal functions, much like the waves.

*The avant-garde as a state of consciousness and further directions in film hierophany*

This dissertation had led me to a position that the avant-garde is universal and innate within the consciousness, much like the sacred. I could not offer such a position from the beginning because then there would be a danger that I would have to study films from many different countries and from many time periods, and that would not be manageable. Thus far, it suffices that the case studies I have presented convey mythical themes, images, and symbols that do operate on a universal level, even if the methods of expression and manifested results are divergent. We must keep in mind however that while hierophany and the avant-garde share certain structural relationships, only *some* avant-garde phenomena can be considered sacred. Renato Poggioli remains the only theorist of the avant-garde to propose an avant-garde psychic state that dictates behaviour, similar to a vibrational mediator transmitting instructive signals:

I mean the instinctive forces and primary currents...: psychic seeds or roots, often to be perceived under the form of irreducible or unsuppressable idiosyncracies. And by ideology I mean the rationalization of these forms, currents, or residues into formulas of logic: their translation into theory, their reduction to programs and manifestos, their hardening into positions or even “poses”. In fact, an ideology is not only the logical (or pseudological) justification of a psychic state, but also the crystallization of a still fluid and suspended sentimental condition into a behavioral code even before it has crystallized into work or action.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1962; repr.1982), p. 4.

Poggioli describes a psychic state as a ‘condition’ and ideology as ‘code’, with the former always preceding and dictating the latter to the point where, if the former did not exist, the latter would not have a source from which to be executed. A code — in this instance, a socialised code — is a structured method of conduct that is understood and shared by the relevant individuals.<sup>290</sup> The psychic state as a ‘condition’, on the other hand, remains a state of consciousness, rather than a commonly visible phenomenon. In the latter half of the text, Poggioli cites Freud in direct association with depth psychology, and that from such a perspective, a work of art can contain within it both psychic value and therapeutic qualities: ‘Modern depth psychology, from Freud on, is not limited to looking at the elements of a work of art only as psychic symbols...it...also functions as private therapy for the individual artist.’<sup>291</sup> Ideology then is a behavioural extension of the psychic condition. The inextricable link between ideology and psychic state completely converges with Poggioli’s presentation of the interrelationship between what he refers to as ‘currents’ and ‘movements’:

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<sup>290</sup> Marjorie Perloff presents an example of Gertrude Stein whom she describes as ‘the most radical American writer of the early twentieth century’ and who ‘disliked literary movements, belonged to no cénacle, and participated in no group manifestos or activities.’ (Perloff, “Avant-garde Tradition and Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry”, in *Revue Française D’Études Américaines*, no. 103, February 2005, 117). Stein treated other avant-garde women writers dismissively (118), and instead pledged her strongest allegiance to ‘that great modernist aggressively heterosexual male painter — Picasso.’ (118) Thus, it is evident that there are enormous disparities between the individual preferences of the artist in question and the expected norms operating within a cultural movement. Instead of developing a sense of ideological sisterhood with other avant-garde women writers, Stein exercised her personal preferences to the complete contrary, treating her women contemporaries dismissively.

<sup>291</sup> Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, p. 166.

...at times there are more vast and vague cultural manifestations which we more suitably label “currents”. “Current”...seems especially to allude to vital forces, intuitive and unconscious elements, tendencies rather than groups...Thus its validity is limited to generalized and unstable orientations, cultural situations more in potential than in execution, to tendencies in a fluid or raw state. Briefly, it indicates environmental factors only translatable with difficulty into terms of historical consciousness and theoretical awareness. “Movement”, on the other hand, is a technical term...appropriate to art history and literary criticism, insofar as both are concrete history and specific criticism.<sup>292</sup>

Poggioli describes *currents* as ‘vast’, ‘vague’, ‘intuitive’, ‘unstable’, ‘fluid’, and ‘raw’. And he describes *movements* as ‘technical’, ‘concrete’, and ‘specific’ — adjectives suggesting movements to be verifiable occurrences that are empirically observable. As he describes currents as ‘fluid’ and movements as ‘concrete’, the water metaphor implies that the latter is a direct transformation from the former. We must first consider the fact that water is the only element that can exist in a multitude of states ranging from fluid to frozen to vapourous. An avant-garde movement then is an identifiably localised version of a current. Furthermore, Poggioli describes currents as ‘unstable’ and ‘translatable with difficulty into terms of historical consciousness and theoretical awareness’, implying that currents constitute the thought forms that have not (yet) emerged with any tangible evidence. If currents remain within the state of pre-emergence, then movements are actively operating in a state of full emergence in the public arena. The fluid state (the current) is ever-capable of being contained within any shape or mould. The solidified state

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<sup>292</sup> Poggioli, pp. 19-20.

(the movement) has in and of itself become shaped and moulded. Perhaps, Artaud also alludes to a similar idea of renewal and regeneration from a seminal fluid state: ‘The actor does not make the same gestures twice, but he makes gestures, he moves; and although he brutalizes forms, nevertheless behind them and through their destruction he rejoins that which outlives forms and produces their continuation.’<sup>293</sup> The implication here is while appearances would suggest that there is outward repetition in the form and choreography of certain theatrical gestures, there is no way that it can be considered repetition from the mythical perspective. The analogy here is that one can never jump into the same river twice, precisely because the river is always flowing, and would never wait nor pause for any cause. So what outwardly appears to be repetitious becomes transformed into an embodiment of expanding newness.

This avant-garde state of consciousness can be applied to the kind of sacred cinema that is entirely devoted to liminality as a determining foundation (one such example of a liminal state is the *ma* interval). The main character of this potential area of research is Victor Turner who describes liminality as ‘interposed between stretches of ‘ordinary’ time, or occur[ring] either in places ‘set apart] from ordinary activities or temporarily changed in nature to accommodate ritual action.’<sup>294</sup> The purpose then is to discern a liminal dimension that is simultaneously sacred and avant-garde (avant-garde in a sense that it is a new hybridity resulting from the fusion of two or more states), which I am proposing should be referred to as the ‘fairy dimension’ — the

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<sup>293</sup> Artaud, ‘Preface: The Theater and Culture’, in *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 12.

<sup>294</sup> Victor W. Turner, ‘Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media’, in *Religion*, vol 15/3 (London: Academic Press, 1985), pp. 205 – 218 (p. 209).

analysis of cinematic portrayals of this perplexing half-world somewhere along the conjoining pivot between Heaven and Earth.<sup>295</sup> The ‘ritual action’, as Turner refers to it, is almost entirely defined by rare, mysterious, and mesmerizing characteristics, involving some form of travelling to, within, and from the liminal realm or the fairy dimension itself (in this dissertation, this form of travelling/transportation features in Cocteau’s *Orpheus* and Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu*). The ritual travelling ‘reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language)’<sup>296</sup> of a dimension inhabited by divine earthlings — fairy-folk — who share a converging earthly realm with the mortal world, but who carry out an aloof existence. Fairytales, and other tales of the strange and enchanting, often describe the fairy dimension as a magical realm elusive to human perception. The elusiveness of the fairy dimension is accentuated through nostalgic overtones of traditional story-telling methods exemplified in iconic starting lines, such as ‘Once upon a time’, or the Arabic equivalent ‘It was and was not so’. Even those phrases are entirely characterised by liminality, yet selecting films that convey the simultaneously sacred and avant-garde nature of the fairy dimension is certainly not as simple as such opening lines may sound. For we must also keep in mind that many mainstream movies do occasionally feature *some* avant-garde elements. Hollywood blockbusters such *The Lord of the*

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<sup>295</sup> The following description mirrors the theories of Eliade and Artaud to the fullest extent — that modern secularisation has suffocated and repressed the sacred/mythical dimension: ‘The departure of fairies is a tradition in itself, a genre of lament for the passage of time and the loss of innocence. Fairies always belong to yesterday, because today’s world is corrupt, sophisticated, urbane and disenchanted. The repeated elegy for their departure bespeaks a recurrent sense of erosion of tradition by the demands of the present and the pressure of the future.’ (Brown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, p. 163.)

<sup>296</sup> Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), p. 96.



*Rings* (2001-3) and *The Hobbit* (2012) are effective examples of portrayals of the fairy dimension that truly do raise the bar in terms of cinema's imaginative potential. There are also films that have enormous popular value (as can be seen in the case for Hong Kong's intensely star-driven movie industry) that do in fact show an impressive range of avant-garde qualities. Tsui Hark's *Green Snake* (1993) features the widest variety of water states (in fact, I would argue that it would be difficult if not impossible to find any other film that features such aquatic variety), most of which the fairy beings in the film (the snake women) have a sacred affinity with: rain, mists, fog, streams, lakes, ponds, home baths, steam, snow, floods. Its anchorage in fluidity cause the fairy dimension to be detached from any finalised concrete form, as water is a symbol of purity in itself. In Annette Michelson's interpretation of Maya Deren's cinematic ideals, she describes 'a cinema that would offer, as no other medium can, "real toads in imaginary gardens" ...'<sup>297</sup>, which is a metaphorical definition of the fairy dimension itself. This dimension is retained in the realm of the terrestrial — tangible and accessible to earthlings who remain bound by mortal flesh. This terrestrial nature stands for the aspect that is the most immediately 'real', equivalent to Michelson's metaphor of "real toads". At the same time, the fairy dimension is blessed with unfathomable, divine qualities — this divine nature constituting the aspect equivalent to Michelson's metaphor of "imaginary gardens". Here, the integration of the 'real' and the 'imaginary' generates an overriding liminal quality, giving rise to an avant-garde film form which ultimately does not posit any distinction between that which is imagined and that which is not, expanding further and further our definition what reality actually is.

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<sup>297</sup> Annette Michelson, 'Poetics and Savage Thought: About *Anagram*', in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-garde*, ed. by Bill Nichols (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 21 – 46 (p. 31).

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