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Holy Motors

Abstract
This is a film review of *Holy Motors* (2012) directed by Leos Carax.

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In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes, "Either we have no dreams or our dreams are interesting. We should learn to arrange our waking life the same way—nothing or interesting." With his extraordinary movie *Holy Motors*, French director Leos Carax applies Nietzsche's principle to filmmaking, arranging his movie like a dream. In doing so, he offers a meditation on the intimate—even sacred—relations between cinema, dream, death, and identity.

Carax opens his movie with excerpts from Eadweard Muybridge's famous early studies in motion pictures, thereby paying homage to cinema in a manner that characterizes the movie on the whole. Though Carax has denied it in interviews, *Holy Motors* is, among many other things, very much a movie about movies—their dreamlike, transformative powers. For Carax, movies are imaginative spaces in which the world is recreated, and the audience with it. *Holy Motors* at once pays tribute to and exemplifies the transformative efficaciousness of cinema.

The Muybridge clips are juxtaposed with the establishing shot of the movie, in which the camera is trained on a man—"*le Dormeur*," played, significantly, by the director himself—sleeping, and perchance dreaming, in a bed. He awakens—but not really, for he is, after all, "the sleeper." He rises from the bed before skirting the perimeter of what is ostensibly a hotel room whose window overlooks an airport runway. The man caresses walls papered with images of trees, finding a door embedded in the two-dimensional forest. The wall with a secret passage: this image conveys something of the transportative power of movies themselves, their two-dimensional (and now, sometimes, "3D") images acting as portals to other worlds, other imaginative possibilities.

The door has a lock that *le Dormeur* opens with a curious prosthesis: a cylindrical key that extends from his middle finger. The penetration of a lock by that most phallic of digits would seem to portend a Freudian sexual allegory but, although eros pervades *Holy Motors*, the movie is far from a reductively psychoanalytic affair. And in contradistinction from Freud, what interests Carax is the manifest content of the cinematic dream—the play of images, the shifting of identities of actors, the atmospheric intensities of spaces set off from the everyday, spaces governed by logics that are a far cry from those of waking life. Indeed, when the man passes through the threshold, he finds himself on the balcony of a movie theater in which the audience sits entranced, captivated by the luminous moving images it beholds. A black dog moves through the aisles in slow motion. The atmosphere is uncanny, and the illusion captivating. It is now evident that the man who rose from his bed has never stopped dreaming; he has simply awakened within his sleep into another dream.

In fact, no one awakens in this movie except to enter further dreams, suggesting, as Maurice Blanchot has put it, that "sleep grows sleepless in dreams."[1] The movie's protagonist, Mister Oscar (played brilliantly by Denis Lavant), is actually a multitude of characters. (Leos Carax is an anagram of "Oscar Alex," the name the director was given at birth; Oscar would thus seem to be Carax's alter-ego, or dream-ego.) Oscar is a sort of actor (his limo contains a full dressing room) who dons numerous guises throughout the film as he is chaperoned on a journey to the end of the night by an elegant woman aptly named Céline.

Céline drives a long black vehicle from the Holy Motors limousine service, ushering Oscar from one "appointment" to another across Paris. The movie follows Oscar

on his disparate appointments. *Holy Motors* thus has no discernible plot, but rather proceeds through a chain of episodes, each requiring Oscar to adopt a different persona. Oscar's identity, as the penultimate scene of the movie makes clear, remains an open question. Indeed, he appears only to exist across a multiplicity of identities, a host of personae with no clear or settled boundaries. Similarly, *Holy Motors* eschews conventional narrative, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Rather, in this movie, dream logic prevails, with chains of associations and startling juxtapositions subverting the everyday rationality of waking life as well as usual movie-making devices.

To be sure, dream logic drives this movie in its entirety. None of the causal relations that define waking life is established between Oscar's nine nocturnal appointments. Oscar first appears as a smartly dressed captain of industry, making deals and talking big money in the backseat of the limo. But he soon transforms himself into a pauper in rags, begging for coins and contemplating the passing feet and concrete of Paris from a woefully hunched-over perspective. Further appointments find Oscar in a multitude of situations, for instance, acting out battles of video-game war and dragon-love in a virtual-reality simulator; playing father to an insecure adolescent girl; and, being killed in the midst of transforming into his doppelganger.

The episodes seem to correspond to major passages and moments in life—adolescence, death, love—as well as filmic genres: melodrama, musical, thriller, and even monster movies. In one stand-out sequence, Oscar becomes "Mister Merde," a gimpy, grotesque, cemetery-lurking, satyr-like leprechaun with an eye of creamy vile jelly. He descends into the tunnels below the city, emerging to gobble funeral flowers and terrorize Paris's strolling populace, with the theme from *Godzilla* accompanying his

comical rampage. The monstrous Merde shoulders his way to the sidelines of a fashion photo shoot centering on Kay M, played by a gorgeously statuesque Eva Mendes. In a frenzy of photo-shooting, an American fashion photographer, focused on Kay M, rapturously exclaims, "Beautiful! Beautiful!" But when his eyes catch Merde, the chant turns to "Weird! Weird!"

In a wild, shocking, and funny progression, Merde bites off the finger of the photographer's assistant, then with bloodied mouth licks the exposed armpit of Kay M, painting it red—an image more erotically charged than any of the more sexually explicit movie images I've seen in recent memory. Merde whisks away the impassive model, taking her back to his underground lair (the sewers below the city, of course), where he transforms her flowing dress into a burqa-like veil, before reclining naked and starkly priapic in her lap, falling asleep to her lullaby in a strange and beautiful revision of the pieta.

In this scene and, in various ways, throughout, the movie links dream, death, and the underworld. And it is with this connection that we can begin to discern some of what's holy about *Holy Motors*. First, the movie's dream logic resonates with the uncanny logic of the sacred. Classic theories of the sacred from the likes of Emile Durkheim and Rudolph Otto have emphasized the fascinating ambivalence of the sacred, at once terrifying and alluring. Mircea Eliade, meanwhile, wrote of the "paradox of the sacred"—the fact that the sacred, though opposed to the profane, manifests itself within the everyday. Ambivalence and contradiction are embodied in the sacred in a manner that defies the "either-or" logic of profane life.

Similarly, Freud claimed that the unconscious, of which dreams are perhaps the most dramatic expression, sustains rather than resolves contradiction.[2] *Holy Motors* enacts a kind of cinematic convergence of the logic of the sacred with the logic of dreams or the unconscious, de-familiarizing the everyday and eliciting ambivalent affects: fear and desire, longing and loathing. In his famous essay on the uncanny, Freud notes that the *unheimlich* ("unhomely," typically translated as "uncanny") is a term that evolves in the direction of ambivalence; like the sacred, it is both itself and its other, both familiar and strange, homely and unhomely. Carax presents his dream through a translation of traditional sacred imagery and themes—from the Christian and pagan traditions—into the quintessential modern idiom of popular cinema, providing an ecstatic escape and an inner journey into a world of constant flux, familiar yet strange, beautiful yet weird, profane yet sacred. In *Holy Motors*, the mood of the uncanny, with its de-familiarizing effects, converges with and underwrites the cinematic sacred.

The uncanny was a favored mood of surrealism, an art movement with which *Holy Motors* shares certain approaches and sensibilities. (A scene in Paris's famous Samaritaine department store, now empty and littered with mannequins, plays upon the surrealists' love of ruins and the démodé, as well as their collective obsession with mannequins and automata.) As art historian Celia Rabinovitch has suggested, the surrealists found in uncanny experiences a kind of secular experience of the sacred.[3] The uncanny in various forms abounds in *Holy Motors*: in its nocturnal atmosphere, its strange juxtapositions, its uncertain identities, disguises, doppelgangers, etc. The prevailing mood of the movie, coupled with its lack of narrative, thus unsettles the logic of waking, rational, goal-driven life. The experience of the movie has about it the air of

the numinous. Otto famously characterized the holy in terms of the numinous—an ambivalent *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that applies to this movie as well.

But the holiness of *Holy Motors* also has something to do with its evocations of the underworld. James Hillman, a psychologist drawing upon but also critically diverging from both Freud and Jung, has argued that dreams provide a concourse with death and the myth-making faculties of the unconscious, or underworld. It is in dreams that the soul, or psyche, is created and perpetually recreated under so many guises. "The underworld is a realm of only psyche, a purely psychical world," he writes. "What one meets there is soul." He goes on to claim that "the underworld perspective radically alters our experience of life."[4]

Radical alteration of our experience of life through the transformations of dream: this, I believe, is a key religious component of *Holy Motors*, with its resolutely underworld perspective, its endless dream. It would be tempting to see the audience portrayed at the beginning of *Holy Motors* as versions of the hapless denizens of Plato's cave—stagnating in the thrall of illusions that hold them in passivity. *Holy Motors* at once conjures and counters this image. Those in the audience, though quietly captivated, are witness to the transformations, the perpetual alterations that, I would suggest, extend to and activate the audience's own powers of imagination in the dream-space of the movie theater. And in contrast to Plato's philosophical hero, who escapes the cave to behold the luminous "truth," the dreamer of *Holy Motors* wants to dwell in the cinematic cave, to remain in the dream, where truth is multiple and identities are unstable.

Brent Plate has argued that movies provide a space of re-creation, a space that activates our myth-making faculty.[5] Hillman places this faculty in the space of the

unconscious, the underworld. These two insights converge in *Holy Motors*. Thus the rhyming of *Holy Motors* with the "holy moment" (attributed to film theorist André Bazin) is fortuitous. The "holy moment"—that mode of attention to the sacrality of the present—asks not to be interpreted, not to be given a meaning in the context of the formulaic narratives so familiar in Hollywood, but rather to be dwelled in with rapt attention, such that its experience might alter our lives. Carax's is an artistic counter-vision of the sacred that gives lie to the limited visions usually foisted upon us by the entertainment industry and the traditional political and ecclesiastical powers that be.

"Art's free imitation," Hölderlin wrote, "is a dream at once terrifying and divine."[6] One might suggest that the best way to dwell in and with the disturbing and divine dream of *Holy Motors* is to resist the urge toward interpretation that would seek to settle upon a unary, definitive "meaning." Not to interpret the dream, but to be given over to the experience of *Holy Motors*, at once familiar and strange, nocturnal and luminous: this is to be captivated by the sacred dreams without which we cannot live.

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[1] Maurice Blanchot, "Dreaming, Writing," in Michel Leiris, *Nights as Day, Days as Night*, trans. Richard Sieburth (New York: Marsilio Pub, 1998), xxviii.

[2] See, for example, Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 353.

[3] See Celia Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

[4] James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 1979), 46.

[5] S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: The Re-Creation of the World* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008).

[6] Hölderlin cited in Blanchot, "Dreaming, Writing," xxviii.

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