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Crystal Gazing

Esther Leslie

Can films divulge the future? Is the celluloid strip a form of crystal ball that forecasts what is to come? Siegfried Kracauer saw signs of imminent Nazism in German films of the 1920s, noting that the portents of war, genocide, brutality, authoritarianism are evident in the many murderers, persecutors, mad scientists and severe father figures that populated Weimar cinema.¹ Kracauer diagnosed these predictions retrospectively, looking back at Weimar cinema in his work of the 1940s. His 1920s and 1930s city sketches - identified as filmic in themselves, for the ways they treat the streets and the neon lights of German cities as dramatic, glaring, dizzying optical experiences – are, though, already punctuated by signs of the violence that was soon to become every-day and official.² In absorbing images from the present, film, it would seem, captures in some strange way lines of development, storing within itself, or on its surface, ciphers that will come to be seen as prophetic. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Crystal Gazing*, from 1982, suggests in its very title that some sort of divination is to take place in their film. What will the crystal ball reveal? What can film foretell or, in Kracauer's twisted temporality, what will it show to have already been set in motion, but which finds its open reality only now?

Crystal Gazing is set in the London that was contemporary to it, but it evoked Weimar Germany, and the antechamber to Fascism, by basing some of its characters and their fates on characters and their fates in Erich Kästner's 1931 novel *Fabian*. The main character in *Fabian* is a doctor of literature with a weak heart. He makes his money writing advertising copy, until the day he is replaced by a cheaper employee. Once unemployed, he spends his time drifting through the city and its brothels and bars, loving and losing women who trade their sex for money or fame, sometimes engaging in cynical repartee with his idealistic friend Labunde, a political activist negotiating a polarising political atmosphere. Labunde is writing a doctorate on the writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and, in the course of the novel, he will become a suicide. Fabian dies too, leaving behind the imperfect world he witnesses, as he attempts to rescue a child from a river, despite the fact that he cannot swim. In his 1950 introduction to the

¹ See Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* [1947], Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 2004.

² Siegfried Kracauer, *Strassen in Berlin und Anderswo*, Das Arsenal, Berlin, 2003.

reprint of the novel (which was committed to the flames first time around in 1933), Kästner described his story as a ‘fun house mirror’ or ‘distorting looking glass’, depicting a reality marred by mass unemployment and social misery. It is distorted by caricature, satire and exaggeration, but none the less a mirror for all that. He adds that it was written as a warning about the abyss that Germany, and Europe, were approaching, their citizens merrily bobbing along to the seductive strains of a rat catcher.³

Crystal Gazing likewise stared into its moment and asked what is becoming of this city and the people in it, in these depressing times of upheaval? The film follows, for the most part, four people as they make their way or fail to in London in the early 1980s, in an environment moulded by the advent of Thatcherism in 1979. It asks what new politics loom on the horizon. How will they change us and our relationships? Can we fight them with narrative, or film, or art? Will they kill us? The film’s characters are two men and two women. The men are not heroes. They are lost, unmoored, drifting. Both die, one in an accident, one by his own hand. We learn of these deaths through TV or video, distanced, mediated – the men are not full-bodied, they are becoming redundant. The women, by contrast, find ways to exist, but this is by being pulled into the workings of contemporary capitalism: one melds with the spectacle, as a pop star; one enters the economy through photographic work that can be commoditised for financial prediction. Both utilise imagery – of the self and of the environment to further their own and capital’s fortunes.

In the few available blurbs and texts on the film, it is described as ‘the most narrative film’ that Mulvey and Wollen made, and characterised as ‘a departure from the emphatic formalism’⁴ of earlier films. But if it is a narrative film, it is a digressive and wandering one, just like the narrative of Kästner’s *Fabian*. The film is episodic and rambling, just as its characters, especially Neil, the lonesome, unemployed fantasy illustrator, roam and drift and seem not to know where to go or who to go with. Futures are fantasized, but the male characters seem bereft of one, made redundant by new capital, yet still bound to it. The film proceeds by the use of tableaux, one-shot takes, set pieces, short chapters – a notable example is Keith Allen’s improvised monologue in a taxi queue. As much as the film meanders through a loose intervallic narrative, it also encounters blockages. It is comprised of interruptions. There are

³ Erich Kästner, *Fabian: Die Geschichte eines Moralisten*, DTV, Munich, 1989, pp. 9-10.

⁴ Eleanor Burke, Entry on Laura Mulvey, Reference Guide to British and Irish Film Directors, online <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/566978/>

abrupt halts, failed plans, sudden endings. It knots together its characters in strange, often stressed relationships, not straightforward ones, but perverse ones, unhappy, mismatched, with a sense of heading nowhere. The genre of the fairy tale is evoked in the film's references to *Puss in Boots*. This traditional, heart-warming genre brings cold comfort in the London of the 1980s. The juddering action of *Puss in Boots* as played in the Pollock's toy theatre exposes an illusory hope for good fortune, just as it demonstrates folk wisdom's version of the mobilising power of language and desire.

For sure, in *Crystal Gazing* the question of narrative appears as something that the film possesses, but critically. The filmmakers intended to break with the trends perceived amongst radical British filmmakers at the time: the London Filmmakers Co-Op and the political documentary movement eschewed narrative, having imbibed anti-narrative theories from Structuralism in Paris. But this was not to say that a complete acceptance of it was warranted. Somehow narrative had to be worked with and against. *Crystal Gazing*, it seems apparent from an interview by Mulvey and Wollen with *Framework* in 1982, was part of another movement, a new period, perhaps the one unleashed by Thatcherism, perhaps the one which had to begin after the waning of the experimental film movement. New alliances and new resources present themselves in a desperate situation, which also brings all the potential energies of a necessary repositioning. *Crystal Gazing* wanted to align not with the 'nightmare of independent film'⁵, but with other independent cultural forms, ones that had more popular reach: independent music, theatre, comedy, science fantasy art, graffiti, busking, video games – subcultures, in short. This is not to say that the theoretical influence that had been so key for British radical cinema was abandoned. As Peter Wollen succinctly put it in the *Framework* interview: 'Rock n Roll and foreign theory, those are the two backbones of the film'. The question of accessibility and who would form the right or wrong audience are questioned within the film, ironically, perhaps, but none the less – specifically in relation to Julian's PhD, a radical post-Lacanian reading of *Puss in Boots*. For whom is it written, for what and to whom?

Across and around all this, the film gives time to music, to the songs of Lora Logic, which seem to be diegetic and non-diegetic, at one and the same time. The songs tug against the narrative, holding it up – though they also underline how Kim is becoming a pop star, hitting

⁵ Interview with Mulvey and Wollen by Olly Hoeben, Fizzy Oppe, Don Ranvaud, *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 19, 1982, pp. 17-19.

success, breaking through, rather than being impeded or obstructed. In as much as the songs hold up narrative, they are ‘individual units, like acts of “attractions”’, as Mulvey observed in *Framework*. In that one word, ‘attraction’, two modes of cinema are yoked together: popular and avant garde. ‘Attraction’ is a name given to the mode of cinema in its first years: a sensational, event-based frolic, visual delight, gags, shocking events, attention seeking spectacle. ‘Attraction’ is also a concept in cinema theory and practice, coined with an avant garde project for film whose terms were identified by a filmmaker and theorist, S.M. Eisenstein.⁶ His first films were organised – and theorised - as a ‘montage of film attractions’. He took forms that he had worked with theatrically, the popular forms of vaudeville, music hall, circus, sideshows, all discrete and complete elements that have the capacity to shock a viewer and work on them emotionally and viscerally, and he re-purposed them as the basis for a montage theory of film, which utilises attention-grabbing and shocking segmented narrative, as well as chains of association. All this is directed by Eisenstein towards revolutionary ends. The film is broken into parts and it is also an ideological whole.

Crystal Gazing has a narrative, but one that bares its constructed nature openly – with its use of repetitions, scenes that balance each other, interruptions, flows and blockages. The film is conceived as a series of episodes and as a whole. And that has something Brechtian about it – and perhaps indicates the extent to which this film is composed as an epic, a journey, a series of stations along a way. This way is a route that brings death with it, as much as it brings flourishing. The dialectic and all its contradictions are laid out as a tableau in one of the closing scenes: a picket line, a company collapse, some scabs, the thwarted journey and death of a non-hero. This death is mediated to us by TV, by the TV news. This one death, Neil’s demise, will be forgotten by most viewers by the time of the next news, just as Kim barely registers the news of Neil’s friend’s suicide, caught up as she is in her own journey into celebrity, into becoming a spectacle in the technological imaginary. The spectacle asserts itself in this film and is shown showing. All the characters appear on video or TV, dead or alive. These devices are vectors of oblivion, notoriety or fame – it all depends on who and what you are and when. They steal life away from those who watch, as a Situationist might put it, just as they are vehicles for showing so much death, factual and fictional, though the distinctions barely matter. There a suggestion that there might yet be a more lasting effect of the failed academic’s suicide,

⁶ Two relevant essays, ‘The Montage of Attractions’ (1923) and ‘The Montage of Film Attractions’ (1924) are anthologised in Sergei Eisenstein, *The Eisenstein Reader*, edited by Richard Taylor, British Film Institute, London, 1999.

for it is broadcast on home video, that then-newish medium of self-representation, which promised as a glimmer the possibility of acquiring a means of reproduction. The video is doubly mediated: it exists in the moment of its filmic screening and as an explanatory document for those within the film who seek answers. It leaves multiple traces, but what it seems to do more than anything is to make out of suicide a theatrical gesture, one enriched by a reading of Antonin Artaud's caustic open letter from 1925 to the Chancellors of the Universities: 'Europe is becoming set in its ways, slowly embalming itself beneath the wrappings of its borders, its factories, its law-courts and its universities'. This video within a film speaks to the wider theme of decay and hopelessness.

But there were other influences acknowledged by Mulvey and Wollen in the *Framework* interview. Wollen stated: 'The film is really poised between Brecht and Breton'. As the reference to *Fabian* indicates, the film had its connections to modernism, to the neo-epic city novels of the interwar years, in which shattered men – Franz Biberkopf, Leopold Bloom, Fainy McCreary, Nikolai Apollonovich Ableukhov - crash up against incomprehensible mediated cities, but it might also be read through more recent ideas expressed by Mulvey in her essay 'Uncertainty: Natural Magic and the Art of Deception' from *Death 24 x a Second*. Here Mulvey discusses the 'convergence between the arts of reality and the arts of deception that brought about the birth of the cinema in 1895'.⁷ Embodying this convergence is Georges Méliès, a professional magician and illusionist who melded the documentary capacity of cinema with magic and trickery. Méliès devised effects and surrealist scenes, quite unlike the Lumières' focus on Realism. Documentary and magic, the real and the enchanted might be crudely bannered under the contraries of Brecht and Breton. Mulvey's essay reflects on how forms of popular entertainment, 'arts of deception', emerged out of the growth of a leisured mass audience in the later nineteenth century, appealing to 'human fascination with the unnatural, the impossible and, ultimately, the supernatural' and 'its constant readiness to be fooled'. Cinema capitalised on these. In *Crystal Gazing*, a couple of scenes in a cabaret with a magician, hint at a relation between cinema and the showmanship of magic. While the cabaret form was an inspiration for Brecht (as well as a location of the attraction form for Eisenstein), because of its raucous popular nature, in *Crystal Gazing* it represents a space of deception, a fraudulent space where a magician plies his non-magical tricks. In one scene in the cabaret club, as if to emphasize the link from the film to early cinema and the arts of enchantment, Lotte Reiniger's

⁷ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 x a Second*, Reaktion, London, 2006, p. 34.

shadow-play animation *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) plays in the background. Cinema has a capacity to deceive; audiences have a capacity to be deceived. Audiences long to be deceived. But cinema too has the capacity to reveal. Modernity's new consciousness, so Tom Gunning, via Mulvey, is one in which audiences experience 'Pleasure in the material relation between illusion and optics and between illusion and momentary credulity, playing with the mind's susceptibility to trickery', all of which 'involve various successive phases of exchange between the eye and the mind, belief, doubt, curiosity'.⁸

All well and good, but for this film, *Crystal Gazing*, which displays its fairy-tale and fantasy influences quite obviously, it exists in modern times, when new magics, likewise spurious, are ascendant. Or these are old ones repurposed to new ends. The character Vermillion, an occasional magician's assistant with a charmed gaze at night time in the club, performs by day hi-tech augury, gazing on satellite photographs. Like the photographs of spirits of the nineteenth century, which appeared to make invisible forces visible, her photographs visualise the ethereal through infrared and other optical techniques. In this way, they allow for an analysis of something that cannot yet be seen: economic futures, the futures of food markets, the size of yields to come, annexed to colours on the images, as in, for example, those produced by drought spots, whose poor crops generate out of their nothingness profits in futures markets. The new purpose of this augury, this crystal gazing, is economic prediction. Here it gleams as the first twinkling of neoliberalism. There is a deft magic in the film in that it recognises the rise of certain kinds of cultural labour, specifically intellectual labour, as central to a new phase of capitalism. It depicts a future that was, and would be female, in Thatcher's sense only perhaps, or, with a sliver more hope, in the sense of the women on the picket line who appear inside the final crystal ball, fighting back, a female workforce asserting its demands, but they are harbingers of death too. What deaths? Of the old-style working class struggle? Of radical possibility? Of the vanguard and the avant garde? Of what has been? Somehow they connect to – catalyse, redeem, disrupt - our non-hero who dies, finally a hero, under the wheels of a scab coach, while in the act of saving a child's life. He dies just like Fabian, on whom he is modelled, both committing their one, final, decisive moral act. Morality is of the old world. It cannot persist.

⁸ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 x a Second*, Reaktion, London, 2006, p. 42.

Looked at from the perspective of today, the crystal ball is a stand in for something else. It is the globe, our Earth, as seen from outside and above, as Vermillion sees it from her satellite photographs. What the film grasps as image, in its incipient moments, is the then emergent phase of global capitalism, of globalisation, of precarity, of extending mediatization, of new conditions in a world of flows and borders.