Cosmopolis

"the root stench being usury and METATHEMON"
Ezra Pound, The Pisan Cantos LXXVIII

When Ezra Pound used his epochal poetic work Cantos to convey a diagnosis of the fatal illness of the modern world, he did it using one single word: usury. At a time when money had lost all connection with real fundamental values, the world had moved off in a new direction from which, as this sworn antimodernist and fascist cold-bloodedly states, there is no return. In Pound's text, usury is presented as the final embodiment of human decline, and Pound attributes the invention of this uniquely universal financial tool to the Jews. Leaving the author's anti-modernism and anti-semitism on one side, the fact remains that in the early modern period usury was rendered legal and modern banking was born, releasing the genie of financial abstraction. Money, as those who wanted to earn without actually working were quick to grasp, doesn't necessarily have to serve as the equivalent of value of a certain good, but can instead represent a value of its own, which in this case is abstractly derived. With this ingenious step money became independent and self-sufficient for the first time. According to Pound, our civilization has been in a state of irreversible decline ever since, and insatiable banking circles – behind whom, in his view, stand the Jews – are the main culprits. Be that as it may, the deep shift from the real towards the abstract left a decisive stamp on the spirit of modern times, especially when the world of finance was concerned. As one of the characters in David Cronenberg's new film Cosmopolis discovers, money has lost its narrative quality in the same way that painting has, and nowadays money needs only to be engaged in a discussion with itself. It therefore seems logical for the director to open and close a film whose main hero is a financial speculator with the kind of abstract paintings (Jackson Pollock-style at the beginning; Mark Rothko at the end) that have become universally recognized symbols of art in our time. Ever since the middle of the 20th century it has been the unquestioned trend to attach most value to the pictures in which it is difficult, if not completely impossible, to tell what exactly is being depicted. If we can still speak about depiction at all, bearing in mind that we have lost touch with any real point of reference. And there you have the analogy with the modern banking system, in which money frequently represents itself in the endless reproduction of abstractly derived numbers. To the mortal mind these inscrutable financial towers of Babylon, just like abstract art, are merely symptoms of a wider present-day phenomenon which Martin Heidegger calls the concept of the Gigantic (das Riesenhafte) and which appears in innumerable forms. The Gigantic is the thing with the help of which, he maintains, quantity arrives at its own qualities. The question that arises is what will happen if the Gigantic supercedes man and achieves its own qualities – it will become the size that overreaches any measurement and becomes impossible to predict or foresee, Heidegger coldly deduces. But, let's forget about philosophy and get back to art. As with Pound's Cantos, Cronenburg's Cosmopolis presents a magisterial diagnosis of the spirit of the times, in the form of a highly stylized and exceptionally complex work of art. The film explores the consequences for the human spirit of a time in which money more than ever before exists for itself and for abstract speculation. Usury gave us banks, and the banks are now driving people to go out onto the streets, occupy them and put up tents. In other words today's opponents of the system are behaving in a far more desperate way than the participants in either the French or the October revolutions. In the uniformed world of capitalism with no alternative, it's impossible even on paper to die for an ideal, only for affordable loan. Interest has even officially become the word that opens and closes the gates to heaven and hell. In Cosmopolis Robert Pattinson, who already has considerable experience of being a vampire (thanks to the Twighlight films), here embodies an even more bloodthirsty type of predator – a financial speculator. Eric Packer, as his character is called, is already filthy rich, but that does not prevent him from grabbing for more and more. And this clean-cut 28 year old travels around in search of that 'more and more' in his surreally spacious and sound-isolated white limousine, where he is visited by his business associates, the doctor who presides over his daily check-up, the women he fucks, the woman with whom he talks about life, the woman who is in charge of his Theoretical Department and so on and so forth. The film follows the course of a day in which Packer, despite the qualms of his bodyguards, goes to have a haircut on the other side of town. During the course of this whole-day odyssey our antihero will temporarily leave the secure womb of his limousine only to chit chat a bit with his ultra-beautiful and ultra-rich wife who is a poetess by profession and can therefore allow herself the rare luxury of having nothing to do. This beauty holds him under control by persistently shortening the sexual act, totally conscious of her body as the only thing with which she can intrigue her husband's ego bearing in mind that the soul in the world of Cosmopolis is a worn-out and unusable relic. Love itself comes across as an excessively imbecilic concept in a world in which numbers on the screen built into the seat of your limousine are the only things that have the power to produce some kind of emotional reaction. The fact that these feelings are slaves to abstractly produced values clearly ought not to worry us too much. When he wants a rest from the deeply virtual nature of his life's calling, Packer simply fucks something and eats greasy, unhealthy food in the first snack bar he can find. The only real problem that his grandiose ego can't seem to cope with is in the fact that he has been diagnosed with an asymmetrical prostate. By the end of the day he will find out that it is simply an anomaly about which it is impossible to ascertain the cause and significance. Cronenberg's film thereby presents an archetypal Odyssey, but turned upside down. The hero no longer travels from one adventure to another; on the contrary, the adventures obediently come to his limousine where he consumes them according to his own rules. And the aim of the journey is in no way heroic, but totally mundane and transient. Packer has set off to have a haircut, and we all know how quickly hair can grow. Instead of finding God and salvation at the end of his quest, he will meet a naïf who beliefs that he can save him and accords him Christ-like characteristics. God is dead, and someone must take his place in the thankless task of bringing salvation to the human race. Who could me more suited to the task than the apostle of high finance that is our hero?

Cosmopolis is an adaptation of Don DeLillo's novel of 2003, in which the action was set three years earlier, in 2000. Cronenberg has already made skillful use of the great literary figures of our epoch, adapting JG Ballard's Crash and William Burrough's Naked Lunch. He has also filmed Patrick McGrath's Spider. As well as being a writer of undoubted literary talent, DeLillo is also blessed with prophetic powers (in Cosmopolis he foresees the financial crisis of 2007 and the Occupy Wall Street movement that followed it), and Cronenberg uses the potential of DeLillo's material to the maximum. The world of DeLillo's fiction is close to the director's sensibility, and the novel's atmosphere has been transferred masterfully to the screen. The director has also taken dialogue directly from the novel. Characters deliver DeLillo's prose in an almost declamatory way, which produces an effect of decadence of supposed human communication. The performances of the actors are one of the film's strong points. Greats such as Samantha Morton, Juliette Binoche and Paul Giammati have coped admirably with DeLillo's dense and frequently abstract dialogues, transferring their focus to internal currents that find their expression in gestures that seem to express either a surfeit or a total lack of bodily control. Robert Pattinson in the lead role excels in creating the character of a rational and omnipotent speculator in the real and tangible, and as we watch him forging through the emotional wasteland of his everyday life it as almost as if we feel its sharp, frustrated margins on our own skin.

Apart from DeLillo, one other literary great served as inspiration for Cronenberg's film, which opens with the following quote: What if rats become a unit of currency? The author of this dangerously contemporary hypothesis is the Polish poet and economics graduate Zbigniew Herbert. The rats here are symbolic of a world in which values have once and for all been turned on their heads, a world in which the incomprehensible and unmeasureable, in Heidegger7S words, supercedes man. Cronenberg poses the question of what happens with the internal world of people who are forced to exist in a world of intangible abstractions that obstinately remain beyond the grasp of human control and reason. Cosmopolis thereby presents the ingeniously graphic image of realities governed by spectres. Its portrait is carried out masterly with archetypal material as the story about our contemporary state uses age-old forms of human experience. Thus one day in the life of a financial speculator who travels to the other side of town in his white limousine in search of a haircut is just a transposition of the Odyssey – and of one other story about the journey from life towards death. At the end of the film, our hero, who embodies the position of a man who has taken on the role of God, will await the Last Judgment. Only this time it is not he who prays for mercy, rather the problem lies in the fact that while playing God it didn't occur to him to save anyone. In the course of his journey we have discovered what it is like to sail in seas where storms are no longer called into being by gods (as they are all, as everybody knows, long dead), but by the incomprehensible abstractions that have the power to persuade us that even a rat might be a unit of currency. If one day humans from some other time might wish to peer into the shapes of this contemporary simulacrum, or the empire of the virtual, it will be enough for them to watch Cronenberg's brilliant film and discover how there was once a strange time when the most dangerous, most bitter, most brutal opponents of the system didn't kill their rulers with knives or guns but simply threw cream cakes at them. Cronenberg's Cosmopolis is so far the best film to have come out from supposedly fatal 2012. The film will certainly grow more powerful with time, providing we have the energy to throw off the magic of false mirrors. It is an authentic artistic testament of a time in which phantoms and spectres wear seductive masks of narcissistic rationality, and whose eyes are a-shine with endless rows of inscrutable figures.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams

The past beats inside me like a second heart, wrote John Banville in his novel The Sea. Indeed; the past is an integral part of the present, and so is the future. In each of us, the pieces of the things past are breathing and the threads leading inexorably to the future are being born. The co-existence of different time levels of human experience is a phenomenon that art had long harnessed into its unstoppable cart, leading us continuously and persistently forward, one step at a time. In his 2010 film Cave of Forgotten Dreams, Werner Herzog does more than simply present us with the layers of human experience from different time periods for the sake of his art; with full dignity, he's asking about the meaning of art, trying to define the laws that have so reliably kept her mechanisms running for the past 30,000 years. Time - past, present and future - and the constancy of human instinct to express itself artistically are the central themes of Herzog's film. This time, the director found an excuse for pursuing his metaphysical preoccupations in an opportunity opened to him by the French government. In 1994, a week before Christmas, while rambling in the hills in the southern French region of Ardèche, the forester Jean-Marie Chauvet and his two friends stumbled upon something that looked like an entrance into an underground cave. The discovery proved to be spectacular because the cave he found by chance, and which was later named after him, contains the earliest known cave paintings. On the walls in some of the halls of this impressive natural beauty there are charcoal paintings that are at least 32,000 years old. It is fascinating how complex and beautiful they are, and in no way inferior to the drawings made 25,000 years later. The Chauvet drawings, which among other things represent the first known attempt at achieving a three-dimensional quality and movement in the picture, reveal that the need for artistic innovation is a very modern phenomenon. They show that people felt no need to change their way of artistic expression for thousands of years. After reading Judith Thurman's inspiring text on the Chauvet cave and the questions it raised in The New Yorker in 2008, the famous filmmaker got interested into that unexpected window into the prehistoric era. Having obtained the permission to immortalize this historical discovery, Herzog and his small crew filmed the cave's interior in 3-D, and had long conversations with the team of experts working on the scientific research project inside and outside the cave. The great director asks them some very banal questions, but every now and then surprises them with a deeper and more important question. Some of them give equally unexpected answers that help illuminate the film's central themes. However, the stars of the film are the cave itself with its masterly shot, surrealistically powerful paintings, and the director's voice-over that has long been the trademark of his documentaries. Each question asked in Herzog's recognizable voice with which he, in flawless English with a strong German accent, challenges the most demanding phenomena of human existence, resounds with the additional layers of meaning. It seems that even when he's asking the most innocent questions he has something much more complex in mind, as if he's always aiming at some hidden targets, buried treasures, suppressed truths. The film's title points to one of the directors' basic premises: from their inconceivable time distances, the cave paintings tell us about an eternal human need to transform reality into its higher potential through artistic expression. What were our ancestors dreaming about, we are asking together with him, what made them adorn the walls with the pictures of impressive power? It is interesting to point out that the Chauvet cave was not used as a living space but as a place for artistic expression exclusively. Herzog is particularly intrigued with a rock full of handprints left by one and the same person. The scientists tell him that this lone man visited the cave some six thousand years after the impressive drawings were made, and that he had one crooked finger. The man's wish was to leave his trace in the place that preserved the dreams of his and our ancestors. Without false modesty, Herzog deals with the enigmas to which he doesn't even try to find the answers; he is content to state that the attempt at answering the question about who and what we are has always been an integral part of our unfathomable journey from birth do death. This path, veiled by darkness, has been and will always be illuminated by the light of human gift of thinking about themselves and the world in the images that surpass the limited range of their personal odysseys. The rambler that left his handprints in the cave was not an artist, but he knew he was standing close to the eternity that the unknown authors of buffalos and lions on the cave's walls secured for themselves.

Herzog evokes their beauty and magical power using 3-D technology, which he otherwise publicly opposes. Throughout the film we are taken back to the fascinating interior and its paintings that pulsate with timelessness. We are imagining the torches that 30,000 years ago illuminated the damp walls where the paintings danced their dance, the same ones that we see today and that will hopefully also be seen by the ones that will come after us. But will they see them, and what pictures of ourselves are we going to leave behind for them to keep?

It is this question of future that Herzog devotes his impressive post scriptum to. Not far from the Chauvet cave there is one of France's many nuclear plants. The warmth that is a by-product of cooling of its reactors has been used to create a special microclimate whose tropical characteristics enable the keeping of alligators (Herzog calls them crocodiles). While we are watching those lazy reptiles standing as still as dead men next to the heated aquarium, the picture of our rather dark future is rising before us. Climate changes will undoubtedly turn this planet into a big aquarium in which not even the alligators may be able to find some comforting shade. The people who painted the beautiful scenes of animals in their eternal struggle to survive on the walls of the nearby caves lived in the ice age, while our descendants will live in the sad tropics. Both those distant moments in time are products of the present moment in which their meanings and forms are smelting in the workshops of our self-understanding. Will some future explorers admire the testimonies of our dreams and will they be lucky enough to discover them? The images of future differ from those of the past in their duration, both physical and the

subjective one they have in our minds. While the man of the past spent millenniums painting equally sublime pictures on the dark walls illuminated by nothing more than torches, the man of the future will be caught in one perfectly illuminated, but brief moment of his finality. Herzog presents this at the same time magnificent and frightening abstraction through the scene of the two albino alligators swimming towards each other, thus confirming the duality of each change. They testify about the road that a species is able to travel, about the stories inscribed in the time line of which they are part. The albino alligators before us are not the result of natural processes but of an artificial habitat created by humans. Our ability of abstract thinking has reached the point where we can literally transform nature, and not just transpose it through line and colour. It is astonishing that for some 25,000 years the man didn't find it important to paint himself too, not just animals, and even when he did it, the aim was to show the universality of the laws of nature; of life and death cycles and the fertility that enables them. However, once the small step towards the individual and abstract was finally made, the time started to accelerate ominously. In the last few thousands of years, instead of drawing buffalos and lions on the walls of the caves of our dreams, we often tried to show the person who can and knows how to stand opposite the nature. He is now looking back at us relentlessly, mirroring the reflection in whose child-like selfish look there is something that we hope does not belong to us.

The Impossible Possible
Alain Resnais' **Wild Grass**

People are not the only ones to go crazy. Grass sometimes does it as well. Wild Grass grows on pavements cutting through the rough concrete. Why does it lend itself to the reckless feet of passers-by? Is there something cheeky about confronting the ever stronger concrete? Is there something irrational in the presumptions of wild grass and something reasonable in concrete's lack of any? Could it be that wild grass is crazy enough to fall in love with concrete's utter indifference? Or the one of somebody's feet? Are we paying enough attention to the fact that wild grass is defeating the asphalt jungle with sheer power of conviction? After all, there are meadows, why not grow there?! Why does wild grass refuse to grow where it is meant to, where it was designed to begin and end? Is it because it prefers the touch of hard soles to that of bare feet? Or could it be that there is a special pair of feet for whom it has decided to grow on the pavement? Is it maybe longing for some unobtainable pair of shoes? For something or someone meant for it only?
These are the questions asked by the eighty eight year old Alain Resnais at the beginning of his latest effort Wild Gras (Les Herbes Folles, 2009). It's the eighteenth feature length film by the director whose 1959 feature debut Hiroshima Mon Amour was immediately proclaimed the first modern film of the sound era by Cahiers du cinéma then Editor Eric Rohmer. During what now accounts to half a century of directing masterworks Resnais has been focusing on exploring the specifics of the medium ever expanding our concept of what cinema is and could be. The central themes of his work are time and memory starting with his 1955 holocaust documentary Night and Fog and peaking with modernist benchmark Last Year at Marienbad, 1961 Cannes Palm d'Or winner. Resnais has always managed to create highly structured films whose purity of form highlights lack of patterns in the realm of the real. In a recent interview on Wild Grass Resnais explains: ""It's really a matter of life imitating art instead of the opposite—the way we often feel the emotions of everyday life as if they had already registered on the screen. When everyday life resembles cinema, it interests me more than when I see a documentary film. If you make a film very close to reality, you don't have to give it a form. I feel that when there is a form, I come closer in fact to the reality of life." More specifically the film deals with the concept of coincidence bringing our experience outside the parameters of reason. Resnais is interested in how and why we try to convince ourselves of the biggest of all human misconceptions – the reign of the rational. The film captures the form (the crack in the concrete) created by irrational behaviour of its heroes (wild grass of the title). Art is means of making form visible by shaping experience into story.
The opening sequence of Wild Grass asks the questions mentioned at the beginning by Resnais' ingenious use of the specifics of the film medium. First we have a forward tracking shot (opening trademark of his films) bringing us to a mysterious round tower whose dark interior is only to be speculated on. The next shot is again a tracking one - grass growing on pavement. Then we see forest made of unidentified human legs marching on it and then a tracking shot of real meadow. In French, 'les herbes folles' means a plant that grows in a place where it has no hope of developing—in a crack in a wall, or a ceiling, thus the title of the film which was based on novel L'Incident by contemporary French writer Christian Gailly. The incident from the novel's title was used to kick start the film's narrative following the theft of a purse; its subsequent recovery and l'amour fou this series of coincidences will lead to. After tracking anonymous feet marching on les herbes folles camera eventually focuses on one particular pair of legs confidently walking Paris streets in lacquered high heels. In the voice-over narration we are warned that: "She didn't have ordinary feet, so she went places she wouldn't go if she had ordinary feet." Enter Marguerite Muir, a dentist moonlighting as an aviatrix, who has decided to spoil herself with a new pair of shoes. Just after she finally manages to find a perfect pair (and thus a perfect match) some guy on roller-skates grabs her yellow purse which than flies through the air in slow motion remindful of a kite. At the same time we meet an elderly gentleman Georges Palet looking at the wrist watch in his comfortable study and concluding: „It will have to stop eventually, it is exhausted." Is Georges talking about himself or the watch, or the thief running away with the purse, or maybe the time itself? He continues the soliloquy by asking: "Why don't we just stop?" and in next shot he is already in the shop: "I need a new battery, don't we all need one?" Our hero will not only get the new battery for his watch but for his uneventful daily routine as well. While leaving the shopping centre he will happen to find a red wallet belonging to the lady with extraordinary pair of feet. Not being able to resist his curiosity, or just following the conduct code required by the situation, he thoroughly examines the content of the red wallet paying special attention to the photos of its red-haired owner. She seems happy on one, but sad and pensive on another Georges muses and we are forced to take his word on this since Resnais cunningly refuses to show us the photos themselves. Driving home he imagines all the possible outcomes of his meeting with the wallet's mysterious owner. This is shown in a wonderfully devised shot in which Georges is shown from the back driving his car while at the same time we see his face in the upper right corner of the screen. The structure of the shot masterly uses possibilities of film language to signalize we are now inhabiting character's private fantasies. And these are all about the prospect of Marguerite Muir being the long awaited battery for George's mundane existence. So our otherwise happily married hero decides he is madly in love with the dentist cum aviatrix who instead of a conventional hairdo sports wild red bush on her head. Why Marguerite? Is it out of pure boredom that he becomes unhealthily obsessed with her (at one point even slashing her tires) or because of the excitement provided by the emotional horrors of unrequited love? Georges seems certain of only one thing: "Thinking of her will be like thinking of nothing."
The key question of Wild Grass asked with Resnais' undeniable artistic mastery is why we find it so hard to connect romantic love to the domain of the real. In other words, how is it possible to always crave the impossible? The complex relation of the possible and impossible as reflected in the human experience is best told in the medium which makes fantasies come true through power of illusion. And isn't that exactly the thing we do by making ourselves believe in our irrational illusions. Film makes the impossible possible come to life turning our formless experience into an art form. Illusion ends where reality begins and you can't have one without the other. In words of film buff

Georges: “After the cinema, nothing surprises you. Everything is possible.” Everything taking place in Wild Grass could just as easy be the fantasy devised in our hero’s imagination in order to distract him before time finally stops. Our imagination just like cinema provides as with the impossible possible. We are being transported to a different world in which every story has the same closure: long kiss followed by loud music and caption The End. On screen desire and its object finally meet while in reality desire only makes us act as if the impossible is likely to become possible, wild grass likely to conquer the concrete, imagination surmount the facts. Those who have immortal longings are never one with reality finding rare satisfaction in fantasy world, both off and on screen. The hero of Resnais’ film spends all his evenings in the small cinema watching Grace Kelly flick in which she rests in safe arms of William Holden. Near the end of Wild Grass the same will happen to Georges himself – he will hold and kiss his perfect Miss Muir (his Miss Death) after which we see The End caption. His reality is our fantasy and since we are in a playfully philosophical film by Alain Resnais our dream time does not stop here. A plane ride sequence follows including all the turns and loops one can imagine. As time and love, every film has to come to an end. This beautiful fantasy concludes with a little girl’s not so innocent question: “Maman, when I'm a cat, will I be able to eat Cat Munchies?" Fin. You will, honey, you will.

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