

Ruins of the Great Beyond

It is a warm, sunny day in Florida as the camera lens moves into a seaside memorial service for some thirty five elderly people who one night mysteriously escaped from a Florida retirement home, boarded a boat, sailed off into a dense fog and were all lost at sea. Their children, grandchildren and friends all sit listening to the words of a priest as he laments their loss:

There can never be an explanation, in human terms, for the tragedy at sea which has taken the lives of these men and women in the beautiful and peaceful *sunset* of their lives. Do not fear, your loved ones are in safe-keeping. They have moved on to a higher expression of life. Not life as we know it, but in the Spirit-Everlasting. Our loved ones are in good hands, for now and forevermore. Join with me now in a moment of silent prayer.

As all begin their moment of silence one boy, a grandson of two who were lost, looks up to the sky, knowing a different truth in the words of the father. Grandma and Grandpa have joined an alien ship and its crew in an eternal exploration of the universe, never to return.

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The Windows by Stéphane Mallarmé

Weary of the dull hospital and rank fumes
Rising into the banal whiteness of the curtains
Toward the large bored crucifix of the empty wall,
The dying dissembler straightens his old spine

He drags himself and goes, less to warm his rotting body
Than to see the sunlight on the stones, to glue

The white hairs and bones of his gaunt face
To the windows that a clear sun-ray tries to bronze.

And his mouth, feverish and greedy for the blue azure,
As once when young it inhaled its treasure,
A virginal skin and of long ago! soils
With a long bitter kiss the tepid panes of gold.

Drunk, he lives, forgetting the horror of the holy oils,
The infusions, the clock, and the inflicted bed,
The cough; and when evening bleeds along the tiles,
His eye, on the horizon gorged with light,

Sees golden galleys, beautiful as swans
Sleeping on a river of crimson and of fragrance
Rocking the rich tawny flash of their lines
In a great apathy charged with remembrance!

Thus seized with disgust for man with his blunt soul,
Wallowing in contentment, where only his appetites
Eat, and who insists on fetching this filth
To present it to the woman suckling her little ones,

I flee and cling to all windows which open inside
From where one turns one's back to life, and, blessed,
In their glass, washed by eternal dews,
Gilded by the chaste morning of the Infinite

I look at myself and see me as an angel! and I die, and I love
— May the glass be art, may it be mysterious—
To be reborn, wearing my dream as a crown,
In the anterior sky where Beauty flowers!

But alas! Here-below is master: its obsession
Sickens me at times even in this safe shelter,
And the impure vomit of Stupidity
Forces me to stop up my nose before the azure

Is there a way, O Self who knows bitterness,
To break open the crystal insulted by the monster
And to escape with my two feathered wings
— At the risk of falling through eternity?[□]

□ Footnote source

In the beginning of the 1985 film *Cocoon* the camera takes us into a retirement community as we follow three friends, elderly gentlemen, just back from a swim in a nearby pool. As they greet each person they encounter we see the retirement village as a place mixed with happiness and sorrow, presented in the inevitable kitsch aesthetic form used to depict the elderly.

Florida, where this and many other such retirement communities are located, is the state into which a great many people of retirement age from the cold Northern parts of the United States move to live healthier and happier lives, bronzed by the sun. These “golden years,” however, as we have seen from Mallarmé’s relation to the sun, are often not what one imagines them to be. Walking through the retirement home with these men we see the *tristesse* of this *tropique*. It, like Florida as a whole, is filled with elders who have left their families and moved as much as two thousand kilometers from their children, grandchildren and former lives to live-out a youth which they have put off until their old age. But like Mallarmé’s man in the space of death, they wake one day only to find themselves still older, weaker, and often in poorer health than they were. This sunny paradise remains for them beyond a window which they cannot break through.

One day, however, things change. With the help of the “life force” of alien visitors, they awaken, go to these windows, and break through them, into this paradise of Florida, a new Florida, and into a second youth, finding in this state that fountain of youth for which Ponce de Leon had searched some four centuries earlier.

As the story develops, however, the windows close them in once again and they awake to find their only choice to break through is now to go into that great beyond of space, where they will *and* will never become “senile” and/or die.

In Mallarmé’s symbolism we are given a series of images which are best described as scenic reflections – here scenic in that they are a series of clear visual scenes, and reflections in that they happen before (or in) a window (which opens inward) *in* which the man in the space of death is reflected and *through* which he looks. But the poem is also lyrical; Mallarmé is the window which opens inside, it is he who gives the reflection and it is through him the old man (he himself) looks. In response to bourgeois life, to the everyday, a situation in which Mallarmé sees himself in the old and dying Other, he writes: “I flee and cling to all windows which open inside,” that is, he flees to his Self, but in which he is ever “vom Scheusal [der Anderen] so entweiht.” “Is there a way,” he asks, looking into the glass, “to break open the crystal” i.e. is there a way to force open, break through, his Self; to step out of this space of death and escape *in engelhaftige Seligkeit* ? Is there a way in which this death’s head, this monster of the Other, his Self, the man in the space of death, can become *ein Engels Antilitz* in the here and now, can dissemble in such a way so as to flee the space of death which is life? “*Je m’accroche à toutes les croisées* , I cling to windows which open inside, “dem Leben abgewand” he writes, expressing the essence-of-death-in-life to which symbolism always returns.

The poem begins: “*Las du triste du hôpital, et de l’encens fétid,*” “Weary of the *triste* [sorrowful, mournful, sad, melancholy, dreary] hospital, and the rank fumes.” It is in this space of *tristesse* that symbolism and semiotics remain here. In this fallen state, nature (or man) laments, and nature (or man) seeks to escape, here in flight, through symbolic transformation, or masking. In encountering symbolist verse one must see and speak a series of images which are not ones own; one must work through a language of symbols to approach oneself as Other; one must select from amongst them those which convey a knowing and familiar relation of the Other and which suggest the way *out of* one’s own fallen state, one’s *tristesse*, and *back into* a state of creation and the living word. The golden light of the great Other, the sun, through the window, tries to enlighten one, to make one like itself, “to bronze” one, to refill one with life, yet only through the reformulation of symbolism can one reveal, can the Other reveal its, his, or her Self in such a way. Only in this way will the sun receive that which it deserves in return.

The major themes in this poem are the major themes of symbolism. By “symbolism” I mean thinking and acting in terms of the “symbol” in general, at least as we see it since the Protestant reformation beginning with Martin Luther’s reformulation and incorporation of “the Symbol” (as his reformulation is referred to) of the body of Christ and of the Christian doctrine. In Mallarmé’s poem we find the important “symbolic” themes of salvation and redemption; a strong essence on feeling and knowledge leading to salvation through feelings; the theme of life as a death space; and, most importantly, the notion that in working the symbol through oneself (*und umgekehrt*) one can come to possess a Spirit-Everlasting and can gain knowledge to solve the riddles

of life with which one is afflicted. In all symbolism, one must also never forget, one encounters oneself in *encountering the symbolism of the Other*, whether in the stories and symbols of the Bible, or in the words of symbolist poetry, semiotics and/or linguistics, or ethnography. Thus it is through encountering the Other and working his, her or their symbols through oneself that one gains salvation from the death space that is life and comes to possess Spirit-Everlasting. In Mallarmé's old man in the space of death, we do in fact see a man (who is also the poet himself) encountering his own Self through the Other. This Other is an old man who is encountering himself in the glass of a window.

There is indeed a very strong element of the *ur*-ethnographic and historical linguistic in all nineteenth century symbolism, and this is especially evident in Mallarmé who quite often described the goal of his own work as giving “a purer meaning to the words of the tribe.” What this ‘giving of purer meaning’ indicates is that which is the essence of symbolism from the Reformation on. What this symbolism does is reformulates the old in terms of the new; it reformulates the Self in terms of the Other (as always), but does so in a new way.

In the film *Cocoon*, as in Mallarmé's poem, we can see such a reformulative encounter in which the old American tribal words “death,” and “senility” are, through the encounter with the Other, reformulated in terms of the new American tribal words involved in alien encounter and becoming alien. In this encounter is also perhaps the greatest reformulation of all—from the old tribal word “forever” to a new, “purer” understanding of this elusive concept.

In 1995 I moved to Miami with the goal of ethnographically researching and providing a purer meaning to my own tribal words “Alzheimer’s disease” and “senility.” From a previous study of West African and Diasporan ethnology and cosmology, combined with another study of similar elements in European ethnology and cosmology, I came to feel that “death,” “senility” (or “Alzheimer’s disease”), and “forever” were all reinscriptions of some previous, lost, tribal words which had earlier in history been expressed in terms of the relations between the living and the ancestors. The *problem* is that I came to see, as one would expect from an ethnographer, that death, senility and forever were not *purier* expressions of the words expressing the relationship between the living and the ancestors but rather *degraded* ones.

It was in working with those who were very old and have Alzheimer’s disease, and with those who care for them, that I came to hear of the film *Cocoon*. Those who worked and cared for them would urge me to rent this film because they thought that it expressed some very important truth about what it is like to be very old in America and, in particular, to confront and escape from the two most terrifying fates of being old there: senility and death. This film is, in a certain respect, as Mallarmé’s poem shows how all symbolism is, a (scene and image oriented) textual practice to show a means of escape from death, senility and eternity. It is, like all works of symbolism, not only a series of scenes telling a story, but also a controlled set of possibilities on how one encounters it and what one takes from it into one’s life and way of living. It reformulates and proscribes notions of death, senility and eternity for those who have not (at least

consciously) worked today's Christian symbolic inscriptions and proscriptions through themselves; for those who, in their encounter with older others, have come to *reject* today's tribal meanings of these terms and who seek new, purer, refinements of them from cinema, literature or some other pop-cultural medium.

Moving back to the story of the film, the swimming pool which the old friends use each day is actually inside a nearby seaside mansion which nobody lives in. Although using the pool is actually illegal, the men, being old and not having a pool of their own, take their chances. One day, however, approaching the pool, they are surprised to find the mansion in the process of being rented to group of young people. These renters, actually aliens disguised as strong young people, have secretly come to earth to rescue friends animatedly suspended in cocoons lying on the bottom of the ocean nearby, friends which they had left behind on a previous stay some ten thousand years before. Not knowing this group of young people to actually be aliens, the old men decide to use the pool each day while the young people are out at sea collecting their cocoons. Sneaking into the pool again for the first time since the aliens arrived, they discover three cocoons in the pool. Not caring about them, they dive into the pool and begin swimming only to feel an immediate sense of energy and life return to their old bodies.

Going home after this swim the men continue to be energized and later make passionate love to their wives for the first time in years. The next scene shows the wives sitting at a table together the next morning, each one smiling and holding in the secret of her night of passion. One woman amongst them, Rose, who has been afflicted with

Alzheimer's disease, looks at the other two and says, knowingly, "You're all off in *another world* or something."

As the men continue their secret trips to the pool of the cocoons all of their ailments begin to be cured—one of the men even being cured of cancer. Upon discovering this, they urge their friend, the husband of the woman with Alzheimer's disease, to take her to the pool so as to cure her, but he refuses. That same day the aliens return home early with more cocoons and, seeing them coming, the old men hide and observe only to discover that inside their human skins are other, alien bodies of pure, shining, energy. Then, when suddenly discovered by the aliens, they all run away. Eventually, after a few days of thought, the old men come back asking the aliens if they can use the pool again. The alien leader, seeing their need, takes pity on them and lets them use it. The next morning the men take their wives to pool and also try to take the woman with Alzheimer's disease but her husband stops them, telling them very angrily that they have "no right to cheat nature" and that what they are doing is "un-American." In great part the whole film turns around the illness of this woman and the conflict it causes.

A few days later rumors are spreading through the retirement home about the healing powers of the pool. In a riot of enthusiasm a crowd of elderly people invade the mansion grounds and pool, disturbing and breaking two cocoons, unknowingly killing the aliens inside. As a result of so many people being in the pool at once all the life force is

absorbed and the pool loses all of its power. Returning home the aliens discover their dead comrades and experience death for the first time.

In the next scene the woman with Alzheimer's disease is in bed for the evening, talking about old memories as her husband reads a book not listening to her dying words. Noticing her silence, he goes to her to find she has passed on. Then, in a sad and desperate attempt to revive her he carries her body to the pool only to find that the life force is gone. Crying over her lifeless body he begs her to forgive him for not allowing her to be taken to the pool earlier, while the alien leader looks on. Upon seeing this scene the alien leader forgets his anger over the death of his comrade and begins to pity these old people even more.

Nearing the end of the story, the old men come to apologize to the alien leader for draining the life force from the pool and for the death of the two aliens. When the aliens tell them that they must leave earth soon and that there is not enough time to rescue their other comrades still at the bottom of the ocean the old men offer to help them put the remaining alive cocoons back into the ocean where they will be safe until they can return and finish their work. Placing the cocoons back on the sea bottom, the alien leader decides to make the old men an offer, pitying them and their human mortality. 'Come with us.' he says, 'We've got what you want. You'll be students and teachers. We'll visit other civilizations.' The leader of the elderly group asks "Forever?" The alien smiles, "We don't know what forever means," he says.

To not know forever is to not know human life, to not remember. Yet the aliens seem to possess, in their eternal lives, an equally infinite amount of memory and feeling. This film is a study in transformation, a study in which the restricted economy of modern medicine, retirement services, and broken nuclear families is transcended and a general economy of erotic human expenditure is supposedly regained through alien/self rejuvenation and the spirit of exploration and discovery. What *Cocoon* gives us is a symbolically reformulated, folk, understanding of Alzheimer's disease.

In this story there is some sort of identity which forms between the aliens and the elderly. They re-enact the incident of the tree of knowledge, coming to know human death and, in turn, become able to reverse (or at least counteract) the Fall. There is an escape, join us, but, if you do, you "risk" (like Mallarmé) "*falling* through eternity." Each old face become an angel's countenance. It is in Walter Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama* that we see what may be the most illuminative discussion of these ideas to date.[□] In this work Benjamin offers a contrast between two basic modes of allegory.[□]

Allegory (Baroque)

Symbol/Allegory (Romantic)

Petrification (die Versteinerung)

Salvation, Redemption (die Erlösung)

Truth (die Wahrheit)

Knowledge - Feeling
(die Erkenntniss - spüren)

Essence (das Wesen)

Concept, Idea (der Begriff, die Idee)

Nature Morte (das Stilleben)
(Essence-of-Life-in-Death)

Frankenstein's Monster
(Essence-of-Death-in-Life)

[□] Footnote Origin

[□] Footnote where

Life = Dwelling in the Time of Death
Life
(das Leben = der Aufenthalt in der Zeit
des Sterbens)

Death = Dwelling in the Time of
Life
(der Tod = der Aufenthalt in der Zeit des
Lebens)

Death's Head as Goofy/Sad
(Todtenkopf als dämlich/traurig)

Death's Head as Angel's Countenance
(Todtenkopf als "Engels Antlitz")

Ambiguity (die Vieldeutigkeit)

Solvability (die Auflösbarkeit)

Drawing-out (ausziehen)
(Creation/a Creation)
(die Schöpfung/ein Geschöpf)

a Possession/Possession
(ein Besitz/die Besessenheit)

Story of One's Own

Story of *Another* System
of Conventions (das Herkommen, die
Kultur)
(or Convention of Expression)
(das Ausdrucksherkommen)

The *dénouement* of the film begins with one of the old men fishing with his grandson for the last time. He tells the boy that he is simply "going away" and will never return. 'Now don't tell your mother [the old man's daughter]' he says to the boy, 'because she'll think I'm crazy.' When asked where he is going the old man points to the sky saying 'up there.' To all who do not know of the aliens and their offer of eternal life exploring the universe, it seems that the old man is talking about senility and/or death, moving on to some other form of being or consciousness. While the daughter suspects something is wrong, the grandparents drive off to secretly board the boat which will rendezvous with the alien mother-ship that night. In a frantic last scene the aliens and 35 other elderly people from the community, with the police boats close behind in hot pursuit, disappear into a fog and are lifted up to the sound of angel voices into space.

Cocoon, like a great deal of science fiction in literature, fine art, film and music, proceeds via symbol in the way of Romanticism. To a great extent, it follows and helps sustain a certain cultural logic according to which the work of art is seen as resymbolization of currently existing symbols for the purposes of salvation, redemption, knowledge, reconceptualization, and re-ideation. This is most often done in response to the implicit need of solvability via the imitation or adoption of *another* (preferably archaic) people, culture, or system of conventions, which trivialize our own efforts in history but at the same time hold them as high utopian values. As Albert Speer designed buildings with beautiful ruins in mind while engaging in the worst of irresponsible political play, often too do those who ever look Janus-faced into the distant future and distant past at once while forming visions of salvation. As a strategy of resistance such resymbolization should be held up to the closest forms of critique. If space is the place, that place from which many of the oppressed come and to which they shall return, we must ask what kind of space/place it is. Being the distant past and the distant future at once it is not only the space of death, but of our own death, as well as the death of all we believe in, of the vanities of our age. To delight in this seems akin to a form of other-worldliness which the state and its forms of oppression all too often seem to hold most dear. Maybe the state needs this air of absurdity as a form of secret self-legitimization, to pose itself as a compromise, a steady state, a social contract of the eternal present, a present which is both a degradation of some remote past and degraded in the eyes of some future race. But this form of absurdity is forever unconscious, forever in the realm of symbol and dream calling us into interpretation and criticism, and leading us away from essence and critique. The present is a pane of glass, allowing us to see where we

are going and, in its reflection, where we have been. May this glass be art, says Mallarmé, may it be a mystery which one can break through and solve, but at what expense? When race politics are aestheticized in some great *Kristallnacht* of symbolism, the immediacy of the distant past and future comes upon us in a sense of liberation in which we no longer feel the burdens of present. In this breakthrough we enter the fall through eternity which Mallarmé, and all “symbolists,” fear but cannot help but desire. Our Janus-faces stare on as we fall both forward and backward into time and space rushing helplessly towards judgment, rushing towards anywhere but here and now, speeding towards and beyond forever, the angel of history alternately the angel of the future, and the ruins all our own.

Bibliography

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Mallarmé