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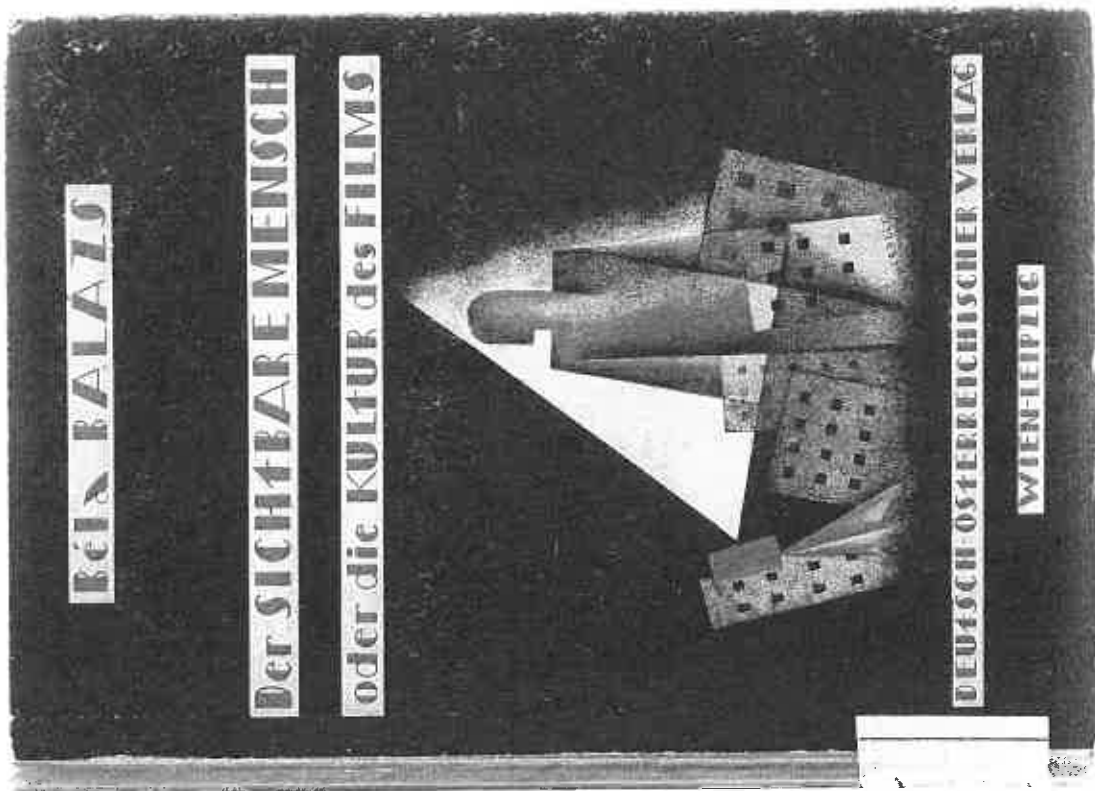
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Film, Folk, Class Béla Balázs on Spectatorship

Film reception and spectatorship are historical in a double sense; this is nowhere more apparent than in the study of silent cinema.¹ Their historical nature is evident in the changing composition of audiences (e.g., from working class to middle class), the changing look of venues (e.g., from nickelodeons to movie palaces), and the changing modes of address (e.g., from early cinema of attractions to classical narrative cinema). But both terms are also historical in a second sense, namely through the introduction in early theories of film of an ideal-typical audience that embodies then-contemporary dreams of social and political change and that enlists theories of spectatorship in larger debates about modern mass and class society. Much work has been done on the pathologies of spectatorship that portray early audiences as either threatened or threatening – that is, as either passive victims of movie addiction or willing participants in the forces of social leveling and moral decay. By contrast, much less has been written about the early utopias of film in which the conditions of movie-going prefigure a democratic and egalitarian society and in which the cognitive and emotional effects of spectatorship acquire the redemptive powers usually attributed to the (autonomous) work of art.

Precisely this belief in spectatorship as a utopian project, dialogic process, and mediating force distinguishes Béla Balázs's diverse writings and makes them ideally suited for a reconsideration of reception as a central category of early film theory. As the last of the classic German film theoreticians to be translated into English, Balázs has attracted growing interest both because of his emphasis on the body, appealing to Deleuzian

1 Both terms refer to the perceptual, cognitive, and affective processes organized by the cinema as an audio-visual technology, its modes of address and forms of attention, its forms of looking and desiring, and its social rituals and subject effects. Spectatorship usually refers to the individual experience of watching a movie and suggests visual pleasures and unconscious desires as well as textually-determined processes of ideological interpellation, whereas reception tends to cover both the institutional practices of film exhibition and the social aspects of movie-going, including the role of spectators as fans and consumers, the dissemination of filmic meanings into everyday life, and the function of cinema as a popular entertainment and public sphere. For an overview of theories of reception, see Staiger 2003. On spectatorship, see Mayne 1993 and Aaron 2007.



1 Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, Faksimilie des Titels der Originalausgabe von 1924.

readings of film, and because of his contribution to a different history of cinema and modernity that complicates the old binaries of mass culture vs. folk art, modernism vs. realism, regionalism vs. internationalism, and so forth.² Balázs is sometimes described as a proponent of camera aesthetics or actor's theory who wrote enthusiastically about the formal possibilities of the close-up and the beauty of the human face. At the same time, in recognition of his critique of film under capitalism and his praise for the medium's revolutionary potential, he has been called the first Marxist film theoretician. Yet measured against traditional categories of evaluation, Balázs's film theoretical writings from the Weimar period lack both the sociological dimensions introduced by Siegfried Kracauer and the formalist categories developed by Rudolf Arnheim. Locating his inquiries at the intersection between texts and contexts, Balázs focuses on the filmic experience of expressiveness and communicability and makes it the foundation of an anthropocentrically-based film theory, what Gertrud Koch calls his "anthropocentric aesthetics of expression" (1987, 171). Thus the conditions of individual spectatorship become the main conduit to a reception aesthetics centered on the cinema as a laboratory for new forms of sociability and collectivity. The notion of folklore, as examined by Hanno Loewy, is central to this process; but as I argue in the following, so is the notion of class.³

Inseparable from the historical conflicts and contradictions of his times, Balázs's reception aesthetics offers a compelling model of reconciliation (if not Hegelian sublation): between the aesthetic claims of film art and the political demands of the modern masses, and between the regressive qualities of film as modern folk art and its progressive tendencies as revolutionary mass medium. In fact, his entire theory of visual culture, including his celebration of physiognomy as the path to new forms of signification and communication, is based on very specific ideas about film reception and spectatorship. While his description of movie-going privileges the solitary experience of the fan-turned-critic – and that confirms loneliness as a central (and highly personal) motif in Balázs's work –, his

2 Reception, of course, also means scholarly reception, and Balázs is indeed experiencing a rediscovery – or first discovery, in the case of non-German (and non-Hungarian) scholarship. Parts of the ongoing English translation project overseen by Erica Carter have already been published (Carter 2007). A special section in *October* (115, 2006) included a few translations of shorter Balázs essays as well as two critical assessments (Loewy 2006 and Turvey 2006); similar initiatives are taking place in Italy (Quaresima 2008).

3 Hanno Loewy is the editor of several (re)editions of Balázs's essayistic, literary, and film theoretical writings and has played a major role in the German rediscovery of his film-theoretical and literary work, especially the relationship between film and fairy-tale (Loewy 2003; Balázs 2001a, b, c).

conception of visual culture invariably aims at an imaginary collective formed in, and through, the direct and almost physical experience of films. In the process, the audience comes to embody two radically different intellectual traditions and political agendas: the return to the premodern folk community of the past and the making of the classless society of the future.

The film critic as first spectator

A prolific, if not always successful writer, Balázs wrote fairytales, novellas, puppet plays, shadow plays, mystery plays, and opera libretti, including the libretto for Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*. An interest in older literary forms and popular diversions, a fascination with transitional states and threshold experiences, and an affinity for the experiences of regression found in childhood and dream align all of his creative endeavors with traditions presumably purged from modernity's enlightened worlds: namely the irrational, the mythological, the intuitive, and the non-linguistic and non-cognitive. This "eternal beginner" (Loewy 2003, 379) and perennial wanderer, who lived in Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, and Moscow, used the new mass medium as a model of multimediality and aesthetic hybridity in all of his creative projects: as a literary author with a penchant for suggestive visual motifs and compelling screen metaphors, as a film critic writing for daily newspapers and trade journals, and as a screenwriter whose credits include the controversial Georg Wilhelm Pabst adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *DIE 3-GROSCHEN-OPERA* (THE THREE PENNY OPERA, D 1931) and a contentious collaboration with Leni Riefenstahl on *DAS BLAUE LICHT* (THE BLUE LIGHT, D 1932).

Above all, Balázs was a busy critic who wrote countless film reviews and more general articles on technical, political, and artistic questions, first for the Viennese daily *Der Tag* (1922–26) and then, after his move to Berlin, for a wide range of publications, including the left-liberal journal *Weltbühne*, the KPD daily *Die rote Fahne*, and the trade publication *Die Filmtechnik*. With the reviewer casting himself in the role of the actual or ideal moviegoer, all of these texts presume a model of film reception and an economy of sensations, fantasies, and emotions that is central to his theoretical work. For the most part, Balázs shared the tastes of fellow Weimar film critics turned theoreticians such as Kracauer and Arnheim. He expressed enthusiastic praise for Charlie Chaplin and Asta Nielsen as personifications of a silent film aesthetic, a weakness for the simple pleasures of well-made genre films and big-budget Hollywood films, and a marked

dislike for the German quality film (e.g., МЕТРОПОЛИС, Fritz Lang, D 1927) and other forms of cultural pretension. His emphasis on emotions in the cinema made him less inclined toward the intellectual montage films of Sergei Eisenstein and Wsewolod Pudovkin but allowed him to assess contemporary film production outside the competing paradigms of normative aesthetics, media didacticism, and mass psychology. The development of critical categories out of the very personal experience of, quite literally, being moved by the movies is openly acknowledged in his frequent confessions of sadness or happiness and his rapture over the beauty of images, and faces in particular. Private but not solitary, all of these experiences informed his advocacy for the urban masses and their demand for quality entertainment; his insistence on technical and artistic quality as a prerequisite of modern folklore; and his belief in cinema as an antidote to modern alienation and social oppression.

Of special relevance to our discussions, all of Balázs's works aim at a reaffirmation of the utopian potential inherent in art: not in the terms established by the historical avant-garde (and its promise of a reconciliation of art and life) but through a tradition of the popular in which the audience is always also the (co-)producer of the work of art. Reception subsequently becomes the perceptual, cognitive, and affective paradigm through which the contradictions of modernism and modernity can be overcome. This preoccupation with mediation (or in-betweenness) and its relevance to an alternative definition of cinema and modernity is inextricably linked to Balázs's Central European biography: his cultural background as an educated, assimilated German Jew in Hungary under the conditions of Magyarization, conditions that turned "Herbert Bauer" into "Béla Balázs;" his intellectual formation under the influence of turn-of-the-century *Lebensphilosophie*, with Georg Simmel, Georg Lukács, Henri Bergson, and the members of the famous Sunday Circle as important interlocutors; his political position as a romantic anticapitalist against the backdrop of Hungarian nationalism and German leftwing politics; and his professional activities as an advocate of proletarian filmmaking and an employee of the film industry. These experiences produced the seemingly irreconcilable differences and continuing efforts at mediation between the discourses of folk and class that informed all of Balázs's political and intellectual commitments, including a brief involvement (together with Lukács) in the short-lived Revolutionary Governing Council under Béla Kun, when he was in charge of the People's Commissariat for Education, Section: Fairytales.

Not surprising given all of these disparate influences, the problem of incommensurability continues to haunt the scholarly reception of his work; hence David Bathrick's (Blochian) description of Balázs as a "non-

synchronous (*ungleichzeitig*) modernist," hence Malcolm Turvey's reflections on the theoretician's productive position between realist and modernist tendencies (Bathrick 1992; Turvey 2006).

The double meaning of *Einstellung*

To shed light on some of these issues from the side of reception, let us start with his two major works, *Der sichtbare Mensch* (Visible Man, 1924) and *Der Geist des Films* (The Spirit of Film, 1930). Part training manual in visual literacy, part confessions of a true cinephile, this culmination of years of watching and writing about movies represents the first attempt to explain the mass appeal of film through its unique position between tradition and modernity. To what degree reception plays a key role in establishing a dialogue can be seen already in the opening statement that "film is the folk art (*Volkskunst*) of our century [...] Not in the sense, unfortunately, that it arises out of the people's spirit (*Volksgeist*) but that the people's spirit arises out of it" (Balázs 2001a, 10). Like Kracauer in his 1926 essay, "Cult of Distraction," Balázs locates film's mass appeal in the challenges of modern urban life.

But unlike Kracauer, who reads the legitimate entertainment needs of the urban masses as part of a progressive, emancipatory mass culture, Balázs turns to older narrative traditions to shed light on film's redemptive qualities. His conclusion: "In the emotional life and fantasy life of the urban population, film has assumed the role previously played by myths, legends, and fairytales" (2001d, 11). Calling film a new revelation of humankind, he approaches its radical otherness from the side of reception, arguing that film, more than all other art forms, "is a social art form effectively created by the audience" (*ibid.*). Accordingly, film's main contribution to the shift from a literary print culture to a new/old visual culture lies in "making human beings visible again," which means: empowering them as the subjects *and* objects in the modern regimes of visibility and visibility. The creation of "the first international language, the language of facial expressions and body gestures" (*ibid.*, 22), for Balázs is predicated on the development of film as a dialogic process and symbolic act, the emphasis on expressive movement (*Ausdrucksbewegung*) in the making of meanings, and the recognition of physiognomy as a cognitive and aesthetic device (see Locatelli 1999).

Written in response to the new sound technology but clearly also influenced by the political radicalization of the late 1920s, *Der Geist des Films* approaches the question of reception and spectatorship from the perspec-

tive of class and discusses film more explicitly as a product of capitalist industry and ideology. Its critical categories emerge from the constitutive tension among the utopian potential of film as a modern folk art, its actual limitations under capitalist modes of production, and its future possibilities in a radical proletarian cinema. Praising film for having discovered "the suprapersonal face of the classes" (2001a, 25), Balázs uses the most popular and most influential films of his times to trace the making of class identity through narrative structures, visual styles, and generic conventions, on the one hand, and modes of spectatorship and conditions of reception, on the other. Under capitalist modes of production, he asserts, mainstream films address themselves above all to a petty bourgeois mentality. Equally removed from the redemptive force of folklore and the liberating gesture of revolution, this mentality finds expression in a highly personalized conception of social reality defined by individual agency, cult of family and private life, and a fatalistic view of history and politics.

However, once the real spirit of film has been liberated from the spirit of films (i.e., under capitalism), film is destined to realize its full potential as an entirely new way of seeing and gives rise to what Balázs, in typical universalizing prose, calls the world folk (*Weltfolk*), a conceptual hybrid of folk and proletariat (2001a, 167).⁴ The process is inextricably linked to his theorization of reception as the instrument of meaning production and subject formation. Reflecting on the double meaning of *Einstellung*, Balázs asserts: "Every image suggests a point-of-view (*Einstellung*), every point-of-view suggests a relationship, and not just a spatial one [...]. That is why every camera position stands for a particular human [i.e., ideological] position" (ibid., 30).⁵ But point-of-view is not just limited to formal strategies; it is inextricably linked to the development of a new sense organ, spectatorship, "that is more important than the aesthetic value of the individual works created because of these organs" (ibid., 10). Accordingly, the reception of film must be approached both through the ideological function of mainstream cinema and through the formative power of cinema as a technology of perception, experience, and community.

4 Elsewhere, Balázs calls for the production of films that represent the world-view of the revolutionary proletariat (1982a, 147-149). In an earlier article, he argues that even the capitalist, national film industry contributes to the making of a homogeneous world audience, an international "normal human type" (*Normalmenschen-Typus*) beyond the old divisions of race and class (1982b, 228-231).

5 Compare Balázs's earlier play on the double meaning of *Anschauung* as both a perception or impression of the world and a particular world view (*Weltanschauung*) throughout *Der sichtbare Mensch* (1982b).

Film as folklore

For Balázs, the fairytale is the literary genre most suited to reconcile the categories of folk and class within the terms of spectatorship and to provide a model both of community and communicability. His characterization of film as modern folklore and the comparison between film and fairytale suggest a notion of reception that stands in equal distance to the horror visions of visual pleasure (*Schaulust*) and movie addiction painted by the conservative cinema reformers of the 1910s and the scenarios of critical self-reflexivity promoted by a decidedly modernist cinema during the 1920s. In fact, it is by emulating the dialogic, open form of the fairytale that the experience of movie-going and its perceptual, cognitive, and affective processes can be translated into the poetics of film. Like dreams, fairytales remain obliged to an economy of desire based on a primary narcissism and an animistic view of the world. They insist on the power of the imagination and uphold the possibility of a redeemed world. Film and fairytale do not represent opposites of reality but a new aspect; for in the fantastic, Lukács reminds us, "everything is true and real, everything is equally true and equally real" (1978, 114; see Hofmannsthal 1978). The characteristics that for Balázs distinguish fairytales from other narrative forms are reproduced in film's conditions of individual spectatorship and collective reception. Moving beyond the formal affinities between film and folklore or folk song explored earlier by film critics Willy Haas and Willy Rath, Balázs focuses in particular on the fairytale's celebration of the fantastic and the wondrous, and its exploration of blurred boundaries, transitional stages, and threshold experiences. They are replicated in the filmic processes of identification, projection, and incorporation, with the new medium's fluidity in its approach to referentiality and positionality only matched by its openness toward hybrid identities and transgressive subjectivities.

Most importantly for Balázs, the Marxist, films, like fairytales, provide a "secularized mythology" (quoted by Loewy 2001a, 137) that upholds the promise of a better life in the insistence on the reality of wish fulfillment. In the motion-picture theater, this promise – and the underlying belief in social justice and economic equality – is realized through the dialogic structure inscribed in film's collective mode of reception. The relationship between storyteller and listeners, which is an essential part of the formal structure and social function of fairytales, is reproduced under the conditions of film spectatorship and gives rise to the active reading strategies defined today as preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings (Hall 1993). Thus the much-lamented crisis of storytelling, explicitly linked by Walter Benjamin to the arrival of the modern novel, is magically overcome through the

establishment of classical narrative cinema as the foundation of modern film poetics and mass entertainment (Benjamin 2002a).

By locating the social function of storytelling within the collective act of listening, fairytales served as an important model for Balázs's conceptualization of early cinema as a public sphere and allowed him to extend his dream of a universal (or international) visual culture into the realm of social and political practices. As a popular art form, film carried on the communal traditions evoked by Benjamin in his theoretical romance with the figure of the storyteller and acknowledged by Balázs in his deeply nostalgic engagement with folk culture. Yet as a modern mass medium, film also promised to compensate for the experience of fragmentation and shock and to contain the provocation of the apparatus through the pansymbolic universalism of physiognomy. For this reason, the characterization of film as folklore must be seen as an attempt to simultaneously validate and contain the medium's otherness within an established discursive paradigm, namely that of folk, and to utilize this tradition for the empowerment of the modern masses as film's designated object and subject, producer and consumer.

The contradictions within the concept of film folklore and its resultant ability to mediate (and incorporate) other differences cannot be explained without at least some acknowledgement of Balázs's extraterritorial position within early German film theory. His enthusiastic descriptions of spectatorship as a redemptive experience stand in sharp contrast to the prevailing lines of argumentation found in Germany during the 1910s and 1920s: the comparisons with literature and theater by the contributors to the cinema debate, the concerns about the psychological effects of filmic 'trash and smut' by the cinema reformers, and the first sociological and media didactical studies about movie audiences by Emilie Altenloh and others (Altenloh 1914; see Heller 1985; Hake 1993).

Balázs's diagnosis of the crisis of language aligned him with the Viennese modernism that produced Hugo von Hofmannsthal's reflections on film "as a substitute for dreams" (1978) but ultimately remained haunted by the aporias of bourgeois subjectivity. Balázs's anthropological perspective, and the focus on physiognomy as the language shared by films and their audiences, put him in opposition to the leftist materialist aesthetics identified with Sergei Eisenstein, Brecht, and Benjamin. And despite the growing influence of Marxist concepts, his thinking continued to reflect the unique configurations of turn-of-the-century thought that turned to holistic concepts such as life and experience to reclaim the unity of the subject against the shocks of modernity. Here important influences included the vitalist philosophy of Simmel and Bergson, Wilhelm Wundt's folk psychology, Wilhelm Worringer's work on abstraction and empathy, Johannes Volkelt's

writings on expressive movement (*Ausdrucksbewegung*), Rudolf Kassner's reflections on physiognomy, and, last but not least, the diagnosis of demystification, secularization, and alienation first presented by Lukács in his compelling definition of modernity as transcendental homelessness.

Film and fairytale

On the remaining pages, I propose to trace elements of Balázs's reception aesthetics in his own literary work and its sustained reflection on the spatial, cognitive, and psychological constellations of movie-viewing. My examples are taken from three very different texts: his autobiographical account of his youth, *Die Jugend eines Träumers* (The Youth of a Dreamer, 1947), his reworking of a Chinese fairytale in "Der Mantel des Kaisers" (The Emperor's Coat), and his contribution to the mountain drama genre, the above mentioned *DAS BLAUE LICHT*. The unique mixture of anti-modernism, irrationalism, and romantic anticapitalism in all three works culminates in numerous screen metaphors that visualize Balázs's dream of film as modern folklore and restore the unity of life through the filmic experience.

To what degree such scenarios reenact the affinities between film spectatorship and childhood can already be seen in Balázs's description in *Die Jugend eines Träumers* of the family maid lighting a fire in his bedroom in the early morning hours. While little Herbert is still lying in bed, she crouches in front of the fireplace, her profile clearly visible against the flames. In the child's version of Plato's allegory of the cave, awakening means imagining:

Und dann begann die große Schlacht an der Wand. Golden flackernd erschienen die ersten Lichtstreifen, sprangen kühn hervor, vereinigten sich, drangen tief in die schwarze Masse des Schattenheers. Kriegerisch knisterte und knackte es dazu. Mit Bangen und Hoffen folgte ich dem hin und her wogenden Kampf. Nie konnte das Licht ganz siegen, aber auch das Dunkel nicht. Ich meinte, dass dort die Entscheidung fallen müsse, von der mein Schicksal abhing. (Balázs 2001c, 29–30)⁶

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[“And then the big battle on the wall began. Flickering in golden hues, the first rays of light appeared, leaped up boldly, merged with each other, penetrated deeply into the massive blackness of the shadow world. There were warlike sounds of clicking and clacking. With fear and hope I followed the surging battle. Neither light nor darkness achieved decisive victory. I believe that the crucial decisions for my entire life were reached there.”] This autobiographical account also points to some personal motives of Balázs's engagement with film, including his sense of loneliness and the desire for

Whereas most film theorists evoke Plato's allegory as a comment on the forced passivity of film audiences, Balázs uses the shadow play to hold onto the promise of transitional moments and endless possibilities and to preserve the power of spectatorship in holding contradictory positions and accommodating opposing sensations. Just as the opposition between film as mimetic representation and illusionist construction is replaced by more complex and ambiguous constellations, the relationship between seeing, knowing, experiencing, and imagining is deliberately kept in suspension, giving rise to a surprisingly contemporary (i.e., phenomenological) conception of film reception and spectatorship.

The clearest indication of the dialogic nature of spectatorship in Balázs can be found in "Der Mantel des Kaisers," one of a group of Chinese *Kunstmärchen* (literary fairytales) written during his 1921/22 Viennese exile. On the surface concerned with the marriage between the Emperor Ming-Huang and the lovely Nüi-Fe, the fairytale offers a barely veiled allegory of cinema. Once again the point of departure is the experience of a separation, in this case the Empress's "dreaming soul," which makes it impossible for her to experience true closeness with her husband. To overcome this sense of separateness, she embroiders a beautiful coat for the Emperor with all the images (of wondrous mountains, rivers, gardens, and palaces) taken from her dreams and offers it to him as an expression of her love. Looking at the Emperor subsequently means reconciling the perspectives of (narcissistic) projection and (phantasmagoric) incorporation; however, the price to be paid for this experience of spiritual oneness is the renunciation of physical intimacy, a price the Emperor is willing to pay. In Balázs, the terms of spectatorship are clearly triangulated, with the Emperor, as the wearer of the coat, placed as the passive object of desire, with the Empress in the position of an active but removed spectator, and with the coat visualizing the medium's precarious position between the materiality of the image and the expressive movement of the soul. Her promise to him that "the longing of my soul will rest upon you with my gaze – forevermore" (Balázs 2001b, 7–8) captures the dynamics of closeness and distance organized by the cinema, including its promise of redemption and its illusion of reciprocity.

The empowering but also seductive nature of spectatorship is even more apparent in *DAS BLAUE LICHT* and its cautionary tale about a wondrous cave on Monte Cristallo. Once again, Balázs uses a folk tale, introduced in the framing story as an old book to a twentieth-century Alpine

community (2001c, 69), the origins of physiognomy in the magical thinking of early childhood (25), and his yearning for folk culture as a redemptive experience (234).

tourist couple, to reflect on the similarities between folk culture and film culture and to make that similarity the foundation of the latter's unique conditions of reception. These include the affinities of film spectatorship with the state of reduced consciousness in nighttime and dream; the identification of looking with sexual desire, with the spectacle clearly marked as female and/or feminizing; the presentation of the collective nature of film reception as both mass hypnosis and mass mobilization; and the power of the image as icon of modern alienation and religious revelation. All of these allegorical references come together in the tale's tragic ending in the cave on Monte Cristallo. Like the film projector, the rays of the full moon rising over the Dolomites illuminate the secret of this remote mountain cave and create a spectacle of crystalline beauty: an apparition of longing and desire. For the men in the valley, the fascination of the blue light proves irresistible – and, because of its remote location, often deadly. For the mysterious mountain girl who guards its secret, the crystal remains an object of uninterested aesthetic pleasure – until the masses from below find a way to mine these treasures for personal gain. The girl's sacrificial death in the end serves as a reminder of the possibility of aesthetic redemption and a warning about the dangers of confusing spiritual beauty with material want. Yet as the framing story confirms, this possibility can only be preserved through the integration of folk traditions into the conditions of modernity.

The conceptual tension between the discourses of folk and class and their mediation through reception aesthetics explains why Balázs's film theoretical work has often been dismissed as incoherent, inconsistent or compromised. Associated with the kind of marginalized or minoritarian sensibilities evoked by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their notion of minor literature, he neither contributed to a modernist theory of the filmic apparatus, as did Benjamin with his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility," nor did he partake in the conceptualization of a vernacular modernism initiated by Kracauer (see Kracauer 1995; Benjamin 2002b, 101–133). Balázs's stubborn insistence on an anthropocentric conception of cinema prevented the inclusion of his utopias of spectatorship in hegemonic conceptualizations of cinema and modernity. Whereas the rediscovery of the early Kracauer has been driven by the relevance of his Weimar writings for contemporary media concerns (e.g., his theorization of surface phenomena and the cult of distraction), Balázs's reflections on a new visual culture allow us today to consider the significance of film as the art of the twentieth century through the lens of such highly charged terms as folk, mass, and class. His reception aesthetics offer a historical model that resists the familiar binaries of early cinema studies

– passive vs. active, affirmative vs. resistant, bourgeois vs. proletarian, and so forth. In his dynamic model of film, folklore, and modernity, the cinema is both spectacular and narrative, exhibitionist and voyeuristic, regressive and conventional, but also empowering and revolutionary. Perhaps it is in the obsolescence of Balázs's utopias of spectatorship that we today can find answers for our own investments, as film fans and as film scholars, in the question of film reception and the social and political imaginaries outlined at the beginning of my essay.

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