

# Digital Satyr. Notes on Matthew Barney.

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*Matthew Barney's cycle of five films is intitled "Cremaster" – the word that defines the muscle that raises or lowers the testicles in response to fear or change in temperature. Barney also uses it as a synonym for the genital indiscernibility of the embryo during its first seven weeks, after which it begins to develop its male or female form.*

*All the films are produced on video and copied onto CD and into 35mm format for showing in standard cinemas. The Ludwig Museum in Cologne installed a cinema and the rest of the exhibition space was used to display the installations and props used in making the films.*

The symbolic figures and visual sequences that Barney introduces onto the screen are entirely original creations and show his preference for expressing himself through visual metaphor. It is an approach that challenges the idea of borrowing other people's words. In the last quarter of the 20th Century many commercial types of art relied heavily on quotations from literary texts. Barney uses storytelling as the basis for his metaphors. For a century and a half all visual art, in defending itself against the literary, had come to rely too much on the supremacy of form, and had exhausted itself in the process. Barney's work is simultaneously abstract and figurative. This is a combination that the Surrealists had also tried to achieve but from the beginning they lacked the experience to demonstrate the universal use of abstraction. The viewing of Barney's films requires receptive but passive perception – what Samuel Becket called a necromancy that regards every object as a mirror of the past. From this point of view his films can be linked to those of Kronenberg, Greenway, Reifentahl, Genet and Caro. Russian cinema could also add the name of Paradjanov and perhaps, to a lesser extent, that of Tarkovsky.

Although Barney draws on literary themes in the creation of his art, it would be a mistake to judge him on the basis of drama. Rather he is simulating the process of telling a story. His work could perhaps be seen as poetry except that a poem allows us to travel through time whereas his films do not. Barney lacks that dramatic imperative that helps us to remember what came first and what happened next. The rhythmic sequence of his film technique constantly shifts the scene of the action and generally speaking, the dramatic thread of his films is too loose. We cannot question the meaning of metaphors for they exist outside the realm of logic. This is why German art historians maintain that Barney's art has many images yet their message remains unclear.

Who then is Matthew Barney? Born in San Francisco in 1967, he graduated from Yale and moved to New York where he currently lives. He has worked in many media including video installations, films, sculpture, photographs, and sketches.

His first show was at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco in 1991 but the decisive influence on his reputation and career advancement was the New York Gallery of Barbara Gladstone. From 1992 onwards Barney began to introduce into his works the images of fantastic creatures that pre-figured his later cinema epics.

To form an impression of Barney's works, one needs to know the cultural context of his environment, ideas and sources. The American editors of the "Ctheory" magazine, Arthur and Marilouise Crocker in an article "The Matrix of Image" explain how bio-technology will broaden the spectrum of image formation – "our future is to disappear in images". These are not just external images on TV, cinema and digital photography. They are also the matrix images which are defined by the human frame, layers of images such as computer scanning, MRI, tomography and ultra-sound. The media of the future will be influenced by those invisible cameras – the eyes of scanners that can be heard, the unseen cameras of satellites.

Let us return to the film "Cremaster". The order in which the five films were created between 1994 and 2002 was not chronological. The first to be made were Nos. 1 and 4, followed by 5, 2 and finally 3. We will give a brief outline of the action and location of these stories and of the part played in them by Barney himself.

An analysis of these films reveals a series of signs and symbols taken from cosmology, alchemy and anatomy and ranging from Greek mythology to electronics. Many articles have been written on Barney and the catalogue accompanying the exhibition at the Ludwig Museum is a massive folio including a lexicon with an index of names, symbols and received myths.

In "Cremaster 1" the action takes place on two levels: in a football stadium with a surface of blue astroturf, and in two advertising balloons of the kind often seen hovering over sporting events. In the stadium, chorus girls dressed in white and orange with wide hooped skirts and white hats like a wavy drop of frozen cream, dance in chain formation making living patterns. At the same time, in the balloons four severe-looking air hostesses are sitting at oval tables piled high with bunches of grapes – black in one plane, white in the other. The immaculately dressed hostesses are bored and longing for touchdown. They pass the time smoking, adjusting their postures, glancing out of the windows and eating grapes. One of the protagonists finds herself under a table that is covered with a white cloth. She wears a skimpy light silk dress and dances slowly around the hollow table-leg, lying on her back. Then she makes a hole in the tablecloth with her hairpin, and surreptitiously steals some grapes, which magically roll through her body and pour onto the floor through a hole in the high heel of her mule. When they reach the floor, the grapes link together like necklaces and form regular, symmetrical, mirror-image patterns. The figures they form look like female genitalia, and replicating this, the chains of girls in the football stadium arrange themselves into identical biomorphic shapes. The film has no beginning and no resolution: the balloons will never land, the protagonist will go on building new figures out of the grapes, stretching slowly like a mollusc as she looks for a lipstick; the air hostesses will not break their silence, and the smiles of the girls in the stadium are frozen for eternity. Perhaps, the protagonist, hidden from these sculpture-like air hostesses, expresses their subconscious desires, their biological rhythms and their suppressed eroticism.

In “Cremaster 4” we find ourselves on the Isle of Man, known for its TT motorcycle races. One of the Celtic folk images of the island is the sacred Ram of Louth, a part played by Barney himself. His Ram is a red-haired Satyr in a Victorian white suit, tap-dancing in front of a mirror in a small white house hanging out over the water at the far end of a pier that reaches out into the sea. Three cube-shaped fairies with androgynous features surround the Satyr and prepare him for a journey, filling his pockets with handfuls of pearls. Simultaneously we hear the engines of two motorbikes, one blue, the other yellow, roaring off in opposite directions on the road around the island. The Satyr dances obliviously until the floor begins to grow thinner, and he finally falls down into an underwater cave formed of expanding and contracting masses of white sticky organic material. Along these Vaseline labyrinths the folkloric daemon is crawling towards his target fuelled by the same competitive spirit as the racers around the island. It doesn't matter what their objective is; one can feel that the characters, on their different levels, are experiencing the same emotions.

“Cremaster 5” is a lyric opera, a story of tragic romantic love in Budapest in the 19th Century. Ursula Anders plays the part of a melancholic, fateful and capricious queen, whose beloved magician ends his life by committing suicide. This part is taken by Barney. The drama takes place in the baroque Opera House in Budapest, on a chain bridge across the Danube, and in the Gellert saunas connected to the royal box, where the drowned hero re-appears in the guise of a Triton with silicone organs. Mermaids surround him. He wears coral boots with widening tops like gladioli or calla lilies, which reach to his waist and look like horny flesh. In the underground saunas, pearly balls are rolling on the surface of the water and, under the water, pale-beige mermaids, with tiny nets of capillaries visible through their skin, are swimming with flowers and ribbons in their hands. The camera reveals a panorama of Budapest covered in snow. The queen's beloved, the magician, dismounts from his beautiful, black horse on the bridge. His hands and feet are bound with huge, white plastic handcuffs, and wearing these encumbrances he jumps into the waters of the Danube as dawn is breaking. According to Barney, this is an act of emancipation, but it also replicates a performance of the master of “escapes” Harry Houdini, who was born in Budapest in 1874 under the name of Erick Weis. Fascinated by Houdini who was a master of escapology, Barney associates him with the study of the limits of the human body, intellectual power and the possibility of physical and spiritual renewal.

The next film in the sequence, “Cremaster 2”, can also be read on several levels. On the biological level this film illustrates Barney's idea of a rupture of harmony when an embryo begins to take its male or female form. On the metaphoric level it shows the regression of a man to the beehive. The central character is Garry Gilmore, a murderer sentenced to death. According to his personal mythology, he saw himself as a drone doomed to ruin. In his return to primitive forms of life Gilmore discovers the art of ‘release’ from present-day conditions and imagines a legend of Harry Houdini as his ancestor, regarding him as his grandfather, married to the Queen Bee. These mythological assumptions and twists are entirely individual to Barney and based on the exercise of his freewill. They owe nothing to the psychology of the detective story or documentary. The content of the film – the murder and the execution of Garry Gilmore – is stylized as a Gothic western.

He kills an attendant at a petrol station, a Mormon, by shooting him in the back of the head on the tiled floor of the wash room. The case was widely discussed in America in 1977, and the sentence might indeed have been changed, but Gilmore refused to appeal and chose instead to convert to the Mormon faith believing that acceptance of his execution would save his soul from perdition. The scene of the execution resembles a rodeo at the salt island in Idaho. Gilmore sits astride a bull and “rides into” death. These close-ups are intermixed with panoramic views of endless strange mountain landscapes, promising a final resolution within their severe reclusion. The bull that Gilmore rides to his death is a creature of fantasy : it looks like a living ceramic statue of an animal with a rugged crupper. It steps onto the matt surface of the salt bank, and this frosted glass is symbolic of an anima, the soul of the murderer. In the final part of the film Barney takes us back to the beginning of the 20th Century. In a hangar of the Columbian Industrial Exhibition, we see Gudiini who has just finished another performance. The Queen Bee comes up to him and seduces him thus becoming Gilmore’s grandmother. This is how “Cremaster 2” ends.

The final film in the sequence “Cremaster 3” lasts for three hours, divided into three parts of unequal length. For the first two hours we are watching the story of the construction of the famous Chrysler skyscraper in Manhattan at the end of the 1920s. The last hour is devoted to a performance at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum of Modern Art in New York. In “Cremaster 3” Barney shows us a vertical process of spiritual advancement by means of a fight between the Architect (Richard Serra) and his Apprentice (Barney). The Architect recreates a Masonic myth of the building of the Temple of Solomon and the discovery of how we should understand the Universe. According to the plot, the Apprentice undergoes a three-part process of initiation from the first to the highest grade of Masonic Master. The Prologue opens with a Celtic mythological scene: two savages: one cunning, the other stupid, are fighting, though seemingly in a spirit of optimism. A female figure appears from beneath the Earth as if summoned up from the depths of the distant past. (An explanatory to the scene tells us that this is Gilmore’s re-incarnation).

As if from nowhere, some boys appear and drag this living corpse into the central foyer of the skyscraper, where they leave it on the back seat of a black “Chrysler Imperial New-Yorker”. After that, in the same foyer five more long-nosed “Chrysler Crown Imperials” begin driving in circles until they reach the center; they then methodically ram an “Imperial New-Yorker” until it looks like a half-baked, misshapen fist-sized cabbage head. Meanwhile the Apprentice is moving between floors in a lift. One symbolic scene follows another. We watch a horse race in Saratoga where the horses start to decompose, their muzzles melting like blanc-mange. A Masonic candidate is progressing through his initiation. In the bar of the Chrysler club a group of officials decides his fate, juggling with the artifacts of Masonic ritual. These rituals become grotesque as we descend to the level of mere mechanics. Nowadays we might smile at the choreographic moves of a Greek soldier or the ritual of some exotic country might strike us as absurd. The Masonic ritual in the film is just as risible. In a dentist’s chair sits the Apprentice with missing teeth and bleeding gums. The Architect is implanting fragments of the battered car into his mouth. This disemboweling of a man symbolizes the destruction of a

lower level of the Ego in order to allow it to progress to a higher stage. Finally both Architect and Apprentice die: the building their proud initiative has completed proves stronger than human desires, and the Chrysler building destroys its makers.

Now that we know the content of "Cremaster", what are we to make of it? As we can see, every object that comes within the focus of Barney's lens seems to be surrounded by an invisible buffer zone. These objects seem to be wrapped in a kind of immunity; microcosms of elementary particles that are divided one from another. At the centre of Barney's art is the human body, combining mythology and technology. We may ask ourselves: are there any historically important heroes in Barney's works? Does our Age recognise such figures? The Middle Ages had the miraculous deeds of Saints, the Renaissance had the Bible and Classical antiquity. Our time is the age of the businessman. Barney takes his characters from the Pantheon of digital images that represent nothing but their own electronic essence. In his works we find an epic uniformity, a never-ending movement towards some objective. Nothing is clearly defined or attainable; rather there are opal lights reflecting on surfaces, high-molecular materials, and artificial or natural extensions of the human body. This leaves only one question. Where do these extensions take us?