

Matthew Barney: River of Fundament

The film RIVER OF FUNDAMENT Matthew Barney & Jonathan Bepler

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Taking the American landscape as its backdrop, the film RIVER OF FUNDAMENT is an epic story of regeneration and rebirth, set in three major American cities - Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York. Loosely based on Norman Mailer's 1983 novel "Ancient Evenings", the film follows the death and reincarnation of two principal characters, who take the form of Norman Mailer and an anthropomorphic automobile. A collaboration between visual artist Matthew Barney and Berlin-based American composer Jonathan Bepler, the film was conceived of as a contemporary opera that combines documentary footage of three live acts performed in outdoor environments in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York, with live-action cinema, largely set in a careful recreation of Mailer's Brooklyn brownstone apartment, where the late author's wake is underway.

In "Ancient Evenings", Mailer's protagonist, the nobleman Menenhetet I, uses magic and trickery in order to become reincarnated three times in the womb of his wife, who then becomes his mother. In each attempt at reincarnation, the undead must cross the river of feces to attain new life, with the goal of changing his corporeal status from that of nobleman to pharaoh. In his third and final attempt to transform, Menenhetet III becomes stuck in the womb, failing to reincarnate. In RIVER OF FUNDAMENT, Barney recasts "Norman" in the role of the protagonist, as he endures two rebirths, failing in the third, in hopes of attaining a higher status among the ancestry of Great American Letters. The looming spirit of Hemingway haunts Norman as he transitions from one body to the next.

The film unfolds in three parts, each of which includes one of the live acts that follow the narrative of the automobile. Aspects of the protagonist's will and desire for transformation are put into action in the outdoor productions that are performed in REN (Los Angeles, 2008), KHU (Detroit, 2010), and BA (New York City, 2013), involving the 1967 Chrysler Imperial from CREMASTER 3, a 1979 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am, and a 2001 Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor. Rivers and thoroughfares dominate the landscape, evoking the river of feces described in Mailer's novel. From the freeways of Los Angeles to the River Rouge and Detroit Rivers central to the automotive industry - and finally to New York

City's East River (which is host to a funereal barge ferrying the Mailer apartment) - manmade and natural arteries transport the protagonist on his journey from death to rebirth.

The central scene of RIVER OF FUNDAMENT is a wake for Norman Mailer, which is imagined as a lavish dinner party attended by New York's cultural literati, including Salman Rushdie, Liz Smith, Dick Cavett, Lawrence Weiner, and Larry Holmes, as well as by characters from "Ancient Evenings" and Barney's earlier film project the CREMASTER Cycle. The wake takes place inside the Mailer apartment, which in the final act of the film is ferried down the river. This central scene of the wake is intercut with scenes from the earlier performances and the story of Norman's journey along the river of fundament, which parallels that of the automobile and is populated by the incestuous characters detailed in the myth of Osiris. As the story of Norman's lives are recounted to him by an elder pharaoh, Norman's widow and wives contemplate the soul's journey as a series of recitatives, quoting passages from "Ancient Evenings", as well as American authors Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William S. Burroughs.

Score: Taking the central scene of the wake as its departure point, the film is intercut with musically driven performances that were filmed over the course of the past seven years under the broader aegis of the project. As in Bepler's previous explorations of sound as a vehicle to channel transgressive states, RIVER OF FUNDAMENT's musical component is an autonomous element that shapes the subliminal drives at play within the storyline.

Cast & Musicians: RIVER OF FUNDAMENT features a notable and diverse cast. Specialists from various industrial processes - including large-scale iron smelting, automobile demolition, and sulfur casting - join dramatic actors Ellen Burstyn, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Paul Giamatti, John Buffalo Mailer, and Elaine Stritch. In addition, the film features characters from Barney and Bepler's previous collaboration CREMASTER 3, including characters played by Barney and Aimee Mullins. Avant-garde vocalist Joan La Barbara, percussionist Milford Graves, baritones Eugene and Herbert Perry, funk/blues singer Belita Woods, singer Lila Downs, singer/songwriter Shara Worden, singer/actor Deborah Harry, composer/organist Dr. Lonnie Smith, and the Mystic River Singers (a Native American pow-wow group) lead an eclectic group of musicians.

Live Performances: Three site-specific performances, which were filmed before live audiences in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York, are an integral part of the film. During each live performance several sculptural pieces were created, including Barney's first major works produced from traditional sculptural and industrial metals such as iron, bronze, lead, and copper. The centerpiece of the three performances is the work DJED, which was created when twenty-five tons of molten iron were poured from five custom-built furnaces into an open, molded pit in the earth at the site of a derelict steel mill along the Detroit River.

Exhibition: DJED, now owned by Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel, will be exhibited alongside thirteen other sculptures, storyboards and works on paper from RIVER OF FUNDAMENT at Haus der Kunst in Munich from March 16 to August 17, 2014 in an exhibition curated by the museum's director Okwui Enwezor. The exhibition will occupy over 6,500 square feet of exhibition space. Concurrently, Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich will present the European premiere of RIVER OF FUNDAMENT on March 16th. The exhibition at Haus der Kunst and the film screening at the opera house will comprise the totality of the multi-part RIVER OF FUNDAMENT project. A modified version of the exhibition will travel to Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, Australia in late 2014.

World Tour: RIVER OF FUNDAMENT will premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on February 12th 2014. It will tour internationally to proscenium theaters through 2015. The tour is presented on behalf of the artist by the Manchester International Festival.