

FLICKER

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ABSTRACT. *Flicker*. Theodore Roszak's sophisticated and extreme long novel *Flicker*, published in 1991, resonates in many ways with the masterpieces of the cryptographic thriller tradition, like Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (1980) or Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* (2003). Its core lies in the conspiracy theories, due a fictional plot driven from the deep shadows of the world of cinematography. By doing some research, a UCLA film scholar comes across the films made by a rather allusive American director protected by a secret organization. The director's hidden biography takes us back to the interwar Germany, making the scholar to discover that his subject's films contain hidden messages that can be deciphered by means of a special device.

Keywords: *Theodore Roszak, Flicker, counterculture, the Sixties, cinema, cryptographic novels*

REZUMAT. *Sfârșitul lumii în alb și negru*. Sofisticatul și foarte lungul roman *Flicker* de Theodore Roszak (1991), publicat în românește sub titlul *Sfârșitul lumii în alb și negru*, seamănă în multe privințe cu operele de vârf ale tradiției ficționale criptografice, cum sunt *Numele trandafirului* al lui Umberto Eco (1980) sau *Codul lui Da Vinci* al lui Dan Brown (2003). Trăgându-și obârșia din vastul domeniu al practicilor conspirative, acțiunea lui ne poartă înspre lumea întunecată a cinematografeiei, prin intermediul unui cercetător care descoperă în mod accidental filmoteca unui nu foarte cunoscut regizor american, a cărui biografie secretă se prelungește până în Germania dintre cele două războaie mondiale. Adâncindu-și căutările, protagonistul înțelege că filmele produse de către regizor ascund mesaje secrete, care pot fi descifrate cu ajutorul unui decriptor special.

Cuvinte cheie: *Theodore Roszak, Flicker, contracultură, anii 1960, cinematografie, roman criptografic*

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Published in 1991, the cryptographic novel *Flicker* by Theodore Roszak traces, at its first level, the existential and intellectual links of the protagonist, Jonathan Gates with cinematography, and especially with the work of a B movies director named Max Castle. It is the history of an obsession with accidental causes, through which a rather superficial UCLA film scholar, Jonathan Gates, comes across the strange movies completed by the former German director Max von Kastell (a.k.a. Max Castell). Gates' further investigations lead him into the shadowy world of an esoteric conspiracy, orchestrated by the so-called Children of the Storm/Sturmweisen, a secret organization responsible for keeping alive the former Gnostic Cathars far beyond the beginning of the 20th century.

The scenario seems plausible within a cryptographic novel like *Flicker*, fueled by the Romantic treatment of the Cathars during the nineteenth century – especially by writers like Napoléon Peyrat, a priest who mythologized the Cathars by placing them rather conveniently at the roots of the Protestants –, but it is not endorsed by the scholars. Sean Martin (146), for example, asserts that the very last Cathars lived in Piedmont in the fourteenth century, coexisting with the fugitive Waldensians, chased by the Inquisition. At his turn Michael Frassetto (102) remarks that the Albigensian Crusade did not eradicate the heresy completely because the Cathars will disappear only during the fourteenth century, after enjoying one final success under the guidance of their last important missionary, the perfect or „Good Man”, Pierre Autier. Stating that the Cathars have indeed disappeared – „*le catharisme a disparu bel et bien en tant que religion organisée et pratiquée*” (171) –, but their spirit stayed alive, an interesting argument being the vivid emergence of Protestantism in the former areas inhabited by the Cathars (it is by no means a casual effect) Jean Markale (58) mentions as the last Cathar stronghold in the region the church of Sabarthès, and says that beyond the fourteenth century we could only speak about neo-Cathar resurrections – and here we have the premises of the fictional plot imagined by Theodore Roszak in *Flicker*.

Strategically, Jonathan Gates' first contact with Max Castle's cinematography is presented as an initiation rite equivalent to predestination, sustained by the biography of the protagonist. Born in 1939, the “annus mirabilis” (Roszak 9) of the Hollywood film industry, since many iconic movies were screened before the United States joined the WWII, Gates thinks his life in terms of cinematographic events, even his birth being connected to movies, because his mother felt the pains of the delivery while watching *Gone with the Wind* for the third time in a row. Later on Gates literally absorbs voraciously everything related to cinema, identifying himself with the iconic rebels of the 50s, Marlon Brando and James Dean.

The identification is projected onto the identity crisis of his generation, sterilized by the hypocrisy of the Eisenhower epoch and by the film censorship instilled by the National Legion of Decency. The crisis grows a “*glandular attraction*” (Roszak 15) in Gates towards the foreign films projected in underground cinemas, like *The Classic*, a filthy projection hall situated in the western part of Los Angeles, where Gates gets acquainted with the French New Wave Cinema (François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol) as well as the Italian Neo-realists (Luchino Visconti, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni).

To put it differently, the liberation of his sexuality from the taboos functions as a lure for Gates, and marks the first steps of his shadowy adventure which makes him enter the labyrinth which goes to Max Castle. Its first step is the dissociation between sexuality and sensuality, between the instinct and its artistic expression, which gives Gates the opportunity to unleash a virtually infinite intellectual game, through which the idealized body is transformed in the so-called “*non-corporal emblem*” (23).

Another initiator of Gates’ cinema-erotic education is Clarissa Swan (Clare), co-owner (with Don Sharkey) of *The Classic*, who will later become an acclaimed film critic. An antipode of the American standard female ideal, Clare has abandoned her career in a period when the interest in cinematography fell outside the academic curriculum, and refined her taste for films in Paris, at the Cinémathèque Française, where she also met Jean-Paul Sartre, sharing a few of his ideas. Another of her acquaintance is André Bazin², the founder of the prestigious *Cahiers du cinéma*. Clare becomes Gates’ mentor for several years, teaching him that the movies are “literature for the eyes”, “*much more than a bag of optical illusions*” (Roszak 57).

The history of the mechanisms that generate the optical illusions is taught to Jonathan Gates by the other owner of *The Classic*, Don Sharkey. With him we enter into the history of technicality facilitated by *Zoetrope*, one of the many pre-film animation devices that produce the illusion of motion by displaying a sequence of drawings or photographs by showing the progressive phases of that motion. According to Sharkey the inventors of this device are the “*Zoetrope Worshipers*” (Roszak 81) living on the “Biblical lands”. One of them is Louis Aimé Augustin LePrince, a French artist and the inventor of an early motion picture camera, who might have been the very first person who shot a moving picture sequence by using a single lens camera and a strip of (paper) film.

LePrince is interesting for our story because he disappears mysteriously in 1890, generating a lot of theories related to conspiracy, ranging from a perfect suicide to a murder caused by the battle for the innovation patent, because the

² Bazin's call for objective reality, deep focus, and lack of montage are linked to his belief that the interpretation of a film or scene should be left to the spectator.

other competitor was Edison's kinetograph. Another conspiracy inserted in Sharkey's history is related to a secret organization called *Oculus Dei*, interested in fighting the dark sides of evil promoted by the movies, but also responsible for equaling cinematographic illusion with black magic. The *Oculus Dei* was created in order to challenge the evil effects of the first moving projections done during the Middle Ages by the Templars and by the Knights of Malta – and that's why we have a very real device called "Maltese cross" inside the projector. Acknowledging the narcotic effect of the *laterna magica* (Roszak 84-85), Sharkey, who is influenced by a fanatic *Oculus Dei* Jesuit (the fictional assassin of Henri Langlois) whom he met in Paris, concludes that the "theology of cinematography" lies on four pillars: Good, Evil, Reality and Illusion (Roszak 84).

Clare's obsession for *Les Enfants du Paradis*, a film made by the French Marcel Carné during the German occupation, and bought at auction by the son of a former Nazi minister of culture, leads her to discover a mysterious film happily recuperated from an orphanage near Dessau. *Judas Jedermann* (*Judas Everyman*), was made in the 20s by the director Max von Kastell for UFA (Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft, the most renowned German film production company founded in 1917), being censored by the authorities.

The fictional von Kastell is presented as belonging to a group of German directors specialized in Gothic fantasies, a very popular genre in the years following WWI. The real masterpiece of the domain is *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) from 1920, a German silent horror film, directed by Robert Wiene, considered the quintessential work of German Expressionist cinema. In short, the film tells the story of an insane hypnotist who manipulate a somnambulist to commit murders. The script was inspired by various experiences from the lives of Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer (the writers), who were left distrustful of authority after their experiences with the military during WWI. In a book published in 1947, entitled *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Siegfried Kracauer confirms the exponential position of the film within the aesthetic of the period, also suggesting that there will be a link between the apolitical and escapist orientation of the Weimar-era cinema and the later Nazi totalitarianism. Introduced by Roszak into his novel, Kracauer's theories draw a connection between the Gothic German cinema saturated by vampires, werewolves, hypnotic malefic warlocks and the symptoms of evil promoted by the Nazi, Hitler presented as the greatest hypnotist being the ultimate reference of the link, due his hypnotic skills to turn the spectators into zombie assassins while watching the film.

Max von Kastell's promising career is chopped down by the Nazi censorship. His other film was *Simon the Magus*, which pours a secret Gnostic

ingredient into our novel, the fictional cast of this film, listed by Roszak in his text, including also Louise Brooks, one of the former idols of the silent movies, recuperated after the WW II, who was the real protagonist of Georg Wilhelm Pabst's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora's Box*), a film originating in Frank Wedekind's play *Erdgeist* (*Earth Spirit*). Moving to the US in 1926, along with an impressive group of prominent German film directors – the exodus is real –, von Kastell becomes Max Castle, being hired by MGM to direct *The Martyr*, a film dedicated to the early years of Christianity. The film, screened in a version wanted by the studio, but disapproved by Castle proved to be a disaster. Also a disaster will be Castle's attempt to screen Joseph Conrad's *Heart of the Darkness*. Despite Orson Welles' personal support (also fictionalized in *Flicker*) the production was labeled a "man-devouring film" (Roszak 341). Marginalized by the big studios and relegated to make B-movies productions, Castle will specialize himself in low budget horror movies, produced by obscure studios, sometimes even under pseudonyms, like Maurice Roche.

Additionally, Castle is presented as helping Orson Welles to produce *Citizen Kane* (1941), and he is, the same year, John Houston's counselor when making *The Maltese Falcon*, in an attempt to deepen the religious symbolism of the film, focused on the falcon and the Maltese cross. While the fictitious Houston was positive in asserting that Castle belonged to a bizarre religious sect similar to the Rosicrucian, Orson Welles acknowledged that each cinema project shared by Castle had its secret, shadowy dimension. The fictionalized Welles remarks that Castle has always been interested in the *Unenthüllte*, which is the unseen, something perceived only by the dark half of the mind. In a last attempt to turn Conrad's novel into a movie, Castle pays a trip to Zürich in 1941, to look for money at the headquarters of the Orphans of the Storm, but vanishes during his journey.

Many years later Jonathan Gates visits the Cathar orphanage in Zürich, located in a gruesome construction elevated by Zwingli and taken over in 1738 by the order which considers itself older than Catholicism. Dedicated to "the light that shines in the darkness and cannot be penetrated" (Roszak 476), the building bears the sign of the order, the Maltese cross, with an encircled logo superimposing the letters A and X. In the church Jonathan comes across a violent iconography, whose protagonists are the martyrs of the cult, but he also finds a version of the myth of the Gnostic Sophia, which is subtly replicated in Max Castle's movies, including the scenes shot in Mexico for *The Heart of the Darkness*. By analyzing the images, Gates realizes that the director has used in an artistic manner, which is in a sacrilegious way, the ritual of the Cathars, the dance of the black bird (the true divinity) and the dance of the white woman (Sophia), in order to impregnate the ritual of Conrad's primitives

with power and expressivity. He was therefore punished and exiled on a deserted island, while the rest of the world knows that he has died.

The words used by Roszak to describe his protagonist's initiation are boisterous. *The Classic*, where Gates gets firstly acquainted with Max Castle's films, expands and becomes a place full of initiatory attributes. Mixing symbols of ethereal purity and dark Gothic, it becomes "a *small, legendary temple of the arts*" (Roszak 7), a sacred, but hidden space of common urban geography and decrepitude, assimilated to a "*crypt*" (Roszak 7, 152). Gates' revealing experience is compared to the "*last supper*" (Roszak 8), to Christ's revelation in the catacombs, long before the sign of the cross and the Gospels become "*the guiding light of mankind*" (Roszak 7).

The narrator sees himself as a "*dumbfound neophyte wandering in the dark womb of a reformed belief*" (Roszak 7), where he finds something miraculous, undefined, alien and enigmatic. By doubling the identity, the already mentioned neophyte is associated to a "*searcher*" (Roszak 8-9), able to grasp the great mystery from within the decaying matter, to feel "*the taste of the Eucharist*" and, fully transformed, to herald the outer world "*the apocalyptic word*". As I've already said, the words are too big and too loud to describe the experience of a simple, more or less understood movie watching, but the author wants to suggest that at the beginning of the Sixties, when the protagonist gets acquainted with Castle's movies, it is especially his innocence and lack of theory that makes him the ideal candidate to promote the forgotten director's films, and to sense "*the vague and flickering revelation of the dark god whose scriptures tell the secret history of the cinematography*" (Roszak 9).

Jonathan Gates deepens himself into Castle's fragmentary universe, made of his interviews and of his written texts associated to *Judas Jedermann*. They reveal an ambivalent dichotomy *light vs. darkness*, because, on the one hand, it can be experienced directly, as the light which tears apart the total darkness of a cinema theater, and, on the other, it is the spiritual light of the cinema which molds our souls. According to Castle, the fictional director, the actors are always "*children of light*" (Roszak 61), luminescent entities capable of chasing away the dark sides of life, as well as the deep darkness of the underworld.

When watching *Judas Everyman* for the first time, Jonathan experiences an overwhelming terror, coming from repulsion mixed nevertheless with fascination, because the spectators are prompted to share Judah's guilt. Conceived as the drama of the psyche, Castle's movie places Judah into a modern frame, equaling Judah's guilt with any betrayal of a political fellow. By looking for the deepest message of the movie, Jonathan's subconscious

instinctively selects “unclean”, a hidden code which he later discovers in other movies directed by Castle too.

In this early phase of his research on Castle’s movies Gates misses another code, revealed to him by Shannon, an unsophisticated girl: “*It’s enough to put you off sex for the rest of your life*” (Roszak 172). Jonathan realizes that cinema could be the greatest conspiracy of all times, because Castle’s films actually implement the sterilizing theology of the Cathars, who believe that the world is a struggle between light and darkness, between spirit and flesh. Manichean at its core, the belief asserts the simultaneous existence of the God of the Light and of the God of the Darkness. Their conflict is the fight between the soul and the body, whose aim is to liberate the divine sparkle existing within the humans. A similar struggle can be found in the flicker of the films, transforming cinematography into a secret tool of religious recruitment.

Reshaped into a church which hosts and educates the orphans, the Cathars sneak hidden symbols and messages into their movies, in order to make people to take the way of the light, by restricting the voices of the flesh and of the sexuality, associated, in a pure Gnostic tradition, to the procreation of the evil side of our personality, namely the body. The restriction also explains why the Cathars rely on the orphans in order to recruit new members: it is because they provide a non-biological ascendance. The fanatic Castle had suggested that the habit of procreation did nothing else but “*nurtured the Devil*” (Roszak 446), as it happened with different political systems like the Nazis, who needed children and therefore promoted procreation.

Castle’s obsession with abstinence is also illustrated by the disciplined, yogic sexuality of his former lover, Olga Tell, cast in different sequences of the projected *Heart of Darkness*. She calls the free from procreation sexuality *bhoga*, which in Sanskrit (yogapedia.com) means indulgence, enjoyment, consumption, experience and sensual pleasure. In the yogic philosophy, *bhoga* is a term used in several ways. Some see *bhoga* as the enjoyment of earthly pleasure that prevents self-realization. Others see it as a type of pleasure without engagement, necessary for a healthy mind and body. An extreme example in the novel is the fictional Simon Dunkel’s film entitled *Deserters of Birth*, featuring fetuses reluctant to be born, which hide themselves instead deep in their mothers’ womb.

Step by step Jonathan deciphers the exact Manichean symbols hidden in Castle’s films, as well as a long series of premeditated subliminal symbols having a tremendous impact on the spectators. He is helped by Castle’s former camera man, Arnold (Zip) Lipsky, who owns several original versions of the films made by Castle (*Count Lazarus*, *Bloodhouse*, *Doctor Zombie*, *The Kiss of the Vampires*, *Sing Sing Shadows*, *Axis Agent*, *From Man to Monster*). Zip Lipsky

gives Jonathan a device called *sallyrand* (from the name of a burlesque dancer of the era), a technical tool capable to see and decipher the hidden layers of a given movie. The *sallyrand* is a stripper which unfolds a film, allowing the person who uses it to see what is behind the front image. (Jonathan discovers that a similar device is currently used by the members of the Children of the Storm, but they call it anamorphic multiphilter. The technicality of the name is explicable by the plain fact that the school produces technicians, not artists, Castle's artistry being conceded as a heresy by the order.

Nevertheless, from time to time the Church encourages the artistic fulfillment of one of its orphans with outstandingly high technical skills. One of them is the albino Simon Dunkle – the name is a fusion between Simon the Magus and the word *Dunkel* in German, meaning darkness, – who was educated in the Californian orphanage of the order, called Saint Jacques the Martyr, in order to honor the former Great Master Jacques de Molay. Dunkle is the author of several films dominated by primary violence and by the exacerbated lusts of flesh, promoted aesthetically by the so-called Morb Culture (a prolongation of the heavy metal), whose aim is to reject everything, be it present, past or future.

Simon belongs to a group of directors interested in overemphasizing sadism within their films, as it happened in the successful *Psycho* (1960), "*the beginning of a very bad thing*" (Roszak 536), according to Clare's profound diagnosis. This is the reason why Roszak picks an Alfred Hitchcock quote for the motto of his novel: "*The stronger the evil, the stronger the film*". Simon's nihilist message reaches its highest peak in a movie dedicated to a planetary Holocaust, "*the nothingness from the end of all nothingnesses*" (Roszak 591), which is also a tool to assert the director's Messianic power, attributed to him by the Order. The shadowy vision is validated by the Cathars who are convinced that our world is a hellish place, it belongs to the realms of the darkness, the quoted authority being the prophet Seth, the substitute son given to Adam by God in order to replace the killed Abel. Simon Dunkle shares the malefic ideology, thinks that the Devil, Ahriman, Satan and Yahweh are variations of the same dark god, that the body is the creation of the malefic god, that the black bird is the true god himself, and Castle is his prophet, because his films tell the truth unseen by the others.

Jonathan Gates first uses the *sallyrand* in order to decipher *Doctor Zombie*, in which a Führer, the leader of a plantation transforms the locals into zombies, but they are freed by a doctor who gives them a magical drink, an elixir. But they refuse to be free, which brings us to Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, who explains emergence of the modern totalitarian regimes by the fear of freedom experienced by their subjects. The *sallyrand* allows Gates to

watch the second layer of the film, the movie behind the movie, in which images taken from the Nazi marches are mixed with the murders of WWI and superimposed upon the scenes presenting the zombies attacking their doctor. According to the author, "*Castle sneaked into a horror film a peculiar interpretation of the zombie status. He focused on it as the symbol of the people who want to be slaves, a desire that generated catastrophes during his days*" (Roszak 225).

Jonathan's wish to pursue an academic career based on the interpretation of the coded movies comes true due to the Counterculture of the Sixties, to the Vietnam War, the protests of the so-called "Groucho-Marxists", and the emergence of Pop Art, especially of Andy Warhol's. In Clare's teachings, for instance, the films that feature heroes like James Dean or Marlon Brando promote the necessity of conflicting the generations, giving way to ideas related to the rejection of the fathers and of their values.

Nevertheless the times also bring forth academic competition. For Jonathan Gates the harshest academic challenge is represented by the French neuro-semiotician Victor Saint-Cyr, who asserts that movies are places for a programmed collective hypnosis, induced by the flickers of the light and by the codes of light that go on and off. According to one of Saint-Cyr's most brilliant students, Julien, the hypnosis is premeditated, induced by the wish to deepen collective alienation by reducing the analytical time gap allowing the spectators to move from one image to another. According to the fictitious researchers, the generation of the year 2000 will totally reduce the time gap between two images, losing freedom by dependency, which will lead the scientists to the conclusion that the experiment has been a success. Actually, the experiment is about programmed regression: the great majority of the population will regress to the state of the primates, while the revolutionary elite will put aside enough superior neurological material in order to reconstruct "*the positive and hypnotic side of the conscience*" (Roszak 404). And, of course, to rule over it.

Realizing that cinema discourse is permeated by different codes of conspiracy, Jonathan Gates becomes a target for the Cathars, is kidnapped and taken to a deserted island, where he meets the real Max Castle. There they replicate *The Classic Movie Theater* into a cave, killing their time by combining separate scenes taken from movies having no connection one with the other into sophisticated "aesthetic apocalypses". Detached from any responsibility, they become the new children of the Apocalypse, guided by Rhett Butler's replica from *Gone with the Wind*: "*Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.*"

Additionally, Jonathan sets up to write his memories, entitled *Flicker*. They will be about the mystique of conspiracy transmitted secretly by the movies to a happy child exiled together with his idol on a deserted island not found on the maps.

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