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Dehistoricizing Man(n): *El Cid* and Kracauer's Mass Ornament
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The numerous historical films that merely illustrate the past are attempts at deception according to their own terms. Since one always runs the danger, when picturing current events, of turning easily excitable masses against powerful institutions that are in fact often not appealing, one prefers to direct the camera towards a Middle Ages that the audience will find harmlessly edifying. The further back the story is situated historically, the more audacious filmmakers become. They will risk depicting a successful revolution in historical costumes in order to induce people to forget modern revolutions, and they are happy to satisfy the theoretical sense of justice by filming struggles for freedom that are long past.¹

Kracauer's analysis of the historical film culminates in a dismissal of historical, and thereby factual, efficacy. In this circumstance, the period piece can assume an earlier time frame as a departure from the burden of accuracy rather than an acceptance of it. Academic records indicate that *El Cid* (dir. Anthony Mann, 1961) ignores much of Rodrigo Díaz de Bivar's factual exploits as a warrior for hire, fighting more often for compensation than any religious or moral certitude. Why, then, was this character's story so appealing as a platform for a historical epic film? *El Cid's historical ambivalence suggests that it's story is more appropriately detailed for potential aesthetic achievement than realism.*

Kracauer begins describing the aesthetic condition of the mass ornament as a reference to the Tiller Girls, a performance group based on visual uniformity. He focuses on their performance of emulation and repetition, through which they are "no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics.... One need only glance at the screen to learn that the ornaments are composed of thousands of bodies, sexless bodies in bathing suits. The regularity of their patterns is cheered by the masses,

¹ This passage is taken from Siegfried Kracauer's essay "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies."

themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier.²” Already, there is an allegory bridging this performance art with the cinema. The masses are clearly the film’s intended audience gathered in a theater, which composes the modern medium for the cinematic ornament.

The film’s actors become the performative aspect of this equation, wherein their acting and involvement in a character role, no matter how important, is meager and unnecessary without the remainder of the operative whole. The film opens with a revelatory glance at this phenomenon, as Rodrigo carries a cross through an empty landscape. In retrospect, his great battles and leadership are abstract and ineffectual without the massive army of followers. As the stand-in Christ figure, he showcases the absence of the epic’s ornament: a solitary figure, symbolism without spectacle. The grand armies and battle sequences, far from accurate or historically meaningful, are a platform for the restaging of myth for the consumption of the audience. Along these lines, Kracauer states that “the human figure enlisted in the mass ornament has begun the exodus from lush organic splendor and the constitution of individuality toward the realm of anonymity to which it relinquishes itself when it stands in truth and when the knowledge radiating from the basis of the man dissolves the contours of visible natural form.” Rodrigo evolves from the stark individuality of that opening scene through a gauntlet of ideological takeovers, finally arriving at his own death for the cause of uniting the masses. This unity incorporates both the fictional re-emergence of Spanish sovereignty in the film and the symbolic finality of the plot,

² This quotation and all that follow are from Siegfried Kracauer’s essay “The Mass Ornament.”

which is to say that Rodrigo's death sums up the narrative concerns to efficiently end the movie.

The director of any epic intends on presenting a larger-than-life story in a longer format than the average film. This length necessitates a gradually apparent connection between the beginning and the end of the story, without which the plot could be split into any number of smaller movies. Rodrigo's first and last scenes associate his character with something beyond the historical personage that it was based on, and in fact something beyond concrete realism. For instance, his recovery of the destroyed church's cross bears no immediate relief to the burden of plot; it only serves to re-signify the character, any attempt of which begins to unravel the true and more logical past. The last scene also departs not only from authentic reality, but also from genuine possibility. Kracauer elaborates on this trope, saying that "these practices...seek to recapture just what the mass ornament had happily left behind...that is, exalting the body by assigning it meanings which emanate from it and may indeed be spiritual but which do not contain the slightest trace of reason." This point furthers Mann's obvious preference for aesthetics, favoring spiritual signification over reasoning. Rodrigo's final ride through battle parades a dead man through an entire advancing army and evokes a legendary or mythic achievement that flies in the face of common sense.

Kracauer's final clarification of the modern mass ornament clarifies its application to Mann's film.

Enterprises that ignore our historical context and attempt to reconstruct a form of state, a community, a mode of artistic

creation that depends upon a type of man who has already been impugned by contemporary thinking—a type of man by who by all rights no longer exists—such enterprises do not transcend the mass ornament's empty and superficial shallowness but flee from its reality.

The mass ornament of *El Cid* depends upon Rodrigo's character, who by the end of the film no longer exists to the audience. It becomes clear in retrospect that the history has been taken for a ride, that the character's signification, upon which the entire story is based, are emptied during the last scene. Mann's epic retraces the authentic story through a funhouse mirror, with the goal of depicting the grand aesthetic of Medieval Spanish warfare shrouded in a false history: "through its confrontation of truth, in fairy tales."