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## **The Lost City of Cecil B. DeMille: Political Antiquity in Classical Hollywood**

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Since Hegel, architecture has been understood in dialectical conjunction with its human antipode, the illusive world spirit. Here the philosopher speculates with reference to Ancient Egypt: “whole nations have been able to express their religion and their deepest needs no otherwise than by building, or at least in the main in some constructional way.” [1] The pyramids and the sphinx and the columns, Hegel claimed, “which have been able to brave all periods and revolutions and which excite our wonder and astonishment as well by their fantastic appearance as by their colossal massiveness, either bear this character entirely or else are for the most part its product.” [2] But these two entities – spirit and architecture, animate lifeworlds and their built environment – are phenomenally inseparable: they are always going to be folded together by mutual contingency. Perhaps that is why subsequent thinkers have affirmed that, when understood in unison, these two phenomena ultimately provide a materialist allegory for historical experience. This is what Walter Benjamin suggested when, upon visiting Naples with Asja Lācis in 1925, he was given cause to believe that it is not those otherwise privileged forms such as language, art, or technology but architecture that serves as “the most binding part of the communal rhythm.” [3] Or, to cite the foremost theorist of both space and rhythm, it was Henri Lefebvre who observed that architecture “appears as the intangible outcome of history, society and culture, all of which are supposedly combined within it.” [4]

If architecture is something like the bassline to world spirit, an inseparable part of our shared cadence in a given space or time, then its allegory of historical *experience* will nevertheless occlude the ongoing and incomplete *process* of modernity. That is to say, the major dialectic of architecture and spirit suggests an ancillary or minor dialectic, of historical reflexivity and mediating consciousness, which asks us to position our critical thought not only in relation to architecture as an evolving concept but also in relation to the

multiplicity of experiences into which that first dialectic resolves: to appreciate the relationship between our own historical moment and the distinctly premodern creations of Egypt and Naples and so on. It is here that cinema becomes important, as both a technological adjunct to architecture and as a mediating force. Recall that Stanley Cavell holds cinema and architecture on parity for their investments in technology as simultaneously functional and aesthetic; that, like the industrially as well as artistically marvellous cinema, the attraction of architecture is “not merely an intellectual appeal to the engineers who participate in its invention and construction, but an appeal as spectacle and drama to those who watch its structures being raised or felled, or their sites excavated.” [5] What’s more, cinema is not just analogous to architecture; cinema also serves as the principle medium in which architecture’s spectacle and drama, its entanglement with world spirit, can play out in real time. That is to say, the cinema is where we go to witness the rise and fall of bygone civilizations. My hope for what follows is that this ontological heteronomy of both architecture and cinema, as media that exist between the realms of material expediency and an artistic ideal, will ultimately enable some effective mediation between the two.

That latter dialectic will be the focus of this essay, whose first part theorizes the function of ancient architecture as mediated into modern consciousness by Hollywood cinema during the 1920s and thereabouts. There and then, I submit, architecture served a decidedly political function. Gilles Deleuze once said that “American cinema constantly shoots and reshoots a single fundamental film, which is the birth of a nation-civilization,” and he makes this claim with reference to the ancient world and that world’s architectural vistas in the cinema of D. W. Griffith. [6] While we are going to follow Deleuze in looking at the emergence of this geopolitical or even economic dimension of architecture as it first appeared in specifically Hollywood cinema, we should also bear in mind his gesture toward that cinema’s historical contemporary. “It,” he says of Hollywood, “has in common with the Soviet cinema the belief in a finality of universal history; here the blossoming of the American nation, there the advent of the proletariat.” [7] During the 1920s, in the wake of the Russian Revolution and its founding of the socialist state, history was said to have become (in the words of Ernst Bloch) “a polyrhythmic and multi-spatial entity,” stretching collective thought and praxis between primeval hearts of darkness, the modern megalopolis, and utopian dreamscapes. [8] My thesis is that when cinema represents architecture and especially ancient architecture it does so in ways that speak to history in this sense: as an incomplete project, the outcome of which remains up for grabs. Provided all of this is true, we should therefore be able to determine a film’s political tendency from its architecture.

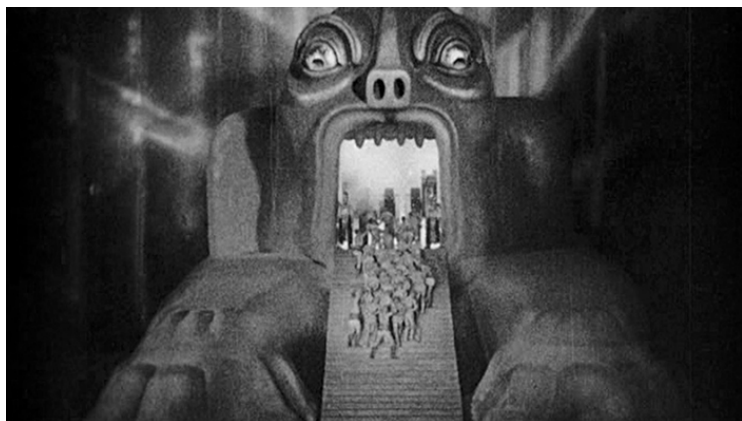
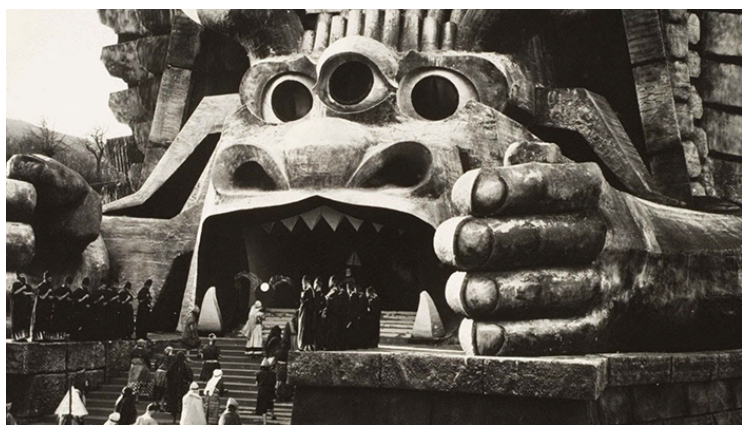
While part one of this essay develops that thesis in relation to a sampling of well-known films, part two then looks to an exemplary filmmaker, Cecil B. DeMille, for a practical demonstration of architecture’s political valences in commercial cinema. In addition to cinematic exemplarity (a “certain style of cinema – DeMille’s roughly – thus comes to stand for the American cinema itself,” reflected Michael Wood [9]) this filmmaker is singled out here for at least two reasons. First: one of his directorial signatures is massive and elaborate architectural *mise en scène*, with which he frequently uses the ancient world as a staging ground for epic melodrama. Second: because he was an incorrigible reactionary – a right-wing republican who claimed to have nothing but contempt for the Left – the vehemence of which necessitated a critical interest in political history and especially in the relationships between capitalist and socialist states. “No more conservative or patriarchal figure existed in Hollywood,” wrote Edward G. Robinson of DeMille, “no one more opposed to communism or any permutation or combination thereof.” [10] Despite or even because of this opposition, he nevertheless found value in the Russian Revolution. “Like not a few American artists of the 1930s,” writes Thomas Doherty, “DeMille looked to the Soviet Union as a lodestar, expressing his sympathy with the Bolshevik experiment and his opinion that capitalism was doomed.” [11] Moreover, on the few occasions when DeMille expressed a muted enthusiasm for the socialist state – including in his diary from a trip to the USSR in 1931 – he would turn to the language of space and architecture in such a way that will help us apprehend a relationship between the content of his films and their historical present. “Russia offers many and marvellous opportunities,” he would write with an oblique nod to urban planning. “It packs more drama per square inch than can be found in a square mile elsewhere.” [12] Together, then,



the two parts of this essay outline an argument for a radical political construal of architecture as the material cognate not only to competing modes of production but also to their social structures and lived experience, together providing a theory and example of what architecture means within the art of filmmaking.

### 1. *The Ancients and the Moderns*

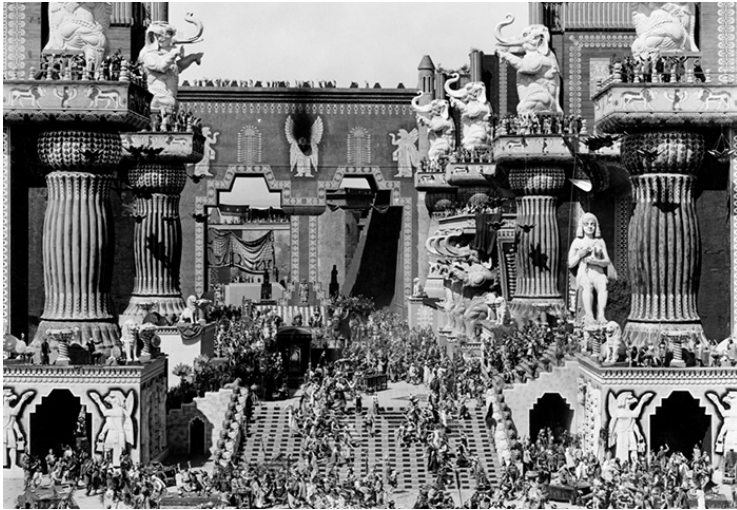
There is only one reference to architecture in *The Communist Manifesto*. When narrating the long revolution of the bourgeoisie, capitalism's bursting asunder humankind's primitive fetters, Marx and Engels refer back to the monuments of the ancient world and to the medieval inheritor of that world's legacy. "It," they say of the bourgeoisie, "has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades." [13] As we know, the awesome markers of premodern civilization have long been surpassed by a different kind of architecture – by a built environment wholly adapted to the accumulation of wealth and to the reproduction of capitalism's social order. "The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns," we read. "It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life." [14] From the Egyptian pyramids and the Roman aqueducts, which together emphasise the agrarian economy and the religious mysticism of the ancient world, through to our own cities of eternal newness, where everything and everyone are freely bought and sold: such is the architectural form of capitalist modernity, how the human ecosphere has been littered by concrete sediment from the immemorial currents of political history.



It is precisely this, the actualization of history through architecture, which we encounter in so much early cinema – from the Molochian temples of Giovanni Pastrone and Fritz Lang to their American counterparts, which we are about to explore. Indeed, cinema produces its own shrines to bourgeois wonder, lionizing its advanced position in capitalist modernity against earlier modes of production, and it does so as a disjunctive synthesis of form and content. Our method for thinking about this synthesis originates with Fredric Jameson's illustrious law of cinematic remediation, "that whenever other media appear within film, their deeper function is to set off and demonstrate the latter's ontological primacy." [15] This rule is



redoubled in the case of ancient architecture, itself a signifying medium, the cinematic representation of which forces a convergence between two irreconcilable social orders: one primitive, the other modern. When cinema shows us capitalism's ossified prehistory, delivering atavistic spectacles that are brought to life only by the modern magic of industrial technology, it does so in such a way as to assert the "ontological primacy" of its medium and of that medium's lifeworld. The ancient past is returned by way of the form more closely linked to mechanical reproduction and therefore to capitalism than any to have come before. This is the political meaning of what Vivian Sobchack has termed the "surge and splendor" of historical epics. [16]



The synthesis of ancient content and modern form is what we encounter at its most astonishing in D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* from 1916, which stages the fall of Babylonia on a truly epic scale. The grammar of the establishing shots is perfectly calibrated to accentuate the sheer enormity of the great wall and the gates to the city, which dwarf not only the hundreds of human extras but also the gargantuan elephants on which many ride and the scattered palm trees that offer little shade. Irises open from off-centre, as though to simulate the human eye's inability to perceive the architectural whole, and combine with slow pans and lateral tracking shots that together emphasise a sense of awe. The most overwhelming sequence of all, however, comes during a feast held in the great court of the Babylonian palace, a venue advertised by the intertitles as opening onto a mile-long hall. The courtyard – flanked by elephant-topped pillars, by statues of ancient idols and winged divinities, and draped in carpets and banners – comprises a large flight of steps leading up to a double-archway. The steps and the archway supply the shots with a depth to match their apparent verticality. Moreover, the scene is densely populated: every horizontal surface, from the foot of the steps to the pinnacles of the archway and the pillars, is lined with spectators; and, whilst the tribute-bearers on the steps move as one in synchronicity, the elegance of their choreography contrasts with the streaming

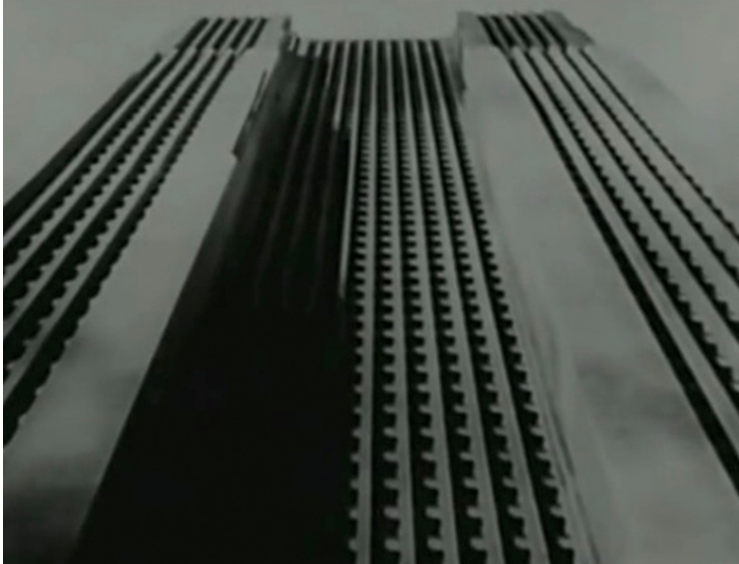
multitudes converging from the shot's rear. At first, the size and detail of all this give the impression of a tableau, like an architectural painting. The apparent stillness, however, is offset by movement, and especially by the movement of the camera, which dollies down to the lower steps, briefly settling between the choreographed ascent of the tribute-bearers, before it swoops forward and cranes back up to its initial vantage. The enormity of the *mise en scène* is only made navigable by the motility of the camera. And so it is that the ancient content is rendered animate, brought to life, by the modern form.

The canonical reading of this aesthetic belongs to Miriam Hansen, from whom Jameson takes his law of remediation. "These traveling shots," she writes, "invite the viewer to marvel at the sights displayed, like a visitor to a world's fair or an archaeological site, but never without cicerone; they draw attention to their own virtuosity as much as they display the monumental dimensions of the set." [17] Moreover, that this architectural wonder is introduced under the sign of its own annihilation – that Babylonia is, as Griffith shows, a fallen empire – accentuates the self-perceived distance between Hollywood in 1916 and the "ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions" of a pre-capitalist lifeworld. Indeed, the Babylon sequence is used as a fable to illustrate the film's titular concept as a primitive social disease, wherein the great city's demise is the result of two warring superstitions. "It converts the relative anarchy of the marketplace into a hierarchy of present over past," reflects Hansen. "Just as the still-competing precursors are neutralized into pastness, reduced to a depository of styles that are passé, this move too involves the transformation of the present into a mythical presence." [18] The filmic medium thus performs a self-mythologizing role in the passage from ancient civilization through capitalist modernity. As a thoroughly technological exhibition, as a cinema of attraction, the medium announces historical mastery. It sings a visual hymn to the present, which – as other episodes in this omnibus film make perfectly clear – is the time of industrial capitalism.



While Griffith's film is only the most striking iteration of that disjunctive synthesis of ancient content and modern form, we see a similar dynamic elsewhere in early Hollywood – charmingly in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), as romance in multiple iterations of *Cleopatra* (1912 and 1917), and heroically in *Ben Hur* (1925). And if indeed capitalism's mastery of its prehistory is playing out as a relationship between the industrial modernity of film and the superannuated lifeworld of its architectural *mise en scène*, then that dialectic is still with us today in post-filmic cinema, where it is now working in overdrive. Witness, for example, Michael Bay's second *Transformers* blockbuster, from 2009. Toward the film's narrative climax, an enormous CGI robot grapples up the Great Pyramid of Giza, which is said to encompass some sort of alien technology, and begins tearing off chunks of granite and limestone, inhaling them into the whirring vortex of its body. All of this acquires an even more immense scale when reframed in low angles, from the

perspective of the one human to observe the show of force up close at the pyramid's base. John Turturro's character, a renegade scientist responsible for calling in a long-distance artillery strike, supplies the scene with its punch-line. "I am directly below," he pauses, looking overhead at two swinging balls of titanium, "the enemy's scrotum." The sublime force of capitalism is personified as a techno-industrial apex predator and is shown laying waste to its slave-built ancestry. This is how capitalism thinks itself by way of its privileged medium: as the awe-inspiringly virile embodiment of what Joseph Schumpeter would have called "creative destruction," here equipped with a pair of wrecking-balls for bollocks.



When early Hollywood screens the outcome of capitalist modernity – not just “what man’s activity can bring about,” but also what such activity has become for the enormous cities and their urban populace – it does so by using the same kinds of imagery we see in its depictions of the ancient world. Grandiose long shots, impressive and oppressive verticality, swooping cameras, and architecture made to appear as titanic as it is functional: a familiar kind of monumentalism. That is what we encounter upon first entering New York City in the opening minutes of King Vidor’s *The Crowd*, from 1928. After a series of cross-faded images establish the city’s morning bustle – “I had not thought death had undone so many,” reflected T. S. Eliot on a similar street scene – we are given a vertiginously rotating shot taken from the sidewalk and gazing up at an enormous building, two conjoined towers, rendered as a silhouette that blocks the sun. After a cut, the camera assumes its position between these towers, and slowly tilts skyward to observe hundreds of uniform windows stretching beyond visibility. Another subtle cut and the camera, still tilted upward, cranes to the top of the building and locates the one open window, onto which it slowly zooms. Crossfade



to the interior, where the camera floats diagonally across a sea of evenly spaced office desks all populated by anonymous workers, one of whom is singled out, as though randomly, and is framed in medium. A close-up on the desk plaque emphasises the de-individuation of this workforce and the non-heroic status of our protagonist: “John Sims, 137.” Welcome to capitalism, population everyone, or just about. What a sequence like this potentially encodes, not just narratively but in the aesthetic itself, is that “the same society which developed human productive energies to unimaginable proportions has chained them to conditions of production imposed upon them,” as Theodor Adorno reflected in 1965. “This fundamental contradiction,” he suggests, “is most clearly visible in architecture.” [19] So the pyramids of Egypt and the gardens of Babylon find their successor in the modern city’s densely populated skyscrapers, all of which are constructed by and for the extraction of value from living labor power – once as chattel but now as wage slavery. Here the functionalism of the skyscraper, as combined with the monumentality of the shooting style, might be read as another affirmation of capitalism’s purpose-built environment. And yet, if the hypothesis of remediation is as true here as it is when talking about ancient architecture, then something more critical is sure to be at play. Like in Egypt and Babylon, the social relation this architecture sustains is built upon a contradiction and, as such, it will invite supersession in the form of a negative counterforce.

Jean Baudrillard opened his infamous contribution to a debate on the meaning of September 11 by reminding the audience that the “attacks also concern architecture,” and that the political values for which the Twin Towers stood were entangled with their material design. They are to capitalist modernity what the ancient monuments were to their pharaonic and oligarchic rulers, and we find that reflected in Baudrillard’s choice of comparative referents. [20] “The effigy of the system,” he insists, “was no longer the obelisk and the pyramid, but the punch card and the statistical graph. This architectural graphism is the embodiment of a system that is no longer competitive, but digital and countable, and from which competition has disappeared in favour of networks and monopoly.” [21] To level the modern legacy of the obelisk and the pyramid is to therefore register, in an act of singular violence, the ultimately symbolic connection between capitalist architecture and capitalism itself. “In terms of collective drama,” he claims, “we can say that the horror for the 4,000 victims of dying in those towers was inseparable from the horror of living in them – the horror of living and working in sarcophagi of concrete and steel.” [22] If, however, that symbolic connection is the truth of a terrorist act, related arguments can be made about the shared desires that inform cinematic destruction:

The countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy, which they clearly attempt to exorcize with image, drowning out the whole thing with special effects. But the universal attraction they exert, which is on par with pornography, shows that acting-out is never very far away, the impulse to reject any system growing all the stronger as it approaches perfection or omnipotence. [23]

While such a claim is clearly drawing on the post-70s explosion of cinematic annihilation, such spectacles were nothing new to that period, and neither is the apparent desire to obliterate the architectural embodiments of capitalism. This tendency – described by Alain Badiou as “the formalized spectacle of destruction, of cataclysm, a sort of Late Roman Empire consummation of murder, cruelty, and catastrophe” [24] – originates on the historical terrain we are presently exploring.



The spectacular disaster movie, wedded as it is to an array of special effects far more impressive than the camera's motility as seen with Griffith and Vidor, was inaugurated in 1933 by Felix E. Feist's *Deluge*, an RKO production that depicts the razing of New York City by earthquake and tidal wave (and which issues the blueprint for Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004). In a montage that still retains its capacity to amaze, skyscrapers buckle and disintegrate, exploding from the ground up, with the metropolis appearing to collapse in on itself, and this is all before heaving walls of water surge through the wreckage and wash away any remaining vestige of life. At its most symbolically potent, in a kind of world-historic castration metaphor, the scene shows us the Empire State Building: framed at a distance and with the other midtown skyscrapers barely reaching above its foot, the building fractures and crumples from near its base, falling backwards before the surrounding architecture even begins to tremble. For all this spectacular destruction, the film regrettably takes its political fantasy – the destruction of capital – and filters it through natural phenomena. What the insurers would call an act of God obviates against political indemnity. Nevertheless, Baudrillard's thesis on architecture and capitalism seems as accurate for this as it does for what took place in 2001, that an assault against the architectural form of capital in its own heartland appears as symbolically consonant with the political desire for the destruction of capital and its social order. And yet, the question remains: in what historical force or entity might we source such an assault and all that it represents?

This anti-capitalist counterforce enjoys no clearer historical frame than in the closing moments of *King Kong*, also released by RKO in 1933. After escaping the Broadway theatre in which he had been chained

and shackled, “Kong, the Eighth Wonder of the World,” kidnaps the Fay Wray and with her enclosed firmly in paw he ascends the Empire State Building. The building is shown in profile, as an impossibly tall spire that looms over the city haze below, with the comparatively diminutive figure of Kong climbing its peak. The scene cuts between three shot types: that extreme long-shot of the building in profile; a much closer long-shot looking down over the great ape’s figure to glimpse the Chrysler Building off in the background; and medium close-ups of the fighter pilots charged with bringing the monster down. The film ends with Kong falling to his death, having been shot full of lead by the circling biplanes, and it plays the moment for maximum pathos. “But this tragic film,” Max Page has reminded us, “is also a powerful celebration of the city. The Empire State Building in *King Kong* is, by its analogy to a mountain peak in the eyes of Kong, raised to the level of natural wonder – it is our mountaintop.” [25] This is a strange twist on the law of remediation. While, in Griffith’s film, we saw the technologically mediated staging and subsequent destruction of the ancient city; and while, with Vidor, the modern city was framed in a visual language more fitting of the ancient monuments and with that came a desire for historical negation; here, still in the modern metropolis and atop a monument to economic function, we appear to have come full circle: cinema conjures up the very antithesis to its modernity, the primal ape, against which to affirm the medium’s own technological prowess. And yet, the relationship between the ancient and the modern, the primitive and the new, is in confusion. Kong is, of course, a technological marvel, built from sculpture and robotics and brought to life through stop-motion; he is, paradoxically, a figure of modernity, but a figure that wants to leap the historical present. Even if Kong’s rampage is ended by human technology, namely an airplane piloted by the two directors – Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack – what remains insoluble here and central to the film’s political outlook is the sheer joy of that technologically animate lifeform ascending the monument, as Julian Murphet has phrased it, and “simply being, with the whole world of capital spread out before him like a broken dream.” [26]



There is an obvious and allegorical argument to be made about Kong as the embodiment of a righteously vengeful underclass, but the scene’s architecture helps sharpen that argument into something more precise. While *King Kong* opened in New York theatres on 2 March 1933, two months later on May 5, Moscow announced the winner of the architectural design competition for the Palace of the Soviets. “If,” as Susan



Buck-Morss has done for us, “one compares the drawing of the final variant of the Palace, which incorporated Stalin’s significant modifications, with a widely distributed publicity poster for *King Kong* (not a still, incidentally, from the film), there is no denying it: In both form and content, the images are strikingly similar.” [27] Indeed, the winning design shares its architectonic with those images of Kong’s skyward ascent, on the spire of the Empire State Building. The mediations between these two images are well known and legion. A brief timeline should render what Buck-Morss described as “faint possibilities of actual connection” with sufficient clarity. The competition that yielded the design had been going since 1931 and enjoyed global publicity; the Empire State Building was also completed in 1931; Stalin famously held affection for Hollywood cinema, even while most American films were denied circulation in the USSR. “It is,” however, “likely that both the Palace designers and the moviemakers were influenced by another source, for which there were several possibilities,” which might group together, simply, as the revolutionary spirit of socialism. [28] Even without any sort causal relation between the Soviet design and the American film, we can see plainly that architecture has once again grounded film’s relationship with history – this time, however, gesturing not only to an ancient past, in the monumental building itself, but also to an alternative modernity or an immanent future. Kong is the living beast of socialism; a proletarian dictatorship made of mechanized fur and flesh.

What we have seen so far in this sampling of films is cinema positioning itself squarely between two phases of history, between two different modes of production, each of which articulated as a possible destination for humankind. Cinema appears to be thinking itself not only as part of capitalism but more specifically as the capitalist interregnum between a feudal or absolutist past and a potentially communist future – and it is doing so, here, by way of architecture. Of course, this is just as much about the reality of what Leon Trotsky famously theorized as “uneven and combined development” as it is about the sequential stages of history – the idea that, as Ruth Jennison has helpfully summarized, “at any given time multiple eras might be sharing the same moment competitively or synergistically, their layers and imbrications generated by an uneven temporal and spatial landscape.” [29] In this view of modernity (to which we will soon return), architecture and its cinematic remediation appear as emblematic of historical admixture or, more accurately, of historical contradiction. It grounds cinema within a distinct historical time and space, equipping life with a social order, a logic, or what Benjamin, Bloch, and Lefebvre would have called a rhythm – be that the rhythm of an ancient slave cast, a modern working class, or some future vanguard. Architecture is history, history registers as architecture, and so it is with architecture that cinema determines its relationship to history, thought and felt simultaneously as both actuality and immanence.

## 2. DeMille’s *Commandments*

Cecil B. DeMille once described the Russian Revolution using an atavistic metaphor that recalls – or, rather, pre-empts – the final minutes of *King Kong*. He referred to the event as “a great prehistoric beast shaking off its shackles and stepping into civilization.” [30] The gargantuan imagery is appropriate, considering that, perhaps more so than any of his contemporaries, DeMille dedicated himself to staging “the birth of a nation-civilization” against the kind of monumental architecture we have encountered in the films of Griffith and Vidor. My sense is that these two things – a political interest in the socialist state and an aesthetic commitment to monumental architecture – are not as separate as they might otherwise appear, and neither does their conjunction produce a filmic echo of the director’s political beliefs. The orthodox political reading of DeMille’s cinema is to approach his films from the 1920s and 30s retroactively, observing them through a lens burnished with Cold War ideology. Indeed, DeMille’s establishment of the Foundation for Political Freedom and his work for the House Un-American Activities Committee have been documented at length. As Tony Shaw puts it, using an appropriately religious image, DeMille was not only at the centre of Hollywood’s anti-communist turn; he also “tried harder than arguably any other filmmaker to ‘sanctify’ liberal capitalism.” [31] While this is an accurate assessment, and one that is shared by many, I want to suggest that by paying close attention to the architecture and its historical dialectic we will gain a deeper insight into the more unstable and evolving political commitments that suffused DeMille’s filmic output over a period of decades. Like geopolitical and economic history, where

capitalism's supposed victory over its socialist antithesis was never a foregone conclusion but the cause of irresolvable antagonism, in DeMille's cinema the political destination of humankind was a matter for dispute.

Here we will be especially interested in DeMille's two versions of *The Ten Commandments*, first released in 1923 and then remade for 1956, and in what transpired between them. Siegfried Kracauer is lucid on the ideological transformations of American cinema between the inter- and post-war periods from which these films emerged, and chiefly on the waning of enthusiasm for the previously allied socialist state. "Gone are the brave Russian women fighters, the happy villagers, and the democratic allures of the rulers," he would reflect in 1949. "In their places sombre bureaucrats, counterparts of the Nazis, spread an atmosphere of oppression." [32] My hypothesis is that, in DeMille's cinema, the rightward shift in politics is as responsive to intrinsic causality as it is to the broader historical currents running through the national culture during these decades. Here is DeMille's statement of artistic intent for the 1956 remake:

For more than twenty years, and increasingly in the years since World War II, people had been writing to me from all over the world, urging that I make *The Ten Commandments* again. The world needs a reminder, they said of the Law of God; and it was evident in at least some of the letters that the world's awful experience of totalitarianism, fascist and communist, had made many thoughtful people realize anew that the Law of God is the essential bedrock of human freedom. [33]

Wanting emphasis here is not the obvious fact that DeMille remade a film in response to an historical climate of totalitarianism but, rather, that he remade this specific film and not one of his other comparable efforts in relation to a specific type of political schism – in other words, that something about the earlier version of *The Ten Commandments* spoke exemplarily and maybe even prophetically to the perceived strength of the socialist state. From the standpoint of style, these two films are worlds apart: one is shot in black-and-white, punctuated by descriptive intertitles, and reaches its technological apotheosis in a singularly spectacular sequence utilizing double-exposures and Technicolor Process 2; the other, by contrast, is shot entirely in VistaVision and Technicolor, is an all-speaking feature, and it deploys a far more advanced array of special effects, including blue screen and rear projection. What both films share, in addition to the Biblical source of their narrative, is an affection for the monumental architecture of Ancient Egypt and with that comes the dialectic we have seen at work elsewhere in Hollywood, bringing with it a politically determining response to modernity.





The 1923 film's epigraph, from the Book of Exodus, grounds the subsequent narrative and its imagery in the concrete realm of architecture. Or, more specifically, it grounds the film's architecture on a bedrock of human labor. "And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigor, and they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of serve in the field." This introduces a scene of slave labor, thus reframing the ancient world not as a pre-made monument but as the outcome of immeasurable toil and suffering. Indeed, the opening shot looks up, from the standpoint of a slave, at a burly taskmaster preparing to crack a whip, his size only accentuated by the architectural background of which he appears as an almost natural extension: the blank gaze of the sphinx, and behind it enormous sandstone ramparts. He cracks the whip, and the camera cuts to approximate his perspective, looking down on an army of men and women pulling five long ropes, which – the subsequent shot reveals – drag the sphinx and the slavedriver together on one platform. This shot is taken from further away, showing the sphinx's slow progression from right to left across the foreground, and it presents the humans as relatively diminutive in comparison to the temple walls and hulking colossi behind them. "The building of such works," claimed Hegel, "exhausts the entire life and activity of nations at certain times." [34] And that is exactly what we are seeing here, communal rhythms pushed to the breaking point of exhaustion, then beyond that point and toward acts of minor insurgency and finally to a kind of revolution (or at least a mass strike), when Moses leads the Israelites away from Egypt.

What, then, is the political orientation of this film's revolutionary action? The story of Moses freeing the Israelites has been tied to conceptions of revolutionary history on either side of the political spectrum, issuing from Paul Robeson on the Left through Hitler on the Right. Marx himself conscripted Moses as an agent for satire, using the prophet's name to ventriloquize the lessons of Adam Smith: "Accumulate, accumulate! This is Moses and the Prophets!" [35] There is, however, a peculiar irony that makes this ancient story pertinent to the early 1920s and to the socialist state. In Russia, the Bolsheviks had not waged war against advanced bourgeois capitalism; they had, instead, fought to depose the more primitive forces of absolutism, mounting what Trotsky described as an assault on "the ancient capital of the Russian Tsars." [36] Illustrative here is Trotsky's influential formulation of uneven and combined development, a concept developed to explain this anachronism:

The law of combined development reveals itself most indubitably, however, in the

history and character of Russian industry. Arising late, Russian industry did not repeat the development of the advanced countries, but inserted itself into this development, adapting their latest achievements to its own backwardness. Just as the economic evolution of Russia as a whole skipped over the epoch of craft-guilds and manufacture, so also the separate branches of industry made a series of special leaps over technical productive stages that had been measured in the West by decades. [37]

From a strictly materialist standpoint, the Egypt of Moses is much closer in economic and governmental



structure to Tsarist Russia than it is to the view of modern America to which it is compared in the film's second half. If one were to imagine the Russian Revolution in a different time or place, Ancient Egypt would be a much better staging ground than the modern metropolis – and perhaps this is why DeMille's critical fortunes would overlap with those of the leading Soviet filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein.



William Faulkner, famously enlisted as the great Hollywood novelist, would see no problem amending one of his images from the late 1930s, changing the description of a Utah coal mine from “a scene like something out of a DeMille Dante,” so that in the published text DeMille's name would be deleted and replaced with “Eisenstein.” [38] Indeed, that DeMille and Eisenstein seem interchangeable makes good sense, given their shared predilection for teeming crowds and mass spectacle. Similarly, though in a claim that would be ironized by the remake just three years later, in 1953 André Bazin lamented the passing of those epic films once staged by DeMille. “Nowadays,” he mused, “we must go to Russia (and perhaps India) to find a film with an enormous crowd of walk-ons, or a movie that is produced regardless of cost.” [39] It is safe enough to assume that Bazin was thinking of Eisenstein when making this remark given the remarkable similarities between these two filmmakers, not only in spectacular staging and political subtext, but also on account of some more direct visual correspondences. For instance, take the scene in which Moses first leads the Israelites into the desert, when their procession is shown in a long shot that captures the size of their collective, swarming black against the white sands, with their trail curving away from enormous gates. As far as staging goes, and in the positioning of a revolutionary mass against monumental architecture, this shot is remarkably similar to the widely-circulated photographs of the re-enactment of the assault on the Winter Palace in 1920 (an event that would later be re-re-enacted for Eisenstein's 1927 film about the Russian Revolution, who later still would re-adapt the re-re-enacted imagery for the great procession in the

first part of *Ivan the Terrible*, from 1945). While DeMille appears to have influenced Eisenstein, and while the two filmmakers certainly share aesthetic predilections, to say that Soviet cinema had some impact on DeMille before 1923 would nevertheless be fallacious because anachronistic. Nevertheless, these associations between DeMille and Eisenstein are only the point of departure for a more speculative relationship between Hollywood and Moscow.



Recall that, in Jameson's law of remediation, what we are seeing is the disjunctive synthesis of ancient content and modern form in order to promote the ontological primacy of cinema over its objects of representation. In *The Ten Commandments*, it is not just that ancient architecture might serve as an analogue for Tsarism. More pointedly, in moments of technical virtuosity, when the special effects are at their most astonishing, cinematic form subtly calls upon a distinctly socialist modernity, as exemplified by the Russian Revolution. The film's technological power is on display nowhere more ostentatiously than with the parting of the Red Sea. To create this scene, DeMille's technical director Roy Pomeroy engineered a double-exposure system that allowed Moses and the Israelites to cross the seafloor between two walls of cascading gelatine. While this gives water an architectural quality – reimagining the sea as a concrete substance that can be sculpted into vistas that simultaneously resemble and surpass the *mise en scène* from the opening scene – it also allows for an excellent visual pun in which the pharaonic chariots, themselves a symbol of aristocratic might, are swallowed whole by a body of water whose name accords with the color-coded description of socialists as red. Similar things can be said about when Moses descends from Mount Sinai with the eponymous commandments. He communicates with the Israelites via a sermon whose medium is not simply the prophet's voice – indeed, his words are punctuated by lightning cracks, whose superimposition onto the pro-filmic imagery gives the impression that part of the medium itself, the white text of the intertitles, is leaping out of the form and into diegetic content. Though it will surely be significant that this effect achieves some architectural attainment, with the lightning carving away at the mountainside, just as significant here is that lightning is one of the most widespread metaphors invoked

when describing Vladimir Lenin's speeches during the early days of the Revolution. "I shall never forget the speech," Nikolai Sukhanov would later reflect, "which broke like lightning over the assembly and shook and confused not only me. It seemed as if all the elements had been let loose, as if the demon of destruction was rising from his depth." [40] Here it appears that, following the law of remediation, the architectural imaginings of DeMille's film affirm not just the modernity of capitalism ("There is something rotten at the core of our system," he would later claim [41]) but also that of its socialist adversary.

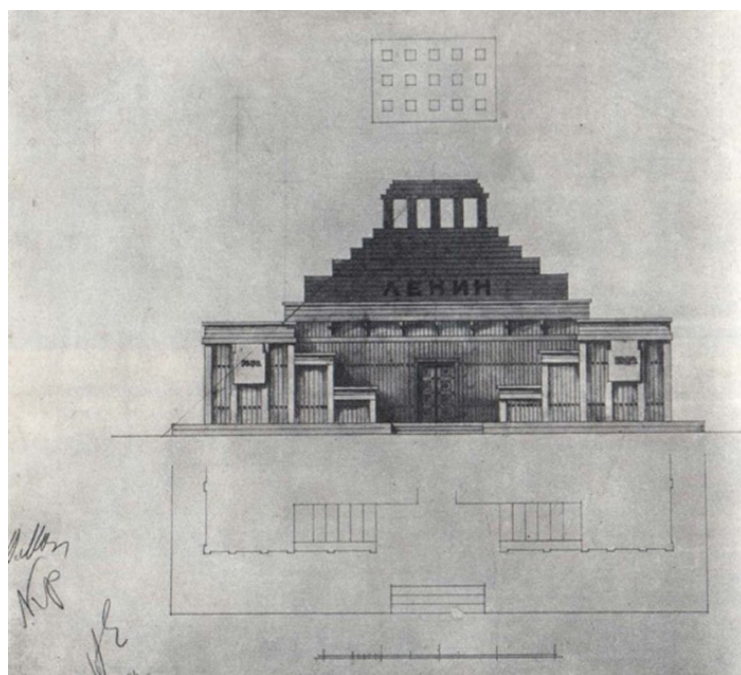
Pulling and straining  
against the tide –  
the flower of Russia  
harnessed like cattle  
to a Volga boat –



Even though we must be careful in suggesting what DeMille was taking from the socialist state ahead of 1923, we can still say with certainty that, in the late 20s and early 30s, he was very much thinking of this earlier film when more obviously preoccupied with the "great prehistoric beast" rearing up and out of Russia. *The Volga Boatman*, DeMille's historical melodrama released in 1928 and set within the Russian Revolution, is the epitome of what Kracauer describes as one of Hollywood's reactionary strategies, staging "a romance between a Russian Red and his, or her, class enemy, which drove home the humanly destructive efforts of Bolshevist class hatred." [42] This film concludes with a near-quotation from that earlier production's imagining of Ancient Egypt. When the titular boatman, Feodor, is declared a class traitor for his romance with a member of the overthrown aristocracy, he is sentenced to share their immediate fate, to manually tow a barge carrying the Bolsheviks to the tribunal at which the aristocracy will be sentenced. Remarkably, the shot repeats what we encountered with that architectural labor in *The Ten Commandments*: as with the sphinx in that film, here the barge is dragged from right to left across the screen, it too replete with a whip-cracking slavedriver. What this tells us is that, back in 1923 and under the shadows of the pyramid and the sphinx, DeMille had devised an aesthetic well-suited to political representation – which, though here it is used for reactionary purposes, speaks to the contemporary context of the socialist state. Similar things can be said of the film that Kracauer nominates as an exemplary of Hollywood reaction, that it too reveals a political subtext of DeMille's 1923 production: namely, *The Forgotten Commandments*, a 1932 propaganda flick directed by William Schorr and Louis J. Gasnier, which includes 21 minutes of edited footage from *The Ten Commandments*, but compares the ancient sequences to socialist Russia

instead of industrial America.

That *The Ten Commandments* was engaged architecturally with the idea of socialism is all but confirmed when, in 1931, DeMille visited the USSR. While this visit featured all the sites typical of diplomatic tours, from the Kremlin through the Steppe, of interest here is the language in which DeMille recorded his impressions, and how frequently his choice of figuration implied resonance between the socialist state and his favoured aesthetic. “Russia,” he would reflect, “is a land of one hundred and thirty eight million slaves and two million masters.” [43] Phrases such as this, with their echo of Ancient Egypt, sound like an American conservative responding dimly to the dictatorship of the proletariat, but the truth of things is far more interesting. A second historical irony is at play here, which takes us far beyond DeMille’s anti-socialist conservatism. If the first irony was that Russia effectively skipped bourgeois capitalism, making the tiger’s leap of revolution out of absolutism and into socialism as akin to Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert, the second irony is that, after Lenin’s death in 1924 and under Stalin’s subsequent rule, the USSR returned to older architectural forms – and, in particular, to those of ancient Egypt.





This began, of course, with Lenin's Mausoleum in Red Square (which DeMille described as "thrilling" [44]), built in the style of an ancient tomb with the immortal pharaoh-god encased in a glass sarcophagus, concealed below a small pyramid. So writes Owen Hatherley: – The embalming of Lenin ? opposed by his family and many communists ? was first accommodated by a temporary wooden step pyramid, based by Shchusev not on Russian despotic precedent, but on Egyptian and Sumerian architecture. – [45] And indeed, Lenin's tomb gave rise to an entire architectural movement:

It began the stepped, pyramidal, strictly hierarchical architecture that would succeed the horizontal and egalitarian forms of Constructivism ? what the Soviet architectural historian Vladimir Paperny considered a distinct 'Culture One' and 'Culture Two'. In 1930, Shchusev remodelled the Lenin Mausoleum into what might be his masterpiece, a cold, imposing, ornament-free pyramid of red and black granite, as abstract as anything by Malevich, as authoritarian as any Kremlin. [46]

The similarities extended beyond the monumental, however, and here we might underscore the ideological inversion that potentially comes with repurposing the ancient world in the name of public art. When, for instance, the commissar of transport accused the architect behind Kropotkinskaya station in Moscow of wanting to emulate Ancient Egypt, and especially the Great Temple of Ammon at Karnak. The architect, Alexey Dushkin, replied: "Their palaces are for Pharaohs, but ours are for the people." [47]

Though DeMille considered numerous productions focused on the socialist state, he would ultimately accede all of them; "it would be the most fascinating place to work," he admits in his travelogue, "but I would probably make a better picture of it at home than here." [48] Nevertheless, the socialist state's own return to Ancient Egypt, first at the level of architecture but increasingly as a despotic communal rhythm manifest in the paranoia and policy of Stalinism, would enter into the mix of DeMille's subsequent filmmaking, reaching its apogee – naturally enough – with his remake of *The Ten Commandments* in 1956. This film inverts the allegorical referents to better suit the determinations of its Cold War jingoism, identifying the repressive pharaohs as Soviets and the brave Hebrews as Americans. If, in 1923, Moses and the Hebrews looked something like a revolutionary vanguard, overthrowing their oppressors and escaping the clutches of absolutism, by 1956 they had embraced (as Deleuze has it) "the two characteristics of the American dream: that of a melting pot in which minorities are dissolved and that of a ferment which creates leaders capable of reacting to all situations." [49] The critical consensus on this film is that, indeed, it is a purely reactionary take on socialism, and the film itself certainly insists upon this reading with DeMille's famous opening monologue, which includes these words:

Ladies and gentlemen, young and old, this may seem an unusual procedure, speaking before the picture begins, but we have an unusual subject – the story of the birth of freedom – the story of Moses. [...] The theme of this picture is whether man ought to be ruled by God's law, or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator, like Rameses. Are mebut n the property of the state or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today. Our intention was not to create a story, but to be worthy of the divinely inspired story, created 3,000 years ago, the five books of Moses. [...]

If this overture feels like an overdetermined presence that ham-handedly wants to force an interpretation on the subsequent action, that is likely because, as an allegory for Soviet totalitarianism, the retelling of Exodus is far from perfect and lacks in clear historical referents. Specifically, what this introductory paratext seeks to obviate against is the law of architectural remediation we have now seen shaping political tendency across multiple films. If we pay close attention to that law, a new interpretation presents itself in contradistinction to that of anti-socialist reaction.

The architectural frescoes on display in this film are, despite their setting in Ancient Egypt and that setting's contemporaneous resurrection in the Soviet Union, remarkably American. As Alan Nadel has observed, this film's built environment "has three chief site of conflict, each corresponding to a socioeconomic class in

postwar America. The Egyptian court signifies upper management, or the country club set; the Goshen hovel of Moses's family, the working class; and the 'suburban patio' of Baka the master builder, middle management. Even Baka's outdoor fire," he adds, "suggests the barbecues that adorned middle-class patios." [50] While these observations are manifestly playful, they nevertheless accentuate the truth DeMille's overture wants to suppress: that, architecturally as well as socially, this representation of Ancient Egypt is just as much a vision of corporatist America as it is of the Soviet Union – that, to borrow Nadel's excellent description, "DeMille's Egypt is a construction company that builds pyramids with the pharaoh as chief executive officer." [51] And yet, in excess of that world, which could at this point in history be either capitalist or socialist, are those magical fantasies with which Egypt is brought to ruin and which are once more enabled only by the form, in a series of technological marvels greater than anything to have come before them in celluloid. It is that form, here the stuff of VistaVision and Technicolor, that encodes a supersession yet to come, an immanence without name or referent. The film's narrative logic of spiritual and material deliverance ultimately refers to neither the manifest destiny of the United States nor the socialist teleology of the Soviet Union but, rather, to some New Jerusalem built on the ruins of their mutual supersession. Fully aware, in Benjamin's phrase, that the "subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself," DeMille's film ultimately promotes, despite itself, the communist idea that revolutionary ferment is "nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of the liberated grandchildren." [52]

#### *Coda: Our Antiquity*

Perhaps it is no more than wistful to conclude by suggesting that all of this is now the stuff of a distant past – of a time when revolutionary promises could be enacted and betrayed with such force as to necessitate absolute inversion, which for DeMille meant an attempted reversal of aesthetic principals in step with the march of political events. Modernism, Jameson has reminded us (with reference to Alexander Kluge), "is our classicism, our classical antiquity." [53] There is, then, a curious doubling of this dialectical take on cinema and architecture as a critical exercise, for it exhumes what has become our classical antiquity's own exhumation of classical antiquity. This, too, finds its clearest resonance in the field of architecture or, perhaps more appropriately, in archaeology, the study of history and prehistory through the excavation of physical artefacts, the traces of a built environment that has outlived its communal rhythms. For the first version of *The Ten Commandments*, DeMille constructed twenty-one giant sphinxes to line the path of an 800-foot-wide temple. Legend has it that, with the filming complete, the set was simply pushed into a trench and buried somewhere in the deserts nearby to Hollywood. In 2012, archaeologists recovered one of these set pieces, a plaster sphinx, now twice removed from its historical context. The Lost City of Cecil B. DeMille: our antiquity.

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