



Times Quotidian

...an infinite number of things to speak of



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Automotive

March 17, 2013 | by [Janet Sternburg](#) | Filed Under: [Text&Context](#) | 31 Comments



A word broke in two the other day, right in front of my eyes.

A familiar word: automotive

becoming

auto

motive,

breaking into unfamiliar meanings: auto (self); motive (reason for acting).

I had been thinking about a film I adored but didn't quite understand.

Auto motive: a key?

The self is the reason, the motor for acting

Acting?

In the film [Holy Motors](#), a man has a reason for acting, a motive, a motor.

He is performing himself.

A film in which a man is running, in black and white, first one way, then running back. He is a silent movie.

A man who is only automotive. A man as made by [Jules Marey](#), the man who 'began' cinema, who began the phases of movement of the moon of cinematography, a man who captured motion as later in the film the man who is the performer will perform a dance of motion capture.

Quick — freeze one frame of interpretation — the cinema is a motor and it is holy.

A man is running in the past; then what are those horns braying behind his automotive stylized past?

They are the horns of traffic, of cars, of the present.

What makes the [Carax](#) film so free, — 'liberated' is perhaps a better word — is that the man seems to operate without a past; time plays no role, nor does its playmate, memory. The only past he has is the fun-house of endless reflection, so that the person may or may not be the person, a past may seem to be the past but then is revealed as only a scene — and a scene is different from a past, isn't it? Different from a memory? A scene can play tricks.

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Well, doesn't memory plays tricks? A memory may seem solid, but here it is a wall through which we walk along with the hero, the incomparable **Denis Lavant** whose capacity for transformation astonishes.

A man in bed in the middle of nowhere; the bed beside his empty; he is alone.

In fact, he is almost humorously (at least to me) existentially alone. He wanders, a somnabulist, groping in dark glasses through a room, a television set on, beside a window, a city outside, a plane is landing.

His wall is a mural. His hands search birches, like a blind man. He is feeling his way.



His finger finds the lock

He turns it

He pushes and pushes

He crashes through and walks upstairs into a projector's beam,

into a cinema among static spectators, a still,

where he is the only man moving. Where he is the automotive.

Where a mastiff prowls the aisle, the endangered aisle of cinema. What rough beast slouches?

He feels his way.

A child in a round mirror, trees behind her, her hand splayed out on a window; a phantom in the iconic pose of 'Meshes in the Afternoon:' she announces this film, yes, a film of references, to a purpose which is first (but only first) cinema. **Edith Scob** portrays his chauffeur named Celine (a goddess' name, a French woman's first name, a brand, a French author called 'an absolute bastard'), Scob referencing the character she played years ago in '**Eyes Without a Face**,' Georges Franju's horror film, about the process of 'heterografting – the transplantation of living tissue from one biologically compatible organism to another . . . as a means of preserving and re-capturing youth.'



Eyes Without a Face, Georges Franju, 1960

The mask, always the mask, which is also the mask of Phantom of the Opera, of a gargoyle in Notre Dame, of Victor Hugo's Hunchback therein, of a French sewer, all of these tropes that casually whisk by in Leos Carax's Holy Motors, a film of such brilliance that to watch it is to blink one's eyes in holy amazement. I say

Vogue

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- **Art** (75)
- **Fashion** (28)
- **Film** (78)
- **Music** (104)
- **Performance** (56)
 - **Dance** (19)
 - **Theater** (26)
- **Photography** (129)
 - **The Loupe** (34)
- **Text&Context** (93)
 - **Books** (20)
 - **Essays** (40)

ARCHIVES

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holy; yes.

Auto motive — Cinema is self, the maker. Cinema is motor, the actor. Cinema is holy.

and then

the 'action'

begins

a Corbu-like white house; children are bouncing a ball on a balcony; 'dad' leaves the house in an executive's suit, carrying a briefcase

'see you tonight dad'

as he walks toward a black car that we expect he will get into but no, this car follows him past a guardhouse with men and machine guns on roof; reality is collaborating with the role he is about to play.

'Bonjour, Celine,' to the waiting woman.

and there it is the white stretch limousine.

'How many appointments today?'

'Nine.'

The executive opens a file

quotes figures, financials, puts on headphones;

talks:

'We've got to get guns'

he is talking danger,

takes off headphones; we are in Paris; we are in plot.

takes off his jacket, puts it on hanger, flips on the lights surrounding a make-up mirror, takes out a wig, long hair, 'female,' brushes it; we are in a world amiss.

Plot has gone off the rails.

Bonjour, Oscar

another man is in the car

criticizing the performance

M. Oscar says, *'I miss the cameras — now they are smaller than my head.'*

The other man says, 'Don't be nostalgic, sentimental, thugs don't need to see.'

He is . . . he is. . . well, he is the executive producer, the car a heartless studio, the actor its heart.

The man is scarred, bloody

What makes you carry on Oscar?

His answer: *the beauty of the act*

What is beauty, M. Oscar?

In the eye of the beholder

And if there's no more beholder?

His job threatened

Cinema threatened

The next appointment

The next and next and next. . .

The man is voracious; he is Alice in Wonderland driving through the looking glass, chomping on flowers, on leaves, on a woman's hand, he is Goya's giant made small but still thrusting children in his mouth, he is an avatar, an acrobat, arrayed in signals of motion capture, dancing a duet of animal passion, of death by snake, a single man on a treadmill, a man in a luxe hotel on his deathbed caressing the hand of his dear niece, he dies, he is resurrected, goodbye, *see you again?* a professional to another, rising up to become a professional assassin, to kill his brother who is the twin of himself, also shot dead, lying on the self-same ground



And the next and the next . . .

A car going up the Champs Elysee
suddenly he (seems to) break from the routine

'Stop the car!'

Gun in hand he runs across the street

shirtless in a feral red hood

A cafe where the banker sits; he shoots the character he was in the beginning

The portfolio again

last appointment?

yes.

you're ill

I think I caught a cold killing the banker.

Scob lights a fire — there is a grate in the car — he unpeels his wrinkled face

goes through a gorgeous hall of dissolving mirrors

he is The Lady from Shanghai, the dissolving mirrors of self

in front of La Samaritaine department store

he 'runs into' Kylie Minoghue in another car —

seeming like an accidental meeting between appointments.

She has a Hitchcock face (the alluring passivity of Kim Novak)

hair in french twist.

She is called Jean (Seberg), in a trench coat, from another film,

it is noir, it is night.

Is that your hair?'

they made me older.

Are they your eyes?

No they've made me Eva Grace, an airline stewardess

living the last year of her life.

A grating; they bend down and under it, come out

into a gutted store

La Samaritaine

They're turning it into a luxury hotel.

Another thing no longer adequate; no longer wanted.

Like cinema.

They walk on plastic tarps.

We have 20 minutes to catch up on 20 years

She sings, Jacques Demy,

walking away from him,

who were we? when we were who we were ? back then?

runs toward him; violins, Deborah Kerr,

there was a child

The strings swell

we once had a child



I'm sorry.

Lovers turn to monsters and yearn to be far apart

They climb up the stairs, do they have Vertigo?

They are on the roof; the huge letters of a sign,

backward (of course): LA SAMARITAINE

there's something you don't know

— *about you?*

— *about us.*

time is against us.

I'll be going.

he'll be here any minute

it's better that he and I don't meet. . .

he walks away turns waves she waves and . . .

takes off her coat; She is in her stewardess uniform. Takes off her wig; shakes her brown hair. She has become another person.

Another person?

Takes off her shoes, climbs over the roof railing and inches along the letters of the sign, and . . . and . . .

turns around: stands at the ledge, the street way down below . . .

Cut.

He is walking down the stairs, sees the man, the other man, who is going to meet her —

he hides

the other walks up the stairs: *Jean is that you? Jean Jean?*

The white limo is there, as always waiting for him

but in front of it is a body. Her body.

he caws, a crow, a bird, the Bird(s) —

runs

jumps into the limo

Monsieur Oscar: *'we are obsolete Celine'*

The film is a threnody to the cinema that Carax loves and sees in its death throes

But cinema too has a purpose here beyond itself, it too is a refraction. The references are not only a game of Can You Find the Reference? but to the illusion that is us, believing that we are auto-motive but perhaps propelled, believing that we are acting our lives when we may be only acting scenes under someone else's direction, believing we are meeting the memories of a loved past on the roof of a building when we may only be meeting a memory of a Hitchcock film which itself is a memory of the illusory other, the woman who eludes, escapes, climbs, ultimately on a sign — the Hollywood sign, the face of Mount Rushmore, the window through which James Stewart peers into the lives of others, the sign that is a sign of La Samaritaine, the alphabet of letters from which we, along with the 'character' throw ourselves off. Among other things, Holy Motors is French philosophy.



A man is performing himself.

La Samaritane?

The Parisian temple of consumer goods, now gutted, and also the Samaritan of parable, of which Wikipedia tells us that 'a traveller . . . is beaten, robbed, and left half dead along the road. First a priest and then a Levite come by, but both avoid the man. Finally, a Samaritan comes by. Samaritans and Jews generally despised each other, but the Samaritan helps the injured man. . . Tell us that portraying a Samaritan in positive light would have come as a shock to Jesus' audience. It is typical of his provocative speech in which conventional expectations are inverted.'

Unwittingly Wikipedia is telling one of the many refractions of Holy Motors, a film so deceptive that we think we are interpreting it as the a story of an actor, of identity assuming many roles and thus being plastic, of an actor in a cinema, of this actor as a parable for us as actors. No. We go deeper and deeper; we climb over the sign LA SAMARITANE with some of its letters burnt out, we throw ourselves off, we look down at the body, we go on to the next episode.

you really must eat

he is in a dressing gown

looks like an odalisque

we must laugh before midnight

before the chimes?

who knows how long

a long day, she says

we're all drunk

we're all drunk and dead

M. Oscar it's getting late

Celine parks the limo.

He turns out lights in make up mirror covers the mirror with black cloth

she gives him the money for tonight

see you tomorrow

Standing next to her, he is tiny

he thanks her

Celine gets back into car

we hear

a song

we would like to live again

but that means we'd like to relive the same thing (piano)

make the long journey once more

touch the point of noreturn

and feel so far away from our childhood days

and when we're cold we think

we'd like to live again.

that means we'd like to live the same things afresh

our time has not yet come to rest

we have to do what we love again

dive once more

into the cold liquid days



He is 'home,' enters a suburban petit bourgeois house

It's me, he calls out.

It's me?!

It's me?

The fundamental sentence of identity?

Darling!

An ape enters.

How is our baby Luce?

How is our baby, light?

He and the ape hand in hand

at a cerise window

looking out

my dears

i've got some news to share

The song

our life is about to change

we see ourselves start again, feel

the sap rises inside us

but it cannot be

no it cannot be

no it cannot

A film without mechanics — narrative or otherwise — an episodic form through which we advance, without explanation, each episode promising narrative but never giving us the end until the end.

Is this not cinema? Is this not life? Is this not THE END?

No. Now we are with Celine driving at night in the car

into a garage called HOLY MOTORS, the light on the O almost burned out

Celine releases her tight French twist into a spray of blonde, taking years off the Scob of the 1960 Franju film, becoming young again, as the song of Holy Motors says *it cannot be* — but it can be, in cinema.

She puts on a mask, a phantom of the opera mask, a Franju mask.

She makes a call

I'm coming home

she walks down an aisle, a bride,

beside her are all the white limousines, parked at a slant,

her bridesmaids.



She turns off the lights.

The white stretch limousines left alone in their stalled spaces speak: we hear their murmured voices conversing.

A yawn.

'My client spent the whole day crisscrossing the city

I'm dead'.

Red backlights blink on and off as different cars talk in different voices

I'm trying to get some sleep

It won't be long before you sleep

before the junkyard

we're becoming inadequate

silence

an old man's voice

men don't want visible machines any more

we don't want no more engines

no more action

muttering, all of them,

amen

amen

It is a congregation, a meeting, even a conclave. At the end, on the word they all atone, one almost expects smoke to be sent up, annunciatory of a new election, a passage into grace.

The man who has performed in a white stretch limousine, who has peered into a bulb-arrayed looking glass, making himself up, must exit.

A boy in an silent film throws a stone.

The End (?)

An automotive/ autobiographical note:

I have always loved cars, I especially love the wrecked, dented, wounded, weary ones, especially when they are reclaimed by light and transfigured into photographic splendor. Where did this come from? My father, a cabdriver; seeing him as more than a wreck, more than wounded and weary, becoming these photographs.



Splendor, Janet Sternburg, 2001



Fracture, Janet Sternburg, 2009



Holy Rust, Janet Sternburg, 2009

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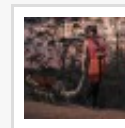
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 Tagged With: [Denis Lavant](#), [Edith Scob](#), [Holy Motors](#), [Janet Sternburg](#), [Leos Carax](#)

Comments

Ana Cervantes says:

March 17, 2013 at 6:06 pm



Dizzying, dazzling, brilliant, mi querida Janet. You are amazing!

Jo Ann Callis says:

March 17, 2013 at 11:07 pm



Janet Sternburg really knows how to bring together the visual and written worlds she inhabits because she practices both of these talents in her own creative life. This description and interpretation of “Holy Motors” has brought the film to life for me. I also happen to love the stills she included in her piece. I was hooked by both using my imagination and also by seeing the real photos of some of the scenes from the actual film. The piece is somewhere between prose and poetry. I certainly am looking forward to seeing it after having read Sternburg’s perceptions.

I recently saw another film that peaked my interest, which is “The Face of Another” directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara taken from the novel by Kobo Abe. The visuals in that surrealistic Japanese movie are inventive and stunningly beautiful as well.

Catherine Filloux says:

March 18, 2013 at 5:23 am



Janet Sternburg creates for me a new form of writing in her kaleidoscopic and poetic piece about Carax's film Holy Motors. Her personal connection to automobiles with text and her photos provides a moving conclusion. From birches into Paris through cinema and scaling street signs to "coming home" Sternburg breathes life into an extraordinary shared journey.

Amy Brook Snider says:

March 18, 2013 at 5:44 am



Bravo! I was swept away by the breadth of Sternburg's cinematic associations and word play. Remembered a sign in nearby Tribeca for a camping store, "Tent and Trails" that read instead, T Entrails or something like that.

Jim Krusoe says:

March 18, 2013 at 9:27 am



Love those white limos as bridesmaids!

Philip Alvaré says:

March 18, 2013 at 12:13 pm



Was it Harold Bloom who expressed the idea that the only legitimate criticism of a work of art is a another work of art? Nevertheless, I recalled that idea after reading Janet Sternberg's piece (critique – though more a visual and poetic response, and best form of criticism) about Leos Carax's Holy Motors. And at this point I'm reluctant to proceed wondering, what "comment" or response in relationship to another's response, criticism, or commentary might be but, a kind of meta-critique– a criticism of criticism which (I think) may be what Sternberg has evoked in her Auto-Motive but, there's much more here. Art may be reiterative, and maybe saying that is redundant but, in that sense an ekphractic work of art which is what Sternberg has crafted, and created is a constuctive critical response to Carax's film, as opposed to the usual, deconstructive critical response to most works of art, and I salute her for that. But now that I find myself wandering in a hall of mirrors, I'm beginning to wonder what it was I originally set out to say. Oh, I remember: I admire Auto-Motive, think it's a fine piece of writing, and visual/photographic work in and of itself, and though I haven't yet seen it, I'm going to floor it, and beat a fast track to Holy Motors! Vroom!

Michael Holzman says:

March 18, 2013 at 12:23 pm



Movie reviews point to the movie they address. Janet Sternberg's re-view shows us the movie we (may) have not seen.

Nina Menkes says:

March 18, 2013 at 7:43 pm



great writing on a great film, BRAVO!! xxx

Sherry Sonnett says:

March 18, 2013 at 8:20 pm



How wonderful to be so inspired by the work of another, and then to make your own inspiring piece... beautiful...

Jordan Elgrably says:

March 19, 2013 at 3:57 am



The movie completely comes alive for me as does Paris, film history, and time's river...the poetic critique somehow reminds me of the thousands of small moments in which I wandered that city's streets, cafés, trains, roads, observed thousands of people, become part of the city's transcript. I've seen several Leos Carax films and now, thanks to this brilliant review, I'll have to find "Holy Motor".

Sean Lynch says:

March 19, 2013 at 9:32 am



Since I saw Holy Motors about a month ago, I haven't been able to get the movie out of my head. Leaving the theater, to enter back into "reality," I felt disoriented: moved by this film but also confused, lacking the vocabulary to articulate what I had just sat through and wondering how something I could barely describe was able to shake me as deeply as it did.

Sternburg does a wonderful job here of capturing the fantastical world Carax creates—a world where the lines separating empirical reality, self, and performance aren't necessarily erased but redrawn in an unfamiliar way.

A movie as fantastical as Holy Motors can only be contextualized by the kind of lyrical response Sternburg provides. This wonderful response to the film has steadied my disorientation a bit and makes me look forward to going back and watching this movie again!

Charles Bardes says:

March 19, 2013 at 1:08 pm



I don't know any of the films, but I greatly enjoyed the writing.

I kept thinking about the Northrop Frye argument that criticism doesn't need to be a secondary genre, dependent on the primary work being critiqued, but can function independently. Your photos, too, echo the text: refractive, fractured planes, disjoint but cohesive at the same time.

Emory Holmes II says:

March 20, 2013 at 7:13 am



Ms. Sternburg's surging, literary voice (and its pacing), and her focused, strobe-light imagery create a doppelganger of the film her words and ideas invoke; as if this critique itself were sitting in the darkened theater beside us, eating popcorn with absurd delight, flashing, affirming, debating, investigating and calling out its own mirror image on the screen. Indeed, it is a work of art itself: of labor, patience, imagination, wit and craft. Thrilling to read and, for someone like me who has yet to see Mr. Carax's challenging new work, it is a catalogue (or rather: a menu) of seductions, a roadmap into an enigma; a joke where everyone is provided clues to a punchline that never comes. Each line is as startling as a strangers' caress — a stranger we are compelled to follow into the shattered looking-glass where, one suspects, more strangers and a deeper dark awaits — but it is only ourselves sitting there, staring at us, reflecting us, questioning us. I had to take a deep breath after reading this. And marked my calendar to remind me to find this film. But Ms. Sternburg's poetical review has already primed my motor and marked, like racing stripes across my head and heart, the bright path I must follow: Ready, Set, Go see Holy Motors. Quite marvelous. Bravo.

Lia Skidmore says:

March 20, 2013 at 4:43 pm



If the film is a fraction as beautiful as this review, it will be thrilling!

Marissa Chibas Preston says:

March 20, 2013 at 7:59 pm



What an exhilarating and beautifully poetic tribute. Janet Sternburg can zero in on the essence of a work like no other. The autobiographical note is especially moving. Felicidades!

Lori Precious says:

March 20, 2013 at 8:56 pm



I feel transported to another time, another place like a visit into another psyche. I enjoy the prose+poetry+pictures. More please.

Wainer Guimaraes says:

March 20, 2013 at 10:38 pm



Dear Janet,

Your “automotive” piece of art is extremely rich, and I was not able to grab it totally in the first reading, or in the second or third... speaks differently as you read it again. And yet, right on the first reading, it was fascinating, and led me to resonate with various thoughts and words; especially “we once had a child”... I felt the child is still within, and your words woke the child as I was led through your art into images and thoughts of a 1st time experience; delicious feeling even if at times I could not cognitively understand them but just feel them... it was like being grabbed into another dimension through its creativity and newness.

A voyage of another kind.

Loved it.

Thank you for not keeping you art to yourself.

Wainer

Jane St. Clair says:

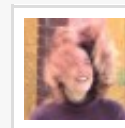
March 21, 2013 at 4:58 pm



I must see this film. I haven't yet, but what Janet has done has embodied with language its heartbeat. It's a review meets prose poem that seems to do that exact feat that her photography does: within and without in the same breath. Simultaneous. I want to see the film now and then reread Auto motive again. Thanks for the textured, visceral plunge.

Terry Wolverton says:

March 21, 2013 at 5:52 pm



This is my favorite kind of criticism, when the work of art becomes the starting point for an expanded series of reflections—personal, artistic, social. The mind of the film maker and the mind of the author work in collaboration to weave together what's apparent and what resides beneath the surface. Thank you, Janet, for calling this to my attention.

Corey Madden says:

March 22, 2013 at 7:44 am



Illuminating! Makes see the film through new eyes!

neil baldwin says:

March 24, 2013 at 2:02 pm



as one who has followed the work of janet sternberg for more than 35 years this discourse comes as no surprise b/c it is an exercise in the poetics which reside in her roots and still make themselves manifest. i am taking “poetics” in the oldest sense of “making,” in her case, “meaning-making,” coupled with the visual dimension so that we are left with a multitude of impressions – a [good] barrage. i do not want to imply that the film is a “pretext” for janet to perform a multimedia exercise – rather, she has constructed her own art work out of the inspiration she received.

Travis Preston says:

March 24, 2013 at 7:12 pm



Upon reading this extraordinary piece I had the uncanny feeling I associate with leaving the movie theater. It is the experience of walking slowly away from a life lived – Hosanna and Requiem inextricably bound in longing and loss.

steve anker says:

March 24, 2013 at 7:51 pm



Janet,
This is a wonderful piece and has had me completely rethink the film. Now I want to see it again, preferably in a theater. The range of your associations is inspiring and informative, and your writing opens up rather than closes down my own associations. This is truly terrific criticism, and more than that, it is a wonderful creative piece on its own. Thanks, and please let me know when you have other pieces that I can read.
Warm regards, Steve

Howard Burkat says:

March 25, 2013 at 6:14 am



The combination of media to say what Sternberg wants to say mesmerized me – especially when she adds her own photos. Thanks Janet.

tony cohan says:

March 26, 2013 at 6:26 am



Yes, art begetting art. I did see Holy Motors (here in Guanajuato, Mexico, where our cinemateca runs international films new and old all year long) in the midst of a busy time and was fascinated though not sure what to make of it and didn't have time to dwell upon it. Here, you've dwelled for me! And in a form as open as your subject. This is terrific, Janet, essay/crit/response as free playing field of associations, invoking your readers' own associations: car as theater (J.G. Ballard, The Beach Boys, Godard's WEEKEND, Nick Ray's REBEL...and on and on...), and Leos CAR AX ??? A great way to work.
Felicidades, Tony

Jamie Wolf says:

March 28, 2013 at 2:15 pm



I responded so urgently to this that I thought I had left a comment congratulating you...only to find today that it must have been all in my mind! What a fascinating piece... the combination of the genres is intricate and scintillating and prompts the thoughts of the reader into myriad destinations, all of them rewarding !

As usual, lovely work!

Gabor Kalman says:

March 29, 2013 at 11:25 am



I wanted to see the film first and I just did. Wonderful film and a brilliant response. I look forward to your sharing your impressions with us every time you see a new film in the future! Congratulations.

Jeri Weiss says:

April 2, 2013 at 11:29 am



This is a review from the soul out. Incredible!

Rafael says:

April 25, 2013 at 9:42 am



Janet,

It took me a while to re read this final version. Full of substance. "Superbe" insightfulness into the film. So inspiring. I have to see it again with this new perspectives. I love how you weave in and out , thought with history with self biographical notes, with life, with cars. One thing is for sure, your love for nourishing life.

Thank you, R

James Moore says:

May 23, 2013 at 5:15 am



It is marvelous when a piece written as a reflection on a work of art becomes itself a rich source for reflections of one's own. While I am now curious to see the film, Janet's writing invites one on journey of its own; one that inspires a myriad reflections, especially on the motives we have for creating and recreating our selves, and the broken logic that governs the scenes and memories and actions that comprise our lives. The form in which the piece is written amplifies this quality, creating a kind of moving bridge between the recollections from the film and the tangents along which one is inevitably distracted while reading.

Brilliant!

lewin wertheimer says:

June 30, 2013 at 8:27 pm



Janet, I am very late to be commenting on this fantastic article. I love your agility and ability to weave themes together like an abstract tapestry. Beautiful, intriguing , provocative and always compelling. Thank you.

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