

Hercules's Fame Precedes Him Everywhere: Zapruder

Silvia Lucchesi in Conversation with Zapruder (Nadia Ranocchi, David Zamagni, Monaldo Moretti)

SILVIA LUCCHESI: The central theme of your new work, the myth, is very ambitious. Important works on the origin and interpretation of myths have been written by philosophers, historians, and scholars. You chose Hercules, one of the most popular classical heroes. To this figure and his legendary labors you have dedicated the *Zeus Machine* project, which will be exhibited as a twelve-channel video installation. A cinema version of it will premiere at Lo Schermo dell'Arte Film Festival in Florence. Why would one choose to work on the myth of Hercules today? What fascinates you about this hero?

ZAPRUDER: Hercules's fame precedes him everywhere. Everyone's already heard of him; we know that he is strong and that his invincibility gives him courage. He does impossible things. He is a superhero-savior of humanity. In his shoes you feel like an athlete, and your every effort reaches Olympian peaks. He is an exemplary figure, and we wanted to make an exemplary film, a documentary on the mythological ruins of our society, featuring asteroids, flying statues, and Hollywood actors. There is no myth without heroic deeds—deeds that are entirely separate from those of the Olympian gods, sovereigns of heaven and Earth, who love to hear about themselves. Hercules is a demigod, son of the umpteenth divine whim, and must complete a number of undertakings to expiate his guilt and redeem the immortality that is his due.

SL: Of the many classical depictions of Hercules, you chose the Hercules Farnese. Why that particular sculptural representation of the hero?

Z: The Hercules Farnese is a portrait of the adult hero. He has already faced his labors and defeated the monsters. He leans on his club and ruminates on his diminished role in a world without monsters.

SL: In the film, the theme of myth isn't just a reference to classicism. It's a circular element of unknown origin, always present and without end, that directs even our most banal actions. It's strictly connected to the very essence of cinema, and in this sense explains your use of James Dean face masks in one of *Zeus Machine's* episodes. What does myth tell you today?

Z: We could say that *Zeus Machine* is a film of statues that come to life, and the myth, like the statues, takes on the meaning of a vestige that civilization leaves behind, and goes toward this. Like a mask with Hollywood features, the myth is a faithful intermediary that preserves the point of view of cultural memory, and gives the new and the unknown a strong personal connotation.

SL: *Zeus Machine* has twelve episodes, called "labors," distinguished by sequential numbering that is the record of today's heroic enterprises conducted by ordinary people in which the anthropological data becomes myth: a 3D prologue about the creation of the world, which alludes to birth of Hercules; and two "labors" with actors in costume. The first refers to events that occurred during the conception of the hero; the other is dedicated to Alcmena, Hercules's mortal mother. How did you work on the script and the sequence of episodes?

Z: To render its multifaceted and contradictory nature, we worked on the Hercules myth through the arts that keep it alive in various ways. The starting point for us was the hero's cinematic origin: the muscular male with supernatural strength, generally a bodybuilder in skimpy clothes. The twelve episodes of the script have no end and always start again, like revenants. In sequence they add up, and give life to, a precise mosaic, organized as a theorem on myth. It took two years to put together all the segments, and until the work's completion, it wasn't possible to watch the film online. It was a laborious, long wait.

SL: This film seems to start from a deep knowledge of the real people involved. How important was the field research period? What work process did you adopt to include a particular "event," or "labor"?

Z: One recognizes Hercules from the labors that are inseparable from the hero, like a scar, a birthmark, a brand. For *Zeus Machine* we first wrote the film, then looked for the materialization of what we imagined: a passerby, a landscape, a car, a stone. When we were there we recognized them, and this process has to be mutual, because when it isn't, you can't bring home the scene even with the best care and resources.

SL: From your first anaglyph films, your sense of the frame and the relationship between action and background has been important. The impression is of a sculptural immobility, also achieved through the use of theatrical lighting. It seems a choice that contradicts the moving nature of cinema.

Z: The immobility in *Zeus Machine* alludes to a time outside normal time. A suspension, a mythical time that doesn't advance or recede. Sculpture is a perfect example of this. Stereoscopy led us to see the scene as a pyramid of perspective planes, like a sculpture of time. The movement of the cinema is the time that passes on the screen and on those who live there. You say "Action!" and record its duration.

SL: In the film there are visual references to Muscle Men of Peplum (also known as sword and sandal) movies, a popular film genre in the 1950s. Could you explain this relationship, which is particularly evident in the episode set in Cinecittà, and the costume scene shot at Baia Imperiale, the legendary disco in Romagna?

SL: What role does the viewer play in your work? And is there a difference for the viewer of one of your single-channel films versus the viewer of a video installation?

Z: Those who view the installation version of *Zeus Machine* will be able to move freely among the labors, and choose where to start and how to proceed. They'll actively participate in the assembly of the piece, which will be rebuilt in his image and likeness. The labors will happen simultaneously, generating that mythical time that detaches itself from the scanning of duration, beginning and end. It is a circular, perpetual time. The spectator of the film, on the other hand, will entertain a direct relationship with the duration and succession of the labors. We imagine this person playing ever-changing roles—the ethnologist, the enigmist, the cinemaniac, the sculptor, the performer—on a screen that is an open window, where it will alternately become the look that sees and the object that is seen. For example, in *Ascent to Olympus*, we organized a show within the Santarcangelo Festival. In reality it was a live movie set: viewers were an integral part of the film and eyewitnesses to the performance. When it was installed for the first time at the MAXXI museum in Rome, that projected audience became a subject for another public in the flesh, both a witness and a stand-in.