

The Blue Bird

By Kaveh Askari

Aesthetically and philosophically ambitious, “The Blue Bird” stands out as an achievement in American art cinema of the 1910s. After gaining some experience directing films in the United States, French expat director Maurice Tourneur pursued his interest in the fantastic by adapting this popular play by Belgian Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck. It was an adaptation for which Tourneur was well suited, given his training in the fine arts and his experience as an assistant to the Symbolist painter Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Tourneur’s adaptation answered the play’s imperative—that we should nurture a spiritual commitment to the hidden life in everyday things—with stylized sequences that linked his film to the other arts and to the previous generation of movie magic.

In Maeterlinck’s own theories of acting, he suggests that actors be treated as puppets, that performers might even being replaced with shadows and sculptures, and that décor be granted a new vitality. It would already be tempting to imagine the medium of cinema as one answer to Maeterlinck’s call for this next generation of Symbolist performance, simply by virtue of its incorporeal shadows, animations, and reflections. Tourneur’s adaptation of “The Blue Bird” directly invites this temptation. The living performers yield to elaborate costumes, designed sets, and trick effects. Characters such as The Rich Children are seen only as shadows in windows. The Shades and Terrors appear as diffuse outlines of bodies projected on a scrim. Sculpture and performer merge in the tableaux vivants that guard the entryways to the different chambers in the Palace of Night. If Symbolist aesthetics require a merging of the animate and inanimate, then Tourneur’s pictorial *mise-en-scène* enables this transformation of values.

An allegory of the search for spiritual fulfillment, “The Blue Bird” demands that the seeker pay close attention to the invisible souls inhabiting things. The film turns to the media environment of early cinema as a way to explore this theme. This happens most clearly in the sequence where the main characters in the story emerge, in human form, from the everyday objects and pets inside the children’s home. The stop-motion animation in this sequence immediately stands out, as it did to reviewers in 1918. As the



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Little Tula Belle and Robin McDougall, appearing as Tyttl and Myttl in “The Blue Bird,” Maeterlinck’s masterpiece, filmed under direction of Maurice Tourneur.

This picture appeared in the January 1918 edition of Film Fun. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

magic in the story begins, before Tourneur introduces the human forms of Fire, Milk, Water, Sugar, Bread, and the Cat and Dog, the children see their beds race across the room and a washbasin pirouette around a wardrobe. The origin of this stop-motion scene has roots in the studios of the animator Émile Cohl. Before coming to work as Tourneur’s art director, Ben Carré had helped Cohl to create early animation films like “The Pumpkin Race” (1908). Maeterlinck demanded that Carré imbue his furniture with living souls, but Cohl taught Carré’s living furniture how to act.

Tourneur’s and Carré’s dancing washbasin premiered, however, in a very different context than Cohl’s animations. This was the same year that proto-surrealist Louis Aragon published “On Décor,” recommending Poe’s “Philosophy of Furniture” as mandatory reading for the student of cinema and singling out Chaplin as a performer with a spiritual sense of décor. Aragon admired moments when Chaplin seemed to invert the relationships between performer and object. Tourneur dwelled on these same mo-

ments in the animated sequences of “The Blue Bird.” Tourneur’s film updated the Symbolist fascination with the souls in things. Not only did he recycle early cinema in the scene. He also reanimated those charged ideas about cinema that Symbolist writers of the 1890s imagined in the early devices of Lumière and Edison.

Stop-motion offers one palpable example, but references to early film magic proliferate in the film’s styling of the puppet-characters. The film magic of Georges Méliès in particular appears to influence the film, which does make sense in a *féerie*, even one produced even as late as 1918. The loaf of sugar grows into a cone-head man with a moving camera superimposition that mimics Méliès’s “The Man with the Rubber Head” (1902), and the loaf of bread transforms into an Orientalist sultan who brings Méliès’s conjurer characters to mind. The costumes for Sugar and Bread also directly copy those of the 1911 Théâtre Réjane production (the theatre company that employed Tourneur before he was hired by the Éclair film company in France) directed and designed by Maeterlinck’s partner, Georgette Leblanc. Méliès and Leblanc drew, after all, from similar material, and neither of them shied away from the darker side of these magical transformations. In the 1918 adaptation Sugar snaps off his own fingers and Bread slices his own flesh with a scimitar to feed the hungry mouths around them. If Leblanc’s production almost called out for the violent alchemy of Méliès’s earlier cinematic tricks, Tourneur’s adaptation seems to recognize this and uses tricks from early cinema magic to extend the violent, alchemical spirit of the stage production.

Indeed, Leblanc’s production design exposes the threads that join the aesthetics of Symbolist theatre, early cinema, and Tourneur’s and Carré’s picture craft. The flowing gowns Tourneur and Carré used for the women who play Water, Milk, and Night gestured to Symbolist icon Loïe Fuller’s serpentine dance. Night’s gown in the Théâtre Réjane production comes even closer to Fuller’s costumes for her Folies Bergère performances, with dowels to extend the span of fabric hanging from her arms. Stills and descriptions from the production indicate that Night’s gown was indeed within the same sphere of influence that produced Edison’s many Serpentine Dance films with Annabelle Whitford and Toulouse Lautrec’s paintings of Fuller in frenetic splashes of color. Carré and Tourneur offer a more direct reference to Fuller’s “Fire Dance” with the transformation of the character Fire, whose billowed-fabric move-

ments resemble a serpentine dance projected in reverse, or in reverse gravity. They use a fan to blow the orange-tinted costume upward like flames. Tourneur’s traces of Fuller’s serpentine dance almost literalize the connection between Fuller, as a Symbolist icon, and early cinema. Tourneur extends this connection into later experiments with art filmmaking by reconfiguring these early cinema traditions in a 1918 film. He affirms those correspondences between Maeterlinck’s philosophy of art and a Paramount feature film.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that while “The Blue Bird” does engage a specific aesthetic tradition, Symbolism, its sensibility is far from purist. The film’s painterly citations borrow lighting techniques from eighteenth-century oil painting and framing from Victorian illustration—techniques that many Symbolist painters rejected. The film alternates between deep-focus *repoussoir* to its opposite, the flattened cut-out staging that resembles Tourneur’s sketches for the murals of Puvis. Its mode is inclusive and irreverent, even as it addresses reverent institutions of art. Public lecturers on Symbolist art—who had helped to make Maeterlinck a household name in the United States—had softened the edges of this aesthetic tradition for polite society, but they set into motion the tradition’s promiscuous life in American discussions about art. Tourneur’s film appeals to these lecturers, but also revels in this promiscuity by bringing Loïe Fuller, Georges Méliès, Émile Cohl, and Louis Aragon into renewed contact with Symbolist traditions. The line connecting Tourneur’s films to early cinema is not a straight line. It doesn’t get to Edison, Méliès, or Lumière without also winding through Symbolist theater and painting. Tourneur’s art cinema succeeded by actively forging these connections.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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