

**FROM THE ASCENT OF SPECTACLE TO THE COLLAPSE OF MEANING: MYTH,
ETERNAL RETURN, AND THE MYTHOPOETIC REWRITING OF CULTURAL MEMORY
IN *BABYLON***

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Abstract

This article examines Damien Chazelle's Babylon (2022) as a contemporary Hollywood allegory in dialogue with the Babylon/Babel myth. The film's transition from silent to sound cinema exceeds the status of technological development and acquires the force of a formative rupture, reorganizing body, voice, performance, visibility, and cultural memory within modern film history. The analysis places Hollywood's claims to permanence, grandeur, and cultural authority in relation to dispersal, repetition, corporeal excess, and historical erosion. Babylon casts Hollywood as a modern Babylon/Babel formation: Babylon evokes grandeur, excess, and collapse; Babel evokes linguistic dispersal, plurality, and communicative crisis. The opening party sequences, sound-recording scenes, Nellie LaRoy's corporeal excess and voice, and the final montage constitute the article's principal analytical sites. These scenes bring carnivalesque excess, technical discipline, simulation, aura's erosion, and cultural memory into a single interpretive field. Nellie LaRoy's body and voice exemplify the star body that Hollywood renders visible, disciplines, and ultimately marks as excessive. The final montage reconstructs cinema history outside linear progress, arranging it as fragments, citations, repetitions, and visual residues. Babylon produces Hollywood's dream of visual immortality and exposes its instability within the same cinematic structure. The article approaches Hollywood as a symbolic field for American modernity's myths of progress, celebrity, technological mastery, and permanence, exceeding the limits of film industry. Ultimately, Babylon acquires the force of a mythopoetic allegory that conceives cultural continuity in terms of fracture, repetition, loss, and the labor of reconstruction, apart from the ideals of stability, completion, and historical coherence.

Keywords: *American cinema, Babylonian myth, crisis of representation, simulation, eternal return, mythopoetic allegory*

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GÖSTERİNİN YÜKSELİŞİNDEN ANLAMIN ÇÖKÜŞÜNE: *BABİL* FİLMİNDE MİT, EBEDİ DÖNÜŞ VE KÜLTÜREL HAFIZANIN MİTOPOETİK YENİDEN YAZIMI

Öz

Bu çalışma, Damien Chazelle'in Babil (2022) filmini Babil/Babel mitiyle ilişkili çağdaş bir Hollywood alegorisi olarak inceler. Film, sessiz sinemadan sesli sinemaya geçişi yalnızca teknolojik bir yenilik değil, modern sinema kültüründe beden, ses, performans ve bellek üzerinde etkili kurucu bir kırılma olarak yorumlar. Bu çerçevede Hollywood'un kalıcılık, görkem ve kültürel otorite iddiaları; dağılma, tekrar, bedensel taşkınlık ve tarihsel aşınma süreçleriyle birlikte okunur. Makalenin temel iddiası, Babil'de Hollywood'un modern bir Babil/Babel figürü olarak temsil edildiği yönündedir: Babil ihtişam, aşırılık ve çöküş imgesiyle; Babel ise dilsel dağılma, çoğulluk ve iletişim kriziyle ilişkilendirilir. Çalışmada açılış partisi sahneleri, ses kayıt sahneleri, Nellie LaRoy'un bedensel taşkınlığı ve ses performansı ile final montajı merkeze alınır. Bu sahneler aracılığıyla karnavalesk taşkınlık, teknik disiplin, simülasyon, aura kaybı ve kültürel bellek ilişkisi tartışılır. Nellie LaRoy'un bedeni ve sesi, Hollywood'un görünür kıldığı, fakat aynı anda dışladığı yıldız bedeninin belirleyici bir örneği olarak öne çıkar. Final montajı, sinema tarihini doğrusal ilerleme anlatısı içinde değil, fragman, alıntı, tekrar ve görsel kalıntı mantığı içinde yeniden kurar. Bu nedenle Babil, Hollywood'un görsel ölümsüzlük arzusunu hem kuran hem de aşındıran bir sinemasal yapı olarak okunur. Bu okuma, Hollywood'u yalnızca bir film endüstrisi olarak değil, Amerikan modernitesinin mit, bellek ve görsel iktidar üreten simgesel alanı olarak konumlandırır. Makale, filmin Amerikan kültüründeki ilerleme, şöhret, teknolojik hâkimiyet ve kalıcılık mitlerini sorguladığını ileri sürer. Sonuç olarak Babil, kültürel sürekliliği istikrar ve tamamlanmışlık fikrine değil; kırılma, tekrar, kayıp ve yeniden kurma emeğine dayalı biçimde düşünen mitopoetik bir alegori niteliği kazanır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Amerikan sineması, Babil miti, temsil krizi, simülasyon, ebedi dönüş, mitopoetik alegori*

1. Introduction

Babylon refuses a generic settlement. Historical drama, Hollywood chronicle, and nostalgic reconstruction remain insufficient for a film that stages early cinema as spectacle, ruin, and myth as inseparable registers. Chazelle assigns spectacle an allegorical force, making it the medium that gives Hollywood's cultural contradictions visual pressure (Debord, 1967: 12; Jameson, 1981: 72). Within this spectacle, early Hollywood comes forward less as a coherent origin than as a volatile scene of invention, appetite, discipline, and impending collapse. The passage from silent to sound cinema intensifies this volatility, instituting a decisive break in cinematic expression and revising the relation among body, voice, gesture, and image. Within this strained historical field, Hollywood assumes the form of a mythic

city: radiant in its ambitions toward permanence, yet fractured by excess, discontinuity, and historical erosion. The film thus binds cinema's dream of endurance to the frailty of representation itself.

Ruination belongs to cinematic modernity from its point of formation. *Babylon* recasts Hollywood's passage from silent to sound cinema in mythopoetic terms; decline acquires the status of an internal force already active within cinematic ambition, far from any belated consequence of success. The transition to synchronized sound gives this logic its Babelian structure: linguistic dispersal coincides with a new discipline imposed on speech, gesture, and visual legibility. That disciplinary pressure draws grotesque corporeality and abjection into the same field of crisis. Nellie LaRoy condenses that crisis in a body marked by fascination, disorder, and eventual expulsion, pressing against the limits of symbolic order (Bakhtin, 1984: 19; Kristeva, 1982: 4). Aura's erosion intersects with the intensified circulation of simulation in Hollywood's self-mythologizing imagination; spectacle derives force from repetition even as repetition drains it of stability (Baudrillard, 1994: 6; Benjamin, 1968: 221). The closing montage gathers these tensions into a historical and philosophical register beside Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence and Benjamin's philosophy of history, as cinematic time turns around repetition, rupture, and historical debris (Benjamin, 1968: 257; Nietzsche, 2001: 273).

These concerns finally gather around three conceptual problems: the passage of Babylonian motifs of hubris, polyphony, and collapse into cinematic form; the proximity among excess, abjection, simulation, and the carnivalesque; and the closing montage's role in recasting cultural memory and cinematic afterlife (Assmann, 2011: 37). Within this frame, *Babylon* cannot be reduced to nostalgia for Hollywood's golden age. The film casts cinema as a mythopoetic allegory, with ambition, dissolution, and recurrence supplying the very grammar of cinematic modernity.

Allegorical film analysis, myth criticism, and cultural memory theory establish the article's methodological ground; close reading carries the main interpretive labor. The analysis returns to three decisive sites in *Babylon*: the passage from silent to sound cinema, the staging of bodily excess, and the closing montage. These sites develop the film's central problem. The sound transition reorganizes speech, gesture, and cinematic legibility; bodily excess strains the boundaries of symbolic order; montage returns cinema history as fragments, citations, and visual recurrence. Read in relation to one another, these scenes render Hollywood's desire for permanence inseparable from the forces of dispersal and collapse.

Allegory provides that collision with its larger form, since Chazelle translates historical change into images of ascent, excess, fragmentation, and ruin. Myth criticism situates this imagery within the Babylon/Babel constellation, casting Hollywood as a modern cultural tower built from spectacle, ambition, and linguistic instability. Cultural memory theory illuminates the film's treatment of cinema history as repetition, citation, and return. A linear reconstruction of early Hollywood consequently

recedes behind a mythopoetic reading of *Babylon*, one that binds representation, memory, and historical imagination to the instability of modern visual culture.

2. Spectacle and the Collapse of Meaning: Multilingualism and the Babel Effect in *Babylon*

Babylon anchors language and spectacle in the crisis of cinematic modernity staged by Hollywood's passage from silent to sound cinema. The biblical story of Babel supplies the film with an allegorical grammar: the collective desire for height, permanence, and cultural unity culminates in linguistic fracture, dispersal, and the loss of shared intelligibility (Genesis 11:1-9). Chazelle inscribes this pattern into early Hollywood, as synchronized sound unsettles the expressive abundance of silent cinema and submits speech, audibility, and performance to newly enforced demands. Spectacle lends this rupture its visible intensity, transmuting noise, gesture, and bodily excess into signs of a world struggling to secure cinematic order. The transition consequently assumes the force of a cinematic Babel effect, with plurality drawn into regulation and expressive excess pressed toward coherence. In the soundstage sequences, microphones, enforced silence, repeated takes, and vocal calibration recast performance as an ordeal of technical submission. Meaning, visibility, and authority submit to the order of sound, as cinema's earlier polyphony contracts into a disciplined regime that makes audibility a condition of visibility, authority, and survival.

The opening party sequence turns heteroglossia into a sensory condition of early cinematic expression. Bakhtin's account of linguistic plurality, grounded in the coexistence of divergent voices, registers, and social idioms, illuminates a scene governed by plurality instead of unified order (Bakhtin, 1981: 272-273). The camera's restless movement through bodies, music, intoxication, and spectacle denies the sequence a stable visual or narrative center. Movement, laughter, obscenity, accent, and bodily proximity disturb any settled hierarchy among voice, gesture, body, and image. Bakhtin's carnivalesque enters the sequence alongside heteroglossia, since linguistic plurality passes through bodies, vulgarity, and the temporary suspension of social rank. Linear narration gives way to simultaneity, as gesture, sound, and corporeal excess compete for perceptual force. Multiplicity forms the very substance of pre-sound Hollywood's expressive abundance. Hollywood assumes the form of a living Babel: a world of converging voices and bodies, its plenitude already carrying the signs of dispersal, fragmentation, and collapse.

The transition to synchronized sound imposes a new discipline on cinematic production, perception, and performance. Microphones, soundproof booths, marked positions, and repeated takes function beyond neutral technique; they subject speech, gesture, and bodily presence to an order of audibility and synchronization. The soundstage acquires a Foucauldian logic as a space of measurement, correction, repetition, and normalization (Foucault, 1972: 5). Chazelle's mise-en-scène makes this logic

visible in the studio, as improvisation loses its former privilege and performance submits to acoustic precision and temporal constraint. The booth isolates the voice from the body and turns the actor's presence into a measurable acoustic object. Nellie LaRoy's struggle inside the recording booth gives the shift its most concentrated form: spontaneity, formerly valued as expressive force, undergoes recoding into acoustic error. Her failure registers the collision between an unruly performance style and a system newly organized around acoustic obedience. Audibility operates as a criterion of institutional authority. Sound enters the film as a regime that converts expressive abundance into measurable conformity and turns cinematic intelligibility into a disciplinary demand.

Baudrillard's simulation theory places the sound transition inside an order of code, circulation, and technical reproducibility. Signs derive authority from calibration, detached from any stable relation to lived experience (Baudrillard, 1994: 6). In *Babylon*, the gestural and visual abundance of silent cinema contracts beneath the pressure of synchronized dialogue. Vocal presence loses the force of embodied trace and circulates as a reproducible signal. Sound detaches the voice from bodily immediacy, submitting it to correction, repetition, and code. Expressive immediacy recedes before standardized legibility, as cinematic meaning aligns with synchronization and functional coherence. Nellie LaRoy's vocal breakdown concentrates this transformation: speech reaches acoustic registration but forfeits expressive presence. Her accent, rhythm, and bodily volatility disturb an acoustic order built on obedience. The qualities that secured her visibility in the silent era acquire the status of liabilities under synchronized sound. The recorded voice marks the severed relation between body, presence, and cinematic meaning.

Benjamin's account of mechanical reproduction brings the sound transition into the orbit of ritual value, uniqueness, and distance at the moment of technological standardization (Benjamin, 1968: 221-222). In *Babylon*, the party sequences retain a fragile auratic intensity sustained by improvisation, bodily excess, collective rhythm, and the seeming unrepeatability of performance. Yet that intensity already circulates inside spectacle, leaving aura as an unstable remainder absorbed by reproducible culture. The soundstage substitutes repetition, calibration, and regulated visibility for volatile immediacy. Performance passes from collective excess into technical reproducibility, and aura thins into residue. The Babel-like polyphony of early cinema contracts into a disciplined acoustic order; formal coherence survives by sacrificing residual resonance. Cinematic presence persists only as recurrence, loss, and technical return.

Chazelle's staging of early Hollywood transforms linguistic and aesthetic rupture into a Babelian drama of failed consolidation. The passage from the party sequences to the soundstage carries the film from heteroglossic excess into technical regulation, as voices, bodies, gestures, and sounds gradually relinquish their improvisational freedom to the discipline of synchronized speech. This historical

reversal reaches its most concentrated form in Nellie LaRoy's vocal crisis: the energy that secured her visibility in the silent regime returns as acoustic disturbance within the emergent acoustic order. Her failure, in turn, furnishes the new order with the excessive body required for its own consolidation. Babel names this collapse generated from within the demand for unity itself. The attempt to forge a single cinematic language releases the very fragmentation it labors to contain, and spectacle intensifies dispersal precisely at the moment of coerced coherence. In *Babylon*, meaning survives only as a provisional residue of circulation, technical mediation, and broken continuity. The film leaves spectacle, language, and technology in unresolved tension; cinematic change unfolds as a history that extracts coherence from exclusion, repetition, and loss.

3. Abjection and Excess: The Sacred, the Grotesque, and the Collapse of the Cinematic Body in *Babylon*

Babylon binds bodily excess to spectacle's visual machinery; the grotesque body thereby strains Hollywood's regime of glamour, discipline, and control. Poised between flesh, performance, and cinematic display, this body exceeds the scale of isolated disruption, as excretion, spillage, vomiting, sweat, and bodily breakdown rupture Hollywood's manufactured glamour and return material excess to a visual order organized around beauty, visibility, and control. That glamour draws its authority from the materiality it labors to conceal, appropriating bodily excess, stylizing it, and expelling it at the threshold of aesthetic incoherence. Kristeva's abject names the violence of this return: expelled matter turns back upon the order that expelled it and strains the symbolic boundaries sustaining aesthetic control (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Chazelle gives this reversal cinematic force as repudiated matter presses back into view and the boundaries of classical Hollywood falter at their moment of enforcement. Bodily disorder thus forms the material underside of spectacle, fastening glamour to the abjection it never fully masters. From this underside, grotesque excess assumes profane force and draws bodily collapse toward a degraded form of sacred intensity.

Nellie LaRoy concentrates abjection in the figure of the star body, a body produced as spectacle before it receives the mark of disorder. Her restless physicality, accent, vocal force, vulgar speech, and performative excess disturb the codes that discipline performance into cinematic glamour. The energy that secures her visibility also renders her unstable, excessive, and ultimately expendable. Kristeva's account of the abject gives this contradiction its theoretical pressure: symbolic order sustains itself by expelling the bodily matter and unruly presence that continually return to disturb it (Kristeva, 1982: 3-5). Nellie's body carries this unstable economy of glamour with particular force. It fascinates by exceeding decorum and invites rejection once excess begins to threaten coherence. Hollywood desires her femininity as spectacle and punishes it as excess; visibility itself turns into a scene of repudiation.

Her trajectory binds desire to expulsion, stardom to symbolic violence, and glamour to sacrificial exclusion.

The party sequences displace abjection from Nellie's individual body into Hollywood's collective body. Bakhtin's carnivalesque enters with particular force, as the sequence unsettles the distinctions that govern social and aesthetic hierarchy (Bakhtin, 1984: 19). Bodies crowd, touch, and collide; decorum loses authority, and social distinction falters. Restless camera movement, amplified sound, and rhythmic excess scatter perception across bodies and deny the sequence a stable perceptual center. Proximity, touch, intoxication, noise, and exposure turn the party into an unstable collective field. The party forms a field of bodily circulation before Hollywood sorts, disciplines, and assigns value to bodies. The grotesque exceeds private transgression and presses upon spectacle as a collective force. Hollywood assumes the shape of a carnivalesque formation sustained by excessive bodies, yet this suspension already bears the pressure of reversal: the unruly collectivity of the party will later confront the calibrated discipline of the soundstage.

The passage from party to studio converts carnivalesque vitality into disciplinary containment. The sound booth, microphone, and spatial markings enforce silence, regulate speech, and restrict movement, reducing performance to an order of calibration. The corporeal abundance celebrated in the party sequence returns in the studio as a technical defect. Douglas's formulation of dirt as "matter out of place" gives this shift its conceptual force: Nellie's body assumes the status of displaced matter by refusing the spatial, vocal, and acoustic placement demanded by synchronized sound (Douglas, 2002: 44). Performance passes from expressive excess into the demands of placement, timing, and acoustic obedience. Nellie LaRoy's corporeal intensity exposes the fragility of that order, since her bodily presence exceeds acoustic regulation and symbolic coherence. In the studio, the abject returns at the point of maximum control, forcing cinematic order to confront the disorder it excludes to preserve aesthetic authority.

Babylon casts this paradox as a profane sacred intensity rooted in abjection, mortality, and corporeal excess. Kristeva places the abject in proximity to the sacred at the intersection of mortality, contamination, and symbolic collapse; impurity gains symbolic density beyond simple degradation (Kristeva, 1982: 17-18). In *Babylon*, breakdown and material overflow acquire ritual force as glamour, mortality, and spectacle converge on the body. Ecstatic collectivity, corporeal eruption, and spillage assume the force of degraded rites within a cinematic order already shadowed by deterioration. The Babylonian motif elevates this profane sacredness into a historical allegory of excess and collapse. The ancient city's association with excess and decadence supplies the allegorical grammar of Hollywood's glamour-repression dialectic: repression underwrites glamour, and vitality returns at the margins Hollywood strives to exclude (Genesis, 11: 1-9). The grotesque body carries this tension: grandeur and

decay, glamour and abjection, spectacle and repudiated matter remain mutually implicated within a symbolic order sustained by disavowal and recurrent rupture.

4. The Tower Rebuilt: Cinematic Immortality and Nietzsche's Eternal Return in the Final Montage

The closing montage in Damien Chazelle's *Babylon* ruptures the film's historical frame and recasts cinema history as a cascade of recurrent images. Early experiments, classical forms, modern fragments, and digital intensities accumulate in collision, so that linear progression dissolves into saturation, recurrence, and perceptual excess. Rapid shifts of color, texture, speed, and cinematic reference deepen this perceptual saturation and sever remembrance from stable historical continuity. Manny Torres confronts this vision after exhaustion and loss; his gaze places personal ruin beside cinema's impersonal afterlife. Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return binds the sequence to recurrence, since images return in altered form as variation, excess, and disintegration (Nietzsche, 2001: 273). Return offers endurance by withholding completion. History persists here as recurrence alone: images return yet fail to restore the continuity their circulation seems to promise. Cinematic forms rise, collapse, and reappear, bound to the cycle that lays bare their fragility.

Benjamin's philosophy of history draws the montage away from recurrence alone and toward debris, interruption, and historical residue. Benjamin's Angel of History views progress from the vantage of wreckage: advancement gathers as debris (Benjamin, 1968: 257). In *Babylon*, cinematic memory carries the burden of this Benjaminian wreckage. The accelerated image flow renders film history as luminous debris, held between survival and disappearance, each fragment marked by forms already broken by technological change. The montage rejects chronological ordering and sets past images against the present as fragments charged by historical pressure. Its fragments resist incorporation into a stable narrative of advancement. Benjamin's historical materialism detaches cinematic immortality from intact preservation and relocates it amid ruins. Cinematic immortality assumes the form of damaged endurance: cinema persists as residue, citation, and fractured afterlife.

The final montage recasts cinematic immortality as the endurance of broken return, with Manny Torres's exhausted gaze turning the sequence into an act of belated witnessing that holds personal ruin beside cinema's impersonal afterlife. Return, in this sequence, refuses the restoration of origin; images reappear as altered, damaged, and historically burdened forms. From this fractured temporality, the imagery of ascent and collapse rebuilds the tower of cinema from its own ruins, binding ambition to dispersal from the outset. Nietzsche's eternal return gives this structure its philosophical pressure, since recurrence grants cinema endurance only by binding it to repetition, alteration, and loss (Nietzsche, 2001: 273). The fragments of film history resist the fantasy of an intact archive; they circulate as

remnants, citations, and unstable returns, attaching survival to the labor of reassembly itself. Each return rebuilds the tower while carrying the trace of collapse. Cinematic immortality resides in this instability, in a form of persistence denied final completion.

5. Cinema as Myth-Machine: The Collapse of the Sacred Narrative and the Hyperrealization of Culture in *Babylon*

Damien Chazelle's *Babylon* configures cinema as a myth-machine that invests the moving image with promises of transcendence while simultaneously revealing the instability of those promises. From its earliest encounters, cinema generated a quasi-sacred charge by rendering absence present and conferring durability upon the ephemeral, aligning spectatorship with ritualized modes of vision and mythic expectation. *Babylon* mobilizes this inheritance as a critical problem, situating cinematic transcendence within economies of excess, repetition, and erosion that unsettle the authority of sacred narrative. The opening party sequence condenses this paradox at the level of collective embodiment, mobilizing carnivalesque excess as a force that suspends hierarchy and fuses sacred aspiration with profane materiality (Bakhtin, 1984: 20-21). Nellie LaRoy emerges in this space as a liminal figure whose charismatic intensity secures visibility while marking the threshold of symbolic tolerance. Her presence concentrates the internal contradiction of the myth-machine, as cinematic glamour generates devotion and rejection in a single gesture, and as the aura of star-making materializes alongside the conditions of its imminent destabilization.

Kristeva's notion of the abject situates Nellie LaRoy at the threshold where bodily excess fractures symbolic coherence and renders visible the limits of cinematic order. Defined as that disturbs identity, system, and order, the abject sustains a constitutive relation to visibility by returning at the moment of expulsion and imposing the terms of presence upon representation (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Nellie condenses this dynamic as a figure whose vitality commands attention even as corporeal transgression such as sweat, profanity, and emesis marks her body as intolerable within the emerging aesthetic of synchronized sound. The recalibration of performance imposed by technological discipline transforms expressive intensity into acoustic deviation and redirects ritualized aura toward legibility and control. Within the myth machine of *Babylon*, this displacement exposes the persistence of star-making as a process dependent on bodily exclusion, staging brilliance, and repudiation as coextensive effects of the same symbolic economy.

Cinema operates here as a myth-machine structured around repetition, excess, and continual recomposition, sustaining narratives of endurance while simultaneously foregrounding their intrinsic instability. The iterative accumulation and circulation of images function as a generative mechanism that produces the semblance of continuity via recurrent fragmentation and formal rearticulation. Such

dynamics situate cinematic ambition within a cyclical process of reconstruction and erosion, binding spectacle to recurrence and dispersal. The myth-machine persists through the reiteration of its structural limits, establishing the conceptual horizon for the article's concluding engagement with cinematic immortality as a condition shaped by repetition, loss, and constitutive fragility.

The sacred dimension reconfigures itself and reappears in inverted form, anchored in corporeality and finitude. Kristeva's theorization of the abject delineates this proximity to the sacred by inscribing mortality as a constitutive limit and relocating symbolic intensity within collapse, contamination, and bodily excess (Kristeva, 1982: 17-18). In *Babylon*, acts of vomiting, bleeding, and corporeal spillage acquire ritual valence, operating as profane sacraments within a cinematic economy governed by repetition and exhaustion. Montage intensifies this dynamic by displacing origin and consolidating continuity via recursive decay, thereby sacralizing persistence at the level of form. Cultural memory furnishes the mediating architecture for this transformation. Assmann's conception of memory as the transmission of identity across time elucidates the capacity of repetition, ritual, and reusable forms to stabilize coherence amid rupture (Assmann, 2011: 37). Chazelle activates this logic within the grammar of montage, assembling fragments of cinematic past into provisional rites that provisionally secure meaning without reinstating transcendence. Hollywood's identity materializes from this tension as a spectacle that monumentalizes its own remnants while simultaneously disclosing the fragility of its metaphysical ground. Cinema here operates as a myth-machine structured by reiteration and continual recomposition, producing the appearance of endurance as an immanent effect of cyclical return and systemic instability, and thereby situating cinematic immortality within a horizon defined by recurrence, loss, and constitutive fragility.

6. Simulation and the Myth of the Tower

Babylon figures the tower as Hollywood's architecture of images, a structure assembled from spectacle with stable ground withdrawn. Monumental sets, premieres, star bodies, publicity rituals, studio machinery, and montage fragments become the materials of cinematic permanence. Authority depends on circulation, repetition, and exchange, detached from secure anchorage in lived reality; Baudrillard's simulation describes this logic as signs acquire force from circulation itself (Baudrillard, 1994: 1). In Chazelle's film, Hollywood manufactures durability by binding images to circuits of mutual reference, each image drawing authority from other images apart from referential depth. The cinematic tower rises from spectacle with foundation already withdrawn; rehearsal, replication, and recursive visibility sustain it, and each new layer of spectacle erodes the ground it presents as secure.

Chazelle's mise-en-scène materializes simulation across bodies, sets, microphones, publicity rituals, and repeated performances. The orgiastic party sequences manufacture authenticity from total

performance: sound, movement, intoxication, and corporeal proximity generate immediacy as an effect of theatrical excess. That fabricated immediacy encounters its technical underside in the soundstage; visibility submits there to repetition, calibration, and mediation. Nellie LaRoy's performances condense the tension between charisma and code. Her bodily overflow commands the camera's attention, yet her vocal presence resists absorption into repeatable acoustic form. Baudrillard's simulation theory locates authority in self-referential circulation; signs sustain coherence by referring to other signs in the absence of stable anchorage (Baudrillard, 1994: 6). Culture enters the hyperreal at the moment Hollywood's images abandon outward reference and circulate as the reality they claim to represent. Spectacle acquires solidity by multiplying images; each multiplication draws it further into the instability of the hyperreal.

At the film's conclusion, *Babylon* draws cinema history into an accelerated circulation of fragments. Origins recede within that circulation; continuity detaches from historical sequence and persists as visual recurrence. The montage's accelerated citations render film history as a field of residues, unstable returns, and visual afterimages. Manny Torres's belated gaze lends this circulation an affective gravity, setting personal exhaustion against cinema's impersonal endurance. Benjamin's account of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction gains particular force here, as singular works relinquish their ritual distance and reappear as reproducible traces within a field governed by seriality and circulation (Benjamin, 1968: 221). Hollywood enters the frame as a modern Babylon, its tower built from images, spectacle, and repetition. The tower relinquishes transcendental promise and remains an unfinished structure of recurrence, assembled from reiteration, residual imagery, and accumulation. Endurance detaches itself from completion; the image survives by returning, deteriorating, and folding into altered arrangements of memory.

7. Cinema as Modern Babylonian Allegory

Babylon figures Hollywood as a modern Babylon, a symbolic city assembled from spectacle, ambition, repetition, and fragility. Its authority rises from visual excess, yet that same excess unsettles the coherence it appears to secure. Sets, stars, premieres, parties, and montages accumulate into a monument of cinematic permanence; dispersal, however, already inhabits the structure of that monument. Grandeur and collapse therefore occupy the same visual order. Hollywood carries American modernity's spectacular dream of permanence as a dream already marked by instability. Its tower of images grows by repetition, enlargement, and visual return, but the accumulation that gives it scale also weakens its ground. Endurance survives in the unstable labor of repetition and saturation. Hollywood's grandeur fractures from within the mechanisms that sustain its visibility; Babylonian memory binds ambition to disintegration, and cinematic permanence appears as a monument already exposed to recurrence, instability, and erosion.

Chazelle's visual architecture extends the Babylonian allegory into the film's visual form, binding spectacle, embodiment, and saturation to the same logic of excess. In the opening party sequence, music, movement, intoxication, corporeal proximity, and restless camera motion produce a dense polyphonic field that disturbs hierarchy and decorum. The film's figures circulate within this symbolic city as distinct pressures within the same allegorical order: Nellie LaRoy binds visibility to transgression, Manny Torres turns aspiration toward instability, and Jack Conrad bears the erosion of charisma produced by technological transition. Marginal figures carry this dispersal further, marking voices displaced toward spectacle's edges. Extended tracking shots, amplified soundscapes, and insistent montage install excess as a formal principle beyond decorative surface. This excess reaches cinematic memory as well, since images survive as fragments, citations, and residual traces. Benjamin's reflections on aura lend this process theoretical pressure: singular presence yields to reproducible memory, and continuity persists only as fractured visual remains (Benjamin, 1968: 221). Hollywood's monumentality depends on accumulation, repetition, and visual saturation; each of these forces also bears the trace of disintegration.

Babylon casts Hollywood as a regime of cultural memory sustained by repetition, spectacle, and loss. Assmann's theory of cultural memory clarifies the principle at work here: identity endures by recurring in reusable texts, images, and rituals (Assmann, 2011: 37). Premieres, star images, studio rituals, and montage form the repeatable grammar of Hollywood's institutional memory. In the recirculation of this grammar, Hollywood remembers, monumentalizes, and revises itself. In Chazelle's film, montage and spectacle exceed historical recollection, recirculating cinema history as a damaged inheritance, its continuity dependent on repetition, citation, and visual return. Hollywood's visual memory gathers progress, celebrity, technological mastery, and permanence as exhausted myths of aspiration. The past returns as image, ritual, citation, and residue; continuity survives in the very exposure of permanence as unstable. American myths of progress and immortality enter an allegorical structure governed by recurrence and collapse. Hollywood relinquishes the appearance of an autonomous industry and gathers the density of a symbolic city, bearing the contradictions of modern culture in its architecture of images. As a twenty-first-century Babylon and Babel, the film renders Hollywood's splendor inseparable from the forces that undo its coherence: repetition, dispersal, and symbolic erosion.

8. Discussion: Film–Myth Relations and Contributions to American Culture

Babylon invests Hollywood with the density of a modern Babel: a symbolic city animated by ambition, repetition, spectacle, and fragility. Babel registers linguistic and symbolic dispersal; Babylon bears the logic of grandeur, excess, and ruin. Myth enters cinematic form as the grammar organizing Hollywood's visibility, memory, and historical self-image. In Chazelle's film, myth exceeds decorative

reference; it furnishes a grammar for American cinema's projection of permanence, translation of visibility into authority, and masking of the instability carried by its own excess. Hollywood's cultural power derives from accumulation, circulation, and visual saturation, yet these same processes lay bare the vulnerability of spectacle-driven endurance. The film recasts Hollywood from industrial history into cultural mythology. Chazelle's film binds the mythic imagination of American modernity to cinema's promise of survival: progress, celebrity, technological mastery, and cultural memory appear as aspirations already shadowed by exhaustion and dispersal. The film casts American cinema as a secular myth-making apparatus, one that generates cultural memory by repeating and destabilizing its own images. Permanence persists here as repetition, detached from the security of achievement; cinematic history unfolds as an unstable sequence, every accumulation already bearing the trace of erosion.

Technological transformation and corporeal excess lay bare the cost of Hollywood's mythic promise of visibility. Synchronized sound compresses multiplicity into calibrated intelligibility, submitting bodies and voices to new demands of timing, placement, audibility, and control. Sound operates as an apparatus of cultural sorting, distinguishing admissible bodies and voices from those marked as excessive. The body consequently bears the pressure of historical rupture, marking the passage from cinematic innovation into discipline. Nellie LaRoy condenses this pressure with particular force, since her vitality commands visibility only to reappear as a sign of excess, instability, and eventual expulsion. Hollywood eroticizes Nellie's femininity as spectacle and disciplines it as disorder. Kristeva's abject lends this contradiction its theoretical force: bodily excess participates in meaning-making, yet the order that extracts energy from it must also mark it as intolerable (Kristeva, 1982: 3-5). Spectacle preserves fascination by absorbing what it later repudiates. Transgression circulates as spectacle until it threatens institutional coherence; at that point, the same excess that animates cinematic glamour polices the boundary of inclusion. Hollywood's promise of visibility, therefore rehearses a broader American fantasy of self-making, with success rendered inseparable from calibration, discipline, and exclusion.

Cultural memory transfers these dynamics from film history to American cultural imagination. For Assmann, cultural memory depends on reusable images, narratives, and rituals that transmit identity across time (Assmann, 2011: 37). In *Babylon*, montage and spectacle recall, fracture, and recirculate cinema history as a damaged inheritance. Hollywood converts cinema history into a national fantasy of progress, celebrity, technological mastery, and cultural survival. Fragments of the past return as image, citation, ritual, and residue, giving continuity a provisional form amid repetition and loss. American cultural identity attaches itself to this unstable circulation: progress, celebrity, technological mastery, and permanence survive as myths repeatedly reenacted and repeatedly eroded. Hollywood consequently appears as the meeting point of progress and exhaustion, immortality and breakdown, cultural memory and historical attrition.

Babylon enters American Studies as a film that recasts Hollywood beyond the limits of industrial history and places it inside the longer life of secular myth. This reading shifts attention from Hollywood as an entertainment industry to Hollywood as a symbolic institution that manufactures American fantasies of progress, visibility, and survival. Cinema inherits forms once attached to sacred narrative, including ritual, ascent, fall, and return, and translates them into images of celebrity, technological mastery, and cultural endurance. Theological patterns of ascent, dispersal, and return persist in the film after transcendence has lost its metaphysical security: ascent survives as ambition and celebrity, dispersal as linguistic, bodily, and visual fragmentation, return as montage, repetition, and cultural memory. Hollywood acquires the density of both industry and mythic city, carrying the paradoxes of American modernity in its architecture of images: ambition bound to instability, freedom disciplined by technical systems, memory sustained by fragments. Allegory gains importance here for its capacity to cast cinema as a secular form of cultural imagination, a medium that repeats, monumentalizes, and fractures the myths sustaining America's narratives of endurance.

9. Conclusion

Babylon distills Hollywood's desire for permanence under the sign of ruin. Babel condenses the logic of dispersal; Babylon anchors the image of grandeur already shadowed by collapse. Across the transition to synchronized sound, Nellie LaRoy's abject body, and the final montage, Chazelle's film transmutes fracture into the very condition of cinematic survival. Hollywood's mythic authority draws force from its capacity to convert instability into spectacle and spectacle into cultural memory. Its claim to magnitude derives force from erosion, exhaustion, recurrence, and temporal fracture; continuity survives as unstable return. The film unsettles teleological accounts of cinematic history and redefines endurance as a precarious labor of repetition, excess, and reconstruction. Hollywood consequently assumes the force of a privileged cultural site for reading American modernity's investment in progress, visibility, spectacle, and survival. Grandeur and collapse remain locked inside the same visual order, and Hollywood's radiance gathers intensity from the traces of debris, loss, and symbolic erosion.

In *Babylon*, cinema relinquishes the fantasy of a monumental archive and assumes the form of a field governed by accumulation, attrition, and mnemonic saturation. Images endure by returning in altered and fragmentary forms, and the final montage concentrates this logic in their accelerated circulation. As images return, fracture, and recombine, the film detaches coherence from stable authority and installs fragmentation at the center of cinematic meaning. Myth, in turn, forfeits narrative unity and persists as residue, reverberation, and afterimage, always nearing disappearance. Visibility intensifies as permanence erodes, so cultural endurance comes to depend on the repeated circulation of damaged images, each return preserving memory and confirming loss. Hollywood consequently remembers itself in fragments, temporal fractures, and incomplete returns.

The Babel allegory refigures Hollywood's formative moment as a history of expressive fracture, technical discipline, and unstable cohesion. The desire for a single cinematic language precipitates new forms of rupture. Silent cinema's heteroglossic abundance compresses under synchronized sound, as gesture, improvisation, bodily movement, and vocal excess yield to the demands of acoustic calibration. Microphones, recording booths, and repeated takes translate plurality into reproducible order, narrowing the field of performance at the very moment technological innovation promises expansion. Nellie LaRoy's vocal failure lends this contraction its embodied form, disclosing how the new acoustic order translates vitality into error. Her failure also renders the female star body the surface for the inscription of technological discipline and its limits. The promise of unity acquires legibility precisely at the point of unavoidable rupture. Benjamin's philosophy of history gives this reversal its critical density by treating historical continuity as a form written in loss. Hollywood's so-called golden age consequently harbors restriction inside its own promise of magnitude; erasure, control, and expressive attrition remain internal to that promise from the beginning.

Hollywood's allegory of endurance reaches its most material expression in the grotesque body. In *Babylon*, spectacle draws vitality from the excess it expels, placing Kristeva's abject at the center of Hollywood's cultural imagination. Nellie LaRoy's charisma commands recognition by disturbing propriety; her collapse discloses the industry's dependence on repression, exclusion, and bodily discipline. The party sequences extend this contradiction into the collective sphere, as Bakhtin's carnivalesque converts degradation into renewal and makes vitality legible in disorder. Nellie's individual collapse and the party's collective excess disclose the same logic: Hollywood converts disorder into vitality before marking it as expendable. The film locates cinema's aura inside the profane force of bodily degradation, binding grandeur to decay within the same symbolic order. The body consequently carries Hollywood's paradox in visible form: emblem of triumph, sign of collapse, and figure of cultural endurance exposed to disruption, instability, and breakdown.

The final montage grants the Babylonian allegory its most concentrated historical form. Cinematic images surge as fragments, rushing toward saturation and unleashing the double sensation of visual intoxication and structural ruin. The line of progress fractures into debris lit in rapid succession; history attains legibility only as discontinuity, citation, and return. Continuity endures as an unstable labor of reassembly, detached from the security of intact preservation. The tower of images projects monumentality on fragile ground, raising vertical ambition from materials already marked by dispersal. Cinematic immortality draws force from this unstable circulation; each return sustains the image by laying bare its vulnerability to erosion. Memory abandons the fantasy of the unified archive and endures as a constellation of ruins, assembled from fragments and left open to further recomposition.

Babylon grounds artistic truth in fracture, detached from the ideal of completion, and this claim gathers force across the film's decisive zones of rupture. The sound transition, the abject body, and the final montage return to the same philosophical insight: cinema endures by laying bare the fractures it fails to master. Images return without restoring wholeness, and memory persists in broken circulation. Collapse gains formal density at the point where rupture discloses the contradictions concealed by coherence. Bodily excess, visual fragmentation, and repetition consequently shed the status of deficiency and assume the status of conditions for continued significance. Permanence survives only as vulnerability, sustained by incompleteness and denied the comfort of final resolution. Against Hollywood's fantasy of seamless permanence, the film sets a damaged truth grounded in instability, residue, and return. Allegory converts this fragility into philosophical force, so cinema imagines truth as persistence among ruins, detached from the fantasy of completed ascent.

Babylon establishes a critical framework for American Studies by reading Hollywood beyond industrial history, as a secular institution of myth, memory, and visual power. Its significance derives from the convergence of media form, theological residue, cultural memory, and the symbolic contradictions of American modernity, since the film recasts Hollywood as a cultural apparatus that transmutes technological progress, celebrity, and visual spectacle into myths of national endurance. Hollywood consequently assumes the density of both industry and symbolic city, generating images that convert ambition, technological mastery, celebrity, and permanence into cultural myth. This mythic structure is articulated across three related registers: Babelian dispersal registers in technological rupture, decadence assumes visible form in carnivalesque excess, and collapse concentrates force in the hyperreal density of the final montage. These registers disclose the persistence of theological grammars inside secular cultural formations: ascent without transcendence, dispersal without redemption, return without restored unity. Ascent registers in Hollywood's dream of celebrity and vertical ambition; dispersal surfaces in the Babelian crisis of sound and visibility; return is concentrated in the final montage's damaged memory of cinema. Across these movements, *Babylon* assumes critical force for American cultural analysis, casting cinema as a form of cultural imagination that repeats, monumentalizes, and fractures American identity inside its own images.

Reflection on *Babylon* reorients the argument toward the ancient city's governing paradox: monumental ambition already harbors the force of dispersal. Hollywood absorbs this paradox as a modern tower of images, luminous in ascent and vulnerable at the moment of illumination. Cinema projects vertical ambition from spectacle, celebrity, technological mastery, and visual excess, yet each image carries the inscription of erosion. Fascination intensifies at the edge of disappearance; brilliance derives intensity from its exposure to loss. Myth endures as ruin, fragment, and recurrent visual form, detached from the fantasy of monumental totality. Fragmentation assumes the status of remembrance,

enabling repetition to sustain cultural legibility after coherence has fractured. Cultural endurance persists as return, not secured duration: grandeur derives force from fragility, and survival remains vulnerable to breakdown, dispersal, and loss. Immortality, stripped of transcendental promise, acquires the form of recurrence without culmination, as modern culture reassembles itself from the ruins it cannot finally master.

Babylon finally suspends Hollywood between monument and ruin, archive and carnival, Babel and Babylon. Babel registers dispersal, and Babylon bears splendor already shadowed by collapse; Chazelle's vision of cinematic modernity derives from this double inheritance. Cinema renounces transcendence as completion, preserving its afterlife in fragments, returns, and unstable acts of reassembly. This logic attains its most forceful visual form in the final montage, as cinema history reappears in fragments that preserve memory and expose loss. Bound to this rhythm of repetition, collapse, and damaged renewal, American culture assumes the form of a field of mythic force gathered at the point of breakdown. Cinematic immortality endures in the repeated activation of fragments, detached from the fantasy of stable totality. The tower ascends with ruin already inscribed in its materials; illumination radiates as brilliance remains vulnerable to disappearance. History attains legibility in fractured form, with fragments disclosing an endurance unavailable to monumental continuity. Cultural temporality advances by disintegration and recomposition; continuity draws itself from the labor of rebuilding from ruins. The allegory of Babylon culminates in this paradox: American modernity preserves its afterlife by rebuilding itself from the fragments ruin leaves behind.

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