

matthew barney river of fundament

matthew barney river of fundament is an ambitious and multifaceted film and art project that challenges traditional narrative structures and explores complex themes through a unique blend of sculpture, mythology, and performance. Created by contemporary artist Matthew Barney, *River of Fundament* is a three-part film inspired by the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead and the novel "The Story of the Lost Child" by Norman Mailer. The work intricately combines avant-garde cinema, operatic elements, and elaborate set designs to examine concepts of death, rebirth, and transformation. This article provides a comprehensive overview of Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament*, including its artistic context, thematic content, and critical reception. Furthermore, it delves into the film's symbolism, production process, and its place within Barney's broader oeuvre.

- Overview of Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament*
- Thematic Exploration in *River of Fundament*
- Artistic Elements and Symbolism
- Production and Cinematic Techniques
- Reception and Impact

Overview of Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament*

Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament* is a landmark project that spans over six hours, divided into three acts. It was premiered in 2014 and represents a significant evolution of Barney's exploration of the human body and transformation. The film is notable for its integration of operatic performance, sculpture, and narrative filmmaking, making it a hybrid work that defies conventional categorization. *River of Fundament* draws inspiration from the ancient Egyptian funerary text, the Book of the Dead, which guides the deceased through the afterlife, alongside Norman Mailer's novel that explores themes of death and rebirth through a modern American lens.

Genesis and Inspiration

The conceptual foundation of *River of Fundament* stems from Matthew Barney's interest in mythology, anatomy, and cultural history. The project reinterprets the journey of the soul after death, linking it with American

industrial history and Mailer's literary themes. This synthesis results in a layered narrative that unfolds through symbolic imagery and complex visual metaphors.

Structure and Format

The film is structured as a triptych, with each act corresponding to different phases of transformation. It includes operatic sequences performed by renowned singers, elaborate sculptural installations, and surreal cinematic vignettes. This structure allows Barney to explore diverse modes of storytelling and artistic expression within a single cohesive work.

Thematic Exploration in River of Fundament

Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament* is rich with themes that interrogate mortality, regeneration, and the cyclical nature of life. At its core, the project investigates the interplay between physical decay and spiritual renewal, framed by mythological and industrial motifs.

Death and Rebirth

The central theme revolves around the process of death and subsequent rebirth, inspired by the funerary rites described in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The film portrays this transition as both a physical and metaphysical journey, emphasizing transformation as an essential aspect of existence.

Industrial Metaphor

Barney incorporates elements of American industrial decline, using the metaphor of the automobile's lifecycle to parallel human mortality. The narrative references the dismantling and recycling of cars, symbolizing cycles of destruction and regeneration in a contemporary cultural context.

Mythological and Literary References

The work draws from a variety of sources, including Egyptian mythology and Norman Mailer's literature, creating a dense intertextual framework. These references enrich the narrative, offering viewers multiple layers of interpretation related to identity, death, and legacy.

Artistic Elements and Symbolism

River of Fundament is renowned for its intricate use of symbolism and its blending of diverse artistic disciplines. Matthew Barney's signature style is evident in the sculptural forms, performative elements, and visual motifs that permeate the film.

Sculptural Installations

The project features monumental sculptures that serve as both physical backdrops and symbolic objects within the narrative. These installations often incorporate materials such as metal, rubber, and organic matter, reflecting themes of industrialization and organic transformation.

Operatic and Performance Components

Opera plays a crucial role in the film's emotional and narrative expression. The performances by trained singers enhance the mythic and ritualistic atmosphere, while the choreography and staging contribute to the immersive experience of the work.

Symbolic Imagery

Barney employs recurring symbols, such as the river, vehicles, and anatomical forms, to convey complex ideas. The river serves as a metaphor for the flow of life and death, while the cars represent cycles of decay and renewal. Anatomical references link the human body to broader themes of transformation.

- River as a symbol of continuous movement and change
- Automobiles representing life cycles and industrial culture
- Anatomical motifs emphasizing physicality and mortality

Production and Cinematic Techniques

The production of Matthew Barney's River of Fundament involved extensive

collaboration across disciplines and significant logistical complexity. The film's cinematic techniques reflect its experimental nature and artistic ambitions.

Filming Locations and Set Design

River of Fundament was shot in multiple locations, including industrial sites, natural landscapes, and custom-built sets. The environments are integral to the film's narrative and aesthetic, providing a tangible connection to the themes of industry and nature.

Use of Medium and Visual Style

Barney's approach combines traditional filmmaking with performance art and sculpture, resulting in a visually rich and textured experience. The film employs varied cinematographic techniques, including slow motion, close-ups, and wide shots, to emphasize different narrative elements.

Collaborative Efforts

The project brought together artists, musicians, performers, and technicians to realize its complex vision. This multidisciplinary collaboration was essential to achieving the film's operatic and sculptural dimensions.

Reception and Impact

Since its release, Matthew Barney's River of Fundament has been recognized as a significant contribution to contemporary art and experimental cinema. It has sparked discussions around the boundaries of film, performance, and sculpture.

Critical Response

Critics have praised River of Fundament for its ambition and originality, though its dense symbolism and unconventional format have also challenged audiences. The work is often regarded as a demanding but rewarding experience that pushes the limits of narrative and visual art.

Influence on Contemporary Art

The project has influenced a generation of artists interested in interdisciplinary practices and the fusion of visual art with performance and cinema. It exemplifies the potential for art to address profound existential themes through innovative forms.

Exhibition and Screenings

River of Fundament has been exhibited in museums, galleries, and film festivals worldwide, highlighting its dual nature as both a cinematic and sculptural work. These presentations often include accompanying installations and performances to fully engage viewers.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'River of Fundament' by Matthew Barney?

'River of Fundament' is a feature-length film and performance art piece by Matthew Barney, released in 2014. It is a complex multimedia work combining mythology, industrial history, and personal narrative to explore themes of death and rebirth.

What themes are explored in Matthew Barney's 'River of Fundament'?

The work explores themes such as transformation, the cycle of life and death, industrial decay, mythology, and the intersection of the human body with machinery and landscape.

How does 'River of Fundament' relate to Norman Mailer?

'River of Fundament' is loosely based on the novel 'Ancient Evenings' by Norman Mailer. The film reinterprets Mailer's story, incorporating elements of Egyptian mythology and Mailer's portrayal of reincarnation.

What artistic mediums are combined in 'River of Fundament'?

Matthew Barney integrates film, performance art, sculpture, music, and installation in 'River of Fundament,' creating a multi-sensory experience that blurs the lines between different art forms.

Where was 'River of Fundament' first premiered?

'River of Fundament' premiered at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, marking a significant moment for experimental and avant-garde cinema.

What is the significance of the industrial imagery in 'River of Fundament'?

The industrial imagery, including scenes set in Detroit's factories and scrap yards, symbolizes decay and renewal, reflecting the film's exploration of transformation and the life cycle.

How long is Matthew Barney's 'River of Fundament'?

'River of Fundament' has a runtime of approximately 4.5 hours, making it an extensive and immersive artistic experience.

Who composed the music for 'River of Fundament'?

Jonathan Bepler composed the original score for 'River of Fundament,' continuing his long-standing collaboration with Matthew Barney to create a haunting and atmospheric soundtrack.

Additional Resources

1. *Matthew Barney: River of Fundament*

This book offers an in-depth exploration of Matthew Barney's ambitious multimedia project "River of Fundament," which blends film, sculpture, and performance art. It examines the complex narrative that intertwines mythology, industrial history, and personal transformation. Richly illustrated, the book provides valuable insights into Barney's artistic process and thematic concerns.

2. *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle*

As a precursor to "River of Fundament," this book delves into Barney's landmark "Cremaster Cycle," a series of five films known for their intricate symbolism and innovative visual language. It analyzes the conceptual frameworks and mythological references that underpin Barney's oeuvre. Readers gain a comprehensive understanding of his evolving artistic vision.

3. *Myth and Materiality in Contemporary Art*

Focusing on artists like Matthew Barney, this book explores how contemporary creators use mythological narratives to address issues of identity, transformation, and material culture. It situates "River of Fundament" within a broader context of myth-inspired art practices. The essays examine the interplay between storytelling and physical form in modern art.

4. *The Intersection of Art and Industry: Matthew Barney's Vision*

This volume investigates the relationship between industrial history and artistic expression in Barney's work, particularly in "River of Fundament." It looks at how the artist incorporates elements of metallurgy, machinery, and urban decay into his visual storytelling. The book offers a critical perspective on the fusion of art and industrial processes.

5. Performance and Sculpture: The Hybrid Art of Matthew Barney

Highlighting Barney's innovative blending of performance art and sculpture, this book discusses key works including "River of Fundament." It analyzes how his physical performances inform and transform his sculptural creations. The text provides a nuanced understanding of the dynamic between movement and material in his practice.

6. Contemporary Video Art: Narrative and Experimentation

This anthology includes a chapter dedicated to "River of Fundament," situating it within the landscape of experimental video art. The book examines narrative structures and cinematic techniques employed by artists like Barney to push the boundaries of traditional storytelling. It is a valuable resource for understanding the evolution of video as an artistic medium.

7. Alchemy and Transformation in Modern Art

Exploring themes central to "River of Fundament," this book discusses how contemporary artists use alchemical symbolism to explore transformation and regeneration. Matthew Barney's work is featured prominently as an example of how ancient motifs are reinterpreted in a modern context. The essays link historical alchemy with present-day artistic innovation.

8. Sculpture in the Expanded Field

This text addresses how artists like Matthew Barney expand the definition of sculpture through interdisciplinary approaches. "River of Fundament" serves as a case study for understanding the integration of film, performance, and installation within sculptural practice. The book challenges conventional notions of form and space in art.

9. Art and Mythology: Reimagining Ancient Narratives

Focusing on the resurgence of mythological themes in contemporary art, this book explores how artists reinterpret ancient stories to comment on modern life. Matthew Barney's "River of Fundament" is highlighted for its inventive retelling of myth through a futuristic lens. The collection emphasizes the enduring power of myth in shaping artistic expression.

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