Introduction

As was the case for authorship around 1990, in the last decade the tide has turned for cinephilia. Raised from the critical doldrums in which it had drifted since the 1970s, it has in the new millennium gathered momentum in the form of an outpouring of published essays, special journal issues, and book-length collections (as well as a singly authored monograph) devoted to its numerous manifestations and implications. As some of the contributions in this dossier indicate, it was Susan Sontag’s 1996 *New York Times Magazine* lament for the bygone days of cinephilia, “The Decay of Cinema,” which sparked the powder keg—buried, not forgotten, unearthed anew—for critical work on what might be termed the new cinephilia. Much of this work proceeds from and along the faultlines that have divided academic film studies proper from the more broadly based film culture which partly gave rise to the discipline in the first place. And it is along precisely these faultlines that cinephilia’s future must be envisioned.

I consider this in-between-ness to be a good thing: cinephilia may be understood as something of an irritant to certain entrenched conceptions about what academic study proper is, what it might concern itself with, how it should carry out its procedures—and this is very much the spirit of George Toles’s piece which concludes this dossier. It also flies in the face of the “death of cinema” doom-mongering that came into vogue around the time of Sontag’s article and that fixated on how new digital media are effecting a fundamental break in the history of the medium. For it is without question that two particular growth technologies—DVD and the Internet—have fueled cinephilia in ways that are swerving it away from previously privileged sites and forms of consumption (i.e., the movie theater, 16mm and 35mm projection). On the one hand, as Liz Czach points out in her examination of film festival going, the affiliations between a classic, big-screen cinephilia and the fiscal realities underpinning contemporary festival economies are now ones held in an uneasy tension, with both stargazing and the construction of the festival audience threatening to imperil...
those individually experienced filmic moments that have heretofore come to define cinephile knowledge. On the other hand, Jenna Ng explores how cinephilia is facilitated anew, and in increasingly interactive ways, by home viewing and re-viewing enabled by an array of technologies, of which DVD is inarguably, at least at the moment, the most significant. Twenty-first-century cinephilia thus marks a move away from the rarified, quasi-religious theatrical experience of the filmic relic, but at the same time carries with it both a version of the cinephile object as fetish (the DVD as collectible) and of the myth of total cinema as articulated by André Bazin in the childhood of cinephilia itself, a phase and a filiation of central concern to Chris Darke.

It is important to underscore how the unpredictable convergence and rapid accretion of advances in not only moving image but also informational technologies and cultures are essential for the prominence and variegated forms of cinephilia today. Along with film festivals and DVD, the Internet emerged in the late 1990s to effect several polarities which distinguish contemporary cinephilia as much more complex than its forebears. DVD collecting and viewing, carried out online now to a degree unthinkable a decade ago, perforce turn audiences and spectators into atomized consumers, and so engender a different kind of cinematic apparatus from that theorized in the 1970s, but one even more complicit with the ideologies of capitalism—in this sense, the impetus for the era of so-called Screen theory which threw cinephilia into such critical disfavor might easily weigh in on the implications of its current manifestation. But DVD has also made much more widely and immediately available a wealth of global film history that does not require the cinephile to live in or near a major urban center (a “world city”) in order to access these treasures, in dribs and drabs, via the archive and cinemathéque circuit—its recognized democratizing function. Marijke de Valck’s contribution, which opens the dossier, addresses how the digital is a nexus for debate in the world of film archives on precisely these terms, throwing into question the material integrity of the filmic object on the one hand and driving its preservation and restoration on the other—and with much wider constituencies than ever before potentially reaping the benefits. For the study of film inside the academy and out, the Internet has proven to be an equally powerful force for cinephilic engagement. Myriad types of writing and reflecting on cinema now appear across a range of online journals; Offscreen and Screening the Past emerged in the year following Sontag’s (inadvertently?) generative death knell for cinephilia, Senses of Cinema, at the century’s end. But the bulk of Internet writing lies, of course, beyond properly academic discourse: fan and cult Web sites, festival and DVD reviews, “100 Best...” lists, blogs, and so forth. These are having deleterious effects on professional film criticism (especially post–credit crunch) at the same time as they foster increased interest, awareness, and knowledge of films and cinemas of all types. They also serve to remind us of the hale and hardy state of film culture, and of the central importance of the filmic object, indeed the filmic moment, for cinephilia, certainly, but also perhaps for a newly engaged and reinvigorated academic film studies.

The study of contemporary cinephilia can thus be parsed out in many ways. One approach would be to separate it into its venues of consumption, its technologies of vision, and its activities and forms of production—but such a separation must be seen from the start as an artificial one. Another approach would be to consider cinephilia
as phenomenon (cultural, historical, geopolitical), as experience (collective, individual), and as knowledge (fascination, reflection, interpretation). The contributions to this In Focus interface more readily with the latter approach, and have been organized along just such a circuit, from outside to inside—with the curious, happy coincidence of the final two concerning themselves with two American films from 1931. But these patiently unapologetic textual analyses are not merely concerned with their chosen films, but also with what the films provoke outside of their own skins: their sociological contexts, their relations to other films, the various techne that weave the cocoons inside which they metamorphose into fluttering beings that captivate in their ephemerality and impermanence. What emerges, in the end, is the overwhelmingly physical disposition of film, how it figures bodies, machines, rooms, landscapes, and their relation as forms of deferral beyond the space and time of the film itself, leaving it for us to rescue, to explore, and to articulate—though not to complete—their moments of inscrutable pleasure. It is this sense of wonderment that academic film studies lost somewhere along its way, and through a renewed engagement with cinephilia might yet regain.

Much has been said about the death of cinema. In media industry circles the persistent decline in cinema attendance has ushered in a phase of serious reconsideration of existing business models. New industry strategies increasingly put forward the liquid notion of “content” as a replacement for the old edifice of cinema. Issues of convergence and technological change are at the heart of artistic and cultural concerns about cinema’s contemporary condition as well. Peter Greenaway, one of the more persistent purveyors of the death of cinema position for more than a decade, has proclaimed cinema “brain dead” and urged all filmmakers to leave behind the literary tradition of storytelling and convert to the new aesthetics, interactivity, and multimedia forms, as he has done himself.1 While such talk of the “death of cinema” is widespread and developments in digital distribution and production reach new heights in bringing

about fundamental transformations to the moving image, it is important to remember that, together with the fascination with cinema’s ending, cinephilia has resurfaced as a central concern, both in public debate and in academic writing.\(^2\)

That interest in the “love of cinema” revives when the object of affection is perceived to be under threat is in itself not remarkable. One can indeed discern a certain defensive element in the recent cinephilia discussions, at times explicitly reactionary, to pronounce cinema “alive, well, and still developing in new and unforeseen directions.”\(^3\) However, it would be a mistake to appraise the recent cinephilia debates merely as defensive rhetoric. My main objective in this essay is thus to draw attention to the valuable contributions these discussions have made to the positioning of professionals in response to the radical turn-of-the-millennium transformations.

In retrospect we can point to Susan Sontag’s 1996 “The Decay of Cinema” as a starting point for the revived interest in cinephilia.\(^4\) Since then cinephilia has been discussed and referred to most productively and passionately by film critics, film archivists, film scholars, filmmakers, and, to a lesser extent, film festival programmers. The debates should above all be seen as a reaction to the “situation of crisis” in which film culture found itself at the end of the twentieth century: when digitization challenged cinema as both a technology and practice, as new technologies offered possibilities for new types of communities to emerge; when a steadily progressing globalization of cultures and industries combined with the bloom of filmmaking in Asia and South America to contradict existing Eurocentric perspectives on cinema; and when the commercial hand of large corporations increasingly reached for and interfered with everything. In this time of multiple transitions and maximum uncertainty about what cinema had been, was, and (if it) would be, the more steadfast love for cinema became a preferred vantage point from which to rethink and reassess cinema for today. Considering the fact that the men and women engaging in the discussions were professionally affiliated with cinema, their contributions were never just abstract reflections on this peculiar relationship to an art form, but always also intertwined with a wish to understand the changes happening in their field and to respond adequately to the current challenges. We could call this the “applied” side of the cinephilia debate, and I think it is particularly worthwhile to reassess its recent manifestations by looking more closely at two specific contexts in which cinephilia became a hot issue: film criticism and film archives.

**Film Criticism and Cinephilia.** Film critics were quick to respond to “The Decay of Cinema.” From a professional commitment to report on the latest trends, styles, and shifts, critics accepted Sontag’s provocative challenge to frame the medium’s contemporary transformations. In order to assess the revival of interest in cinephilia, we should ask what was at stake for the film critics. At first sight, technological developments seemed to be playing a key role. Would cinema lose its value when watched at home


\(^3\) Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin, eds., *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), back cover.

instead of in the magical surroundings of the cinema theater? Would the abandonment of celluloid be lethal for cinema as a unique art form? On closer inspection, the vitality of cinema as aesthetic form and cultural practice is a recurrent conclusion in critics’ writings. An influential book edited by Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin is an emblematic example. In *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia*, gloomy talk about the death of cinema is countered by a rich patchwork of reflections, letters, interviews, and essays largely dedicated to the analysis of exciting films, filmmakers, and filmmaking that the contributors convincingly put forward as their collective rebuttal to the argument that cinema’s days are numbered. The book, moreover, is not only a celebration of cinema as a mutating art form, but also of the evolving ways people worldwide continue to connect intimately with cinema, despite the profound technological changes that might be altering the patterns of its consumption. The position that cinema is not dead, then, and in fact is far from dying, is not only backed up by numerous examples of a flourishing art form, but also with the observation that film lovers still invest considerable time and effort in watching and discussing great films—maybe less in art houses, but then all the more by going to film festivals, watching DVDs at home, and participating in film communities on the Internet.

So what exactly is at stake here? Firstly, cinephilia appears to be brought into the “death of cinema” debate to prove the unchallenged significance of contemporary world/art cinema favorites—Abbas Kiarostami, Tsai Ming-liang, and Terrence Malick, to name but a few. Indirectly, however, this line of argumentation also supports a specific journalistic approach: it underscores how reviews written by “a certain kind of worldly film critic,” appearing in the culture sections of newspapers and in serious magazines about directors like Kiarostami, fulfill actual readers’ needs. Secondly, it implies that the money allocated for such critics sampling the festival circuit is well spent. On reflection, the cinephilia discussion thus revolves around a crisis concerning not only cinema but also criticism or, to be more precise, the power play between contesting perspectives on what qualifies as valuable or useful criticism. On one side are the “serious” critics who defend close readings of noteworthy films, even if they are foreign and/or not released in their papers’ markets. In “Is the Cinema Really Dead?” Jonathan Rosenbaum articulates how the debate on the death of cinema is connected to the contemporary practice of film reviewing. He laments the intolerant attitude of some of his colleagues who only review films showing locally and (ab)use the death of cinema line to reassure their moviegoing readers that what’s available at their local multiplex or video store is all that’s worth seeing. Rosenbaum avers that

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any committed critic ought to look beyond the mainstream fare his editor wants him to cover, travel to film festivals to sample the unfamiliar, and do more research on emerging trends, even if these activities interfere with his paper’s strategy.

On the opposite side are found not only the “intolerant” critics but above all their chief editors, who increasingly succumb to the influence of Hollywood’s marketing machine and prefer running pieces on the most recent blockbusters, reporting on industry news, or doing festival (red carpet) atmosphere impressions. Placing the revival of interest in cinephilia in this framework makes clear how it plays a key role in the critical response to the publishing world, in which business interests are tightening their grip on an already alarming decline in the amount of column space devoted to culture; cinephilia helps advocate what one could call serious cultural film criticism by underscoring its value and invoking the existence of a dedicated audience of readers.

Ironically, the renewed attention for cinephilia and its new manifestations may at the same time make the position of film critics more vulnerable. The proliferation of amateur cinephiliac writing on the Web especially can be seen as oil on the fire lit by those criticizing serious criticism as elitist and contemptuous of mass culture. For where is the value for money in paying professional film critics when plenty of reviews, discussion groups, and blogs are already available online? And if we follow the characterization by James Naremore that “[g]ood criticism needs to be written from the heart” and “informed by a spirit of discrimination and cinephilia,” how can professional criticism be distinguished from amateur reflections? Sight & Sound editor Nick James sounded the alarm in October 2008: “The dilemma is clear. There’s a welcome increase in free access to writing about film, but the consequence has been a drop in the status of the professional film reviewer.” He rightfully points out that the advantage bloggers have over paid critics is a far greater freedom in their writing—they are not curtailed by the power of advertisers and distributors. In this respect they might even provide a model for professional film reviewers, who according to James “must stop pretending to represent the norm and take a more prominent stand against the Hollywood machine and its avalanche of poor films, and to stand for a broader view of film culture.” James thus ultimately welcomes the new generation of bloggers and amateur reviewers. From a critics’ perspective a new golden age of criticism is likely to emerge if a cinephiliac commitment to exploring cinema in all its diversity prevails, and access to new movies and films from the archive is guaranteed. This second condition, however, has caused fierce debate among archivists.

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11 Naremore, in correspondence with Martin, Rosenbaum, and Martin, eds., Movie Mutations, 127.

12 James, “Who Needs Critics?”
Film Archives and Cinephilia. Cinephilia has also featured in discussions on the future of film archives and film museums, in particular vis-à-vis digital developments. I will focus here on one particularly interesting collection, *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace*, edited by Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath, and Michael Loebenstein in 2008. Although cinephilia is not the main subject of the book, it frequently recurs as a concern in the transcribed conversations and written contributions that comprise the volume. In comparing the book to *Movie Mutations*, two striking similarities come to the fore. One is that both take the form of a collection of discussions, exchanges, talks, and essays that have been assembled over the course of a couple of years. Secondly, as was the case for film critics, film archivists’ recourse to cinephilia is symptomatic of an attempt to reclaim power for their professional expertise and cultural perspective on the archival profession and practice. Like journalists, archivists are increasingly challenged by forces of commercialization and popularization now that media industries and governments have realized that archives contain treasures that can be mined indefinitely for television broadcast, DVD editions, on-demand Web viewing, and other future access technologies.

For film archivists, however, quite different issues are at stake than for critics. A brief look at the ambitious Dutch project Images for the Future (Beelden voor de Toekomst) highlights some of the major challenges faced by film and television archives today. The Images for the Future project has set out to preserve, digitize, and make the audiovisual collections of six major Dutch institutions available to third parties. It aims to save Dutch heritage, increase media literacy, and contribute to a strong knowledge society. Several obstacles, however, stand in the way of reaching these goals, and it is worth quoting the consortium’s delineation of these at some length:

The market doesn’t offer a suitable solution for the preservation and digitisation of the audio-visual heritage. This is due to several market imperfections. Potential commercial parties and users of the material simply cannot find the collections, or are discouraged by the question of copyrights. Secondly, market parties will shrink back from the considerable investments needed to disclose specific parts of the material, especially when it is only going to be used once. The material first has to be preserved and digitised before it is ready to be used in, for instance, schools or video on demand. The costs are prohibitive, and thus an obstacle to economic development. A problem of coordination will appear when necessary investments cannot be justified by one-off users, and when the material’s owner cannot get access to the financial means needed for such investments. Moreover, a possible monopolization of the audio-visual collections by private financiers will be detrimental to the social importance and the educational value of much of the material. It’s

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therefore up to the government to level the obstacle and make available the means that will enable the preservation and digitisation of all the material in one project, and the accessibility to all users.¹⁴

There is, in other words, a discrepancy between the investment needed to disclose complete collections and the amount of material that might bring in extra revenue. In addition, there is a tension between the wish to make all historical materials available for educational purposes or research and copyright owners’ resistance to free access. Moreover, before analog material can be digitized it needs to be preserved, which significantly adds to the total costs of the project.

In Film Curatorship an interesting discussion revolves around conflicting notions of good archival practice that draw on the divergent cinephiliac models of Henri Langlois and Ernest Lindgren (founding curators of the Cinémathèque Française and the British National Film Archive, respectively).¹⁵ Langlois was one of the first figures in the development of film archives to start collecting and preserving film, but he acquired his large and devoted following mainly due to the screenings he organized of these (at times unique or only extant copies of) films in the Cinémathèque, setting the standard for a cinephile film-viewing experience that still holds a mythical appeal today. Langlois’s model helped educate the cinephile generation of the Nouvelle Vague, but—as the collection’s contributors pointedly remind us—also resulted in the permanent loss of many films. Lindgren, on the other hand, was principally concerned with preserving cinema history and would always protect the original artifact from the wear and tear of projection if this was necessary to ensure its existence for the future. Assessing both models in light of the recent trends of access and digitization, the assembled archivists clearly favor Lindgren’s respect for the film but also consider it their obligation to offer the original cinema viewing experience to the public, whose cinephile habits are now under the corruptive spell of what Vinzenz Hediger, professor of Media Studies at Ruhr University Bochum, elsewhere calls “contemporary mass market cinephilia.”¹⁶

Hediger offers an interesting alternative view of cinephilia and the archive. New media technologies, or what he calls “the industrialization of film cultural memory,” drive the democratization of cinephilia, which he defines as the initiation of the public into the secrets of the cinematic past. As a film historian rather than an archivist, Hediger is less concerned with preserving the technological apparatus of cinema than with widening the reach of our audiovisual heritage. He seems sympathetic toward the industry analysts, who regard movies as studios’ major asset, which can be delivered as

¹⁵ Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath, and Michael Loebenstein, eds., Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum and SYNEMA, 2008), 63–65. For more on how Langlois and Lindgren served as foundational models in the history of the archive movement, see Penelope Houston, Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives (London: British Film Institute, 1994), esp. 23–36 and 49–59.
“content” via multiple platforms and will continue to attract viewers independent of their technological outlet. Clearly this view of film as “content” that should be made “accessible,” no matter how, clashes head-on with film archivists’ concern for the material history and specificity of the medium and its works.

There is a passage in Film Curatorship that makes crystal clear what’s at stake for the archivists. In it Alexander Horwath recalls a discussion with Jonathan Rosenbaum on subcultural DVD and download communities. While Rosenbaum points out their merits—namely, that they expand film-historical and film-philosophical thought and criticism—Horwath stresses how this do-it-yourself subculture “makes our work and our job harder at the same time. Because it contributes to the chimera of film’s and film history’s ‘all-over availability.’ And it doesn’t put a lot of focus on the issue of how we engage with films.”17 In other words, for film archivists the recent cinephilia debates have complicated their position and made it more difficult to find support for archival concerns in the face of widespread belief in, indeed misconceptions regarding, the digital era as one promising universal access. Their contribution calls attention to easily forgotten issues—for example, that there can be multiple copies and different historical versions of films that beckon curatorial handling instead of being simply made accessible to wider audiences. Theirs is a plea, in short, to love not only film, but also its material history.

Cinephilia as Middle Ground. The examples of film criticism and the archive make clear that from professional perspectives the cinephilia discussion constitutes an arena where conflicting interests are being played out, and where alternative positions to the mainstream tendencies of commercialization and economization are being hatched. For film critics, the assessment of the vitality of a certain type of affective and critical engagement with cinema is also a celebration of the vitality and significance of criticism itself. Therefore, regardless of any threat the new cinephile communities might pose for film criticism as a paid profession, print film reviewers commonly applaud the spread of online cinephile discussions and participate in these rewarding exchanges ex aequo. For film archivists, the recent revival of interest in cinephilia has given rise to the need to point out the reverse side of the democratization discourse subtending it, in particular the matter of access to our cinematic heritage. Three issues are thus brought to the surface. One, due to the commitment to preservation, presentation of archival films is never self-evident—projection will continue to jeopardize film prints if the funding to make screening copies is lacking. Two, the idea that films are unchanging objects that can easily be made accessible has to be problematized; when a film from the archive is made accessible it needs to be accompanied by explanatory material (such as introductions, discussions, publications, etc.) that frames the individual history of that (version of the) film. And three, analog films are physical (and perishable) artifacts, and people ought to be able to continue experiencing them via analog projection, especially in an era that is now witnessing widespread conversion to digital exhibition.

Elsewhere, Malte Hagener and I have written about the difficulties in distinguishing between cinephilia as a concept and as an individual emotional experience: cine-

17 Horwath, “Presentation and Performance,” Film Curatorship, 128.
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Cinephilia has proven to be so enduring precisely because it forms a bridge between the biographical and the theoretical, the singular and the general, the fragment and the whole, the incomplete and the complete, and the individual and the collective. This essay confirms and reiterates such an approach to cinephilia as double-movement. It shows how film critics and film archivists engage in the debates with both intellectual interests and professional concerns in mind, moving back and forth between personal preferences and rational considerations. The editors of *Movie Mutations* and *Film Curatorship* have both chosen a strikingly similar format that dovetails neatly with a characterization of cinephilia as a quintessential middle ground: the *bricolage* of transcribed discussions, letters, e-mail exchanges, written essays, and interviews mirrors the double-movement between the anecdotal and the serious, between the spontaneous and the contemplated, and between the familial and intellectual. It is precisely its ability to move between positions that privileges cinephilia as a preferred conceptual starting point for so many constituencies in their discussions of contemporary transformations.


Cinephilia, Stars, and Film Festivals

by Liz Czach

Since the publication of Susan Sontag’s 1996 essay “The Decay of Cinema,” cinephilia has reemerged as a subject of some debate and consideration in film studies. Woven through these investigations has been the vexing question of whether cinephilia is dead, and if not, what new manifestations of cinephilia are evident. There is little doubt that cinephilia has undergone numerous transformations since its golden age, epitomized by the moviegoing habits of the devotees of the ciné-clubs and cinémathèques in 1950s and 1960s Paris. With more than a tinge of nostalgia, most commentators are willing to acknowledge that that era has passed. What, however, has taken its place? Have new kinds of “cine-love,” as Sontag called it, emerged? If so, where do they transpire? And what forms do they take?

Perhaps there is no better place to undertake an examination of what is emerging than to begin with a consideration of what has been lost. Sontag’s lament for cinephilia’s death specifically mourns the passing of the conditions necessary for the cinephiliac experience, particularly the demise of the movie theater. Sontag passionately articulates how a movie image can seduce an audience through the sheer magnitude of screen size: “You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie,” she writes, “and to be kidnapped was to be overwhelmed by the physical presence of the image. The experience of ‘going to the movies’ was part of it. . . . To be kidnapped, you have to be in a movie theater, seated in the dark among anonymous strangers.”

It is the darkened theater that is the privileged site of the cinephiliac encounter between screen and spectator. As Adrian Martin has similarly pointed out, “immersion in the film itself” is a precondition for the cinephiliac experience.

Sontag’s “The Decay of Cinema” might aptly be refigured as “The Death of the Big Screen.” In the era of declining single-screen movie theaters and the concomitant “multiplexing” and “megaplexing” of theaters with smaller screen sizes, as well as the decline of art house cinemas and repertory circuits, the potential for the cinephile to watch a film from the preferred vantage point of third row center has severely diminished outside of large metropolises with thriving film cultures. In this context, it is no surprise that film festivals emerge as one of the last refuges for the cinephile. Film festivals occupy a liminal space between the older forms of first-generation, pretelevisual cinephilia, where the only access to films was in movie theaters, and contemporary forms of cinephilia, in which DVD collecting and digital downloads bypass the moviegoing experience altogether. As Malte Hagener and Marijke de Valck point out, “[a]rguably one of the most ‘classical’ of contemporary cinephile practices is the festival visit.”

The explosion of the international film festival network suggests that cinephilia is far from dead. Catherine Russell optimistically notes that “[c]inephilia is in many ways alive and well, continuing to flourish in the hundreds of film festivals that take place every year around the world.” Thomas Elsaesser echoes the sentiment by suggesting that cinephilia’s natural home is the “film festival and the film museum, whose increasingly international circuits the cinephile critic, programmer, or distributor frequents as flâneur, prospector, and

2 Ibid.
4 Thomas Elsaesser has distinguished different generations of cinephilia in his “Cinephilia, or the Uses of Disenchantment,” in Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory, ed. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 27–43. The editors of this collection have elsewhere followed up on his distinctions. They write, “Whereas the first generation of cinephilia was marked by local trajectories and one’s favorite seat in a specific cinema, the second wave was marked by international trajectories toward specific festivals (Deauville, Rotterdam, Pesaro) and retrospectives, while contemporary cinephilia relies on the dispersed and virtual geography of the link and the directory”; see Hagener and de Valck, “Cinephilia in Transition,” in Mind the Screen: Media Concepts According to Thomas Elsaesser, ed. Jaap Kooijman, Patricia Pisters, and Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 23.
5 Ibid., 25.
With the decline of other screening opportunities and venues, the film festival has emerged as a privileged site for big-screen, art cinema cinephilia.

Film festivals present a seductive return to classical cinephilia with their promise of a unique, unrepeatable experience frequently offering a rare opportunity to view films on the big screen before they disappear into the ether or only reappear on DVD. Festivals screen films as they were “meant to be seen,” in the immersive space of the darkened movie theater. Yet, while many argue that cinephilia is alive and well at film festivals, there is a creeping anxiety that it is still endangered. Increasingly, festivals are perceived as not facilitating cinephiliac connoisseurship, but rather the consumption of stars and celebrity culture. The anxiety has been fueled by the increased column inches devoted to “red-carpet reporting” at the expense of serious film criticism. For example, a few days before the launch of the 2005 edition of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), the cover of the entertainment section of the local newspaper, the Toronto Star, was inscribed with the headline “Hollywood Is Coming.” This caption was superimposed over dozens of tiny photos of the celebrities who were due to make their way north for the festival. Hollywood, it seemed, was literally invading the city. The perceived takeover of film festivals by stars, particularly from Hollywood, threatens the cinephiliac public sphere that many festivals have traditionally fostered. The threat of Hollywood and its stars is a radical departure from the first generation of French cinephiles, who adored and venerated American cinema as one of genres, directors, and actors (as opposed to stars). Contemporary cinephilia is seemingly threatened by Hollywood and its star power. The assumption is that where stardom is celebrated, the importance of film wanes. Thus emerges a central dilemma for film festivals—stargazing seemingly can only be embraced at the expense of cinephilia.

The threat to film festival cinephilia and the cinephile is most evident in the anxiety over particular festival participants who embrace a noncinephiliac disposition. A playful, but no less insightful, characterization of various festival “types” was published in a pull-out section entitled “The Insider’s Guide to the Film Festival” included with the monthly magazine Toronto Life that coincided with the 2006 TIFF. The special publication included an introduction to the five TIFF types—the diehard, the festival staffer, the cineaste, the stargazer, and the scenester—as well as a guide to “their haunts and the movies they’ll be watching this year.” Of the five types, the cineaste is the stereotyped beret-wearing cinephile and the only one with a clearly demarcated cinephiliac disposition. By contrast, the diehard enjoys watching movies but does not love them, and the festival staffer is simply too overworked to watch films. It is, however, the last two figures, the stargazer and the scenester, who provoke the most anxiety in their clear allegiance to celebrity culture over film culture. The stargazer, for example, can “typically be found riding the elevators at the Four Seasons or loitering poolside at the Intercontinental. . . . Owns three camera phones and has subscriptions to Us, Hello!,

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7 Elsaesser, “Cinephilia, or the Uses of Disenchantment,” 36.
8 The “threat” may be felt more profoundly by North American festivals such as TIFF and Sundance, which are located in closer proximity to Hollywood than European festivals.
People and Entertainment Weekly.
While still credited with attending movies, the stargazer’s principal pursuit is to spot celebrities (and apparently to photograph them). Equally enamored with the stars, the scenester is credited with fixing “Nick Nolte up with his ‘Toronto girlfriend’” and showing “Vince Vaughn what a real lap dance is like.” And when it comes to the category of Must-See Movies, the scenester’s noncinophilia really comes to the fore, for he will never “sacrifice beauty sleep or party time to see movies.”

The centers of attraction for both the scenester and the stargazer are celebrities, not films. In a film festival environment in which parties, scenes, and events overpower the status of film as an art form, the cineaste, as exemplary of the cinephiliac disposition, appears as an endangered species (Figures 1–2).

Festivals, both North American (Sundance, TIFF) and European (Cannes, Berlin, and Rotterdam), have always stressed their cinephiliac image, highlighting the serious nature of the films screened. Yet, over the past several years, an increase in both the participation of stars at film festivals and the ensuing media coverage devoted to same has provoked criticism that film festivals are becoming too star-driven.

The perceived threat of stars to festival cinephilia and the status of film within these festivals was clearly the target of an awareness campaign launched during the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. Responding to growing concern that the screenings and director Q&As were losing ground to celebrity sightings and parties, the festival furnished attendees with buttons emblazoned with the slogan “Focus on Film.” An accompanying postcard coached festivalgoers to keep film as a primary concern. The campaign tacitly acknowledges the “threat” that a burgeoning, and perhaps uncontrollable, celebrity focus poses: it draws attention away from films and filmmakers. As the accompanying material pointed out, displaying the button spoke the following of its wearer: “I want to see films that I know I’ll never get to see anywhere else; My idea of ‘celebrity’ is the filmmaker who directed my favorite film at the Festival; I’m willing to wait in the cold for two hours to see a hot documentary; I love that for 10 days I have something in common with over 50,000 people in a small ski town. . . .”

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10 Ibid.
posits an increased focus on celebrities at the festival, which it attempts to combat by recasting celebrity in terms of films and filmmakers and by restoring film’s status as the principal object of desire through a renewed emphasis on the cinephiliac disposition. This plea to “focus on film” thus asks participants to experience the festival as a cinephile. Problematically, the cinephiliac disposition is proposed as a means by which community is created among festival participants, so that 50,000 people can have “something in common.” Yet this commonality of the filmic experience runs counter to the deeply personal, often idiosyncratic, response to a film that characterizes cinephilia. While viewing a film at a festival may be a collective event, the cinephiliac moment is not necessarily communal. Christian Keathley explains that even when cinephiliac details or moments are shared, they still “remain one’s own, no doubt in large part because the initial encounter was a private one, even though it occurred in the public space of a darkened theater.”

Sundance’s campaign to recuperate and reconfigure cinephilia fails to take into account essential features of the phenomenon. Can film festivals emerge from under the media attention directed at celebrities and reinvigorate their reputations as film-centered experiences? Similar responses to the perceived threat can be seen at the Toronto International Film Festival. In his 2006 *Time Canada* article “How Toronto Attracts the Stars,” film critic Richard Corliss enumerates some of the expected attendees and playfully suggests that TIFF adopt MGM’s motto: “More Stars Than There Are in Heaven.” However, Corliss mitigates the considerable star power that will be in evidence by suggesting that these “movers and shakers . . . might outnumber the spectators—if Toronto didn’t attract 300,000 of the film faithful to see, discuss and gawk.” After breezing through a list of celebrities forecast to attend the event, Corliss notes, “However much glamour the star vehicles bring to Toronto, the real value of the festival lies in the foreign art films and the knowledgeable audiences who seek them out.” Shifting the focus from the stars to the audience, whose gawking refers to watching films and not spotting celebrities, Corliss suggests that the secret of Toronto’s success is that here “the audience is the star.” Again, we witness a compulsion to recast the audience broadly and the cinephile more specifically as the festival’s film-friendly core to counteract the blinding luminosity of so many stars.

That film festivals and their critics are compelled to re-emphasize film as a raison d’être is highly indicative of the precarious position that filmgoing occupies in the public’s perception of what transpires at film festivals. In TIFF’s case, the threat to cinephilia strikes at the heart of the festival’s identity, given its carefully cultivated image of a special viewing public. TIFF’s success as one of the world’s leading international film festivals has been heavily weighted toward two intertwined phenomena: the claim to being the world’s biggest publicly attended festival and the audience’s film savviness. Similarly, Brian D. Johnson’s anecdotal history of TIFF, *Brave Films Wild*...
Nights, written to coincide with the festival’s twenty-fifth anniversary, favors a narrative in which the audience figures as a major contributor to the festival’s achievements. Johnson peppers his text with endorsements by enthusiastic festival attendees gushing about their Toronto screenings, such as David Putman, producer of Chariots of Fire (Hugh Hudson, 1981), who, after a particularly successful festival experience, stated, “Toronto had one of the best cinema-going audiences in the world.”

A key element in the success of TIFF, and a significant selling point, then, is that it delivers film-literate spectators to filmmakers, producers, distributors, and sponsors. As the festival’s own Web site suggests, its success since its launch in 1976 can be largely attributed to Torontonians’ cinemagoing habits: “Toronto was becoming a key screening location for both Hollywood and international cinema in large part because of its audience, which was cinematically literate, diverse in its tastes, and curious. If other festivals were relatively exclusive, Toronto provided a true, and accurate, public testing ground.” In their comparison of TIFF and Montreal’s Festival des Films du Monde (FFM), Dipti Gupta and Janine Marchessault argue a key point of differentiation between the two festivals is how they promote themselves. FFM focused on selling the festival’s home city as a beautiful location combining old-world charm with the allure of cosmopolitan foreignness, while Toronto, they contend, did not have an interesting city image to sell, so “it turned toward its local audiences, which have been sold ad nauseam as the biggest commodity of all.” Yet, festivals like Toronto and Sundance increasingly appear concerned with losing the power to shape their image as an event populated by cinephiles.

Can festivals re-create a prelapsarian experience harkening back to an idyllic time when film festivals were untainted by stargazers and scenesters? Such a fabled period, of course, never existed. Festivals have always courted, and struggled with, stars. As early as 1957, in his book Les Stars, Edgar Morin was already noting how the “star system has devoured the international film contests and turned them into international star contests. At Cannes, it is no longer the films but the stars that are exhibited as the chief attraction.” Cannes, a key destination for cinephiles as well as one of the most glamorous festivals in the world, illustrates the inevitable coexistence of stargazers with cinephiles. What Cannes, and other film festivals, makes abundantly clear is that creating the conditions for a cinephiliac experience is not a film festival’s only consideration. These are, after all, film festivals. The extra-cinematic or para-cinematic events at film

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17 Also in Johnson’s book, David Kehr of Chicago Magazine says that “there is an atmosphere of shared interest, shared enthusiasm, and (when the occasion demands) shared disgust unlike any other festival I’ve ever attended” (95).
18 This “festival history” section of the site has recently been removed, but can still be viewed via the Internet Archive’s “Wayback Machine.” See http://web.archive.org/web/20080120122603/http://tiff07.ca/festivalinfo/festivalflashback/history70s (accessed June 22, 2009).
festivals are key to their success: they rely on events such as parties, press conferences, and red-carpet entries as much as they do on the films themselves.\textsuperscript{21}

What is at issue here, then, is cinephilia’s visibility. While the scenester sniffs out the ultimate para-cinematic event, the not-to-be-missed party destined to become part of festival lore, the cinephile seeks by contrast the “classic” encounter with film that is, though shared with a community of fellow cinephiles, a largely individual and personal experience. Unlike the adoring crowds of fans or autograph-hunting throngs, there is little to witness when a cinephiliac event has transpired—it goes largely unperceived. As Paul Willemen points out, your experience can be “different from [that of] the person sitting next to you, in which case you have to dig him or her in the ribs with your elbow to alert them to the fact that you’ve just had your cinephiliac moment.”\textsuperscript{22}

The evidence of the encounter is often only tangible, long after the immediacy of the screening, in the festival reviews found in specialty magazines such as \textit{Cinemascope, Sight & Sound, Film Comment, Cineaste}, and so forth.\textsuperscript{23} The cinephiliac moment cannot, and never could, as Edgar Morin noted over half a century ago, compete with a star event. It is thus little wonder that the largely invisible cinephiliac experience appears to be under threat from the largely visible star culture, an atmosphere wherein the stargazer’s “Who did you see?” replaces the cinephile’s “What did you see?” And yet, the apparent incommensurability of the cinephile with the stargazer and scenester is little more than a red herring, since cinephiles who attend film festivals “are attracted by the films, but are also lured by the whole festival atmosphere.”\textsuperscript{24} A film festival without stars and parties would be as impoverished as one without cinephiles. Cinephilia is not in decline at film festivals. Rather, star culture has profoundly permeated some film festivals to an unprecedented degree, and this shift has diminished the status and visibility of the cinephiliac moment—making its very existence appear imperiled. 

\textsuperscript{21} In her discussion of the role of para-cinematic events at Cannes, Vanessa R. Schwartz points out, “Movies alone could not establish the festival as worldwide stage for international film culture but press coverage of ‘events’ could”; see \textit{It’s So French! Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan French Film Culture} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 72.


\textsuperscript{23} These magazines, like the film festival cinephile, are themselves vestiges of the "classical" cinephiliac disposition: a new generation of cinephiles is turning to the immediacy of the Internet and blogging to post reviews and reactions.

\textsuperscript{24} Hagener and de Valck, “Cinephilia in Transition,” 25.
The Myth of Total Cinephilia

by JENNA NG

Valentine: She saw what this meant, way ahead, like seeing a picture... Like a film.

Hannah: What did she see?

Valentine: That you can’t run the film backwards. Heat was the first thing which didn’t work that way... A film of a pendulum, or a ball falling through the air—backwards, it looks the same... But with heat—friction—a ball breaking a window... It won’t work backwards... You can put back the bits of glass but you can’t collect up the heat of the smash. It’s gone.

Tom Stoppard, Arcadia

The paradigmatic structure of myth is alluring, if only because it offers a unity of vision, an achievement of cosmic order. Chaos is reconciled within neat narrative arches. In “The Myth of Total Cinema,” André Bazin elevates the invention of film from a coincidence of technological potshots to the fulfillment of a higher, more elemental drive: the need to form an image of the world, “an image neither burdened by the liberties of the artist’s interpretation nor the irreversibility of time.”\(^2\) In so doing, Bazin inverts the vector of cinema’s history: not a forward chronology unfolding to the march of scientific progress, but a reversed homecoming narrative, where each of cinema’s technical discoveries is not one step further along the story, but back toward where it began—the guiding myth of re-creating the world in its own image.

Bazin, rightly or otherwise, ties up the invention of cinema as a journey toward the unifying goal of an Icarian dream. Might the loving of cinema be cast into a similar mythic trajectory? Recent scholarship on cinephilia has sought to expand on contemporary cinephilic practices—particularly in view of new technologies such as video,

1 Tom Stoppard, Arcadia (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 94.

DVD, and the Internet—3—to showcase the multi-variegated ways in which cinephiles love cinema today, despite (and defying) Susan Sontag’s 1996 “end of cinephilia” declaration. This essay does not attempt to add to that discussion, but instead sketches in broad strokes an overarching theory, via an overview of its past and present forms, to suggest cinephilia’s own unifying goal. Might there not be a singular tapestry of disparate threads of cinephilia, woven across cinema’s different technologies, in which a guiding myth to this love may be discerned? How to originate a myth of total cinephilia?

**Going to the Cinema for Time.** The history and politics that surround the first significations of “cinephilia,” referring broadly to film culture in the 1950s and 1960s, cannot be overlooked. As Malte Hagener and Marijke de Valck have explained, among its important historical nuances was the *politique des auteurs*, through which Godard, Truffaut, and *Cahiers* et al. championed specific (mostly American) movies that matched their idiosyncratic tastes. Nor was such preference for Hollywood confined to France: Adrian Martin outlines an almost contemporaneous and similarly American-centric cinephilia in Britain, “set in motion by the *Movie* critics at the start of the 1960s” and stretching across the decade via the British Film Institute, Ian Cameron’s *Movie* series, and the Edinburgh Film Festival retrospectives. The core of this cinephilia was an all-encompassing film culture in those decades and particularly in France, one which points not only to movies and art, but also to politics, ideology, community, and social practices. Yet cinephilia was also the *physical* act of viewing films, invariably in the cinema hall. This by no means detracts from classical cinephilia’s historical or political significances, but it does identify a premise: the ritualistic and dedicated film watching which generates the rest—the film clubs, the magazines, the cross-continental adulations, the genealogies, the politics.

And how uniquely, how *lovingly* were movies watched in those days. Thomas Elsaesser describes his viewing practices in the 1960s, a process almost ceremonial and sanctified: “Cinephilia meant being sensitive to one’s surroundings when watching a movie, carefully picking the place where to sit, fully alert to the quasi-sacral feeling of


nervous anticipation that could descend upon a public space, however squalid, smelly or slipshod, as the velvet curtain rose and the studio logo with its fanfares filled the space.”

In this cinephilia of films absorbed in the darkness of the cinematheque, the first three rows were sacrosanct: as Sontag writes, “the 1960s and early 1970s was the feverish age of movie-going, with the full-time cinephile always hoping to find a seat as close as possible to the big screen, ideally the third row center.”

In Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers* (2003), itself a cinephilic reflection, a character describes the same desire for proximity to the screen, as if distance would swallow up the light: “I was one of the insatiables. The ones you’d always find sitting closest to the screen. Why do we sit so close? Maybe it was because we wanted to receive the images first. When they were still new, still fresh.”

What is the fundamental magic underpinning such passion? Here a collective culture falls into the innumerable shades of the personal. Paul Willemen, for example, writes of his pleasure in watching films as revelation, “a theory of the sublime moment, the breathtaking fragment which suddenly and momentarily bore witness to the presence and force of desire in the midst of appallingly routinised and oppressive conditions of production.”

Sontag’s reasons were simultaneously of practicalities—“movies gave you tips about how to be attractive”—and sublime captivation—“the experience of surrender to, of being transported by, what was on the screen. You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie.”

The revelatory moment, the nervous anticipation, the suspended duration of being kidnapped and lifted into another life: these expressions ultimately speak of time, a desiring not (or not only) for a world represented in realistic glory as per Bazin’s myth of re-creation, but of time reallocated to us in the form of someone else’s life, ordeals, and experiences, so that two hours in a dark hall transfigures into something else—the temporal cadences of the film resounding in its wonder. When we “lose” ourselves in the movies, it is an immersion into different worlds, certainly, but also different temporalities—the rush of cinephilic revelation, the prolonged plangency of a movie resonating with our lives, the duration in whose blankness we are suspended while “kidnapped,” in whose temporal abeyance we suspend movie time and consciousness. Andrei Tarkovsky writes, “I think that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is time: for time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience.”

If cinema is an enterprise for reality, then cinephilia is a proposition for time, with going to the movies its form of seeking.

Moreover, cinephilia is also about delving for time in its pastness. As Drehli Robnik writes, “cinephilia always reaches back beyond the temporal distance that history’s (or life’s) progression creates to revive memorial bonds that connect lived presence with

7 Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema,” 60.
9 Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema,” 60.
past experiences.” If the recording of cinema is not only the capture of reality, but also an appropriation of “a different when,” if the power of the indexical imprint is not only an affirmation of “it was there” but also of “it was there,” if the unreeling of images in the presentness of a spectator revives “memorial bonds” to connect her lived presence to her living memories, then cinephilia is also a quest for memory and pastness. Siegfried Kracauer recognized how the spectator who laughs at old films is also “bound to realize, shudderingly, that he has been spirited away into the lumber room of his private self . . . In a flash the camera exposes the paraphernalia of our former existence, stripping them of the significance which originally transfigured them so that they changed from things in their own right into invisible conduits.” Yet what is the point or pleasure of such a quest for time? What can one do with time lost or spent or not yet had? In Stoppard’s Arcadia, Valentine points out “that you can’t run the film backwards”; the heat of the smash is gone because we are bereft not of a whole window but of the time of a window being whole. Perhaps being given time in the form of watching a movie serves as an erasure of a ball’s falling curve, a gesture toward recovering an unbroken window, invoking a time before corruption and hence a return to prelapsarian innocence. Going to the movies—seeking time—is, then, a futile if romantic quest for Eden. For that reason, my heart stirred when I read of how Jean Douchet in the 1960s would curl himself into the fetal position “every night in the second row of the Cinémathèque Palais de Chaillot”: how physically uncomfortable, how peculiar, but how movingly apt—enjoying, in the intensity of film watching, in the protective amniotic darkness of the cinema hall, the bliss of pre-birth innocence.

Take Your Time. In the 1980s, film viewing was taken definitively into the home, a change in cinephilia which Hagener and de Valck characterize in terms of “staying in” versus “going out.” Movie love was no longer cultivated by frequenting the cinemathéques and repertory theaters but instead predominantly nursed at home, fed by television and/or portable viewing machines, beginning with video (the first breakthrough), VCD (mostly in Asia), laserdisc (short-lived), Internet file swaps (illegal), DVD (including Netflix), TiVo (along with cable), and now (potentially) Blu-ray. Even the film clubs have come home, thanks to broadband and the personal computer, as Internet film forums, Web sites, and blogs replace the cinephile communities of cafés and movie houses. 

14 Elsaesser, “Cinephilia, or the Uses of Disenchantment,” 29.
The consequences of these new technologies for cinephilia have been discussed elsewhere, with the general consensus being that these technologies have successfully augmented cinephilia for a new generation by expanding the new cinephile’s film horizons, granting unprecedented access to foreign works, and opening up new movie worlds. As Bryant Frazer, a self-declared “part of the generation of movie lovers that embraced television and videotape as soon as they were available,” asks rhetorically, “What other way was there to access older American movies, let alone foreign film?”

I am intrigued by how these new modes of engagement not only present benefits of access and convenience but also proffer time in ways different from those provided to film viewers in the cinema hall. Through these new technologies, time is offered at the sheer disposal of this cinephile, at her leisure, in manageable chunks, and with almost absurd luxury: time to watch the film when, as, and how I want; time to skip lectures and escape to the university’s fortuitously well-stocked video library; time to find an undisturbed two-hour slot in the middle of the night at the end of a fourteen-hour corporate job; time to pause, to fast-forward, to rewind; time to replay, and replay yet again.

These offerings of time from new technologies were already nascent with video and, to a limited extent, television, but they have achieved their greatest fruition with DVD, TiVo, and Blu-ray. With these, time is not only offered at one’s disposal, as with video, but also parcelled out in different ways and with ever greater flexibility and ingenuity. In a DVD, sections of the movie may not only be fast-forwarded, but skipped, as one moves in warp drive, from chapter to chapter. One may rewind and fast-forward across a spectrum of speeds, from single frames to flashing across whole chunks of minutes. The time of a film is now capable of being stretched, shrunk, expanded, and even modified: the DVD of Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000), for example, offers the viewer the option of reordering the sequences so as to watch the film “chronologically.” With TiVo, films may be digitally recorded from an electronic television programming schedule or downloaded from the Internet, enabling viewing time to be carved out of the cable network or the ether, like a slice of pie, and deferred for later consumption. Blu-ray allows for even more malleable ways of managing time. For example, its D-Box Motion Functionality enables a viewer to experience motion in her D-Box chair, matching the action on screen. Depending on whether the seat is 2- or 3-axial, she can be tilted across different direction vectors (up/down, front/back, left/right, or diagonally). But movement is simply a change of place or position *through time*. With D-Box motion via Blu-ray, time is no longer merely in spectatorship—the facile staring at a screen—but is also presented through space, through change, through the body. Time as experienced via new moving-image technologies is innovative in its unprecedented lability, but also mutative, becoming spatial, derivative, carnal.

I am not asserting that watching a DVD or sitting in a D-Box chair necessarily constitutes a cinephilic act. Insofar as such technologies *facilitate* cinephilia, these experiences of time perforce come into play, particularly since they contrast so vividly with time as encountered by the first-generation cinephiles, sitting in the dark with

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their eyes glued to the huge screens. In the new cinephilia, time is chopped up, parcelled out, and presented in myriad ways to deal with as one wishes. Rather than a commodity constantly slipping out of one’s grasp, cinema experience in the new cinephilia reminds me instead of a lyric from *The Last Five Years*, Jason Robert Brown’s off-Broadway musical: “Take a breath, take a step, take a chance. . . . Take. Your. Time.”

**The Myth of Total Cinephilia.** Cinephilia travels a mythic arc similar to that of cinema itself, driven not by a need for reality but for time—a trajectory linking the quest for time to its relative subordination and control as achieved through digital technologies. But—and this is possibly the most important point—how does this account of cinephilia purport to connect with the pleasure and love that form its core? In an essential sense the question is unanswerable, for love is personal; we can only look to ourselves for our own reasons. For this reason cinephilia remains untheorizable; it escapes discourse.18 Yet love, too, must stem from something. Bazin writes of how the image galvanized his emotions: “Only the bluntness of the lens, by stripping the object of the experiences, the prejudices, of all the spiritual filth which enveloped my perception, could make it pure for my attention and subsequently for my love.”19 The fundamental inspiration for his love is his desire to see the world anew in its unsullied purity and grandeur. Therein rests a need for redemption—a deliverance from spiritual grime—and for purification which similarly drives the longing and seeking for time, and thence the impulse for subjugating time which suggests the myth of total cinephilia: time to regain innocence, to return to things before they were irrevocably bungled. This is not self-defeating nostalgia, but the brute realism of a ball flung against a window. The possibilities and potentialities of newness make things more exciting and more interesting than the old, but also more complicated and more arduous. The modern technologies of new cinephilia give us a modicum of control over time, chimerical and otherwise. We take comfort from that, if only for a little while, in our desperate delusion.

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18 I have argued this point in my “Love in the Time of Transcultural Fusion: Cinephilia, Homage and *Kill Bill*,” in Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, eds., *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*; see especially p. 75.

19 Author’s emphasis and translation. “Seule l’impassibilité de l’objectif, en dépouillant l’objet des habitudes et des préjugés, de toute la crasse spirituelle dont l’enrobait ma perception, pouvait le rendre vierge à mon attention et partant à mon amour.” André Bazin, “Ontologie de l’image photographique,” in *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* 16.
It is said that the spectators who choose to sit as close to the screen as possible are children and movie buffs.

Roland Barthes, “Leaving the Movie Theater”

Barthes’s famously backhanded eulogy to cinemagoing has a touchstone status in discussions of cinephilia despite its author’s self-identification as a noncinephile, best expressed in his admission that “whenever I hear the word cinema, I can’t help thinking hall, rather than film.” Along with Christian Metz’s Imaginary Signifier, it marks the moment of a powerful disavowal of cinephilia upon which the influential strand of film theory, dubbed “psychosemiotics” by Thomas Elsaesser, established itself. One of the ways in which this disavowal was couched was in the association of cinephilia with infantile enthusiasm, with childhood. In this essay I will examine the pairing in order to explore the historical self-consciousness that underpins the current rejuvenation of interest in cinephilia. Victor Erice’s The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena, 1973) is an ideal film to facilitate my examination for a number of reasons. It is a film that can be seen to be concerned with the “childhood” of cinephilia. As a film that looks back to the childhood experience of cinema in 1940s Spain from the historical perspective of the mid-1970s—that is, at the moment of film theory’s disavowal of cinephilia—it speaks of and to successive generations of cinephilia. And, in the thirty-plus years since its release, the film now resonates anew in its fascination with—and remarkable representation of—a recurrent motif in my reconsideration of cinephilia: the “epiphanic moment” of spectatorship.

2 Ibid., 346.
Erice has described the moment I will examine in *The Spirit of the Beehive* as “the best . . . most important . . . most essential” moment he has captured on film in his long but intermittently productive career.\(^4\) In terms of duration it is indeed only a moment, lasting just a few seconds in a scene a little over two minutes long. The scene shows a six-year-old girl, Ana (Anna Torrent), watching her first film, an experience so overwhelming that she subsequently interprets the world around her through this encounter with cinema. The world into which she carries this experience is that of Spain in 1940, with the country in the midst of a civil war. Ana lives in an isolated Castilian village with her parents and her older sister Isabel (Isabel Telleria), and *The Spirit of the Beehive* opens on the day a mobile cinema arrives to project a film for the villagers, James Whale’s 1931 *Frankenstein*. It is at this screening that we are first introduced to Ana and Isabel.

At the heart of this scene is the moment in question. Ana’s small, grave face concentrates on the scenes from *Frankenstein* being projected in which a little girl, Maria (Marilyn Harris), plays by a river. The creature emerges from the riverside bushes and Maria responds guilelessly to his appearance, handing him some flowers, which together they toss onto the river to see them float. As Frankenstein holds a flower in his coarse hands and, imitating Maria, raises it to his nose to smell it, we see Ana’s reaction. Suddenly, she sits up in her seat and leans forward, enraptured at the spectacle she is witnessing. Opening her mouth slightly, she seems to shape a word to herself and then leans back. The light of the screen shines in her eyes. Put neutrally, we see what *Frankenstein* shows and Ana’s reaction to it. Put more expressively—and with greater fidelity to the moment of Ana’s reaction as captured by Erice—we don’t see what she sees, but her *seeing* it. We watch Ana’s face itself becoming a screen upon which the external signs of an internal epiphany are being played out, a revelation the child will carry into the world beyond the cinema.

The film integrates both the moment in *Frankenstein* that elicits Ana’s reaction and Erice’s recording of the moment of her reaction. At one level, there is the film being responded to (a classic horror movie from early 1930s Hollywood) and the spectator responding (a seven-year-old actress in the early 1970s who had never seen the film before, playing a girl of the same age in the 1940s who has never seen any film). At another level, there is the detail that triggers Ana’s astonishment, Maria offering Frankenstein a flower, and the moment of An(n)a’s reaction captured by Erice as *real*, where the boundaries between Anna the actress and Ana the character dissolve. In *The Spirit of the Beehive*, then, the dimension of the “cinephilic moment” is here doubled.

What does the idea of the “cinephilic moment” designate? Why choose this term over others such as shot, scene, or sequence? Precisely because it points to a dimension of the spectator’s reaction that is seen as escaping these recognizable, regulated units of cinematic grammar. The moment may ultimately reside within some combination of them but is irreducible to them. As Paul Willemen says, “what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown.”\(^5\) He goes on to describe the cinephilic moment as “not

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choreographed for you to see. . . . It is produced en plus, in excess or in addition, almost involuntarily.” Willemen’s definition appears to disqualify this moment in The Spirit of the Beehive, inasmuch as it is “choreographed.” Yet, when one considers how this scene was shot, another dimension emerges. Erice has described the scene as follows:

Paradoxically, it was filmed in a completely documentary style. It’s the only shot filmed with a handheld camera. Luis Cuadrado shot it sitting on the floor in front of Anna as I supported his back. He captured Anna in the act of discovering—it was an actual screening. She was really seeing the movie. He captured her reaction to the encounter between the monster and the little girl. So it was an unrepeatable moment, one that could never be “directed.” That’s both the paradox and the wonder of cinema. If we think a bit about this film, it was made with a very premeditated style. Nevertheless, what I consider the most essential moment of the film is a moment that goes beyond all that formal planning.

The split between a premeditated and quasi-documentary style of shooting is visible in the scene, which was shot with two cameras from four different angles. An establishing shot of the interior of the makeshift cinema initially presents a side view of the audience, the lights dimmed and the projector’s beam visible. There follows a series of shots in which the film on-screen is shown from the audience’s point of view. The “moment” itself is bracketed by a pair of nonhandheld shots, the framing static and at the audience’s eye level, in which Ana and Isabel look up and off to the right of the frame. However, Ana’s astonished reaction is recorded from a setup in which she is shown raptly gazing up and off to the left of the frame (the camera has an evident handheld tremor). We barely notice that the 180 degree axis has been jumped. The heart of the scene is the child’s moment of spontaneous amazement around which everything else coalesces. But while we may not be aware of the breach of classical continuity editing, this transgression is itself in keeping with the eruptive quality of Ana’s reaction, as though a rigid shot/counter-shot correspondence between spectator and screen cannot contain or adequately express what passes from one to the other.

Erice describes this moment as “the crack through which the aspect of film that records reality bursts through into every kind of fictional narrative.” In this respect, The Spirit of the Beehive corresponds to a further definition of the “moment.” As Christian Keathley puts it, “The cinephiliac moment is the site where this prior presence, this fleeting experience of the real, is felt most intensely or magically.” Mary Ann Doane also notes that “rarely does cinephilia fasten onto a cinematic technique such as a pan or a dissolve. . . . [W]hat is visible but not shown must be a function of the indexicality of the medium.” Erice succeeded here in capturing something rarely shown on

6 Ibid.
7 The Footprints of a Spirit.
8 Ibid.
film—the natural, unforced moment of a spectator’s response to cinema’s revelation of the “real” beneath the “fictional.” It is worth restating how the moment is doubled in this scene. For it is not so much in Frankenstein that this aspect of cinema emerges but in Ana’s reaction to it—the revelation of cinema’s potential to disclose something real is conveyed, transmuted via the screen of Ana’s face. This is an image of spectatorship of a particular kind, which underlies a certain vision of cinephilia and is expressed here in its most raw, fundamental, and childlike form. Spanish critic Marcos Uzal sums this up when he remarks on how Ana’s “reactions touch us as if she was the first spectator and cinema was being reborn through her.”

Ana’s reactions express an aspect of the cinephilic moment that Willemen discusses in terms of “excess,” examined in terms of the theologically informed discourse of “epiphany” and “revelation” that derives from the highly prevalent Catholic influence in postwar French film criticism:

What is important is that they [cinephiles] dig up moments which can only be seen as designating, for those people, something in excess of the representation. . . . And these moments show you where the cinematic institution itself vacillates, where it might tip over or allow you a glimpse of the edge of its representation.

Once identified, this excess is related to a mysterious dimension of spectatorship designated as the “elsewhere” or “beyond” of cinematic representation: “[T]he film allows you to think or to fantasise a ‘beyond’ of cinema, a world beyond representation which only shimmers through in certain moments of the film. Where you see it shimmering is largely, but not exclusively, up to you. The cinephilic claim is that cinema can do this.”

Keathley notes more recently how film studies has traditionally tended to subordinate such moments of textual excess to cinema’s narrative imperative, citing David Bordwell’s definition of moments of excess as “whatever cannot be assigned meaning or relevance in relation to the broadest sense of a film’s narrative. This excess includes ‘colors, expressions and textures’ that ‘become “fellow travelers” of the story.’”

However, this general dichotomy between narrative and that enigmatic substance “excess”—which is disciplined by narrative and yet supplementary to it—has a particular place in cinephile spectatorship, according to Willemen:

[I]n order for notions of revelation and excess to happen, to be noticeable at all, they have to be demarcated or demarcatable, in some sense, from what else is happening in the film. So it is no accident, indeed it is highly necessary, that cinephilia should operate particularly strongly in relation to a form of cinema that is perceived as being highly coded, highly commercial, formalised and ritualised. For it is only there that the moment of revelation or excess, a dimension other than what is being programmed, becomes noticeable.

13 Ibid., 241.
14 Keathley, Cinephilia and History, 32.
15 Willemen, “Through the Glass Darkly,” 238.
The “highly coded” narration referred to here is that of classical Hollywood cinema, and in this regard Willemen isolates the examples of Fritz Lang and Jacques Tourneur. However, if we recall Erice’s observation about the “highly premeditated” way The Spirit of the Beehive was shot, then a similar degree of codification can be said to apply to Erice’s film, albeit within the different aesthetic procedures of modern European cinema. To further examine the relationship between narrative and excess enshrined in the cinephile moment, and in order to delineate the utopic dimension of the “beyond” it gives onto, it is worth reconsidering Ana’s epiphany.

Vicky Lebeau describes Ana as “the very symbol of how a child’s passion for film is caught up into the work of making sense of the world, its terrible violence.” Discussing the figure of the child in early cinema, particularly in the genre of “Child Pictures” in Victorian cinema, she asks: “[W]hat did the spectators of early cinema look at, what did they look for, in the busy pictures displayed before them? Contingency, detail, visual ‘noise’ are part of what the camera, the photograph, whether still or moving, brings with it. . . .” In the evolution from cinématographe to cinema, the question was “how to turn that excess of the visual to the purposes of narrative,” says Lebeau:

Cue the child. On the initial evidence of the child pictures, Victorian cinema began to bind that excess of the visual through the image of the child, investing the child as spectacle at the same time as it drew on the stories, and values, attached to children and childhood. . . . Cinema will use the image of the child to secure its appeals to verisimilitude, to the uncontrived, even haphazard, recording of life as it passes before the camera.

In certain respects, Ana too fulfills the function Lebeau identifies in early cinema, whereby the child serves both to incarnate the unruly polysemy of the image and to bind it to narrative. But this is not all Ana does. She also foregrounds cinema’s residual capacity, associated with its own infancy, to produce an excess which escapes the strictures of narrative in undisciplined sparks of signification. And at the moment she senses, then sees that capacity in Frankenstein, Ana embodies it for Erice, for the film, perhaps even for Spain. What escapes from the narrative of Frankenstein, via Ana, into The Spirit of the Beehive forms the major coordinates of its narrative. One film begets the other through the ramifications of Ana’s cinephile epiphany.

In this transmutation from the detail that provokes Ana’s reaction to the moment of the reaction itself, Erice displaces attention away from the fugitive particular to what comes after the encounter with it. The film thus becomes an allegory of the aftereffects of cinephilic spectatorship. Miriam Hansen observes that what is at stake in such moments is the possibility of a “split-second meaninglessness” which acts as “the placeholder of an otherness” beyond understanding, wherein the particular and the detail “precipitate processes in the viewer that may not be entirely controlled by the film.”

17 Ibid., 25; emphasis added.
18 Ibid., 25–26, 39.
This is a striking description of what happens to Ana. The figure of Frankenstein becomes Ana’s “placeholder of an otherness,” and the film presents her with numerous other beings whose “monstrousness” hinges on their equivocal relationship to life and death: her father, first seen as a strange figure attired in his beekeeping outfit, who lectures his daughters on the perils of poisonous mushrooms; “Don José,” the anatomy-lesson mannequin to which Ana symbolically adds eyes; the doomed fugitive freedom fighter whom Ana attends to; and, ultimately, Frankenstein himself, whose appearance to Ana (in a dream or hallucination) is the answer in the world to her earlier epiphany in the cinema. Ana’s narrative trajectory describes the interpenetration of film and world and gestures toward that dimension Willemen refers to as a “beyond” of cinema. One may therefore regard The Spirit of the Beehive as a chronicle of the child’s newly sparked imaginative engagement with the world through cinema. Indeed, Marcos Uzal likens Ana to the children of Italian neorealist cinema who “see more than they know what to do with” and for whom the cinema “is a means not to forget the world around them (ruined by war and fascism) but to reinvent it, to raise it to the level of films and dreams.”

It would be wrong to dismiss this statement in terms of mere escapism, with cinema being seen simply as a refuge from the world. Whatever else it was, first-phase postwar cinephilia must be regarded as a generation’s response to the shock in childhood of the simultaneous experiences of war and cinema—a response which subsequently comes to be culturally formalized first through a set of viewing practices, then through writing and filmmaking. This particular historical conflation of cinema and childhood informs a major strand of postwar European cinephilia, which one finds frequently in writing on this period. French art critic Jean-Louis Schefer captures it well when he recalls not the films seen in childhood but “the films that saw our childhood,” a forceful inversion Serge Daney was also fond of invoking. Born in 1940, Erice is also of this generation and has written about the abiding association of cinema with a wartime childhood:

> It is, in some way, inevitable. Since that single history, that of cinema and the twentieth century, is confused, irremediably, with our own biography. I am referring to the people of my generation, born in the time of silence and ruin that followed our civil war. Orphans, real or symbolic, were adopted by cinema. It offered us an extraordinary consolation, a sense of belonging to a world: precisely that which, paradoxically, Communication, in its present state of maximum development, does not offer.

Apart from the explicitly utopian register of Erice’s description of cinema providing “a sense of belonging to a world”—a world defined neither by war nor by Spain’s own protracted experience of fascism—there is a further dimension to this generation’s formative encounter with cinema. For Erice, as for Daney, Schefer, and many others,

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cinema alone offered such “extraordinary consolation,” inasmuch as it was not yet just another node in an undifferentiated image world. The historically specific nature of this encounter with cinema underwrites The Spirit of the Beehive, and Ana remains its incarnation. If the cinephile can be considered a “child of cinema”—Daney, for example, christened himself a “ciné-fils,” or “son of cinema”—then Ana further embodies this filiation as, like Erice himself, one of the symbolic orphans that cinema “adopted.”

The Spirit of the Beehive has continued resonance for current discussions of “post-filmic” cinephilia thanks also to a relatively little-known recent work by Erice. In 2006, he made La morte rouge, a thirty-two-minute digital video essay that clearly reveals the autobiographical dimensions of his first film. In this work, Erice recollects his first experience of cinema when, as a five-year-old, he accompanied his older sister to a San Sebastian cinema named the Kursaal to watch a Sherlock Holmes spin-off thriller, The Scarlet Claw (Roy William Neill, 1944). He describes himself as having been of an age when “fiction and reality were the same thing,” just as they are for Ana. For both, the early experience of cinema represents an “episode of initiation” provoked by a film whose “scariness spread forth beyond the screen, prolonging its echo in the atmosphere of a devastated society.”

La morte rouge, then, reveals Ana in The Spirit of the Beehive to be the filmmaker’s own gender-shifted infant surrogate. What both films have in common in bringing their cinephilic concerns up to date is an emphasis on the changing spaces of cinema and, therefore, of cinephilia.

The cinema in The Spirit of the Beehive, the site of Ana’s epiphany, was modeled on the mobile projections of the 1940s, makeshift affairs to which villagers brought their own seats, and a similar detail is also present in La morte rouge. The Kursaal Cinema, where Erice had his formative encounter with The Scarlet Claw, was housed in a building that had formerly been a casino; when gambling was outlawed, it was “converted into a refuge of shadows . . . giving it a life of dreams.” In his commentary and in the numerous shots of the Kursaal’s grand, ghostly interior draped with dustsheets, Erice intimates a provisional and mutable cinema, one that has now come to occupy another space for which it was not originally intended. The film, after all, was commissioned for and shown as part of a major art installation, Correspondances: Erice-Kiarostami, in which the Spanish director was brought together with a kindred spirit, the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami. A more culturally elevated site than the casino or village hall, no doubt, the museum’s integration of cinema has significant repercussions for “post-filmic” cinephilia. And the spatial shift alluded to in La morte rouge points to the potential for new epiphanies, future forms of cinephilia, other Anas yet to come.

26 Ibid., 296–297.
27 Ibid., 296.
28 Correspondances: Erice-Kiarostami was staged between February 2006 and November 2008 at the following institutions: Centre de Cultura Contemporània, Barcelona; La Casa Encendida, Madrid; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne.
Rescuing Fragments:
A New Task for Cinephilia

by George Toles

“To see the object as in itself it really is,” has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly. . . . What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? Does it give me pleasure, and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do; and, as in the study of light, of morals, of number, one must realize such primary data for one’s self, or not at all.

Walter Pater, 1873 Preface to The Renaissance

To be a theoretician of the cinema, one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it: have loved it a lot and only have detached oneself from it by taking it up again from the other end. . . . not in order to move on to something else, but in order to return to it at the next bend of the spiral. Carry the institution inside one still so that it is in a place accessible to self-analysis, but carry it there as a distinct instance which does not over-infiltrate the rest of the ego with a thousand paralysing bonds of a tender unconditionality. Not have forgotten what the cinephile one used to be was like, in all the details of his affective inflections, in the three dimensions of his living being, and yet no longer be invaded by him; not have lost sight of him, but be keeping an eye on him.

Christian Metz, The Imaginary Signifier

2 Christian Metz, The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema, trans. Celia Britton, Anwyll Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 15, cited in Christian Keathley’s Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 27–28. Keathley’s study, the best book about cinephilia that I have encountered, led me back to Metz’s principled renunciation of certain kinds of movie pleasure. Keathley proposes, in the final chapter of his monograph, an anecdotal approach to arresting moments or brief passages from well-known classical films. His examples are diverse and intriguing, but seem to me to be personal to the wrong degree, and somehow to inhibit rather than promote further speculation.
find Christian Metz’s painful farewell to his own cinephilia instructive as well as moving. He resolves to set aside the emotion that came naturally and unbidden in his early devotion to cinema because this could only restrict his progress as a theoretician, one who aspires to “love” on a higher, more austere level. He expresses concern about movies’ onetime power to “invade” him, and sees a continuing susceptibility to such invasion as a dreadful form of blindness. Unless there is a voluntary casting off of all Romantic belief in the image and its edifying influences, the theorist will not arrive, like an intrepid explorer, at “the next bend in the spiral.” Metz expresses the hope that the consciousness that replaces his child’s ego will be up to the task of implacability, of a beneficially forceful indifference. If his viewing intelligence is properly armored, his ego will not be “over-infiltrate[d]” with “a thousand paralyzing bonds of a tender unconditionality.”

What is most striking in Metz’s formulation is his equating the power and claims of art with “paralyzing” bondage. If you allow yourself to be taken over by an art experience, it may feel as though you have entered a “tender,” and therefore acceptable, captivity. But the tenderness itself must be opposed and rooted out so that the power balance can shift back to the beholder. Only if the impervious viewer prevails in his contest with images can any movement toward legitimate knowledge occur. The viewing process must strive at all times to shatter illusion and to resist the supplications of an indolent, manacled imagination. Seeing is not believing; seeing is about seeing through and past what we are given. Nothing is more deceptive than mere responsiveness to a pleasurable image. As many other theorists argued around the time of Metz’s renunciation of cinephilia (and for years, if not decades, after), unskeptical immersion in film experience is a capitulation to the culturally determined traps for the eye and mind which the “regressive” medium is bound to resort to. The critical language that Metz and others devised to protect us from pleasure, beauty, and the power of the senses was suitably dry, abstract, and cold—eerily remote from the slip and slide of sensation, and the emotional texture of aesthetic detail. Film Studies in the 1970s and 1980s was eager to purge itself of the allegiances of childhood in order to don the lab coats of an earnest, disengaged maturity.

When we revisit the work of the 1950s Cahiers du cinéma critics, and follow, say, their excited intuitions about the metaphysics of mise-en-scène, the language of their analysis is still bracingly sharp and alive, animated by the revelatory shock of seeing more. There is an imperious swagger in much of the prose, but also a balancing acquiescence, a beguiling willingness to be confused and undone by what they have encountered. If we could only yield to the compositions and color schemes of Nicholas Ray, these dynamic “force fields” may be able to show us things that no one has previously understood how to look at, or to value properly. But we must go slowly. We need to study Ray’s films, patiently absorb their lessons so we can begin to grasp afresh what seeing a movie entails, and in the fullest sense may require of us. Being “infiltrated” by strong impressions implies not merely an openness to what is not under our command or control, but a tacit acknowledgment that we know very little for sure (in movies and in every other sector of experience), and that what we do know may not be worth protecting. Set this rationale for love and reimagining against the elaborate “back turning” of Metz’s The Imaginary Signifier, in which almost no images from any existing films
seem worth the false labor of engagement. It is as though proper reasoning requires self-blinding.

Cinephilia has always delighted in the serendipitous finding and elaboration of the overlooked moment, the “corner of the eye” detail in film narratives. The film lover pursues the apparently incidental, throwaway element in order to discover, on closer inspection born of intuition or feeling, how the inconsequential is essential—a possible key to the whole design. I would like to propose that cinephilia might find fresh fields to cultivate in the realm of movie fragments. Let us concede that most movies do not achieve a compelling unity or find the ever elusive “appropriate form.” The common experience of watching any film is of proceeding by fits and starts. A specific actor’s presence may bring a situation to life for a while, an evocative setting becomes more distinctive than anything that preceded its appearance, a mood settles in briefly that feels more truthful and enigmatic than other jerry-built sections of the story, a stranger waves from a distance in a manner that feels quietly arresting, a face turns toward us in just the right way and at exactly the right instant, the music unexpectedly disappears and we find ourselves hearing the silence in the yard and gazing at a child’s lost shoe.

I am not suggesting that the stray luminous passages in otherwise disposable or broken narratives ought to be scavenged catch-as-catch-can with no regard for the film worlds which engendered them. I feel that Walter Pater’s emphasis on knowing one’s impressions of a whole entity—“What effect does it really produce on me?”—is worth preserving. Yet instead of arguing for the value of the whole because of the exceptional force of certain pieces, one might rather consider how a movie dreams its own way, with onerous digressions and mishaps and bewilderment, to the piercing clarity of certain glittering shards. The fragments warrant being respectfully placed and considered within their narrative context; it is, after all, the felt combination of a given moment with its surrounding circumstances that allows it to “lift off” emotionally. The context, at the very least, supplies a space and occasion for what emerges. But the brief passages that rise above the rest are also, arguably, in communion with each other, sharing a higher pitch of awareness and a secret network of correspondences. Perhaps they are seeking to actualize another, better imaginative realm within the movie’s vexing limits. At the same time these fragments link up with kindred episodes in other more fully realized films, which seem to conjure up alternative homes for them, more spacious and attuned to their bewitching qualities. The stubbornly alive particles and remnants of a forgotten movie have elective affinities with the larger, always unfolding utopian narrative of cinema at large.

William Wellman’s Other Men’s Wives (1931), made shortly before his much better known The Public Enemy, contains a number of inspired episodes which leap the divide between efficient studio workmanship and an ineffable, defamiliarizing rightness. I think especially of two linked segments near the film’s end. In the first, a recently blinded railway engineer, Jack Kulper (Regis Toomey), stumbles through a vast rail-yard in a rainstorm, feeling his way to a particular engine which will allow him to attempt a rescue mission that he knows will be futile. He is determined to take his own life, and thus prevent his former friend Bill White (Grant Withers), who is consumed with guilt over a romantic betrayal as well as Jack’s blinding (which he has accidentally brought about), from making the rash journey first. As this description amply attests,
the setup for the scene in question is brazenly, perhaps foolishly, melodramatic. But when Toomey’s Jack is shown to us in the colossal downpour, working his way by groping touch (and uncertain memory) from one end of the freight yard to the other, melodrama gives way to a peculiar, striving, dignified anonymity. A man, invisible in long shot to everyone except the viewer, attempts, with crazed perseverance and a fitful delicacy, to complete an imposing, sacrificial task.

It is as though the milieu effortlessly begins to assert a reality stronger than the immediate dramatic circumstances. The space-time continuum has an unchallengeable thereness. Jack’s blindness may carry the imprint of elaborate artifice, but his environment—observed with wondrous precision in the midst of what might aptly be termed a “forgotten man” Depression deluge, hurtling down inexorably with no end in sight—swallows for the time being any prior viewer concern with contrivance and falsity. The studio-generated images of downpour achieve an undeniably rough, even terrible beauty. The man we watch stumbles and falls and is nearly hit by a train as he pits himself against the elements, trying to “find his way around” again in the little stretch of territory he once knew like the back of his hand. Paradoxically, it is difficult in this scene to stay concentrated on the cumulatively dismal facts: Jack seems initially to be helpless, moving in circles, heedlessly soaked through, and perhaps bent on suicide. Our focus, however, is increasingly on a man gradually righting himself, and becoming known to himself through a dilemma that strips away his false attitudes.

When a character is deprived of sight on-screen, and thus loses contact with whatever in the image world is available to us, we are often induced to project ourselves more forcefully inside the film, so that we can see and participate on behalf of our blind surrogate, and nearly be there in his stead. The reality of what he can’t take in is made up for by our hypervigilant, visceral presence beside him. A character who has previously neither excited much interest nor engaged our sympathy, except in abstract terms, becomes tied to a predicament that suddenly enlarges what he seems to be. I am struck by the ease and simplicity with which this transformation is effected. Jack Kulper, viewed from an intimately distant perspective, becomes a displaced person on a more consequential, existential level than the narrative has prepared us for. Like so many working men and women in 1931, he has been severed from the occupation, and supporting milieu, that gave him whatever personal and social definition he possessed. As I already noted, the early shots in the sequence make us feel that a combination of forces, natural and social, are reducing him to a resourceless, infantile state. His petulant manner of setting forth, well, blindly, to do something, anything on his own terms makes him seem to have as yet no inner sense of where he is, or what he is up to. His solitary movement against the backdrop of a Thomas Hardy storm is, to be sure, framed as a kind of protest, but Toomey’s Jack does not immediately have the stature to be equal to it, and this works to the film’s advantage. If he were nobly purposeful from the outset, the episode would unfold more as a clockwork concept than as a richly muddled experience.

It is hard to say at exactly which point in his travail this faceless wanderer shifts from the register of flailing pathos to matter-of-fact dignity. Wellman intercuts frequently between Jack slowly making headway in the engine yard and a theatrical, poorly written argument scene. Jack’s former friend and rival, Bill, is shown offering
ponderous reasons to a railroad higher-up why he needs to take charge of a near-certain fatal run of a train over a pair of bridges on the verge of collapse. Each time that Wellman returns us to this stagy two-shot debate in progress, the film’s claims on the eye and mind sharply diminish. The scene entraps us in the stasis of early talkie “proscenium arch” presentation; there is no behavioral truth, or surprise, or visual texture to save us from the mounds of convictionless jabber. Yet as soon as Wellman reconnects us with Jack’s halting journey (which resembles that of a man feeling his way home in the dark), the film opens up like a fan and sweeps us back into its tangible, unforced actuality. It is as though Jack takes counsel from the viewer’s intense proximity and wordless guidance. He not only grows more adept at moving and figuring out, as he could not at first, where approximately he is located. He also seems to find a means of standing separate from his own desperation, and is no longer held back or done in by it. Jack inexorably becomes more mindful that he is going to be taking the place of his self-condemning friend, answering the latter’s guilty paralysis with a surprisingly sturdy equanimity and equilibrium of his own. As he gains awareness of the exchange’s possible meaning, his suicide mission acquires a nimble, even jaunty fatalism. Sacrificial acts can have some authentic reverberation when the one who stands in for another in a crisis has some of his lost capacities restored to him. Though it could be argued that Jack’s decision to plunge alone into the rain so that he might discover, unaided, the right engine pointed in the right direction is sullen, uncalled for, and hopelessly masochistic, his motives and chances for awakening appear to expand as we accompany him.

A movie can transform a character’s inner landscape with credible swiftness if propitious visual circumstances are found for such a remaking. We experience Jack as a man allowing himself to be seen, someone no longer in hiding from himself, as we follow his mortifying efforts to keep his footing and carry out his search. At first it seems that he is resolved to rid himself of a life rendered useless, and will seize any haphazard means to do so. But as we stay with him, in the expansive inside of the frame—the frame of Wellman’s and our perspective for proper imagining—it seems clear that he is sacrificing himself for a friend whom he has learned to see again. In the lonely, pulverizing storm, he acquires by repeated outer and inner trial the clairvoyance of one who knows his way around. He has somehow reforged his lost connections to the two people (friend and wife) who matter most to him, and has overcome his bitterness—the dead weight of his former despair and self-pity. Wellman shows us, as he does frequently in his career, a man lightening his load by willing himself all the way out into the open. In just a few months, Wellman will return to this hard, lustrous rain near the end of *The Public Enemy*. As James Cagney’s Tom Powers stalks toward us, eyes malevolently aglitter and purposeful beneath his drenched fedora, we see a perfect reversal of the hatless, blind Toomey’s revelation. Cagney brings all his hypnotic, disquieting power to a final concentrated point, and claims with his last feral smile the narrow cunning of an animal determined to survive. Cut off from everyone, he is glad to have shed all motion-impeding affiliations, and steps forward, in the heat of pleasure, to instigate a career-capping shoot-out.

Jack Kulper eventually ends up on the floor of his sought-after engine. He has lighted upon it, in mystical movie fashion, because it coincides—as a feeling-responsive
object—with the inner connections that he has managed, by an act of grace, to recover. His friend Bill also manages to join him on the engine briefly and, after a strangely irrelevant altercation, is physically overcome and ejected from the train. Now the way is clear for another condensed passage of resplendent film poetry. I love in movies how our sense of things is continually contracting and expanding. The fading out of interest in one event, moving along at a sleepy rhythm, can lead abruptly to a surprised discovery of how much something related to it—perhaps sitting right next to it—suddenly matters. Finding our way back in after a disappointing lull often feels like the director is turning to us directly, and asking for a renewal of faith. He tells us that it is possible to go deeper in this situation, if we are willing. “Can you imagine this with the energy that I do? Are you up to the demands of seeing what is now before you?”

Toomey, who has clumsily played his blindness from the outset by the simple expedient of closing his eyes, settles into his final cozy domicile—the engine in steady, racing motion that no longer has need of his attention. He is ensphered by a beautiful kingdom of sounds, in which the rain and machine noises warmly blend together. I am reminded of Buster Keaton’s way of securing an accommodation that is whisperinglyhuman from the various odd corners and edges and piston rods of his train in The General (1926), where he perches and lies down. There are moments of maternal clemency when the machine almost caresses Keaton, or otherwise yields to him in ghostly solicitude. I also think of Jean Gabin in Renoir’s La bête humaine (1938), consulting the engine he serves with such touching bewilderment for some revelation of what drives and deforms him. Gabin’s dirty goggles produce a similar effect to Toomey’s closed, blind eyes. Gabin even confesses at one point that there is an inner haze which rises up in him in times of turmoil that obscures everything. And finally I recall Glenn Ford in Fritz Lang’s Human Desire (1954), a Korean War vet just returned to his life as an engineer in a streamlined, modern train. He regards his engine as the place where he is most entitled to be reticent and sealed in, where no one can press him for memories, future plans, or explanations.

Once Jack has the floor of the engine to himself, he desperately feels about for something in the suddenly too empty enclosure to restore a sense of attachment. He is hoping that his friend left some small reminder of himself behind to keep him company, an antidote to unconditional aloneness in his wait for the end. What Jack finds (was indeed hoping to find) is the absurdly negligible stick of chewing gum that Bill had offered him just before their last scuffle for possession of the engine. Throughout the film, Bill accompanies most of his friendly overtures to others with the invitation to “have a chew on me.” Jack had, in fact, been asked to purchase some packs of gum for Bill on the afternoon when his wife and best friend acknowledge their love for one another. There is, of course, something woozily overdetermined about the return of this signature object to prominence as Jack steadies himself for death. How inescapable in so many movies such tidy purveyors of meaning and consolation are. Part of their assigned work is always to retrieve some semblance of order in human activities from a world veering menacingly toward senselessness. The gum must be there, must be located, and have its significance acknowledged and embraced if the movie’s form is to take hold of the victim’s predicament and give it arresting placement within the narrative. The object completing its pattern of development can, of course, if ill-chosen,
seem crude, sentimental in a ghastly way, or burdened with more elucidation than it can accomplish with the requisite effortlessness.

The arrival of Bill’s gum is one of those precious, unaccountable instances where a device tilts so very close to the ridiculous before asserting—with homespun confidence—its sublime rightness. It is the element that is essential to complete Jack’s final settling in to his makeshift “bed” in the engine. He stretches out, and the cold, seemingly graceless materials around him arrange themselves in such a way that his comfort (finding the perfect spot for a lolling hammock daydream) is assured. With little room to maneuver, he still seems ideally framed by the spare accommodations. His immediate needs taken care of, he now gives himself over to contemplative chewing. The closed eyes, the rhythmic movement of his mouth, and the folded arms show a man gently working his way inward as the train presses ahead. How satisfying and spacious its controlled movement is, curving through the rain and darkness within which Jack has found shelter. And it is fitting in this timeless final interval that his outer and inner circumstances knit together so benevolently. In a famous line from another Tempest, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.”

In the film’s closing shots, which are for me among the most affecting in cinema, the action has returned to the daylight world of a railway stop diner and the ceaseless flow of trains on less worrisome journeys than that which claimed Jack’s life in the storm. Bill White has just had a chance meeting in the diner with Toomey’s widow, Lily Kulper (Mary Astor), who has returned to her home in this neighborhood after several months of absence. She invites Bill to visit her whenever he might be free, and possibly help her in putting in a garden. Throughout this exchange, Withers, whose demeanor is more difficult to read than Astor’s, is backed by a window in which a moving train, loomingly close, is always visible. Its sounds appear to be filling in, tentatively, for some of what Withers’s Bill is trying, but unable, to find words for. When Lily makes her invitation to resume their relationship, he surprisingly makes an abrupt departure from the diner, literally racing off before supplying any intelligible response (or even attitude) to her brave overture. Wellman’s camera views him in long shot as he climbs onto the last car of a train building up speed. We then watch from behind him as he clambers to the top of the carriage and proceeds to run the entire length of the train, a tiny figure almost vanishing in the distance. Two-thirds of the way through his dash, he pauses for an instant, deep in the frame, raises his arms, and leaps in jubilation. He does not turn back to look at Lily, but we feel he is aware, somehow, that she might be looking at him. Astor stands, leaning forward in the diner doorway in close-up, and offers to his retreating back the same radiant smile of eager, unabashed surrender that she exhibits in her balcony wave to Walter Huston in the final shot of William Wyler’s Dodsworth (1936). In addition to the lovely, skewed logic of Withers’s scrambling flight across the train top as his release into joyous acceptance, this concluding image of the train traveling outward and elsewhere seems to link Bill’s precarious, uninhibited leap into life with the dreamy self-containment of Jack’s dark passage to death. The beckoning future is viewed from behind, available in a swift, telling glimpse, but still visibily exceeding our grasp; we can’t slow the future down, make it linger and attain better focus. It is all about transitory proximity in the midst of rushing separation: moving toward something that is hauntingly in back of you, awaiting your arrival. The image
magically becomes the content of Jack’s final waking dream, a reunion of loved ones in the heady clime of impossibility. Going away and coming toward—three figures meeting in imaginary space—find their perfect movie fusion.

Cinephilia can bring to light such “lost” movie fragments as these from Other Men’s Wives. In doing so, film lovers may find renewed impetus to link the incandescent language of stray movie passages to everything that they already know, feel, and imagine about how movies work. With luck, some portion of the beauty and strangeness of these discoveries may unsettle the process of knowing, and place us once again, to our advantage, in the dark.

Contributors

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