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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*¹

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.

2 “[U]ne image sur laquelle ne pèserait pas l’hypothèque de la liberté d’interprétation de l’artiste ni l’irréversibilité du temps.” André Bazin, “Le mythe du cinéma total,” in *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* 7th ed. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 23 (author’s translation).

DVD, and the Internet³—to showcase the multi-variegated ways in which cinephiles love cinema today, despite (and defying) Susan Sontag's 1996 "end of cinephilia" declaration.⁴ 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.⁵ 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 admirations, 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

3 See in particular "Permanent Ghosts: Cinephilia in the Age of the Internet and Video," a dossier of five essays in *Senses of Cinema* published over its March and April 2000 issues, at <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/4/> and <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/5/>, respectively (accessed April 16, 2009); Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, eds., *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005); and Jason Sperb and Scott Balcerzak, eds., *Cinephilia in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Film, Pleasure and Digital Culture*, Vol. 1 (London: Wallflower, 2009) and Vol. 2, forthcoming.

4 "[P]erhaps it is not cinema that has ended but only cinephilia—the name of the very specific kind of love that cinema inspired." Susan Sontag, "The Decay of Cinema," *New York Times Magazine*, February 25, 1996, 60; subsequently reprinted as "A Century of Cinema" in Sontag's *Where the Stress Falls: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 117–122.

5 Adrian Martin, "No Flowers for the Cinéophile: The Fates of Cultural Populism 1960–1988," in *Island in the Stream: Myths of Place in Australian Culture*, ed. Paul Foss (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998), 117–138. Richard Porton also highlights the connections between cinephilia, history, and politics, tracing the politics "from the Popular Front" in American cinephilia through the 1940s and 1950s via the writings of, among others, James Agee and Robert Warshaw, in "The Politics of American Cinephilia: From the Popular Front to the Age of Video," *Cineaste* 27 (Fall 2002): 4–10.

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.”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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 insatiates. 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 Willemsen, 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.”⁸ 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.”⁹

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.”¹⁰ 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

6 Thomas Elsaesser, “Cinephilia, or the Uses of Disenchantment,” in Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, eds., *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, 28–29.

7 Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema,” 60.

8 Paul Willemsen, “The Desire for Cinema: An Edinburgh Retrospective,” *Framework* 19 (1982), 49.

9 Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema,” 60.

10 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 63.

past experiences.”¹¹ If the recording of cinema is not only the capture of reality, but also an appropriation of “a different *when*,”¹² 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.”¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.”¹⁵ Movie love was no longer cultivated by frequenting the cinema-theques 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.¹⁶ 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.

11 Drehli Robnik, “Mass Memories of Movies,” in Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, eds., *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, 56.

12 Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 20.

13 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, ed. Miriam Hansen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 56.

14 Elsaesser, “Cinephilia, or the Uses of Disenchantment,” 29.

15 De Valck and Hagener, “Down with Cinephilia? Long Live Cinephilia!” in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, 13.

16 Blu-ray Disc effectively won the format war, previously waged against HD DVD, when Warner Bros. announced in January 2008 it would only release Blu-ray products after May 2008, leading to major retailers such as Wal-Mart, Woolworths, and Netflix to drop HD DVD; all the major Hollywood studios eventually followed suit. See Thomas K. Arnold, “All Hollywood Studios Now Lined Up Behind Blu-Ray,” Reuters, February 21, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/entertainmentNews/idUSN2118265320080221> (accessed April 16, 2009).

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?"¹⁷ 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 parceled 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

17 Bryant Frazer, "Essay 5," in "Permanent Ghosts: Cinephilia in the Age of the Internet and Video," <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/05/cine5.html> (accessed April 16, 2009).

their eyes glued to the huge screens. In the new cinephilia, time is chopped up, parceled 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. *

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.