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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*¹

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

1 Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: MacMillan, 1873), viii.

2 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl 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 paralysing bonds of a tender unconditionality."

What is most striking in Metz's formulation is his equating the power and claims of art with "paralysing" 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 railway 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 reformed 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 whisperingly human 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 visibly 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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