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3. **Reel Changes: Post-mortem Cinephilia or the Resistance of Melancholia**

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**Abstract**  
This chapter follows Christian Keathley (2006) and other film scholars’ recent reappraisals of personal anecdotes and subjective impressions as heuristic tools for studying hidden dimensions of cinema history. It attempts, by analyzing the disappearance of “cue marks” from the film theater experience, to seize an aspect in the private phenomenology of movie reception in the transition from analog to digital, that metonymically – and performatively – offers an “insider” perspective on technological changes. This anecdote (about the disappearance of “cue marks” between two viewings of Malick’s *The Tree of Life*) will also be considered as an allegory of recent discourses on cinephilia, and the melancholy very often associated with it, in this transitional age. This melancholy can be seen as a mode of resistance to the sweeping amnesia technological “revolutions” often entail.

**Keywords:** Terrence Malick, cue marks, cinema experience, phenomenology, anecdotal history, cinephilia

**Cinephilia and the Anecdote**

In his 2006 *Cinephilia and History*, Christian Keathley develops the idea that cinephilic anecdotes, although attached to the most personal, fleeting, and often non-intelligible dimension of film viewing, can offer useful knowledge, not only on the level of film reception, but, more largely, on film history and film theory. These anecdotes, for Keathley, are often tied to personal epiphanies, anchored to a context (a place, a time, people with whom the film was seen), and characterized by the fascination for specific, often unspectacular,
moments in the course of the film – a punctum as Barthes would say in *Camera Lucida*, or a photogenic moment as Epstein tried to theorize – that affect us without always knowing exactly why. Keathley develops his core argument concerning the ‘cinephilic moment’ from a discussion between Noël King and Paul Willemen, published in *Looks & Frictions*. In it, King and Willemen discuss the specific dimension of the cinephile’s experience, which singles out fragments, extremely brief and often insignificant instances in a film (most often American classical narrative films) – a gesture by an actor, the color of his socks, a ray of light, an object in the periphery of the frame, a certain bodily posture – that operate for individual viewer within the general economy of the film, a revelatory epiphany that troubles the course of the narrative and imprints an intense, irrational, and enduring relationship between the spectator and the screen (this ‘moment’ could be the equivalent of what Barthes defines as the photographic punctum, “what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there”). Keathley, moving from Willemen’s and King’s intuition, tries to develop this proposition, both historically and theoretically, by collecting and theorizing series of such anecdotes, through film criticism (French and American) and history, and articulating them through recent phenomenological approaches to film viewing (Sobchack), as well as cultural and media history (Kracauer, Benjamin, Schivelbusch, Doane, Marks, etc.). Keathley’s claim is that once detailed, amplified, and properly excavated, these anecdotes shed a new and unexpected light on films, while rehabilitating, within film academia, the pleasure of cinephilia (often depreciated, criticized, and scrutinized in traditional film theory). He writes: “the cinephilia anecdote [is] a form designed to produce unexpected and useful knowledge about the movies, the starting point being what our proprietary discipline might regard as an excessive or inappropriately zealous cinephiliac pleasure.” A decisive, obstinate anecdote that impresses and lingers, that one carries throughout his life in his memory, is never, in fact, anecdotal: it says something of the person watching (his own obsessions), but also of the (historical, technological, phenomenological) conditions of watching in general; it can also produce new ways of writing film history and thinking about film theory while sticking to the most subjective and, for all appearances, banal dimension of the cinema experience.

**Projecting *The Tree of Life***

Here, then, is the anecdote. In the summer of 2011 (my guess is mid-July), I had the pleasure of seeing a 35mm print of Terrence Malick’s *The Tree
of *Life*, at the Cinema Ex-Centris in Montreal. Of the many extravagant wonders the film contains, I was struck and completely obsessed during this first (of what was to become many) viewing of the film by something that was to become a true cinephilic – and unrepeatable, unretrievable – moment for me, something that barely had to do with the film’s aesthetic, its plot, its character development, something that hadn’t even been shot by Malick’s cameraman, and that, technically, is not even really part of the film! It nonetheless completely shifted my understanding and appreciation of the film. I am talking about the cue marks, printed on the end of each reel of the print running through the projector, which serve to indicate the moment of changeover between two projectors and two reels. They come, as many movie-goers know, in many shapes and forms (X’s, circles, ovals, written in pen or punched in, white or black, etc.). In the case of *The Tree of Life*, they were black circles, slightly oval (probably due to the 1.85:1 ratio), circled by what seemed like a thin pale yellow line. The *imprint*, the impression the cue marks would leave on me, did not appear immediately. In this case, as in many other cases of cinephilic moments, it often takes a second occurrence of the same thing (or a variation of the same) to make the previous one appear in its analogous singularity (as Deleuze formula goes: ‘la différence apparaît entre deux sortes de répétition’ and ‘la répétition est entre deux différences’). *The Tree of Life* was made up of eight rolls of 35mm film, 139 minutes in all (although concurrently, many Digital Cinema Package files were also in circulation in North America and Europe⁶). Although the traditional changeover system had, generally speaking, been replaced in commercial theaters by a platter system (or so-called cake stand’) where all the reels are spliced together on one big reel (as was the case in the ExCentris booth), contemporary prints (the rare ones still being produced) still contained these marks (for the rare cinemas or cinémathèques still running with two projectors). Whether the cue mark is printed on the negative or the positive, it would appear in white (positive) or black (circled in ink, as was the case for my *Tree of Life* print). It is only after the second changeover (from reel 2 to 3) that I recalled the preceding changeover (from reel 1 to 2), which lay dormant in my memory, waiting to be released, and that was to enlighten retrospectively a vague intuition, still unarticulated, concerning the construction of the film and the emotional and physical pleasure I was experiencing at that moment.

The second reel, as any reader who has seen the film on print in a dark hall may recall, starts with a black image, out of which, through a series of magnificent shots, the creation of the world is deployed, from the big bang to the ice age. Then, at the end of this second reel, through a succession of
disjointed elliptical shots that are the trademark of Malick's films since *Days of Heaven* (1978), we witness in less than two minutes of screen time the conception and birth of Jack O'Brien, future hero of the film. If we are to take this material fact seriously (the unity of the reel), we could say the creation of the world leads to, pursuing the same breath of time, the birth of the character. The third reel is devoted to the formative years of the child until his early adolescence, a paradise soon lost (as is often the underlying tale of Malick's films), before the apparition of conflicts with the father, played by Brad Pitt, that start in the fourth reel. This fourth reel begins with a low, dark shot of Mr. O'Brien, his back filling the entire space of the frame, literally swallowing all the wonderful pastoral light in the park of the previous tracking shot that ends reel 3. Basically, Malick gives the same block of time to the creation of the world and the formative years of the child, and this can be calculated – and this is what led me to this conclusion – from the strict point of view of the materiality of the projection: one reel for each. This thematic (theological or anthropo-cosmogonic) equivalence, this narrative autonomy between the two 'creations of the world', of each version of the *tree of life* (the cosmic and the subjective-human), is inscribed in the rhythm and transition of the reel change; at least, it became clear and obvious to me because I became obsessed with those cue marks and what, through them, was slowly becoming a secret mode of access to the unfolding film.

This private and, in fact, hard to share experience coincides precisely with Willemen's definition of the 'cinephiliac moment', when he writes:

> What you are reconsuming is the moment of revelation experienced in an encounter between you and cinema, which may be different from 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 had a cinephiliac moment.6

Counting reels and a hard to define fascination with the specific tempo of the changeover (with its two-time drill: the first cue mark announcing the moment, six or seven seconds later the second one appears, even more briefly, swallowed by the light of the other projector), are part of the obsessive, vaguely fetishistic attachments associated with the intimate pleasure of viewing films on 35mm (a pleasure still easy to come by in commercial theaters in 2011, not so frequent today). It is also a way of knowing for sure – since digital projectors have improved considerably over time – whether we are seeing a print or a digital file. But rarely had a cue mark exerted such a decisive role in my critical appreciation of a film.
The more I pondered and reflected on the relation between reel changes and the narrative structure of the film, the more it became clear to me that this was very conscious on Malick’s part (and in his other films, through the vague recollection of viewing some of them in theaters, which seemed to work around the same division into reels), and, in this respect, that he was a director (his notoriously puzzling narrative structures notwithstanding), who, like many classical filmmakers, still thinks about his film ‘in reels’ (Hitchcock, Lang, Minnelli, Ford). What is true of the three first reels (and, in particular, the sense of unity found in the aforementioned reels 2 and 3), also holds for the first and last reel (again, this is a classic narrative strategy, where the first and last reels tend to mirror each other). All the ‘points of present’ (to speak in Deleuzian terms, ‘pointes de présents’) are found in both the first and the last reel: in the first reel, all these ‘points’ are separated, placed on distinct temporal planes, whereas, in the last reel, they are reunited on the same plane of immanence (the seashore), concretizing the reconciliatory possibilities of the film that allow for the suturing of time and perform (without showing it) the end of mourning (it is the trajectory of the film). Here, too, there can be found a similar system of equivalence that can be intuited through the material structure of the projection.

By virtue of the simple fact of a film built and conceptualized by blocks of time/reels, which a theater in Bologna, the Cinema Lumière (and what a marvelous place to see *The Tree of Life*) showed with the two first reels inverted, for over a week, without any protests from spectators (the film has no opening credits, and thus the screening would start with the ‘creation of the world’ reel (Reel 2), which, in fact, could make sense, continuing into Reel 1 and into 3, without much narrative disruption). It is only when an audience member who had seen the film in another theater realized the problem that the inversion was corrected. This anecdote led to a variety of comments on the blogosphere where detractors of the film saw this as a confirmation of the confused, arbitrary and random construction of Malick’s film.

Even if the film worked with the reels inverted, it surely would have appalled its maker, since we know Malick’s attention to the conditions of projections of his films is notorious (and is similar to that of Kubrick and Lynch, known for their extravagant requests throughout the process of the film, from pre-production to projection). Confirming this, we can quote the ‘Notice to projectionists regarding the *Tree of Life*’ that Malick sent to theaters showing the film:

Though proper theater projection is fast becoming a forgotten art, we consider projectionists to be the last remaining artisans of movie
exhibition and we implore your help in delivering *THE TREE OF LIFE* properly to the screen.

With a friendly salute, we urge you to consider the following points:
- The film should be projected at the 1:85 aspect ratio.
- (for film projection) Reel 2 begins with a black frame. Please be sure to cut at the marked frame or the frame line.
- Please keep the faders at a minimum of 7.5, though we hope to set as high as 7.7 if the sound system permits.
- There are no credits at the beginning of this film, so make sure the lights down cue is well before the opening frame of reel 1.

These specifications refer to a certain type of film experience, but also to a type of control and monitoring that, as Malick himself projects in his notice, is rapidly disappearing. Film projection has almost vanished from commercial cinemas and most of the operations he refers to are now automated and beyond the control of the person responsible for ‘playing’ the film (a role that we need to distinguish from that of ‘projectionist’).

On the same blog page where I collected this information (Aphelis⁶), we can find similar notifications by Kubrick and Lynch, as well as Selznick. Kubrick had very specific requests for *Barry Lyndon* concerning the music that was to be played before and after the screening, as well as during the intermission (among other things); for *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch asked projectionists to “raise volume 3db hotter than normal,” and “give the picture a small amount of headroom” (slightly modifying the 1:85 aspect ratio, something that is impossible to control in most current digital cinemas). And to go as far back as *Gone With the Wind*, David Selznick (the producer, not the director) signed a four-page booklet with specifications for exhibitors. While, today, filmmakers and producers are perhaps just as exacting about the conditions of exhibition of their films, the flexibility allowed by digital projection and the autonomy of the ‘intendant’ is very low (choice of aspect ratio, sound volume, luminosity). From *Gone with the Wind* to *The Tree of Life* to current exhibition practices, it is possible to appreciate the gradual dissolution of an ‘artisanship’ of movie exhibition that existed from the birth of cinema until its fairly recent disappearance (we can still witness it during conscientious avant-garde or early film screenings).

These documents are an archive of the way film technology and aesthetic experience were historically controlled and modulated to shape, in different epochs, specific types of desired film reception and overall meaning, beyond the film’s so-called *text* (the ‘text’ of *Barry Lyndon* does not require that there be “no less than 15 foot lamberts of lights on the screen, and
no more than 18," and yet the experience of the film desired by its maker requires it). All this is deeply tied to the physical reality of film experience that was still anchored to the same mechanical reality of the apparatus, at least from the classical sound age, but well beyond if we are to only consider the 35mm format, as well as the reel of celluloid as measure of unit of certain types of film experience (one-reel, multiple-reel, etc.). All this is, generally speaking, well forgotten, and only specialized events devoted to early cinema, film restorations, experimental cinema, and a handful of cinémathèques and arthouse cinemas, still understand the weight and importance of such 'superficial' preoccupations.

If the Tree of Life is, among other things, a philosophical and technological mediation on the capacity of cinema to allow the co-existence of extremely foreign temporalities (the Big Bang, the life and death of dinosaurs, life in Waco, Texas in the 1950s, life in a contemporary urban city in the 2000’s), to intertwine and collide generations, the old and the new (the film was also shot on various formats of celluloid film stock [35mm, 65mm], and used many different digital cameras [Phantom HD Gold, Red One Camera] and digital related technologies), it is interesting to consider that it also appeared in North American theaters at a historical juncture between two ages of cinema that could still, in 2011, cohabit in the same city, in commercial venues (we can still see films on film in Montreal, but almost exclusively, like elsewhere, at the Cinémathèque). During the summer and fall of 2011, the quasi-totality of cinemas in Montreal, as well as in North America and Europe, replaced their 35mm projectors with digital 2k projectors, in accordance with the Digital Cinema Initiative (DCI, regrouping the major Hollywood studios) recommendations (since then, a new norm of 4k has been adopted by some commercial theaters, and there is talk of 8k projection, but, of course, this would mean changing the equipment of all the theaters, especially repertoire cinemas that are far from reimbursing their 2k projectors, but all this is another issue). The November 2011 issue of Cahiers du cinéma (#672) announced on its cover page: “Adieu 35. La révolution numérique est terminée ” (“Goodbye 35. The digital revolution is finished”).

The second time I saw The Tree of Life during that summer of 2011, was in Toronto, at the TIFF Lightbox, where the film was shown in 2k/DCP format (I have, since then, screened it numerous times on my Blu-ray player). Of course, at all of these ulterior viewings, I was unable to find my cue marks (which I had mentally reconstructed and placed in order). For, in the meantime, growing in my memory, blossoming in my recoding of the experience, these cue marks had become mine.
Reel Changes

The reader would be right in thinking that this anecdote about cue marks is totally insignificant, when compared to the extent and variety of mutations experienced by the film viewer since the 1990s (one can see *The Tree of Life* on his iPhone in the subway or on a plane! Who cares about cue marks, some might think!). But my revelation of the importance and further disappearance of the cue marks in this film — that, to me, resonate with Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1975 article on the 'Disappearance of the fireflies' and the recent discussion Georges Didi-Huberman addresses concerning this marvelous text in his *Survivances des lucioles* (2012) — is, to me, exemplary of the kind of small detail that transforms the very nature, both in depth and surface, of film experience. The cue mark is tied to a memory of cinema that arches back to its process of institutionalization, a memory that is recaptured and survives every time a film is properly projected on celluloid, in a darkened hall.\(^{10}\) The evolution from early cinema's 'one-reeler' (1000 ft, roughly 11-15 min.) to the appearance of multiple-reel films (but where each reel maintained a sense of unity and self-containment)\(^{11}\) in the 1910s to the classic continuous 'five-reeler' (5 x 2000 feet, around 90 min.), established in the 1910s and 1920s and that still dominates narrative cinema today, allows one to rapidly scan the history of cinema and the development of narrative feature length film. It also inscribes this stabilization and standardization within a larger cultural scope: the introduction of the 'invisible' reel change, from probably the mid-1920s onwards, marks the beginning of the standard experience of a narrative feature film, with its five reels, its five pivotal moments, which are not without recalling the five acts of classic tragedy or the five movements of a classic symphony, etc.\(^{12}\) Among other things, the shift to digital projection erases this physical memory of the history of cinema (that the French language still preserves in the expression *long métrage*), inscribed into the archeology of its technical apparatus and configuring the experience of the viewer (albeit a specific kind of viewer, such as myself, who is accustomed and attached to these cue marks and the information they provide: length of the film, narrative development, which often entail quality, provenance, and date of the print, etc.). Interestingly, it was often still possible to see cue marks on VHS copies as well as low budget DVD transfers (which were usually simple transfers from theatrical release prints). They have (almost) completely disappeared from common DVD and Blu-ray editions today, for which the source is digital intermediaries.

It is often possible to identify — without any historical research, simply from movie-going habit in *cinémathèques* and arthouse cinemas — a date,
often the provenance of the print, from the shape of the cue mark, i.e. whether the cue mark was punched in the negative or the positive print, in the same way that it is possible to estimate the age, the viewing frequency of a film, and the care it has undergone from the scratches and tears at the end of reels (where the cue marks usually appear). There is a private pleasure tied to these cue marks, a pleasure partly due to the fact that they are not meant to be seen by the viewer, in that, although they are on the film, they are addressed to the projectionist alone (as so often, the cinephile develops a fascination for something he believes he alone has seen). The cue mark is part of the secrets of film history and technology, demythologized or, better, remythologized by the popular Fight Club (Tyler [Brad Pitt, again!] says “in the industry, we call them ‘cigarette burns,’” a term never, in fact, used in the industry, but which, since then, has been widely used by movie buffs, although projectionists have never adopted the term and are, in fact, quite dismissive of its usage). Fight Club appeared on screens in 1999, in the wake of the digital revolution, when, all of a sudden, these forms of movie exhibition where beginning to feel increasingly obsolete; at least, this was the case by that point of the changeover system, replaced by the platter system. Not so paradoxically maybe, Fight Club was, probably along with the Matrix, one of the films that had, at the time, the most exceptional and extravagant 2-DVD box set, and that totally embraced the possibilities of home-movie viewing.

Films as diverse as John Carpenter’s 2005 TV-episode Cigarette Burns (in the Masters of Horrors series, reclaiming the expression popularized by Fight Club), or Tarentino and Rodriguez’s Grindhouse double-bill, are two recent examples of anachronistic usage of cue marks, at a time when technology was rapidly turning these fleeting apparitions into private jokes for geek connoisseurs, commodified within their narrative or worked into the visual texture of the work, both pointing, in truth, to a lost experience for most of the viewers (Cigarette burns aired on television and is available through Vimeo, Grindhouse had a very brief existence in theaters, the audience of this film preferring the DVD or Torrent experience). Also, in all the above-mentioned cases, the cue marks in the film do not, in fact, correspond to real cue marks; they are there as commodity (often generated digitally). I would say, in the same way digital photography cannot produce a light leak, or a super8 app on an iPhone cannot really scratch the image, these are all simulacra that point to a lost, technologically absent origin that capitalizes on the aesthetic virtues of an analog effect, but without the logical causality, historical intelligence, and knowledge transmission that produces it. What interests me, here, is less the geek culture’s fetishistic,
almost regressive fascination with cue marks that one often encounters in
certain circles and concerning certain films, but the memory they carry
and the way they (unknowingly) allowed an articulation of a spectator’s
contemporary gaze with a crucial, albeit discreet, dimension of the history
of cinema’s apparatus, which vanished suddenly, not even with a whimper,
around 2011-2012.

These ‘fireflies’, as I like to call them, in their very fleetingness, in their
periodic and obsessive return (in the films, in my memory of film view-
ings), their apparition as brief streaks of light tearing at the image, not
meant to be seen by anyone (except me), seem to be made of the same
substance as the film from which this meditation stemmed from, The Tree of
Life, where their importance was to grow paramount in my understanding
of the work, but also in my understanding of what was shifting in movie
experience at the time. Thus, it is with melancholy that I saw them disappear
from commercial theaters (since then, I often try and imagine where they
would have been placed in the films I see in theaters, and it has made
Cinémathèque screenings of 16mm or 35mm prints even more precious). But
maybe, in turn – and this point is perhaps the substance of the reflection I
am trying to conduct here – it is precisely on the threshold of their erasure,
of their technological obsolescence, that they appeared significant. In the
same way the vintage inflation surrounding analog technologies or ‘residual
media’ (LoMo photography, super8 apps on the iPhone, a plethora of digital
programs allowing the simulation of the specificities of celluloid film or
photography, vintage typewriters, etc.) is only possible because of the rapid
changes that have been occurring in the wake of digital conversion. To
express it in less negative terms, we can say, like a character of Godard’s
Éloge de l’amour, “C’est quand les choses finissent qu’elles prennent un sens”
(“It’s when things end that they start making sense”). Or, in Pasolini’s
existentialist statement: “Death enacts an instantaneous montage of our
lives. [...] only thanks to death does our life let us express ourselves.” The
disappearance of the cue marks from the theater suddenly made clear
what they meant to me, for certain cinephiles understanding of cinema’s
(technological) history.

The Cinephilia Discourse

This anecdote and the muttering they allowed me to develop on the shifting
nature of film experience, can be seen in conjunction with, or as an allegory
of discourses on cinephilia, and the place these discourses have come to
occupy (through the 2000s) within film theory and history. For example, precisely at a time when cinephilia has become decisively obsolescent in its traditional and canonical form (a process that has surely been underway since the 1970s\(^9\)), to adopt new continents of cinema (there is a new map of world cinephilia today, as Rosenbaum and Martin aptly showed in *Movie Mutations*, 2004), but also an ever greater variety of medias, platforms, social interactions, and modes of expression (cinephilia is well served by today’s blog culture and social media, as we can witness in two volumes edited by Jason Sperb and Scott Balcerak, *Cinephilia in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, 2009 & 2012).

Although it can be argued that film studies developed (in France and North America to talk only of those) on a backdrop of often distant cinephilia – either in its aesthetical approach or its appraisal of certain film-makers/auteurs canonized by classical cinephilia (Parisian, to be blunt)\(^20\) – cinephilia served more often than not as a ‘bad object’, a *repoussoir*,\(^{21}\) acting as a foil, with Metz’s famous recommendation (although frequently the quotation limits itself to the first part, keeping aside the ambiguity Metz wishes to maintain):

> To be a theoretician of the cinema, one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it [...] 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.\(^{22}\)

In Metz’s pronouncement, cinephilia is identified as a past life ("*le cinéphile que l’on a été*"\(^{23}\)), before the theoretician put on the white lab coat of scientifi city. It is a distancing or splitting from oneself (where the cinephile must be maintained only for ‘self-analysis’ and observational purposes). It can be said that ‘cinephilia’, as object of theoretical and historical investigation, on the one hand, as self-proclaimed critical position from which to speak from, on the other, has traditionally received limited academic attention until recently (even if, as can be argued, much of its curriculae, choice of films, and authors, stem from the conquests acquired by ‘classical cinephilia’ of the 1950s-1960s). There is no doubt that there has been, in recent years, a gradual shift in discourse. Cinema’s centenary, on the one hand, and Susan Sontag’s controversial *New York Times* article (‘100 Years of Cinema’ also titled the ‘Decay of Cinema’), a heartfelt and critical meditation on the disappearance of a certain type of cinephilic love of movies, can be seen as two watershed moments that crystallized debates about cinephilia that
have been underway for 20 years. Already, Paul Willemen and Noël King’s memorialist dialogue, published in 1994, set the tone of many of the debates that were to blossom and explode within academic discourse at the turn of the century, triggered by the publication of Keathley’s *Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees* (this decisive book’s major intuitions are found in King’s and Willemen’s article/discussion). Since then, a great number of articles, special issues, monographies, collective publications, colloquiums, workshops, and seminars, have multiplied, incorporating, and interrogating cinephilia in all of its dimensions and geographies, from its classic, urban, intellectual manifestation in New York or Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, to its earliest forms in the 1910s, as well as its contemporary variations in the digital scape, in both Western and Eastern culture. Deploying various conceptual and methodological tools, from cultural history to phenomenology, micro-history and sociology, absorbed by reception studies, gender studies, women studies, digital media studies, one can say that, compared with the tone of Keathley’s introduction to his book, cinephilia has gained respectability in academia, although one can argue it has been at the cost of a domestication and a normalization within the constituted branches of the discipline (are film studies re-enchanted by this, as Keathley had hoped?).

By mapping a number of discourses on cinephilia, we can ponder on the meaning of its current currency. One thing that does seem certain, is that many of these discourses look at cinephilia through the lens of historical pastness, that they take for granted that it has passed, that it has died or has, more simply, always been disenchanted. To caricature, we can say cinephilia survives today either as a zombie (the nostalgic living dead) or the cyborg cinephilia 2.0 (harnessed and expanding through to contemporary digital platforms). But in both cases, it is as if we needed cinephilia to vanish – historically, technologically – to constitute itself as an object of theory and study (death is always a moment of great reflexivity, as Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* or Malick’s *The Tree of Life* demonstrate). As Thomas Elsaesser once wrote (although he was not sure if the phrase was his or Lev Manovich’s), “theory is always the funeral of a practice.”

As Mary Ann Doane summarizes at the end of her wonderful book, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, “[i]n the face of new technologies such as television and digital imaging that seem to threaten the cinema with obsolescence, film theorists have manifested a renewed interest in cinephilia and cinematic contingency.” Similarly, Laura Mulvey more recently argued:

As the cinema underwent those transformations of the 1990s that brought so many pronouncements of its death, so cinephiles began to reflect
(perfectly rationally) on the passing of the special, ritualistic conditions of watching films, obsessive habits of moviegoing and the love of moments and fragments that had characterized their preferred form of spectatorship.27

Technology not only modified cinephiliac practices, it produced and encouraged an alternative mode of writing about, theorizing, and historicizing the deep phenomenology of film experience, which, I believe, characterizes a lot of film studies writing of the last ten years. The tone and nature of many articles (especially those written by an older generation of (very diverse) scholars, such as the already cited Andrew, Willemen, Elsaesser, Rosenbaum, but also Wollen’s wonderful Alphabet of Cinema (2001) or moments in David Bordwell’s blog, Observations on Film Art), often reflective, adorned with melancholia, reminiscent, playfully anecdotal, joyously disenchanted, invoke a need to reinscribe and theorize individual experience and spectatorial phenomenology from a subjective standpoint. In so doing, they seem to always point to a fleeting, extinct experience, which makes it available as a theoretical material (even if it consists of saying cinephilia is still very much alive).

My hypothesis could be formulated simply thus: technological innovations of the last 20 years, and, in particular, the shift to digital cinema and the variety of new modes of access and viewing it allowed, profoundly transformed the face of cinephilia, making its traditional definition ‘untimely’.28 By the same discursive twist that illuminates interest in dead or residual media, cinephilia’s waning has awarded it, in addition to a series of concepts in the same situation, and to which cinephilia became associated with, a powerful currency: notions such as indexicality, contingency, epiphany, chance, and, more generally, consideration for the materialities involved in the film experience (things ‘media archaeology’ is interested in), all gained importance in the 2000s. Post-mortem theorizations of cinephilia should be considered through this discursive network formation, perfectly and brilliantly defined by Elsaesser when he writes:

We care about the indexicality of the photograph because we miss it in the post-photographic pixel. We celebrate the ‘materiality’ of clunky 18th century stage machinery or the elaborate illusionism of a Pepper’s Ghost phantasmagoria because of the effortless creation of such three-dimensional ‘special effects’ in computer graphics virtual space. We marvel at the sheer ‘diversity’ of 19th century visual culture – maybe
because we sense its imminent disappearance? In which case, ‘convergence’ might be less our inescapable fate than the name of our inadmissible fear, nostalgically but also frantically driving our excavation and preservation efforts.  

It is in this wide context that one can also appreciate the renewed interest for the long-neglected (especially in French theoretical circles) life and writings of André Bazin. This is apparent in the recent (and sometimes critical) works of Dudley Andrew, Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, or Laurent Le Forestier, in the surge of colloquiums (the two Opening Bazin conferences in Paris and Yale, and the proceedings that came out of them), and the relaunching of the project to publish the long-awaited complete works (Cahiers du cinéma). The title of an issue of Film International, I believe, sets the table for the discussion: “Because we need him now: re-enchanting film studies through Bazin”. As if a perceived necessary re-enchantment of our discipline presupposes a return and a rehabilitation of cinephilia and its tutelary patrons.

The same, it seems, can be said of the presence of Jean Epstein (the original ‘proto-cinephile’, among the first generation of militant film aficionados). We could mention numerous anthologies, conferences, film retrospectives (in Montreal, Paris, New York), the (also, long-awaited) publication of his complete writings in French (slated for publication between 2014-2017, by Les Presses du réel), and a complete DVD box set (Potemkine film). As symptomatic as the title of the Film International issue for Bazin, is a website called photogenie.be, which allows us to understand Epstein’s status within the discursive zeitgeist concerning cinephilia:

[A] present-day interpretation of cinephilia can be guided by photogénie in order to reconnect to a tradition in which the fascination with moving images leads to fresh insights. At photogenie.be, we want to combine a sense of wonderment with keen analyses. The connecting principle is the intense perception of cinema. The articles that will be published on this website – on films old and new, cinema past and present – will not try and force this perception to fit preconceived frameworks, but will endeavour to make the viewer receptive to what films can make us see, in an attempt to put the allure of the cinema into words. […] Epstein and his contemporaries are making a come-back, both in academic film studies and in cinephile circles. But what is the relevance of their theories and what can we as present-day cinephiles learn from their approach to our beloved medium?
We could also, among other manifestations, mention the ‘Cinephilia Dossier’ of the Journal *Framework* (published in the spring of 2009), where the same question was addressed to critics, bloggers, film scholars: “What is being fought for by today’s cinephilia(s)?”, trying to revive, or tap into the polemic fever and fervor of yesterday’s cinephilia debates. In the introduction, Jonathan Buchbaum and Elena Gorfinkel explain how, “In asking our question regarding contemporary cinephilia, we wondered whether these writers and critics could or would identify a polemical thrust driving cinephiles and their critical practice today”, only to conclude:

While we come from different generations of cinephilia, we were interested in whether contemporary critics/writers saw themselves as having a position to defend – political, aesthetic, or other/intellectual. In fact, it seems that fighting for communities and bridge building, not polemics as we understand it, is the dominant thread in the responses. That may very well reflect one of the most dramatic changes in film viewing over the last thirty years, which is the shriveling of the theatrical audience for films resulting from the worldwide phenomenon of new supports of video and DVD, and the new delivery systems of cable and satellite. The public sphere once occupied by *Cahiers*, and *Screen, Film Comment, Framework, Cineaste, Jump Cut*, all still publishing, and many others has migrated or melted into the Internet of online journals and blogs, and the responses indicate that they are trying to assimilate that transformation in their writing, which may for the moment render battles of critical position quaint vestiges of a lost world.

In this respect, and for all the reasons I have evoked, we can legitimately ask if every theory and history of cinephilia is always an expression of melancholia (self-expressed or not), speaking always-already of an experience that is lost, absent. A book titled *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia* is another schizophrenic symptom of this paradoxical, melancholy discourse on cinephilia. Cinema is not what it was, we have forgotten what it was, but cinephilia – and this is Rosenbaum’s hope – continues to exist (but what would cinephilia be without cinema, if not a melancholic practice)?

The underlying and unresolved questions would consist of asking if there is a link between this melancholic theory of cinephilia and cinephilia’s melancholia (so beautifully expressed by Serge Daney or explored in Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*). This cinephilic melancholia did not wait for the advent of digital cinema and torrent culture, and can be diagnosed in critical writing between the late 1960s and late 1970s, precisely bracketed
by the expansion of television and the first VCRs, between May 1968 and the emergence of film studies as an independent discipline.

Can one melancholically theorize cinephilia’s melancholia? Can one use such a melancholic approach to cinema (that should be distinguished from a strictly nostalgic, regressive attitude)? Can there be an epistemology of melancholia, in terms of a specific mode of knowledge it allows?

If there is such a thing, one of the features of this melancholia is its attachment and valorization of a certain type experience, often anachronistic, often extinct, ‘vestige of a lost world’, for the simple reason something of cinema’s memory passes through it, that it is luminous and inspiring. This ‘melancholy of resistance’, or this ‘resistance of melancholy’, affords the advantage of (at least trying to) being critical of deterministic techno-theoretical discourses. It is also a way of carrying a portion of this memory of cinema, deposited in anecdotes, in privileged encounters with films and the singular epiphanies they allow, with the hope of being able to reanimate, in others, their fleeting and ephemeral shards of light.

Notes

1. Keathley, *Cinephilia and History*.
2. Willemen, ‘Through the Glass Darkly’.
5. Although it has been the subject of much discussion, it is useful to remind readers that for its premiere in Cannes, in 2011, Terrence Malick opted for the DCP rather than the 35mm print of *The Tree of Life* (after a six-hour debate and testing). As we can read in the July 2011 editorial of *CSI-La lettre*, the newsletter published by the French *Commission supérieure de l'image et du son*, “It is maybe not insignificant that Terrence Malick, director of *The Tree of Life*, winner of the Palme d’Or, finally chose the digital projection to present his film at the festival, after having been attached body and soul to the 35mm copy. This immense director hesitated during rehearsals between the celluloid and DCP copy of his film, asking Pierre-William Glenn and Alain Besse to screen over and over again the same scenes in the two formats to finally concede that the quality of the digital copy was exceptional and that it faithfully represented his intentions and his work” (Glenn & Hébert, ‘Éditorial’, 1, my translation). In 2014, every film shown in Cannes was projected in a digital format.
7. I recall in *The New World* a reel (probably reel 2) ending with one of the characters saying: “We’re going to live like Kings here,” followed by the third
reel beginning with a shot of an axe cutting down a tree; the ‘cut’, here, between the idealized ‘new world’ and the harnessing of nature that will destroy it, could not have been more clear. It is embedded not only in the editing of the film, but in the very split between reels that make up the film.


9. On these important issues, see the discussions found in P. Cherchi Usai, D. Francis, A. Horwath, M. Loebenstein, Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace (Vienna: Synema, 2008).

10. It is for this reason that curators such as Michael Loebenstein, consider the DVD of a film restored by a film museum to be a “catalogue medium,” in which “you are going to see black leader in it, you are going to see reel changes. We include them to inform you about the special conditions the material was in when we found it.” (Cherchi Usai et al., Film Curatorship, 27)


12. On the other hand, it can be argued that films such as Nolan’s Memento (shot on film) or even Kiarostami’s Ten (shot on video) seemed to have been imagined to work within the narrative (and mental) structuring of the DVD, with its division into short (10 min. or so) ‘chapters’.

13. Again, as Willemen argues: “What is being looked for is a moment or [...] a dimension of a moment which triggers for the viewer either the realization or the illusion of a realization that what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown. [...] It reveals an aspect or a dimension of a person, whether it’s the actor or the director, which is not choreographed for you to see.” (Willemen, ‘Through the Glass Darkly’, 237).

14. It can also be argued that a certain number of films shot on video, lost their essence when shown on 35mm in theaters, such as Sokourov’s The Russian Ark or Figgis’ TimeCode (the splitting of the films into reels, even mounted on platters, created a disruption in the real timeflow the films where based on). A digital projection was better fitted to these works.

15. To give only one example out of many, there exists a web site devoted to Star Wars culture, that collects (using a wide range of versions of the films, mostly bootleg copies from the late 1970s and 1980s, for the original theatrical release of the first trilogy, and theatrical bootlegs for The Phantom Menace and The Attack of the Clones) screen caps of the cue marks of the Star Wars episodes: see http://fd.noneinc.com/Reel_Changes/Reel_Changes.html.

16. I can recall an extenuating, late night screening at the Cinémathèque of a worn-out print of Michael Snow’s La région centrale (1971), when the joyous apparition of the cue mark (accompanied by multiple scratches and sound glitches) signaled that the shot was (finally) soon going to end; I can recall a screening, in the 1990s, of Persona, at the Cinéma du parc, where the projectionists would systematically miss his changeover, and the first cue
mark left us suspended, each time, wondering if he’d ‘get it’ this time (all this somehow made sense with the film we were watching), etc.

17. See Acland, Residual Media.
19. For many historians of cinephilia such as Antoine de Baecque, May 1968 was the pivotal moment, when, to generalize, growing suspicion was drawn towards cinephilia, accused of ideological blindness, in favor of political and psychoanalytical theory that was to drag the cinephile out of the cavern and into the (dialectical materialist) light. When these and other Grand Theories collapsed (in the 1980s), home video, blockbuster culture, and the desertification of movie venues in cities big and small, had erased all possibilities of a ‘true’ cinephilia surviving (like the one Sontag and others experienced and nostalgically regret). See De Baecque, La cinéphilie, 365-377, and Andrew, ‘The Three Ages of Film Studies’, 341-351. See also Skorecki, ‘Contre la nouvelle cinéphilie’. For my part, I rather share the opinion and attitude of Jonathan Rosenbaum and others who prefer to talk about cinephilia mutations, and adopting a posture that can maintain alive older practices of cinephilia, whilst embracing the possibilities of the new (anachronism is always an interesting status for a cinephile).

20. A point violently critiqued by Laurent Jullier and Jean-Marc Leveratto, who argue that, in France at least, a specific brand of elitist ‘cinephilia’ (Cahiers-oriented) not only literally occupied the film studies discourse and practice in France, but also confiscated a more popular, widespread understanding of cinephilia and movie-going. See Jullier & Leveratto, Cinéphiles et cinéphilies.
23. Although it is not the task of this article, Martin Lefebvre has shown convincingly how parallel to Metz-the-theoretician, there exists a Metz-cinephile, against which the theoretician is in constant struggle. In a fascinating interview given in 1975, Metz explains his complex, and slightly schizophrenic relationship (self-hatred, mockery, love) with cinephilia: “Et puis, il y a cette résistance qui me retient sur le bord de l’objet film, comme si j’étais devant un seuil que j’hésite à franchir. Ça tient certainement au fait que je l’ai trop aimé à une certaine époque. Les coups de patte contre la cinéphilie dont je parsème scrupuleusement mes écrits sont la liquidation d’une vieille querelle avec moi-même. Quand j’y pense, se sont sans doute les seuls passages un peu agressifs et polémiques qu’il y ait dans mes livres. Aujourd’hui, la cinéphilie est une attitude que j’ai largement ‘dépassée’, qui me fait sourire, mais il faut croire que je ne l’ai pas entièrement dépassée puisque je constate, quand je suis franc, que je lui en veux […] Je crois que c’est ce même problème qui explique ma résistance à l’analyse textuelle.” (Metz, ‘Entretien’, 25)
Mulvey, 'Some reflections on the cinephilia question', 191.

One example of this is the 2002 documentary Cinemania, a portrait of ‘traditional’ New York cinephiles (deeply attached to the theater experience) that is completely at odds with the heroics and beautified image of 1950s and 1960s Parisian of North American cinephilia. In 2002, the same movie-going habit is perceived as autistic, antisocial and pathologically abnormal.

Elsaesser, ‘The New Film History as Media Archaeology’, 92.

Andrew, What Cinema Is!; Joubert-Laurencin, Le sommeil paradoxal; Le Forestier, ‘La « transformation Bazin »’.

Film International, 5, no. 6 (December 2007).

The sheer idea of ‘opening Metz’, through a thorough and thought-provoking investigation of his archive, as Martin Lefebvre (see Chateau & Lefebvre, ‘Christian Metz et la phénoménologie’) had recently engaged it to situate his work and thought not only as a theoretician, but also as a cinephile and lover of movies, proceeds, it seems, of the same discursive paradigm of a theoretical rehabilitation of cinephilia.


Ibid., 180, emphasis mine.

Rosenbaum, Goodbye Cinephilia.

Daney’s melancholia (omnipresent in his later work, and particularly, from the time he became sick and knew he was shortly going to pass away) stems both from his understanding of (his) cinema as having to do with childhood and childhood impressions (‘Le cinéma, c’est l’enfance’), hence something always-already lost and impossible to recapture; this melancholia appears in the context of a contemporary media world – and this is ever ceaseingly true – that can increasingly do without cinema (‘un monde sans le cinéma’). As he writes in his L’exercice a été profitable, Monsieur, “La mélancolie cinéphile viendrait de ce que nous avons rencontré certains films qui nous ont donné à voir ce que nous ne connaissions pas (ce dont nous n’avions pas l’usage), le visage d’une expérience à venir, la bande annonce de ce qui nous regardera un jour.” (Daney, L’exercice a été profitable, 323).

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