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Cinephilia now

In the introduction to this collection of essays, the editors Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener set out their definition of and approach to cinephilia, and seek to position the book in distinction to earlier work on cinephilia. Their aim is that *Cinephilia* will come to represent a period break, with future research based on their conceptualisation of cinephilia as "an umbrella term for a number of different affective engagements with the moving image" (14). This they label as cinephilia 2, in opposition to (presumably) cinephilia 1, which they tie irrevocably to the defining moment of the 1960s French *Nouvelle Vague*; its now-petrified status as an elitist, snobby mode of film reception; and its historical appropriation by dogmatic agendas, such as the *politique des auteurs*.

Cinephilia, despite its transparent etymological meaning - love of cinema - is a term that resists ready and shared understanding. Annette Michelson argued that there is "no one such thing as cinephilia, but rather forms and periods of cinephilia" (1998, 3): a point taken up by de Valck and Hagener as they note "the Parisian archetype" of classic cinephilia, still exerting an almost Siren-like influence today (12). Paul Willemen, in his influential essay "Through the glass darkly: cinephilia reconsidered", saw the amorphous status of cinephilia as contributing to its usefulness and longevity:

A particular term is widely circulated, widely taken up, and then someone comes along and tries to give it an essential definition, which is not the point because the whole reason for the term being in circulation in the first place is that it can cover different fields without specifying what is meant. ... Cinephilia itself describes simultaneously a particular relationship to cinema (and the question then opens up of what kind of relationship that might be) and it also describes a particular historical period of relating to cinema. (1994, 226-227)

It may have been prudent on the part of de Valck and Hagener to heed Willemen’s comments. Their decision to demarcate a past and present cinephilia, and to offer value judgements on the work of others, ascribing (for example) Susan Sontag, Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin to the "past", "elitist" cinephilia camp, and identifying themselves with contemporary cinephilia, is questionable. Readers will question whether they have assessed others' work accurately and fairly. Readers may question whether de Valck and Hagener's approach is too sweeping and determinative, especially given that in their opening paragraph they describe cinephilia as a "universal phenomenon", "the film experience evok[ing] particular sensations of intense pleasure resulting in a strongly felt connection with the cinema, often described as a relation of love" (11). Some things in life are universal - the need for food, water, air - but cinephilia is not one of them.

Other contributors to the volume offer more nuanced approaches to cinephilia. The volume is organised in three parts: ramifications, technologies and techniques of cinephilia. Part I, *The ramifications of cinephilia: theory and history*, opens with a typically thoughtful essay by Thomas Elsaesser, "Cinephilia or the uses of disenchantment". The three other contributors to this section consider movies as diverse as *The dreamers* (Italy/France/UK/USA 2003), *Titanic* (USA 1997) and *Kill Bill: Vol.1 and 2* (USA 2003 and 2004) for the insights they can offer on aspects of cinephilia: respectively a nostalgia-driven search for lost time, blockbuster culture and transcultural homage. Jenna Ng concentrates on the difficulty of understanding and representing love, including cine-love, in her meditation on *Kill Bill*. Her conclusion is that it is almost inevitable that scholars will analyse the practices of cinephilia, rather than its conceptual basis, as love resists objective theorisation. Drehli Robnik, writing on "Mass memories of movies: cinephilia as norm and narrative in blockbuster culture", offers a helpful way forward from the editors' binaristic approach to cinephilia. Cinephilia, Robnik writes, "involves
extraordinary cases of ordinary practices: a love for extraordinary films; an intense love for ordinary ones, capable of charging them with extraordinary qualities; love for a medium as a whole, which, totalized into a lovable whole, turns from a medium into an art or a memory" (55). This conjures up a continuum of cinematic experiences, along which the full spectrum and range can be organised, encompassing, but not limited to, cinephilic responses. As Robnik expresses it, liking movies is a "common habit". Perhaps cinephilia should not be viewed as a thing apart, but rather considered in light of the broad, wide-ranging - not universal or one-dimensional - experience of responding to movies.

Part II of the volume, Technologies of cinephilia: production and consumption, contains essays detailing both the varied kinds of contemporary film reception, and the developments in technology which facilitate such diverse spectatorship. Melis Behill considers the links between cinephilia, the internet, and online film communities. Wanda Strauven meditates on Jean-Luc Godard's Les carabiniers (France 1963), inspired by a chance viewing of the film on American TV. Two chapters look at changes in film history made possible by new technologies in film restoration and archiving: Charles Leary writes on the specific challenges confronting the remastering of Hong Kong cinema, and Vinzenz Hediger argues that film reconstruction would be best served by acknowledging that the rhetoric of the original is just that- rhetoric. Marijke de Valck looks at the Rotterdam International Film Festival as a test case of not only cinephilia, but the struggle between popular and elitist tastes it represents.

In de Valck's essay, she takes issue with Jonathan Rosenbaum's comments on the Festival in Movie mutations (2003). Rosenbaum wrote of taking pleasure in the evidence, as he saw it, of the "hunger for experimental work" at the Festival, "which gives me a renewed faith in the capacities of spectators" (53). Firstly, de Valck argues that popular, mainstream fare is more sought after at the Festival; then she criticises the conceptualisation of cinephilia she sees implicit in Rosenbaum's words, with cinephilia "a skill to be mastered" by a select few. Rosenbaum, she says, is a "professional cinephile" driven by fear, fearful that "the established spaces for the recognition and appreciation of marginalized film tastes will be appropriated by others. God forbid that they might be popcorn munchers!" (100-101) Here we are confronted with the recurring motif of old-school cinephilia as snobby and elitist, cinephiles imagining themselves a superior breed to those enjoying simple movie pleasures. Rosenbaum's argument in Movie mutations is directed towards the iniquities of "American commerce" encapsulated in the Hollywood machine dictating what spectators see - an argument he developed at book length in Movie wars (2002) - rather than inveighing against cinemagoers and their pleasures.

If cinephilia is about finding pleasure/s in movies, and surely it is, then those who find pleasure must be entitled to share, or at least express, their pleasures with others. Paul Willemen argued that there is always a proselytising impulse to cinephilia; the need to bear witness to what one has seen and experienced, seeking to convert others to one's faith. Willemen links this to an elitist concern: cinephilia writing "draw[ing] attention to what has been seen by 'the elect' but which may not have been noticed by 'routine' viewers". (1994, 239) I'm not sure that this adequately reflects the nature of the exchange; at least, not in all cases. A test in reading criticism or in conversation is whether or not it makes me want to see the movie under discussion. But, even if it fails on this level, it can still be eye-opening and enriching to realise the pleasure and nourishment others can find in films, genres, actors, that leave me cold. Adrian Martin, in his concluding contribution to Movie mutations, wrote that "I am not interested in erecting a new system of taste - which can only be another limiting, exclusive prison, as taste systems always are" (181). This is not the language of someone seeking to police the borders of cinephilia.

The third part of the volume concentrates on the filmmaker as cinephile. Elena Gorfinkel groups together Todd Haynes, Paul Thomas Anderson and Wes Anderson as makers of self-consciously anachronistic films, drawing on the film historical past and imaginary. Jan Simons considers the contributors to Dogme95 as working within a playful cinephile framework. Conceptual, experimental cinephilia is noted in essays on Jon Routson's bootleg artworks and Morgan Fisher's film (J) (2003), a montage homage to insert shots. Gerwin van der Pol, taking as his starting point the intertextual links between Peter Greenaway's A Zed and Two Noughts (UK/Netherlands 1985) and Adriaan Ditvoorst's earlier film De Witte Waan (Netherlands 1984), develops his theory of the cinephile as game-player; on the hunt for arcane references within and between films. Rather than feeling daunted by the impossibility of picking up all references, van der Pol's cinephile takes pride in finding connections not even intended by the filmmaker. "The spectator finds a quote that was possibly not designed as such - the maker of the cinephile takes the credit, rather than feeling that they might be popcorn munchers!" (215-216) This seems to return the cinephile to elitist territory; capable of better, richer experiences than most cinemagoers. Given that van der Pol stipulates that this is a private activity, with the cinephile's finds not to be shared with anyone, it is however harmless, if somewhat pointless. But as Jane Austen pointed out, one half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other. And perhaps the point of pleasure - the pleasure of pleasure - is that it doesn't have to have a point?

Cinephilia, of any era, is reliant upon the opportunity and ability to access cinema. Cinephilia now, a reading of this volume would suggest, is in a position to blossom, based on a plethora of entry-points to cinema: theatrical releases, DVDs, television, the internet, film festivals, and more. Thomas Elsaesser writes that a challenge for
the new cinephile is "to know how to savor (as well as to save her sense of identity from) the anachronisms generated by total availability, by the fact that the whole of film history is henceforth present in the here-and-now" (38). Availability and accessibility are not synonyms for one another. A film may be available for purchase, rental or at a cinema screening, but it's not accessible if you can't afford the price of the ticket. Marijke de Valck offers a taxonomy of festival cinephiles: the lone list-maker, the highlight seeker, the specialist, the leisure visitor, the social tourist and the volunteer (103-105), without considering that perhaps it is financial considerations that dictate the number of films seen, or the choice to volunteer one's labour. None of the contributors to Cinephilia: movies, love and memory mention money and its correlation to people's ability to cultivate their cinephilia. This omission is not restricted to them, however. To my knowledge, an account of cinephilia that engages with socioeconomic issues has not yet been written.

If you're interested in cinephilia, or in how people experience the cinema today, this volume is worth reading. I question whether it achieves the editors' aims of representing a period break for research: indeed, whether such a division of past and present cinephilia is desirable. Some knowledge of cinephilia's origins and history may not be essential in order to understand cinephilia now, but it would surely help. If we were to consider the spectrum and continuum of cinephilia during cinema's existence, we might find as many continuities as ruptures.

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Works cited


