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Mass Memories of Movies

Cinephilia as Norm and Narrative in Blockbuster Culture

Drehli Robnik

If we equate cinephilia with liking certain movies, the term loses its meaning; but it also does so if we disconnect it entirely from the common habit of liking movies. In its relation to the value-generating cultural economy which circulates everyday affection by and for the cinema on a mass scale, cinephilia 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.

Something similar can be said of cinephilia when considered as a theoretical perspective. Here, cinephilia's extraordinariness suggests problems that it poses to disciplinary orders of discourse. This becomes clear if we look at two conceptual approaches to cinephilia that emerged in the 1990s, both use cinephilia as a guideline for thinking about cinema in a broader sense. In Paul Willemen's approach, cinephilia designates a surplus not contained by film analysis; in Thomas Elsaesser's it points to cinema's anomaly with regard to historiography. Both focus on the memorial dimension of loving the cinema, and I will try to abstract and mobilize some of their arguments to discuss how aspects of cinephilia have become normalized in today's media culture and how we re-encounter allegories of cinephilia in the ways people act out their love for movies which are extraordinary in the most ordinary way. I will try to clarify my argument about contemporary blockbuster culture with respect to a movie with lots of love – quantified in box-office terms – attached to it, namely *TITANIC* (USA: James Cameron, 1997).

In Paul Willemen's reconsideration of cinephilia, the term designates a loving attention to moments of "revelation" experienced in confrontations with highly coded cinematic representations (Hollywood genre movies); an attention and a practice of demarcation that appear close to, but nevertheless remain distinct from theoretical practices of structural analysis, of deconstruction or reading against the grain. What makes cinephilia "resist and escape existing networks of critical discourse and theoretical frameworks" – what keeps love distinct from discipline, one might say – is the surplus of revelation, the involuntary "excess of 'the seen' beyond 'the shown.'"¹ In passing, Willemen refers to this as "ghosting" and hints at "overtones of necrophilia, of relating to something

that is dead, past, but alive in memory."² Here, his understanding of cinephilia comes close to a central aspect in Thomas Elsaesser's view.

Elsaesser offers an understanding of cinephilia that is closer to necrophilia. 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 past experiences.³ Relating to something alive only in memory means that cinema is "the love that never dies."⁴ Elsaesser takes up Pierre Sorlin's argument of the near-impossibility of writing a history of the cinema, of a medium dedicated to restoring the past, most of all its own past, to life as it is captured in images that move and affect us here and now: "Because of its undead nature, the cinema perhaps does not have a history (of periods, styles, modes). It can only have fans, clans and believers, forever gathering to revive a fantasm or a trauma, a memory and an anticipation."⁵

Elsaesser's and Willemen's views of cinephilia meet in their respective emphasis on images that cannot be fully incorporated into linear, causal narratives – into coded narratives of Hollywood genre movies in Willemen's case, into narratives of traditional historiography in Elsaesser's. They differ, however, in respect to cinephilia's relation to a film history that is embedded in media history. To Willemen, cinephilia becomes critically urgent "now that cinema and film theory are threatened with extinction," now that the predominance of electrified images makes cinephilia inappropriate and television "destroys cinema," even makes it impossible "to remember cinema" – a "crime against culture," as he puts it.⁶ In Willemen's critical melancholia, what threatens to become lost in the "visual impoverishment" fostered by digitization and what cinephilia, therefore, has to preserve from oblivion is a "density of the [cinematic] image" that is "infused with a sense of history." Cinephilia mourns a loss of history and at the same time acknowledges history's separating power, because to Willemen cinephilia is a discourse that sees cinema "as being completely locked into the 'before' of the electronification of the image."⁷

For Elsaesser, digitization also provides an horizon for thinking cinema, but his perspective is a lot less negative, and his emphasis is not on a frozen "before," but on a liquified "after": "When we speak of the cinema today, we speak of cinema *after* television and *after* the video game, *after* the CD-Rom and the theme park."⁸ Therefore, TV is not the impossibility of remembering the cinema, but just our moment and our way of remembering it.

These two versions of "cinocrophilia" each imply their vitalism of the cinema: a vitalism critically played off against cinema's death by television in Willemen; while Elsaesser's folds around the digital and its own death by media history, thus making its radical outside its non-identical inside. To put it differently: Elsaesser's "afterlives" paradigm (in which trauma points towards fantasmatic retroactivity) allows for a post-critical vitalism to which the death of cinema

might be just a death mask that the image puts on in the course of its intermedia transformations. To Elsaesser, this metamorphosis is exemplified not least by the blockbuster as today's motor of cinema's popularity.

With its capability of translating cinematic events into a great variety of media and options for consumption, the blockbuster is digital cinema's most accessible horizon for remembering cinema. Blockbuster culture takes films and film histories apart and reconfigures them, constantly producing memories of film experiences, film experiences as memories. According to Elsaesser, the blockbuster acts as a "time machine" which we might see as a translator or modulator between temporal regimes – times of everyday habitual consumption, times of spectacular experience, times of catastrophic history.⁹ It generates and regenerates memories, most of all of itself, that are not easy to get rid of, that want to be lovingly kept, revived and re-lived in commodified terms and on a mass scale. Seen from Deleuze's perspective of control societies, this is how blockbuster culture contributes to the audiovisual engineering of social consensus and to making a normalized type of subjectivity what Nietzsche called the "dyspeptic" incapable of forgetting: "[Y]ou never finish anything."¹⁰

Since the most ordinary blockbusters perform the most miraculous metamorphoses, it is not surprising to find them described in terms of the supernatural or the religious. While Thomas Schatz at points evokes rhetorics of Christianity or Buddhism in his study of the New Hollywood, its "multimedia regenerations" and "reincarnations,"¹¹ Elsaesser offers the vampire as a proto-dionysian allegory for affective investments in digitized cinema, for the latter's metamorphic powers, for the retroactivity of remakes, re-issues, revivals or revamping old generic modes. The image of the vampire – of undying love, insatiable hunger for memories, circulating in media culture – stands in a peculiar relation to Willemsen's conscious use of catholic vocabulary: He sees the cinephile as a "trawler" whose analytic perception casts a net over a film to dig and fish for revelatory moments.¹² To the trawler we might add a well-known metaphor for a close relative of the cinephile: The term "poacher" was coined in 1988 by Henry Jenkins for fan cultures of TV consumption, for their retroactive tactics of reappropriating and rewriting standardized media products.¹³ Today, from the vantage point of digitization which provides the hypertextualization of media products within a normalized technological basis, this image allows itself to be taken apart and reconfigured, i.e., to be remembered.

Blockbuster culture remembers the poachers as well as the treasure-hunting trawlers and their extraordinary activities of reading-as-writing. It reconfigures their subject positions into those of ordinary vampires and media parasites. I am not claiming that mass culture has become popularized and self-reflexive to a degree as to make all of us poachers and trawlers in Jenkins' and Willemsen's

sense. These consumption practices can be understood as potentially resistant within an older power formation; when blockbuster culture remembers them, it abstracts and retains their disregard for narrative closure and their impulse towards keeping images alive, rescuing them from oblivion; what is *not* remembered, what does *not* return, is the critical, oppositional moment in cinephilia and fandom, is the pathos of dangerous transgression associated with it. To translate a distinction introduced by Jenkins into the present: blockbuster culture offers positions not for rebellious, but for “loyalist” identities of poachers¹⁴ – loyalty not to an order transcending economic norms as in Jenkins, but to brands and product lines as preferred hunting grounds. Polemically speaking, those subjectivities glorified as consumer culture’s nightmares since De Certeau, i.e., the fans and the cinephiles (insofar as they are fans), are now the marketing strategists’ dreams come true: they accept so many offers for appropriation. This formulation clearly implies a fallback to the derogatory discourse on mass-cultural dupes (to which we are so allergic nowadays) – so I should rephrase my view in more abstract terms: cinephilia, as one of the once-marginalized minority pleasures of transforming industrial products into practices that act out logics of memory and retroactivity, is now offered within the scope of hegemonic cultural norms and on a mass scale. The flexible modulation between audiovisual flows, flows of capital and flows of love allows for a plurality of affective investments in and usages of digital cinema.

A good example of this can be found in the recent transformations of a most ordinary manner of appropriating cinema: the home video/laser disc/DVD collection which raises archival memory to the level of “videophilia.” In Charles Shiro Tashiro’s Benjaminian account, videophilia points to a subjectivity reminiscent of the “absent-minded examiner”: the “Proletarian Epicure” who acts as his or her own projectionist and “waits for it on video.” In 1991, Tashiro saw this waiting as ambivalent. On the one hand, it is the anticipation of a religious ecstasy which video, unlike cinema, cannot provide; on the other, it involves a technologically based refusal to wait, to wait for moments of revelation or, to put it more modestly, for favorite scenes: “What we once might have endured,” writes Tashiro, we now skip by fast-forwarding, because of a “saturation by classical cinema” and its narrative linearity. To Tashiro, the videophile’s remote control over the film manifests a critical, proto-deconstructive disruption of the film’s auratic spell and at the same time a commodified pleasure in which “[s]avory replaces rapture.” In a manner typical of cultural studies discourse circa 1990, Tashiro sees the self-empowerment of the consumer as giving rise to a “revolutionary hope [for] the destruction of classical cinema.”¹⁵ In Barbara Klinger’s later, Benjaminian essay on the privatization of cinema in videophilia, this self-empowerment is reconsidered in terms of the user as owner and classi-

fier, fetishist accumulator of cultural capital available through director's cuts and eager disseminator of trivia learned from making ofs.¹⁶

What these videophiles retain from Willemen's cinephiles is a disregard for narrative integrity in favor of a technophile attachment to the apparatus (which also played its role in traditional cinephilia) and in favor of the trawling of images. The isolated, fetishized "key image" that achieves paradigmatic status in digital cinema can be seen as the mass-cultural aggregate of cinephilia's fascinating, revelatory moment. It is useful to recall Timothy Corrigan's demystifying account of the "film culture of cult" (bearing in mind differences as well as affinities between cinephilia and cult practices): "Those traditionally marginalized cult audiences have... expanded across culture and been reborn as the primary audience position..."¹⁷ This centering of margins emphasizes the VCR, its technologization and normalization of performative and appropriative aspects of cult behavior. Video materializes films as landscapes of textual ruins through which viewers travel, extracting favorite images from them by remote control like souvenirs.¹⁸ Corrigan's video materialism might be reconsidered (remembered) from the vantage point of the DVD, with videophilia now manifesting a necrophiliac, nostalgic aspect with regard to analogue video, its corporeality, its characteristic "grain," its infusion with histories of usage, all this to be mourned in the way scratches were fetishized in vinylophilia after the introduction of the CD in the mid-1980s. The isolated favorite image as a textual ruin becomes literalized in epiphanies specific to video: rental videos confront you with traces, ruined images, left behind by someone else's fascination by a moment.¹⁹

Fishing for fascinating moments not only acts out what the remote control is there for, but also mimics practices of film design and marketing known as "high concept" and studied, for instance, by Justin Wyatt. High concept means the overall adaptation of the film image to requirements of intermedia dispersal and shareability. Images are abstracted and rendered flexible in order to be fed into various cycles of consumption and for functioning as logos for all manner of merchandise and advertising media. The unprecedented degree to which we nowadays encounter blockbuster images in trailers (theatrical, internet, video-based, or TV trailers) involves a high-conceptual redefinition of love for and memories of the cinema. The trailer – presumed to contain a film's most fascinating, in some ways most revelatory moments – is the mass-cultural reification of an anticipated memory of a film. It is the film lovingly remembered in advance, and at the same time a form close to the image's total dissolution in a pure flow of audiovisual information to be randomly modulated. The high-concept DVD is another instance of the all-purpose blockbuster image catering to modes of consumption that are hypertextual, participatory, cultist, poaching, trawling, vampirist, and cinephile. By caressing all the folds and openings of the audiovisual body offered to you via DVD, you appropriate and remember a

film event as you have experienced it in its theatrical aggregate; the film will have been the anticipation of its DVD, and, in a cinephile inflection, the anticipation of revelations because there is so much more to see on a DVD than during a theatrical projection (not least because the big screen shows you more than you can see); or, as a reviewer wrote on the theatrical release of *ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE* (USA: Steven Spielberg, 2001): "It bristles with hidden quotations from Kubrick, which in their abundance will only reveal themselves on the DVD edition to come."

Let me, finally, turn to *TITANIC*, to the way this film incorporated cinema's problematic relationship to digitization. As an extraordinary instance of the ordinary global success that blockbusters aim at, *TITANIC*'s box-office triumph was not just due to the common fact that many people found they had liked the movie after they had paid to see it, but it also built on and mobilized versions of cinephilia. While its theatrical release manifested a Catholicism capable of uniting young and old target groups, legend has it – or maybe fan trivia has it, or maybe statistics has it – that one driving force behind *TITANIC*'s monumental box-office figures was the enthusiastic repeat attendance by young girls. This phenomenon might point us towards the cinephilia-turned-to-knowledge in Heide Schlüpmann's feminist reconsideration of cinema as a culture of the lived-body "guided by love" and as a mass public sphere emphatically encompassing post-bourgeois subjectivities of women.²⁰

An emphasis on the lived-body and a version of cinephilia, albeit much less feminist, was also manifested in the way the public sphere of journalism (not only in Austria and Germany, I assume) made sense of *TITANIC* as a movie that sparked and catered to film critics' nostalgic essentialism of authentic great cinema. In reviews on German TV, the display of the bustling life of "the people" on the lower decks inspired a comparison of James Cameron to John Ford; and a Viennese newspaper critic raved about Cameron as the "creator of breathing characters," his "courage to still make breaths sensible."²¹ In this we encounter a cinephile vitalism to which populist celebrations of vitality and the sensibility of breathing revealed that Old Hollywood was not dead, and had either risen from the cold grave of marketing formulas or was at least still breathing.

Let us for a moment recall the importance of sensible images and their existential closeness to living, breathing, passionate bodies in recent cinephile discourses that remember the vitality of the cinema by relating to its embodiment of new lives. In this context, the shaky hand-held camera image, usually accompanied by lots of breathing sounds, is a bodily symptom of the cinema that is perceived as incarnating a revival. With some of the *Dogma* films as well as with *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT* (USA: David Myrick & Eduardo Sanchez, 1999) – a no-budget, teen horror blockbuster event turning its high concept

against itself – a shaky noisiness in sound and image signals a creative overcoming of the *rigor mortis* of a cinema that appears as too controlled and too artificial to common-sense cinephile ideologies. By diagnosing breathing hand-held camera images, the symptomatologic connection can be extended to the notorious landing sequence in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* (USA: Steven Spielberg, 1998). Here, on the generic ground of the action spectacle, a traumatic memory of history fused with the cinephile remembrance of a popular cinema that was and is truly “moving” on a mass scale.

Which – although *TITANIC* contains hardly any hand-held camera images – brings us back to Cameron’s film. David Simpson situates it alongside *SCHINDLER’S LIST* (USA: Steven Spielberg, 1993) and *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* with regard to the “effects produced by cinematic trauma by proxy.”²² To borrow a tagline from Spielberg, *TITANIC* is one of those historico-memorial blockbusters that “inspired the world to remember.” All the care it takes with the dignity of remembrance points not least to a conception of how *TITANIC* wants itself to be remembered, thereby accumulating cinephile cultural capital. *TITANIC* was celebrated in highly ideological terms as a blockbuster with a difference, one that would leave only genuine memories behind, no commodified ones in the form of sequels, theme park rides or merchandise (although there was, of course, lots of stuff to buy in the film’s wake). In *TITANIC*’s narrative and audience address, we can see both Willemen’s and Elsaesser’s versions of cinephilia at work, two versions of remembering cinema from the vantage point of digitization: There is the fear of losing it, losing cinema, losing history, losing the memory of the revelation, which is, however, narratively translated into a discourse of revival inspired by the ability of digital cinema to remember this very fear. To put it differently, in Elsaesserian terms: The remedy is more of the same; the acting out of the trauma provides for therapy and folds the death-defying memory of cinema into a remembrance of *TITANIC*, the catastrophic historical event as well as the film.

The film itself poses the problem of how to remember *TITANIC* and offers solutions. One of them is, as Diane Negra has pointed out, its alignment with mass-cultural discourses of survivalism. This implies not only an ethics of self-reliance, but also the possibility for the director to pose as a survivor of his own near-disastrous project; and one might note that *TITANIC* marks the beginning of the prominence of “boot-camp” rhetorics in interviews and making-ofs that escort most blockbusters, with actors noting how they had to undergo military training for their roles and are now traumatized by the exhausting shoot. This subject position is also available to audiences, who become survivors of the *TITANIC* experience and turn to therapy in the form of listening to Celine Dion or re-consuming the film. In this vein, Negra reads the question which in the film’s

diegesis initiates Old Rose's oral historical account of the disaster as a discursive invitation: "Are you ready to go back to TITANIC?"²³

Simpson is probably not alone in comparing the old survivor's struggling verbalization of the TITANIC "story that has to be told" to media images of the oral histories of concentration camp survivors.²⁴ By extending this connection, we can draw – without being too frivolous – a link between TITANIC, SCHINDLER'S LIST and THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT, which represent three conversion narratives aimed at generating a dignified memory appropriate to the suffering of living, breathing people. Three blockbusters, atypical in different ways and in different ways surrounded by intermedia practices of archival memory; three attempts at making use of revelatory, emphatic, memorial, counter-historical powers of cinema in a digitized horizon. So that in the end – to borrow another tagline from Spielberg – "something has survived," at least an image, something to be remembered, to be loved, to be touched and be touched by. Without too much evocation of the traumatophile film-as-boot-camp metaphor, we can see all of these movies constructing narrative allegories of their own production processes: how history's listing of casualties becomes a cinematic "list of life."

In TITANIC's case, what Negra calls a "storytelling contest"²⁵ is, from a cinephile's point of view, a platonic process of selecting the true image, the one that is the most faithful to the idea of loving memory, by narratively lining up candidates for this title and rejecting false pretenders. The frame story moves from treasure-hunting cynicism that guides us through video images of the underwater wreckage in the film's opening scene to the technophilia of a "forensic" reconstruction of the Titanic's sinking in digital animation. These electronic forms of imaging are being conceived as "too distant" in the course of the narrative and therefore ruled out – in favor of Leonardo Di Caprio's drawings from real life (done by Cameron himself) of which one has survived the disaster. But, of course, the image ultimately capable of embodying memory and deserving of love is not the drawing, but the cinematic image: it has assembled, synthesized, all its rivals and was doubly present from TITANIC's very first shot, a would-be documentary long-shot of the ship departing with a man with a movie camera visible in the foreground. It seems as if the cinematic image could survive and even contain digitization. TITANIC's memorial image on the one hand folds digitization into the splendor of "great cinema" (the invisible special effect of sweeping "camera travelings" above and around the ship); on the other hand, the film is able to remember a Bazinian ontology of the cinematic image. The latter finds its meaning in the context of the narrative fusion of a catastrophic collision with the close encounter of two young, passionate bodies – a sensualism that remembers social and physical mobility in terms of the proto-tactile, moving mobility of the image. Its cinephile discourse culminates in the ontologically testifying imprint that, at the moment of orgasm, Kate Winslet's hand

leaves on the dimmed windshield of the car in which two heavily breathing characters make love just before the iceberg hits.

Cinema is the love that never dies, especially when blockbuster culture offers us image treasures saturated with sheer life to be trawled from the bottom of the ocean or from the chapters of our DVDs, and when it makes the survival of history in memory a matter of cinephilia.

Notes

1. Willemen, Paul. "Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered." *Looks and Frictions. Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, London: BFI 1994, pp. 223-257, (pp. 231, 242).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 239, 227.
3. Elsaesser, Thomas. "Über den Nutzen der Enttäuschung: Filmkritik zwischen Cinephilie und Nekrophilie." Schenk, Irmbert (ed.). *Filmkritik. Bestandsaufnahmen und Perspektiven*, Marburg: Schüren, 1998, pp. 91-114, (pp. 102, 109-113).
4. Elsaesser, Thomas. "Specularity and Engulfment. Francis Ford Coppola and BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA." Neale, Steve and Murray Smith (eds.). *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 191-208, (p. 206).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
6. Willemen, "Glass Darkly," *op.cit.*, pp. 225, 243, 254.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 255, 244.
8. Elsaesser, Thomas. "Digital Cinema: Delivery, Event, Time." Elsaesser, Thomas and Kay Hoffmann (eds.). *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998, pp. 201-222, (p. 204).
9. Elsaesser, Thomas. "The Blockbuster: Everything Connects, But Not Everything Goes." Lewis, Jon (ed.). *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*, New York: New York University Press, 2001, pp. 11-22.
10. Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on Control Societies." *Negotiations 1972-1990*, New York, Chichester, and West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 177-182, here p. 179.
11. Schatz, Thomas. "The New Hollywood." Collins, Jim, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (eds.). *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. New York, London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 8-36, (pp. 29, 31).
12. Willemen, Paul. "Glass Darkly", *op.cit.*, pp. 237, 240
13. Jenkins III, Henry. "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching." Penley, Constance, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spiegel, Janet Bergstrom (eds.). *Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*. Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, pp. 171-203.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 171-203, (pp. 174, 191f).
15. Tashiro, Charles Shiro. "Videophilia: What Happens When You Wait for It on Video." *Film Quarterly*, 45/1 (1991), pp. 7-17, (pp. 13, 11, 15f).

16. Klinger, Barbara. "The Contemporary Cinephile: Film Collecting in the Post-Video Era." Stokes, Melvyn, Richard Maltby (eds.): *Hollywood Spectatorship. Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, London: British Film Institute, 2001, pp. 132-151.
17. Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991, p. 81.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 82ff.
19. I recall a late 1990s rental video copy of the erotic thriller *WILD THINGS* (USA: John MacNaughton, 1998) with the tape all wrinkled by frequent application of the still and review functions during the scene of the "threesome" between Matt Dillon, Denise Richards and Neve Campbell. Of course, I didn't hesitate to add a few wrinkles myself.
20. Schlüpmann, Heide. *Abendroethe der Subjektphilosophie: eine Ästhetik des Kinos*, Basel and Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1998.
21. Philipp, Claus. "Rettung durch Untergang." *Der Standard*, 9 January 1998, pp. 34f.
22. Simpson, David. "Tourism and Titanomania." *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (1999), pp. 680-695, (p. 694).
23. Negra, Diane. "TITANIC, Survivalism and the Millennial Myth." Sandler, Kevin S., and Gaylyn Studlar (eds.). *Titanic – Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1999, pp. 220-237, (p. 237).
24. Simpson, "Tourism and Titanomania," *op. cit.*, p. 685.
25. Negra, "TITANIC, Survivalism and the Millennial Myth," *op. cit.*, p. 228.