CINEPHILIA AND ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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Stuart Collier

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Approved by:

Dr. JC Reilly, Advisor
School of Literature, Media, and Communications
Georgia Institute of Technology

Dr. Vinicius Navarro
School of Literature, Media, and Communications
Georgia Institute of Technology

Dr. Angela Dalle Vacche
School of Literature, Media, and Communications
Georgia Institute of Technology

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INTRODUCTION

Cinephilia, broadly defined, means 'love for cinema.' Many people love movies, and for a variety of reasons, but for cinephiles that love runs far deeper than the desire to be entertained. Cinephiles are marked by a passion for cinema, one often defined in terms of aesthetic appreciation, consumption of film criticism, and a tendency to seek out what is marginalized or undervalued in filmmaking.

On the surface, cinephilia seems to refer to a specialized fan enterprise with no larger significance. However, cinephilia has been integral to the historical evolution of cinema, spurring on new artistic traditions and modes of critical thought, and keying in on larger paradigmatic issues of information circulation and media consumption. The 1960s surge in cinematic modernism and auteur theory, the proliferation of underground video trading and cult film enthusiasm in the 70s and 80s, and the globalism of contemporary film culture are all directly tied to cinephilic activism.

While cinephilia has led to well-documented reverberations within film culture since the beginning of the twentieth century, the steady rise of digital media over the past two decades has radically transformed the nature of its productivity into something with readily observable implications for all forms of media consumption. Over the past two decades, scholars have developed several frameworks for assessing the qualities unique to new media and the new modes of interactivity and usability they have facilitated. Now, they argue, people can come together and collaborate as a group without incurring any of the organizational costs that are necessary in the non-digital world. Geographical spheres of cultural stature and the institution of journalism have become less prominent in light of the Internet, which provides a forum for budding writers and content-producers, and

which also eliminates geographical location as a requisite for participation. The narrative of cinephilia as it has entered the age of new media is illustrative of these various observations and ideas, encompassing a shift from physical and cultural difference to exchange and community building, from institutional division and toward a new, more egalitarian legitimacy online.

In prior decades, the selectivity of theatrical distribution and the predominance of metropolitan publications greatly limited the extent to which cinephiles from non-urban areas could participate in film culture. Recently, however, the surge of participatory new media has allowed these various cinephiles to come together and shape film culture in tandem with one another. The progression of new media over the past few decades also correlates with a greater understanding and awareness of formerly unacknowledged foreign cinema, and the notion of a global film culture has never been stronger.

Cinephilia also complicates the issue of file sharing through mobilization efforts that organize communities and develop new systems of currency according to the practice of sharing. Where most of the limited discourse on file sharing frames it in legal terms, a cinephilic assessment illuminates the communal aspects of file sharing. So often viewed as a free-for-all information grab, file sharing has been appropriated and channeled by proactive cinephiles into the bedrock of private communities dedicated to the circulation of world cinema. The practice of file sharing enables cinephiles from all across the world to share rare films with one another, tying into a globalist paradigm of transnational collaboration. As foreign film critics have become more prominent in online cinephilic circles, and niche DVD labels seek to expand their catalogues to broach more and more of world cinema, cinephilia has grown more and more into a globalist enterprise, seeking

to expand beyond the Euro-American canon of cinema that has reigned in both academic and journalistic spheres.

This paper seeks to address the following: the historical importance and evolution of cinephilia as it has crossed the threshold of the digital age; cinephilia's integration into several key new media models of online collaboration; and how the interplay between these models as applied to cinephilia has allowed it to achieve an unprecedented scope as a collaborative endeavor, which then has larger significance for an era largely defined by its media technologies. New media, viewed through the lens of cinephilia, has facilitated a new standard of mass collaboration and utopian sharing, spurring on our worldwide culture of new media consumption to a more liberated and interactive productivity.

HISTORY OF CINEPHILIA

"What was cinephilia? It was a particular way of loving movies: eclectic, voracious, attuned to the importance of film as a force in everyday life, impassioned, if a little sentimental, undiscriminating in its pursuit of a new movie high…" (Morrison, 394)

Ever since the term started being used, 'cinephilia' has been described in terms of grand passions and obsessive practices. As James Morrison's description attests, though he positions it as an extinct phenomenon, cinephilia is a ravenous, fanatical love for cinema. Far removed from academic study or casual enthusiasm, cinephilia is a form of intense engagement with the filmic medium that writers who are so afflicted discuss in lofty terms of ritualism and spiritual intimacy. Film historian Thomas Elsaesser writes, based on his film-going experiences in the 1960s, that cinephilia "meant being…fully alert to the quasi-sacral feeling of nervous anticipation that could descend upon a public

space, however squalid, smelly or slipshod, as the velvet curtain rose and the studio logo with its fanfares filled the space" (Ng, 147-48).

This borderline religious fervor for cinema that marks many cinephiles has offered grounds for conflating cinephilia with cultism, a comparison that provides a historical entryway into cinephilia's origins. Cultism is a related phenomenon of film enthusiasm that treats specific films, notable for their eccentricity or unfamiliarity, as objects of reverence. Cultists seek out what is strange in cinema and make it familiar through repeated viewings (Corrigan, 26). Cultism and cinephilia share aspects of ceremony, of adoration, and of exalting that which has been marginalized or overlooked. While cinephilia did not become a major phenomenon until several years later, the notion of cult film has been traced back to 1932, when American film critic Harry Alan Potamkin identified a cult following around the silent comedies of Charles Chaplin and Buster Keaton. This cult of slapstick also existed in 1920s France, where such films were valued as art and where Surrealists were arguing that it was in cinematic 'failures' that one found true sublimity (Gorfinkel, 33).

There are important differences between cinephilia and the cult film experience, the former an expansive love of the medium itself and the latter a practice of repeated adoration of specific idiosyncratic films with the intention of consecrating them as cult objects. And yet this early cult film mentality, aided by the criticism of filmmakers like Jean Epstein and cine-club pioneers like Ricciotto Canudo, paved the way for the cinephilia that emerged in the aftermath of World War II (Rodowick). It is within this historical period, ranging from the late forties to the late sixties, that most appraisals of cinephilia are focused. Archivist Henri Langlois' Cinémathèque Française, which

screened American films of all stripes for its patrons, became a key educational resource

for a group of budding cinephiles who came to write for the influential film journal

Cahiers du cinéma and who spearheaded the French Nouvelle Vague in the late 1950s

and into the next decade. This formative period of cinephilia was also marked by an

upwelling of American film criticism. Following the mid-50s polemical writings of the

Cahiers critics that designated a film's director as its author, or auteur, American film

critic Andrew Sarris controversially imported this auteur theory into the United States,

arguing that filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford, commonly perceived

simply as entertainers, held their own as great artists (Powell).

Cinephilia was, for many critics and students, a pretext for intellectual

engagement with politics and culture. The filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague, most

notably Jean-Luc Godard, brought their encyclopedic knowledge of film history and

aesthetics to bear on important political events of the day, including the aftermath of the

Algerian War and the Maoist youth movement that gained traction throughout the

decade. Campus film societies involved in leftist activism were also unbridled auteurists

who screened films by Ford and King Vidor. For the Wisconsin Film Society, run in the

late 1960s by film scholar Joseph McBride, there was no discrepancy between the

group's progressive politics and its consumption of Hollywood movies, many of which

were entrenched in right-wing value systems. This gap was bridged by an intellectual

appreciation for art and popular culture, and by the discovery of underlying political ideas

within the films that had previously gone undetected (Porton, 9-10). Despite the tendency

in 60s cinephilia to elevate the status of commercial Hollywood filmmakers, it was

inarguably a radical movement that sought to overturn prevailing conservative attitudes

about what constituted valuable art, both aesthetically and politically. These critical ideas continue to shape contemporary film theory.

      After the 1960s, cinephiles co-opted new video technologies in order to fuel their passion for movies. Videotape trading became a way for American cinephiles to acquire access to older films no longer being screened, or to otherwise unobtainable foreign films. Jenna Ng describes this shift in cinephilia from an ideal of theater ritual, communal gathering, and total, unbroken immersion in the filmic image to one of solitary viewing and personal control over a film's temporality (149-150). The transferal of cinephilic activity from the public space of the movie theater to the private space of basements and living rooms, in conjunction with the general decline of theatrical distribution and attendance famously gave birth, in 1996, to a state-of-affairs essay by Susan Sontag that declared cinephilia deceased. In 'The Decay of Cinema,' she writes that "The reduction of cinema to assaultive images, and the unprincipled manipulation of images (faster and faster cutting) to make them more attention-grabbing, has produced a disincarnated, lightweight cinema that doesn't demand anyone's full attention."

      For Sontag, like Elsaesser and other writers cited above, cinephilia is defined by a medium-specific engagement with film projected in a theatrical space. Outside of that context, they claim, it loses its magic and power of illusion. And yet as modes of cinephilic engagement have changed, so has the conceptualization of cinephilia. Sontag's essay sparked a tremendous response from fellow film critics who framed cinephilia in terms of mutation and malleability. As technology became splintered and traditional Euro-centric canons began to break down in an increasingly globalized world, these critics felt propelled to map out the current cinematic landscape and, by extension, what

really comprises cinephilia (De Valck, 133-134). It is in the face of digitization, multi-media convergence, and the growth of the Internet that these critics seized upon a new paradigm of cinephilia, one marked no longer by temporal and technological unification of experience but rather by an assimilation of new technologies to create new modes of engagement with cinema, new film communities, and new ways of continuing the causes spearheaded by the postwar generation of cinephiles.

Contrary to Sontag's declaration, the changes that cinephilia has undergone since the 1960s have vitalized it and brought it to a new prominence that has left the spatial demarcation of the theater, the geographical strictures of metropolitan film clubs, and the intellectual circles of journalistic film institutions to overflow into a digital realm where these boundaries and dividing lines are increasingly nullified. Before discussing the magnitude of these changes, however, it is important first to discuss what has remained constant: the forms of knowledge that cinephilia prizes and seeks to produce.

CINEPHILIC KNOWLEDGE

"Cinephilia is an affirmation of cinema. But what does it mean to affirm cinema?" (Baumbach).

It is not enough to define cinephilia as a passion for cinema, which touches only on an attitude or characteristic endemic to cinephilia but fails to account for the specifics of cinephilic culture, its activities and initiatives, the forms of knowledge it consumes and seeks to produce. This section aims to provide a rough breakdown of the knowledge, broadly defined, that cinephiles place value on. This knowledge, firstly, helps to further clarify what makes cinephilia unique as a practice, differentiated as it is from academic

film studies, cultism, and other forms of cinematic enthusiasm. Even more importantly, the availability and quality of this knowledge are governed by systems of distribution and circulation. To define different forms of cinematic knowledge is also to gain a better understanding of the regulatory systems that limit access to this knowledge and the measures that cinephiles take in response to them.

Cinephilic knowledge is informed by the unique evaluative approach that cinephiles take toward films. This process of evaluation tends to consist of personal engagement and aesthetic admiration, and it is a process that cinephiles apply to any film, no matter how far outside the bounds of popular taste. One of cinephilia's underlying precepts is that the critical and commercial consensuses that dictate popular notions of 'importance' are exclusionary and restrictive, and that many deserving films have yet to receive a fair appraisal.

There is, therefore, a potential disparity between the films that are accessible, promoted, and canonized, and those that cinephiles deem worthy of importance. This conflict has been elaborated on at length by critic and self-designated cinephile Jonathan Rosenbaum, who constructed a polemic around mainline canonization in his article "List-o-Mania, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying And Love American Movies." Attacking the American Film Institute and its list of the one-hundred greatest American movies, Rosenbaum accuses the list of promoting films that are already familiar, established, and commercially certified, while ignoring anything that might exist outside these parameters. He notes that "the lax attitude that 'anything' can eventually be caught on video is a debilitating illusion" and that, in order to achieve something "genuinely useful," the AFI might have "polled the same group of individuals about the 100 most neglected American

movies and then made an effort to make them available." These statements resonate

deeply with cinephiles not only aware of a greater breadth of cinema than what is

commercially distributed, but also attuned to the perplexing and complicated issue of re-

formatting theatrically screened films for home video.

French critic Nicole Brenez takes a similar position, framing the issue in terms of

the inadequacy of 'official' film history and in terms of the equivalence between

commercialism and what is considered important. Striking a hostile and similarly

polemical tone, she writes, "…a certain number of poorly informed spectators believe

still that *Titanic* (US, 1997)…is a more important film than *A Luta Continua* (MZ,

1976)…which amounts more or less to believing that some samples of wallpaper are

more important than the writings of Arthur Rimbaud" (Brenez, 198).

For Rosenbaum, Brenez, and other cinephiles, films are important as both art and

historical objects. This placement of serious cultural importance on marginalized,

foreign, or otherwise non-commercialized films impels a sense of activism and

polemicism directed against organizations that filter these movies out of their canons or

distribution agendas. Cinephilic 'passion' for films, then, is constantly being obstructed

by limitations on access imposed by studios, corporations, journalistic establishments that

maintain a status-quo approach to canonization, and various other organizations that hold

some sway over film circulation.

One of the key forms of cinephilic activism, then, consists of forming counter-

canons. In a 2001 manifesto titled "Light My Fire: the Geology and Geography of Film

Canons," Adrian Martin writes, "A canon, as I imagine it, has the weight of impersonal,

collective, institutional authority, like a law engraved on a table that Moses brought down

from some mountain." Continuing to discuss the cultural and historical importance of film canons, Martin proposes that the two most prevalent types of canons in circulation are those based on commercial success and those based on conservative notions of film art that continue to consecrate the same short list of culturally certified masterpieces. Martin proposes a new, alternative canon that embraces cinematic extremes and marginalized works that don't factor into commercial or traditional film canons. Instead of proposing a large-scale cinephilic consensus of great films that would comprise this new canon, Martin views it as flexible entity in continual flux, the result of lists constantly being compiled by cinephiles. Martin, Rosenbaum, and Brenez have published such lists, and activity of list-making continues to play a prominent role in online film communities, from message boards to blogs to news sites.

Cinephilic evaluation is assisted both by fact-based research and critical analysis. Underlying the fight for greater access to and representation of foreign, marginalized, and older films is a push for more involved research into film history, focusing on biographical information on individual filmmakers, background production information on individual films, and more thorough insights pertaining to historical trends and film movements. The value placed on information runs parallel to that placed on the films proper: both are culturally important, both are limited, and each one informs the other. However, this activism is directed less against systems of film distribution and commercialism than against academic film study, whom many cinephiles hold accountable for providing this information. As Australian film critic Adrian Martin writes in a letter to film academic James Naremore, "I believe that academic film study tends (in general) towards a safe consolidation of what is known, a certain kind of consensus."

Referring to a 1980s film dictionary written by Richard Roud ascribing the most important achievements of cinema to a small handful of predominantly European countries, Martin writes: "Roud's text offers an amazing example of what happens when a period of overconfidence in film culture at large (including the academy) becomes overconfident and atrophied, and thus ripe for the waves of change." (Rosenbaum and Martin, 123-124).

Cinephiles not only value information that has been suppressed or overlooked but also contend that much information pertaining to cinema, even that which is most lauded, is severely underdeveloped or founded on popular myths. Jonathan Rosenbaum and Kent Jones have written about many myths centering on Orson Welles, perhaps the United States' most acclaimed filmmaker, that have become commonplace in biographies and other historical accounts (Jones, 155). A similar case involves a 2007 biography of Jean-Luc Godard, one of the major figures of French art-house cinema, written by *New Yorker* film critic and outspoken cinephile Richard Brody. While one of Brody's aims was to dispel misconceptions about the filmmaker's later work, many critics opposed what they saw as the promotion of other alleged myths (Krohn). Cinephiles, in valuing marginalized aspects of film history, see shortcomings in education about cinema, the reductionism of many academic film histories, and the need for alternative sources of information.

Finally, cinephiles also place importance on evaluative film criticism and discourse. A byproduct of the cinephilic view of cinema as an art form, the importance of artistic analysis and criticism to cinephiles helps explain the rift between cinephilia and academic film studies. Film scholar David Bordwell points out the uniqueness of cinema

among the arts for harboring such a division. Bordwell traces the division back to the development of film studies during the 1970s, which moved away from cinephilia in general and the auteur theory in particular, embracing instead various incarnations of 'Grand Theory': "Explicitly…a great many academics turned away from the artistic and humanistic dimensions of cinema. In the process they alienated cinephiles" (Bordwell). For Bordwell, the auteur theory provides the foundation for the arts-based criticism practiced by cinephiles and remains the key reference point for cinephilic discourse on film. Cinephile film critic Zachary Campbell elaborates on the absence of an artistic perspective in academic film study: "I fear [cultural studies] claimed as its own exclusive 'turf' any intellectual discussion of these sorts of films. This precluded a lot of thinking about Hollywood or other popular media spaces in terms continuous with art historical practices" (Campbell, 211).

Additionally, film criticism is the primary mode of discourse and community building among cinephiles. It is the key form of knowledge that cinephiles seek to produce themselves. As cinephile and online film blogger Girish Shambu explains, "I tend to think of a cinephile as being different from a 'buff' or a 'fan' in the following way: a cinephile is deeply interested both in movies and the writing, reading, and conversation that surrounds movies, i.e. the discourse of movies." According to Nico Baumbach, "Film criticism is a polemical intervention into a larger social field." This critical film discourse ranges from the journalistic level, where it is practiced by Martin, Rosenbaum, and many of the critics cited above, to smaller-scale communities, like campus film societies or online message boards. Where the first two forms of knowledge, canons and fact-based research, are necessarily limited and obstructed on an institutional

level, film criticism is an unrestricted social activity that, more than any other, brings cinephiles together and forms the basis for communities.

These three forms of knowledge have been prized by cinephiles since cinephilia became solidified as a cultural force in the 1960s. The oppositional dynamics between cinephilia and larger circulation systems outlined above are more recent developments but have nonetheless been important components of the digital cinephilia of the last several years. With this in mind, it becomes possible to chart cinephilia and its capabilities for producing and obtaining knowledge over the past few decades and assess how new media have drastically altered the landscape of cinephilia.

CINEPHILIA AND NEW MEDIA

The relatively recent phenomenon of digital media has provided cinephiles with a new means of assemblage and activity. While cinephiles have formed communities and acted in service of knowledge production for decades, the Internet and other forms of new media have radically changed how cinephiles go about these activities. In *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan*, Robert K. Logan distinguishes between the concept of 'mass media', in which a medium transmitted its information to a mass audience on a one-way circuit, and new digital media, which allow their users to engage with them on an interactive level. "The 'new media,'" Logan explains, "permit a great more participation of its users who are no longer just passive recipients of information but are active producers of content" (6).

New media also encompass new platforms for film consumption. Henry Jenkins, in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, writes at length

about media convergence, which loosely refers to interactivity between different media platforms and industries (3). For Susan Sontag, cinephilia was a specific love for the medium of film, extending beyond the content of the films themselves to encompass the technology of their projection and the theatrical space in which they are viewed. In the age of the new media, films circulate among many different modes of spectatorship, stored in celluloid filmstrips and digital files alike. This greater capacity for participation and flexibility of media, the ability for films and information about films to be copied in digital formats and circulated accordingly, grants cinephiles the power and freedom to establish alternative digital channels of knowledge production and distribution.

In an age of media interactivity and convergence, in which users can employ digital media for their own aims, the extent to which films can be consumed and knowledge produced drastically increases. Key to Jenkins' concept of media convergence is that of participatory culture, in which the users take advantage of interactive media to partake in interconnected activities and discourses. Fundamental to this participatory culture is the online knowledge community, in which like-minded users collaborate online to pool their knowledge and resources, resulting in what Pierre Lévy calls collective intelligence. According to Jenkins, "Collective intelligence refers to this ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members. What we cannot know or do on our own, we may now be able to do collectively" (27).

In the introduction to his book, Jenkins says "Right now, we are mostly using this collective power through our recreational life, but soon we will be deploying those skills for more 'serious' purposes" (4). Cinephilia constitutes one such purpose. In online cinephilia, and the myriad knowledge communities of which it consists, cinephiles from

all over the world have congregated to collaborate on ambitious projects aimed at expanding cinephilic knowledge. This expansion is comprised of an increase both in access to films and in critical film discourse, measures which have only been achieved through the circumvention of larger systems of distribution and cultural criticism.

The issue of access to films is paramount to cinephilia, and before delving into the 'illicit actions' undertaken by cinephiles to increase the availability of undervalued films, it is important to briefly describe the history of multi-media access to cinema, how systems of distribution have adapted to media convergence, and certain trade-offs that cinephiles have to contend with in the process. Lucas Hilderbrand describes how, over the past three decades, cinephiles utilized video technology to reproduce films and share them with one other. At first, these activities were separate from both the cinephilic purism expressed by Sontag, who valued the theatrical experience of film-going, and major media manufacturers who wanted nothing to do with home video (214). Over the years, however, home video has become a major industry, and films are now released for public consumption on a variety of formats, ranging from DVDs to online streaming.

Multi-media spectatorship has posed challenges to cinephiles who value the theatrical experience of film spectatorship. Film critic James Quandt has written that films seen on DVD or on laptop screens constitute degraded reproductions of works designed for big-screen projection. The issue extends to film archivists as well. Marijke De Valck, writing on contemporary issues in cinephilia, explains that "archivists are increasingly challenged by forces of commercialization and popularization now that media industries…have realized that archives contain treasures that can be mined

indefinitely for television broadcast, DVD editions, on-demand Web viewing, and other future access technologies" (136).

Despite these shortcomings of multi-media film spectatorship, contemporary cinephiles tend to find the expansion of access worth the trade-off. Of primary importance are the ways in which cinephiles partake in online file sharing, an issue most often assessed vaguely and from a strictly legal standpoint. Yochai Benkler has written about the Internet's enablement of 'peer production,' collaborative initiatives founded upon the free sharing of resources without any financial incentive. Discussing file sharing networks in particular, Benkler states that "The broader point to take from looking at peer-to-peer file-sharing networks, however, is the sheer effectiveness of large-scale collaboration among individuals once they possess, under their individual control, the physical capital necessary to make their cooperation effective" (85). This is particularly true when narrowing the issue to explicitly cinephilic file sharing, in which Benkler's concept of the peer-to-peer network overlaps with Jenkins' concept of the online knowledge community.

Cinephiles find the home video market lacking in many titles they believe deserve to be seen, and the practice of peer-to-peer file sharing has enabled them to share these films, often obtained from television recordings or other obscure sources, to a larger audience. However, cinephiles tend to organize their file sharing activities within carefully moderated torrent trackers that double as expansive film communities. These trackers collect, organize, and host countless uploaded films for the benefit of the community, members of whom have to abide by certain rules in order to avoid banishment. These trackers, in the sense that they pool the resources of the entire

community to expand upon a uniform collection of films, double as online knowledge communities. These torrent trackers and other file sharing initiatives both undermine and circumvent legitimized channels of film circulation. The ethos of bootleg video trading, according to which the sharing of marginalized films that lack sufficient distribution takes precedence over issues of copyright and intellectual property, has expanded into a utopian, activist enterprise that exists outside of the limitations imposed by geographical proximity and physical media.

More prevalent than cinephilic file sharing communities, online discussion communities and cinephile blogs are where cinephiles take the greatest advantage of the interactive possibilities of the Internet and where Jenkins' knowledge community concept is more clearly evident. These websites provide outlets for amateur writers from anywhere in the world to enter into mainstream cinephilic discourse, whether those writers maintain their own blogs or merely leave anonymous comments on the blogs of others. These sites exist on a gradient from underground message boards to unofficial blogs run by professional film critics to alternative film news journals. This agglomeration of online blogs and discussion sites is unofficially referred to as the online film blogosphere and implicitly functions as an enormous interconnected community. Loose affiliations often form the basis for more meaningful partnerships and large-scale mobilization efforts.

This proliferation of cinephilic writing stands as an important example of the democratizing capabilities of participatory culture online at the same time it demonstrates how this democratization has occurred in direct conflict with existing cultural institutions. In his book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*,

new media advocate Clay Shirky describes the platform that the Internet provides for amateur writers as integral to the participatory utopia he sees in the Web, as well as a threat to professional 'gatekeepers.' As he puts it "what was once a service has become a bottleneck" (69). This dynamic is especially played out in contemporary film culture, where the amateurization of cinephilic writing has led to the decrease of column sizes of journalistic film articles. The decline of professional film criticism may also account for the recent firings of such reputable film critics as J. Hoberman and Todd McCarthy.

This erosion of professional film criticism constitutes for many cinephiles a victory for genuine, passionately sought after knowledge over institutional authoritarianism. The voices that are valued in contemporary film criticism no longer have to be affiliated with major publishing organizations. Even more importantly, the line between amateur and professional film critic has become increasingly blurred. This attitude is reflected in the following statement by Jonathan Rosenbaum, who used to write for the *Chicago Reader* but now maintains his own website: "I have no idea what differentiates 'professional' film critics from 'amateur' cinephiles apart from the fake credentials dispensed by institutional bases…'professionals', whether they're academics or journalists, don't have to be cinephiles, don't have to know anything about film …in order to be regarded as 'professionals'…"

The increase in and democratization of cinephilic activity online points to an improved capability for carrying out activities previously undertaken on a far smaller scale. The implication is that online cinephilia has spawned a digital utopia of interactivity that stands in stark opposition to restrictive cultural institutions and channels of film distribution. However, this assessment fails to acknowledge that this new

'utopian' cinephilia is governed by its own unique hierarchies and organizational frameworks. These communities must now be isolated from the new paradigms they represent and analyzed in detail and on their own terms.

HOW ONLINE FILM COMMUNITIES WORK

The online film communities most representative of digital cinephilia operate according to specific interactive frameworks, in many cases structured according to organizational hierarchies. These communities can be assessed both on a micro level that addresses specific methods and activities of knowledge building and on a macro level that addresses the larger networks that bind these different communities together. Both perspectives are necessary for understanding not only how exactly cinephiles are employing new media to improve acquire and produce new knowledge, but also the new organizational structures that govern this new activity.

The online film 'blogosphere' provides an instructive subject for these assessments. The blogosphere constitutes a network of film blogs and discussion sites, run by professional and amateur critics alike, all of which are affiliated through cross-linking, intercommunication among different site owners, and other promotional efforts. On the micro level, the blogosphere illustrates how the diversity of online cinephilia and the ease with which anyone can participate in these discussion sites expand the scope of online knowledge building, while at the same time exemplifying new systems of organization and regulation that allow discourse to proceed smoothly. On the macro level, the various affiliations that bind the communities together fuel cinephilic activist efforts unattainable otherwise.

Davekehr.com, a blog maintained by *New York Times* columnist Dave Kehr and one of the most prominent sites comprising the blogosphere, functions ostensibly as a forum for commenters to leave feedback on Kehr's weekly DVD columns. But because Kehr posts the link to his latest column with minimal supplementary commentary, the real substance of his blog has become the varied conversations, debates, and tangential dialogues that extrapolate from these initial postings. The participants are almost exclusively comprised of knowledgeable and passionate film buffs who communicate formally and politely with one another. These comment sections, holding sophisticated critical discourse in a decentralized digital sphere, have become a hub for the kind of knowledge building that used to be limited by cultural and geographical barriers. The knowledge building is augmented by the sense of community: those who participate tend to do so regularly, and this leads to communal ties between members.

While the site primarily traffics in evaluative film criticism and debate as its predominant form of new knowledge, users also put effort into research, fact checking, and the sharing of transcultural knowledge for the benefit of the larger conversation. In one case, an article posted by Kehr on a newly issued DVD of Ingmar Bergman's *Summer with Monika* spurred participant Johan Andreasson to share a Swedish language blog with supplemental materials related to the film's development. Fredrik Gustafsson, another Swedish participant and fellow film blogger who has worked at the Ingmar Bergman Archives in Sweden, fact checked Kehr's claim that the film was Bergman's first to be distributed in other countries, an error that Kehr promptly rescinded. Other examples include Japanese user Junko Yasutani's response to Kehr's article on Kenji Mizoguchi, wherein he provided biographical information to which Kehr and other

participants did not have access. In response to an article on French horror filmmaker Jean Rollin, French users Nicolas Saada and Abdul Alhazred initiated a discussion on the different ways that French audiences perceive genre in cinema.

On some level, this kind of productive interaction between impassioned friends and colleagues constitutes a utopian enterprise, wherein scholarly credentials and geographical proximity are almost irrelevant. Whereas in the past Kehr occupied a position in an insular sphere of mainline American film criticism, the Internet has enabled him to open up to likeminded cinephiles the world over, who have license to correct his mistakes and fill in gaps in his understanding. However, Kehr remains in a position of critical authority and continues to command reverence as a film scholar. Online film culture has not destroyed hierarchies but has erected new ones, hierarchies designed to help facilitate discussion and invite new participants. This can be seen on file sharing sites that implement rules to maximize sharing, on message boards where discussion is moderate by site administrators, and on the blogosphere, where, despite the free nature of discussion, the site owners and chief content producers hold tacit authority.

If online film communities have a primary export, it is discussion about cinema, but a form of discussion that continues a long tradition of formalist film criticism and analysis. While more professional blogs like Kehr's often produce new scholarly and fact-based knowledge about film history, the vast majority of online film communities, from amateur blogs like Ed Howard's 'Only the Cinema' to close-knit discussion forums like *The Life Cinematic*, traffic in qualitative critical assessment of movies as aesthetic objects. The pursuit and production of this knowledge is nothing new in cinephilia, but the means by which it is generated differ radically from those of the pre-digital age. Film

criticism no longer exists as singular textual objects—reviews, articles, think pieces, etc.—but as freewheeling conversations with no fixed beginning or end. Comment sections, accompanying discussion forums, social media, and other feedback mechanisms have ensured that criticism now exists as a collaborative and discursive process. This is owed entirely to the structures and practices of online film communities.

Often the network dynamic of the cinephilic blogosphere facilitates mobilization efforts that have tangible impacts on film culture at large. These collaborations between communities add an extra dimension to the smaller-scale knowledge foraging efforts that transpire within each group. This network model, insofar as it enables large-scale mobilization, suggests Clay Shirky's concept of online mass organization consisting of weak tie activism among countless marginally connected users. Manuel Castells, in his *The Rise of the Network Society*, elaborates on this concept, describing how online communities, relative to real-world physical communities, are based more on weak tie relationships and tend to encourage social expansion via mass linkage at the expense of intimacy and friendship (388-389). But, in online cinephilia, these initiatives are always organized within the clear parameters of what remains an involved, inter-connected, overlapping community often based in strong tie friendships and collaborations. Online cinephilia starts with strong tie integration among the critics and influential film enthusiasts who first harnessed the interactive potential of the Internet and then built up its membership from there.

Friendships among cinephiles on the blogosphere occasionally lead to fruitful collaboration, as in the case of *LOLA*, an online film journal recently launched by Girish Shambu and Australian film critic Adrian Martin. Film journals like *Rouge* and *Senses of*

Cinema invite professional film critics and amateur bloggers, most of whom have carved out some kind of journalistic niche online, to contribute freelance pieces of film criticism. Alternative film news sites attuned to online cinephilia and the importance of critical collaboration to cinephilic knowledge building often arrange virtual roundtable discussions between prominent film critics. *Mubi* employs critics to provide daily commentary and criticism and invites online cinephiles of all credentials to use the site as a means of networking with other like-minded film buffs. Indiewire, most recently, has hosted a dialogue between former critic for the Chicago Reader Jonathan Rosenbaum and Film Comment editor-at-large Kent Jones on the films of Robert Bresson and Jean-Luc Godard, and has invited partakers in Sight & Sound's 2012 'best films of all time' poll to elucidate one of their choices through video interview.

But these collaborative efforts don't end at inspired critical contributions and discussions. Online film communities also band together to work toward larger, activist-minded goals. For example, Farran Smith Nehme, proprietor of The Self-Styled Siren, hosts an annual 'blogathon,' 'For the Love of Film,' with the intent of raising money for important film preservation efforts. The first two fundraisers helped the National Film Preservation Foundation raise money to restore two silent films, *The Sergeant* and *The Better Man*, and to restore Cy Endfield's *The Sound of Fury*. For the most recent fundraiser in May 2012, Nehme and the NFPF sought to raise money to allow a recently restored but under-seen silent film with significant contributions by Alfred Hitchcock, The White Shadow, to be streamed online for three months. The blogathon ensued as fellow bloggers contribute pieces on the theme in question, in this case Alfred Hitchcok films, and readers donated money. In November the Siren, in conjunction with the NFPF,

announced that the fundraiser was successful, and the film was made available on NFPF's website.

Another instance of online cinephilic activism began in September 2012, when American independent filmmaker Mark Rappaport released a notice to several colleagues detailing a dispute between him and Boston University professor Ray Carney over the ownership of his work. Rappaport had allegedly entrusted Carney with safeguarding his film materials while he lived in France. In response to Rappaport's request for the return of his materials, however, Carney has claimed ownership. Though Rappaport has discontinued his attempts at legal action against Carney due to an inability to pay legal fees, fellow filmmaker and occasional political activist Jon Jost, on his blog *cinemaelectronica*, has encouraged the online film community at large to join him in a campaign to pressure Carney into returning the materials. After repeated attempts at contacting Carney failed, Jost created a Change.org petition in early October, which attracted more than 1200 signatures within a month's span. The signatories range from academics like Kristin Thompson to aforementioned bloggers and critics like Girish Shambu and Kent Jones to fellow independent filmmakers like Ken Jacobs and Monte Hellman. All of these people are, in some way, involved in online cinephilia. The petition has been presented to Boston University administrators in an effort to deny Carney tenure and exert even more pressure on him to return Rappaport's materials.

Organizational structures that facilitate activism are also key to the practice of online file sharing. The most prominent of these sites is *Black Bird*[1], a heavily moderated and hierarchically arranged torrent tracker. The site is password protected, and members must follow a virtual currency system whereby the ratio of information downloaded to

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[1] *Black Bird* is an alias. The real name of the site has been withheld out of respect for its privacy.

the amount uploaded to the rest of the community must meet a certain threshold or be faced with banishment. Fulfilling requests for unavailable films and subtitles earns a member additional upload ratio. The structure of the site encourages members to seek out and upload new films and produce new or formerly obscured information. The difficulty of acquiring ratio spurs members to forge alliances with more knowledgeable members who can assist them. The community, numbering more than 30,000 members worldwide, is far from close-knit, but because of the structure in place, which includes a team of administrators and monitors to regulate activity, it succeeds in mobilizing its members to work toward the common goal of sharing rare and overlooked cinema with one another.

Each of these cases demonstrates concretely how online film communities operate in accordance with new media theory and how cinephilia has transitioned into the digital age. The Internet has not simply broken down old hierarchies and fostered a utopian cinephilic ideal, but has also allowed for a transitional process that sees professional critics adapting to online cinephilia and that sees new structures of communication and distribution being erected. What characterizes today's cinephilia is that these new operating systems and intercommunicative networks are maintained by the cinephiles themselves, independent of studios, corporations, or journalistic establishments.

CINEPHILIA TODAY

For the spring 2013 issue of the film publication *Cineaste,* a questionnaire on the nature of the 'next generation' of film criticism was posed to five young film critics. The feature presupposes that digital cinephilia is in a state of transition, and that a new generation of film critics, nurtured in their cinephilia by the Internet and other digital

technologies, is becoming increasingly more prominent. Fundamental to this transition
are the hierarchical linkages and print-to-web migrations that have allowed pre-digital
film culture to adapt to the Internet. But this 'new generation' of younger cinephiles has
not experienced cinephilia before the Internet, and the emergent online film culture
constitutes, in many ways, a starting point. According to Vadim Rizov, one of the critics
polled, "the sheer amount of information available has increased exponentially. We're
only at the start of this…But certainly it's easier than ever to gain not just criticism but
raw information" (Abrams et al.)

This uncharted surfeit of cinephilic knowledge readily available on the Internet
crops up in the answers of other critics, some of whom owe their cinephilic fervor to their
immersion at a young age in online film culture. According to Adam Cook, a contributor
to both Mubi and *Cinema Scope,* "With the right motivation, someone who has seen only
mainstream American films can become familiar with world cinema in a matter of
months. Not just because of downloading…but because of all the information that's out
there." He goes on to say that "If indeed I was a cinephile in waiting, it was the Internet
that played the most pivotal role in realizing that" (ibid.). Boris Nelepo, who hails from
Moscow, writes that the Internet helped him nurture his cinephilia when other distributive
means failed him. For these critics, an Internet connection proved to be something of an
invitation to a free and open-access world of cultural activity and raw information.

The implication remains that this new cinephilia of democratized participation
and resource sharing is still in its infancy, and that there are many challenges and
limitations to overcome. These critics are among the first to have discovered their
cinephilia in a digital environment whose aggregated information and resources have yet

to be sorted out or organized. The wealth of cinema made available by online file sharing has been partially organized and allocated on private torrent trackers, and yet the extra-legal nature of these sites precludes any kind of legitimization of this knowledge. The legal apparatus of intellectual property law has yet to catch up with the important strides being made in online file-sharing, wherein pirates are preserving a culture that their commercial counterparts in the home video market are lacking.

While the greater access to cinema afforded by the Internet has facilitated a more diverse film culture and has arguably led to important changes in academic and mainstream film canons, it will presumably be a long time before the numerous rarities and marginalized films that have been recently made available are subjected to any kind of substantial critical scrutiny. In the meanwhile, in spite of the absence of any professional standards for entry into these communities, some sites have a tendency toward social insulation. Many blogs and message boards have established groups of regular participants, whose familiarity with one another and shared online experience can become a barrier to new members. However, this occasional exclusivity is little more than an ordinary function of group formation and is a minor issue when contrasted with the greater strides in accessibility that have been made over the past few decades.

Cinephilia is a historically populist enterprise. Its earliest practitioners included radical film critics who sought to equate esoteric arthouse cinema with Hollywood crowd-pleasers, and one of its most important initiatives over the past several decades has been the effort to open up film culture to as many people as possible. The new cinephilia, as nurtured by digital media, has expanded this populism in unprecedented ways. The long-term macrocosmic effects of new media on society, the extent to which the Internet

allows for important utopian change, remains a contested issue within new media studies. But in the microcosm of film culture, in which professional writers have conceded the battleground of film criticism to a new generation of amateur cinephiles and in which systems have been erected to maximize the free sharing of both films and cinephilic resources, the utopian progress of new media is indisputable.

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