

Issue 12: Book Reviews

Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees

By Christian Keathley

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A Review by Jason Sperb, Indiana University, USA

Academic film studies can be hostile territory to open declarations of love. Like a gentle breeze, Christian Keathley's new book, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees*, offers a refreshing respite to scholars throughout this often harsh and desolate landscape. Articulating a nuanced discussion of cinephilia's historical origins and continuing theoretical possibilities, Keathley puts forth a broad-ranging discussion that proposes an intellectually rigorous space for discussing cinephilia in academia (which has shunned, in recent years, explicit discussions of pleasure when examining the cinematic text). By these standards, *Cinephilia and History* works remarkably well.

Keathley bases a great deal of his theoretical argument on Paul Willemen's famous conversation on cinephilia with Noel King, first published in 1994. In the article/interview, 'Through the Glass Darkly,' Willemen first posited a more theoretically perceptive concept of cinephilia -- one less rooted in cultural movements (i.e., the Parisian *Cahiers* group of the 1950s and 1960s) that traditionally (and often indirectly) defined the subject. Willemen centres his discussion on the 'cinephiliac moment' -- an epiphanic moment of intense joy, brought on by some indescribable experience during a particular sequence in a film. Keathley clarifies this as "the fetishizing of fragments of a film, either individual shots or marginal (often unintentional) details in the image, especially those that appear only for a moment" (7). This moment gives rise to the book's title -- *The Wind in the Trees*, which refers to the famous anecdote where many early viewers of the Lumiere films were reportedly enthralled more by the wind blowing through the trees in the background, and less so by the foregrounded action staged for the camera. Willemen's suggestion has proven to be profoundly influential on young cinephiles, particularly those within academia; however, he raises the notion of the cinephiliac moment without much of a sustained discussion that could have articulated both its constitution and its usefulness beyond that first epiphanic impulse. It is the first of Keathley's accomplishments to enhance and develop this possibility into a more rigorous theory. He does this by expanding Willemen's idea into two other concepts -- the "cinephiliac anecdote" and "panoramic perception."

Keathley begins his discussion by recounting one of his own cinephiliac moments (repeated verbatim at the end) -- a long fascination with the particular way in which, for him, Jeffrey Hunter's body seems to float through the air during a sequence late in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). Despite

this image's powerful hold on Keathley, established models of critical thinking fail to yield a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon. This, he argues, demands an intervention. "The extraordinary pleasure I take in this moment would surely be classified as a kind of fetishism -- something I would quickly and proudly acknowledge," he writes, "but then it is likely to be dismissed with a condescending snigger" (2). Although the ideas in Keathley's work will be valuable for a wide range of cinephiles, *Cinephilia and History* explicitly posits itself as stemming from, and speaking back to, an academic void. How can academics articulate and find discursive value in this "kind of fetishism"? The negative "reaction is strange, though, when one considers that Film Studies as an academic discipline owes much to cinephilia in all its forms and manifestations" (2). In the early days of scholarship, Keathley argues an intense passion for film caused so many to seek legitimacy through a formal articulation of film studies as a discipline. Yet, he adds, as soon as film gained that recognition, it immediately turned its back on issues of pleasure -- now seen as something that was, at the very least, frivolous and pointless, and, at the very worst, deceptive and destructive.

Keathley understands, however, that for academics to regard cinephilia seriously again, it must also move beyond the fetishism of a moment. He argues that, while idiosyncratic to a point, the cinephiliac moment is something shared by cinephiles throughout the years. Many writers, from François Truffaut, to Peter Wollen, to James Naremore, to David Thomson, have articulated a particular fascination with fragments of existing films, isolating specific peripheral details -- such as, to use one oft-cited example, Gary Grant's red socks during the famous crop-duster chase scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959). To perceive these fragments, meanwhile, Keathley suggests a particular mode of viewing entitled "panoramic perception," which he regards as "the cinephile's defining mode of vision" (30). This requires grazing the entirety of the cinematic image, taking in all the details -- intended or otherwise. This demands too looking around and beyond the foregrounded action, that which is staged for the camera with the particular agenda of moving forward the narrative. Keathley argues that the cinephile has long privileged this mode of perception, where cinephiliac moments can and do emerge.

Keathley use this as a seed for what he calls the "cinephiliac anecdote" -- something whereby a particular fragment builds, almost stream-of-conscious-like, into a more substantive discussion of the film in question and even film history more generally. "With the cinephiliac anecdote," Keathley writes, "the cinephile tells a story about -- or a story that embodies -- his or her relationship with the cinema, a story that has an effect on knowledge in the generalizable sense about its object, as well as in some personal sense" (151). This anecdote is difficult to define, except by example, and so Keathley wisely concludes his book with a series of five cinephiliac anecdotes (most of them written or co-written by him) relaying moments and information on such films as *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943) and others. In *Shadow*, for example, Keathley begins with a fixation on the background presence of a child extra in one outdoor scene who appears, then disappears and then reappears, to build an historical narrative which touches upon: aspects of the making of the film; Hitchcock's traditional use of off-camera space and of actors; hypothesizing about the actor himself (whom Keathley cannot identify for sure); and tying the entire discussion back to the film's much-discussed subtext of vampirism. As an experimental model only now being put forth, the cinephiliac anecdote works stronger in some instances than in others. However, with further reflection and revision, such a mode of writing could prove to be a valuable addition to established forms of critical

discourse.

What then is the value of the cinephiliac anecdote? Keathley sees it as a form of historical writing that disrupts previous assumptions about film and film history, rather than re-enforces them. Writing about Natalie Wood's red lips in *Rebel without a Cause*, for example, provides a shock to thought which compels the attentive viewer to look deeper into the film's production, and to rethink -- like many 50s Hollywood melodramas -- the film's heavy Freudian undertones, but often in unexpected ways (while also disrupting the traditional reading of *Rebel* as a James Dean star vehicle). This form of a *cinephiliac history*, writes Keathley, "engag[es] with history via a form that, like the filmic detail itself, challenges the dominant discourses of historicism" (140). Keathley believes a cinephiliac history of the cinema -- via the anecdote (a term he borrows from New Historicism) -- can offer a history precisely by disrupting established history. This becomes a way to extend the cinephiliac moment he finds so powerful, while also finding a way to build it into a useful scholarly tool. It is a remarkably powerful suggestion, and a welcome academic challenge to the discourse itself -- both what it shows, and what it conceals.

Like all books, *Cinephilia and History* is not perfect, even while it admirably fulfils the project it sets out to. For instance, the distinctions between "intended" and "unintended" fragments which provoke the cinephiliac moment are not always clear. Keathley begins by placing emphasis (in a nod to Willemsen and Andre Bazin) on what the camera supposedly catches unexpectedly as that which provokes a spark (hence the need for panoramic perception), but later seems to backtrack a bit, acknowledging that such moments can be either intended or not. His touching example from *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), fixated on a particularly gruesome shot of violence, clearly falls into the latter category of an "intended" fragment. A bit of ontological cloudiness regarding what exactly constitutes a cinephiliac moment thus ensues. One could also quibble with Keathley's decision to recycle canonical writers such as Benjamin, Barthes, and Kracauer (though they are all in need of a re-evaluation in regards to cinephilia), while also falling back upon established cinephiles such as Wollen, Bazin and Truffaut. This decision, coupled with his use of much-celebrated classics (featuring major *auteurs* like Hitchcock and Ford), could end up re-enforcing the dominant film hegemony he seeks to disrupt, and solidify the elitist perception of which cinephilia has often been accused. For offering a model of "unofficial" and "non-traditional" histories of cinephilia and film, *Cinephilia and History* often treads some fairly well established historical and theoretical paths. Still, most cinephiles are not likely to concern themselves with this issue, and it should not detract anyone from taking a good look at Keathley's achievement, which comes highly recommended to academics and cinephiles alike.

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