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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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Against Fetishism:  
The Moving Quiescence of Life 24 Frames a Second  
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Laura Mulvey (2006) *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the  
Moving Image*

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Film images move. Whether structured by fictional or documentary narrative, film images move in sequences that we follow unaware of the filmstrip of separate stills underpinning this movement. Some avant-garde film, especially its materialist-structuralist modes, attempted to expose the mechanisms of cinema, drawing attention to the photographic still that filmic continuity occludes. Avant-garde filmmakers inserted de-mystificatory breaks into this continuity, which was equated with narrative and illusion, by means of disjunctive strategies and techniques: the use of scratching, inserting text, exposing the filmstrip's sprockets, and experimenting with optical printing. When Laura Mulvey wrote her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), as well as co-directing, with Peter Wollen, films such as *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), very clear cut boundaries existed between narrative cinema and avant-garde cinema. A whole gamut of oppositions such as that between movement and stasis, narrative and non-narrative, illusion and materialism were operative. In the current era of digital technology, these oppositions are becoming less distinct, giving rise instead to dialectical uncertainties that oscillate between them. This is the premise of *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. Due to digital disruption of linearity, either in editing processes or viewing practices such as watching a home movie on DVD, a cinema of stilled moments can be

created and controlled by the viewer. The digital, according to Mulvey, frees the viewer from the dictates of narrative continuity and cinema time. For Mulvey, in the cinema of moments or, as she refers to it, delayed cinema, where the pause button stills movement at will, a 'film's original moment of registration can suddenly burst through its narrative time ...[t]he now-ness of story time gives way to the then-ness of the time when the movie was made and its images take on social, cultural or historical significance, reaching out into its surrounding world' (30-31). In chapters devoted to cinema classics such as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1946), Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), as well as Abbas Kiarostami's Koker trilogy, Mulvey situates cinema's pre-history in photography and a post-cinema in the digital, the latter strangely returning the photographic still to the surface of cinema rather than it being buried by cinematic movement. In the same way that cinema was seen as giving life to dead things, digital technology is seen by Mulvey as giving a new lease of life to the cinema that it supposedly supersedes. Paradoxically, this new lease of life is haunted by a death more akin to the living death in Freud's conception of the uncanny rather than by the death of cinema per se.

The paradox between movement and stasis has haunted cinema from its earliest inception. Writing in the 1940s, Jean Epstein, to whom Mulvey briefly refers, would wonder at the 'transmutation of the discontinuous into the continuous [...] accomplished by the cinematograph' (1977, 23). However, for Epstein, the underlying discontinuity of static images which 'functions as a material foundation for the continuity which man is capable of imagining in the projected film' is itself a phantom of a machine that interprets the 'perpetually moving spectacle of the world', in other words, 'the intransigent continuity of life' (1977, 24-5). It is useful to recall Epstein's metaphysics in contrast to Mulvey's use of the uncanny, which results in a reading of animation or continuity so tinged with mortality that, although Mulvey maintains a dialectical tension between these terms, the inevitability of death and the inanimate instead found the bedrock of cinematic pleasure. That said, Mulvey's examination of the uncanny in relation to uncertainty and temporality provides a very close and sterling reading of Freud's text and its ambiguities. The dialectical tension intrinsic to the uncanny also provides an intellectual model that Mulvey uses to in part structure the book as she explores tensions and slippages between movement and stasis, the living and the dead, narrative and non-narrative in such a way that oppositions turn into their converse. This is one of the most enjoyable aspects of the book.

Uniting Wilhelm Jentsch's emphasis on the new and unfamiliar, e.g. waxworks and mannequins, with Freud's emphasis on the old and familiar

characterized by the belief that the dead return to haunt the living, Mulvey links the fantasy cinema of Méliès and the realism of the Lumière brothers. The Lumière's supposed realism currently takes on the aspect of a ghostly uncanny whose phantom-like quality parallels the magic and marvellous effects of Méliès's theatrical illusions with both types of production taking on an air of 'intellectual uncertainty' in relation to the human body. Mulvey extends this mode of linking disparate protagonists from film theory and history in a following chapter where she brings André Bazin and Roland Barthes together to explore the index in relation to the uncanny. For both the structuralist and the realist/humanist, the photographic index is a trace that, while signifying death, also has a purchase on the future. Barthes's 'this was now' (57) and Bazin's *time embalmed* are conceptions of the photograph as record of the past reaching towards the future, an instance of the past becoming present in another temporality. But for Barthes this is a 'terrible...return of the dead' (60), much like Freud's ghostly uncanny, whereas Bazin's Catholicism permits him to see embalming as a way of seizing life from death. For Barthes, the moment of 'intellectual uncertainty' instigated by the photograph, the *punctum*, is tinged with the melancholy realisation of his own extinction. Although Mulvey does not explicitly mention this, her dialectical reading produces Barthes as the humanist who cannot come to terms with his own extinction, the elimination of 'an I' triggered by the uncanny presence of the photograph (63). Barthes holds fast to the moment of the *punctum*. While this moment overwhelms the subject, the realisation of its poignancy or pain is a sign that one is not yet, or not quite, eliminated. This is why Barthes dislikes cinema, or to be more precise, film.<sup>1</sup> The moving image cannot be seized as such. It subjects the subject to its horizontal time frame, making it impossible for the fetishist to control the image.

Curiously, Mulvey's thesis in *Death 24x a Second*, whereby the viewer can now subject cinematic time to delay, resurrects fetishism as a new and radical mode of spectatorship. This is somewhat puzzling given the proximity of fetishism and voyeurism in Mulvey's earlier 1975 essay where she performed a critique of both. In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey contrasted the films of Joseph von Sternberg to Hitchcock, using the former to illustrate fetishistic scopophilia, the latter, voyeurism. While the former exists outside linear time with the erotic instinct focused on the look alone, the latter depends on sadistic control. However, they are both ways of dealing with castration anxiety and, albeit differently, they are in fact both

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<sup>1</sup> By contrast to his criticism of cinematic movement, Barthes does wax lyrical about the auditorium in 'Leaving the Movie Theatre' (1986a).

bound up with an economy of control. Mulvey would say in 1975 that 'the voyeuristic-scopophilic look that is a crucial part of traditional filmic castration anxiety and pleasure' is something that needs to be broken down (1984, 373). Of course no-one should be pinned down by what they said thirty years ago, but the ramifications of proffering fetishism as a new mode of spectatorship and claiming that spectatorship itself is feminized in the resurgence of the still image in the digital need to be thought through a bit further.

Mulvey's turn towards fetishism in the final chapters of the book is all the more surprising given her claim that delayed cinema offers 'a political dimension' which allows for a resistance to the 'disappearance of the past' and the 'appropriation of time' that is occurring in contemporary society (23). In chapter 8, Mulvey explicitly elaborates what she means by 'a political dimension' in her reading of a sequence from Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) according to the principles of delay, i.e. using the pause button on a DVD. 'With the image halted, the appearance of the black figures on the screen takes on added power and weightiness, standing in for and conjuring up the mass of "coloured people" rendered invisible by racism and oppression, very particularly by Hollywood's culture and representation' (157-8). However, while at 24 frames a second we might not register the black extras that pass by in the Coney Island sequence, does Mulvey's conclusion really add anything that is not already inscribed in the film's narrative or that is not gleaned from academic film analysis, which has always relied on stills? The only advantage seems to be that now we can all do the latter kind of film analysis at home, but while this may be democratic in principle, it destroys the essence of film, which is movement. The reduction of film to a series of stills for the purpose of interpretation has often been regretted by many proponents of classical film analysis. For me, the reassertion of fetishistic spectatorship in *Death 24x a Second* is disappointing and may even be hiding an underlying radicalism embedded in Mulvey's thesis.

In her claim that spectatorship is feminized in the fetishistic control of the stilled image, Mulvey somewhat resurrects the thesis that femininity and fetishism are not mutually exclusive. Freud designated fetishism as a male preserve and in the 1980s artists and film theorists such as Mary Kelly and Mary Ann Doane respectively wanted to recover fetishism for female agency and pleasure. This is old hat. The parameters of debates have shifted. Whether due to the impact of digital technology or to a wider configuration of factors, immersive spectatorship is not seen as the bugbear it was in the 1970s and 1980s. Critical distance, which is preserved in fetishism, is no longer seen as the sine qua non of our engagement with images and instead discussions around haptical tactility and mimetic identification have

superseded the critical detachment that Mulvey, amongst others, called for in 1975.<sup>2</sup> This is seen as a loss of materiality and historicity in some quarters. *Death 24x a Second* can be seen as grappling with these problems, i.e. how to engage with immersive spectatorship without acquiescing a materialist viewpoint or perspective. This is why Mulvey holds onto incompatible positions. One could see this as admirable; however, it is also where Mulvey's thesis comes unstuck. While I have no problem with the idea that '[t]he possessive spectator commits an act of violence against the cohesion of a story, the aesthetic integrity that holds it together, and the vision of its creator', to celebrate 'the possessive spectator's desire for mastery and will to power' in the face of the waning of the power of the male protagonist of narrative cinema is a rather simplistic reversal of terms (171). While swapping one mode of fetishistic control for another might 'reconfigure the power relation between spectator, camera and screen, as well as male and female', how it also dissolves voyeurism, as Mulvey claims, beats me (167). Fetishism and voyeurism are not separable and, even if they were, there is nothing radical about the fetishistic impulse. Surely this attack on plot, which occurs in 'delayed cinema' and which is deployed in interesting ways in numerous artist's film installations, (Mulvey mentions a few of these), offers more potential for reconsidering spectatorship? To my mind, couching it in the reductive terms of fetishism relegates it to an already predetermined set of positions and closes off the possibilities of openness instigated by the impact of digital technology on cinematic practices.

Reading between the lines, there are glimpses of these possibilities in *Death 24x a Second*, e.g. when Mulvey cites Jacques Rancière's concentration on the singular film image. 'We've forgotten why Henry Fonda is not entirely guilty and exactly why the American government employed Ingrid Bergman. But we remember a handbag', he says (145). However, the isolation of the handbag, 'the sails of a windmill' or 'bottles in a line' is not necessarily bound up with a fetishistic impulse, but with the fact that an image can generate an emotive and irrational resonance for a particular spectator that exceeds the film's narrative frame (145). And this emotive quality only resonates due to its occurring in cinematic time, i.e. a time that cannot be seized. While Barthes would regret the temporal constraints that traditionally characterize film, saying that it 'cannot move faster or slower without losing its

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000) and Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (2000).

perceptual figure', it is this very movement that Barthes's notion of the *punctum* would ultimately endow the photograph with (Barthes 1986b, 62).<sup>3</sup>

'Yet the cinema has a power which at first glance the Photograph does not have: the screen (as Bazin has remarked) is not a frame but a hideout; the man or woman who emerges from it continues living: a "blind field" [*champ aveugle*] constantly doubles our partial vision. Now, confronting millions of photographs...I sense no blind field...Yet once there is a *punctum*, a blind field is created (is divined)...The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle off-screen [*hors-champ*] - as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see....' (Barthes in Brunette and Wills 1989, 111).

It is this blind field that Barthes's fetishistic attention on the still seeks to eradicate but it returns, not simply to haunt the subject, but to take him elsewhere. When Barthes claims that the still flouts logical time, whereas cinema is linear, the flouting of logical time that the *punctum* in the still engenders mirrors the very structure of the moving image (Barthes, 1989b: 61). Mulvey is sensitive to this contradiction, but her claim that the freezing of the image that the spectator can enact due to digital technology enables a fetishistic control that is different from previous modes of spectatorship is unconvincing. The fetishistic freezing of the image in the digital and the fetishistic freezing of 'the look' that Mulvey regaled against in 1975 seem to me to be companionable bedfellows that span a thirty year horizon.

But in the same way that Barthes can be read against himself, there are aspects of Mulvey's thesis that make inroads into new models of spectatorship. Returning to 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', I have always been struck by how Mulvey's claims for the close-up of the female image exceed the psychoanalytic framework she adopts in that essay. The fact that the 'representation of the female image threatens to break the spell of illusion, and the erotic image on the screen appears directly (without mediation) to the spectator' is to my mind what needs to be remembered here (Mulvey, 1984: 373). While fetishism is one route or reaction to this, what is also ushered in here is the potential to immerse oneself in an image, which exceeds the terms of control, either of or by the image. In the interrelation between the stilled, yet diegetic, image and the spectator, who is also both still and moving, a disjunctive engagement between the parameters of stillness and movement occurs, generating associations and emotions that are not predicated on content.

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<sup>3</sup> For an extremely interesting reading of the dichotomy between movement and

In *Death 24x a Second*, Mulvey tends to leave this potential in abeyance. Citing Miriam Hansen's analysis of Rudolf Valentino's cinematic passivity as upsetting her 1975 assumptions about the gendering of visual pleasure, Mulvey now somewhat appropriates Hansen's concept of female spectatorship, which actively feminized Valentino as object of the look, for her concept of delayed cinema. But this seems incongruous as Hansen is not talking about the control associated with fetishism here but a look which 'is one of reciprocity and ambivalence' (169) and cuts 'across visual and narrative registers' (170). The framing of this feminized look tends towards incompleteness and interchangeability between positions on and off screen, whereas in Mulvey's delayed image, the shot is subject to a totalizing control whereby all details are legible. While the appearance of the still in the moving image via the freeze frame may logically elicit the fetishistic control that Mulvey describes, I would say that in her adherence to psychoanalytic terms, Mulvey seems to have forgotten the unconscious. The potentially possessive spectator may just as easily be possessed by the emergent stillness. Our relation to images is ultimately unpredictable and, while being predicated on technological forms, is not reducible to them. Technological control of the still image can just as easily prompt an overwhelming of the spectator that moves them in a masochistic direction rather than allowing for the establishment of sadistic control. The quiescence of the freeze frame is never still in the sense that, as Barthes found in his attempt to still the image, it elicits a gaze that is open to a temporality not just of the past, but also to the ambiguity of the future. The index is never a silent memento of that past but is always being animated by the gaze that looks upon it, an animation that in turn unseats the possessive spectator from sadistic mastery. Mulvey hints as much when she discusses the reminder of mortality that ensues in the still images of Hollywood stars now dead, their animation preserved or mummified in celluloid, but again, this fetishizes the index. Mulvey resurrects fetishism to protect against the ephemeral nature of cinematic experience. 'Since the cinematic experience is so ephemeral, it has always been difficult to hold on to its precious moments, images and, most particularly, its idols' (161). However, cinematic experience could be said to be comprised of nothing but remembered and misremembered precious moments. As Stanley Cavell points out in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 'certain moments from films viewed decades ago will nag as vividly as moments of childhood' (1979: 17). Regardless of whether the image is stilled right in front of you or not, there is something about the interaction between the cinematic image and the

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stillness in Barthes, see Peter Brunette and David Wills (1989, 111).

viewer's perceptual apparatus that forbids us to verify what we see objectively. If we could, we would be (recording) machines. We are always in the process of constructing the image projected before us, linking it to other images, whether from the history of film or from the films we replay endlessly in the forms of memories and dreams.

In case this all sounds as if I am berating Mulvey for what she does not provide, let me cite her chapter on Rossellini as an example which hints at another possibility. At the end of *Journey to Italy* (1953), having surmounted the narrative blockages that pivoted around death, the couple, Alex and Katherine, find one another again. They 'declare their love and they kiss in the time-honoured image of cinematic narrative closure' (121). However, as Mulvey says 'this ending does not fit Rossellini's concept of cinema' and the film continues, the camera following people streaming along the street where a local brass band plays (121). When asked about the lack of closure in his films, Rossellini replied: 'There is a turning point in every human experience in life – which isn't the end of the experience or of the man, but a turning point. My finales are turning points. Then it begins again – but as for what it is that begins, I don't know' (in Žižek 1992, 42-3). Mulvey refers to Jacques Rivette's notion of the 'continuance of time' to refer to this other kind of cinema which suggests perpetuity and continuity rather than the formal order of the end (122). Perhaps this could also be extended to encompass those precious moments, 'a handbag' for example, that we remember isolated from their narrative contexts, i.e. they continue in perpetuity in the viewer's memory, making links with other such images and becoming part of the fictions into which we project ourselves.

In Mulvey's chapter on Kiarostami's Koker trilogy and his later film, *Taste of Cherry* (1997), delay does remove us from fetishism and instead circulates as a trope that performs uncanny links between the films themselves and their production. This may be because in Kiarostami's artificially constructed wandering aesthetic 'the topography of the death drive is unlike the horizontal direction of the drive in the "dying together" B movies, or Marion's unconscious drive towards death in the first section of *Psycho*', moving instead in repetitive, circular sweeps that attempt to come to terms with the absent moment of trauma (123). Mulvey's analysis of how each film in the trilogy deploys *then* and *now* again pivots on the dialectic between life and death, but one gets the sense that life wins out here. A flashback of the zigzag path in *And Life Goes On* (1991) triggers the spectator's memory of the previous film, *Where is my Friend's House?* (1987), shot before the earthquake had occurred in Koker, and links to the post-earthquake reconstructions in *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), the image standing out because of its evocation of the continuity of life. In

*And Life Goes On*, the film's failure to index the past event of the earthquake is its testimony to and celebration of life, 'the moving spectacle of the world' that continues in the face of discontinuity or trauma. Just as the suicidal protagonist Mr. Badiei reaches his grave in *Taste of Cherry*, a black screen occurs which evokes 'a symbolic death', the finality of this ending undermined by the video sequences that follow which show the actor playing Mr. Badiei lighting a cigarette and the film crew resting (124). Again, life goes on, but in an off-screen elsewhere. Continuity needs the discontinuous for the purpose of reflection on how life goes on without us or without cinema, but the discontinuous is always shot through with memories seeking new significance in the future. The supposedly still image is a contradiction in terms, for its multiple lines of force always put it into movement, its stillness always being displaced by time. Ontology surpasses technology.

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