

# Cinephilia and the Aestheticization of Film. Cultural Legitimacy Before and After

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## Abstract

The history of cinema is characterized by the fight for cultural legitimacy. Specifically, in the 20th century, cinema played a key role for the expansion of the aesthetic field in debates on contemporary times and even influenced the philosophy of art. Aesthetic categories are taken from other and more traditional artistic forms (such as representative arts, literature and theatre). The purpose is to expand the field of cultural legitimacy of cinema also to those fields which were considered too involved in the industrial needs. This is the reason why contemporary cinephilia have sometimes extended the broad definition of “beautiful” also to more marginal areas as well as to the most unpredictable places (from pornography to horror), thus identifying forms of art everywhere. So, what is cinephilia and how did it revolutionize the aesthetic criteria of cinema?

**Keywords:** Cinephilia; Film Criticism; Film Aesthetics; Film Theory; Film Consumption.

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The history of cinema is characterized by the fight for cultural legitimacy. Specifically, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cinema played a key role for the expansion of the aesthetic field in debates on contemporary times and even influenced the philosophy of art. From the Fifties on, however, the traditional attribution of value in the cinema culture — which was mainly carried out by critics through aesthetic categories taken from other and more traditional artistic forms (such as representative arts, literature and theatre) — was overwhelmed by the onset of French cinephilia, which soon became international cinephilia. Its purpose was to expand the field of cultural legitimacy of cinema also to those fields which were considered too involved in the industrial needs, including Hollywood, B-movies as well as experimental and hermetic authors. This is the reason why contemporary cinephilia has sometimes extended the broad definition of “beautiful” also to more marginal areas (from horror to kung fu) as well as to the most unpredictable places (from pornography to splatter films), thus identifying forms of art everywhere, often for mere anti-institutional provocation. In these recent cases, which refer to the last 25 years, critics no longer establish what can be included in the aesthetics of cinema, but rather other cultural initiatives, such as independent festivals, online magazines, Youtube channels, fan forums and so on. In short, some forms of cinema, previously neglected or even affected by negative opinions, become cool. So, what is cinephilia and how did it revolutionize the aesthetic criteria of cinema?

Film scholars regard cinephilia as a practice rather than as a theory.<sup>1</sup> Cinephilia is different from the simple pleasure of going to the cinema since it assumes and establishes a social and cultural behaviour able to increase the awareness relating to the act of watching a film, expand the knowledge about cinema, and share the love for it through rules and a preceptive attitude. Therefore, there cannot be cinephilia without the critical and historical awareness of cinema. This principle inspired the protagonists of the unique example of the seventh art by Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein, which are considered — especially the former — the founders of cinephilia, since they actually enhanced the compound word (*cinéphilie* or *cinéphile*) then translated into many languages.

This may sound obvious and recall other expressive means, which have their own *bibliophilia* or *melomania*. As for cinema, however, there is something different. In fact, cinema — just like fashion — had been affected by the lack of artistic legitimacy for a long time, as evidenced by the debates on its nature and existence in 1910s and 1920s. Therefore, like the other “-philias”, cinephilia considers cinema a unique field of expression, an original form of art in the same way as a religion, like the Christian one for example, has absolutely original contents compared to the others. The Treccani Encyclopaedia of Cinema defines the cinephile as a “person so fond of cinema that he regards cinema as the highest aesthetic and intellectual experience,”<sup>2</sup> thus assuming that, over the various natures of cinema (communicative, media, commercial, social), the cinephile is mainly interested in the artistic and experiential dimension. Therefore, cinephilia is an aestheticizing practice.

Moreover, cinephilia also has a legitimating power. Its task is performed not only within the circle of the lovers of cinema — hence the difference between being a cinephile or an enthusiast — but also inside the history of cinema to change the standards and the instruments for critical judgment as well as to expand the artistic legitimacy to those directors to whom the status of author was denied. According to Truffaut, in the Fifties, the *politique des auteurs* (the policy of the authors; a policy, not a theory) relied on a crucial element: the supremacy of style to recognize the expressive ability of a director and the dramatic reduction of the importance of history and the contents for cultural legitimacy. This was a true revolution that — once accepted — allowed the French cinephiles to include directors like Alfred Hitchcock or Billy Wilder in the élite of cinema, although they were regarded at most as excellent technicians dealing with structures like thriller or comedy, i.e. outside the context of cinema as a form of art.

In short, the assumption according to which the director should be considered the creator of the work of art also by the most industrial production systems (Hollywood) was the necessary — and probably

1. For further discussion of this problem, see Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, eds., *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), and Roy Menarini, *Il discorso e lo sguardo. Forme della critica e pratiche della cinefilia* (Parma: Diabasis, 2018).
2. Enciclopedia Treccani, online version: <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/cinefilia/>.

long-lasting — condition for a true revolution within the cinema culture.

After this period full of novelties, and after the politicization of cinephilia, the latter - strongly connected to the projection in movie theatres and its ritual – must renegotiate its existence. The Eighties and the early Nineties can be considered *a posteriori* as the preview of what happened later in the contemporary era: it is the beginning of the period when cinema is no longer the main medium. The initial decline is accompanied by the culturalization of cinema and the ennoblement of the film-work within the various media on which it spreads. Therefore, new generations of cinephiles can be taught through major television shows or videotapes — as declared by Quentin Tarantino, who built up his vast and all-encompassing knowledge of the history of cinema thanks to his job as a sales assistant at a video rental store. Obviously, the mystical dimension of films in theatres as well as of collective enjoyment, perhaps followed by discussions, ceases to exist yet a new cinephilia silently grows, marked by the viewer's cultural relationship with the films outside the theatre — private collections, alternative TV shows (*Fuori Orario* in Italy, *Arté* in France and Germany), the large public investments for the cinematographic divulgation in city events (such as La Villette and Massenzio), the introduction of cinema in the academic world, are aspects that stimulate cinephilia, while changing its features once again.

The most impressive innovations, however, include an international tendency, particularly evident in America and Italy, towards the revaluation of popular cinema. Once again, the interpretation instruments are borrowed from modern cinephilia, but are applied to elements generally neglected or despised (as explained before). Whether it is called trash, cult, b-movie, this wide range of horror, erotic, martial arts, crime drama, wacky and various hybrid types of cinema drew the attention of many enthusiasts, clearly oriented towards cinephilia. Once again, a cinema previously considered as the mere exploitation of the lowest instincts of the spectators is aestheticized, it is recovered from oblivion and its reference standards are questioned. The legitimacy now requires filmographic competence, philological knowledge and the passion for rediscoveries. Now, directors not used to be taken seriously are subjected to documented and detailed interviews, analytical reviews of the critical judgment and debates based on the official taste, with the clear purpose of subverting the historiographic standards. VHS and DVD collections, specialized festivals and magazines (“Fangoria” in America, “Nocturno” in Italy, “Nosferatu” in Spain, etc.), websites and other high-visibility sites have identified a movement which represented, for better or for worse, the latest great cinephile community in a territory now completely mapped<sup>3</sup>.

After all, paratexts, communities, festivals and practices as well as directors contribute in postmodern terms help internalise the cinephile attitude, which eventually replaces what usually represented it, i.e. the spectators. Directors such as the above-mentioned Tarantino, the Coen brothers, John Woo, Danny Boyle, the Wachowski brothers, among others, defeat the nostalgia of the directors-historians of New Hollywood (the generation of Coppola, De Palma, Scorsese, Spielberg) and express cinephilia in the activity of those who direct the film, instead of leaving it to the viewers. A historical change which corresponds to another step, not necessarily unfavourable, of cinephilia.

Eventually, the so-called digital cinephilia starts a different period. Nowadays, when cinephilia was supposed to be overwhelmed by the new media and the disintegration of the cinema consumption in movie theatres, the opposite process is observed. This is no surprise: as modern cinephilia resulted from passion, the sharing and discussion of films, now the new technologies of the 2000s offer new virtual places to share these cinephila practices. In recent years, social networks, blogs and forums have become necessary instruments for the transmission of cinematographic memory and the sharing of ideas; it is the modern version (duly amplified) of the past cine-clubs. Numerous online newspapers have been established together with streaming platforms for the legal view of rare and poorly distributed films (Mubi.com, for example), even a movement called *New Cinephilia* which theorizes an important paradigm shift: the new cinephilia does not defend movie theatres at all costs (which still remain the privileged place to express one's love for films), but opts for a peer-to-peer approach with the aim of exchanging feature films and filmographies, uses YouTube as an infinite source of information of the history of cinema, watches films on any medium (from tablets to smartphones) and gets in contact with the other fans through the

3. Now you can meet, in bookshops, titles like Rob Hill, *The Bad Movie Bible: The Ultimate Modern Guide to Movies That Are so Bad They're Good* (London: The Art of Publishing, 2017).

methods described above. Then, due to the onset of new audio-visual forms and formats — supported by the quick digital development — cinema no longer needs any cultural and artistic legitimacy; on the contrary, paradoxically, it is often suggested as the only remedy to the pervasive presence of other kinds of moving images.<sup>4</sup> In this view, opposite elements are seen. Casetti mentions the concept of relocation<sup>5</sup>. In other cases, reference is made to pulverization, to the extent that it is no longer possible to have fixed points, therefore cinema acquires a wider dimension of frenetic cultural consumption marked by the daily aestheticization of objects that have a poor consistency and an uncertain textual collocation.

If this is the theoretical reference contest for cinephilia, what about this aestheticization today? We are witnessing a curious paradox. What the cinephilia has canonized, and culturally legitimized, today becomes a conservation barrier to new forms of cinephilia (and therefore of aestheticization). The more the cinema enters the dimension of official art (testified by the film museums, exhibitions dedicated to film culture, academic programs, funds for the restoration of old films, etc.), more cinephilia seeks new forms of intervention. In particular two:

- 1) Aestheticization of popular cinema
- 2) Aestheticization of cultural products derived from cinema (television series, music videos, fan audiovisual fiction and mash-ups, etc.)

This sounds quite paradoxical. On the one hand, there is cinema — once considered unworthy of being mentioned among the traditional arts — which is the historic protagonist of an increasingly pervasive visual culture and acts as a barrier against the power of new media and their disposable products. On the other hand, cinephilia (or *seriéphilie* — love for tv shows — as it is defined today<sup>6</sup>) rejects this monumentalization and explores all the corners of media consumption to find new elements. In this regard, lately, cinephilia has started to aestheticize non-cinematographic products to save an operational space for the anti-standard and irreverent characteristics of the same practice. A consequence, cultural products deriving from the cinema are aestheticized (for example, television series, music videos, fashion films).

Traditional critics often believe that the web is an infinite place unable to offer reliable niches for cinephilia, since they are made uncertain by the unpredictable mobility of the users. Many studies have shown that this approach is wrong and digital reputation is now widely known and discussed also in cultural terms, together with the issues of belonging and relations expressed by the web communities. Moreover, the legal services under subscription, i.e. the legal enjoyment of audiovisual contents on the web, produce very precise interface architectures, inevitably destined to influence the consumption. This leads to two contradictory consequences: on the one hand, what is referred to as *mediaphilia*<sup>7</sup> contains a certain enthusiasm for the major industrial brands that offer these paid services (Netflix is supported by favourable advertising and the esteem of social networks); on the other hand, the cinephilia — which generally favours every measure intended to expand the online visibility of cinema — is destined by its own nature to look for something unobtainable, to search for latencies, which however are not so hard to find considering the limited quantitative availability of the above-mentioned subjects. Far from solving the problem (or opportunity) of online piracy, legal streaming is an interesting example of the continuous progress of content, library, copyright, commercial enhancement of digital archives.

Yet, with reference to the architecture of streaming services and legal downloads, it promotes the coexistence (not the overcoming or merging) of various products. They have in common not the lack of differentiation of the object — we are able to distinguish and choose a fiction film from a documentary,

4. See Girish Shambu, *The New Cinephilia* (Montreal: Caboose, 2014).

5. Francesco Casetti, "Cinema Lost and Found. Trajectories of Relocation," *Screening the Past*, n. 32 (2011) but also, by the same author, *The Lumière Galaxy. Seven Key World for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

6. Hervé Glevarec, *La Sériephilie. Sociologie d'un attachement culturel* (Paris: Ellipses, 2012).

7. Lucia Tralli and Roy Menarini, "Paratexts from Cinephilia to Mediaphilia. (through Ludification Culture)," in *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media*, eds. Paolo Noto and Sara Pesce (New York-London: Routledge 2016), 138-51.

or the episode of a TV series from a feature film — but the subjective and cultural relationship that we establish with them. This is the reason why, recently, the TV series — which were associated with a certain level of *mediaphilia* and cultural importance also thanks to a spontaneous and unstoppable academic production — are now the most discussed, shared and loved objects of *mediaphilia* in the streaming era.

This is the general reference context in the second decade of the 2000s; now, let us now try to directly assess the relationships between cinephilia and streaming. There is a close connection between cinephile practices in the digital era and semi-legal approaches to the web, which is further highlighted by the research — with special reference to some types of films: original and uncensored copies, cult films considered immoral, auteur films not prone to generalised file sharing. In all these cases, the rarity of the product gives the illegality or para-legality a strong symbolic value in relation to the fact that the research is hard and is associated with the creation of cinephile communities which once praised the importance of physical research or of the journey to reach the theatre, now replaced by digital research practices. This recalls discussions on cult movies, according to the characteristics that the theory has historically attributed to this term, not entirely similar to cinephilia in a strict sense, because it is connected to other vision practices and community of viewers.

In recent years, for example, a debate has generated on the comparison between DVDs and streaming, with DVDs being considered the most obvious place of contemporary cinephilia for years been considered. This is and was due to the coexistence of texts and analyses on the same medium: therefore, the critical para-texts, the analytical potentialities, documents and further information, interviews and the reception history all together inspired the idea that the requirements of the lovers of cinema, cinephiles, collectors and historians could be met in one fell swoop. But things have quickly changed: the DVD market has dropped, to the extent that — as regards DVDs and Blu-rays on non-contemporary cinema — only publicly funded institutions or film libraries are able to survive on the market. Obviously, there is a difference between the national DVD production (the Italian market, for example, is particularly in trouble), and the English-speaking international market: ideally, a Criterion DVD addresses a wider number of countries compared to those in a mono-national language, also thanks to the global spread of the English language. The concern is so high that recently Richard Brody asked: “Will Cinephilia Survive Without DVDs?”<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, if one of the historical dangers feared by cinephilia was the shift from movie theatres to the new electronic media (recalling the debate in the Eighties on films on TV and the first video recording devices), now no major change has occurred except for the medium type. Brody’s thinking finds elements of fluidity and (symbolic) volatility in streaming that would impair the cinephile attention to detail or the possibility of discussing and evaluating the film itself. This is not true, at least in the sense that streaming contributes to the *spreadability* of digital cinephile practices, so that other places are created where discussions are made, such as social networks or cinephile platforms which combine all the characteristics of social media. We call them film archives, film criticism, film evaluation, cinephilia, as well.

Someone in this sense is pessimistic, for example Jon Lisi writes:

Perhaps the issue, then, isn’t that cinephilia is dead, but that it’s no longer relevant. There are plenty of people who continue to love movies and television shows, but the distinction between cinephile and average consumer is becoming more difficult to make. When nearly everyone has access to the same content and not a single person can watch all of it, it’s arbitrary to determine who the experts are, and it’s futile to say what’s worth watching and what isn’t. Cinephiles once belonged to an elite club of movie theater dwellers, but the mass proliferation of technology and social media has granted anyone admission. This openness

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8. Richard Brody, “Will Cinephilia Survive Without DVDs?,” *The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/will-cinephilia-survive-without-dvds>.

has complicated the practice of cinephilia, and has turned it into a shapeless, unidentifiable act.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, this phase is ever-changing. The cinephilia of the digital age is breaking into many streams, some of which promote the use of streaming and specific platforms together with the discursive aestheticization of watching movies, which is a prerequisite of cinephilia. However, *streaming-philìa* can be divided between radical and wise cinephilia, which likes to be the minority and completes its paths, processes and practices in order to mark its territory, and a common *mediaphilia* (cinephilia and *seriéphilie*) that aestheticizes and emphasizes its consumption starting from proximity to objects, their cross-media and their usability as narrative ecosystems. Under this particular circumstance, the fandom and *mediaphilia* practices tend to get in mutual touch and even combine, or to share some digital clusters where many aspects of this situation coexist.

The FOAM syndrome (Fear of Missing Out), typical of the compulsive consumption of films and TV shows, defines the *coolness* of film culture and media culture. A cinema which – according to those who study longer chronological phenomena the field of cultural legitimacy from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on – mostly contributed (as the art of what can be reproduced) to the expansion of the aesthetic field in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is now entering a new phase, equally important for (quoting Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy) the *aestheticization of the world*.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Jon Lisi, "Cinephilia Culture and the Fear of Missing Out," *Pop Matters* (September 4, 2014), <https://www.popmatters.com/179957-cinephilia-culture-and-the-fear-of-missing-out-2495677791.html>.

10. Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *L'Esthétisation du monde. Vivre à l'âge du capitalisme artiste* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).

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