

Pleasure Domes Decreed: Transcendental Time-Travelling Through Film

An essay by **Alex Michon** to accompany *Picture Palace* at Transition Gallery



I like to make films because I like to go into another world. I like to get lost in another world. And film to me is a magical medium that makes you dream... allows you to dream in the dark. It's just a fantastic thing, to get lost inside the world of film. David Lynch ¹

Since the world went into lockdown...

Having originally penned this piece early in March and now returning to it as the world goes into Coronavirus lockdown, film watching has taken on a massively important role in the lives of many of us isolated in our own homes. Luckily film watching for our generation no longer exclusively needs to take place in those darkened pleasure palaces which so enticed Roland Barthes, who was so fascinated by 'the theatre itself, the darkness the obscure mass of other bodies and the rays of light'.²

Way back in the day if you didn't catch a film at the theatre, the expectation was that you would never see it. Now arthouse films are often streamed on platforms such as Curzon simultaneously with their cinema release, whilst big budget movies such as *The Irishman*, *Marriage Story* and *Roma* have a perfunctory week or so at the cinema before being launched on Netflix. Almost everything is now available on every form of device in the comfort of your own home, if you have the money to subscribe or are prepared to resort to nefarious means.

Victor Burgin in his 2010 book *The Remembered Film*, described the various fragmentations of the singular film viewing experience. Film now, he asserted 'may be encountered through posters, blurbs, and other advertisements such as trailers and television clips ... reference work synopses and theoretical articles ... through production photographs; frame enlargements, memorabilia, and so on.'³

To Burgin's list we can also add popular podcasts such as *Projections* and *You Must Remember This* which widen out the process of experiencing film in a more cerebral analytical way rather than just gushing about in the liminal experience of watching.

The cinephilic watching of classic black and white films is often derided as a form of nostalgic escapism or longing for a golden time that never really existed. However as the curator of *Picture Palace*, Cathy Lomax, argues, 'I don't really get why people call watching old films nostalgic, for example; no-one says it is nostalgic to read classics such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or that reading Austen's or indeed Hilary Mantel's books is a form of escapism'.

Moreover, the old idea of nostalgia needs to be reassessed in light of recent digital developments. Writing in *Retro Aesthetics, Affect, and Nostalgia Effects in Recent US-American Cinema* Sabine Sielke notes that:

During the industrialisation of the 18th and 19th centuries – an era seen as increasingly dynamic as our own digital age, phenomena of nostalgia emerge that seem to 'arrest' time; they counterbalance a speedy present with aesthetic recursions to an idealized time-space ⁴

Sielke goes on to say that what was previously considered a 'state of homesickness' is now more likely to be a 'desired state' in which streaming, box sets and film sites allow us to dip at will into a contemporary form of temporal yet transcendent time travel.

The clothes may be 'retro', as in classic black and whites from the 1930s and 40s with their shimmering seductive sequined dresses glinting and twinkling at us from the screen. The shoes may be wedged, the handbags clutched, the streets noir-ed, but the loves, hurts, and betrayals all belong to the universal present-day gamut of human emotions.

Although Jean Cocteau described his films as 'a dream in which we all participate together through a kind of hypnosis' he refuted the idea of films as escapist fantasies.

I am rather surprised whenever I hear people chatter on about poetry or the fantastic in cinematography, and, particularly, 'escapism', a fashionable term which implies that the audience is trying to get out of itself, while in fact beauty in all its forms drives us back into ourselves and obliges us to find in our own souls the deep enrichment that frivolous people are determined to seek elsewhere.⁵

Cinema is that miracle of artificiality which can turn day into night and as in David Lean's classic *Dr Zhivago* make the blistering heat of a Spanish location appear to be Russia in the height of winter, with marble dust standing in for snow and frozen beeswax replicating the icicles on the dacha at Varikino.

Ah Varikino! *My Own Private Idaho* of remembered film, that imagined real which to paraphrase Karen Kilimnik in sub-titling one of her film star drawings, casts me as Julie Christie, as Lara wrapped in furs, hitching up the cowl neck on my winter sweater (with fingerless gloves) sitting at the table reading the love poem that Yuri has written for me, listening to the ominous howling of the wolves out in the forest.



David Lynch, in the quote that I opened this writing with, said that watching a film is like 'opening the door to another world'. In our current self-isolating state never has that other world seemed more precious more real or more necessary to anaesthetise our troubled minds.

For as long as it lasts the film takes us into an imagined real, where we are able to play out the erotic component of a cinematic hypnosis, where the modern magic of cinema simultaneously casts us in the multiple roles of star, director and self. That immersive lure and irresistibility of film watching, which often involves a particular fan love or identification with an actress or actor, reveals something fundamental about why movie-watching is so addictive to so many people and why now more than ever we treasure it so.

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http://www.transitiongallery.co.uk/htmlpages/Transitiontwo/PicturePalace/PicturePalace_hm.html

1. www.lynchnet.com/lumiere/index.html
2. Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (Reaktion Books, 2010), p.2.
3. Ibid p.9.
4. [researchgate.net/publication/334364653_Retro_Aesthetics_Affect_and_Nostalgia_Effects_in_Recent_USAmerican_Cinema_The_Cases_of_La_La_Land_2016_and_The_Shape_of_Water_2017](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334364653_Retro_Aesthetics_Affect_and_Nostalgia_Effects_in_Recent_USAmerican_Cinema_The_Cases_of_La_La_Land_2016_and_The_Shape_of_Water_2017)
5. Jean Cocteau, *The Art of Cinema* (Marion Boyars, 1994). This posthumous collection of writings illuminates Cocteau's own work for the cinema with detailed discussions of his aims, responses to criticism, and his reflections on the relationship between poetry, theatre, and film. He also comments on the stars he admires – Marlene Dietrich, James Dean, Brigitte Bardot – together with directors such as Charlie Chaplin and Orson Welles.