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Cinephilia as Post-Traumatic Compulsion?: Erotic Thriller Obsession in Odette Springer and Johanna Demetrakas' *Some Nudity Required*

by Ben Raphael Sher

Can the affects and behavioral tendencies that arise as symptoms in the wake of trauma contain elements of reparative pleasure? Can cinephilia, defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as a “love or enthusiasm for films,” be part of a self-destructive compulsion? Can a person be described as a cinephile because of her obsessive engagement with films that she hates? Odette Springer and Johanna Demetrakas’ documentary, *Some Nudity Required* (1998) answers these questions by presenting a complex portrait of the ways in which a woman’s cinephilia intertwines with her experience of sexual abuse trauma. In doing this, it provocatively blurs the commonly assumed boundaries that separate trauma from pleasure.

Odette Springer composed music for the action, horror, and erotic thriller films released by Roger Corman’s Concorde-New Horizons Corporation in the late 1980s and ‘90s. In 1991, she became Vice President of Worldwide Music for the company.<sup>1</sup> Springer found herself alternately offended and fascinated by the films she made and the industry in which she worked. She stated: “I was sick and stuff started coming up in my body. It got so I couldn’t stand the sexual violence, but kept being drawn back in spite of the revulsion. I didn’t know why. It was a push-pull thing.”<sup>2</sup> Around 1994, she decided to deal with her conflicting feelings about the industry, and its gender politics, by making a documentary about women in B movies titled *R-Rated: Sex and Violence in Hollywood*.

As she viewed many erotic thrillers for research, she found herself becoming obsessed with them and watching them compulsively. She states “Originally I was going to make a

straight documentary...but as I was watching these clips, I found myself getting turned on, and it horrified me.' The clips, she says, awakened long-suppressed memories of being sexually molested as a child."<sup>3</sup> Her perpetrators' molestation included taking disturbing home videos of Springer as a child dancing naked. In its final form, the now titled *Some Nudity Required*, co-written and co-directed by Demetrakas, became an autobiographical documentary. The film grapples with the ways in which Springer uncovered and began to process her own traumas through her alternately disturbing, uncomfortable, and pleasurable engagement with films, the film industry, and its participants. It disturbingly incorporates many scenes from erotic thrillers, and home movies taken by Springer's perpetrators.

Given that cinephilia is defined as a "love" or "enthusiasm" for film, it seems counterintuitive that it could take place in relation to movies that a person hates and is repulsed by, and only watched to pay the bills. However, Springer's engagement with these films is strongly reminiscent of how scholars have defined cinephilia. At the same time, it also complicates their definitions.

Over the last two decades, a tradition has developed in which scholars have defined cinephilia as a person's adoring appreciation of a film's aesthetics and form, rather than its narrative, dialogue, or characters. Christian Keathley is arguably the most influential of these scholars. He states that cinephilic pleasure manifests itself as an overwhelming, almost orgasmic bodily experience.<sup>4</sup> He writes that this kind of cinephilia, this "pure" appreciation of film aesthetics, is apolitical and separated from issues of identity and ideology.<sup>5</sup> He takes it for granted that the pleasure associated with cinephilia is a wholly positive, affirmative affect. *Some Nudity Required* powerfully complicates his arguments, insisting that cinephilic pleasure can deeply, inextricably intertwine with factors including the cinephile's memories and life history,

and her appreciation of *any* aspect of a film, formal or not. Furthermore, the film demonstrates that the pleasure associated with cinephilia can be tied to the most painful and negative affects.

In the final third of *Some Nudity Required*, Springer's fascination with the films that she watches and researches begins to clue her in to emotions that she cannot reconcile. While watching a film in which two actresses enact a BDSM striptease, she expresses horror (in voiceover) at her physical arousal by the scene. Springer's description of becoming suddenly "turned on" sounds like the bodily experience of pleasure that Keathley associates with cinephilia. However, her pleasure is combined with a feeling of being repelled and horrified by the images that arouse her.

In her chapter about the film, Janet Walker aptly suggests that oblique traces of Springer's memories of abuse reveal themselves throughout the film and her described process of making it. The latter includes her narrated experience of being turned on watching erotic thrillers, and her incorporation of ominous clips of the home movies in which Springer, as a young child, dances around naked. However, her memories of abuse finally become fully legible while she watches and re-watches a sequence of actress Maria Ford, playing a woman who is accidentally choked to death as part of a sexual experiment. Over a close up of Springer watching and re-watching the scene at a console, her voiceover states, "That's when I finally remembered."<sup>6</sup>

Walker writes: "There follows the film's revelation: that Springer was sexually molested in childhood by her aunt and uncle. The home movies from the beginning return in shortened form—the hands spinning the salmon-pink garbed girl and the little naked body—this time interspersed with close-ups of Springer remembering and overdubbed with Springer's account of their past actions."<sup>7</sup> "Where is my mother?," Springer asks in voiceover. "I'm so scared. I hate

those pictures they take of me.” Paul Willemen influentially defines cinephilic perception as the propensity to experience “moments of revelation”: “moments which, when encountered in a film, spark something which then produces the energy and the desire to write, to find formulations to convey something about the intensity of that spark.” *Some Nudity Required*’s “revelation,” to use Walker’s word, represents Springer’s “moment of revelation,” one strongly reminiscent of the cinephilic moments of revelation described by Willemen, together with the experience of bodily pleasure described by scholars like Keathley. Through obsessive film spectatorship, Springer encounters “moments of revelation” about herself that spark in her the desire to write (literally, through the creation of *Some Nudity*’s screenplay, and more expansively through her co-direction of the film). However, Springer’s “moments of revelation” do not come in response to films that she unconditionally loves, but films that she is both repelled by and to which she is strongly attracted and cathected.

Janet Walker analyzes how Springer and Demetrakas use film form in order to work towards representing the “traumatic mindscape.” She writes: “(Auto)biographical traumatic documentaries may be recognized by their use of three strategies or three categories of footage: (1) home movies, (2) direct address to the camera or to an unseen interviewer, and (3) enacted and reenacted sequences. These...are woven together in the films such that their formal design echoes that of the traumatized mindscape, with its characteristic recurrent memories, dissociative tendencies, and involuntary reenactments.”<sup>8</sup> I would add to Walker’s argument by suggesting that the film is also concerned with representing and grappling with an element of the traumatic mind and bodyscape that seems strongly reminiscent of an Imprinted Arousal Pattern, or IAP.

Psychologist Neal King writes that: “The phenomenon of an IAP, common among sexual abuse survivors, induces the individual to continue to be eroticized by stimulation and

circumstances that overtly or covertly resemble the abuse circumstances. This is a type of learned behavior that is imprinted as a traumatic effect of the abuse. It is repeated in an often excruciatingly dystonic cycle which is ultimately in the service of the person attempting to recover from the trauma... Useful understandings of otherwise puzzling behaviors of the victim of sexual trauma can be found in these ideas.”<sup>9</sup> Springer’s cinephilia is characterized by her initially inexplicable desire to watch the films again and again, even though she dislikes them. In her film, her cinephilic repetition compulsion does not just include film spectatorship, but film production. Her narration describes much of her work in the B-movie industry as “puzzling behavior” that “overtly and covertly resembles the abuse circumstances.” In the film, her voiceover states: “So when I found myself in Hollywood, a place where I could compose and sing, I went for it. It felt familiar, like when I was a little girl. So this was my new family.” Later, she states: “Even though part of me wanted desperately to get out of this world of exploitation, something even stronger kept pulling me back.”

*Some Nudity Required* intimately engages with the ways in which cinephilia can manifest itself as a symptom of repressed trauma. Springer finds herself re-enacting films in order to understand her emotional experiences. She writes: “My personal life started to sound like an erotic thriller. I dated a man who thought he was the reincarnation of the Marquis de Sade. He held a cheap whip over me and made me speak French... Another man wanted me to cook dinner for him wearing just my new bustier and stiletto heels. Then there was the married man old enough to be my father. He said he wanted to take care of me, but what he really wanted was to control me. Nobody gets to do that to me anymore.”

Springer finally becomes conscious of what might be her imprinted arousal pattern during her last cinephilic moment of revelation. Her recollections of abuse include memories of feelings

comparable to those that she experiences watching the films. She states: “That’s when I finally remembered. Aunt Lena and Uncle Johnny liked to play this game. I lie down on the floor and Johnny watches as she hovers over me. When I hear the flanking of her gold charm bracelets, I know her hand is reaching for me. She always laughs when she touches me...The little electric rushes feel good but I’m really nauseous at the same time...Degradation, pleasure, fear, that’s the basic formula for an erotic thriller. When I was violated, it felt good, and bad, kind of like getting your wires crossed. It was time to get out, I quit my job.”

While Springer’s cinephilia first manifests itself as the symptom of an emotionally destructive trauma cycle, it evolves into a reparative tool of integration. Springer finally uses her cinephilia to raise her own consciousness about her experiences of trauma. In representing the making of their documentary, Springer and Demetrakas problematize wholly “positive” definitions of cinephilia by identifying ways in which cinephilia can be both symptomatic *and* reparative.

The film suggests that the pleasures of cinephilia, often associated with positive affects and production, in the form of writing, may contain painful traces of trauma that create a barrier to productive personal growth. At the same time, the fraught pleasures that lead a person to re-enact her traumas, often thought of as destructive and counter-productive, may carry within them ameliorative tools. The unexpected encounter between trauma and cinephilia in Springer’s life leads her to experience conflicting affects that are ultimately necessary in order for her to integrate her experiences. Her film documents productively ambivalent pleasure.

In a lecture at UCLA about actor/director Ida Lupino, Amelie Hastie stated that research about a film or star can constitute cinephilia. She states: “It’s the body of [Lupino’s] work and the process of investigation that her work invites, that leads to this feminist’s love of Lupino. To

her cinephilia.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, I would define Springer’s production of her documentary, in which she engages antagonistically with certain male directors but also forms strong, intimate bonds with other directors and stars, as cinephilic. She demonstrates a complicated love for the process of researching erotic thrillers, even though her most conscious response to the films themselves is hatred. If the films that problematically engage Springer become stepping stones to uncovering her traumas, her research into their contexts and their makers helps her to understand and process them.

Much of the film focuses on Maria Ford, a B movie star who expresses dissatisfaction at the film industry’s requirement that she objectify herself in order to act. Springer forms a relationship with the star, and they find themselves opening up to each other. Over a shot of Ford buying lingerie, Springer’s voiceover states: “Maria pretends to be someone else when she’s acting. I’ve pretended to be someone else most of my life. In my family, women were taught that sex is dirty, and only men enjoyed it. So you can imagine how daring it felt when I bought my first bustier at Frederick’s of Hollywood right there with Maria.”

In their theories of cinephilia, Willemen and Keathley argue that cinephilic experiences “can only be seen as designating, for [cinephiles], something in excess of the representation.”<sup>11</sup> They define representation as what filmmakers intend for the spectator to perceive and understand about the diegetic world that they create. In other words, representations constitute the filmmakers’ constructions of narrative, thematic, and ideological meaning. According to Willemen, cinephilia can only take place in response to something *in excess* of this diegetic world and its intended meanings, something that perhaps the filmmaker did not intend. For example, Keathley states that a cinephile might have a moment of revelation in response to the beauty of the wind in the trees behind the actors playing out the narrative of *Jules and Jim*, or an



unintentional gesture made by an actor that reveals something meaningful to a spectator that transcends the actor's character.<sup>12</sup>

Springer's film demonstrates that, indeed, cinephilia can take place in response to a film's representations, or "constructed meanings." She experiences problematic, bodily experiences of pleasure when engaging with the narratives, *mise en scène*, characters, and simulated sex scenes in erotic thrillers. However, Springer also adds complexity to previous theories by suggesting that particularly meaningful cinephilia can take place as a result of the *interplay* of a film's representations and the unintentional moments of "excess" that transcend them. Springer shows that such moments can be enhanced and illuminated for a cinephile when she conducts research about the contexts that surround a film's production. The juxtaposition between the roles Maria Ford plays (sex kitten, femme fatale), and her self-described identity (former honor student, feminist, aspiring serious actress) presents Springer with stronger identification, stronger cinephilic moments of revelation, than either Ford's public persona or her films could do alone. It makes sense that according to Springer, she had her most profound cinephilic moment of revelation—the revelation of her childhood sexual abuse—while watching Ford being victimized on film. She seems to identify most strongly with the contradictory relationship between Maria Ford's role, the erotic thriller's *representation* of her, and Ford's off-screen identity.

The press kit of *Some Nudity Required* states that "Unexpectedly along the way, Springer uncovered disturbing personal memories of her own, that turned her from observer into participant of *Some Nudity Required*—She found herself becoming part of the story."<sup>13</sup> In becoming part of the story, and placing Roger Corman's films, particularly his erotic thrillers, in the context of the industry that creates them *and* her own experiences as a producer-spectator, Springer re-appropriates them, and makes an effort to rescind the dominance of their ideology.

In doing this, she brings to the surface and makes conscious the traumatic experiences and affects that they problematically resemble, evoke, and perhaps even help perpetuate (most prominently, the ways in which sex and violence often become disturbingly intertwined in the mind and body of a survivor of sexual trauma). In doing this, she uses cinephilic production to process her own trauma.

Springer follows her ambivalent cinephilia until it helps her become conscious of the roots of her distress, finally leading her to leave Roger Corman's studio, get another job, and produce a movie that creates a new, different dynamic for women engaging with erotic thrillers and their trauma histories. Her and Demetrakas' work shows that post-traumatic pleasure, rather than just a blocker that keeps repressed trauma from coming to the surface, may also have its uses in processing a trauma and growing from it. *Some Nudity Required* suggests that scholars can learn a great deal from investigating the negative affects that cinephilic pleasures can harbor, and the reparative possibilities contained within the pleasures that post-traumatic symptoms activate. I hope that I have begun this investigation here.

- 1 Press kit, *Some Nudity Required*, accessed at The Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills, CA.
- 2 Clark, John, "Some Nudity" Provided a Catharsis," *Los Angeles Times*, January 24, 1998, n.p. (Accessed in clipping file at Margaret Herrick).
- 3 Clark, n.p.
- 4 Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 29-54.
- 5 Keathley, 28.
- 6 *Some Nudity Required*, dir. Odette Springer and Johanna Demetrakas (Seventh Art Releasing, 1998), VHS.
- 7 Janet Walker, *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 94.
- 8 Walker, 86.
- 9 Neal King, "Childhood Sexual Trauma in Gay Men: Social Context and the Imprinted Arousal Pattern," in *Integrating the Shattered Self*, ed. James Cassese (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 2000), 24.
- 10 Amelie Hastie, "Ida Lupino and Historical Legibility," lecture given at UCLA on February 24, 2009.
- 11 Paul Willemsen, "Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered," in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 240.
- 12 Keathley, 7.
- 13 Press kit, *Some Nudity Required*.