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Conversation/Memory

I have spoken with Laura Mulvey many times over the years—the places and dates are starkest, most retrievable, for the first meetings (at one of the notorious conferences in Milwaukee in 1979) and the most recent ones (January 2017 in London), but the time in the middle has become something of a blur. It was during one of these blurry—spaceless and timeless—encounters that we discussed Marilyn Monroe. I remember that we were at a table in a restaurant and there were others present but Laura and I were at the end of the table and hence somewhat isolated from the others. It was a *cinephiliac's* discussion, about moments in films that were striking and had a lasting impact. I think. But it may have been simply one reference occasioned by our current situation. I mentioned a scene in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953) in which Marilyn Monroe is, similarly, sitting at a table with a number of other people, turning rapidly from one to the other and making clipped comments or asking questions, not waiting for a response. She then settles back and says, “I just *love* conversation.” Laura is perhaps one of the few people in the world who would not only “get it” but remember that precise scene with affection. The scene stuck in my memory because I found an element of truth in it. Despite the fact that Marilyn undermined the dialogical aspect of conversation, instead, engaging in a disjointed monologue, she had grasped the metonymic slide that is characteristic of conversation as a genre, the slippage from topic to topic that is usually more gradual, less harsh. Condensed, that metonymic slide was foregrounded as crucial to the genre, but here exorbitant. And hilarious.

But the residue of that incident remained in my memory for another, somewhat different, reason, having to do with the reception of Mulvey's groundbreaking essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”<sup>1</sup> The incredible and extended impact of that essay had to do with its lucid and compelling elaboration of the cinematic structuration of a relay of gazes in relation to questions of sexual difference in classical film narrative. The essay marked a decisive movement away from the “images of women in film” discourse that had dominated

early feminist film theory. Yet, precisely because of its enormous impact and rigorous systematicity, it provoked resistance taking various forms—it seemed that it was *the* article to argue against, to prove wrong. One of the less impressive but widespread forms of resistance was the criticism that Mulvey did not like, or even love, cinema, particularly Classical Hollywood cinema. My memory of the Marilyn Monroe incident described above is only one of many memories that contest that assessment. Laura Mulvey is, in fact, a *cinéphile*. The idea that to analyze is to destroy or that, in order to dissect and investigate an object (perceived as a hostile and violent approach), one must hate it, is pervasive but ungrounded. Mulvey has written quite elegantly about *cinéphilie*, linking it to nostalgia—not as a disparaging term but as the vital residue of historicity,<sup>2</sup> as a bulwark against the seemingly infinite morphing of the image enabled by the digital.

In this essay, and echoing the binary opposition between spectacle and narrative delineated in “Visual Pleasure,” Mulvey points to the *cinéphile*’s obsession with “film in fragments,” “going against the grain of the cinema’s linearity and duration, favoring instants that break free of narrative.” The *cinéphile* needs to slow down or stop the film, to cherish a moment. Narrative, however, lends meaning to and gives body to the fragment and is, hence, a prerequisite of *cinéphilie*.

The very linearity of narrative, so often dismissed as in some way non-cinematic, acts as a crucial counterpoint to the fragment, the isolated moment, the residue of the celluloid frame. The process of cinematic becoming and fading, from gestural detail to the rhythmic pace of fictional events, finds some kind of personification in the human body, its gestures, emotions and encounters.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting that Mulvey links the temporality of film, its “becoming and fading,” to the body rather than to memory and its lapses. For film’s affinity with memory and its vicissitudes has often been remarked, both in film theory and practice (think of *La Jetée*, *Memento*, *nostalgia*, etc.) In *Death 24x a Second*, Mulvey links the temporality of cinema primarily to its photographic base, the stillness that subtends the movement of the image and the indexicality that, in its affirmation of the object’s simultaneous presence and absence, harbors a sense of death and mourning (these actors, so alive in the film, are now

dead—Barthes’s “an anterior future of which death is the stake”<sup>4</sup>). Hence, death 24x a second. The book is a celebration of new technologies (the VCR, the DVD) that allow stopping a film, reversing it, enabling “complexities and contradictions within cinematic temporality to come to the surface, bringing the spectator’s consciousness directly into the presence of time.”<sup>5</sup> Mulvey is always cognizant of the crucial contribution of narrative and its temporality, but the still image has a special vocation due to its privileged relation to the inanimate, death and the punctum, which in their turn, are linked to an elegiac sense of the death of cinema in the face of the digital and its historical significance for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, the indexical quality of photochemically-based film gives it a “groundedness,” an anchor in referentiality, a limit: “from the age of the algorithm and the pixel, the cinema’s limited vision takes on a new, perhaps unexpected value: (in spite of filmic special effects) a camera could only show what it witnessed and its ability to represent was limited both through the lateral unfolding of a scene and the materiality of its recording process.”<sup>6</sup> This meant that human intervention and imagination were always balanced by indexicality, by “the medium’s groundedness in reference” in opposition to the “spiraling of representational possibility of the digital.”<sup>7</sup>

This last reference to unfolding and process moves the argument away from the still image and toward the linear temporality of the film strip. There are constraints here as well, although Mulvey associates them again primarily with indexicality. The cinema’s relation to materiality/the real is most often situated in the indexical quality of the photochemical base of film. Or it is anchored by the notion that film is more material, a better example of materiality than, for instance, the digital or even electronic image, because its degradation is more imaginable as well as more visible. Bill Morrison’s 2002 *Decasia* celebrates, perhaps nostalgically, the very weight of a materiality guaranteed by subjection to time and deterioration; like furniture, film gains an aura through its status as “distressed.” In both respects, it seems to carry a surfeit of historicity.

Yet, there is another facet of film’s materiality that I would like to stress here. Film, as a series of sequential singularities (i.e. frames, each differing slightly from the previous), is a continuous strip, a ribbon whose dimension of horizontality is also critical to its

representational capacities and has dictated the technologies associated with it: the reel, the projector, rewinds, the camera's magazine, and intermittent motion. This linear dimension, limited by the size of reels and that of the magazine, makes its materiality cumbersome, difficult. Anyone who has ever projected a 16mm film, and at the end of the screening found that half of the reel (or more) was on the ground, is painfully aware of the restraints and limitations posed by the unwieldy material form of a film strip. Finding a clip in a projected 16 mm film involved a certain labor and time—placing a piece of paper at the beginning of the clip and then rewinding the film to that point. VHS shares this physical burden of linearity (Be kind—rewind!).

But DVDs and streaming video provide the operation of random access, a marked expansion of the possibilities of retrieval of an image or scene. Arguably far more significant than the ability to reverse, slow or freeze the motion represented is the capacity to randomly access a shot or scene. Rewinding, a long and tedious process, is no longer necessary. Random access, as opposed to serial access, is another symptom of the contemporary desire for instantaneity, the denial of duration, process and history. According to Wikipedia, "A random access memory device allows data items to be read or written in almost the same amount of time irrespective of the physical location of data inside the memory." In other words, random access processes undermine the significance of the *location* of the object/image/scene that is sought. In contrast, in sequential access systems, "the time required to read and write data items varies significantly depending on their physical locations on the recording medium."<sup>8</sup> Webopedia offers another description: "To go from point A to point Z in a sequential-access system, you must pass through all intervening points. In a random-access system, you can jump directly to point Z."<sup>9</sup> Random access, in making all images available in the same way, in the same amount of time, flattens and dissociates notions of order, hierarchy and duration. The critical impact of random access in image/scene retrieval is rarely analyzed in any depth.<sup>10</sup> But it must be seen as a major contributor to the myth of dematerialization attributed to the digital (which, to the contrary, has its own hardware with its own material limits). And it does have an extraordinary impact on the reception and uses of digital films. It fuels *cinéphilie* insofar as it facilitates fragmentation, repetition and memory. It destabilizes narrative and the very

process of narration. It is difficult not to see random access capabilities as akin to the newspaper and information as analyzed by Walter Benjamin in his essay, “The Storyteller.” The modern phenomenon of “information,” according to Benjamin, is aligned with its closeness to the reader (its accessibility) and its ephemeral nature—unlike storytelling, which takes time, information is succinct, concise, economical (and it does not last).<sup>11</sup>

There is, of course, at least one major difference. This random access to what was previously the prerogative of a potentially flawed memory does last. The alleged nightmare of the digital (on social media, in any event) is that it is there forever, never lost, always accessible. In the past, film reviewers and cinéphiliacs were limited to their memory or written notes to call up a particular shot or scene. The inexorable forward movement of a film, its constant renewal and fading, though part of its charm, sometimes undermined accuracy. Filtered through the spectator’s memory, these images were often subject to forgetting or distortion. Now, however, we are witnessing a contemporary merger of memory and media. Forgetting is not an option. Random access to scenes, facts, dates, names, etc. can, and often does, act as an interruptor, a brake on conversation, as someone brings out their mobile phone to google whatever is at issue. Marilyn Monroe’s conversation as metonymic slide, Benjamin’s narrative that “does not expend itself,” memory as temporal process—all are challenged by a random access that seems to eschew the weight of materiality, the labor of retrieval and the duration of the sequential.

But there is a form of redress. It would be the ever-present possibility of failure, contingency, breakdown of the apparatus. Access can be troubled. What appeared at the beginning of this essay to be a “random access memory,” about Marilyn Monroe’s relation to conversation in a scene from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, was not at all random, a term which would imply that all scenes would be equally accessible to me, locationless, without special markers or a unique temporal/sequential identity. While I remember other scenes from the film, this one is special, not only due to its pinpointing of the metonymic slide of conversation but also due to the details of its recounting, in conversation with Laura Mulvey. Yet, when I tried to invoke random access in order to check this scene on Netflix, to make sure I was describing it correctly, I received this message:

“Whoops, something went wrong.

Unexpected Error

There was an unexpected error. Please reload the page and try again.

Error Code: S7363-1260-FFFFD1C1

Now, at the end of writing this piece, I am still receiving this message. The error, although “unexpected” and even given a code, persists. Perhaps I am wrong about the scene of Marilyn Monroe’s performance of conversation. Perhaps I misremembered....

- 1 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18.
- 2 Laura Mulvey, "Some Reflections on the Cinephilia Question," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 50, no. ½ (Spring and Fall, 2009), pp. 190-193.
- 3 Ibid., p. 192.
- 4 Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 174.
- 5 Mulvey, "Some Reflections," p. 192.
- 6 Ibid., p. 193.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 "Random-access memory," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 24 Feb. 2017, Web. 12 Feb. 2017, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Random-access\\_memory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Random-access_memory)>
- 9 "Random access," *Webopedia*, Webopedia, 24 Feb. 2017, <[http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/R/random\\_access.html](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/R/random_access.html)>
- 10 Lev Manovitch argues that film can provide random access as well as digital media, but in order to make this argument, he must cite early optical toys such as the Phenakisticope and the Zootrope and Thomas Edison's first cinematic apparatus (borrowing from the technology of the phonograph record). Random access is not available for mainstream narrative cinema of the classical period (or even for early silent films). See *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 51-52.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 3, 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 148.