

## Letting the World Happen Christian Keathley<sup>1</sup>

Early in its history the cinema discovered the possibility of *calling* attention to persons and parts of persons and objects; but it is equally a possibility of the medium not to call attention to them but, rather, to let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight. (Cavell 1979, 25)

So wrote Stanley Cavell in his wonderful — and still underappreciated — book, *The World Viewed*. Cavell's insight is an essential one for any serious consideration of cinema: some of the most fascinating, moving, and enchanting moments of movies exist not in those places and moments where we feel things have been deliberately shaped, but rather where we feel that things seems to have been allowed simply to happen. Sometimes these moments are details sequestered in the margins of the image, and at others they are in full view, but nevertheless feel hidden in plain sight.

My book, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (2006), charted across film criticism's first century precisely this preoccupation with filmic details, identifying it as one the key manifestations of that obsessive love of the movies that we call cinephilia. When I began writing my book, I wasn't sure that anyone else in academic film studies was interested in cinephilia. I had read Susan Sontag's essay, "The Decay of Cinema," in *The New York Times Magazine*, and from there I tracked down other recent, but more historically concerned, considerations of cinephilia from France. But film studies in the U.S. seemed to remain uninterested in the topic — or so I thought. I am happy to say that my book enjoyed a very generous reception, and it coincided with other academic statements about cinephilia. Around the same time, Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener's *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (2005) appeared, and it included an essay by Thomas Elsaesser, "Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment," which had been his plenary speech at that year's Society for Film & Media Studies annual conference in London. It seemed that, suddenly, once the small group of us spoke up, there were (happily) many, many more who wanted to join the conversation.

Like the others, my study had its own particular take on the subject of cinephilia. I focused on "cinephiliac moments" (borrowing Paul Willemen's phrase). As I wrote then:

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In a 1994 dialogue with Australian scholar Noel King, Paul Willemen noted that, in the varied body of critical writings associated with cinephilia, there exists a recurring preoccupation with an element of the cinematic experience “which resists, which escapes existing networks of critical discourse and theoretical frameworks.” Noel King clarifies that this “something” emerges in the cinephile’s “fetishizing of a particular moment, the isolating of a crystallisingly expressive detail” in the film image. In these “subjective, fleeting, variable” moments, Willemen writes, “What is seen is in excess of what is being shown.” The cinephiliac moment is not choreographed for you to see” — or rather, if it is, it is not choreographed for the viewer to dwell on excessively. “It is produced *en plus*, in excess or in addition, almost involuntarily.” (Keathley 2006, 30)

I dubbed as “panoramic perception” (after Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1986)) the active cinephiliac gaze that seeks and discovers such moments, and I argued that DVD technology — with its capacity for random access, freeze frame, slow motion — could serve to facilitate this spectatorial experience. Further, in addition to cataloguing various critics’ fascination with cinephiliac moments, and considering how they understood and justified their experience, I argued that these image-moments, as marks of a prior presence, have a particular implication for the writing of film history. In the end, I proposed a new genre of film critical writing, the cinephiliac anecdote, which offered a model for how cinephiles might write out of their experience of these moments in a way that recognizes the specific quality of that subjective experience and yet produces a sharable knowledge effect.

Several months after my book appeared, Laura Mulvey’s *Death 24x a Second* (2006) arrived in my mailbox. On a certain set of fronts, there was a striking similarity of interests and ideas — especially regarding the filmic detail, its relation to history, and the way DVD technologies enable a reinvigorated cinephiliac spectatorial posture. For Mulvey, the concept of “delay” was a key point relating filmic details to time and history. She writes:

In film theory and criticism, delay is the essential process behind textual analysis. The flow of a scene is halted and extracted from the wider flow of narrative development; the scene is broken down into shots and selected frames and further subjected to delay, to repetition and return. In the course of this process, hitherto unexpected meanings can be found hidden in the sequence, as it were, deferred to a point of time in the future when the critic’s desire may unearth them. With the spread of digital technologies, this kind of fragmentation of film has become easier to put into practice. In this context, textual analysis ceases to be a restricted academic practice and returns, perhaps, to its origins as a work of cinephilia, of the love of the cinema. (Mulvey 2006, 144)

I read these words with a very happy recognition. Though Mulvey’s study goes well beyond these points of contact with my own work, I naturally focused on the uncanny overlap — especially appropriate as she and I had each addressed the issue of the uncanny and its relation to the film image in our respective books. Mulvey goes further than I did by identifying two types of cinephile viewers:

one “that is more on the side of a fetishistic investment in the extraction of a fragment of cinema from its context,” whom she dubs the “possessive” spectator; and another “that extracts and then replaces a fragment with extra understanding,” whom she dubs the “pensive” spectator (Mulvey 2006, 144).

This distinction puts me in mind of another, elaborated by Dudley Andrew in his recent *What Cinema Is!* (2010). Considering the influence of Sartre’s *L’Imaginaire* on Bazin’s thinking about the ontology of film, Andrew explains that Bazin accepted Sartre’s interest in the photograph as “a transparent *nothing*, a vehicle rendering the analogon of its object directly to consciousness,” rather than as “a black and white *something*, whose material features (marks of lighting, shade) cause us to see it momentarily as an object like any other, like a carpet or a piece of wallpaper.” (Andrew 2010, 13) Andrew elaborates:

Neither Bazin nor Sartre cares about the photograph as object; the analogon is what interests them both, but the analogon points in two different directions and these men diverge in how they discuss it. Sartre lifts it instantly toward the imagination, where it triggers associations in a manner distinct from other types of image-consciousness. Bazin goes in the other direction, toward the photo’s source, characterizing how the photo’s analogon leads us back down to the world from which it was ripped. (Andrew 2010, 13)

My own book regarded the cinephiliac moment — a variation of the photograph’s analogon — in the manner of Sartre, with my cinephiliac anecdotes “consumed by the freewheeling imagination where memory, emotion, and other images come into play,” (Andrew 2010, 13) thus placing me clearly as one of Mulvey’s “possessive” spectators. Mulvey’s “pensive spectator,” by contrast, extracts and considers the image-moment and, like Bazin, allows it to “amplify our perception, ‘teaching us’ what our eyes alone would not have noticed.” (Andrew 2010, 13) The moment is then used as a *pass-partout* facilitating re-entry, a way back — if not to the world exactly, then to the world of the film — where it now provides a deeper understanding. As an example of the pensive critical mode at work, Mulvey examines the opening scene of Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959), noting the ways in which the appearance of black extras in the crowded boardwalk scene — unnoticed on previous viewings — anticipates the themes of race that the film addresses, both explicitly, in dramatic terms, and implicitly, by “conjuring up the mass of ‘coloured people’ rendered invisible by racism and oppression, very particularly by Hollywood’s culture and representation.” (Mulvey 2006, 158)

Reading and re-reading Mulvey’s book prompted her ideas about pensive cinephilia to sink in such that they began to redirect my own earlier inclination toward a different kind of response to these moments. Teaching classes in which I was encouraging my students to take the role of “possessive” spectator, identify their own

cinephiliac moments, and write cinephiliac anecdotes out of them, I was surprised at how often I found myself putting the brakes on their ideas. For what often first appeared to be a classic case of panoramic perception identifying a fetishized image-moment turned out, with some analytical pressure, to be one more detail in a highly complex filmic system of signification and expression. Often, these moments were identified as cinephiliac moments because, instead of underscoring them with music, lighting, or framing (the surest clues that you are being led where you need to be taken), the director placed them in a *mise-en-scène* that appeared simply to be letting the world happen. To be sure, the students' responses were intense and genuine. The more time I spent with these moments, writing about and out of them, the more I understood, as Mulvey had already argued, that the apparent opposition of the two tendencies — the possessive and the pensive — is “inevitably undermined by the imbrication of ... intellectual curiosity and fetishistic fascination.” (Mulvey 2006, 144-145)

Let me give one example. I had screened for my students Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), partly because it contained what was for me a strongly fetishized moment — though a somewhat curious one in that it didn't neatly conform to the other cinephiliac moments I had written about in my book. It should be remembered that, although Mulvey and I both seem most interested in those times when a film does not insist on the importance of some moment, some detail, some action, but rather lets it happen for us to discover, the cinephiliac moment doesn't have to be a fleeting, marginal, unplanned detail, just an image-moment on which we place “a wholly unreasonable priority and value.” (Cardinal 1986, 11) Here was mine. Late in the film, newspaper reporter Peter Warner (Clark Gable) and runaway heiress Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) are spending yet another night in a low-rent motor lodge, with a blanket hung between their beds to provide privacy. But this night is different. The next day, they will arrive in New York and Ellie will be married to aviator King Westley, a man she has realized she does not love. Before they douse the lights, Ellie asks Peter tentatively, “Have you ever been in love, Peter?”

At first, Peter is reluctant to reveal himself, but then he begins gradually share confidences. Peter declares that if he fell in love, it would have to be with “Somebody that's real. Somebody that's alive. They don't come that way anymore.” After a pause, Peter tentatively begins sharing himself even further. “I saw an island in the Pacific once. Never been able to forget it. That's where I'd like to take her. She'd have to be the sort of girl who'd jump in the surf and love it as much as I did.” Then, Peter's voice softens and he goes even further: “You know, when you and the moon and the water all become one. And you feel you're part of something big and marvelous. That's the only place to live. Where the stars are so close over your head you

feel you could reach up and stir them around.” Suddenly, Peter looks up to see Ellie standing at the blanket wall, tears in her eyes. “Take me with you, Peter.” She races to him, throws herself at the side of his bed and confesses her love. But now, faced with her, Peter’s attitude turns severe. “You better go back to your bed,” he advises her sternly. Ellie continues to plead, but Peter does not soften.

What is most striking here (at least to me) is that this shot [Figure 1] continues for 40 seconds — an impressive duration in a film whose average shot length is a mere 8.5 seconds — and is never once interrupted to provide us with the expected reverse angle shot showing Ellie’s face. Until this point in the scene, Capra has cross-cut between the two characters on their respective sides of the blanket, but here he suddenly refuses to continue with that conventional and established practice. My fascination with this shot, and my experience of its pleasurable intensity, comes not just from the dramatic content (which is strong, to be sure), but from the fact that, every time I see it, I wait in excited anticipation for a reverse shot that I know will never come.



Figure 1: *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) | © Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

Yet I found myself coming up short in my attempts to write a cinephiliac anecdote out of this moment. My attempts to maintain possession of this moment through a certain kind of “freewheeling imagination” came up short. Then, I stumbled across something that

allowed me think about the moment in ways I hadn't yet. In a wonderfully stimulating dialogue between Stanley Cavell and Andrew Klevan, the following exchange occurs.

AK: I find that after I've watched a film I normally have a few moments or maybe just one moment that really strikes me.

SC: Start there...

AK: Yes, I'll start there [...] It feels intuitive. Anyway, I'll only have a dim sense of what it is about that moment.

SC: A moment you care about, however apparently trivial, can be productive.

AK: Why did they think to execute it like that ... *like that*? [...] And why was I drawn to these shots? [...] My intuition was that because these shots were *like that* they might give me a key to the whole film, and open it up in new and rewarding ways. (Cavell and Klevan 2005, 180-181)

Focused as I was on moving *out* from my cinephiliac moment, into the realm "where memory, emotion, and other images come into play," I hadn't considered moving further *in* to the film. Cavell and Klevan gave me a clue how that might be done with my moment. Discussing another Capra film, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), Klevan describes the scene where Deeds (Gary Cooper) and Babe (Jean Arthur), on their second date, stand atop a skyscraper, looking out over the city. Klevan describes the scene:

As they look out the camera is positioned once again behind them so that they have their backs to us. Deeds says, 'What puzzles me is why people seem to get so much pleasure out of hurting each other. Why don't they try liking each other once in a while?' [...] It is one of those Capra moments that people dismiss as 'sentimental' or 'cornball', and it could be taken as corn, but how do we account for the fact that their backs are to the camera, and that we're watching them from behind? How does this perspective effect how we should take his line of dialogue? I haven't developed an explanation of this perspective, but I was fascinated with the contrast between the openness of his sentiment and the hiding of his face (and her face). (Cavell and Klevan 2005, 205)

The similarity between Klevan's moment and my own is marked. When Ellie throws herself on Peter's bed and openly confesses her love to him, she is shown only from behind. Also, in an interesting variation on this dynamic between sentiment and visibility, Peter can speak openly about his own dreams of romantic love only as long as Ellie is on the other side of the blanket and he can't be seen; once Ellie confronts him directly with her own feelings, Peter, now facing her, retreats into severity. The openness of sentiment and the hiding of the face go together in this scene just as they do in the scene with Deeds and Babe. Klevan's moment and mine together forged a striking link between two scenes from two different Capra films. But delighted as I was by this auteurist insight, it still didn't get at my fascination with my moment, nor offer an answer to why these shots were done *like that*.

In answer to Klevan’s query about why these shots were taken from behind, Cavell offers, “Hasn’t it to do with their discovering an intimacy with each other that they are unprepared for?” (Cavell and Klevan 2005, 206-207). In *Mr. Deeds*, the intimacy is just sneaking up on the couple, but in *It Happened One Night*, it is something that Peter and Ellie have been sharing but not permitting to rise to consciousness. Let out suddenly into the open with Ellie’s declaration, it explodes their superficially contained relationship. This reading of Klevan’s moment from *Mr. Deeds* came to Cavell perhaps in part because it applies also to one of his own privileged film moments, another one from *It Happened One Night*. In that scene, as Cavell describes it, “we find [Peter and Ellie] walking together down a road away from us” — again, the shot is taken from behind — “and that’s a shot that over and over I came back to in my mind. I had nothing to say about it. I knew that it punctuated a moment in the film; it was the end of something and the beginning of something.” (Cavell and Klevan 2005, 182) [Figure 2]



Figure 2: *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) | © Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

In an essay Cavell eventually composed, he linked the emotion of this “nothing shot,” as he calls it, to the “transcendental mood” of the events of the night before, when Peter carried Ellie across a shallow stream in the moonlight and laid her to sleep in a field under the stars (Cavell 2005). That mood, he writes, persists into the grey morning, and we see the pair from behind because they, like Deeds

and Babe, have suddenly found themselves discovering an intimacy with each other that they were unprepared for. “It is my general impression,” Cavell writes, “that the motion picture camera held on a human figure squarely from behind has tended to inflect some significance of human privacy and vulnerability, of self-reflection...” (Cavell 2005, 139) Ellie’s later confession of love beside Peter’s bed expresses this vulnerability most directly, and the shot of her held for so long from behind carries with it echoes of this earlier shot on the road, and the memories of that night before that they shared, of those moments, as he tells her, “when you and the moon and the water all become one. And you feel you’re part of something big and marvelous. [...] Where the stars are so close over your head you feel you could reach up and stir them around.” Ellie’s declaration of love is also a declaration of an acknowledgement: that of “one of Capra’s signature emotions — the experience of an ecstatic possibility, as of a better world just adjacent to this one, one that this one speaks of in homely symbol, one that we could, as it were, reach out and touch; if only. . . .” (Cavell 2005, 137) Ellie wants to reach out and touch it.

Just as the shot of the couple on the road is, as Cavell suggests, the end of something and the beginning of something — it is the film’s dramatic mid-point: the end of the first half and the beginning of the second — so the shot of Ellie beside Peter’s bed is the end of something and the beginning of something: the 40 second shot of Ellie from behind, confessing her love, concludes the film’s second act. Her admission is the revelation that will spin us into the film’s final act and toward its conclusion. Thus, these shots taken from behind mark two of the film’s key transition points. So, what of the other transition point, that from the first act to the second? In that scene, the night bus carrying Peter and Ellie from Florida to New York makes a 30 minute breakfast stop in Jacksonville. The two met on the bus the night before, and Ellie woke that morning as they arrived at the station to find (to her mild embarrassment) her head on Peter’s shoulder. The rich, spoiled Ellie, stepping out at the station, asks the bus driver to wait for her, she has an errand to run. A few screen moments later, Ellie returns to find the bus has left on schedule and that she must wait 12 hours to catch the next one. Peter (who knows that she is runaway heiress Ellen Andrews, but she doesn’t know he knows) sits nearby, watching and listening as the flabbergasted Ellie gets the word from the station conductor — and we get a shot whose contents we now partly expect. [Figure 3]





Figure 3: *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) | © Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

On the one hand, the shot of the conductor with his back to the camera evinces a *mise-en-scène* patterning that is fairly common in dominant cinema, especially at narrative and dramatic transition points: end of act one, mid-point, end of act two. There is no reason to conclude that the framing here functions expressively as it does in the other moments, to get at some vulnerability in the station conductor; he is a minor character, appearing only in this brief scene. Nevertheless, what appears as simple patterning still carries an expressive function. Positioned as he is between Peter and Ellie — and with our knowledge of the path their relationship will take, as we do on subsequent viewing — the station conductor's back-to-the-camera stance seems to anticipate that path. This is the moment that truly brings Peter and Ellie together; it is the beginning of their journey alone — alone and together. And the 40 second shot of Ellie from behind, confessing her love to Peter, is enough time to remember the middle of their journey, Peter and Ellie walking down the road; and enough time to remember the beginning of their journey, Ellie missing the bus and Peter lying in wait; and enough time to feel the ecstatic possibility of a better world adjacent to this one.

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