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Review of Anxious Cinephilia: Pleasure and Peril at the Movies

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Anxious Cinephilia: Pleasure and Peril at the Movies.

Sarah Keller. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. 320. \$95.00 (cloth); \$30.00 (paper); \$29.99 (eBook).

Reviewed by Pardis Dabashi, Bryn Mawr College

Love hurts. It hurts because to love someone means to be invested in them without being able to control or subsume them. Love is a form of powerless attachment. Sarah Keller's superb new book, Anxious Cinephilia: Pleasure and Peril at the Movies, gets us to see that moving images are like people in this way. By virtue of their basis in movement, in a constitutive separateness from the viewer, and an ability to appeal to all levels of human affect and sensorium, the movies can fasten us to them while also being fine without us. Indeed, while a person can love you back, be invested in you with equal powerlessness over your movements, the movies can't quite. Or if they do love you back, chances are they're probably loving the next person back just as much. Love, Keller reminds us, is anxious—cine-love, she argues, is even more so.

Keller's book excavates the affective ambivalence—the admixture of “desire” (9) and “anxiety” (3)—she claims motivates cinephilia. Cinephilia, basically put, is the love not just of film texts, but also of the paratextual institutions and practices that constitute and frame the cinema as a psychic and social experience, such as going to the movie theater, writing about film,

talking about film, purchasing memorabilia, attending film festivals, and so on. If to love the cinema is to be a cinephile, Keller shows, and if love is often haunted by the threat of loss, then cinephilia is inherently nervous, anxious about losing the already “nonobject of moving images” (228).

The most immediate consequence of Keller’s investigation of the “amorous” (17) attachments we have to film and all that surrounds it, is that alongside recent scholars such as Girish Shambu, Keller exposes the limitations of the dominant concept of cinephilia often associated with postwar France. Spearheaded by the *Cahiers du cinéma* editorial group and the works of such Nouvelle Vague filmmakers as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, postwar French cinephilia was a mode of engagement with and attachment to the cinema that constructed and relied on a “canon of taste” (65). It was markedly masculinist, elitist, and exclusionist, venerating a “caustic” adjudication, Keller writes, of “what cinema is or should be” (66). Cine-love, Keller shows, has a longer history than this, is more varied in its socioeconomic situations of experience and expression, and is ongoing in its transformations. The ambitions of the book, however, are broader than a debunking of the views of dead white people (mostly, as she importantly clarifies, straight men [37]). Keller in essence uses the complex affective contradictions of cinephilia as a way to read the history of cinema and some of its most definitive disciplinary debates, technological transformations, and “uncertain futures” (36). She shows that the “volatile nature” of the medium itself has invited—and will continue to invite—

“volatile *relationships*” to it. Cinema, she writes, “is a mercurial medium, and its magic, such as it is, depends on fickle spectators who watch and obsess in different ways” (1).

Chapter one offers a history of cinephilia across a number of different moments and places in the development of film as a medium. Keller starts from the beginning of film history and ends with our contemporary moment. She surveys the reception practices of early film; the filmmaking and theoretical practices of the prewar French avant-garde; the dominant postwar French paradigm—what she calls the “epicenter” of cinephilia [61]); the global network of film festivals; and the recent complication of classical cinephilic discourse by the rise of at-home viewing. Keller thus shows, first, that there are just as many ways to experience, talk about, and act on cinephilia as there are people who experience the “unreasoned” (65) and “addictive love” (69) of film. Second, she shows that some of the most heated debates in cinematic history—such as early fears concerning film’s corrupting influence, or the potential perils of including streaming films at major international film festivals—are driven by the affective intensities of cinephilia. And that is because cinephilia so often expresses itself as a stance of “protect[ion]” of what one holds dear and considers, always, to be endangered, whether that be celluloid film, movie theaters, or certain styles of editing (38).

Chapter two focuses on images of the self, which Keller considers to be an especially anxious site of cinephilia. She centers her analysis on one of the long-

standing theoretical preoccupations within film studies: spectatorship. More specifically, she shows how the cinema's ability to forge particularly intense relations of identification between viewer and image is at the core of cinephilia's affective hold on us. She approaches the problem of identification from multiple angles—including the practice of acting in one's own film (108–15), and the phenomenon, articulated by a number of celebrities, of hating to watch one's own performance (112). But this chapter also shows that anxious cinephilic identification can issue from non-human images, such as landscapes, haptic visual textures, or colors of a particular quality (131–32). Keller demonstrates that by virtue of its fundamentally relational structure, cinephilia is an anxious expression of intimacy and all the ambivalent forms of revulsion and attraction, rejection and identification, that intimacy—between self and other, but especially between self and self—entails.

Chapter three demonstrates that a dominant axis along which cinephilia's anxious love has historically been activated is technological. Keller examines three critical moments in cinema's history wherein the specter of technological change in the medium's modes and capacities of representation have caused eruptions of cinephilic discourse and practice: the talkie revolution of the late 1920s, the digital revolution of the early 2000s, and the colorization movement of the 1980s. More urgent to mention here is Keller's exploration of the lesser-known colorization movement, wherein "media mogul" Ted Turner planned to colorize several classic black-and-white films for re-release on television, including *It's a*

Wonderful Life, *Casablanca*, and *Citizen Kane* (154). The colorization movement, Keller writes, “did not bring about a lasting change in the industry” (155) (though its legacies are still with us; think, for instance, of the colorized images in *I am Not Your Negro* [Raoul Peck, 2016] and Peter Jackson’s 2018 *They Shall Not Grow Old* [165–68]). But despite its ephemerality, the colorization movement generated intense cinephilic debates, including legal battles concerning what constitutes aesthetic intervention (e.g. is a colorized film a new film?), aesthetic corruption, and the financial stakes of nostalgia. Some expressions of cinephilia might be more predictable, such as Orson Welles’s warning to Ted Turner to “keep” his “goddamned Crayolas away from my movie!” (161). But others complicate the stance that a colorized film is a worse film: one commentator on Youtube, for instance, pines after the colorized version of *King Kong* that he saw as a child in the early 1990s and recorded on VHS, but that now can only be found through the underground networks of collection and distribution made available on Youtube (164–65).

Keller’s final chapter dives into the digital revolution, studying the “postmillennial apocalyptic” film genre (181). There is a prevalence in this genre, she argues, of stunning, digitally rendered images, in whose computer-generated sublimity we find one of anxious cinephilia’s most recent and striking interrogations. Keller shows that films such as *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (Matt Reeves, 2014), *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015), and *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011) express

ambivalence regarding the aesthetic affordances of the so-called “postcinematic” digital age (193)—which in turn represents broader postmillennial anxieties concerning technological advancement and its effect on climate change especially. These films, Keller demonstrates, stage scenarios wherein the extreme technological advancements of human civilization are both the cause of and remedy to states of apocalyptic emergency. These films’ “exquisite” images of land- and cityscapes evacuated of human life are the primary visual motif driving this genre’s ambivalent meditations on the affordances and perils of sophisticated technology and its aesthetic equivalent in the cinema’s digital turn(181).

Anxious Cinephilia is a deeply informative and persuasively argued book. It is an expansive work that shows with overwhelming clarity how much the history of film and film theory has been about, well, love. Those working within film studies will welcome its fresh and authoritative expansion of what Keller rightly argues is the stubbornly hegemonic understanding of cinephilia as a postwar French phenomenon. But, Keller reminds us all of what cinephiles have always known: to love something is a profoundly complicated thing. It can mean trying to protect it from corruption and extinction; it can mean believing it no matter what it says; it can mean wanting it never to change. But it can also—at the very same time—mean seeing through it, wanting and needing it to be different, even fearing it. It can mean hating it.