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LA CAMÉRA-STYLO

Notes on video criticism and cinephilia

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In his 1975 essay 'The Unattainable Text' – written immediately in advance of the video revolution that enabled cinephiles everywhere to possess film libraries of their own – Raymond Bellour speculated about that day in the future when people could own movies in the same way that they own books and records. Considering the implications of such ownership of movies for cinema scholarship, Bellour wrote, 'If film studies are still done then, they will undoubtedly be more numerous, more imaginative, more accurate, and above all more enjoyable than the ones we carry out in fear and trembling, threatened continually with the dispossession of the object' (Bellour 2000: 21).

That future Bellour imagined has been with us for more than three decades, and while much attention has been given to the changes that the existence of home video has had on film style,[1] there has only recently been a consideration of the ways that ownership and re-viewability of movies is changing – or has the potential to change – film criticism. In *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey describes how movies on DVD – which offer features like freeze frame, scan, slow motion, as well as random access of scenes and infinite replayability – 'have opened up new ways of seeing old movies' (Mulvey 2006: 8), ways that Bellour in 1975 could not have imagined. A key issue for Mulvey in this development is the concept of 'delay', which for her refers both to 'slowing down the flow of the film' and to 'the delay in time during which some detail has lain dormant, as it were, waiting to be noticed' (Mulvey 2006: 8). She explains:

> 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 subject 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 the 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 love of the cinema.

(*Mulvey 2006: 144*)

Mulvey's optimism about this new way of consuming movies and what it affords is clear: 'New ways of consuming old movies on electronic and digital technologies,' she wrote, 'should bring about a "reinvention" of textual analysis and a new wave of cinephilia' (160). But has the 'reinvention' Mulvey anticipates actually occurred? Well, yes and no. Or rather, a change is underway. While much current film criticism, both academic and mainstream, looks and reads like such writing always has, some is starting to look – and sound – very different. This essay is something of a progress report on how the language and style of film criticism are being changed in an era whose multi-media capabilities have expanded exponentially beyond what they were a generation ago.

Thanks to another technology – the internet – film criticism in most quarters has been revitalised in the past decade or so. Due to the economic demands of print publication and the concomitant rising cost of subscriptions, many print journals have moved on-line, a shift that has enabled them not only to survive, but to thrive. Mainstays like *Film Quarterly*, *Cineaste*, *Framework* and *Screen* now exist partly or exclusively through their websites or on-line through academic subscription services. In addition, a variety of new academic journals have emerged on-line, such as *Scope*, from the University of Nottingham.

Further, the distinction between scholarly and non-scholarly cinephile writing has become less steadfast than it had been in recent decades. A quick look back reminds us that, in the 1960s and 70s, we could distinguish between three broad kinds of critics and their readership: there were newspapers critics whose job was to speak to the broadest possible audience; at the other end of the spectrum were specialised academic journals; but in between were publications like *Film Comment*, *Sight and Sound*, *American Film* and *Take One*, which catered to the middle range of non-academic cinephiles, and inevitably drew readers from each of the other two domains. But in the 1980s, those magazines struggled and many, like *American Film* and *Take One*, folded. In the early 1980s, *Premiere* emerged as a magazine geared less for cinephiles than for mainstream movie fans, but even it could not survive in print form. The rich middle ground between academic writing and mainstream movie reviewing narrowed to very little.

But the internet has helped revive and broaden writing about film in this terrain. Through internet blogs, like the one maintained by Girish Shambu, both scholars and non-specialist cinephiles – all of whom have near equal access to cinema's history, thanks to DVD availability – can easily communicate and share their interests and passions, often in quite sophisticated discussions of film history, criticism and aesthetics. For example, in early 2010, Girish's blog featured a post alerting readers to

the online availability of a collection of film reviews that film director Tim Hunter (*River's Edge* [1986, US]) had written as undergraduate film critic for Harvard University's newspaper, the *Crimson*, in the mid-to-late 1960s. This post led to a lively online exchange about a number of topics: the relationship between Hunter's aesthetic at that time, as based on his reviews, and his later development as a film-maker and a director of important television programmes, such as *Mad Men*; Hunter's response to certain key films of the period (e.g., *The Graduate*) in contrast to their general critical reception; and the repositioning of Hunter as one of the handful of America's critics-turned-filmmakers of his generation (along with the likes of Peter Bogdanovich and Paul Schrader).

Between these 'unofficial' cinephile blogs and 'official' on-line journals are publications like *Senses of Cinema* and *Rouge*, which are not strictly speaking academic, but that speak to academic as well as non-academic cinephiles, further bridging these two poles of critical discourse. Because much on-line film criticism takes for granted that its readership includes the non-academic film specialist as well as the academic, it is less jargon-ridden than in years past, while still maintaining a high degree of critical sophistication. Inevitably, the writing style and concerns of non-academics seem to be informing the discourse of scholars every bit as much as the reverse. For example, bloggers are deeply invested in the history of cinema, description of film style and aesthetic evaluation, and their concerns are influencing academic discourse. After several decades of scholarly writing that was wary of making assertions about aesthetic value, or that privileged theories over the individual films used for purposes of illustration, this renewed interest in close analysis in the service of evaluation is most refreshing, harkening back to the early days of cinephile criticism and early academic scholarship in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The emergence of DVD technology, the expansion of the internet and the emergence of a number of sophisticated cinephile bloggers has coincided with a revival in academic circles of the kind of 'expressive' criticism devoted to close reading and evaluation.[2] This kind of scholarship fits Mulvey's description, quoted above: 'textual analysis ceases to be a restricted academic practice and returns, perhaps, to its origins as a work of cinephilia, of love of the cinema'.

But along with DVD ownership, which facilitates close study of films, another key component in the re-emergence of close analysis that Mulvey describes is that the internet enables easier and cheaper incorporation of high-quality film stills and even short clips into critical writing – a capability that has furthered the careful and detailed critical analysis Mulvey describes. Instead of a reader relying on her own memory of a film under discussion – or on the accurate description and interpretation of the author – she can see for herself just how the scene looks, sounds, plays. Of course, the use of film stills in print publication was always possible, but it was also extremely costly, and subject to the availability of film prints. But the easy incorporation of stills and clips into analytical essays places new demands on film critics. The existence of an object (or part of it) alongside commentary on it now places film critics in a position that their literary and art historical counterparts have long lived with: the need to accurately describe and persuasively interpret an object that is equally and as immediately available to the reader as it is to the critic.

But while the availability of movies on DVD has radically extended our ability to study old films, and while the internet offers more outlets for publication of film criticism, the form that criticism takes – its rhetorical and presentational modes – is largely unchanged. Criticism is rendered primarily in the explanatory mode, offering interpretation, analysis, explication; the films function as objects of study that the guiding critical language will illuminate. In this respect, the 'reinvention' Mulvey imagines seems slight.

But elsewhere, it is quite profound. If we want to examine the changes to film criticism brought about by DVD availability, we must consider more fully the inter-section of cinema, DVDs and other digital technologies – not just the internet, but also a variety of accessible and affordable software programs that enable sophisticated image and sound manipulation, such as iMovie and Final Cut Express. For beyond simply having access to movies on DVD, the full range of digital video technologies enables film scholars to *write* using the very materials that constitute their object of study: moving images and sounds. To paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard, film scholars can now answer images not only with words, but also with other images. The possibility of multi-media presentation of film criticism on the internet and elsewhere demands a mode of 'writing' that supplements analysis and explanation with a more expressive, poetical discourse. Godard's own monumental video essay, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1997–98, France), works precisely this ground. Indeed, as this work makes clear, while multi-media technologies provoke a new way of thinking about film, they also offer a new way of conducting and presenting film research. What that kind of critical 'writing' – still in the process of being invented – looks and sounds like marks a dramatic broadening in our understanding of what constitutes the meaning of such terms as criticism and scholarship, supplementing them with features that resemble art production.

In many ways, these technological advances and the opportunities they offer – as well as the overlap of the traditionally discrete realms of criticism and production – return us to the moment described over fifty years ago by Alexandre Astruc in his manifesto, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-stylo*'. 'The cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression,' Astruc wrote, 'a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary novel or essay. That is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen)' (Astruc 1968: 13). This declaration stimulated a new generation of filmmakers – notably, those of the French New Wave – to an unprecedented level of creative work, expanding not only on cinema's already established analogy with the novel, but also exploring Astruc's other possibility – the essay. But now, over fifty years later, due to developments in digital technology, film scholars also find themselves in a position to respond to Astruc's call – using new technologies to invent new audio–visual critical forms.

Here is where the reinvention Mulvey anticipates is beginning to occur, and the continuum of critical work thus produced ranges from the analytical and explanatory to the more poetical and expressive. The internet supports this practice, for while it

not only allows traditional print-style journals to survive, maintaining the language and style with which scholars are familiar, its multi-media presentational capabilities also dramatically expand the possibilities for what could constitute film criticism. While the possibility of multi-media composition of critical work is relevant to every discipline, its creation is especially relevant for scholars whose very object of study consists of moving images and sounds.

The most common form of multi-media film criticism at present is the video essay – short critical essays on a given film or filmmaker, typically read in voice-over by the author and supplemented with carefully chosen and organised film clips. The film historian Tag Gallagher, for example, has produced video essays on Max Ophüls's *Madame de …* (1953, France/Italy) and another on Roberto Rossellini's *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (1966, France), both available on the Criterion Collection releases of those films. In many respects, this work resembles the commentary track available on most DVDs, but there are some crucial differences. Here, the critic offers his commentary not over the whole of the film, but over a much shorter, carefully selected arrangement of clips; second, rather than simply lowering the audio track and having the critic's voice in its place, the essayist can carefully modulate both image and soundtrack to coordinate with his remarks; third, in contrast to the flowing, digressive monologues on many DVD commentary tracks, the critic's thoughts here are focused around select themes.

At present, cinephile bloggers seem to be the most routine producers of such work. The British scholar Catherine Grant (of Film Studies for Free), Kevin B. Lee (of Shooting Down Pictures) and Jim Emerson (of The Chicago *Sun-Times*) have produced video essays, but perhaps this form's most regular and accomplished practitioner is Matt Zoller Seitz (formerly of The House Next Door), who has composed several multi-part video essays for the Museum of the Moving Image's on-line magazine *Moving Image Source*, including 'The Substance of Style', a five-part video that exhaustively charts the various influences – cinematic, literary and otherwise – on the films of Wes Anderson.[3] In one respect, Seitz's essays function traditionally, with a thesis supported by examples, read in voice-over by the author. In the video, this 'written' component (indeed, it can be read as a stand-alone essay) is supplemented by a rich audio-visual mix, which is composed of a variety of clips taken from films by the director in question, routinely placed in juxtaposition to the influences under consideration. The arrangement and careful timing of multiple clips in the same frame, a key compositional strategy in the video essay on Wes Anderson, illuminate these influences most effectively. For while describing the similarities between a shot from *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959, France) and one from *Bottle Rocket* (Wes Anderson, 1996, US) as a way to demonstrate Truffaut's influence on Anderson might be reasonably convincing if well written, viewing clips from the two films simultaneously makes the critical insight about influence much more persuasive.

Nevertheless, as fine as the work by the above-named video essayists is, these works are still very much language based. Or more correctly, we could say that each of the works remains comfortably within the explanatory mode, and it is language in

that mode (spoken and written) that guides it. Images and sounds – even when carefully and creatively manipulated in support of an argument – are subordinated to explanatory language. As Adrian Martin has noted in an on-line essay, tellingly titled 'A Voice Too Much':

> It is instructive to compare both DVD audio commentaries and video essays [like the ones described above] to what Jean-Luc Godard does in his massive *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. In fact, Godard has complained in an interview that he hates it when the voice – the law of the written/spoken text – dominates in a filmic 'essay': there is a lot of vocalising in Godard, but it is always displaced, decentred, at war with all the other elements of the work. It is not a voice which legislates or pontificates, which closes down meaning.
>
> *(Martin 2010)*

It is not just language that is at issue here, but the explanatory mode itself. As Adrian Martin notes, <u>Godard's video uses language (both spoken and written), but it is one component among many, and these components are not unified into any explanatory discourse</u>. Explanation vies with poetics in a collage of images and sounds, words and music, sometimes gaining the upper hand, sometimes losing it.

Against video essays offered in this explanatory mode, we can contrast works composed in a poetical register. These videos resist a commitment to the explanatory mode, allowing it to surface only intermittently, and they employ language sparingly, and even then as only one, unprivileged component. One example is Paul Malcolm's 'Notes Toward a Project on *Citizen Kane*',[4] an eight-minute video consisting of a montage of footage from Orson Welles' film (1941, US) that has been digitally manipulated in a variety of ways – through slow motion, freeze frames, multiple exposures and so forth. The images are carefully selected: Malcolm focuses especially on images of the young Charles playing in the snow outside his boyhood home, the smashing snow globe, the dark coldness of Xanadu, and at the video's mid-point, an aging Kane smashing Susan's bedroom. The piece reproduces little of the film's original sound – only three short lines of dialogue (Mrs Kane saying, 'I'll sign those papers now, Mr. Thatcher'; the young Charlie throwing snowballs and shouting, 'The Union forever!'; and Kane's 'Rosebud') and the diegetic noise of Kane smashing up Susan's bedroom at Xanadu – opting instead for a hypnotic, melancholy musical score by the Icelandic band Sigur Rós. In addition, Malcom lays over these images titles that alternate between his own lines of commentary and quotations from Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958), a lyrical meditation on the emotional power of the homes in which we live and are raised.

The subject of the video – the psychological effects of Kane's loss of his childhood home – is cued by the video's first title ('The house we were born in … is an embodiment of dreams … without it, man would be a dispersed being'), but this theme becomes clear only after an accumulation of images. Further, Sigur Rós's song lyrics are in 'Vonlenska', a non-literal language without fixed syntax, one focusing exclusively on the sounds of language – an apt choice given the video's (and the

film's) idealising of an imaginary, pre-symbolic world of plenitude and maternal union ('The Union forever') that is lost with young Charlie's removal from his home ('I'll sign those papers now, Mr. Thatcher'). But in Malcolm's work, the withholding, subordination or elimination of the explanatory register means we are asked first to experience the arrangement of images and sounds before we understand them. The video does not simply 'explicate' its theme, it seeks to perform it as well, to compose images and sounds in such a way that the emotional elements of haunted longing that mark Kane's character are felt as well as illuminated. Like much conceptual art, which possesses a critical component that requires deciphering, Malcolm's work invites an interpretation as much as it performs one. For example, in the images below, we see first an image that is taken from *Citizen Kane*'s boarding house scene, in which Charlie's mother transfers guardianship of her son to Mr. Thatcher; but Malcolm treats the image so that the cabin window through which we see Charlie playing happily in the snow is removed from its wall, abstracting and further intensifying the boy's (and our) experience of his separation from home. In the second image, Malcolm works a neat pun on the word 'dispersed': as the snow globe smashes and its contents are dispersed across the screen, so Charles Foster Kane becomes, especially in death, a dispersed figure, locatable in parts only through the inevitably incomplete accounts of others. The video effectively engages with the poetic potential of working with images and sounds, without totally abandoning the knowledge effect that we associate with the essay form.

FIGURE 10.1 'the cabin window … is removed from its wall, abstracting and further intensifying the boy's (and our) experience of his separation from home.' *Notes Toward a Project on Citizen Kane*

FIGURE 10.2 'as the snow globe smashes and its contents are dispersed across the screen, so Charles Foster Kane becomes, especially in death, a dispersed figure.' *Notes Toward a Project on Citizen Kane*

With these various examples, we can see two ends of a continuum. The video essays by Tag Gallagher and Matt Zoller Seitz are dominated by language, offering critical works that are understandable, but that ultimately do not fully engage with multi-media technologies and the rich audio–visual possibilities they offer to explore alternatives to the explanatory. Malcolm's work, by contrast, engages primarily with the poetical mode, subordinating language (written or spoken) and the explanatory to an accompanying role, and exploiting multi-media presentation to its fullest – but it risks an opacity that means potentially going unrecognised as criticism. There are clear advantages and drawbacks to each approach. Regardless of their position on this continuum, all the video essays described above testify to Victor Burgin's assertion that, beyond DVD technology, 'The subsequent arrival of digital video editing on "entry level" computers exponentially expanded the range of possibilities for dismantling and reconfiguring the once inviolable objects offered by narrative cinema' (Burgin 2004: 8). Indeed, it is this extraordinary combination – a simultaneous faithfulness to the object of study and an imaginative use of it – that marks the best video essays. Burgin has emphasised the way new technologies enable a creative critical use of films: 'control of a film by means of a VCR [or better still, a computer with a DVD player and a software editing program] allows such symptomatic freedoms as the *repetition* of a favorite sequence, or *fixation* upon an obsessional image' (Burgin 2004: 8) – precisely the kind of 'delay' Mulvey identified, but put to

especially imaginative use in the building of an expressive/critical composition. While all the works described above engage in some way with the *desire* of the critic/creator, those video essays born of some fixation on a favourite image or moment place that desire at the forefront, alongside and equal to – but not above – the film under consideration.[5] Burgin himself has produced such work, one that appropriately subordinates the explanatory register and is instead rendered primarily in a poetical mode. His *Listen to Britain* – originally a 2001 gallery installation piece based on a 1942 short (see below), but available on the Criterion DVD of *A Canterbury Tale* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1944, UK) – is a seven-minute video loop whose anchor is a single shot from Powell and Pressburger's film. Burgin describes in more detail the shot that inspired the work:

> A young woman in a light summer dress climbs a path onto the Downs above Canterbury. Emerging from a stand of trees she is suddenly confronted with a view of the cathedral. The screen frames her face in close-up as she seems to hear ancient sounds on the wind: jingling harnesses, pipes and lutes. She turns her head swiftly left and right, as if looking for the source of the sounds – which abruptly stop as the close-up cuts to a long shot of her alone and small in the bright expanse of grassland.
>
> *(Burgin 2004: 19–20)*

His fixation on this 'sequence-image' (his term) prompted him to want to make something with it. The piece he makes pulls into relief a tangle of related themes from the film, but it does so through a process of careful poetical arrangement rather than through direct explication. Understanding the richness of this work requires a careful description of Burgin's video and some background on the film's plot.

A Canterbury Tale follows three modern day 'pilgrims', each of whom is travelling to Canterbury: Sgt. Bob Johnson, an easygoing American soldier; Peter Gibbs, an English sergeant; and Alison Smith, a London recruit in the Women's Land Army. The trio meet and get stuck on their journey a short train stop away from Canterbury in the village of Chillingbourne, where they become involved in the mystery of the 'Glue Man', a figure who cloaks himself in the darkness of the blackout, sneaks up on unsuspecting young women, and pours glue in their hair. Though set in the then-present, the film begins with a brief prologue that shows Chaucer's pilgrims traversing the meadow above Chillingbourne that affords them a view of the cathedral. The shift from Chaucerian past to WWII present is effected by a match cut from a shot of a falcon soaring to a warplane flying overhead. It is to this same meadow – midway through the film, in the very moment that inspires Burgin's video – that Alison climbs, and at one point in her walk she pauses, perplexed, hearing in her mind the horses, laughter and happy music of Chaucer's pilgrims. Then, she hears a voice speak: 'Glorious, isn't it?' Alison turns and looks, but sees no one. 'Is anybody there?' she calls out. Then a man stands up – Mr. Colpeper, Chillingbourne's village squire – 'It's a real voice you heard. You're not dreaming.' Soon, the two are reclined in the tall grass of the meadow, engaged in conversation.

Burgin's short video is divided into four parts. The first part begins with the close-up shot of Alison listening, watching. This shot is followed by a present day black-and-white photograph of the woods surrounding the meadow, across which the camera pans, left to right. Following this, we see a series of colour video shots of the meadow, also taken in present day – tall grass, poppies, Queen Anne's Lace blowing in the gentle breeze. The first two images are unaccompanied by any sound, but the video shots are backed by the soundtrack music that is heard in the film as Alison crosses the meadow.

The second part consists of a series of titles – white text on a black background – accompanied by operatic singing. The titles read: 'American servicemen/in the village/cannot find/local girls/who will go out with them/At night/the Glue Man/emerges from shadows/pours glue on a girl's hair/then disappears'. The third section returns to the shot of Alison, then the black-and-white photo, and another colour video shot, over which we hear dialogue from the scene on the Downs between her and Colpeper. The final section again starts with the close-up of Alison followed by the black-and-white photo; then we again get a series of titles that cursorily describe the action of Burgin's selected scene: 'Landscape/Girl crosses frame walking uphill/Dissolve to view downhill/Long-shot Girl walking towards camera/Dissolve to woods Girl approaching camera/Girl stops Looks out of frame/Cut view of distant cathedral/cut Close-up of girl listening all around her'. This written description calls to mind Bazin's point about the dynamic between presence and absence in cinema – here, the text stands in for the film's absent sequence, which is present still, but only

FIGURE 10.3 'Alison listening, watching'. *Listen to Britain*, 2001/*A Canterbury Tale*, 1944

FIGURE 10.4 'a present day black-and-white photograph of the woods'. *Listen to Britain,* 2001

in Burgin's memory. The text also reminds us of the inevitable challenge critics face when attempting to describe in writing a cinematic sequence, especially one charged with such affect for a particular viewer. Burgin's reduction of description to the bare-bones of script language perhaps suggests that the attempt to do any more would result in a cascade of words that would nevertheless fail to capture what is for him the emotional power of the sequence.

Burgin's attachment to this individual sequence-image, one in which a woman feels the force of time across history, the events of the past alive in the present, prompts through 'imaginative association' the production in turn of another work that addresses a similar experience of time. Powell and Pressburger's film emphasises the importance of the past, and the changes wrought by passing time, first of all in the prologue with the Canterbury pilgrims, in which a voice-over intones, '600 years have passed. What would they see, Dan Chaucer and his goodly company today?' But this theme finds expression also in the figure of Colpeper, the steward of Chillingbourne's past, offering free lectures and slide presentations on the area's history to the soldiers billeted there. The offices of his Colpeper Institute are marked with a plaque featuring a quotation from another literary figure of England's past, Dryden: 'Not heaven itself upon the past has power/But what has been has been and I have had my hour'.

This moment of Alison on Chilman's Downs calls up the past in two ways: first in her sensing and hearing the presence of the Canterbury pilgrims; and second, in her

recollection of her former fiancé, the time they spent there, and the happiness they thought was ahead for them in spending their lives together. For Burgin, the past is called up in his own experience of being at the place where this scene was filmed:

> When, in 2001, I returned to England after thirteen years in the United States, I was invited to make a new video work to be shown at an arts center in Bristol. The Britain to which I returned after 'September 11' felt itself under siege for the first time in sixty years. Traveling to Bristol by train from London, looking out at some of the most pleasant countryside in England, I recalled *Listen to Britain*, a twenty-minute black-and-white short by Humphrey Jennings, produced by the Crown Film Unit in 1942, when the British Isles seemed imminently at risk of invasion, and that begins with a similarly pastoral scene. My recollection of this short film in turn led me to think of a short sequence from [*A Canterbury Tale*], … which again exiles war beyond the frame of an essentially rural idyll.[6]

Prompted by these memories, Burgin produces a work that highlights the way that cinema functions as an especially potent intermediary with history, a technology and an art capable of making the traces of the past felt powerfully in the present, in much the same way that Alison feels the force of the past on her visit to the Downs. This force is in cinema's DNA, for as André Bazin articulated it, film's power comes not just from what is seen, but from our understanding that what we see on screen is a trace of what once was present, but is now absent. The here-and-now and the there-and-then are held in dynamic tension as we see and feel the past before us in the present.[7] Burgin's use of the black-and-white still photo and the high quality video in the first section of his piece extends the link between those two media – one older, one newer – and the movies.

The role of film as a record and protector of cultural tradition is also cued in Burgin's title, which it borrows from Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister's masterwork of poetical documentary, *Listen to Britain* (1942, UK), a film that, like *A Canterbury Tale*, begins with scenes of ordinary rural life coexisting with the warplanes that fly overhead. In a beautifully dense montage, *Listen to Britain* celebrates (without dependence on a guiding narration) the honour and dignity with which, during the worst years of the war, the British both nourished and gained enrichment from the full range of their cultural treasures and activities – the classical concert, the vaudeville house, the big band dance. With their valuing of English culture and history, all three of these films – the Powell/Pressburger, the Jennings/McAllister and the Burgin – call to mind the anecdote that someone once suggested to Winston Churchill that the government cut budgets to arts and cultural programmes as a wartime sacrifice. The PM responded incredulously, 'What do you think we're fighting for?'

Just as Alison is a visitor ready to hear the sounds of the pilgrims on Chilman's Downs, Burgin is a viewer ready to feel the presence of the past erupt with special force in the midst of a film. As Mulvey describes it, in such encounters,

> The time of the film's original moment of registration can suddenly burst through its narrative time. ... The now-ness of story time gives way to the then-ness of the time when the movie was made and its images take on social, cultural or historical significance, reaching out into its surrounding world.
>
> *(Mulvey 2006: 30–31)*

Burgin's descriptive texts, which appear in the second and fourth sections of his video, highlight this tension between the film narrative in the present, and the sudden bursting forth of an image-sequence that insists on itself as a record of the past. The first text describes the oddest, most surreal thread of the film's storyline – the mystery of the Glue Man – while the text in the fourth section describes the sequence of shots that is the moment of eruption for Burgin, as Alison listens and looks around her. Juxtaposing the two doesn't so much set one against the other as show their interdependence, for each relies on the other for its force: without the power of the documentary image, film's realism would be compromised; without the structuring narrative that seeks to contain it, the image of the past could not burst forth with such excessive effectiveness.

With Burgin's video, the chance is even greater than with Malcolm's that the work will not be understood as criticism, partly due to its intended site of presentation: the museum gallery. Here again, as with much conceptual art, the work has a critical component, but it is not explicitly articulated; instead, it is performed. With this move, Burgin's work appears as an audio-visual version of the cinephilia-inspired criticism produced in the 1950s by the young critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma*. As Paul Willemen has explained,

> If you read the early *Cahiers* stuff that Truffaut and Godard were writing, you see that they were responding to films. ... What they were writing at that time was a highly impressionistic account; in T. S. Eliot's terms, an 'evocative equivalent' of moments which, to them, were privileged moments of the film. These are moments which, when encountered in a film, spark something which then produces the energy and the desire to write.
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> *(Willemen 1994: 235)*

Indeed, it is the manifest engagement with a cinephilic experience that marks Malcolm's and especially Burgin's work. While there is surely no question about Gallagher's or Seitz's love of cinema, their video essays keep that emotion in reserve (as does most film scholarship), while Malcolm's and especially Burgin's display it openly as the source of their 'desire to write'.

In a 2005 essay, Annette Kuhn explored the applicability of psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's notion of 'transitional phenomena' to a consideration of the aesthetic experience afforded by the cinema. In childhood, the most common transitional objects (e.g., a cherished stuffed animal or a favourite blanket) function powerfully as developmental figures. 'Importantly', Kuhn explains, 'transitional objects are precisely material objects, *things*: they have a physical existence, but at the same time they are

pressed into the service of an inner reality' (Kuhn 2005: 401). Though associated primarily with childhood development, the operation of transitional phenomena continues to function into adulthood. 'These [phenomena] are associated by Winnicott with culture in general, … including creative enjoyment of, or participation in, art and religion' (Kuhn 2005: 402). Given the often cited similarities between cinephilia and religion, the movie theatre and the church, it is no surprise that Kuhn should conclude, 'Cinema can be, or be like, transitional phenomena. This is the secret of cinephilia' (Kuhn 2005: 414). Burgin's *Listen to Britain* seems a work precisely of such engagement. In his video, the images explicitly reference the external reality that is Powell and Pressburger's film, but they also reference the 'inner reality' that Burgin has put them in service of – his own personal experience of a moment from the film, his associations to other films, and to the actual place where the film was set and shot. Burgin takes *A Canterbury Tale* and makes something with it – something that both respects and transforms its source of inspiration.

With new technologies of film viewing and digital manipulation, the cinephilic impulse is revitalised and the 'desire to write' is both facilitated and transformed. As Mulvey explains, 'The cinema combines, perhaps more perfectly than any other medium, two human fascinations: one with the boundary between life and death and the other with the mechanical animation of the inanimate, particularly the human, figure' (Mulvey 2006: 11). Digital technologies intensify this experience, producing as a result the two kinds of spectator that emerged from delayed cinema: the 'pensive' spectator, who is 'engaged with reflection on the visibility of time in the cinema'; and the 'possessive' spectator, one who is, in the psychoanalytic sense, 'more fetishistically absorbed by the human body' (Mulvey 2006: 11). As Burgin's work shows, technologies of multi-media production enable the intermingling and uniting of these two sensibilities through a new kind of 'critical writing', one in which 'film material [is] literally detached from its original site to become part of the creative material' of another work (Burgin 2004: 29), while still serving a critical function, one referring back to the primary work and illuminating something about it in the manner of conventional criticism. 'When broken down in this way', Mulvey writes, 'a movie's apparently horizontal structure mutates, so that symmetry or pattern can be detached from the narrative whole or a privileged moment can suddenly take on the heightened quality of a tableau' (Mulvey 2006: 28). The focus on and isolation of an individual moment, the delay in the film's flow, acts as a '"conduit"', in Kracauer's phrase, that then flows into multiple channels from personal memory to textual analysis to historical research, opening up the past for a specifically cinematic excavation' (Mulvey 2006: 26).

Explaining his treatment of this 'sequence-image', Burgin references the alternatives identified long ago by Roland Barthes. In the concluding essay of his *Mythologies* collection, Barthes described 'two equally extreme' critical methods:

> Either posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or conversely, to posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poeticize. … We constantly drift between the object and its

demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified.

(Barthes 1972: 158–59)

Film studies has long been almost wholly dominated by the former critical method, one in which the critic produces, through the explanatory mode, some knowledge about the film at hand. But the incorporation of images into the explanatory text – especially moving images and sounds – demands an acknowledgement that such images, themselves quite mysterious and poetic, do not always willingly subordinate themselves to the critical language that would seek to control them. But if the goal is still the production of some knowledge, the challenge for the 'digital film critic' is to situate herself somewhere in the middle of these alternatives, borrowing the explanatory authority of one and the poetical power of the other. At this moment, the question of how to successfully produce film criticism and scholarship in a multimedia form is one that film scholars should take seriously and engage with actively. Such engagement also implies the creation of pedagogical environments to support such work – both in teaching and in research – and peer reviewed venues of publication that would offer professional validation. What the video essays described above highlight so vividly is that digital technologies that enable the combination of images, sounds and written text invite us not just to move critical discussion into a new presentational context, but to re-imagine the very relationship between a cinematic object of study and critical commentary about it.

Notes

1 To take just one example, see Eidsvik (1999).
2 See, for example, Gibbs and Pye (2005); Gibbs (2002); Klevan (2005); Thomas (2001); and Orpen (2003).
3 Available at: www.movingimagesource.us/articles/the-substance-of-style-pt-1-20090330 (accessed 23 August 2010).
4 Available at: www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring08_NotesTowardsAProject.html (accessed 23 August 2010).
5 I have written about the long tradition in film criticism of precisely this kind of fetishistic attachment to isolated moments in films (see Keathley 2006). For more examples of conceptual art about the cinematic experience, see Guldemond (1999) and Ferguson (1996).
6 These artist's notes are included in the booklet for the Criterion release of *A Canterbury Tale*.
7 The preferred translation of Bazin is the volume of *What is Cinema?* published in 2009 by caboose (www.caboosebooks.net/). For a thorough discussion of Bazin's ideas, see Andrew (2010).

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