

# Re-centering the Cinema Experience in a Multi-Platform, Digital Age

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## ABSTRACT

With the advent of online distribution and the rise of multiple media devices, claims of the cinema's imminent death have surfaced with greater intensity than ever before. Of course, with an ever-widening array of platforms these accounts have placed a newfound emphasis on the cinema as a distinctive physical space, one that plays host to a very particular and much cherished cultural activity. This article considers the substance of these claims by tracing a very particular historical route. Firstly, by revisiting Baudry's notion of the *dispositif*, this article detects the importance of the physical environment in the process of film consumption. Secondly, I relate this emphasis on the physical to the traditional notion of the cinephile, a practice that ritualises the cinema experience. Many accounts across the spectrum of film history will attest to the profound ways in which the physical experience of the cinema summons a rich emotional response. Lastly, I consider how the cinema and the collective nature of film consumption provides an authentic trace to the past and a very certain time and place in history. In turn, despite competition from cheaper and more convenient platforms, this article will endeavour to show how the cinema retains its place at the centre of contemporary film culture.

## KEYWORDS

Cinema, *dispositif*, cinephilia, cultural memory.

## Introduction

In certain respects, film has always faced an uncertain future. From Antoine Lumière to Jean-Luc Godard, the medium's imminent death has been an ever-present feature of film's rich history.<sup>1</sup> However, with the advent of online distribution and the rapid rise of multiple media devices, this apparent death has not only grown stronger in voice, but has taken on new form. Historically, claims of the medium's demise have either revolved around the technology's supposed short-term novelty or have embodied a more mournful disdain for the collapse of a cherished art form. Now, however, the new cultural climate has spawned a newfound emphasis on the cinema as a distinctive physical space, one epitomised by the darkness, the enormity of the screen and the collective mass of an audience. Now, we are increasingly confronted with the cinema's apparent 'Decay' leading to the potential of its outright 'Death'. But what appears to be at stake in these claims is the threat of extinction facing a very specific and much revered cultural activity, as opposed to a form of visual art.

Discussing the rise of portable media devices, *The New Yorker* critic David Denby (2007) views these new methods of consumption as a fundamental threat to the future of a much cherished practice. Films on handheld devices, he says, impede the pleasure and diminish your investment in the image. In the cinema, however, 'you *submit* to [...] [the] screen' and are absorbed by the spectacle (Denby 2007). Some of the more famous accounts that announce the cinema's demise have located the practice of cinemagoing on the fringes of a shifting cultural landscape. In the mid-1990s Susan Sontag (1996) famously decried the cinema's 'irreversible decline'. For Sontag, the rise of home video and the proliferation of screens across public, communal spaces had relocated the practice of watching films to the extent that, 'The sheer ubiquity of moving images has steadily undermined the standards people once had both for cinema as art and for cinema as popular entertainment' (1996). Like Sontag, Anna Friedberg views the cinema as a diminishing cultural force, one being 'displaced by systems of circulation and transmission which abolish' the traditional dynamic between projector, screen and audience (1999, 440). Similarly, in *The Virtual Life of Film*, D.

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<sup>1</sup> Father of Louis and August, Antoine Lumière was reported to have told film pioneer Georges Méliès that film was 'an invention without a future.' However, whether those words truly left Antoine's mouth has been open to debate. Over seventy years later, maverick filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard concluded his film *Weekend* with the intertitle 'Fin de cinema', a statement he reinforced nearly forty years later when he told *The Guardian* that 'Film is over.' Across the span of the medium's commercial history, this type of sentiment has been forcefully reiterated from Guy Debord to Paul Schrader, from Aki Kaurismaki to Peter Greenaway.

N. Rodowick detects a ‘marked *decentring of the theatrical film experience* [...]’ (2007, 27). Like Denby, Rodowick views this shift as having profound consequences for the experience of film spectatorship.

This article seeks to move beyond such claims. In fact, whilst such accounts paint the cinema as a crumbling relic of the past, my aim is to reinforce how the cinema will not only survive this current phase but reassert its position at the heart of contemporary film culture and the centre of modern cinephilic practice.<sup>2</sup> As a result, this article traces a distinct historical route. Firstly, by revisiting Baudry’s notion of the *dispositif*, we can see the emphasis on the cinema’s physical environment. Secondly, I relate Baudry’s intense focus on the cinema space to the cinephile, a rich historical practice that embodies a very distinct relationship to the cinema in a physical sense. Indeed, many accounts across the past one hundred and twenty years will attest to the profound ways in which the physical experience of the cinema summon a rich emotional response. Furthermore, through the notion of personal and collective memory, we can detect a distinctly romantic, evocative and sometimes wistful type of narration that characterises these accounts. In this sense, the cinema provides a privileged passage to the past; a sacred link to the authenticity of time, place and history. Firstly, however, the concept of the *dispositif*; a theory that was formulated, in relation to film, in two influential essays published in the 1970s and written by prominent French theorist Jean-Louis Baudry.

### **Baudry’s *Dispositif***

For Baudry, the cinema as a distinctive physical space works to lure the audience into a passive, dream-like state. This is achieved by a network of interrelated components – the darkened theatre, projector, audience and screen – that contribute to what Baudry saw as ‘privileged conditions of effectiveness’ (1974-1975, 44). In Baudry’s vision, spectators enter the darkened theatre where they succumb to a form of transient hypnosis that shackles their movement. There, sat in the darkness, the viewer’s attention is forced towards the overwhelming presence of the screen. Removed from the outside world and positioned so that

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<sup>2</sup> For clarity, I should reinforce that this article employs the term cinema as a socio-cultural space, as opposed to the medium of film.

the projector conceals its presence, the audience lose the necessary means to test the ‘reality’ of the images on screen. Absorbed in a passive trance, viewers are forced to invest in the images as an ‘impression of reality.’ For Baudry, these elements of the *dispositif* unlock a ‘cinema effect’ which is comparable to the impression of reality we encounter in our dreams. Furthermore, Baudry poses how the disposition of these elements forms the conditions necessary to mobilise Lacan’s ‘mirror stage.’ In response, spectators ‘regress to a state of primitive narcissism’ where they surrender their mental and physical capacities and lose their distinction ‘between perception and representation’ (Kepley Jr. 1996, 535). Fellow French structuralist, Roland Barthes, echoed this sentiment in the mid-1970s when he described the cinema experience as a ‘narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror’ (1989, 346). Here, confined in the darkness and seduced to a primordial state of self-identification, the viewer becomes exposed to what Baudry saw as the forces of dominant, bourgeois ideology.

Baudry also drew upon Plato’s cave as a sort of physical and psychological precursor to the cinema. Declaring that Plato ‘precisely describes in its mode of operation the cinematographic apparatus and the spectator’s place in relation to it’ (1992, 693), Baudry drew upon the darkness of both the theatre and the cave; the almost identical ways that the humans are positioned between the ‘screen’ and the means of visual reproduction; and the shared immobility experienced by the audience and the prisoners. Baudry even referred to the cinema audience as being enslaved and imprisoned, describing the viewer’s condition as ‘chained, captured, or captivated’ (1974-1975, 44). Baudry was also drawn to the way Plato’s apparatus invokes an ‘impression of reality’ where both the prisoners and the cinema audience become the ‘prey of illusions’ as they (unconsciously) surrender their means of determining ‘reality’ from representation (1992, 692). Baudry devoted much time to Plato’s cave and its perceived relationship with the cinematic *dispositif*. Indeed, this was more than a casual resemblance. The allegory of the cave formed a central strategy in Baudry’s work on cinema providing evidence for some ‘psychical or instinctual source behind the invention of the cinematic apparatus’ (Carroll 1992, 714). Indeed, Plato’s cave was deemed symptomatic of an inherent human desire to create the conditions of the *dispositif*. He even referred to the cave as a ‘signifier of desire which haunts the invention of cinema and the history of its invention’ (Baudry 1992, 697) For this reason, Baudry tried to liberate the cinema from the shackles of time. He even proposed that there was probably no inventor or first invention of

the cinema – a belief shared by Gaudreault who declared that ‘the “inventor” of cinema does not exist’ (2000, 12).

One of the issues with Baudry’s notion of a transhistorical desire to produce the cinematic *dispositif* is that it implies a static mode of address. Indeed, from Plato’s cave to the cinema, Baudry’s notion of the *dispositif* imposes a dominant model of spectatorship; one, as already established, that is based on the darkness of the theatre, the enormity of the screen, the concealment of the projector and the spectator’s passive position between the two. However, as many, such as Vance Kepley Jr. have stated, the traditional notion of the *dispositif* has overlooked the ways in which models and methods of spectatorship have altered over time (1996, 536). For instance, Kepley Jr. has rightly reminded us that films have always been presented across a number of different venues. From the fairground to the picture palace, the variety of conditions under which films have been consumed ‘should undermine any confidence that there is a single, archetypal situation in which spectators saw films’ (Kepley Jr. 1996, 536). Similarly, Parente and de Carvalho (2008) accuse historians of neglecting the many forms that stray from the dominant model outlined by Baudry. John Belton even refers to this neglect as a ‘scandal’, indicating a ‘blindness to technological change’ (2014, 468). The effect, as James Lastra states, ‘winds up reinstating a kind of technological determinism’ (2000, 11).

Inevitably, more and more work is engaging with issues of spectatorship at a time when audiences are drawn towards new models of consumption. Now, consumers are faced with films that stretch beyond the traditional and longstanding spaces of exhibition. Instead, films are seen across the breadth of a multi-media landscape: in galleries and museums, in outdoor urban spaces and, of course, via the boundless, digital expanse of the internet. With the advent of online distribution and the prevalence of portable media devices, films are no longer tethered to exclusive and privileged sites of consumption. Instead, they are adaptable, mobile and very much part of the modern consumer’s active lifestyle. Indeed, as Miriam Hansen proclaimed in the mid-1990s, ‘classical forms of film consumption seem to be unravelling on a worldwide scale’ (1995, 137); a comment that would appear even more pertinent today.

However, despite new ways of engaging with film, I think the material basis of the *dispositif* and its emphasis on physical space remains a valuable means of understanding why the cinema remains a central pillar in the cinephile community. Indeed, as a number of accounts from the past indicate, the physical experience of the cinema stands out as part of film's primal appeal. From Maxim Gorky in 1896 to Susan Sontag a century later, these encounters (to be discussed shortly) articulate a profound fascination, one that is firmly rooted in the *dispositif* and their investment in the dynamic between the darkness, the screen and their bodily position. In this sense, despite the numerous advancements that have altered the means of motion picture presentation, we can see how the fundamental conditions that embody the cinema experience (the darkness, the screen, the audience) have remained largely in place since the late nineteenth century. That is to say that the darkness, the scale of the screen and the shared occupation of space has always underpinned the cinema experience. And it is my belief that the uniqueness of this dynamic and the spectator's absorption into the traditional *dispositif* partly preserves the cinema from any impending death. Now, we can see how accounts from the past and the traditional practice of cinephilia articulate this desire for the physical.

### **Cinephilia and the Desire for the Physical**

Whilst the archetypal notion of the cinephile tends to entail a passion for the cinema in a physical sense, cinephilia<sup>3</sup> as a study of practice has, in fact, received little attention from within the studies of the *dispositif*. For instance, in neither 'Ideological Effects...' or 'The Apparatus...' does Baudry make even passing reference to the relationship between cinephilia and the cinema's physical conditions. Christian Metz has, however, drawn attention to this relationship. In the *Imaginary Signifier*, Metz talked about the cinema 'fetishist' and the 'connoisseur' as being synonymous with the cinephile (1982, 75). For Metz, cinephilia embodies a fetish for 'the cinema in its *physical state*' (1982, 75). Metz described this fetish as the 'person who is enchanted at what the machine is capable of' and the person who is absorbed by the '*theatre of shadows*' (1982, 74). Metz also described this fetishism as a desire 'to break open the toy and see into the guts of the machine' (1982, 93). Like Metz,

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<sup>3</sup> Today, cinephilia embodies a more diverse practice than the one we tend to associate with the past. However, this article is invested in the traditional notion of the cinephile, the type embodied by Sontag and described by Thomas Elsaesser (2005) as a practice that developed after the Second World War, one that retains an intellectual instinct, that advocates auteur cinema and that gravitates towards the physical spaces of traditional exhibition.

many of the wistful and evocative accounts of cinephilia work to convey this desire for the physical. For instance, Sontag (1996) talked about the ‘physical presence of the image’ as an overwhelming force. In Roland Barthes’ (1989) account of the cinema experience, he made recurring reference to the darkness as the source of fascination. Here in the darkness, Barthes (1989) said, lies a ‘diffused eroticism’, one that liberates the body and embraces the collective anonymity of the audience. Both Barthes and Sontag were somewhat seduced by the darkness and what Barthes referred to as the ‘obscure mass of other bodies’ (1989, 349). Sontag made direct reference to this relationship when she talked about the need to be kidnapped by the film. ‘To be kidnapped,’ she said, ‘you have to be in a movie theatre, seated in the darkness among anonymous strangers’ (Sontag 1996).

We can even trace these types of responses throughout the evolution of motion picture presentation. Of course, Maxim Gorky’s profound encounter with the ‘Kingdom of Shadows’ in 1896 is now carved into cinema folklore,

It is terrifying to see, but it is the movement of shadows, only of shadows ... Suddenly something clicks, everything vanishes and a train appears on the screen. It speeds straight at you—watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit [...]. (Cited in Adair 1993, 11)

And take this description from 1912, cited by Raymond Bellour,

The darkness of the theatre constitutes an important factor contributing, via the contemplation [...] it produces, far more than one might imagine, to the impression created: the spectator’s attention is solicited and concentrated on the luminous projection without any possible distraction emanating from the theatre space. (Anon. cited in Bellour 2012, 211)

Some sixteen years after Gorky’s account, this short extract demonstrates how cinema spectatorship had soon matured into a form of critical engagement with the space. This description already broadly maps out Baudry’s notion of a set dynamic between spectator, screen and the darkness. A century later, John Ellis (1992) echoed the cinema’s spatial dynamic when he described the theatrical environment as one that fostered conditions of intense and sustained attention. From Gorky to Sontag, these types of accounts testify to the

uniqueness of the cinema as a physical space, something that fails to characterise any other viewing experience with such consistency.

Of course, television has been cast in stark contrast to the mystery, the darkness and romanticism of the cinema. Indeed, we very rarely succumb to tales of the domestic space. Infact, the home has been derided, condemned and consigned to the cultural wasteland. In Barthes' 'Leaving the Movie Theatre', he described the lack of fascination that encumbered television. Here, he said, 'darkness is erased, anonymity repressed; space is familiar, articulated [...] [and] tamed [...]' (1989, 346). The Italian filmmaker, Federico Fellini, similarly denounced the television as a 'household appliance', as something to possess and wield power over (1988, 207). Sontag even referred to domestic consumption like a form of betrayal, one that reflects a deprived state of spectatorship. Indeed, she claimed that 'To see a great film only on television isn't to have really seen that film' (Sontag 1996). Furthermore, Paul Willemen (1994) maintained that any pleasure we do derive from watching films on television is deeply imbricated in our memory and understanding of the cinema experience. For Willemen, we 'unconsciously re-translate the perceived television image back onto a screen in a cinema' as we compensate for the lack of the traditional *dispositif* (1994, 250). In this sense, the cinema becomes the point of departure from which all subsequent encounters with film relate back to in some shape or form.

This rich pattern of discourse that enshrines the cinema yet disowns the television articulates the ways in which the cinephile community have positioned the cinema experience at the centre of cultural life. In this sense, some of the more recent accounts that have reinforced the cinema's cultural value embody a sort of communal resistance in the face of sweeping digital change. As this article will briefly touch upon, this notion of community and shared identity has important historical significance for the future conservation of the cinema. However, what these accounts demonstrate is a shared sense of bewitchment towards the cinema's physical performance, or its *dispositif*. And what emerges from these accounts is a sort of emotional and bodily impulse, one that derives from the darkness, the mystery and the scale of the screen. Indeed, this very relationship that people share with the cinema, one that has been at the heart of cinephilia for decades, remains very much part of the cinephile's primal attraction to the cinema. Thus, what the likes of Barthes and Sontag demonstrate is a rich and



textured history of cinemagoing, one that cannot simply be erased with the rise of digital technology.

Furthermore, those early encounters with the cinema, articulated by the likes of Gorky, indicate the way in which the *dispositif* invoked a very distinct experience before any coherent notion of cinephilia had formed. In this sense, Baudry's *dispositif* conveys a credible belief that the cinema environment does enforce a stable structure of power over an audience – at least a cinephile one. That is to say that audiences do share an almost intrinsic reaction to the darkness and the scale of the screen. However, this relationship that cinephiles share with the cinema can often manifest in very personal and distinct ways. Take Elsaesser's (2005) remark about one of the defining features of cinephilia as the careful consideration of where one sits in relation to the screen. This ritualistic process is perhaps best embodied by the *Cahiers* critic and filmmaker Jean Douchet,

I have to enter the auditorium by the right-hand stairway and aisle. Then I sit to the right of the screen, preferably in the aisle seat, so that I can stretch my legs. This is not just a matter of physical comfort, or the view: I have constructed this vision for myself. [...]. [...] I've positioned my spectatorial body with minute care, adopting three basic positions: stretched out on the ground, legs, draped over the seat in front of me, and, finally my favourite but the most difficult position to achieve, the body folded in four with the knees pressed against the back of the seat in front of me. (Cited in Keathley 2006, 6-7)

As Elsaesser's remark suggests, many accounts of cinephilia embody a shared relationship with the physical structure of the cinema environment – in this case, the need to orientate one's body in a certain relation to the screen. However, as Douchet's ritual implies, that relationship is often performed in entirely distinctive ways. In this sense, these accounts reveal as much about the individual's personal narrative with the cinema than any shared, collective history of spectatorship. In Ian Breakwell's and Paul Hammond's compendium, *Seeing in the Dark*,<sup>4</sup> they underline the importance of the 'idiosyncratic detail and the personal dreamworld' that characterises the cinema experience (1990, 8). For them,

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Breakwell's and Paul Hammond's *Seeing in the Dark* is a collection of personal anecdotes recited by cinephiles from across the world. In keeping with this article, many of the stories articulate the experience of the darkness, the relationship with the screen and even, on occasions, much like Baudry's prisoners metaphor, the notion of being immobile and imprisoned.

Measuring applause does not reveal that the movie was memorable for the woman in the third row because the building on screen reminded her of where she went to school and all those childhood memories came flooding back intercut with the film while the auditorium gently shook as an underground train passed beneath and cigarette ash fluttered down from the balcony in the projector beam. (Breakwell and Hammond 1990, 8)

Robert C. Allen broadly echoed this sentiment when describing cinema performances as ‘unique convergences of multiple individual trajectories upon particular social sites’ (2011, 51). On the other hand, Breakwell and Hammond acknowledge the cinema’s tendency to evoke some sort of collective, yet varied, emotional response,

[...] testimonies from witnesses around the world [...] provided popular proof that there is something about the cinema that encourages, right there in the picture house, thoughts, feelings and behaviour in its patrons by turns enigmatic, terrifying, erotic, sad, hilarious and poetic [...]. (1990, 8)

In researching accounts of cinephilia, this binary relationship between the shared and the personal has struck me as a particularly pertinent and almost intrinsic feature of cultural memory. Indeed, in Annette Kuhn’s study on 1930’s cinemagoing she detects a combination of ‘idiosyncratic detail and collective voice’ that marks many of the stories she repeats (2002, 60). And this binary relationship between notions of personal and collective memory points towards another aspect of spectatorship, one that partly serves to reinforce the cinema’s place at the heart of contemporary cinephile culture; namely, the role of time, place and its trace to history.

### **Cultural Memory and Cinema as a Trace to the Past**

Cinephilia evokes a curious relationship with time. For one, the cinephile stands at the forefront of contemporary cinema culture, engaging with the latest trends and newest voices. As a result, cinephilia places an emphasis on the need to partake in the moment. Recounting his experiences of cinephilia in the 1960s, Elsaesser (2005) commented that the desire and endeavour to catch a film on its first release reflected a primal display of cinephilic passion. To be there, physically involved was to witness ‘the uniqueness of the moment’, to participate in the romance of cinema history (Elsaesser 2005, 38). Part of this romance, however, invokes nostalgia and a wistful portrayal of the past. As de Valck and Hagener state,

‘there is a discernible tendency to investigate cinephilia as an act of memory’ (2005, 14). Willemen has also duly referred to cinephilia as ‘something that is dead, past, but alive in memory’ (1994, 227. What interests me about this relationship between cinephilia and the physical experience of the cinema is how the process of memory plays on notions of time, history and what Raymond Bellour (2012) refers to as a ‘special memory experience.’

For Bellour,

[...] the lived, more or less collective experience of a film projected in a cinema, in the dark, according to an unalterably precise screening procedure, remains the condition for a special memory experience, one from which every other viewing situation more or less departs. (2012, 206)

As Bellour declares, the composite elements which make up the traditional *dispositif* (the darkness, the scale of the screen, the spectatorial position) strike a cerebral balance between passivity and activity, between casual attentiveness and deep concentration (2012, 212-213). For Bellour, it is the uniqueness of this dichotomy – one that Bellour insists cannot be replicated on any other platform – based on a ‘*lived experience in real time*’ that allows a personal memory experience to form (2012, 212). In this sense, the cinema works like a sort of darkened fortress where the uniqueness of each individual performance is preserved within the minds of captivated audiences. There those memories lie, ready when summoned as cinephiles recount where and when they first encountered their first Godard, Tarkovsky or Haneke film. And to the cinephile community, these moments are cherished and recited as part of the romance of cultural history.

Amidst the tide of digital change, this trace to the past and to a certain time and place in history has assumed greater importance. For instance, in trying to formulate a response to the impact that digital media has had on the very fabric of cinema, the likes of Lev Manovich (1999), D. N. Rodowick (2007) and Mary Anne Doane (2007) have revisited notions of indexicality. In this respect, Rodowick (2007) has seen the conversion to digital as a weakening of the bond between the image and its referent because of the absence of physical data. In this sense, the materiality of film embodies an inseparable trace to the authenticity of time and place. As Doane states, ‘What is lost in the move to digital is the imprint of time, the

visible degradation of the image' (2007, 44). Manovich even related the art of cinema to a footprint, as something that bears the physical trace of time and history (1999, 174). In an article for *Screen*, Erika Balsom relates the 'mourning for a lost image regime' as a central part of modern cinephilic practice (2009, 426). For Balsom, the cinephile 'that invests in the material of celluloid' reflects a desire to hold onto an object of the past, one that shares a privileged link to time and history (2009, 427). The cinema as a physical space retains that very same relationship to the past. However, whilst the digital revolution has rendered celluloid obsolete, the cinema continues to thrive amongst the cinephile community despite the presence of new and more accessible platforms. In this sense, the cinema embodies a site of resistance and a sacred link to time, place and history.

These moments and encounters are sealed and enshrined in the memory of collective performance. However, they are reshaped and retold from the reserves of personal memory. For this reason, the collective performance preserved in a certain time and place takes on its own form of narrative, one that remains distinctive to each individual. Here, of course, we return to the notion of personal and collective memory that characterises the cinema experience. However, we should be mindful of the ways in which memories are formed, reshaped and retold over time. Indeed, as Jancovich, Faire and Stubbings state, 'memory is not simply a record of the past, but a reconstruction of that past' (2003, 29). Similarly, Kuhn claims that memory does not provide absolute access to the past as it was lived. Rather, the act of memory entails a process of mediation in which the individual engages in the performance of 'memory work' (Kuhn 2002, 9). In turn, these types of personalised memories adopt a somewhat mythical and romanticised tone; a sort of collective yearning for the past filtered through the prism of personal narration. Editor of *Sight and Sound*, Nick James, adopts this wistful tone in the early 1990s when he wrote about the perceived threat of extinction facing his beloved 'art-house' culture,

Under threat is a particular and much-loved cinemagoing lifestyle. My own addiction to cinema was confirmed at an all-night *film noir* programme at the Scala in 1982. The five films shown have merged into a single passionate epic in my mind, aided in part by the fact that Robert Mitchum starred in three of them. The stepped platforms below the entrance level had no seats and these wooden terraces were the favourite spot for friends to drink the night away in a near-dream state. While beer and bare floors were probably

peculiar to the Scala, the atmosphere of relaxed fandom, surplus raincoats and Styrofoam cups is instantly recognisable to serious cinephiles. (1993, 34)

Even in modest conditions, the 'bare floors' and 'Styrofoam cups' become a whimsical part of the tale. Infact, we can also see this type of narration present in the many accounts of the notorious 'fleapits' where the shabby conditions become a sort of romantic narrative device.<sup>5</sup> In turn, this revision of cultural history works to reframe this type of collective culture as a relic of a bygone era; as a much cherished chapter of the past that presents the storyteller as a bastion of that privileged cultural identity and part of that exclusive community. As James's account indicates, this notion of social inclusion and shared identity is also central to understanding why the cinema retains its place at the centre of modern cinephile culture.

As Kuhn states, the recollection of collective and personal memory works to form a sense of shared identity (2002, 11). Indeed, much of the pleasure for James and others in reciting such stories is the recollection of the culture that the writer participated in. Here, the narrative promotes a sense of community and a connection to a physical and collective place in time and history, one that demands a public display of cultural engagement. As Elsaesser states, cinemagoing not only encompasses the pleasures of spectacle (the sound, the scale, the darkness), but also entails the necessary process of 'being seen' (1999, 212). Inevitably, this process of 'being seen' has class-based implications that steers cultural consumption into the act of preserving social division. Indeed, throughout the history of motion picture presentation (at least from a UK and US perspective), we can detect how the middle-class community have been drawn towards the spaces of 'art-house' cinemas and how, in-turn, the patronage of those spaces become employed as yet another cultural weapon to wield in the war against 'popular' taste. Writing at the end of the twentieth century, Kevin J. Corbett (1998-1999) claimed that in order to truly reflect on the cinema's future, we must consider the ways in which audiences construct meaning from their encounters with the 'big screen.' In-turn, this demands a closer look at the ways in which certain audiences migrate towards distinct cultural spaces as a means to reinforce notions of class and cultural taste. Indeed, across an ever fragmented cultural terrain, the physical spaces that people occupy can serve, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, as 'landmarks and beacons' for particular types of audiences (1993, 95). In

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, see Laurence Edmonds (1951), 'Fleapit Nights', *Sight and Sound*, 21(2), October-December, 87.

turn, this leads us into the territory of film consumption as social act, one embedded in deep-rooted notions of lifestyle, physical performance and the broader public sphere.

## Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to show how the cinema retains its centrality within the cinephile community despite an ever-growing range of platforms jostling for consumer attention. In doing so, we have revisited Baudry's notion of the *dispositif* and its emphasis on the physical conditions that frame the cinema experience. The *dispositif* has been partly perceived as an archaic model, one cut adrift from the evolving cultural landscape. But Baudry's notion of a collective surrender to the cinema's 'privileged conditions' has proved somewhat consistent with accounts from the past. Indeed, scanning the history of cinema spectatorship we can detect a number of deeply profound encounters with the 'big screen', all united by their strong emotional connection to the cinema. However, those relationships that individuals form can often present themselves in distinctly personal ways. Indeed, by considering notions of cultural memory, one distinctive feature that appears is the binary function of personal and collective memories. So, whilst the cinema encourages a certain type of collective mythical narrative, those stories are often formed and reshaped over time in relation to the individual's own relationship with the cinema. In contrast, domestic consumption lacks the same anecdotal quality. We could say that that the home fails to lend itself to the timeless form of storytelling that animates so many historical accounts of cinemagoing and which situates the narrator in a certain time and collective space. To the cinephile, the home is disconnected from the romance of cinema history. Not only are the means of presentation compromised (the inferior quality of aesthetic and sound, the lack of scale), but the performance takes place in the realm of personal space, one removed from the communal process of film consumption where collective identities are shaped and reinforced. Furthermore, by way of its detachment from public space, private consumption fails to take part in the unfolding narrative of cultural history. As we have seen, the need to partake in the romance of history – to be there and to be seen to be there – constitutes a large part of the cinephile's duty. In this sense, then, what these types of accounts attest to is a privileged passage to the past; a sacred trace to a certain time and place in cultural history. And at a time when digital technology is seen to weaken the authenticity of the past, this function serves as a powerful reminder of the way in which the cinema retains much of its distinct appeal. Far

from the brink of extinction, then, the cinema, like cinephilia, shares a curious relationship with time. In this sense, the cinema embodies a social and cultural artefact of the past, but one that remains firmly here in the present.

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