

## The Decay of Cinema

*The New York Times*, February 25, 1996

By Susan Sontag

Cinema's 100 years seem to have the shape of a life cycle: an inevitable birth, the steady accumulation of glories and the onset in the last decade of an ignominious, irreversible decline. It's not that you can't look forward anymore to new films that you can admire. But such films not only have to be exceptions – that's true of great achievements in any art. They have to be actual violations of the norms and practices that now govern movie making everywhere in the capitalist and would-be capitalist world – which is to say, everywhere. And ordinary films, films made purely for entertainment (that is, commercial) purposes, are astonishingly witless; the vast majority fail resoundingly to appeal to their cynically targeted audiences. While the point of a great film is now, more than ever, to be a one-of-a-kind achievement, the commercial cinema has settled for a policy of bloated, derivative film-making, a brazen combinatorial or recombinatorial art, in the hope of reproducing past successes. Cinema, once heralded as the art of the 20th century, seems now, as the century closes numerically, to be a decadent art.

Perhaps it is not cinema that has ended but only cinephilia – the name of the very specific kind of love that cinema inspired. Each art breeds its fanatics. The love that cinema inspired, however, was special. It was born of the conviction that cinema was an art unlike any other: quintessentially modern; distinctively accessible;

poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral – all at the same time. Cinema had apostles. (It was like religion.) Cinema was a crusade. For cinephiles, the movies encapsulated everything. Cinema was both the book of art and the book of life.

As many people have noted, the start of movie making a hundred years ago was, conveniently, a double start. In roughly the year 1895, two kinds of films were made, two modes of what cinema could be seemed to emerge: cinema as the transcription of real unstaged life (the Lumiere brothers) and cinema as invention, artifice, illusion, fantasy (Melies). But this is not a true opposition. The whole point is that, for those first audiences, the very transcription of the most banal reality – the Lumiere brothers filming "The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station" – was a fantastic experience. Cinema began in wonder, the wonder that reality can be transcribed with such immediacy. All of cinema is an attempt to perpetuate and to reinvent that sense of wonder.

Everything in cinema begins with that moment, 100 years ago, when the train pulled into the station. People took movies into themselves, just as the public cried out with excitement, actually ducked, as the train seemed to move toward them. Until the advent of television emptied the movie theaters, it was from a weekly visit to the cinema that you learned (or tried to learn) how to walk, to smoke, to kiss, to fight, to grieve. Movies gave you tips about how to be attractive. Example: It looks good to wear a raincoat even when it isn't raining. But whatever you took home was only a

part of the larger experience of submerging yourself in lives that were not yours. The desire to lose yourself in other people's lives . . . faces. This is a larger, more inclusive form of desire embodied in the movie experience. Even more than what you appropriated for yourself was the experience of surrender to, of being transported by, what was on the screen. You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie – and to be kidnapped was to be overwhelmed by the physical presence of the image. The experience of “going to the movies” was part of it. To see a great film only on television isn't to have really seen that film. It's not only a question of the dimensions of the image: the disparity between a larger-than-you image in the theater and the little image on the box at home. The conditions of paying attention in a domestic space are radically disrespectful of film. Now that a film no longer has a standard size, home screens can be as big as living room or bedroom walls. But you are still in a living room or a bedroom. To be kidnapped, you have to be in a movie theater, seated in the dark among anonymous strangers.

No amount of mourning will revive the vanished rituals – erotic, ruminative – of the darkened theater. The reduction of cinema to assaultive images, and the unprincipled manipulation of images (faster and faster cutting) to make them more attention-grabbing, has produced a disincarnated, lightweight cinema that doesn't demand anyone's full attention. Images now appear in any size and on a variety of surfaces: on a screen in a theater, on disco walls and on megascreens hanging above sports arenas. 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.

In the first years there was, essentially, no difference between these two forms. And all films of the silent era – from the masterpieces of Feuillade, D. W. Griffith, Dziga Vertov, Pabst, Murnau and King Vidor to the most formula-ridden melodramas and comedies – are on a very high artistic level, compared with most of what was to follow. With the coming of sound, the image making lost much of its brilliance and poetry, and commercial standards tightened. This way of making movies – the Hollywood system – dominated film making for about 25 years (roughly from 1930 to 1955). The most original directors, like Erich von Stroheim and Orson Welles, were defeated by the system and eventually went into artistic exile in Europe – where more or less the same quality-defeating system was now in place, with lower budgets; only in France were a large number of superb films produced throughout this period. Then, in the mid-1950's, vanguard ideas took hold again, rooted in the idea of cinema as a craft pioneered by the Italian films of the immediate postwar period. A dazzling number of original, passionate films of the highest seriousness got made.

It was at this specific moment in the 100-year history of cinema that going to movies, thinking about movies, talking about movies became a passion among university students and other young people. You fell in love not just with actors but with cinema itself. Cinephilia had first become visible in the 1950's in

France: its forum was the legendary film magazine Cahiers du Cinema (followed by similarly fervent magazines in Germany, Italy, Great Britain, Sweden, the United States and Canada). Its temples, as it spread throughout Europe and the Americas, were the many cinematheques and clubs specializing in films from the past and directors' retrospectives that sprang up. The 1960's and early 1970's was the feverish age of movie-going, with the full-time cinephile always hoping to find a seat as close as possible to the big screen, ideally the third row center. "One can't live without Rossellini," declares a character in Bertolucci's "Before the Revolution" (1964) – and means it.

For some 15 years there were new masterpieces every month. How far away that era seems now. To be sure, there was always a conflict between cinema as an industry and cinema as an art, cinema as routine and cinema as experiment. But the conflict was not such as to make impossible the making of wonderful films, sometimes within and sometimes outside of mainstream cinema. Now the balance has tipped decisively in favor of cinema as an industry. The great cinema of the 1960's and 1970's has been thoroughly repudiated. Already in the 1970's Hollywood was plagiarizing and rendering banal the innovations in narrative method and in the editing of successful new European and ever-marginal independent American films. Then came the catastrophic rise in production costs in the 1980's, which secured the worldwide reimposition of industry standards of making and distributing films on a far more coercive, this time truly global scale. Soaring production costs meant that a

film had to make a lot of money right away, in the first month of its release, if it was to be profitable at all – a trend that favored the blockbuster over the low-budget film, although most blockbusters were flops and there were always a few "small" films that surprised everyone by their appeal. The theatrical release time of movies became shorter and shorter (like the shelf life of books in bookstores); many movies were designed to go directly into video. Movie theaters continued to close – many towns no longer have even one – as movies became, mainly, one of a variety of habit-forming home entertainments.

In this country, the lowering of expectations for quality and the inflation of expectations for profit have made it virtually impossible for artistically ambitious American directors, like Francis Ford Coppola and Paul Schrader, to work at their best level. Abroad, the result can be seen in the melancholy fate of some of the greatest directors of the last decades. What place is there today for a maverick like Hans- Jurgen Syberberg, who has stopped making films altogether, or for the great Godard, who now makes films about the history of film, on video? Consider some other cases. The internationalizing of financing and therefore of casts were disastrous for Andrei Tarkovsky in the last two films of his stupendous (and tragically abbreviated) career. And how will Aleksandr Sokurov find the money to go on making his sublime films, under the rude conditions of Russian capitalism?

Predictably, the love of cinema has waned. People still like going to the movies, and some people still care

about and expect something special, necessary from a film. And wonderful films are still being made: Mike Leigh's "Naked," Gianni Amelio's "Lamerica," Fred Kelemen's "Fate." But you hardly find anymore, at least among the young, the distinctive cinephilic love of movies that is not simply love of but a certain taste in films (grounded in a vast appetite for seeing and reseeing as much as possible of cinema's glorious past). Cinephilia itself has come under attack, as something quaint, outmoded, snobbish. For cinephilia implies that films are unique, unrepeatable, magic experiences. Cinephilia tells us that the Hollywood remake of Godard's "Breathless" cannot be as good as the original. Cinephilia has no role in the era of hyperindustrial films. For cinephilia cannot help, by the very range and eclecticism of its passions, from sponsoring the idea of the film as, first of all, a poetic object; and cannot help from inciting those outside the movie industry, like painters and writers, to want to make films, too. It is precisely this notion that has been defeated.

If cinephilia is dead, then movies are dead too . . . no matter how many movies, even very good ones, go on being made. If cinema can be resurrected, it will only be through the birth of a new kind of cine-love.

Cinema refers to movies understood (and practiced) as an art. The cream of the medium's expressive history has generally equated with the excellence of individual creators, from Chaplin and Keaton to Fassbinder and Kiarostami. Prognosis: Rapid decay. Cinema reached its point of maximal definition a couple of decades back, and has been slowly dissipating as a cultural force since. The end of film will help hasten cinema toward past-tense museum status?where it will "thrive" in the way Renaissance painting now does.