



Cinephilia Culture and the Fear of Missing Out

By Jon Lisi
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There just isn't enough time in the human lifespan to see all the films one 'should', anymore. So why not just declare the death of the cinephile?

What does it mean to be a cinephile in the 21st century? With so many movies and television shows produced each year, instant access to all of them, and the internet to inform viewers of what they should watch and what they should skip, it seems now more than ever that anyone has the potential to be a cinephile.

In his intriguing essay "Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment" published in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love, and Memory* (Amsterdam University Press, 2005), Thomas Elsaesser distinguishes between first- and second-generation cinephilia. First generation cinephilia, Elsaesser suggests, is "defined by the movie houses, the neighborhoods and cafes one frequented" (30). The second generation is quite different, and Elsaesser identifies two kinds of second-generation cinephilia. The first kind, Elsaesser explains, "has kept aloof from the university curriculum and kept its faith with auteur cinema," and the second kind can be described as "post-auteur, post-theory cinephilia that has embraced the new technologies, that flourishes on the internet and finds its *jouissance* in an often undisguised and unapologetic fetishism of the technical prowess of the digital" (36).

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Like Elsaesser, I'm interested in the latter kind of second generation cinephilia, namely, those that have moved from movie houses to the internet, and those that have more access to media content

than first generation cinephiles ever imagined. On the one hand, content accessibility via digital streaming services, DVDs sent through the mail, and resource websites like Metacritic and IMDB, has made the practice of cinephilia seemingly simpler. These days you don't need to rely on movie theaters to catch up on the latest Godard, and you don't have to convene at coffee shops to make your cinephiliac presence known. Instead, you can subscribe to Hulu Plus, Fandor, and Netflix and find what you need, and you can express your opinions about Godard on various internet message boards.

On the other hand, this "all access pass" has made it both practically and psychologically more complicated to be a cinephile. The convergence of media and the increased quality of television and internet programming over the years has expanded the cinephile's scope of consumption. Now, in addition to the many movies that have been made, cinephiles have developed a passionate love for other types of visual art on television and the web.

In order to practice cinephilia in the 21st century, one must watch a lot of media content. However, it's impossible to be caught up with everything in today's connected culture. Just when you think you've mastered silent cinema, for example, out of nowhere you're quizzed on the films by Lois Weber. And just when you've finished watching all of the movies on IMDB's top 250, you're asked about another, more expansive list on [They Shoot Pictures, Don't They.com](#). Not to mention all of the new releases each year, a staggering 900, according to A.O. Scott of *The New York Times*, in addition to the great television shows and short films waiting for you on the web. ("[Feasts for the Eyes, 1,0001 Nights' Worth](#)", 11 December 2013)

In her article "[The Sad, Beautiful Fact That We're Going to Miss Almost Everything](#)" Linda Holmes argues that "the vast majority of the world's books, films, television and art, you will never see." (*Monkey See* 18 April 2011) Holmes relies on the amount of content produced each year as well as the amount of pre-existing content to reach this conclusion, and her argument, while obvious to some, bears repeating in this age of hyper-connectivity.

Holmes' point is problematic for those like me who adhere to a canon. As a cinema studies scholar, I've been trained to watch X amount of films and read Y amount of books if I am to be considered a serious student of film. In order to receive my MA in Cinema Studies, for example, there was a list of 100 or so films and books I was expected to watch and read. If I didn't see King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937), how can any of my claims about early Hollywood cinema be taken seriously? If I didn't read David Bordwell's *On the History of Film Style* (Harvard University Press, 1997), what right do I have to discuss film form and style? I'm not sure I can answer these questions, but I haven't seen *Stella Dallas* or read *On the History of Film Style* and this hasn't stopped me from participating in the discussion.

The same applies to contemporary cinephilia culture. The general consensus floating around is that there's no longer an excuse to miss a certain film or television show, given our relatively easy access. This consensus is obviously misguided, and if anything, the instant accessibility to content illustrates an individual's inability to consume it all. There simply isn't enough time. Technology may provide people with the illusion that they are connected and have access to so much content, but that doesn't change the fact that one person can't be everywhere and do everything in one lifetime.

Rather than merely echoing Holmes' claim, however, I'm interested in how companies capitalize on this in order to make a profit. Companies use specific promotional techniques to attract consumers to their products, and in the case of the media industries, they tap into the cinephile's psychology by releasing more "must-see" content in a shorter amount of time.

Fear of missing out, or FOMO, refers to the anxiety and inadequacy some may feel when using social media ("[Never heard of FOMO? You're so missing out](#)", by Hephzibah Anderson, *The Observer*, 16 April 2011). Essentially, FOMO takes hold when Sally posts pictures of her awesome birthday party on Facebook and George becomes sad because he couldn't be there. This concept isn't specific to the information age, but the proliferation of social media on a global scale has caused more users to feel as if they are missing out on something else, other than what they're doing, to the point that they check their phones during a party, rather than enjoy the party itself.

The concept of FOMO accurately represents the anxiety of practicing cinephiles. Some cinephiles with FOMO cross films and television shows off of a list and find that the list grows with each day, and others are so stricken that their enjoyment of any film or show is thwarted by thoughts of the next one that needs to be watched.

Indeed, there are a variety of reasons why FOMO plagues cinephiles. For some, cinephilia is practiced to reach a goal—to watch all of the important movies and shows that cinephiles are expected to watch—and when more films and shows are deemed important on the internet, cinephiles don't feel like they will accomplish their lifelong pursuit. For others, cinephilia is a badge of honor, and if it turns out that they haven't watched *La Roue* (1923) or *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), they risk losing bragging rights, especially when they learn that someone else in the world has seen *La Roue* and *Twin Peaks*.

Then there are those who understandably love art and culture and want to experience as much of it as possible, and inevitably come to terms with the idea that they won't get to encounter it all in their lifetime. They learn that they will miss out. Regardless of the reason, however, these cinephiles suffer from the shame and embarrassment of not having seen this film or that television show, and therefore live with FOMO on a regular basis.

My intention isn't to offer a solution to this problem, because honestly the only solution available for cinephiles is to admit that they can't watch every movie ever made, to accept that much of what they miss will be great, to understand that it's okay not to have seen *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), and to realize that their love for cinema isn't less powerful than someone who has seen that film. However, by understanding how media industries capitalize on FOMO, perhaps we will become more conscious of our consumption habits and recognize when we're being manipulated to spend money in the name of cinephilia.

As Barbara Klinger argues, media industries are conscious of and adaptable to changing cinephiliac behavior. In her book *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*, Klinger writes that “film production companies, electronics firms specializing in home theater, VHS and DVD vendors, and other businesses avidly pursue the spectrum of possible collectors, attempting to ignite and feed their desires” (62). An updated version of Klinger’s claim might incorporate digital streaming services like Netflix, [Amazon](#), Hulu, Fandor, and Mubi into this discussion.

Today, many cinephiles and casual viewers consume most of their video content on streaming devices, and Wheeler Winston Dixon wisely predicts that streaming will become the dominant mode of reception in the near future, if it hasn’t already. In his book *Streaming: Movies, Media, and Instant Access*, Dixon claims that “the vast amount of information that each of us possesses will become more and more available to even the casual observer, who won’t even have to search for it” (129). Digital streaming services like Netflix put Dixon’s theory into practice, as users can tell the services what content they’re interested in (drama, thriller, comedy, etc.), and in exchange they will receive “suggestions” for which movies or television shows they should watch next. For a small monthly fee, users can sit back and let Netflix do all of the work.

All of this might suffice for the casual moviegoer interested in killing time with random escapist entertainment, but for cinephiles, Netflix is a valuable streaming service, yet it doesn’t complete the collection. A quick google search of the phrase “Netflix streaming selection sucks” will demonstrate that cinephiles aren’t satisfied with Netflix’s media library, especially when it comes to classic films. For the affordable price of \$7.99 a month in the US, however, Netflix is still worth having for many cinephiles, especially if they want to remain culturally relevant and watch *House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black*, and the latest documentaries and foreign films.

The convenience and accessibility of streaming services attempt to alleviate the cinephile’s FOMO. If, for example, a cinephile can’t watch *The Americans* or *Downton Abbey* on Netflix, they can subscribe to [Amazon](#) Prime for a separate fee and they won’t miss out. Then there is Hulu Plus, which offers many titles from the Criterion Collection for just \$7.99 a month. This is a cinephile’s dream, as many

older foreign films on Criterion are considered essential but for some, too expensive to purchase on DVD. However, as many cinephiles know, the Criterion Collection doesn't specialize in contemporary foreign and independent films, so Fandor and Mubi are needed to ensure that all of the important areas are covered, or so we'd like to think.

In addition to the many different streaming services that are offered, companies have relied on more creative attempts to reach cinephiles. For example, in a marketing ploy that is both genius and sadistic, some media industries have begun to incorporate tweets into their promotional materials. ABC, for example, marketed their new television series *Resurrection* by placing the many Twitter responses to the show in a number of TV spots. The tweets don't comment on the show's quality because the public hadn't seen it yet. Instead, they call attention to the anticipation of the show. In this case, ABC instigates feelings of FOMO by creating a narrative around their show that everyone on social media is talking about it. Therefore, when consumers stumble upon the commercial and see that Twitter is deeming the premiere a must-see event, they feel like they will miss out on the conversation if they don't tune in.

Susan Sontag once lamented the death of cinephilia in a seminal essay in *The New York Times*. ("[The Decay of Cinema](#)", 25 February 1995) Scholars have since dismissed Sontag's essay as an out of touch ode to movie theaters. Jason Sperb and Scott Balcerzak, for instance, claim that cinephilia is alive and well in their anthology *Cinephilia in the Age of Digital Reproduction, Volume 1: Film, Pleasure, and Digital Culture* (Wallflower Press, 2009), and insist that cinephiles merely practice their love in newer, more tech-savvy ways.

Perhaps the issue, then, isn't that cinephilia is dead, but that it's no longer relevant. There are plenty of people who continue to love movies and television shows, but the distinction between cinephile and average consumer is becoming more difficult to make. When nearly everyone has access to the same content and not a single person can watch all of it, it's arbitrary to determine who the experts are, and it's futile to say what's worth watching and what isn't. Cinephiles once belonged to an elite club of movie theater dwellers, but the mass proliferation of technology and social media has granted

anyone admission. This openness has complicated the practice of cinephilia, and has turned it into a shapeless, unidentifiable act.