

# Love Machines

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- Rachel Moore

**Love shook**

**My heart, like mountain winds descending  
upon oaks.**

Sappho, *The Blast of Love*

**Second nature is, in truth, first nature.**

Theodor Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History'

Old films and footage are fascinating not just because they are old, but because they look old. With the enormous span of time now embedded in the very grain of the celluloid, they touch, in a sensate way, the strange and familiar longing for the archaic past which lies at the heart of the modern dilemma. Walter Benjamin's suggestion, that when delving into the technological secrets of modernity the archaic is never that far off, grows palpable when watching film from the archives.

In the Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, I watched colonial footage from all over the world. From the fascinating, but barely readable image in a 1913 film of a Thai king's burial ceremony emerges a symmetrical pattern of bright pink dots that then lay over it, crossing the film's surface with another layer of time. With these flashes of bright colour time's residue breaks out of history, reanimating otherwise unintelligible, archaic nature that lays dormant in the grains of celluloid. Another film, *A Bird's Eye View of Hawaii*, shot in 1916 from an airplane, quickly leaves the coastline for the interior. Wending its way up rivers and gorges to steel-trestled railroad bridges, the film becomes a paean to technology's awesome feats. Locomotives soar out of tunnels onto scaffolded bridges spanning breathtaking depths to burst forth from pre-history, ready made for the twentieth century. And as they so travel from the old to the new, they nonetheless appear to bring the mountain's iron ore with them. Nature – the nature *before*

second nature – inevitably runs apace such dazzling feats of progress whose images permeate many of these films, that nature from which these monuments were once so ingeniously fashioned. At the same time, 'Second nature is,' quite literally here, 'in truth, first nature', as Theodor Adorno claimed some fifteen years later in his address to the Frankfurt chapter of the Kant Society.<sup>1</sup> For it is the airplane, with its camera, that delivers the bird's eye view in mythic proportions.

These films highlight cinema's tactility, the one through making us aware of the film strip as ageing celluloid, the other through this too, with its grainy texture and sepia image, but also in the way the camera takes full advantage of its power to move, to see vast expanses, and thus to celebrate technology on its own. By so viscerally breaking through historic time, such constellations of the archaic, the old and the new easily trump what Ernst Bloch called the "Scotland Yard badge" history customarily displays.<sup>2</sup>

This project could just be called, 'Why do we love old movies?' For surely such technological performances nourish unnatural intimacies – a second nature infused awakening to 'natural history – within the very charnel house of cinema, the film archive.<sup>3</sup> These petrified, estranged strips of time are stowaways in film museums and museums of natural history around the world. Housed in the terrain of the 'strongest narcotic of the twentieth century', the history that showed things as they really were, they turn out to be apt agents for *that* natural history's undoing.

To begin to grasp how old films touch us, it's instructive to look at how technology functions within films. The power of degraded technology to create intimacy does not go unnoticed by filmmakers today where its use extends from the

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avant-garde to popular cinema. One instance from the avant-garde is Sadie Benning's 'pixelvision', which uses a low-tech video image (from a toy camera) whose pixels appear to form a visible permeable skin that dissolves the border between the viewer and the film screen from within. From popular cinema, in *Gods and Monsters* (Bill Condon, 1998), the two central characters watch the blurry images of the movie *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935), on separate television sets, one in a bar, the other in his living room. Come morning when the two meet, their friendship has been uncannily cemented. In *Central Station* (Walter Salles, 1998), the woman sitting in a bus as she is leaving the child, and the child who is left behind, each hold up tiny plastic slide viewers simultaneously, and look at a single slide picture taken at a high point along their journey, thus bringing their fraught relationship to a joyful conclusion. These scenes use the charm of outmoded technology to secure an intimacy between characters otherwise out of physical reach. The intimacy-effect of degraded technology operates within these modern films, but old film draws out a similarly stirring effect when the material detritus of time, in the form of patterns, changes of colour, and ageing's various haphazard scars surface, to suggest a single reason. To further understand such effects, this paper focuses on one way technology provokes intimacy: how people fall in love in the movies.

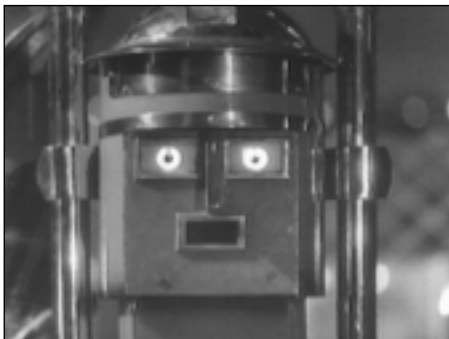


• A radio warms the eager limbs of the honeymooners in *Storm in a Teacup*.

Sappho, champion of erotic love without apology, used nature to illustrate the moment when cupid strikes, mesmerizes the entire body and leaves it awestruck. More often, however, love's touch is unnatural. *Storm in a Teacup* (Victor Saville, Ian Dalrymple, 1937), which is perhaps one of England's first animal rights pictures, is set in a Scottish village and tells the story of a father, Provost Gow (Cecil Parker), his daughter Victoria (Vivien Leigh), a newspaper reporter from England named Frank (Rex Harrison), the beleaguered Irish ice cream vendor, Mrs. Hagerty (Sara Allgood), and her dog Patsy (Scruffy). Frank and Victoria's concerns overlap finally over the fate of the dog that her father has ordered to be put to death. Victoria is exasperated by Frank, who has not only failed to charm her, but has insulted her father, to whom she is devoted. Leaving her father's house after a row, Victoria follows Frank into an amusement arcade, which is the sort of fairground of attractions where early cinema was once found. As they wander through, they are distracted by different amusements, but nonetheless start a conversation as they put coins in slots and play with the various games on display. While Victoria's back is turned, Frank stamps Victoria's name in a metal press; they continue to talk while Frank vents his anger, swinging the model pile driver. She asks him a question and he responds triumphantly, 'Frank! you called me Frank, that's the first time you've ever spoken my name!' From out of nowhere, a life-sized robot whose eyes spontaneously light up, blurts out Frank's weight. They turn from the glowing robot to gaze upon each other's now likewise radiant faces. Continuing their affectionate debate, Victoria accuses Frank of being stubborn while Frank looks into a Mutoscope movie viewer, the only attraction in this episode to whose name we are not privy. She says, 'stubbornness is as old as the pigs,' to which he responds gesturing to the viewer, 'so is this'. Victoria takes his arm and the encounter ends with his handing her a strip of metal with the embossed words 'I love you Victoria', allowing the rest of the film to be devoted to the fate of the dog.

I cite this example not because it is rare, but because it is so extreme. The robot – by turns

primitive *and* futuristic – would appear outlandish in any temporal context. In technological guise, this cupid leaves the couple awestruck and vulnerable to a similarly primal passion. Technology's role as Ariel doesn't stop there. Victoria's father, who has been running a political campaign throughout the film, is publicly shamed for his insistence that the unlicensed dog be killed, so he rights the wrong he has done to ensure his successful candidacy. A pompous man nonetheless, his campaign speech is ennobled by a mural of Robert The Bruce depicted here in a kilt made of feathers, bare-chested in his warrior cave watching the spider from which he drew rebounding strength. The Bruce dominates the frame from behind, while a broadcasting microphone in the foreground of the film frame and thus very large, covers the crotch area of the portrait's kilt with noteworthy precision. The father struts mightily in his ritual garb, his kilt adorned by a large feathered sporran with horns curling forth graphically matching The Bruce's feathered kilt. His voice carries over into the next scene, issuing from a car radio adorned by a mere glimpse of Victoria's leg as she and Frank make their honeymoon getaway. Modern technology radiates love from between the character's legs twice over: bestowing the father's blessing via the masterfully placed microphone on the pairing of Victoria and Frank, where the radio speaker emanates its heat on the eager limbs that wait just below the gear stick.



• Cupid in technological guise: the glowing fairground robot in *Storm in a Teacup*.

Though hardly a great film, *Storm in a Teacup* illustrates technology as a primitive, magical conduit for love because it is so obvious. From the robot's scene in the arcade and from the Bruce as he derives an object lesson from the spider, the archaic travels in a technological flash to the now. But in movies where people are shown getting to know each other and falling in love, the magic moment in which love is mutually acknowledged is often confirmed by some kind of attention to technology. A well known example would be Leo McCarey's *Love Affair* (1939) in which, after much dipping and dodging aboard an ocean liner, Irene Dunne and Charles Boyer stand on the deck and agree that their romance is serious. As they move into New York Harbor, the reigning American symbol of technological industry, the Empire State Building stands tall behind them in the center of the frame.<sup>4</sup> Later, the building will serve a narrative function, but here, in the moment when they are assuredly in love and they turn to look at the towering structure, its grandeur returns their gaze as inspiration. And love needs, at least in represented form, inspiration. To understand how modern technology assumed the role of Cupid, I will briefly consider two well-worn apothegms: that love is magic, and that technology is magic.

With 'the voice of the turtle' in the Song of Solomon, nature confers the moment of love's ascendance: 'The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land'.<sup>5</sup> What sounds here like nature's blessing also marks a moment when nature colludes with Eros, as when the appearance of a snake, for example, startles Eve's composure in Preston Sturges's *The Lady Eve* (1941), effectively tripping her into love. In narratives that pre-date cinema and modern technology, such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, amongst Ariel's magical maneuvers on Prospero's account is the charming of Miranda and Ferdinand so that they are immediately devoted to one another. Cupid's shaft made the magic juice Oberon uses to make the various couplings in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Hermione's statue is animated by Leontes'

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adoration in *A Winter's Tale*. The stories of Tristan and Iseult's love potion and of the horns that finally blow down the Walls of Jericho, as told in *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), alike accede to the notion that romantic love requires a magical trigger that comes from outside the lovers' bodies, and is powerful enough to affect the bodies' every sense.

In much the same way that magic became the link between the word and its meaning for Walter Benjamin, Eros for Plato was endowed with the status of the link between existence and the essence of beings.<sup>6</sup> Eros, the 'pneuma' that transmits between beings, is magic. Couliano, in his Renaissance study of *Eros and Magic*, cites Ficino's *Amore*: 'The whole power of Magic is founded on Eros. The way Magic works is to bring things together through their inherent similarity.'<sup>7</sup> He goes on to describe love as a kind of sympathetic magic akin to the way the 'organs interact, favor each other'. Ficino concludes, 'From this relationship is born Eros, which is common to them all; from this Eros is born their mutual rapprochement, wherein resides true Magic.'<sup>8</sup> If magic is love, Couliano argues, then love is also magic. As the animus that communicates between the two bodies, magic merges one person with another.

Irving Singer brings the idea that love is magic up through idealist and realist traditions to insist that today love is still something over and above, an excess that maintains its magical status perhaps because of its very gratuitousness.<sup>9</sup> However, he insists that the concept of bestowal comes not from outside – that is merely the stimulus – but is generated from within a person. 'Love supplements the human search for value with a capacity for bestowing it gratuitously.' For Singer, in loving one 'subordinate[es] his purposive attitudes,' and 'transforms himself into a being who enjoys the act of bestowing.' Love, for Singer is by nature excessive, in the sense that it exceeds utility. He concludes:

**There is something magical about this [bestowal], as we know from legends in which the transformations of love are effected by a philter or a wand. In making another person valuable by developing a**

**certain disposition within oneself, the lover performs in the world of feeling something comparable to what the alchemist does in the world of matter.<sup>10</sup>**

While Singer argues that the magical transformation occurs within the person, stories, folklore, plays, and indeed his very rhetoric rely on some form of magical Cupid to illustrate love. The idea that love requires a trigger from outside gives force to Spinoza's definition of love 'as an elation accompanied by the idea of an external cause'.<sup>11</sup> Magic is the idea, at least, of love's external cause. In modern times, magic inhabits technology to produce the necessary elation of the body's senses.

Aristophanes' contribution to Plato's *Symposium* describes the birth of love itself as a magic act in which Zeus had Apollo bisect the original human being, that was a round, two-personed figure, turned their heads around, stretching the severed skin together over what became their front and pulling it taut with a draw string. With this act, Zeus set us off looking for our lost half, and thus begins love as we know it today, love founded on lack, on a lost wholeness. It is also the birth of physical eroticism, as 'previously begetting and birth had been accomplished by emission on to the ground, as is the case with grasshoppers'.<sup>12</sup> 'It is from this distant epoch,' Plato reports Aristophanes as saying, 'then that we may date the innate love which human beings feel for one another, the love which restores us to our ancient state by attempting to weld two beings into one and to heal the wounds which humanity suffered'.

Breaks, edges, and taut triangulations are the basis for Ann Carson's reading of lyric poetry, in which eros is the impossible possible connection we understand as the reach of desire.<sup>13</sup> 'For where eros is lack,' she writes, 'its activation calls for three structural components – lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desires so that they touch, not touching.'<sup>14</sup> Love is an impossible thing. It *requires* the heavens to shake, the snake to jolt Eve into a state of terror,

Cupid's poisoned arrow to electrify desire, so as to perform the impossible touch, that touch that does not touch.

The archaic lyric poets were not only grappling with the triangulation of desire, they were also, according to Carson, contending for the first time with writing. Unlike the spoken word, writing, and especially Greek writing, has edges, breaks, clearly defined borders. She suggests that

**If the presence or absence of literacy affects the way a person regards his own body, sense and self, that effect will significantly influence erotic life. It is in the poetry of those who were first exposed to a written alphabet and the demands of literacy that we encounter deliberate meditation upon the self, especially in the context of erotic desire. The singular intensity with which these poets insist on conceiving eros as lack may reflect, in some degree, that exposure.**<sup>15</sup>

The edges of words were part and parcel of the redefinition of a boundless social self, reigned in from social speech's amorphous expansiveness to the confines of writing. To such an individual who 'appreciates that he alone is responsible for the content and coherence of his person, an influx like eros becomes a concrete personal threat'. 'So in the lyric poets,' Carson surmises, 'love is something that assaults or invades the body of the lover to wrest control of it from him, a personal struggle of will and physique between the god and his victim'.<sup>16</sup> The written word operates in the same realm of absent presence as eros. Like eros, writing 'is an act in which the mind reaches out from what is present and actual to something else' [61]. So writing, for the archaic lyric poets at least, is the technology that performs the impossible labors of love. Finally, to love partakes of the same reach of imagination as to know, and it is perhaps no coincidence that a customary way to represent someone getting an idea, is to make a light bulb appear. Carson writes, 'I would like to grasp why it is that these two activities, falling in love and coming to know make me feel genuinely alive. There is something like an electrification in them'. [70]. In archaic times, Zeus' magic and the technology of writing

created the fissures which desire continues to seek to this day.

The modern figure for trickery and ingeniousness, revelation and concealment, is technology. Technology reveals its cunning and trickery most clearly when cast against the un-modern: those savages who are amusingly mystified by bottle openers, cream separators, telescopes, binoculars, telephones, theodolites, and, of course, the phonograph.<sup>17</sup> The last of these has endured from Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* of 1921 to the 1999 version of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* (Michael Hoffman) for a brief show of primitive wonder at the machine: both the Inuit Nanook and Shakespeare's fairy examine the phonograph record and then make as if to bite it. These examples illustrate the projection of a presumed magical status of technology onto the primitive, which in truth more accurately reflects the modern person's attitude. Thrown into primitive relief, technology really doesn't do anything, but instead shares the trickiness and wiliness that are otherwise leached out of us through technology.

The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins once said that the more primitive the technology, the more sophisticated the operator. If this observation reflects something of the modern attitude towards technology (and it is indeed borne out by past and present filmic interest in primitive hunting, craftwork, and the like), our technology today makes us feel a little less than clever. Hence the fear in Heidegger's observation that 'the will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control'.<sup>18</sup> Technology, which we are always trying to get a grip on, is as elusive as it is ubiquitous.

More importantly, for Heidegger technology is 'no mere means,' but rather 'a way of revealing'. 'It reveals,' he says, 'whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us, whatever can look and turn out now one way, and now another'. That is to say, it refers not to the manufacture of something, but rather what he calls the 'bringing forth' of something (say, a ship or a house) which is already a finished thing envisioned as completed 'but is revealed through

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technology'.<sup>19</sup> This same process occurs as physis, 'the arising of something out of itself', when a blossom, for example, bursts into bloom.<sup>20</sup> And here it is difficult not to recall how much cinematic mileage has been gotten from stop-action photography and close-up filming of nature's marvels. For it is the process of revealing that is technology itself where the camera is in its most cinematic element. So Sappho's nature – 'mountain winds descending on oaks' – is not that far from the robot at the fairground show. The technologies that feature in films are no mere means – that is to say their primary importance is not to function as machines, rather, they stand by to *reveal* love.

Since technology primarily stands as a way of revealing, I have discounted the telephone, the internet and such like when they function as a means of communication. A scene from *They Drive by Night* (Raoul Walsh, 1940) clearly illustrates this distinction, however intuitively. Joe (George Raft), up in San Francisco decides that Cassie (Anne Sheridan), down in Los Angeles, is the one for him, so he calls her up. On the left of the frame Joe nuzzles up to the pay phone on the wall, and Cassie, on the right, faces left to coo into her similar telephone and complete the symmetry. Suddenly, from the middle of the frame, a superimposed image of a vertical wooden pole with four horizontal scaffolds holding wires and insulators erupts, Vertov-style, and humming loudly. The telephones are merely functional objects, but the towering telephone pole, like a spinal column and rib cage zinging a message through the nervous system, is technology in full dress, here interrupting the scene to stand mightily, and somewhat eerily, as Cupid. The eeriness that features in this example derives from another quality of technology that its representation as both an apparatus and a skeleton suggests: the double sense Heidegger intends with the word *Gestell* which he uses to name, and thus distinguish the essence of *modern* technology. For in addition to the concealing-revealing which characterizes all technology, modern technology 'sets upon nature and challenges it to yield'.<sup>21</sup>



- 'like a spinal column and ribcage': the telephone connecting the lovers in *They Drive by Night*.

This sense, recently taken up by environmentalists, understands technology's distinctively modern capacity to sap and to store energy as one that effectively turns nature into a servant of technology. Here, technology in the form of the telephone pole, stands between love and marriage. As such, it stands as the energy that takes the natural – wild and erotic love – and turns it into love's cultural form – marriage – as both the armature for and skeletal remains of erotic love.<sup>22</sup> Joe and Cassie, the lovers on the brink of marriage throughout the story, are wedged between two unfortunate models for romance. In this movie, marriage is either deadly (if your partner is Ida Lupino), or dowdy (as with the dull and depressing marriage of Gale Page to Humphrey Bogart). For all the flourish of Walsh's kinesthetic gesture, its wizardry in the end merely reifies rather than enchants. Like a hydroelectric plant that harnesses a river's power and transforms it into metered current, technology here churns nature out as second nature.<sup>23</sup> This too is a magic act. Technology's premier feature is the secreting of its transformative power which makes it appear now frightening, now wondrous, but always as strange. In this, technology shares with the commodity fetish the unnatural role of a magical attraction.

In Max Ophul's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), the lovers visit the Viennese Prater fairground and take a simulated carriage-ride trip around the world to seal their romantic fate. (Much could also be made of the role of carriages and cars that aren't moving as vehicles for love; from Emma Bovary's trysts to the

teenager's flat tyre, it is only when something stops working that it reveals itself fully.) Technology here is an attraction like the amusement park ride, not a means of manufacture. Similarly, the 'cinema of attractions' as opposed to the absorptive pull of narrative-driven cinema rejects its functional element in favor of cinema's magical quality.<sup>24</sup> Customarily, when films simulate early viewers' responses to 'new' technology, they highlight the magical qualities of cinema by flaunting its technological prowess.

Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1992) deployed the titillation and fear often projected onto first contact with the cinema and other related technology in the service of seduction. Count Dracula takes Wilhelmina through an arcade of attractions in turn-of-the-century London streets to view the cinematograph because, he says, 'I understand it is a wonder of the civilized world'. On the screen, two scantily clad women are seated on a man's lap before, much to his chagrin, they disappear and are replaced by a fully clothed woman. 'Astounding,' says Dracula, 'there are no limits to science'. Mina starts to leave. A film of a train moving towards them in negative is on the movie screen in the back of the frame. 'Do not fear me,' Dracula says desperately, and drags her to a cloistered seat in the rear. He holds and caresses her, while on the film screen a naked woman faces the screen, turns around and walks away. Fascinated and afraid, Mina is utterly seduced. She runs through the back stage of an elaborate shadow play, only to be frightened by his white dog (who was black a few scenes earlier) and thus their final seduction scene, with both lasciviously caressing the unnatural dog, begins. Carson's description of Eros's effect could not be more apposite:

Consistently throughout the Greek lyric corpus, as well as in the poetry of tragedy and comedy, eros is an experience that assaults the lover from without and proceeds to take control of his body, his mind and the quality of his life. Eros comes out of nowhere, on wings, to invest the lover, to deprive his body of vital organs and material substance, to

enfeeble his mind and distort its thinking, to replace normal conditions of health and sanity with disease and madness.<sup>25</sup>

The film that forms the backdrop for the scene's climax and the birth of Dracula's and Mina's romantic bondage is again that image of the train advancing from the darkness. Haunting the entire sequence, this film is the 1901 Biograph *The Ghost Train*, (or more precisely, its replica) in which the Empire Express is shown in negative, which makes for the frightful image of a white train zooming out of a black world. With its placement here in the smoky arcade, it markedly echoes cinema's primal scene, the showing of the Lumières' *Arrival of a Train* in the Grand Café in Paris, in 1895, which was then greeted with such 'astonishment'.<sup>26</sup> The astonishment accorded to the reception of 'primitive cinema', of the 'cinema of attractions', unleashes a similar wonder and vulnerability here. The clips of film Coppola chooses to impart Eros' presence not only foreground cinema as a novel attraction, but are also examples of the specific perceptual effects – such as jump cuts and negative exposure – that only film can provide. The technological aspect of cinema in its magical sense, even more than cuddling up in the back row of a movie house, is what, for Dracula at least, makes romance at the movies.

Such purely cinematic moments, such instances of cinematic physis are precisely those that sustained both Benjamin's and Siegfried Kracauer's interest in movies. The materiality of the image addresses the viewer as 'corporeal-material being', seizing it, as Kracauer put it 'with skin and hair'.<sup>27</sup> As with Benjamin's 'innervation', the image grabs the senses, and pulls them into direct contact: 'The material elements that present themselves in film,' Miriam Hansen suggests, 'directly stimulate the material layers of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire physiological substance'. The material elements of cinema: slow and fast motion, jump cuts, angles of all directions and frames in all sizes, coloured filters, and the very aging of the film itself – all serve to give technology a key part in a movie, any movie.

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In the film *Get Shorty* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1995), Chilly Palmer (John Travolta) chooses a film by a director known for utilizing and expanding cinema's formal properties, Orson Welles, to combat Karen Flores' (Rene Russo) romantic skepticism by inviting her to meet him there. As in *Dracula* the movie house love scene is inaugurated by a shot of the film being shown, rather than the spectators watching it, reliving in both instances I suspect a fleeting moment of 'first contact' with the moving image. Welles' signature low-angle shot shows Charlton Heston with a gun disproportionately enlarged due to foreshortening pointed at him. 'How could you arrest me here, this is my country', he says; followed by a high angle close-up of Orson Welles responding for the show-down that transpires. With the sound from the film still audible, we finally see Chilly, so engrossed in the scene that he is literally on the edge of his seat, when Karen ambles into the movie house.



• Chilly (Travolta) besotted by Welles' *Touch of Evil* in *Get Shorty*.

She spots him, but takes a seat far away so she can watch both Chilly and the end of *Touch of Evil* (1958). Anticipating the dialogue, Chilly says, 'that's the second bullet I stopped for you,' echoed immediately on the sound track. Karen smiles in much the same way as one might watching a child with an animal at the zoo. A serious movie enthusiast, Chilly knows the film by heart and continues his recitation of the lines until he can't wait anymore – 'you're going

down, Orson' – as Welles' enormous body hits the water. Chilly beams at Marlene Dietrich's (Tana in the film) gorgeous close-up lingering on the screen and this time the viewer's identification shot is matched to Karen, fully attentive to Tana's vacant eulogy: 'he was some kind of man'. Tana's 'Adios' is the last word, the pianola's brittle trills escort her lone walk along the road where monstrous oil rigs foreground deep and dark space. Chilly's eyes, utterly besotted, look left to right as if to say, 'I don't believe it!' Clearly the opposite of his unflappable persona; he even nudges a stranger to extol the movie's greatness. The pianola's refrain from *Touch of Evil's* accompanies the two out onto the street as they talk and Karen ends the conversation saying, 'this may just work out'.<sup>28</sup>

The pianola music that links the film with the film-within-the-film comes from Tana's place, where it played when Quinlan (Welles) called on her. Their conversation there began with Quinlan's remark, 'That music brings back memories'. Putting a cigar dead centre in her mouth, Tana replied, 'Pianola music, the customers go for it. It's so old it's new. We got the television too, we run movies.' Just as Tana brutally distinguishes the market value of the pianola from the nostalgia Quinlan would prefer, old movies are not vague mnemonics of times past, now viewed through the scrim of experience. Rather, they are so old, they're new. As if unwittingly awakening to cinema's first performance, a film's oldness instantly invokes its novelty and newness. Old movies, with their different styles that now stand out to us as artifice and their more severe surface scars, flaunt their materiality. The newness of the old 'retouches the real with the real',<sup>29</sup> recalling André Bazin's remark in another context, 'as dust on a diamond reveals its transparency'.<sup>30</sup>

*Touch of Evil* is Welles' raunchiest film and hardly a story to elicit the broad smile on Chilly's face at its end. Like Flaubert's idea for *Salambo*, as noted in his letters, it is a film that's pure style. Indeed there is a similar sinister delight at the stylistic punishment such myopic subjects as Emma Bovary and Heston's Vargas undergo. This is not the amusement-filled gallery of early

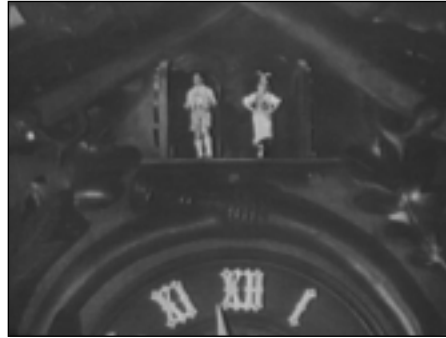


cinema's crude attractions to which Dracula subjected Mina. The use of this film in *Get Shorty* ups the technological ante. This is the cinema of tape recorders used to supply diegetic sound; the longest take in film history up to that point; violently ironic cross-cutting; angles so acute a gun dwarfs Charlton Heston's face. Chilly is taken in by the audacity of pure style. And Karen is seduced by the way the movie works Chilly over, so that, like love itself, the old becomes new. This subtle and intricate use of technology as stylistic prowess to touch off romance is a far cry from clichés of waves breaking, suns setting, or breezes blowing. Those could only be parodic for two people that, as defined by the picture, know a scam when they see one.<sup>31</sup> If anything differentiates the technological Eros from natural Eros, it is a degree of guile.

One might go on to say that the more sophisticated the couple, the more wily their technological romantic muse. The technological magical cupid appears not at first encounter, but after a series of interchanges in which Spinoza might say the characters develop adequate ideas. Like Karen, the most promising lovers spend a fair amount of time observing each other. As Amelie Rorty puts it, 'passive elation moves to active elation and she develops adequate ideas, as she understands what within her he loves and what in him she loves'.<sup>32</sup>

In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Stanley Cavell identifies a genre he calls 'the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage', in which the instances of the Intimacy-Effect of technology that surface with utmost subtlety are mature romances.<sup>33</sup> In Leo McCarey's *The Awful Truth* (1937) Jerry (Cary Grant) and Lucy (Irene Dunne) go through the peregrinations of separation and divorce only to find themselves in separate bedrooms with a communicating door at the film's end. A black cat bars the door which both wish will open, as a cuckoo clock on the wall ticks toward the hour of midnight when their divorce will become final.<sup>34</sup> When the clock strikes eleven fifteen, 'two childlike figurines,' as Cavell describes them, 'somewhere between live figures and automatons, appear from adjacent doorways and skip back in, the two doors closing during the last chimes'.

These figurines appear twice at fifteen minute intervals skipping out, turning around, and skipping back into to the clock to mark the time.



• The cuckoo clock finale of *The Awful Truth* spares us Terry and Lucy's 'literal truth'.

When the door between Jerry and Lucy's room opens for last time, they reconcile. Alone in the one room with a closed door, Lucy smiles at him from her comfortable bed. Thanks, only in part, to the censorship of the times this is the last we see of Jerry and Lucy. We are spared their final embrace, the literal truth, what Nietzsche called merely dead or fossilized metaphor. The finale instead is performed by the cuckoo clock which strikes the last interval before the midnight hour and the two figurines reappear from their separate doors for the third time skipping out, turning round and starting back into their separate doors. But, this time the boy figurine jumps his track and joins the other to exit through one door, accompanying the girl back into the clock. The figurines, neither human nor not human, are technological tricksters of a high order; wily enough to impart love's magic upon a couple that is, after all, already married. Like ornamental gnomes of gardens, these figures rest uneasily in the present, anxious to scurry back into mythic history with, or without, imparting their charms.

Within the film frame, person and thing alike are leveled to the status of an image, and it is in the image where metaphor and the mythic find a purchase. The cinematic object purloins

- Love Machines

subjectivity and hands it over to the world of things. The earrings, for an extreme example, in Max Ophüls' *Madame de . . .* (1953) accrue more value with each exchange, while draining the vitality of the lovers to the point of death, such that the once forgettable objects, the earrings, become brilliant fetishes, so powerful they must finally be gifted to God. These images, with their thing-like status, in turn function not merely as ciphers, but as glistening fetishes, fetishes reanimated by the very subjectivity lost to the object. What distinguishes these technologically charged objects from mere commodity fetishism is the way they can bring back the mythic – in this case, the primordial knowledge of love.

'Only a thoughtless observer,' wrote Benjamin, 'would deny that there are correspondences between the world of modern technology and the archaic symbolic world of mythology'.<sup>35</sup> The mythic takes over in the realm of imagination to attend what cannot otherwise be known; the mythic wrote Kierkegaard, 'allows one to imagine and to make good the loss'.<sup>36</sup> And the mythic always appears as image. Moments of cinematic physis, moments in which technology reveals the archaic are moments in which 'the enciphered and petrified object' reawakens before us.<sup>37</sup> Our preeminent form of second nature, the cinematic image, becomes a dialectical image. Cinema holds a storehouse of these images, lying dormant, ready to burst forth as dialectical images.

Cinema itself rests uneasily in the present. This is true no less for the humble spectator as the film rushes on in front of your eyes as it is for the film preservationist. From the minute they are produced, films change and deteriorate.<sup>38</sup> 'Let's face it,' writes Paolo Usai

**the most stable medium known by human civilization is ceramic. Glass is all right. Stone may be affected by pollution. Canvas and wood have some problems. Something can be done about paper and frescoes, but the gelatine emulsion of a film has been for a hundred years a thin layer of organic material. Gelatine. Animal bones, crushed and melted into a semitransparent layer interspersed with crystals of silver salts. It won't last. It can't.**<sup>39</sup>

Like a living creature, celluloid smells putrid as it decays. In the end it is reduced to a powder.

The film archive of natural history is truly 'a charnel house of rotting interiorities,' to cite Lukács' description of second nature. These reified strips of time may remain just that, nonetheless cinema remains an archive from which we can retrieve and reinvigorate images to suit our more mythic purposes. At once new and old, these images are as unstable as they are potentially magical and above all indifferent to the present. The magic cuckoo clock ticks away the time in *The Awful Truth* 'much like an antediluvian fossil reminding us of another kind of life that doubt has eroded'.<sup>40</sup> The garden gnomes – skipping in, and skipping out – their indifference and their presence, taken together perhaps accounts for Cavell's parting remark to these figurines when he says, 'this clock is a mythological object,' an object, what's more, that is 'only available in the cinema'. It is the sense of the mythic, standing by ready to break forth, but just as prepared to leave, that makes watching old movies a real experience. The film archive of natural history is that storehouse of images that allow us to imagine, and to make good the loss.

## Notes

- 1 Delivered on July 15, 1932. Theodor Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History', trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor, in *Telos* 60, Summer 1984: 124.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, in 'N On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress', *The Arcades Project*, Harvard, Belknap Press, 1999: 463. The full passage reads: 'A remark by Ernst Bloch apropos *The Arcades Project*: "History displays its Scotland Yard badge". It was in the context of a conversation in which I was describing how this work – comparable, in method, to the process of splitting the atom – liberates the enormous energies of history that are bound up in the "once upon a time" of classical historiography. The history that showed things "as they really were" was the strongest narcotic of the century.' [N3,4]
- 3 I take my usage from Adorno citing Lukács (*Theory of the Novel*, 1928) in 'The Idea of Natural History': 118–119. 'This nature [second nature] is not mute, corporeal and foreign to the senses like first nature: it is a petrified estranged complex of meaning that is no longer able to awaken inwardness; it is a

- chapel-house of rotted interiorities.' He goes on to discuss the problem of awakening from second nature 'bringing it back to life' which Adorno then takes as not a theological resurrection, but rather 'what is here understood as natural-history [itself]'. Thus begins the discussion of awakening à la Benjamin. 'When as in the case in the German play of lamentation, history comes onto the scene, it does so as a cipher to be read. "History" is writ across the countenance of nature in the sign language of transience.'
- 4 Of course, the Empire State Building can be variously interpreted. To William Burroughs, for example, it always looked like a hypodermic needle.
  - 5 *The Bible*, King James Version, *Song of Solomon*, 2:12.
  - 6 Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook, Chicago, 1987: 4.
  - 7 *Couliano*: 87.
  - 8 *Ibid*.
  - 9 Irving Singer, 'The Nature of Love', collected in *The Philosophy of Erotic Love*, University of Kansas Press, 1991: 278.
  - 10 *Ibid*.
  - 11 *A Spinoza Reader*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, Princeton, 1994: 189.
  - 12 *The Symposium*, trans. Walter Hamilton, Penguin, 1951: 61.
  - 13 Ann Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.
  - 14 Carson: 16.
  - 15 Carson: 44.
  - 16 Carson: 45.
  - 17 Cream separator, *The Old and the New* (Eisenstein, 1929); telescope, *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990); binoculars, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (Reynolds, 1991); theodolite, *Dersu Usala* (Kurosawa, 1975. This is a complex example, for it is the surveyor who marvels, to the point of making drawings of it, at the way Dersu Usala uses the theodolite to build a hut); telephone, *Mildred Pierce*, (Curtiz, 1945).
  - 18 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays*, trans. William Lovitt, Harper, 1969: 5.
  - 19 Heidegger: 13.
  - 20 Heidegger: 10.
  - 21 Heidegger: 20.
  - 22 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, MIT Press, 1971: 100. 'There is no natural form in which human relations can be cast . . . without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process. We need only think of marriage, and without troubling to point to the developments of the nineteenth century we can remind ourselves of the way in which Kant . . . described the situation. "Sexual community," he says, "is the reciprocal use made by one person of the sexual organs and faculties of another . . . marriage . . . it's the union of two people of different sexes with a view to the mutual possessions of each other's sexual attributes for the duration of their lives"'.
  - 23 Heidegger: 16.
  - 24 Tom Gunning, 'Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', *Wide Angle* 8, nos.3-4, 1986: 63-70. Gunning is here reviving Eisenstein and Yutkevich's term.
  - 25 Carson: 148.
  - 26 Tom Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator', *Art & Text* 34, Spring, 1989: 31.
  - 27 Miriam Hansen, paraphrasing Kracauer in 'With Skin and Hair,' *Critical Inquiry* 19, Spring 1993: 4.
  - 28 Unlike most of the sound in *Touch of Evil*, the pianola playing at the end is non-diegetic, and thus free to roam outside the movie hall.
  - 29 Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, trans. Jonathan Griffin, Quartet Books, 1986: 44.
  - 30 André Bazin, 'The Stylistics of Robert Bresson', in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, University of California, 1967: 131.
  - 31 *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941) has a magnificent parody of such a use of nature when Henry Fonda looks out to see the mountains and trees, and the wind comes up to complete Eve's scam to ruin Hopsy's ideal of romantic love.
  - 32 Amelie Rorty, 'Spinoza on the Pathos of Idolatrous Love and the Hilarity of True Love', in *The Philosophy of Erotic Love*, Kansas, 1991:352-371.
  - 33 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, Harvard, 1981.
  - 34 Cavell sees black cats and women as an obvious sign of female sexuality, but even more obvious is its association with witchcraft: 256.
  - 35 Walter Benjamin, 'N [Theoretics of Knowledge; Theory of Progress]', *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. xv, nos. 1-2, Fall-Winter 1983-4: 6.
  - 36 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, 1989: 107.
  - 37 Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History':110.
  - 38 For a thick description of such deterioration see Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Burning Passions*, British Film Institute, 1994: 19-20.
  - 39 Paolo Cherchi Usai, 'A Model Image, iv. Decay Cinema: The art and aesthetics of moving image destruction', in *Stanford Humanities Review* 7.2, 1999: 43-44.
  - 40 Kierkegaard: 103.