

Meta-cinematic Cultism: Between High and Low Culture

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Abstract

Meta-cinema can depict film viewers' attitudes towards cinema and their type of devotion for films. One subcategory of viewers - which I call meta-spectators - is highly specialized in its type of consumption, bordering on obsession. I contend that there are two main varieties of meta-cinematic reception, not altogether incompatible with one another, despite their apparent differences. As both of them are depicted on meta-cinematic products, the films themselves are the best evidence of my typology. My categories of film viewers are the 'cinophile', an elite prone to artistic militancy and the adoration of filmic masters; and the 'fan', a low culture consumer keen on certain filmic universes and their respective figures and motifs. I will base my rationale on four films that portray such reception practices: Travelling Avant (Jean-Charles Tacchella, 1987, FRA), The Dreamers (Bernardo Bertolucci, 2003, UK/FRA/ITA); Free Enterprise (Robert Mayer Burnett, 1998, USA); Fanboys (2009, Kyle Newman, USA).

Keywords: Film Reception, Cinephilia, Fandom, Cultism, Meta-cinema.

Meta-cinema as intense cinematic devotion

Although regularly met with in academic discourse, the idea of meta-cinema is not entirely uncontentious. On the one hand, it is considered a film practice derived from modernism, for all purposes synonymous with self-reflexivity. For instance, William C. Siska (1979) claims it is a practice that evinces the essence and structure of the film proper and not the subject or the story: the production and reception apparatuses are shown in the films in order to break the audience's empathy with the characters and the action (287-289). According to Kiyoshi Takeda (1987), meta-cinema is a radical and experimental film category which stresses the materiality of the film rather than immersion in the story (89). Both theoreticians place the process of enunciation above its narrative result. On the other hand, meta-cinema may also refer to the conservative practice of making films about the industry, which has become known as "films-on-film" or the "Hollywood-onHollywood" film genre. Robert Stam (1992) points out that these films approach cinema as an institution and a technical and artistic process including its inherent operations (171).¹ Nicholas Schmidt (2007) considers that such artefacts can be embedded narratives, depicted as film showings or shoots, as well as a critical portrait of the agents of production. In these cases the narrative result is paramount.

Nevertheless, both approaches describe the mechanisms of filmmaking; it is essentially the focus and the goals that change in each case, but filmson-film tend to be more descriptive. As examples of the first variety one could mention *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929, Dziga Vertov, USSR), and *Contempt* (1963, Jean-Luc Godard, FRA/ITA). As examples of the second kind one can point to *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, Billy Wilder, USA), and *The Player* (1992, Robert Altman, USA). Laurence Soroka (1983) proposes a synthesis between the two approaches, adopting the expression "Hollywood Modernism" to refer to artefacts that obey a hybrid aesthetics: they are simultaneously self-conscious about the form (enunciation) and manifest a thematic reflexivity that exposes the meanderings of filmmaking (7). He includes in this category *The Last Movie* (1971, Dennis Hopper, USA) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952, Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, USA), two absolutely different products. As the prefix 'meta' - derived from the Greek word μετά, which refers to a cognitive activity centered on *itself* - indicates, there is not necessarily a single way for films to be 'about' the cinema in general.

It is my contention that meta-cinema addresses the strong attraction that film has always, since its inception, exerted on filmmakers and audiences alike. In this broad scenario, making a meta-film could be a way for creators to question their own artistic propensity or the nature of their engagement in the activity. The essence of cinema has a magnetism for creators of different periods of history, geographical locations, and cultural traditions. In a certain measure, meta-cinema is a form of authorial discourse, provided the cinematic depiction takes place throughout the film as its main subject, rather than just as a setting; and provided that cinematic techniques of filmmaking and film viewing are exposed to a substantial extent. The audience, likewise, is deeply engaged with cinema, as an entertaining activity or a mesmerizing force. Viewers appreciate seeing themselves in films and love to know the inner secrets of the activity; some of them become true *connoisseurs* of films and cinematic *praxis* or, on the other hand, the resulting filmic universes.

There is a complicity between these filmmakers and film viewers: a meta-cinematic communication which becomes more important in films that specifically portray specialized reception. These films have to address very different spectators, if they are to cover the complete gamut of meta-viewing. However, all meta-films about film reception share a common trait: they portray cinema as a passionate and engaging medium that tends to arouse a strong compulsion in its viewers. These films portray the meta-viewers as being endowed with a more poignant love for the

movies than the average viewer who also, in his/her own way, 'loves' films. The specialized affection of the metaviewer and the way it has been addressed in certain films is the main subject of this article.

Two opposing types of film cultism

I contend that this strong meta-cinematic affection is a form of cultism, covering apparently opposing types of meta-reception. Usually the expression 'cult movie' is associated with artefacts of dubious quality and/or bizarre aesthetics, thus carrying a pejorative connotation.² Bruce Kawin, actually, claims that they are subversive films projected before a transgressive audience, and that the eventual lack of quality is a by-product of the wish to induce a strong artistic or ideological impression on the viewers. This implies that they are niche products valued not because of their essence but rather because of their *difference*. However, mainstream films and/or films directed by artistic hallmark filmmakers are also applicable as cult films. Federico Fellini's *8 ½*, (1963, ITA/FRA) the Coen Brothers' *Barton Fink* (1991, USA/UK), Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999, USA), Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941, USA) and *F for Fake* (1973, FRA/Iran/West Germany), H.C. Potter's comedy *Hellzapoppin'* (1941, USA), Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959, FRA/JAP), Olivier Assayas' *Irma*

Vep (1996, FRA), Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969, USA), David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001, FRA/USA), Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960, UK), Preston Sturges' classical comedy *Sullivan's Travels*

(1942, USA), and Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, USA) are all straightforward meta-films who have come to be considered cult movies, either in specialty books or sites such as IMDb, *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Wikipedia*. Therefore, I adopt the word 'cult' as synonymous with *revered* and proceed to explain how the so-called 'love of movies' has no specific pedigree.

a) The sanctity of cinephilia

In its colloquial meaning, the word 'cinephilia' expresses no more than a severe attraction for films, which is induced by the cinematic apparatus itself and can strike pretty much everyone. However, historically, cinephilia was fully contextualized, having developed in France, especially Paris, during the mid-forties and throughout the fifties. It attacked very specific human targets: '*les mordus du cinéma*' ('the bitten by the cinema'). Antoine De Baecque (2003, 11) defines traditional French cinephilia as a way of seeing films, of talking about them, and of spreading the cinematic message. There were some cultist rituals involved, such as belonging to a community centered on a particular group of people, a specific film magazine, a chosen film theatre, and a certain

cluster of ideas. These classic cultists devoted their entire lives to watching as many films as possible and writing about them in specialized magazines such as *Cahiers du cinéma* and its rival publication, *Positif*. The writing was as important as the film viewing because it was a way to remember the primordial act of watching every single film. The cinephiles' obsession with the films extended to the practice of compiling lists about almost anything related with cinema: filmmakers, films, particular objects such as posters and photographs, and so on.

In De Baecque's opinion, all of this points to a counter-culture, endogenous and protected from outside intervention. At the time there weren't as many technological channels to view films and interact with them or because of them as there are now, but certainly the essence of the activity was the same. There is, nevertheless, a difference: whereas the classic cinephile watched films on a big screen, taking full advantage of the apparatus and considering the film theatre a sort of religious temple, the 21st century specialized viewer is able to appropriate the object in a more physical way, tampering with it or molding himself or herself to it, if he/she so wishes. French cinephiles of the fifties, a young generation of viewers marked by its youth, formed a close community of cinematic twin souls. It is no wonder that this obsession and form of artistic militancy turned many of them into the most successful filmmakers of the next decade in France. François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, for instance, derive from this sort of elite cult and both would go on to direct meta-films. In neighboring Italy and in Germany, to where this affiliation had spread, other people also professed themselves to be born filmmakers, truly obsessed with the nature of the cinematic medium and their own attraction for it (take, for instance, Federico Fellini and Wim Wenders).

It is from this professed cinephilic community that most of the meta-cinematic films stemmed. According to Jean-Paul Tórk (1978) and Frédéric Sojcher (2007), it is only natural that filmmakers should dedicate at least one film in their directorial career to this concern. In fact, some of the most influential directors in many countries have done so repeatedly, building a notorious meta-cinematic *oeuvre*.³ Jean-Luc Godard, who is usually known as 'Monsieur Cinéma' ('Mister Cinema'), could be considered the poet laureate of such a tendency, with an admirable count of twenty five meta-cinematic fictional features (not taking into consideration his film-essays). Yannick Mouren (2009) has coined the term 'poetic art', derived from the Latin *ars poetica*, to refer to a filmic subgenre that reveals the working methods, the aesthetics and the ethics of a certain director who is straightforwardly present in the work, either in person or through a fictional *alter ego*. This type of artefact is meant to summarize a certain director's filmic practice.

It should be noted that such *auteurs* - so named here because of the thematic and aesthetic consistency of their careers - before becoming directors, had already expressed their love, as spectators, in a very intense and specialized form of film viewing. Here the feelings provoked by the films themselves and the 'moments of revelation' they provided were perhaps combined with a certain attraction towards the filmmakers themselves and the glamorous job they held. To this sort of audience a director is a star in his or her own right, someone to be looked up to and, eventually, a role model for the future. It is not surprising that for the Young Turks, who made up a sect within the renowned French magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* and fully backed Truffaut's '*politique des auteurs*', the director was the mastermind of a film, responsible for the script, the *mise-en-scène*, and the general look of the picture, including its editing. In other words, this was the person who was able to take hold of the film in a way that, as viewers, they never had been able to do before, despite their glorious moments of personal revelation in the film theatres (and in one auditorium in particular: the Cinémathèque Française, then under the direction of Henri Langlois). For them, as for less specialized film viewers, the film director was a metonymic representation of the cinematic work of art and a symbol of the whole activity. To experience the director, through the viewing of films, was a mediated way of becoming part of that person's artistic universe and activity. Therefore, the filmmaker was - and still is - one of the components that contributes to making 'cinema' so fascinating for specialized viewers. However, as Serge Daney has claimed, and DeBaecque confirms, the '*ciné-fils*' (admirable pun on the word cinephilia, and which means 'son of cinema') has a fundamentally aesthetic relationship with the Seventh Art.

After May 1968 institutional cinephilia changed its habitat, knocking with vigor on the door of the universities and causing Film Studies to become part of curricula. However, the word 'cinephilia' itself was erased from the common vocabulary as the intelligentsia saw it as a negative form of obsession. Instead, the aesthetic relevance of the master-piece was emphasized to the detriment of the specific cinematic 'vision' of the masters themselves. From the seventies onwards, the indefinable impetus which translates itself in a will to direct lingers on in the souls of film students, as it does in less artistically inclined film-buffs. Eventually film students become directors and are then able to question their cinematic art in their own films, either through the fictional meta-film or the more recent form of the essay-film. Those who are not so fortunate, or so persistent, are obliged to consume films and their favorite creators on the screen. These are the sort of people that make up most of metacinema's target-audience, since they fully

appreciate and identify with the cinematic messages and universes those films convey.⁴

Four confessed and acknowledged cinephiles decided to pay their own homage to the historical period of French cinephilia, depicting fans whose private and, to some extent, professional lives revolve around cinema and their passion for films, as well as the experience of watching them and disclosing them to others in a messianic way. The films are *Travelling avant* (Jean-Charles Tacchella, 1987, FRA), *The Dreamers* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 2003, UK/FRA/ITA), *La valigia dei sogni* (Luigi Comencini, 1953, ITA), and Luc Moullet's *Les sièges de L'Alcazar* (1989, FRA).⁵ For the purposes of this article I will concentrate on the first two, which deal more directly with the young generation of film viewers and the atmosphere of the *cinéclubs* ('film clubs', meaning both specialized art house film theatres, such as the Cinémathèque Française, or just improvised film venues run by amateurs).

The action of *Travelling avant* begins in October 1948 and ends in late July 1949 the date of the first edition of the *Festival du Film Maudit*, 'the first festival solely consecrated to the filmmakers and their films', as the voiceover commentary states at the end of the film. Its main goal and cinematic universe is made clear from the beginning. Right after the open credits, an intertitle dedicates, in French, 'this film to Jean-George Auriol and André Bazin / and to the cinephiles of the entire world'.⁶ Jean-Charles Tacchella has an impressive curriculum vitae as a cinephile: he started out as cinema critic (for the magazine *L'Écran Français*) where he wrote extensively on filmmakers, before becoming one himself in 1971; before that, in 1948, he was one of the co-creators of *Objectif 49*, a film club presided over by Jean Cocteau, and much later, he would be president of the Cinémathèque Française, from 2000 to 2003. Clearly, the (mis)adventures of Nino (Thierry Frémont) - the humble young man who leaves the provinces to live in Paris because he could see more films there - and Donald (Simon de la Brosse) - the young and rich egocentric who wants to direct his first film before he is twenty five years old, just as Orson Welles did - have an autobiographical patina to them. Tacchella too lived and breathed for the cinema, embodying Jean-Luc Godard's dictum that 'a tracking shot is a moral matter' ('*un travelling c'est une question de morale*'). *Travelling avant* is, therefore, a guide to the cinephilic way of life and a tribute to the status of the film director (*metteur-en-scène*).

The authorial stance depicted in the film is confirmed by a voice over who presents the two male protagonists and recounts their meeting in a suburban film club of the Parisian area; the scene which follows acts as a transvisualization of what the voice over had stated. The film opens under the aegis of the darkened film theatre sanctum where the session is already under way, lighted by the creating beam of the

projector. The image is a tracking shot (not forward as the title of the film implies, but backwards) captured from the position of the screen. Other scenes in *Travelling avant* take place inside film theatres, including the lobby of the Cinémathèque Française, but no other adopts this position. The shot is thematically relevant because it imbues the relationship between the cinephiles and the screen with an added mystique. As the character Matthew (Michael Pitt) in Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* observes, the screen has an immersive force which transcends the images themselves, despite their revealing and insightful nature:

I was one of the insatiates, the ones you always find sitting closest to screen. Why did we sit so close? Maybe it was because we wanted to receive the images first, when they were still new, still fresh, before they cleared the hurdles of the rows behind us, before they had been laid back from row to row, spectator to spectator [...]

First comes the screen; then the images. This dual loving relationship between apparatus and cinematic content is part of the life mission of the members of this free masonry, as Mathew calls the 'film buffs'.

In *The Dreamers*, the characters are content with just talking about films or reenacting scenes in private circumstances. For instance, the two friends Matthew and Theo (Louis Garrel) discuss who, between Chaplin and Keaton, is cinematically better; Isabelle (Eva Green), after having made love with Matthew, repeats the loving ritual of Garbo in *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933, USA), caressing pieces of the furniture as a way to recall the love-making. In *Travelling avant*, however, both Nino and Donald want to become film directors and they are, actually always making films in their own minds, that is, they perceive the world cinematically, as a string of shots put together in order to convey specific emotions. For instance, when their friend Barbara (Ann-Gisel Glass) attempts suicide, they watch over her at the hospital as she lies in bed still unconscious. Donald, who is Barbara's former lover, perceives the situation as a suspenseful dramatization in the manner of Hitchcock - close up of the emergency bell by the bed; Barbara's hand trying to reach it; a nurse who comes in but does not check on the patient - whereas Nino, who is falling in love with Barbara, sees it as a simple but emotional scene, more like Murnau: close up of Barbara's face as she opens the eyes for the first time. Throughout the film, some of the character's feelings and the development of certain meaningful situations are conveyed in this way as cinematic scenes, thus highlighting the power of the *mise-en-scène*, which both friends consider the pinnacle of filmmaking. In fact, they are always stating this creed: 'The *mise-en-scène* is everything we add to the script' ('*La mise en scène c'est tout ce qu'on rapporte au scénario*'). Not only do they reinforce the position of their

contemporary French critics, but also De Baecque's, for whom learning to see through film watching is tantamount to creating: 'Learning to see it's already a way of making films; learning to see is constructing a representation of the world where the wish and the praxis of the filmmaker are already in an embryonic state' (De Baecque 2003, 24, my translation). In fact, at a certain point in *Travelling avant* Nino watches 41 films in only ten days and starts to write a comparative study of René Clair and Jean Renoir.

Nino also wants to become a film historian and he applies himself earnestly to the task of writing creatively: he writes an original screenplay, which gets stolen when, for lack of money to rent a room, he is forced to sleep in a Salvation Army home; he also writes extensively on German Expressionism, his favorite cinephilic topic. He takes this activity so seriously that he calls it 'work', although there is no evidence that he ever gets paid for it, quite the opposite. On one occasion he nearly gives up on his dream of succeeding in the world of 1950s French cinematic community. However, unlike Donald, who wants to become a star director and thinks of cinema as a profession (a *métier*), Nino does not consider giving up his artistic integrity: 'For me, it's not about filming no matter what. It's about making an art work [*une oeuvre*], like Dreyer' (my translation). Furthermore, he claims that 'artists are lonesome creatures'. This twofold obsession, shared in different ways by Nino and Donald, is dryly commented upon by Barbara on two separate occasions: 'There's more to life than cinema' and 'Cinema makes you completely blind'. However, she is not innocent in her statement: she is just as committed to cinema as they are, but, unlike them, she has already lost a boyfriend to failure in the cinema world (Henri, who is only shown in a photograph, has successfully committed suicide), so she knows that life is not a film.

Nino, Donald and their friend Gilles (Luc Lavandier) avidly collect iconic film stills and photographs of stars, with which they decorate their rooms and which they take everywhere with them: whenever evicted or voluntarily leaving a place they pack a considerable number of these photographs. Barbara, however, surpasses them by collecting actual films: the loaned warehouse where she lives is packed with reels she has stolen from the laboratories where films are chemically disposed of. Tacchella's opus even contains a scene in which Nino and Donald accompany her on just one such raid. The stolen reels are a cinephilic catalogue: for instance, they include acclaimed French and German films.⁷ Nino profits from this fact to try to advance his project for the creation of his own *cinéclub*, like so many cinephilic hopefuls of the time (François Truffaut, for instance, created his film club at the age of sixteen). He aims to educate the audience: 'Cinema is art, not industry', he observes to an exhibitor he and Donald approach. The man is not convinced and voices the mores of the day

in a critical manner: 'A film club, hum? Like everybody else! It's the new fashion these days'. Eventually, they succeed in setting it up, with the help of Nino's girlfriend (Laurence Côte) who loves him passionately and unrequitedly (he only has eyes and thoughts for cinema and, later on, for Barbara). In his speech at the opening, Nino tells the (insufficient) viewers present not to expect an explanation of the film (as André Bazin used to give in his film showings), because 'they think they must not influence the spectators; the important thing is for them to watch and make up their own minds'. The economic failure of the enterprise dictates the end of Nino's *cinéclub* and the inner division of the cinephilic group of six friends who started it. Ultimately, Barbara donates all her collection of films to Henri Langlois and the French Cinémathèque.

Nino, Donald, Barbara and their other close friends live in a cinematic bubble, not socializing beyond their inner circle. This isolation and the fact that they live as if in a perpetual film - 'In life people should behave as actors. That would provide them with more chances to succeed', Nino observes at one point - should be the recipe for death or lunacy, but Tacchella, who has succeeded in this habitat, gives his characters a happy ending. Nino and Barbara's exchange, when, at the end of the film, they are happily living together, is an ironic denial that life should be lived as cinema.

Barbara: I've always craved to know why, at the movies, the audience have always needed happy endings.

Nino: There will be less and less of them. They're too far from reality.

Love for cinema does not need to be obsessive in order to be fulfilling is Tacchella's final message.

b) The universe(s) of film fans

On the opposite pole of the filmic affection continuum one finds another phenomenon which cannot be disregarded, if a complete and serious consideration of meta-cinema is to be undertaken. These viewers do not wish to become directors and do not possess a considerable knowledge of the filmic masters. Their relationship with films is, however, as intense as the one experienced by the die-hard cinephiles. These people, who are referred to by the initially pejorative term 'fans', immerse themselves in the universe of their favorite film(s), not the *oeuvre* of their chosen director(s). They are content with being viewers of the same film or franchise, over and over, and over again, as if on a perpetual loop. This time it is not the act of watching as many films as possible that counts, but the feat of watching as many times as possible the same film or selected group of films, usually pertaining to the same cinematic universe. These viewers are also a product of the seventies, metaphorically engendered either at the midnight

sessions of films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975, UK/ USA) much in vogue at that time, or caused by the appearance of the commercial phenomenon currently known as the intentional blockbuster, of which *Star Wars* (1977, George Lucas, USA) was the forerunner.

The fans may achieve their fusion with cinema in a different way from the cinephiles, but if one compares their habits, there is no denying that the fans' consumption is also highly specialized. This type of *fanatical* reception is a form of activism, characterized by the creation of a closed community which produces cult materials and whose love extends to all their everyday activities, consuming the viewers' entire time and energy. Janet Staiger (2005), following Henry Jenkins (1992), notes several aspects of the typical behavior of the fan: (1) a particular form of reception based on watching the films more than once with enormous fervor and making plans, filled with expectations, for the upcoming viewing; (2) the existence of an interpretative community that discusses the films/TV series in group, according to pre-established criteria (although there may be different views about the same object); (3) opinion activism (the fans express their points of view and speculations on several information platforms such as blogs and chat rooms); (4) cultural production (the fans not only consume, but they also actively produce several byproducts of their object of cult, namely news archives, letters, wardrobe, word games, fan fiction or fanfic,⁹ videos, role-playing situations; (5) a way of living based on the collection and continuous trading of objects, as well as trips and pilgrimages to famous sites related to the object of the cult; (6) group interaction consisting of conversations on the available communication platforms.

Two meta-films which depict this particular variety of meta-reception deserve a closer look: *Free Enterprise* (1998, Robert Mayer Burnett, USA) and *Fanboys* (2009, Kyle Newman, USA). The popular website *Rotten Tomatoes* rates the movie *Fanboys* at an incredibly low (only 32% of appreciation),⁹ *Free Enterprise* fares a lot better (at 83%). Both films adopt the exact same strategy and even parody the same sci-fi screen icon: the actor William Shatner, who portrayed Captain Kirk in both the original TV series of *Star Trek* and in the movie based upon it. The main characters of both films, but especially *Fanboys*, are depicted as being extremely childish, asexual (quite literally virgins), naturally alienated from reality without the need of drug abuse. To sum things up: misfits, by all criteria. Despite their odd habits and the obvious fact that they are dysfunctional, the viewer never ceases to sympathize with them, although straightforward identification is impossible (unless one is dysfunctional oneself). Although I have stated that the meta-spectator is the ideal viewer for meta-films, in this case, because of their low-brow comedic nature, the two films under scrutiny are exaggerations

of reality and not straightforward representations thereof. There is no immediate identification but a slightly distanced affection does take place anyway. The films might not enhance the aura of the fans portrayed, but they certainly do so of their love-objects: *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977, USA) and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Robert Wise, 1979, USA), both of which have by now become part of the collective cinematic imagination of the American people.

Free Enterprise is a satire on the *Star Trek* cinematic universe; *Fanboys* could be considered its filmic rival, since it illustrates the obsession of the *Star Wars* fans. In fact, this rivalry itself is part of the theme of *Fanboys*, which is probably why it was less appreciated than its counterpart. By deriding the *Star Trek* universe from a position of rivalry, *Fanboys* offends many specific fans and meta-viewers at large. These two films convey an accurate portrait of the behavior of 'Trekkers'¹⁰ and 'Warsies'¹¹ and both cast William Shatner as 'himself' poking fun at his own cinematic *persona*. This onscreen presence is more relevant in *Free Enterprise* where the filmic universe and the fans portrayed are that of the *Star Trek* Saga. Here 'The Captain' is the idol of the two main characters, Mark and Robert, respectively a producer and an editor in the Los Angeles movie industry, both incapable of maintaining stable relationships with women, despite the fact that they are already turning thirty. Robert (Rafer Weigel) talks rather intellectually about the Saga, referring to it as 'The Gestalt of *Star Trek*', but holds on to his action figures and starship models from the franchise with childish reverence. William Shatner, considered by both in their childhood years as 'The Laurence Olivier of airways', as Mark (Eric McCormack) puts it, turns out to be totally different in person from his 'living legend'. In fact, Shatner is more of a geek than the two film geeks themselves (Mark's small production company is significantly, albeit unobtrusively, called GEEks). Shatner does not seem to have any outstanding qualities: his artistic ideas are a catastrophe (he wants to star in all the male parts of a six hour-long musical version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*); he is a terrible snooker player and sings awfully; he drinks too much and likes pornographic magazines; he is awkward around women and dresses exotically. Still, he can quote admirably from Shakespeare and provides crucial advice to his two admirers ('Guys, you gotta mix a little reality with your imagination to achieve happiness in your life'). In fact, he is portrayed as a flawed but interesting and all-around nice human, not a God of celluloid. As he 'himself' says: 'Everybody expects the actors to be like the characters they play, not like who they really are' and 'You have to separate the art from the artist'. In *Fanboys* Shatner's presence is limited to only one scene, where he hands the group of *Star Wars*' buddies the plans to infiltrate The Skywalker Ranch, which they eventually do, thanks to his

precious help. Whereas on *Free Enterprise* the legend was Shatner, despite his 'real-life' shortcomings, here the protagonists want to become legendary themselves, by breaking into George Lucas' ranch and seeing the much awaited and yet unreleased *Star Wars, Episode I* before everybody else does: 'Our names will become legends, spoken by nerds throughout the galaxy'. The nerds are turned into heroes, as if by the waving of a magic wand; and by the same logic, the *Star Trek* hero (Captain Kirk/Shatner) is depicted as a traitor.

Despite their different filmic universes, both *Free Enterprise* and *Fanboys* have in common the fact that the protagonists are male and proudly so, despite the fact that their sex life is erratic or non-existent. In both films a 'girl', which is how they pejoratively refer to females, has to fight her way into one of the protagonists' hearts. This is achieved by sharing a common knowledge of the beloved filmic universe and by having similar collecting impulses (in other words, by becoming 'one of the boys'). Still, in *Fanboys* this is integrated into the mystique of the iconography in question since Zoe (Kristen Bell) will prove to be a marvelous sidekick to the character Windows (Jay Baruchel), his real-life Princess Leia, and actually dresses up that way for the much-announced premiere of their love-object. All the main characters in this film are younger than the male friends of *Free Enterprise*, and are (or should be) starting their professional lives after high school. They don't live or work anywhere near Los Angeles and have nothing to do with the film industry, but by managing to break into The Skywalker Ranch, as well as by attending the premiere of *Episode I*, they get in touch (and put us in touch) with a particular reality of film reception. Their emotional immaturity is reinforced by the way the script treats the rivalry between Trekkers and Warsies. In two separate occasions these two opposing groups battle each other, the fights being caused, in both situations, by a very *fan-atical* verbal offense: 'Han Solo's a bitch' (the expected answer being: 'Nobody calls Han Solo a bitch!').

Both films are deceptively simplistic, both aesthetically and commercially. Indeed, these two aspects come together in that both films cater to fans of the specific universes portrayed (at least those who have enough sense of humor to enjoy the satirical depiction and to recognize it as an exaggeration) and to film buffs at large, but within an undeniable teenage comic context. Both of the directors involved in these projects are what some critics would unsympathetically call Hollywood mainstream hacks: Robert Meyer Burnett is mainly an editor and *Free Enterprise* is the only feature he directed in a career that started in 1990; Kyle Newman had only directed two teenage comedy features and took no part in the screenwriting of *Fanboys*, which was his directorial debut in longer films. However, Meyer Burnett and Newman are self-confessed fans of the sagas *Star*

Trek and Star Wars, respectively,¹² which makes them authorities in a way, and sound choices for the direction of these projects.

To my mind, the fact that the first two films analyzed here are European productions and the last two are American movies is not to be disregarded. In fact, it has everything to do not only with the way this particular passion is regarded in each country, but also with the idea these two film industries have of their own cinematic output. North America tends to consider its films as narrative entertainment, whereas in Europe, and especially in France, cinema is highly regarded as a vehicle for *auteurs* (although France also has an entirely popular mainstream). The most important difference between these products is not, however, the objects they portray, but the way in which they depict them. High culture meta-cinema is all about nostalgia and pure affection; it perpetuates the aura of cinephilia. Mainstream low culture fandom, on the other hand, pokes fun at cinema through a commercial perspective. In doing so, however, *Free Enterprise* and *Fanboys* totally hit the mark without destroying the underlying cinema in the process.

Devoted viewers, one and all

Nowadays, the iconic and/or graphic properties of the blockbuster and the low-brow cult film call for a never before seen consumption of motifs instead of images and sounds, allowing the fan to live the filmic universe, without either any sense of the director being involved in the process or any reference to film aesthetics in general. Science fiction, which has formed a considerable part of the mainstream from the eighties onwards, and ultra-experimental products of dubious technical quality are now put on a par with so-called cinematic masterpieces of the 20th century. Ironically, it is precisely because of its association with low culture, that fandom, like cinephilia before it (through a different route), has become the subject of academic study, especially in the United States, a country that has always paid attention to celebrity and its manifestations. Whereas Godard relished the revolver and hat of the gangster in the American film noir cycle, to the point of incorporating them in the plot of *Breathless* (*À Bout de Souffle*, 1960, FRA), cinema fans now choose to dress up as Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia or Captain Kirk, to salute like Mr. Spock or to handle a light saber like a Jedi. What interests me here is not this reality *per se*, but how meta-cinema makes use of it, since both ends of the cinematic continuum have been depicted in meta-films.

As already hinted at above, there are incredible resemblances that place the cinephile and the film fan side by side, despite the fact that the former is nowadays associated with a form of high culture reception and production and the latter is associated with low culture film viewing. It seems to me that from

the eighties onwards there has been a common ground between different kinds of 'cinema lovers', one that ultimately resulted in the theoretical division of 'cinephiles' and 'fans' but which, ironically, only brought these two kinds of viewers closer together in practice. When compared, the films that represent such behaviors, state as much. Moreover, the preconceived idea that cinephilia is a worthier sort of activity and feeling than fandom is also dismantled. Not only do the above-mentioned low-brow meta-films about fan activity turn out to be cleverer and cinematically more gratifying than they first appear, but also the high-brow compulsion of cinephiles can seem a lot less interesting than is traditionally thought. That is not the case in the more descriptive films I have mentioned so far in this article, especially *Travelling avant*. Nevertheless, Louis Skorecki, a French cinephile who, in the seventies, questioned the love for movies in an extensive article entitled 'Contre la nouvelle cinéphilie', ('Against the New Cinephilia') inadvertently helps to convey an entirely unappealing idea of 1950s French '*mordus du cinéma*' in films such as *Les Cinéphiles 1: Le retour de Jean* (1988, FRA) and *Les Cinéphiles 2: Éric a disparu* (1988, FRA). In both these films young characters, who could pass for social misfits, do nothing but stand in line to buy cinema tickets (the cinema marquis is not seen and there is a general avoidance of film posters as well); or else they sit and stand somewhere else simply talking about films. No single shot of a film is shown, nor are there images of the inside of a film theatre. Actually, not even the filmic community teeming with intellectual fervor that De Baecque so fascinatingly writes about is put on screen for the viewer to see. Skorecki films nothing but idle talk, set against flat surfaces and, ironically enough, devoid of all emotion, which is precisely what characterizes cinephiles.

The reason these two films may hold some personal meaning for their director but may look so unappealing to most viewers (even specialized ones) has nothing to do with the lack of traditional storytelling. The problem is that they do not convey what should be the core of cinephilia: a moment of intimacy brought about by the moving image as it is *projected* or *perceived*. Paul Willemen (1992) describes the 'cinephiliac moment' (written this way to rhyme with 'necrophiliac') as a mixture of revelation and fetishistic collecting in which the object of desire consists of images of the film itself. The cinephile behaves much like a fisherman who casts his net over the film with the intent of capturing special moments which, however, were not choreographed by the director to be seen as such. In these instances the film produces a 'spark', isolating certain aspects of the film (scenes, gestures, looks, etc.). Christian Keathley (2006) takes up Willemen's idea, but adds another dimension to it: that of 'panoramic perception', as he calls it. The eye should scan the image, registering small details that act as catalysts for pleasure. This

look is ambivalent, inasmuch as it immerses the viewer in the film and, at the same time, establishes a distance from it. Nonetheless this 'moment', according to Keathley, could be considered a *mise-en-abyme* in which the obsessive relationship of the movie lover with films is revealed in its most dense and concentrated form (Keathley 2006, 32).

In their way of over-consuming the films, both cinephiles and fans could be found guilty of the aforementioned propensity. In meta-films, however, this consumption has to be extended to the universe in which these people reside, that is the human and spatial geography of the direct depiction of the cinematic art and industry. The eyes of the extra-diegetic metviewers are cast not only upon films, but especially upon communities and their worlds. The two types of successful meta-cinematic portrayals of specialized intra-diegetic film viewers I have undertaken to write about here (die-hard cinephiles and alienated film buffs) achieve the depiction of such communities, despite their affiliation with high or low culture. Therefore they both aim their spotlights or arrows, depending on the tone of the reception they have in mind (nostalgic or comic), at the specific communities and their mode of film viewing, but also, more to the point, at the way these viewings are based on a common faith and on living their loveobject to the full. Both, however, would miss their mark if the viewings themselves and the images and sounds of the love-object were not presented for us to see, either directly, as a film-within-the-film, or indirectly through the parading of posters, merchandising and the reenactment of narrative situations. One must not forget that these meta-cinematic products have to present their narrative and theme *in process* in order to address and involve the meta-viewer. In so doing, pop culture can definitely meet high art, a slogan one of the characters of *Free Enterprise* uses to his advantage during an industry pitch.

End notes

¹ Notwithstanding a possible ideological deconstruction of cinema.

² In fact, Janet Staiger divides this reception in two groups of products both of them characterized by ironic content, formal excess and anti-elitism: the 'para-cinematic' variety of B movies and exploitation cinema, made up of bad films, and the 'camp' variety of extremely hyper-gendered, violent and tacky content, usually watched in an atmosphere of communal participation.

³ There are many directors who have signed more than two meta-cinematic features, either in Europe or the United States. Europe: Agnès Varda, Alain Cavalier, Alain Resnais, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Andrzej Wajda, Carlos Saura, Claude Lelouch, Dino Risi, Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Jacques Rivette, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Lars von Trier, Luis Buñuel, Manoel de Oliveira, Maurizio Nichetti, Max Ophüls, Michael Haneke, Nanni Moretti, Pedro Almodóvar, Peter Greenaway; Pier Paolo Pasolini, Philippe Garrel, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the Chilean Raúl Ruiz, Theo Angelopoulos, Wim Wenders. In the United States and

Canada: Abel Ferrara, Albert Brooks, the British Alfred Hitchcock, the Canadian Atom Egoyan, Blake Edwards, Brian De Palma, Christopher Guest, Darren Aronofsky, the Canadian David Cronenberg, George Cukor, Harry Hurwitz, Henry Jaglom, Martin Scorsese, Mel Brooks, Orson Welles, Peter Bogdanovich, Quentin Tarantino, Robert Altman, Steven Soderbergh, Terry Gilliam, Tim Burton, Vincente Minnelli, Woody Allen. Many other filmmakers have directed at least one.

⁴ "Film festivals present a seductive return to classical cinephilia with their promise of a unique, unrepeatable experience frequently offering a rare opportunity to view films on the big screen before they disappear into the ether or only reappear on DVD. Festivals screen films as they were "meant to be seen", in the immersive space of the darkened movie theater" – Jenna Ng (2010, 141).

⁵ Moullet's film focuses on the activity of a professional critic from the famous magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* throughout an entire week of film watching sessions in one film theatre only - the 'Alcazar' of the film title – also attended by a colleague from the rival magazine, *Positif*. The work voices the cinematic considerations of the protagonist about the films seen; illustrates the rivalry between the two publications and their respective official positions on cinema. Comencini's film, on the other hand, although the action is set in a time before the birth of the *cinéclub* movement, is a depiction of an old film lover who visits the laboratories where film copies go to be chemically disposed of in the hopes of collecting enough material to set up a private museum. In so doing, the character acts as a selfappointed curator, trying to preserve Italian works of reference which he also shows at people's houses when such services are requested.

⁶ All quotations from this film are presented in my translation.

⁷ Among them are the serial *Les Vampires / The Vampires*, Louis Feuillade, 1915, FRA; *Le Courbeau / The Raven*, HenriGeorges Clouzot, 1943, FRA; and *Der Letzte Mann / English title: The Last Laugh*, F.W. Murnau, 1924, GER, which is shown at the first, and only session of Nino's *cinéclub*.

⁸ Either *zines* (specialized magazines with some editorial work) or *apas* (simple compilations without any criteria).

⁹ The film critic Roger Ebert doesn't do much better.

¹⁰ "Trekkies" is considered to be profoundly derogatory, as one of the Trekker characters of *Fanboys* so well points out.

¹¹ The official designation of the *Star Wars* fan is less consensual than that of the *Star Trek* saga.

¹² As indicated in many blogs, sites and online interviews (e.g. Other Worlds Austin; Blastr; MovieWeb, Hollywood Chicago.com).

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