
Article

The analytic gaze through the prism of childhood

Emmanuel Siety^{1,*}

¹Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, France

*Correspondence: filmeducationjournal@ed.ac.uk

Translated by Madeline Whittle

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Abstract

Translated into English for the first time by Madeline Whittle, Emmanuel Siety's article draws extensively on Jean Louis Schefer's *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* to explore the connection between the films we encounter in childhood and a lifelong relationship with cinema. Siety asks what is the role of film education in the moving-image saturated contemporary era for preserving something of the special bond formed by our first encounters with films in cinemas, and our self-development. The article further considers the limits of an analytical approach to film, as opposed to a phenomenological approach which privileges the direct experiences of cinema, going beyond the 'scholarly' interpretation of films.

Keywords Jean Louis Schefer; phenomenology; cinema going; self-development

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Giuliana – What should I do with my eyes? What should I watch?

Corrado – You ask what you should watch. I ask how I should live. It's the same thing.

Red Desert (1964) dir. Michelangelo Antonioni

The analysis of film engages an intimate part of the analyst: something of his past, his personal construction, within which cinema itself may play a decisive role. Inevitably, indeed, it engages a piece of his childhood or, to put it more enigmatically, an originary core. This is the lesson handed down so powerfully by certain atypical film books, of which one of the best may be Jean Louis Schefer's *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*, published in 1980, the back cover of which (written by Schefer) formulates this inner dialogue:

'Well, why do you go to the cinema?'

'I don't know! Or rather, as I understand it: I go to visit a world, a time, that *watched* our childhood.'

In 1993, *Cet enfant de cinéma que nous avons été* ('We were cinema's children') (Bergala and Bourgeois, 1993) invited an array of individuals of diverse status and from all generations – film scholars, critics, educators, directors, writers and students, forming a freely composed, heterogeneous community, with no pretensions of sociological representativity – to reflect on the genesis of their relationship with cinema: the first films watched, or remembered, with whom, in what circumstances, and what impressions they made, prompted by a questionnaire to which each participant could respond freely, sequentially or not, in succinct fragments or a more constructed text. This approach rested on the conviction that, as Alain Bergala wrote, 'when we go to the cinema today, even if we find it much changed, and ourselves changed along with it, we are always accompanied more or less secretly by the cinema-child that we once were', with the aim of giving form and visibility to this hypothesis via a mosaic of testimonies, like the Chinese portrait of an intimate shared truth (1993: 9).

In an earlier interview with Serge Toubiana, Serge Daney (1994) analysed the family saga that had steered him to cinema, in relation to the seminal figure of a father whom he had never met, dissolved in the anonymity of internment, but whose ghost would be accommodated by the whole of cinema, and who would grant Serge Daney the status of 'cine-son'.

In *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*, Jean Louis Schefer (1980) takes care to distinguish between two types of spectators, 'the ordinary man' and the scholarly spectator endowed with an analytic gaze. 'The ordinary man' of cinema, he writes, is 'he for whom objects of pleasure become objects of knowledge, not the inverse' (Schefer, 1980: back cover). He is insistent on this point in the book's introductory text, regarding the cinematic experience that he will attempt to define: 'For the spectator, cinema is first and foremost something completely different than what filmic analyses reflect of it' (1980: 11). And a bit later: 'Cinema and cinematic images don't automatically call up any technical or theoretical knowledge. That kind of knowledge doesn't matter so much to me' (1980: 16). Serge Daney (1994: 20), influenced by Schefer's book and his proposal regarding the 'films that have watched our childhood', added: 'It's one thing to learn to watch films "professionally" ... and quite another to live with those films that watched us grow up and that have seen us, early hostages to our future biographies, already ensnared in the toils of our history.'

We must not grant too much significance to the proposed distinction between film analyst and ordinary man, between he who watches films professionally and he who lives among the films that watch him. This distinction only makes sense in relation to a normative conception of the professional gaze and the scientist's ethos, and these books and their authors have the virtue of revealing the blind spots inherent in this framework, consequently inviting us to re-evaluate the learned gaze according to a metric of intimacy. The distinction is only worth posing in order to be revised, using the method employed by Daniel Arasse (2005) in *On n'y voit rien*, a collection of texts in which Arasse manhandles the figure of the orthodox art historian with equal parts humour and intensity, and without making any concessions in terms of methodological rigour and erudition. The film analyst may be afraid of compromising himself in affect and subjectivity. He does not want to deceive himself regarding the object of his analysis (he means to speak not of himself, but of films) nor its discursive category (what he posits is not a judgement of taste, but an argued proposition that is thus refutable or revisable). The film analyst, however, cannot help but

recognise the child of cinema that he once was, the originary core that informs his viewing of films, and he need not elucidate the reasons why certain films watch him in order to pursue avenues of growth whose benefits may well exceed his own private interest.

We can imagine the child we once were – and who survives within us, deflecting our gaze – by considering three interdependent levels, each inscribed within another like three concentric circles.

First, in the outermost circle, there is the experiential framework that initially moulded our way of looking at the world in general, and that thus conditioned our way of looking at the films that we were brought to see, as experiences to be lived and as statements about the world.

Next, there survives within us the child who went to the cinema. By going to the cinema, even to see films that he did not see as a child, the adult repeats an experience that he has already had. He reconnects with an originary phenomenological experience that the technological evolution of cinema and of audiovisual practices may have profoundly altered. He may find it intact but nevertheless be conscious of a loss, a distancing, a lack. For many, this cinematic phenomenology, independently of the films themselves, was the scalar experience of the theatre, the promise of the screen's white surface, the expectation of darkness, the emotion of the dimming lights, the projector's luminous beam traversing the room, and something else: sound and light, sparkling colour or the archaic magic of black and white, actions, movements, faces – what we call a film. There are others: lost phenomenologies – swept aside by technological innovation, but persisting through the 1970s and 1980s – of projecting little silent Super 8 reels in a corner of the house that could be made dark, accompanied by the mechanical purring of the projector, heir to the magic lantern projections that so profoundly influenced young Marcel Proust and the child Ingmar Bergman, a phenomenology of an intimate cinema that opens a portal to the unknown in the domestic sphere.

Finally, there survives within us the child who encountered not only *cinema*, but certain *films* in particular. This is why Serge Daney identified two categories of films, those which 'watched us grow' and all the rest. 'For me, *Psycho*, *La Dolce Vita*, *The Indian Tomb*, *Rio Bravo*, *Pickpocket*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, *Tales of the Taira Clan*, or indeed, *Night and Fog* are films unlike all others. To the question "does this watch you?", they all answered "yes" (Daney, 1994: 20).

What, then, do these films of our childhood, films that saw us grow up, carry forth out of the past into our adult consciousness? Marcel Proust (1987) wrote, on the subject of books that were once childhood favourites: 'If we still happen today to leaf through those books of another time, it is for no other reason than that they are the only calendars we have kept of days that have vanished, and we hope to see reflected on their pages the dwellings and the ponds which no longer exist.' This private memorial dimension, this aptitude of a book, or a film, for bottling the unique fragrance of a lived moment, is equally present in Schefer's (1980: 11) reflections:

If the cinema – leaving aside for the moment its constant renewal in every film and in every screening of every film – is defined by its special power to produce lasting effects of memory, then we must know, and must have known for several generations, that through this memory a part of our lives passes into our recollections of films, including films that might seem totally unrelated to our lives' actual circumstances.

For all that, the memorial model that Schefer (1980: 11) constructs is less concerned with the possible restitution of an intact fragment of the past than with *effects of present-day meaning* elicited by filmic images in our adult consciousness, resulting from the persistence somewhere within us of a relationship with these images dating back to our first experiences of cinema:

The meaning that comes to us (and that comes to us inasmuch as we are a site of resonance for image effects, for the 'depth' of images, and inasmuch as we handle the entire future of these images and sounds as affects and as meaning), that very particular quality of meaning made sensible is inextricably linked to the conditions of our vision; quite precisely to the experience ..., and perhaps even to the very first experience of seeing them.

The enigma, for Schefer (1980), lies in the ways in which our present-day viewing conditions are marked by the primordial encounter with cinema in general, and with certain films in particular. These conditions are, for the ordinary man of cinema, but also for the film analyst, foundational elements of his adult understanding and discernment. Schefer invents a part of our selves that is sworn to silence, 'permeable to effects of meaning without ever being able to be born into meaning through our language' (Schefer, 1980: 12), and that he calls, at times, 'the invisible part of ourselves' (Schefer, 1980: 15), at times an 'ultimate chamber' – 'where the hope and ghost of an *interior history* circulate' (Schefer, 1980: 17) – and, elsewhere, an 'unknown center' (Schefer, 1980: 166), a prism through which our present experience is carried out. *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* is an invitation to partake in a state of consciousness and a quality of attention with regard to the cinema and to films, singular and personal though they may be, which must necessarily be capable of addressing us, and of communicating something about *all of us*: 'It is impossible that my experience of cinema could be completely solitary' (Schefer, 1980: 11).

Regarding the films that watched him grow up, Daney likewise does not entertain any associations related to memory and the fixed restoration of the past. On the subject of the trip to Hollywood that he undertook in 1964 with Louis Skorecki to interview several surviving pioneers of film-making (himself only 20 years old, having recently made his *Cahiers du cinéma* debut), Daney (1994: 88) offered this commentary that sheds light on his relation to the past: 'The voyage to America was in conversation with this ... belief that anything that has value is necessarily "in the present tense." ... That which is no longer active may well be left to the sociologists, the cultural commentators, the scholars; it does not concern me.'

On a personal level, one's factual childhood may belong to the past, but childhood as a symbolic, legendary, imaginary construct is perpetually under construction, always in the present tense, especially during an encounter with the films that contributed to the formation of one's self-image:

If I made the little boy in *The Night of the Hunter* into one of my favourite *alter egos* (the other being John Mohune in *Moonfleet*), it was because this child was around ten years old when the film was made, in 1955, and was thus an exact contemporary of mine, my 'American' brother. The way in which the little boy, directed by Laughton, gazes upon a situation whose gravity he cannot yet comprehend, knowing only that he must look after his own sister, who knows only that she is a woman; the wide-eyed gaze of those who don't know how to play, inexperienced children who are all but little adult impersonators: this was the legend in which I wanted to appear, this was the facet of myself that I like to think the cinema revealed to me in the end, like a photo that would have taken twenty years to develop. (Daney, 1994: 63)

The question is not at what age Serge Daney saw these two films. What is important here is that, through the mediation of the fictional children John Mohune and John Harper, he encountered childhood. But what childhood? Not the remembered one, but childhood as it is delivered to us, in the present moment of the construction of the self, by way of the encounter between certain films and the originary core that we carry within ourselves and which, in Daney's case, qualified him to recognise these two cinematic boys as his alter egos.

These two films pose the additional question of how the figure of the cinematic child plays into this dynamic, linking the present and the past in the spectator's experience, the present seen through the prism of the past and the past reworked by present experience, a past rendered even more present by the encounter with the films. Once again, the figure of the child gestures as much toward the past as toward the present moment of the adult spectatorial experience and an *ethic of the gaze*. Cinema, writes Daney (1994: 78), 'is not a technology for displaying images, it is an *art of showing*. And showing is a gesture, one which obliges an individual to see, to watch. Without this gesture, there is nothing but the image.' The fiction of childhood-in-training (two young men learning the ways of the world, fatherless boys called upon to construct an image of the missing father figure) here facilitates the formation of a real childhood, at the same time that it corroborates the cinematic corpus of observant children (from *Germany Year Zero*

to *Life, and Nothing More...*), alter ego of the film-maker and the spectator, each of whom works hard to establish a gaze and to devise for himself a way of moving through the world and through images.

Christian Metz, in *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), distinguishes between works about cinema in general, as a spectatorial apparatus, and works about particular filmic objects. *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* is a product of both approaches. A portion of its poetics of cinema is developed over a series of unillustrated passages, where films burst forth, so to speak, from an inner crucible; but for sixty pages or so, the book's structure and logic contrast with the rest of the work. This part, titled 'The Gods', carries out a selective, targeted analysis of around thirty film stills. The term 'analysis' may be debated in light of the freeness of the author's prose and his asserted subjectivity. At the very least, we may posit that what's at work here is an art of showing, to borrow Daney's formula, and not merely one of extrapolating. The texts are short, no more than one or two pages, and systematically paired with a preliminary, uncaptioned image, invoking precise elements from the image's contents while granting it a new visibility in the process. In this sense, these texts are indeed formative of the gaze, which may well be the principal aim of any analytic text.

Taken together, these texts '[offer] the gaze traces of vision, from the inside, in order that it may espouse them', as Merleau-Ponty (1961: 126) wrote on the subject of painting. In Schefer's (1980: 11) terms: 'I thus wanted to account for that single feeling of persistent strangeness – as if it were that image-receiving humus – born with "my" cinema, and to write it down in order to make it palpable.'

This vision by way of the ultimate chamber, the inner hearth where our earliest images congregate, possesses art's power of defamiliarisation, as described by Victor Shklovsky (1917: 12), and which, in its ambition to render visible, or to recover one's sight, can be so aptly applied to the project of analysis: 'Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony ... the technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," a process that consists in complicating the form, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception.'

Scheferian vision proves especially effective at detecting those cinematic effects which are the product of incompleteness, transformation, regressive processes, akin to the memorial dynamics of the inner chamber, circulating between three levels: first on the level of embodiment, with a predilection for the investigation of disorders and anatomical aberrations; then on the level of affects, of urges, of moral behaviour; and finally on the level of the imaging material. Thus, Schefer's talent for bluntly exposing the infantile erotic urges that run through the imagery of Laurel and Hardy's films goes hand in hand with a capacity for examining the figurative cruelty at work in the genres of fantasy, horror and burlesque, and with an extreme sensitivity to the materiological imagination conjured up by such films as *Vampyr* (Carl Dreyer) or *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström).

This vision-from-within operates on a highly specific corpus of films, and it can be identified as the elective principle of a group of works capable of 'irradiating' the child of cinema, and of enabling the realisation of a process of co-birth. Among the analysed images, we find three instances of films featuring Laurel and Hardy, but also Keaton, Chaplin, and the films of Mack Sennett. The burlesque genre, a category of films generally intended for an audience of children, is here joined by horror and fantasy: four [miscounted by Siety] instances of Tod Browning's *Freaks*, but also the same director's *The Devil Doll*, Terence Fisher's *The Mummy*, Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr*, and Murnau's *Nosferatu*. The second part of *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*, titled 'The Gods', is essentially a gallery of monsters whose composition draws as much on the bestiary of the burlesque as on that of horror: miniaturised, putrefied, obese, atrociously mutilated creatures (the Living Torso of *Freaks*, for example). Also present are Stroheim (*The Merry Widow*) and Renoir's *Nana*, substantiating a cinema of cruelty and perversion. Likewise, elsewhere in the book we find references to *Los Olvidados* and *Shoeshine*, films about orphaned children and wretched childhoods.

Certainly there is a biographical element at play in the selection of these works, written implicitly, between the lines, scrupulously avoiding the use of 'I' in order to preserve the enigmatic status of the child that the author had once been, an enigma lodged within him, impossible to colonise and uncontrollable in its effects. Schefer, born in 1938, sketches the outline of a wartime experience as though utterly free

from fear – ‘the earth did not open up beneath the feet of a distracted child: no cries were ever emitted near him’ (Schefer, 1980: 96) – and slips in the clue of a long-gone father – no remains to be identified, no dead body – which links him, surprisingly, to scenes from Serge Daney’s childhood. All this, as though deferred, would be poured back into his first cinematic experience after the war, a viewing of *Shoeshine* (Vittorio De Sica, 1946):

Catastrophe couldn’t take a step, even through the rubble, even through bereavement, until the day the child was taken to the cinema. *Shoeshine*: the fear of the war and its four years of terror, of shattered objects and vanished faces became fixed in an instant in that particular movie theatre, on the image of that first film. (Schefer, 1980: 96)

Schefer (1980: 96) presents this delayed consciousness, this out-of-sync dawning of fear brought on by cinema, as not merely his own personal business, but that of a generation: ‘This was how the fear of war spooked so many children after the Liberation; they not only became aware of the fear of having escaped a massacre, but also gained the intermittent awareness of having died all the same’; in this respect, ‘the chattering of teeth was not limited to Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and Walt Disney’, and thus ‘Only in this way did the war never end’ (Schefer, 1980: 96). But was this fear merely one generation’s, or could it help to identify fear as a primordial affect of cinema – ‘every child’s first experience at the movies, the one that colours all the rest’ (Schefer, 1980: 12) – by virtue of the affinity between one dark room and another, between the shadowy movie theatre and our own inner chamber?

And why did that fear awake as excessively and as madly, as madly out of control as laughter? If not because we were then closer to death, and to the fear of dying, because we’d just emerged from it, not because of the unfinished war, but because of our fear of the dark that was just coming to an end; the darkness that had scared us when we didn’t know how to speak: we were barely emerging from inextinguishable death and the dark was returning to reveal those expressions of desire that we could not understand. (Schefer, 1980: 162)

One of the most salient aspects of this portrait of cinema viewed through the prism of childhood is this pointed attention to ratios of magnitude. In one image, Stan Laurel is on all fours to act as a step stool for a servant who, standing balanced on his back, can thereby reach a telephone mounted unrealistically high on the wall, inaccessible in the same way that many objects would be for children. The imagination becomes agitated, childhood and adulthood commingling around this image, whose element of perversity Schefer accentuates with a single scathing gesture – the infantile regression of the man on all fours, the masochistic eroticism of his submission and reification in relation to the servant who tramples him underfoot:

It is thus the entire body, rather than the contingency of its psychology, that is a fiction. And if I linger another moment in this kitchen, what can I do? Undo the girl’s apron, count the ceramic tiles, measure the improbably high placement of the telephone and become the smallest Lilliputian of all? And will I, because of all this, weep and shrink? (Schefer, 1980: 41)

Another text devoted to an image of Laurel and Hardy (Lewis R. Foster’s *Men O’ War*, 1929 [misattributed by Siety]) is titled ‘The Object’. The object in question, as we understand upon looking at the image, is a woman’s undergarment held aloft by Hardy. In the image, Laurel, Hardy and two women are horizontally aligned. The two men exchange a look, Laurel’s finger pointing in the direction of the two young women, whose slim waists make it difficult to imagine that the outsized object could belong to one of them. ‘Enigmatic objects (without attribution), modest attitudes and lowered eyes: it’s a kind of pass-the-slipper game, interrupted by the same attitude at once modest and indecent. We must imagine the bottom, the owner of such knickers’ (Schefer, 1980: 51).

In the film *Brats* (1930), the comic duo manoeuvre around a set of oversized furniture for the simple reason that the two protagonists are supposed to be children – except that, as we come to understand,

the confused pleasure of the film is inextricable from the sight of these adult bodies infantilised by decree of their environment. The image from *Men O' War* dispenses with any such pretext, applying the factor of enlargement to a woman's undergarments, and thus causing the two men to regress without a narrative alibi.

We turn the page to reveal the next image, and the Laurel and Hardy film is succeeded by Dreyer's *Master of the House*. We are then struck by an unexpected kinship between two polar-opposite images: in a beautiful composition reminiscent of Pieter de Hooch, a woman stands in a doorway, holding over a tub a rectangular linen illuminated by an out-of-frame light source. The calculated juxtaposition of the two images substitutes a linen (redefined as a 'shroud' in the title of the text) for the 'object' held by Oliver Hardy. Just as Schefer's gaze explodes the boundaries between laughter and mourning, between burlesque and horror, this juxtaposition wastes no time in knocking us sideways, trading sexual perversion for Christian mysticism, one fetish for another. It is a testament to how thoroughly the writing and the ensemble of images embrace this logic of indifferenciation, of association, of cruel transmutation that recalls a Baudelairean child determined to see 'the soul' of his toys: 'So there is this invisible chamber inside us, where, in the absence of any object, we torture the human race itself, and from which, mysteriously, incomprehensibly, the feeling or conscious anticipation of the sublime comes to us' (Schefer, 1980: 17).

The invisible chamber is not unlike the laboratory of Doctor Moreau in the novel by H.G. Wells, an experimental torture chamber of the human race. By watching cinema in accordance with the vision-from-within, Schefer assembles film fragments and images that are liable to make the cinema, in turn, resemble a similar laboratory. And what better than the image of a cinematic mummy, with its bandages and its battered head like a lump of clay, to open up our understanding of the ephemeral production of all these rough-hewn beings that cross our consciousness in the course of watching a film? In the corresponding text, 'The Mummy', Schefer (1980: 31) writes:

Here arises a being that was never engendered in this world (nor in history); an organism endemic to cinema comes to infect us with its impossible birth. And as a spectator I am thus the perpetual site of this birth and of a duration that is never granted to monsters.

In the inner crucible, we understand that bodies enjoy the greatest intimacy with material reality, from a dusting of flour in *Vampyr*, to the flakiness of analogue film, by way of make-up's thickness. Thus, Schefer (1980: 81) writes of Catherine Hessling as Nana in Jean Renoir's film, with her excess of cosmetics: 'A kind of white butter deposits its cream on the face that continues to darken (to rot and to watch) beneath that same layer.'

We may wonder about the historicity of this 'invisible chamber' – was the particular moment of the post-war period essential for establishing such an affinity between the spectator and the cinema, through the ordeal of death and fear? Reading Schefer and Daney, or rewatching *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, one might think so. Still, we can ponder what could be the obscure chamber of today's young spectators, tomorrow's adults. Are they still spectators? Are they allowed to be? Or would we prefer them to be merely users of audiovisual media? Are digital images and computers and smartphone screens, this proliferation of miniaturised imagery, capable of fostering such a stronghold? In the age of social networks and the widespread confiscation of intimate space, we cannot help but think that it might be the task of film education to safeguard this vision-from-within, sealed away in the darkness – the task of training students to practise a certain way of looking through, and looking at, the art of cinema.

Filmography

Brats (US 1930, James Parrott)

The Devil Doll (US 1936, Tod Browning)

Freaks (US 1932, Tod Browning)

Germany Year Zero (IT/FR/DE 1948, Roberto Rossellini)
Life, and Nothing More (IR 1992, Abbas Kiarostami)
Los Olvidados (MX 1950, Luis Buñuel)
Master of the House (DK 1925, Carl Dreyer)
Men O' War (US 1929, Lewis R. Foster)
The Merry Widow (US 1925, Erich von Stroheim)
Moonfleet (US 1955, Fritz Lang)
The Mummy (GB 1959, Terence Fisher)
Nana (FR 1926, Jean Renoir)
The Night of the Hunter (US 1955, Charles Laughton)
Nosferatu (DE 1922, F.W. Murnau)
Red Desert (IT/FR 1964, Michelangelo Antonioni)
Shoeshine (IT 1946, Vittorio De Sica)
Vampyr (DE/FR 1932, Carl Dreyer)
The Wind (US 1928, Victor Sjöström)

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