

Twilight at the Cinema

His refuge from IBM is the cinema. In a film called L'Eclisse a woman wanders through the streets of a sunstruck, deserted city.... The woman is Monica Vitti. With her perfect legs and sensual lips and abstracted look, Monica Vitti haunts him; he falls in love with her. He has dreams in which he, of all men in the world is singled out to be her comfort and solace...

Youth J. M. Coetzee

The business of growing old crept up on him slowly. It was not something he had thought about or planned for. There was no course on it in college. And then one day there it was, staring him straight in the face--grey beard, cold, dark hands, brittle bones, wrinkles here and there, and more, of course. It simply engulfed him, all of him, from top to bottom, from that day onward.

It arrived one night when he had gone to the cinema. In those days, a ticket cost \$6.50. Those were the days, weren't they? He approached the ticket booth and plunked down a five-dollar bill and recognized at once that it was not enough. But before he had a chance to add to it, the woman in the booth gave him change. Mindlessly he took it, walked away, ticket in hand, feeling rather sly. Yet he was puzzled and wondered if there had been a special discount that night. However, it wasn't Tightwad Tuesday or any special day that he was aware of.

Finally, it dawned on him. The woman at the ticket counter thought he was over 65 and had charged him the senior rate. He stopped in his tracks--aghast. There it was in all its horror, his premier performance as an honored citizen. He recalled all those times before when he had teased the young woman behind the ticket counter by asking for a senior ticket. His batting average at this ploy would have barely qualified him for the Sally League. But now when he was in no mood to play the game, it wasn't even necessary.

As the years went by, he found himself going to the cinema more often. Who could resist that senior discount? Instead of heading for the links, he went off to the movie house. He had always been drawn to films; now he had the time to see them. They were his “refuge,” his teacher, and now his only escape. He never tired of seeing his favorites again, always finding something new that he had missed before or forgotten about or wanted to recapture once again. Like literature, films gave him a place to locate his feelings. They gave him new ideas to tinker with, called into question others, and reminded him where he belonged. They consoled him, helping him to get through his dormancy for a few hours. He was amazed at their power and the way they entered his life.

He lived with the characters for days, couldn't get them out of his mind. There were moments when he thought he took on their appearance and others when he would begin emulate their behavior. It took more than a week to recover from the somber tone of *In America*, in spite of the irrepressible joy and sparkle of the two little girls. Their indomitable spirit could not overcome the specter of death that hovered over their life. At the end Christy, an eleven year old, as beautiful and as perceptive a person as he had ever seen on film, asks you to try to forget, to try to forget the death of her brother, even though she knows that neither she nor you will ever be able to.

Christy narrates the story of her family's emigration to America from Ireland. She tells it quietly and realistically. Her reticence is beguiling. We know she sees well beyond appearances; we know that mostly by her silences. Her quiet knowing manner as she tells her story is the only reason he goes to see the film again. He wishes there were more people like Christy. He wishes he knew them too. One would be enough.

Now that he is a member of the discount demographic, he goes to the cinema more than he cares to admit. He feels somewhat like Susan Sontag who “At the end of her life, working hard, and often ill...went to the movies every day of the week.”¹ It is no

¹ David Denby, The Moviegoer: Susan Sontag's life in film. *The New Yorker*, September 12, 2005.

surprise, however, that they do not make many movies about the twilight years. Can you imagine how long they would last in those 25-theater suburban multiplexes? However, occasionally he finds one in a video or DVD made for art house patrons, usually with sub-titles, that are his favorites anyway.

In the Argentine film *Common Ground* Fernando, an aging literature professor in Buenos Aires is forced into retirement leaving him and his devoted wife, Lili, to confront their reduced economic resources. They conclude they must move to the countryside to try to carve out a new life on a small farm. It is not an easy adjustment. He sees this film at a time when he and his wife are facing the same realities. At dinner one night they talk about their plans. Like Lili and Fernando, they must move on, yet they are uncertain about where to go. He seeks warmth; she is happy to stay put. He dreams of Italy; she has no desire to move abroad. This dialogue has been going on for years. She says the thought has occurred to her to forget about him, to buy a little house somewhere and do what she wants. He is stunned by her remark.

While he has been looking for some common ground, she has been thinking about giving up on him. He doesn't know how this is possible after all their years together. Yes, he is aware there is often an imbalance in love. Still he wonders if he really means anything to her anymore. He has his doubts that they will ever be able to pick up the pieces and find some contentment elsewhere, anywhere, excluding Italy.

In *Common Ground* Fernando and Lili try valiantly. They begin by learning how to grow lavender to be used in the manufacturer of perfume. They prepare the land, they order the plants, they are happy together on their farm. Like Fernando he too has also thought about buying a small farm, one where he could have a lemon orchard, and perhaps a few fruit trees. He imagines learning what it takes to grow and care for them. He thinks he would be happy doing that. He knows his wife would be happy as long as there was ample space for her flower garden. Yes, he would like to try. Sadly, in *Common Ground*

Fernando succumbs to pneumonia before the lavender is planted. He is sure Fernando's fate will be his too.

He finds the current movie scene hopeless. The days when you went to see every film from France and Italy are long gone. Where oh where is Ingmar Bergman these days? He concludes the Summer Doldrums have become a permanent, year-round fixture now. It is not unusual for him now to walk out of a film well before it is over. Things have become so bleak he decides to see *Shall We Dance*, a remake of the quite wonderful Japanese film of the same name. It seems the Hollywood crowd is making nothing but remakes these days, a testament to their epic creative talents.

He is surprised by how much he enjoys it. Everyone enjoys it. When it is over, the audience bursts into applause. Such a light film. Fun yes. But applause? He is reminded of a Sunday matinee when a young woman came down before the audience and asked for everyone's attention. She announced to the perplexed assembly that it is her mother's birthday, indeed, a very special one, and asks everyone to join in singing happy birthday to her. Without a moment's delay everyone begins a lusty Happy Birthday to, Sandy followed by wild applause from the smiling moviegoers.

He begins musing over a scene in *Shall We Dance* where a middle-aged woman meets the detective she has hired to snoop on her husband who she suspects is having an affair with his dancing instructor. They meet in a bar. She wants him to end the investigation. The detective wants to flirt with her. He asks her why do so many people get married? She replies at once by saying it is to bear witness to your life.

He is startled by her comment. How odd he thought. It reminds him of a remark one of the characters in Rachel Cusk's novel *The Lucky Ones* that he happens to be reading then: "I felt a terrible despair at having failed to find another human being to corroborate my existence." He didn't think that was why most people married or the reason they would give if you asked them why they did. That is not why he married his wife or why she married him as far as he knows. It had nothing to do with confirming their existence.

Rather his life seemed to unfold on its own, independently of the responses of his wife to the accounts of it that he gave her. Yes, it was sometimes pleasing to tell her about his day, how he felt, and the ideas he had. Sometimes it was even instructive. But their marriage was not dependent on her bearing witness to these accounts or of his witnessing hers.

In the film *Intimate Strangers* a woman walks into the office of a tax accountant and begins, ever so hesitantly to unload her troubles. The meeting is brief. We know she had an appointment with a psychiatrist whose office is down the hall. We think she has simply entered the wrong office.

Nevertheless, she arranges to see the accountant-befuddled-shrink again. The next meeting is a little longer, more tearful, even more puzzling to the accountant. However, he clearly relishes her tale. And she clearly enjoys unraveling it to him. Their one-way conversation enlivens them both. The sessions become longer, the details more intimate, the accountant, now fully engaged, more questioning.

He saw this film during a time when he felt his isolation was growing oppressive. Like the woman in the film, he simply wanted to talk with someone. He wanted to express himself. He knew nothing would change in the long run, although it did for the woman in the film as she eventually flees from her marriage, and moves to the south of France.

One raining afternoon he went to see *Before Sunset*. Jesse and Celine meet again in Paris nine years after that memorable train ride when they had met and spent the night wandering through the streets of Vienna. In *Before Sunrise* they were young lovers. In *Before Sunset* they are subtler, wiser, but still in love. This time their connection seems deeper, more genuine, more real.

“Connection.” Celine speaks of it twice. What is it, what is their connection to each other, what does it mean, in general, to connect with someone else? What is the exhilaration that comes from the experience? Why is it so rare? Why do we yearn for it

so much? It is fleeting. It leads nowhere. It never lasts. It can never last, can it? Show me a connection that has lasted much beyond its beginnings.

Not surprisingly he is irresistibly drawn to films depicting the relationship between an attractive young woman and older man. It is one of his maladies. He thinks it may be a common malady of aging men. It also appears to be a subject that movie makers with all their epic talent never tire of making for this demographic. He recalls *Housekeeper* about a man in his 50s who hires an alluring young woman to clean his house. Another, *The Girl in the Café* about a dapper diplomat who invites a girl that he has met by chance in a crowded café to come with him to a G8 summit meeting. He sees *Shopgirl* in which a computer magnate courts a young woman who is 35 years younger and sells gloves at Saks.

Lost in Translation is far and away his favorite of this genre. None can come close. There is no lust in *Lost in Translation*. There is none of the awkwardness that usually characterizes most depictions of a couple like this. She is young, about twenty; he is almost three decades older in his fifties. In spite of this difference, they find themselves at loose ends and similar mind at the swanking Park Hyatt in Tokyo. They never talk about their age difference, although early on she says he must be going through a “mid-life crisis.” He thought it was the only false moment in the film.

The fact that these two people, at opposite ends of their lives are drawn to one another is the heart of the film. They banter, they jest, or simply gaze at one another. There is never any hint that he can't keep up with her or that he is uncomfortable playing around with her friends. He is as young as they are. Sofia Coppola, the film's author and director, put it this way: “But I think that, you know, that early 20s kind of 'what am I going to do with my life?' crisis I felt was similar to the guy having a mid-life crisis. I just related to his character and allowed them to both be kind of going through similar things, but from other ends of the spectrum.”

Yet he didn't think it was necessarily a younger woman older man crisis. It is a crisis that any two individuals can have at any time in their lives. The connection between Bob and Charlotte is startling. He kept wondering what they could they ever do? What kind of a relationship could they possibly have? He wanted them to have a future. And yet he knew that was impossible. At the end Bob says he doesn't want to leave. Charlotte replies, well don't. We'll start a jazz band. Age is so irrelevant. And yet it colors everything. She is newly married and unhappily so. He has been married 25 years and finds it is growing tedious. The emotional torpor of their separate lives is the springboard of their relationship.

He often finds himself puzzled why the characters depicted in contemporary films act the way they do. They may be indecisive or ambivalent or violent or they may feel strongly about another person. But it isn't clear why. And so they are less compelling than they might be. None of this is the case for *Lost in Translation*. He knew why Charlotte and Bob were there, why they were at loose ends. He understood them. At the end of the film he cannot get them out of his mind. The feeling lasts for days. It enters his dreams.

Charlotte is luminous, totally unadorned. There is nothing racy or pretentious about her. She is quiet, inquisitive, reflective. He learns she was a philosophy major at Yale and so there is a reason for her doubts and curiosity. There is also a sweetness about her, a sweet and melancholy wistfulness. She is thoroughly irresistible. She speaks softly. She is quiet. While she doesn't say much, when she does, it is smart, clear, and to the point. She seems years older than her age. The rhythm and tone of her words is lovely.

Bob is detached, bemused, and full of hilarious wit and innocuous nonsense. She approaches him in the bar and asks him what he's up to. He says he is planning a prison break and asks if she is in or out. When she tells him she studied philosophy, he tells her there must be a "good buck in that racket." What is it that he sees in her? Is it her youth? The good times they have together? The escape from his sleeplessness and boredom? Or a trifling fling far away from home? The depth of their apparent feeling argues against

those possibilities. Yet, he wonders if they would have been drawn to one another if they had not been geographically removed from their spouses?

The ending is wrenching. They depart from the Park Hyatt rather clumsily. On the drive to the airport Bob sees Charlotte walking down a crowded street. He tells the driver to stop and races after her. They embrace and with tears in her eyes and maybe his too, they finally kiss for a heartbreaking moment. He whispers something to her. And then, as they must, they go their separate ways.

The summer is over now. Soon it will be hard to remember what it was like. He cannot understand why it is so hard to remember the warm days of summer during the icy days of winter. He wonders if we could simply warm ourselves up by recalling those blistering days of August? We become sad by recalling times of distress. Why not warm by recalling those days by the pool in Tuscany?

To try he watches *Heaven* again one night. Italian is spoken in many of the scenes. Grim events occur in Milan and then the final third takes place in Tuscany, in and around the hill town of Montepulciano. It was the Tuscan countryside that drew him back to the film--the dry rolling hills, the lone oaks on the hilltops, the long dirt roads with an old villa at the end. It was warm, the light was clear, the colors were vivid--yellow and orange, the mood was subdued and peaceful. He often wonders if he could live there? Once again his thermostat rises just a bit.

He recalls a walk he took one morning when he was staying at a small medieval *borgo* in the heart of Tuscany. The sun was rising on yet another clear and warm day. He knew there was nothing like the early morning light of a Tuscan morning. The path he took bisected two large fields of ripening grapes that led away from the *borgo* toward the main highway. Small groves of olive trees were growing out in the fields and off in the distance he could see the bell tower of the village of Castelnuovo Bernardgna. It seemed too good to be true. Once again he felt so at one with the world. Not a person could be seen or heard. He wonders if that might have been his last visit to Italy. He wasn't

getting any younger. How many more times could he do this? Ah, yes, the problem of age again. It will not go away. He wonders if he will have to spend the rest of his life seeing films about Italy, instead of going there. What a bleak thought!

Every now and then he falls in love with a movie star. In the beginning it was Julie Christie. More recently it was Juliette Binoche who he knows he will marry one day. And then there is the lovely Gwyneth Paltrow. Since she is now married, he will have to simply dream about her. She even has a child now. She named him Apple. Well, what could you expect from Gwyneth? He wonders if her next child will be known as Pear? Or will it be a vegetable, something like Tomato or Avocado?

Gwyneth, he can't even spell it, let alone pronounce it. He is not sure what people call her? What does she prefer? Maybe Gwyneth? Probably not. It is too regal. Yet she is regal. So maybe she'd settle for Gwen. He prefers that, so he knows she does too Gwen is highbrow but more than that, she is good and she is sweet, She is as good and as sweet as they come. Combined with the highbrow, she is from another world. Could he possibly gain entry to that world? What a question.

Still it is OK to wonder about her, how she spends her days, what she likes to do. He reads somewhere that she does Yoga so he plans to take that up too. But he knows that is for another time, like the days and nights he will spend with lovely Gwyneth Paltrow. He wonders if being good and sweet is enough, if Gwen does much thinking? He wonders if she even asks questions especially more interesting ones than he does. One day he sees her being interviewed on TV. She is charming, truly exquisite. She is funny and reflective. She is perfect in all respects with that wonderful, knowing smile.

And so this is how it went from week to week as he pondered the meaning of the films he saw. They engage him as much as the books he reads or the theatrical performances he attends. They puzzle him, move him, sometimes clarify matters, but more often confuse him, especially over questions of moral thought and action. These he never stops wrestling with. His progress is slow, very slow. He doesn't know what he would do if

he met Charlotte at the Park Hyatt in Tokyo. Or if he would sleep with Celine if he saw her again in Paris. What would he do if he ever came face to face with Gwyneth? The movies in which these lovely women appear did not help him answer these questions. He never forgets the films or how it felt when he saw them and he knows he will see them again. That is enough. There is no need for moral clarification or a transforming experience. He can live with their image on the screen. He will have to. He knows he should not expect more from the cinema and that he better get back to his work instead of spending so much time at the movies.