

Notes on Cinematic Desire (for Louis)

John David Rhodes

for Michael

__. Cinematic desire: a desire for cinema and/or a desire for the things we see in and through cinema. Pasolini claimed that when we see a cinematic representation of a body on screen (Pasolini's examples are usually young men), we are *actually* seeing that body: the actual boy, the thing itself. Something whole is there and something (some desire) is thereby satisfied. Pasolini doesn't resort to a Wittgensteinian prop to explain what he means by "That's Gerard Malanga up there!" He means "*That's Gerard Malanga up there!*"¹

__. When we desire, through cinema, through a particular type of cinema, we seem to desire to touch the whole. But mostly we don't share Pasolini's certainty about what is really up there. Rather, we tend to blame cinema for its partiality and missed encounters, for its encouragement of the fetish, its half-truths and half-hearted satisfactions.

Having been found out, cinema has been asked to remind us of something that we already know (its failure), has been asked to respond to our impatience with its impossibility of touching the whole, or its failure to satisfy us completely. It knows it can't give us everything, and we know that it can't, but we find it difficult to resist admonishing it into offering a confession of its failures (we call these failures political, and, insofar as they are, they are also sensual). We like film to confess its failure through a theatricalization of its partiality, its missing parts. Film theory (for that is the "we" I intend here), when it occupies itself with the criticism of cinema's failures, risks becoming a set of ethical reminders, a conduct book. A film made to accord with the conduct book's desire would be an elaborate audio-visual counter-factual demonstration of its own awareness of everything that it (the film) shouldn't be caught doing or that we shouldn't be caught watching. Such made-to-order production is what is known in ecclesiastical circles as "preaching to the choir."²

__. What happens when I know a film cannot give me everything but can give me the only thing I want? What if I love a star's body, am impatient with scenes in which he (here, permit me the masculine pronoun—I will be working through my understanding of this problem—the desire for an actor's body and how this might inform an understanding of 'cinematic desire' more broadly—via my own libidinal investments) did not appear? And what if my desire seemed to be neither useful or interesting, neither a sign of my enslavement to images, or to ideology, nor the key to my emancipation? Furthermore, what if this desire for *this* body (and I will be getting to which body I have in mind in just a minute), while it is certainly historically situated (I and this star's body share a world and a moment in history, it's clear), promised no more than the contingency of any desire's inevitable attachment of itself to the bodies it finds most suitable to its purposes.³

If the answers to my rhetorical questions confirmed my suspicion that a desire for a body onscreen is not reducible either to an experience of social domination, or amenable to being understood as a form of incipient social emancipation (what media studies might call 'agency'), then is there anything left to say?

In other words, if it neither enslaves or liberates me, what is there to say about my desire for Louis Garrel (or at least for the Louis Garrel I see and know through films)?

__. For Freud, viewing becomes perverse when it does one (or more of the following): 1) becomes fixated exclusively on the genitals; 2) manages to override disgust (succumbing to coprophilia, etc.); 3) supplants entirely the actual genital sex act itself. Thus looking is problematic when it looks at too little (*just* at the genitals)—which may also be a looking that it is too literal; when it looks at more than it should; or when it looks too long (and therefore makes us forget what it was meant to be a prelude to). Perverse erotic looking is looking that is content to remain looking, that does not anticipate actual contact with the object. Non-perverse erotic vision (which is, frankly, hard to imagine) would be a looking that embraced both the genitals and the rest of the body, but did not poke around too much behind the genitals (or at what comes out of them), and managed to overcome the temptation to be satisfied with itself. Looking, however, is so infinitely mobile, so curious, and so susceptible to absorption that it would seem to be that sensual faculty almost doomed or destined to perversity.

__. When cinematic desire is taken up or experienced more literally, as in “I actually desire *that* body onscreen,” then cinematic desire starts to mean something more (or less) than the disposition of power relations that the image might (re)produce. Too little separates the desire I might feel for the body of the film actor⁴ from the desire I might feel for the naked bodies offered by pornography—or for people I see on the train, for that matter. Nakedness and the non-simulation of the acts themselves (despite however coded these acts are—and here I mean coded both in the “real” world of social and sexual relations and coded in terms of pornography’s invocation and construction of genres, its adherence to narrative patterning, etc.) are the only things, essentially, at least until recently, that have separated porn from “mainstream” cinema. The separation between porn and non-porn has only become ever more tenuous now that it is, in certain cases, acceptable for the star’s body to be naked, or—more rare, but increasingly common—for actual sex to be shown to take place in the cinematic image.

Porn gives everything away—or promises to. It reiterates cinematic desire as a desire for everything. In doing so, it does nothing wrong, nor ought it to be blamed necessarily for believing itself to be able to give us everything, which it ultimately cannot do, and which it knows it cannot do. (Its efforts to show *so much* are the signs of its self-knowledge of its inevitable limits.) Its limits and its self-knowledge of its limits are constitutive of its pleasures and its aesthetic organization, as well as its disappointments. Nonetheless, the logic of porn’s representations of desire is beholden to the whole—the whole as either the thing that is seen, felt, or fantasized actually to be there, or as the thing that we must be reminded will *never* be there.

__. What would a cinematic desire be like if it were self-admittedly partial and comfortable with its own partiality, but, at the same time, did *not* feel it necessary to lament its (or cinema’s) failure to acquire the whole? And what, moreover, would this cinematic desire feel like if it were entirely serious about its libidinal cathexes (I want *that*, for real; I am *aroused by that*), but also entirely satisfied with the mere partiality it expects to receive and enjoy?

__. Such a desire might be the desire for the actor’s body, a desire that is wildly negligent of the precise situations (the particular films, of the particular scenes in particular films)

in which the star's body is offered and is excited more by the sight of that body than the whole of the film in which that body makes its appearance. The actor's body is the plenitude of the part: the fetish, in other words. The fascination with the actor's body must always, to some degree, be understood in terms of the fetish: the part that promises everything.

And yet our desire for actor's bodies is usually subjected to an analysis that will see our enthrallment as: 1) passive ideological ensnarement; 2) active identification (fantasy); or 3) historically locatable curiosity. Can I think about the sort of fetishism—this exclusive and morcellated pleasure—that interests me here without restricting myself to these three options?

—. In deciding to take my desire for Louis Garrel as the experience through which to consider these issues, I run the risk of over-complicating matters, for loving Louis is an experience born out of watching the movies in which he has appeared, and all of these belong to what we would call contemporary "art cinema," even if that term or that category seems to carry less force than it might have in the 1960s.

Louis, in fact, enfolds us in and returns us to the historically specific body of 1960s art cinema and the generative matrix of cinephilia that produced it. Louis's godfather is Jean-Pierre Léaud, his father, Phillippe Garrel, an accomplished filmmaker who followed immediately in the wake of the *nouvelle vague*. If those were not credentials, or material connections enough, Louis's first film that received widespread notice (and the one in which he first appeared naked) was *The Dreamers* (2003), a film made by Bernardo Bertolucci, featuring a prominent cameo by Léaud, and that takes as its subject the entwinement of sex, cinephilia, and emancipatory politics.

Art cinema's putative seriousness (its aspiration to the category of "art") has been both what its detractors like to emphasize in criticizing it and what has permitted it the ("artistic") license to gratify the desire to see naked flesh. (Screened today, *I am Curious Yellow* makes a more convincing art film than it does a porn film.) The body of the art cinema actress has historically been a highly cathected object for middle-to-high-brow spectators. Jeanne Moreau and Monica Vitti bared more than their tormented souls for art cinema's spectators, and, as Mark Betz has recently argued, these same bodies are in fact what grounds the relations between style and politics in the best art cinema from the 1960s.⁵ Thus the body of the art cinema "star" may be an end in itself, an object of physical desire, and a trope of some much large totality. But my desire for Louis feels much more like an end in itself—a delightful *cul de sac*. I can't tell that it takes me anywhere; however, the certainty of my desire *every time I see his body onscreen* feels to me like something I ought to have something to say about if only because it is such an insistent and arousing dimension of my movie-going and film-watching habits.

Moreover, in choosing Louis, or in recognizing the way in which I feel called by his onscreen presence (his body, voice, his manner of "being" in front of the camera), I risk the accusation that my erotic object—a star to whom I am devoted—is too obvious and too neatly tied up in a field of cinematic production in which I have a long-standing investment. In other words, in loving Louis, I hazard over-determination.⁶

Not only do I fear that having an interest in a star's body (Louis's) is an experience about which there is little or nothing to say, I am also slightly humiliated by the fact that my interest in him betrays my interest in the films he has made, most of which I have taken

pleasure in, but about which I also fear there is nothing much to say. These films are delightful, slightly frivolous if film-historically astute concoctions that one expects from the better directors of French middle brow cinema: the above-mentioned film by Bertolucci, or Christophe Honoré's *Chansons d'amour* (2007), or the several films by Louis's father Phillipe in which Louis has acted. All of these films interest me, but they interest me less in and of themselves than Louis's presence in them interests me.

___ Linda Williams connects the genre of the musical to porn. With its notorious lack of synch sound and its organization around a series of physically demanding "numbers," the feature length porn "is a kind of musical."⁷ It goes without saying that the musical is a kind of porn.

Chansons d'amour, a musical, in which Garrel plays a grieving heterosexual who becomes a contingent homosexual, is a kind of porn film, and like porn, it is often embarrassing. The moments at which the film stages its debts to the musical are also the moments at which it might accede to the pornographic. (There is, however, much less nakedness than I would have liked in *Chansons d'amour*). The love song, as always, is the means of seduction. The film's musical numbers also declare the film's debts to art cinema (the "reflexive" musicals of Demy and Godard). One feels, however, that there is something too effortless about the film's declaration of these debts. Perhaps I find it somewhat embarrassing because it seems so unembarrassed. (Although this might be knowing unembarrassment, in which case it *is* embarrassed.)

In the film, Erwann, a young gay character played by Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet, falls in love with Ismaël, Louis's character. Midway through the film Ismaël/Louis, whom we have only known as a heterosexual (albeit one willing to engage in a f-f-m ménage), is mourning the death of his female lover. Erwann/Grégoire begins to stalk Ismaël/Louis, despite having received no encouraging signs of shared interest or even incipient bisexuality from Ismaël/Louis. Honoré grants himself/us and Erwann/Grégoire our wish: Louis becomes his, too easily, just as the film too-easily lifts from and pays homage to its sources. There is no painful history of coming out; a switch is simply and suddenly flipped. The loved body (that of Ismaël/Louis, of the art cinema star) becomes ours (Erwann, as I am obviously suggesting, is our stand in) because we desire it and because we obstinately, stupidly persist in desiring it.

The film, however, is less an example of wish-fulfillment than it is an illustration of a wish actually being fulfilled. I really hoped that I would see Louis in his pants, but hadn't even dared to think that I would find him thus in the arms of an admiring eighteen year-old boy. But that is what the film gave me. It seems to have given me what I wanted. I could have, of course, wanted more: I could have wanted to be the one in bed with Louis (in his pants), but I would not have expected to have that particular desire satisfied by this film. I really think, instead, I got what I wanted, or at least as much if not more than I expected.

___ Like Pasolini, I would *totally* "go there." But also like Pasolini, what is there (up there, on the screen) is enough for me. To be honest: I don't content myself with desiring Louis as a means of disavowing the fact that I will never have him completely or in real life. I have read that Louis lives in Paris, in or near the Rue M_____, a street where I myself once stayed in a rented flat. I could imagine haunting the Rue M_____, hoping to see him in real life, but my desire is greater or lesser than a desire that would have me do

so. That sort of desire to have Louis (a desire I can easily understand) is different from my cinematic desire for Louis.

__. Having said that, the potential proximity of the art cinema star's body to mine is peculiar to this mode of filmmaking. I'm pretty sure I could track down Louis if I really needed/wanted to.⁸

__. When I am watching a movie in which Louis plays a role, I am, as I have said, impatient for his appearance onscreen. In a scene in which he does not appear, I become impatient for his return. I lose track, in this way, of the narrative. Traditionally, this sort of spectatorship would be understood as "distracted." However, would it not be more correct to say that it is a form of concentration—perhaps of over-concentration?⁹

__. Perhaps desiring Louis does contain the possibility of some masochistic pleasure I take in knowing that is unlikely we will ever meet, much less meet in bed, and that, moreover, there are others (mostly women, as far as I can tell) competing for with me for the chance to nail him. Here, my desire amplifies something that obtains in most scenes of desiring: we assume that the other is desirable to others as well as to ourselves. The term "desirable" designates some degree of social consensus. Desire is constituted in the field of the other—yes, but also in the other's constitution in others' fields, as well. I desire, in part, because I imagine others will desire the same, which makes it gratifying when the other has chosen me, which, in my case, with regards to Louis, is likely to remain unlikely.

__. The artist Mike Kelley once made the proposal that movie stars and other celebrity figures of desire should be required to "actually **pleasure** the population they continuously titillate." Kelley suggests that "these ritualized public figures be required by law to put in time at government-sponsored sex clinics, where they will be accessible to all."¹⁰ It hardly needs to be mentioned that Kelley is joking; but that doesn't mean that there isn't something serious about the proposition. After all, if I respond to an advertisement for Coca-Cola by buying a Coca-Cola, I have done something that most would regard as reasonable.

__. The fetish might be stupid way of looking at things, but it's still a way of looking at things.

__. In films in which Louis plays a less-than-central character, as he does, for instance, in *Dans Paris* (2006): I am deprived. Perhaps Honoré knows that there is something nearly unseemly in having him play the main character repeatedly in all of his films. When he appears in a minor role, I wonder: will there be occasion enough for him to be naked? In *Dans Paris* a long scene of Louis getting out of the sofa bed naked in this father's flat seems to want to compensate for his relative scarcity elsewhere. This scene will have to do.

__. In *Ma mere* (Honoré, 2004): the pretext of the Bataille source text allows Honoré to subject Louis to a number of humiliating erotic encounters. This "transgressive" text, adapted, in the most po-faced manner, here legitimizes a lust that cannot pretend to transgression, as well as a mode of filmmaking thoroughly nestled, as I have suggested, in the safe confines of contemporary European art cinema. I find myself unconsciously justifying the film by emphasizing its predication on the Bataille text, as if this will make

it and my interest in it more interesting. But mostly I am grateful to it for Louis's nakedness, which transgresses nothing.

__. When I began to think about this essay, I was invited to dinner at a colleague's house. His eleven year-old daughter offered to show me around the house in order that I could see some renovations that had been completed. She briefly showed me her sister's room and then her own. Above her bed were several posters of Taylor Lautner, star of the *Twilight* films. I asked her did she not prefer Robert Pattinson. She explained that Pattinson is her sister's favorite and that her sister doesn't like having competition, thus she (the one showing me around) has settled on Lautner. Early on, even in fantasy, we learn to settle for second best.

__. Or else—also common—we tend to keep our fantasies “realistic.” But do fantasies remain fantasies when they become excessively realistic—or too probable? Why have a fantasy life if it is really just a probability life? At the same time, there is something touching about the reasonable fantasy. Maybe fantasy needs to be fertilized by possibility (however unlikely that possibility might be). Or maybe fantasy is just our means of mediating the difference between the possible and the likely.

__. A colleague tells me that maybe what I am describing has something to do with Winnicott's transitional object, in the sense that it's important that it is *this* object, and not any other. The interest in a transitional object may fade, but during the time of its usefulness, nothing else will do. It is neither a symbol, nor is it appreciated as the thing itself. String is string. But it is still symbolic. (It might go without saying that the symbol is always structured by metonymy, however forgotten its origin.) The transitional object manages an experience of loss and participates in (while not being identical to) the operations of illusion. It is a way of managing fantasy and its desire for totality. Totality won't be arrived at through the transitional object, but what it offers in exchange for totality is an excess of particularity. Again, *this object and no other*. What am I managing here, though? Have I lost anything? Watching a film I get exactly what I want, and this experience includes the foreknowledge that I won't ever really have it (him).

__. And yet, I will admit that in planning to write this and in the act of writing this I did (and do) think that there might be some chance that Louis will read this, that this will draw us together, or allow us to meet. I thought that perhaps the way to insure this would be to make the essay (this one) exorbitantly obsessive. But then, through writing this I learn that that is not exactly how I feel about Louis. I am not obsessed. I am intensely interested and I am aroused. When I want what I get from Louis, he is the only one who can give it to me. It falls to him alone to give me this. Somehow the convenience of this situation now strikes me as something less or other than obsession.

__. As I write this, it occurs to me: my writing may not be equal to my object. I should make my writing more excessive so as to bear witness to the authentic passion of this desire, even if this passion is not obsessive. (Louis might be better impressed/seduced.)

__. The nose, the chin, moles, the just too-fleshy rear (something decadent about it, slightly louche, faisandé—what is the word?), the hair, thin calves, lips (the upper lip almost thin, the bottom lip delightfully full). The eyes: how to describe...pale skin, dark hair, the fact of having seen his penis, repeatedly, of knowing incredibly well what his body looks like. His soft muscularity. Something cruel in his face, some small layer of fat

on his otherwise muscular tummy. The depth of the indentation below his clavicle. (Will this do?)

__. Less pleasant: the possibility that, given he is an actor, he might just be unbearable company.

__. While I began to write this I also became interested in what I consider an inferior object: the perfectly named Taylor Kitsch, the star of a television show (*Friday Night Lights*) that has caught my (belated) attention, and who, like many of those things referred to by his surname, seems cut to the desire of many others. Desire for kitsch, expresses, after all, a kind of degraded democratic impulse, or fantasy. I wonder if, in writing this, I will not only fail to catch Louis's attention as a result of writing this, but will also foreclose the possibility of meeting Kitsch because I will now have offended him in the last sentence. I think it less likely that Kitsch will read this than that Louis might. I press on.¹¹

__. Following the week in which notice was served that five of my colleagues (along with 100 odd members of staff in other departments, both academic and "service") would be potentially losing their jobs due to a "restructuring" of the university, I tried to watch a movie. Every night I returned home—worried, emptied, disgusted—ate dinner and tried to watch Phillippe Garrel's *Les amants réguliers* (2005). Every night, maybe thirty minutes into the film, I fell asleep. I had bet my intense attraction to Louis against my narcolepsy. Drowsiness won against desire. By Friday I had only made it ninety minutes into the film's total of 171, yet those ninety I had watched in soporific repetition, in an absorbed but semi-conscious stupor. The high contrast black and white of the film's simulation of May '68 had become as familiar as my flat. The film's jump-cutting only doubled the effects of my half-wakefulness. I would fall asleep and wake, not knowing where I was in the film. Rewinding (if that is still the term), I would find I was only a minute ahead of where I had nodded off. Other times I would find that an hour had passed, the film near its end that I seemed not to be able to reach. I wondered about the insipidity of undertaking this writing project—dubious in the best of circumstances—at exactly this moment. And yet, the convergence—during that week of sleepful watching—of sex, desire, forgetfulness, political protest, the urgency of my (and my colleagues') present moment pressing in on my attention to a gorgeous representation of a past to which this moment feels related—this all felt somehow important, if only because I had to wonder if it really was or what really was.¹²

__. Nothing can be everything, but the one thing can be enough, in part *precisely because* we know it isn't everything.

John David Rhodes is an editor of World Picture. He is also the author of Stupendous, Miserable City: Pasolini's Rome (University of Minnesota Press, 2007) and the co-editor of On Michael Haneke (Wayne State University Press, 2010).

Notes

¹ Cf. Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Res Sunt Nomina" and "The Code of Codes," in *Heretical Empiricism*, Louise K. Barnett, ed., Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett, trans. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 255-260 and 276-283.

Pasolini actually uses the (rather tortured) example of “Jerry Malanga” in “The Code of Codes.”

² On the subject of poetics, Frank O’Hara wrote “If someone’s chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don’t turn around and shout, ‘Give it up! I was the track star of for Mineola Prep.’” (Frank O’Hara, “Personism: A Manifesto,” *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, Donald Allen, trans. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995], 498.) Certain forms of film theory want film to be that thing that reminds us that it is *not* that track star.

³ For Freud our desires are clearly what ground us in the historically contingent character of experience. Cf. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. James Strachey, trans. and ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1962/1975), 22-23. The historically contingent nature of desire may express itself most vividly in perversions, especially the fetish.

⁴ In special cases, this actor may be called a “star.”

⁵ Cf. Mark Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 93-177.

⁶ A friend and colleague, a theorist and a critic of French cinema does not share my interest in Louis: “I’ve taught too many pretty French boys just like him,” she says. *Beata lei*.

⁷ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 124.

⁸ An aside on contemporary art cinematic stardom: The presence of Chiara Mastroianni and Louis in *Chansons* declares the film’s overdetermined and quite literal, genealogical descent (or declension) from European art cinema of the 1960s. Chiara’s face is a bizarre physiognomic condensation of art cinematic inheritance. I find her too uncanny a screen presence, despite finding her beautiful. My absorption oscillates: in her face I see her father, now her mother. Actually, Wittgenstein’s duck rabbit comes in handy here.

⁹ Here I am reminded of Roland Barthes’ over-investment in certain material details (orange slices macerated in run) of the text, which he describes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1975). In an unpublished manuscript Danny Hayward has suggested that the theorization of modernity’s distractedness lacks what should be the necessary foregoing theorization of concentration, or of whatever it is that distraction is *not*, or of that state from which distraction is assumed to be a declension.

¹⁰ The quotations are from a press release prepared for a show at the Patrick Painter gallery, held January 23-February 1999. The press release may be downloaded at the following web page: http://www.patrickpainter.com/artists/Kelley_Mike/1999-01/index.html# (last accessed March 7, 2010).

¹¹ It seems there are a lot of young actors called Taylor these days. But Taylor Kitsch? Can this really be a star’s name? Cut and sewn to the order of redundant pleasure...

¹² This is the first “note”, the first paragraph of the present essay (if that is what this amounts to) that I wrote. I don’t know if it belongs here, but it is where everything started.