

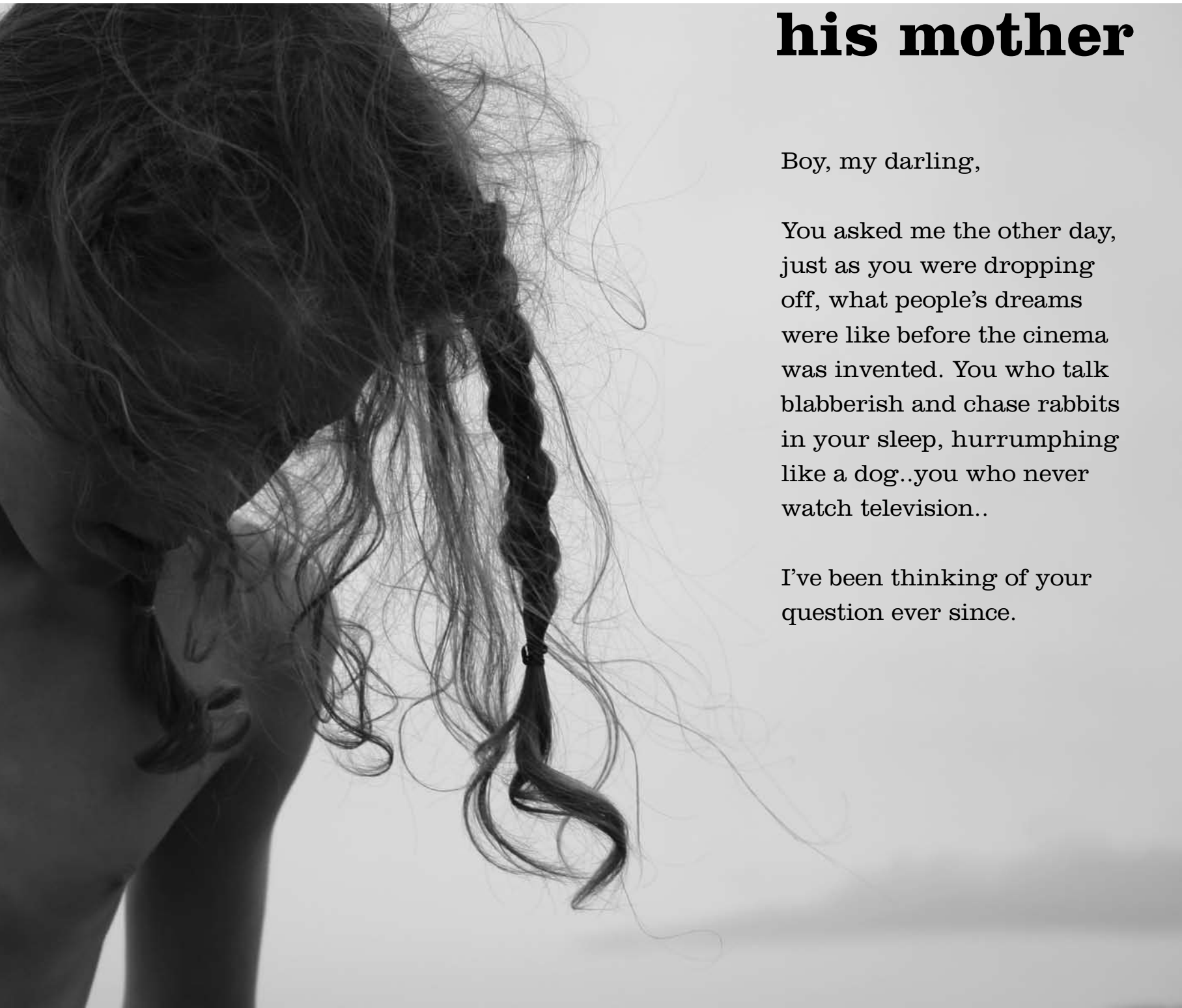
a letter to
a boy
from
his mother

Boy, my darling,

You asked me the other day, just as you were dropping off, what people's dreams were like before the cinema was invented. You who talk blabberish and chase rabbits in your sleep, hurrumphing like a dog..you who never watch television..

I've been thinking of your question ever since.

by Tilda Swinton



I just think of how my mind went whirring after you had fallen asleep and I lay there wondering... and all I know is - it was a good feeling. I just know that I want my mind to whirr like that. That it hasn't whirred like that for a while, that its precisely this whirr factor that I value the cinema for providing. Even a QUESTION about cinema can do it to me... Yes, and like all your questions, particularly the kind that come at the very dog end of a long day... there is no answer that I feel capable of offering : 'What was the last thing to be made?' 'Can you jump on the clouds when you are dead?' 'What do worms taste like?' '...What does a wet lamb feel like?...' (although we've discussed - and researched - these last two in detail)

There are so many things that I suppose I could talk about. I could talk about the making of films: what I have learned in the trenches of independent filmmaking over 2 decades. Or what I have learned about the differences between independent filmmaking and the studio system I have more recently become acquainted with. I could talk about performance. I could talk about innovations and new technologies. I could talk about struggle and things that fall apart... I could talk - at length - about money.

But your question - and its hypnotic effect on me - inspires me to talk about none of these things. But to meditate on something I think is far more important than all of this - and much more difficult to address. You make me want to talk about what cinema is and why we need it: and what it is that is incorruptible - uncooptable - within its realm; about the state of mind - the projection of vision - the social project that cinema is - and why its worth the fight in the first place. And why no revolution, digital or otherwise, could cheat your generation out of its existence. And why I am hopeful to my boots that its never, ever going away.

Your sleepytime question about cinema - about dreams - sends me in a way I want to be sent. I'm so proud of you for asking it. Proud that you would wonder such a thing. Proud to know that you instinctively relate film to dream, as few of us making cinema today are encouraged to do...

You are 8 and a half. What an age for a boy to ask about cinema and dream!

It occurs to me that that same evening, Dadda was telling me that his falling asleep in the cinema is a particular honour to the film in question. He was telling me this as a compliment, his having snored through three of the four films released last year in which I appeared.

My friend, the great Italian cultural critic Enrico Ghezzi, has written about this very thing, Dadda remembered: the invitation to reverie that a visionary cinema can provide, the invitation to become unconscious. No joke. Personally, having been exposed recently to the slew of trailers before Spike Lee's new film, or even those before *Ice Age 2*, I would have been grateful for a cosh on the back of the head for any - temporary - escape from the escapism of those previews of forthcoming attractions...

I think the last film in which I experienced this kind of ecstatic removal was at a screening in Cannes of the Thai film *Tropical Malady: Sud Pralad*. In my opinion, it's a masterpiece, mysterious and shapeshiftingly magical, a love story that actually carries the power to tip one into love, a nightmare of nature that kicks a primal punch... that takes us into the wilderness of human nature and leaves us there. I actually remember rubbing my eyes with my fists in a comedy gesture during the screening, convinced, for one split second, that I had fallen asleep, that only my unconscious could have come up with such a texture of sensation.

Can I be alone in my longing for inarticulacy - for a cinema that refuses to join all the dots? For an a-rhythm in gesture, for a dissonance in shape? For the context of a cinematic frame, a frame that - in the end - only cinema can provide. For the full view, the long shot, the space between... the gaps... the pause... the lull... the grace of living...

The figurative cinema's awkward and rather unsavoury relationship with its fruity old aunt, the theatre, to her vanities, her nous, her beautifully constructed and perennially eloquent speechifying, her cast iron - corset-like - structures, her melodramatic texture and her histrionic rhythms. How tiresome it is, it always has been. How studied. The idea of absolute articulacy, perfect timing, a vapid elegance of gesture, an unblinking, unthinking face. What a blessed waste of a good clear screen, a dark room and the possibility of an unwatched profile, a tree, a hill, a donkey...

How I long for documentary, in resistance - for unpowdered faces and unmeasured tread - for the emotionally undemonstrative family scene - for a struggle for unreachable words, for the open or even unhappy ending? The occasionally dropped shoe off the heel, the jiggle to readjust; the occasionally cracked egg; the mess of milk spilt. The concept of a loss for words. For a State of Cinema - as the state of grace that it affords us - in which nothing much happens but all things are possible, even inarticulacy, even failure, even mess...

I've been making films for twenty years now and I still don't know what to do with my face when people ask me at what point I decided to become an actress - or even an actor - or how not to feel offended when I'm asked about getting into, or out, of character, something I, frankly, know nothing about. I used to think until quite recently, that this awkwardness was because I was embarrassed about being caught not taking something seriously. But now I think I detect a tang of irritation, of offence, at the implication that I might be present but not correct, that I might be there, on a screen, without faith. The idea that I would be there to ENACT something for some nefarious, even vanity based, reason to do with drawing attention to myself. Too serious to be a dilettante and too much of a dabbler to be a professional.

Last year, in the course of my recently developed pastime as studio spy, in the process of promoting two fantasy films for different Hollywood studios, I was advised on the proper protocol for talking about religion in America today. In brief, the directive

was - Hold yr hands high where all can see 'em, step away from the vehicle and enunciate clearly, "nothing to declare".

At a press conference in London for Disney's film, I was asked, to chilling frisson in response, if I were still a member of the Communist Party. A friendly Spanish journalist reassured me later, sotto voce and with apology for her - American - colleague, that in Spain things are more clearly understood. The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.

The fact is, as I clarified that day, I never stopped being a communist. The fact IS that the Communist Party of Great Britain no longer exists as such; that the party was morphed into the Democratic Left over ten years ago; that my membership of the party was an act of faith born out of an alliance with ideals of fairness and a commitment to a welfare state that it was clear to me then was in the process of being deserted by the Parliamentary Left.

But I love the idea of goose-stepping old Walt D, making over \$700 million dollars with the help of a Red Witch...

He is more than welcome. At least we made her whiter than white, the ultimate white supremacist, and we managed to railroad the knee-jerk attempt to make her look like an Arab...



**...to talk
about what
cinema is and
why we need
it: and what
it is that is
incorruptible
- unco-optable
- within its
realm...**

And maybe - just maybe, on top of all that - Disney might have ended up underwriting the most expensive advertisement teaser for Derek Jarman's and Lynn Hershman's back catalogue that any of us could ever have imagined.

Besides - I always was a believer in the essential message of that particular Christmas blockbuster: In my universe, beavers CAN talk.

The rampant old church that cinema is. You never can tell whose gonna jump up into the pulpit...

The thing is, for me - and here the advising studios and the investigative journalists barked up the wrong tree with this pre-industrial amateur - filmmaking, too, has always been an act of faith. Not only in the sense in which one needs a certain amount of conviction to get the films made in the first place, but in the more amorphous sense in which one takes one's faith to the cinema as to the confessional: the last resort of the determined inarticulate, the unmediated, the intravenous experience of something existential - transmuted through the dark, through the flickering of the constant image through the projector onto the screen... the sharing of private fantasy; the very issue of the unconscious made in light. Faith way beyond politics. Way beyond religion. Way beyond time.

It was in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* that I saw an image from a dream that has visited me all my life, made real. Does a thing have to be shared to be made real? A bird, flying towards the camera, dips its wing into the sand that fills a room. Did I imagine this? I haven't seen the film for years. Can somebody tell me? Was I dreaming even then, in the Cambridge Art Cinema in 1981? Or might there be the possibility of a shared dream, a shared unconscious after all? This was before I had ever made a film, ever met a filmmaker, ever half-willingly stood in front of a camera.

Among the first films I made with Derek Jarman, our segment of *Aria*, *The Last of England*, and *The Garden* were made in this confessional spirit. The triple-decker faith that made us want to make these films was paramount.

These films were beyond personal: shot as home movies on Super 8 and then blown up to 35mm, collated over the course of a year, filmed as documents of our life as a group and then put together in the way an anthology of poetry might be edited, with gaps filled later by purposefully designed sequences. The private rendered public purely by virtue of exhibition. No articulation attempted, no narrative imposed.

I remember distinctly a young man - after a screening of *The Last of England* at the New York Film Festival in 1989? 1990? - telling me in great detail the narrative of the film he had just seen. With serpentine logic - and exquisitely moving, somehow. His projection, and the impact it clearly had on him, seemed to me to be the highest possible compliment he could have paid to the film. I remember him asking me if he was right. I remember wincing, because it felt like the wrong question, and telling him that of course he was right. Whatever he saw there was real, was his to define.

The First article of faith we were in the process of professing in the cultural cinema of the late 80s and 90s in England was partly a political faith in the very idea of resistance: very often resistance of a quite literal and pragmatic kind.

It is easy to see, especially in Jarman's *Edward II* adaptation - where the gay, activist collective, *Outrage*, is prominently featured in the climax of the film's narrative - how site-specific this work was at the time, lobbying, as it did, against restrictive civil liberty policies proposed by Thatcher's Conservative Government. It felt powerful that the work had an international profile at a time when this was being seen by those without the long view, as a purely localised, national problem.

In a Second article of faith, beyond practical politics, these films were connected intrinsically with the lives of the artists who made them - they figure a dedication to a reality seldom seen in the cinema. For young, gay people all over the world in the years in which they were released, the value of their solidarity in sensibility, in company, is simply incalculable. To be an emerging, gay teenager in a small town in the early 1980s, stumbling upon Jarman's *Sebastiane* was, for so many, nothing short of a miracle. As cultural cinema, made by artists outside the industrial paradigm, these films widened the spectrum of a European and world cinema, and, I would argue, society - in a unique way.



This year, those oh so brow-furrowing bareback cowboys went to the Oscars. Straight eye for the queer guy. And even Grey Gardens - star of the Maysles' documentary masterpiece - stands by to smash in a musical on Broadway, restored, so I am told, in the first act, to it's pre- cat-shit, all-Bouvier-busting glory, with the Kennedy's coming for tea. O wow. How times do change. Does that mean the faith charm worked?

This year I have already spoken to students from Pittsburgh to Edinburgh who have never heard of Derek Jarman.

But over everything, the Third, and possibly most liberating, faith that we were professing in those days was a belief in the cinema screen as the Church for the Aliens. The safe space where we could all hang out. The Grace Cathedral of Cultural Acceptance and the possibility of an audience with eyes and ears. And time. And attention. Those were the days when Independent Cinema rarely got capital letters: before, under cover of darkness, it became morphed into the generally co-dependent cinema now at the heart of Hollywood's streamlined mainstream, and certainly before it constituted any kind of industrial profile, and - in the days before anyone ever dreamt of a cultural cinema as being something that might make them any money.

I remember feeling distinctly nostalgic for those days a couple of years ago when I had the good fortune to serve the jury of the 2004 Cannes film festival - the year that Michael Moore made a film for the cinema, *Fahrenheit 911* - in order to say the things he wanted to say to an intergalactic audience in a way that, already at that time, he could no longer say those things on television, on the radio or in many publishable organs back home. Regardless even of its content, this film, in my opinion, dignified - honoured - the cinema, by choosing the refuge of its wider screen, its quieter dark.

For Better or Worse. THERE'S a battle cry to nail up on any filmmaker's wall: Not for profit, (notice). Not for box office. And, eventually in the analysis, not even particularly for now. For the hell and the heaven of it. For the State of Cinema. That promised land of freedom as you, my boy, might imagine it to be; a playground equipped with all the climbing frames and spinning things and chutes and swings you could ever need.

Like a trapdoor hidden by a carpet, the route to the 90s is obscured. The fact is that those times changed fast. There's a story there that I'll tell you another time - a different set of wars that some, but not all, of us survived.

For my generation on, even the aliens, it is hard to grasp that it is in fact a scrupulously constructed fantasy that we have, each and every one of us on this planet - European, Asian, Sikh, Finn, Masai, Maori, male, female, neither, both - asked, at least once in our lives, a girl to the school prom, standing in the American high school corridor flanked by metal locker doors. That we have each and every one of us negotiated cheerleaders and their jock boyfriends; skirted a baseball diamond with a school jersey round our waist; that we have endured Thanksgiving dinners, year in, year out; shut a

front door with our arse while carrying a big square paper bag full of Oreos and milk cartons, shouting 'Honey! I'm home!' This is a sort of reality for us all, wherever the tentacles of intergalactic, Marshall plan-like, distribution reach. The same kind of reality that governs the idea that Hershey's chocolate tastes of chocolate and not black wax.

If I pray for anything, within my faith, if I'm posting any wish to my personal Cinema Santa this year, it is for more and more wise and courageous distributors, with more and more big and small and beautiful cinemas. Distributors with the kamikaze vision that spreads the broad and long view; that finds a way of casting wide chicken feed, the wildflower seed, of difference, of particularity, of dissonance, of a belief in the innovative power of human expression beyond the confines of the conventions of narrative. Programmers who, as Bertolt Brecht would say, 'Made Suggestions.'

Your generation, my child, so I see from those terrifying trailers for upcoming Easter treats, is given to understand that the wilderness is over; that wild animals - be they extinct species from the ice age, or almost domestic pet-like critters dependent on processed food foraged from trash cans for their survival - are a thing of the past. Anthropomorphised beyond all dignity, all point in their existence. And that this - their, ours, yours - is an unavoidably, peacelessly, violent world; hot for looming great close-ups and cartoon double-takes; low on blood and high on impact... like the wars now waged in our/your name... like the story of these times as told by our storytellers.

Timothy Treadwell, the subject of Werner Herzog's ingenious documentary portrait, *Grizzly Man* - blazes the trail for the fantasists. By insisting that these ferocious-looking, grizzly bears will in fact be harmless to him, by expressing so adamantly his longing to be inside a bear suit, he gets his wish and ends up with his head off and inside a bear mean enough not to care that Treadwell loved him. It is posited in the film that Treadwell is only tolerated by the bears because they in some sense consider him mentally defective as a human, posing no threat to them on the grounds that he doesn't really count as human. Thereby hangs a tail, out of, and occasionally into, the mouths of bears.

But yes! There IS a wilderness that prevails! A wild blue yonder. That wild and woolly, mysterious and uncuddly possibility - unairconditioned, unelectrified, uncivilised. Hooray for anything outside of a civilisation defined, as this one is, by the unnatural tyranny of doubtlessness. Hooray for myriad languages, (even between humans), belief systems, sign languages between aliens - for the need for language at all, to explain and transmit our differences. Or to attempt to... to materialise our inarticulacy, to accept the possibility of failure and to make the attempt afresh, every day.

I think about Charlie Kaufman's Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation* suggesting to the spot-lit, posturing Robert Mckee - script doctor and industry narrative guru - that he is a writer attempting to create a story where nothing much happens: "Where people don't change... they don't have any epiphanies... they struggle and are frustrated and nothing is resolved - more a reflection of the real world'

Your generation, my child, so I see from those terrifying trailers for upcoming Easter treats, is given to understand that the wilderness is over; that wild animals ... are a thing of the past.



3



4



5



The state of cinema IS a dream state. No known address. Occupied, dictated, created by no-one.

'The real world?' echoes Mckee, 'The real fucking world. First of all, you write a screenplay without conflict or crisis, you'll bore your audience to tears...secondly...'

'Nothing happens in the world ? '

'Are you out of yr fucking mind? People are murdered every day, there's genocide, war, corruption. Every fucking day, somewhere in the world somebody sacrifices his life to save somebody else. Every fucking day somebody somewhere takes a conscious decision to destroy someone else. People find love, people lose it...

If you can't find that stuff in life, then, you, my friend, you don't know crap about life. And why the fuck are you wasting my two precious hours with your movie? I don't have any use for it!"

The whole question of reality is so clearly one out of control, at this point in history, that I suggest we are into a meltdown of quite a fresh kind - mammoths, sloths, human consciousness and all. A crisis in storytelling. An existential crisis unimagined by Sartre. A world where the very idea of fact strains, somehow, to be hedged by inverted commas. Your fact. My fact. Subjective alienation complete. Capitalist mission accomplished. There is no such thing as society, no common ground...

When the question of media fabrication and distortion is no longer a matter for breaking news, when trustworthy political leaders seem to occupy only the most fanciful, fairytale landscape in the imagination, when the idea of believing one's own eyes is a question constantly in doubt - what path for fiction, then? What horizon can narrative and figurative storytelling look to?

The loss of confidence in the paradigm of reality versus fiction, and the addiction of 'factual' news reportage to the high drama of sensation, cannot leave a society's relationship to its myth-making and acting-out processes unaffected:

Perhaps most significant of all, the systematic amping up of the high drama of daily life as disseminated via the 'reality' of news programming must only key up a population to expect and need the adrenaline rush of sensational, result-heavy, political action from its leaders - its new bedtime storytellers.

When we are used to seeing results of every story arc within 30 minutes, including advertisements, no wonder we get used to expecting a resolution within 90 minutes, including popcorn, or a matter of months, including collateral damage. The rush for the third act denouement became, somehow, back there, a political strategy...

A film like *Crash* - winner of Best Film Oscar this year - pleases, if it does, reassures because of its resemblance to a familiar version of reality - TV reality. Shot relentlessly in close-up, its encounters persistently hysterical, high - albeit melo - drama and nothing but - it delivers the punch of any primetime cop show/crime biography/close circuit documentary law and order expose. Its vernacular use of a 'real' look at racial tension is fabulous oil for a souped-up old engine - so familiar as to be palatable, but twisted just enough to feel fresh.

We live in the inverted commas "reality" age - ever awake, too tired and chewed to dream, square-eyed, and addicted to the reality of tv...from getting to know realllll people to getting to cook realllll food to

getting to dress realllll bodies... all playing at life.

There is a lot of real sex about on screens large and small ... those writhing fleshly limbs that distract us from those charred and decapitated carcasses we are now so blasé about witnessing in our own, aptly named, living rooms.

We are required to wear our hearts in our mouths. On our sleeves. In our boots. High alert narratives day in day out.

The state of cinema IS a dream state. No known address. Occupied, dictated, created by no one. When it comes to moving goalposts, what art form could be described as more flexible than film? As ever, its all up for grabs. And evolution - as ever - is the name of the game. Smoke and mirrors. Necessity. Mother. Invention. One more revolution and the wheel goes round.

Film is the art form through which time becomes material. Now more than ever, perhaps, we need its possibilities and the sincerity of its witness. In this period when we are attacking and dismantling time itself through our fascination with the virtual and with the simultaneous - we now long for new, renewed, experiences of the temporal, an existential sensation of duration. Why?

Perhaps it is to do with memory and the sense that we are increasingly being pulled into a vast, orchestrated project of amnesia.

We discovered cinema in the same moment in history when we re-discovered - through Freud - the significance of our dreams. Now we are displacing

and distorting, (with our passion for genetics, neuroscience, cognitive), the ineffable element of the dream within the machine. Our dreams are the place where we can remember that which we never realised we knew.

And the prism through which we can reflect these visions - the trick of the light, that alchemy of smoke of mirrors so much more than the sum of its parts - is what the cinema is. This is what you might call the Good News...

There IS a place to make for, the original online world that doesn't give up on nature, an unmeasurable border to cross that can hold us and our dreamscape secure and inviolable, peaceable and lawless, where we can meet and be faithful beyond the petty, worldly confines of all corruptible networks and their nets...

The State of Cinema - that place where you met Jacques Tati for the first time:

Jean Cocteau
Michael Powell
Buster Keaton

Bresson's donkey *Balthazar*

The Méliès moon
and Chris Marker
and Luis Bunuel

and some people you are yet to know, just around the corner

someone called Terrence Malick
and someone called Wong Kar Wai
and someone from Hungary called Bela Tarr
and someone from Italy called Federico Fellini
and someone from Switzerland called Jean Luc Godard

and someone from Iran called Abbas Kiarostami
and someone from America called David Lynch

where the Pixar people live
where you saw China first -
and Japan before you went there, hand in hand with Miyazaki,
and Africa
and Sweden.
and the universe under the sea

Like all great states, it is a state of mind, borderless and with no policy of exclusion or deportation. It does not pretend to be united. It doesn't even claim to be civilised. It does not sell its policy of freedom with the small print of enforcement, is not evangelical, hierarchical, meritocratic ...

No known address. No visa required.

So thank you for your question, boy. Like all good questions, it inspires a wash of more questions. If I don't think of anything else to talk to the people in America about, I'll ask them one of my own. If we cannot see what people's dreams are like before the invention of cinema, what can we know about our dreams now - long after cinema has become a state in her own right, a place in which so many of us live, selling, buying, stealing, guarding - some of us, living, breathing?



Xavier Byrne. You 8 and a half year old pilot/mechanic/rock star pagan, hair to your waist and the future in your eye, already planning your own summer cinema out of straw bales. I salute you. I'm down on my knees sweeping the temple with my hair and lighting the candles.

Here's your idol, Mr. David Bowie, writing about an earlier time, some 35 years ago a time when your mother was about your age:

"There was the distinct feeling that 'nothing was true' anymore and that the future was not as clear-cut as it had seemed. Nor, for that matter, was the past. Therefore, everything was up for grabs. If we needed any truths, we could construct them ourselves. The main platform would be, other than our shoes, 'We are the future now'."

Some things never change.

Never stop asking. Never stop moon-age daydreaming. Dream us the future, baby. Awaken our memories. Vote for Pedro.

Dream on.

Your ever loving

Mumma

1, 2, 3, 6 - Xavier Byrne

4 - The Last of England

5 - The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe

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