

SEARCHING FOR SOMEWHERE

To Roland Barthes's "typology of the pleasures of reading" must be added the experience of film-related browsing online, involving a cinema viewer who, like Barthes, feels "out of place," an "anachronic subject, adrift" in new questions, problems, delights, and banalities. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (Hill and Wang), first published in French in 1973, Barthes defines a loose methodology—"to graze, to browse scrupulously, to rediscover"—that resonates with the way digital technology is interweaving viewing and reading. A website like Mubi ("your online cinema anytime, anywhere") offers a Notebook section for critical commentary as well as festival notices, movies for rent from the cloud, and even a Garage section intended as a sort of online film school. Meanwhile, the convergence of cable and wirelessly networked Blu-ray players connects the Home Box Office with Netflix Instant and Vudu, an HD streaming video service which presents reviews from Rotten Tomatoes and Wikipedia entries in tandem with its library of movies. Even the retro experience of going out to the cinema for a screening at a specific time in a particular location involves the web, both beforehand (look up the trailer on YouTube) and afterwards (click through Metacritic and Twitter to see what reviewers and the community of viewers are saying). The browser in this post-cinema domain of interconnection recalls Barthes's "obsessive" category of reader, who delights in "the voluptuous release of the letter, of secondary, disconnected languages, of metalanguages."

As a case study in the ethos of browsing, I've been following Sofia Coppola's curiosity, *Somewhere*, which has traveled from the Venice Film Festival to an unprofitable limited release in U.S. theaters, a decidedly mixed reception online, and a fragile digital half-life on sites like CinemaNow that make one's living room into a hotel showing "Hollywood's Latest Hits" in the weeks leading up to their DVD release dates. I first watched *Somewhere* in one of those middle-American antique cinemas that's been converted into an Indiewood venue and offers simulcasts of opera from La Scala, theater from London, and cult late-night movies. It was actually a Twitter message from an Australian writer friend and Coppola diehard in San Francisco that sent me off to a February matinee in Cleveland Heights, Ohio through a

decidedly nonvirtual blizzard, wiping snowflakes off the screen as smileys zipped back and forth across three time zones.

Then I watched a film in which the two primary characters, celebrity actor Johnny Marco (Stephen Dorff) and his daughter Cleo (Elle Fanning), bond by watching television together in a luxury hotel in Italy (a dubbed version of *Friends*) and by playing the video game *Guitar Hero 5* on a Playstation 3. Perhaps Coppola was thinking of later audiences who might play the DVD or stream the movie through their game consoles, and watch people like themselves playing video games in a self-reflexive reverie that Andy Warhol might have approved. When the characters switch to playing Wii tennis, Cleo misses the jokes about Martina Navratilova, whose sports stardom is already part of a vintage world—as the *Guitar Hero* franchise will soon be too, having been discontinued by its producer, Activision, and going the way of the arcade version of the game a kid plays in Tokyo in *Lost in Translation* (2003).

In another film curious about Japan, *Sans Soleil* (1983), Chris Marker in voiceover says that, after much global journeying, "only banalities" still interest him, and watching such provocative banalities—and watching watchers watching them—is what a lot of *Somewhere* is about. After Marco breaks his arm falling down some stairs at the Chateau Marmont hotel in Los Angeles, there's nearly five minutes of blond twins pole-dancing for the actor, followed in short order by nearly three minutes of his blond daughter skating at the Pickwick Ice arena. (The cinema was so empty I didn't bother anyone by using my iPod's stopwatch to time the shots.) Marco claps appreciatively for both acts of twirling girls, but in the latter sequence he's also checking his phone for text messages. Later on, we glimpse Cleo packing her tennis racket into dad's car for summer camp, recalling the blondes' earlier routine pretending to paddle each other with similar sports equipment. These sequences are more subtle than they sound—the pole-dancing couldn't be called prurient and the visual analogy between it and the ice-skating isn't overbearing. But the film's tone of tender parricide remains consistent. Dads in particular and men in general are rarely awful in Sofia Coppola's comedies, but here, as in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and *Lost in Translation*, they're a bit confused and helpless, accident-prone. These are movies that operate through dramatic irony: the viewer is meant to



Slowdown

Somewhere. © 2010 Somewhere LLC. DVD: Focus Features.

draw threads together that the characters themselves remain mostly unable to connect.

I saw *Somewhere* around the same time as another hypnotizing film about voyeurism designed for nostalgic consumption on a gigantic screen, and deliberately planned as an all-out assault on short attention spans, Eugène Green's 2009 *The Portuguese Nun*. (As yet undistributed in the U.S., the film screened at the Cleveland Cinematheque, a rep gem

near Case Western Reserve University.) Both films are oddly conservative in the specific sense that they jokingly emphasize the venality of quick pleasures and appear to promote child-rearing as a remedy for our drifting world. This is a cinema of slowing down. It's not enough to watch, to browse like a tourist through one's own life: hang around, linger, stick to something, somewhere, someone. Yet while Green's film consistently confronts its viewers, its towering faces often

locked in “eye contact” with the audience, *Somewhere* presents a very different set of images, such as an infinitesimally slow zoom-in on Marco breathing under a face mold for an acting part, his eyes covered, the camera a hovering attentive presence, less like a fan or a stalker and more like a Barthesian pleasure-seeker.

Both films are intended to be comic, but *Somewhere* more clearly indulges in cinematic in-jokes and intertextual nods. When Marco passes a car accident without stopping, *Somewhere* conjures with Godard’s *Breathless* (1960); when his voice is washed away by helicopter noise as he tells Cleo “sorry I haven’t been around,” Coppola is surely winking at *La dolce vita* (1960); when we’re watching Marco and Cleo drive around town, it’s more than the daughters’s name that recalls another film about demi-celebrities filmed in a subtle illusion of real time, Agnès Varda’s *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962). These threads hang loosely rather than being pulled tight, just as *Lost in Translation* played a series of contemporary variations on and inversions of *The Graduate* (1967), if you cared to notice them. At any rate, this is a film slow enough to invite reveries of other films into the picture, an intertextual game that continues afterwards and inevitably migrates to the web. It’s surely true that online commentary and new exhibition platforms are retuning the perusal experience in significant ways, yet all literate films invite their viewers to browse through cinema history, especially ones like *Somewhere* that self-define as belated or even deliberately “minor” works.

Echoing Barthes, “electrofringe” new-media artists whose work involves sampling and recycling have coined the term “pleasure of the intertext,” a pleasure in link-making and source-hunting. This enjoyment is itself fluid; in particular it modulates over time. I went back to the theater to watch *Somewhere* again the day after my first visit, having reviewed *The Virgin Suicides* on Netflix Instant and *Lost in Translation* on DVD, and browsed through *Breathless* and *Cleo from 5 to 7* for quick points of reference, searching for interlinking images or sequences. *Lost in Translation*, of course, contains a scene in which the characters watch *La dolce vita* and I followed the Italian thread, moving from Fellini to Antonioni—first *L’avventura* (1960) and then the photography scene from *Blow-Up* (1966) on YouTube (for reference purposes it’s sometimes easier to locate a clip online), which shares with Coppola’s films a certain wry tone about unconsummated sex. Think of the desperate girls and boys in *The Virgin Suicides*, the non-affair in *Lost in Translation*, and, in *Somewhere*, the scene in which Marco falls asleep going down on a party girl because he’s taken pain pills. Back in the theater for my second viewing of *Somewhere*, I became less interested in its connections to the New Wave and more

compelled by its Italianate meanderings, the way Coppola obviously remembers how Fellini and Antonioni explore the empty lives of lost and confused rich people.



Somewhere is a remarkably divisive film that provokes genuine arguments amongst friends—plus it’s actively despised by some reviewers, denizens of the Twitterverse, and members of various online user communities. The Daily section on Mubi aggregates *Somewhere*’s reception into a narrative summary, providing links to over thirty critics and bloggers, including one gendered fight over “Rich Girl’s Cinema.” The popcorn icon at Rotten Tomatoes, which aggregates general user feedback, gives *Somewhere* an approval rating just under 50%. Is *Somewhere* “a fascinating, mature, beautiful work” (Salon) or “a triumph of tedium” (*Orlando Sentinel*)? Beyond revealing a thwarted Will to Power among first responders who now find themselves in the role of online chorus rather than tastemakers and gatekeepers, as well as suggesting evidence that female critics consistently liked the film, the split on the aggregation sites forms a kind of collective recommendation, a reason to go see a film that has upset some and delighted others. Rotten Tomatoes, like Metacritic, operates on the surface as a gigantic focus group and a vehicle for consensus through number-crunching (approval ratings for *The King’s Speech* hover around 95%), but in fact provides a huge range of individual opinions and minority reports.

One of the user terms for Twitter, the “hive mind,” suggests that research can be increasingly interactive, sometimes overwhelming so. Microblogging sites like Twitter may contain the Barthesian enjoyment of “metalanguages” par excellence, and, despite its strict parameters of 140 characters of text, it has proved effective for film critics, Roger Ebert being only the most obvious and widely read figure. Twitter works well as a supplement to RSS feeds for media coverage of film—as a conveniently one-stop way to take in information from magazines, production companies, distributors, festivals, critics, and even individual cinemas and filmmakers. I like to consult Twitter about movies I’m watching by sending status updates and messages to various interlocutors and correspondents from London to the West Coast (in addition to discussions via email, online chat, text messaging). During my discussions about *Somewhere*, a cinematographer pal in L.A. suggested, over a series of private messages on Twitter, a comparison between Gordon Willis’s color palette and the look of *Somewhere*, a connection that’s especially intriguing because of Willis’s work as Director of Photography on Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather* series. (Another potential act of parricide in *Somewhere* involves its “European” style as a throwback to the kind of New Wave-influenced

BROWSING



Left column. Top: *Lost in Translation*. © 2003 Lost in Translation Inc. DVD: Universal Studios. Second: *Cleo from 5 to 7*. © 1992 Agnès Varda et enfants. DVD: Criterion Collection. Third: *Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles*. © Chemeh I.S./Paradise Films. DVD: Criterion Collection. Fourth: *La dolce vita*. © International Media Films Inc./Third Millennium Films Inc. DVD: Koch Lorber Films. Right column: *Somewhere*. © 2010 Somewhere LLC. DVD: Focus Features.

American film that might have been made in the early 1970s by the elder Coppola's original, failed American Zoetrope production company, and Marco's trip to Italy might be read as a joke at the expense of the traditional Sicilian wedding in *The Godfather*.) The cinematographer also rightly mentioned Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) as a potential precursor for *Somewhere's* gradual unfolding of tasks from daily life such as cooking, an amusing notion in the specific sense that this analogy, if accurate, would associate the character of Johnny Marco with prostitution, the occupation of Akerman's title character. Certainly both films tend to ambush the unwary viewer and provoke similar accusations of being deliberately boring.

Searching through Twitter for references to *Somewhere* reveals a buzzing cloud of haters (not all of them clearly male). What follows is a selection, a snapshot of Twitter comments posted during a four-day period, February 3–7, found using the search terms "Sofia Coppola" and the hash tag "#Somewhere." "Oh yeah, Sofia Coppola's 'Somewhere' is the most pretentious film I've ever seen. 'Lost In Translation' was ALL Bill Murray—she's a hack." "Formula 51 was the perfect palate cleanser after watching Sofia Coppola's snoozefest *Somewhere*." "The urge to call out 'Boringgg!' while watching Sofia Coppola's 'Somewhere' was almost overwhelming in parts." "Damn it Sofia Coppola why do you think entertaining the audience is beneath you." "Whatever you do don't go see the movie [#somewhere#worst movie ever](#)." "Saw [#Coppola](#) film [#Somewhere](#) - why more than 2 minutes of her film contains pole dancing is beyond me... really, what's the point?" On the other hand, there's also more thoughtful stuff: "Wow [#Somewhere](#) ..no plot, no real storyline, no gimmicks.. I think it worked." "Sofia Coppola's style is really slow, simple, and melancholy." "Sofia Coppola effectively portrays the loneliness of being a girl in a world that knows how to use you but not how to value & understand you." "Sofia Coppola é o Edward Hopper do cinema." The more minimalist style of commentary that flourishes on Twitter turns up too: "Sofia coppola :-)" and "♥♥ Stephen dorff ♥♥ [#somewhere](#)." In my digging on Twitter I also found a link to a blog with a nice description of Coppola's style: "camera dwells insistently on a very particular kind of indolence, consciously overextending shots" (www.imitationlife.com).

This is the kind of browsing that Stuart Klawans, the film critic for *The Nation*, deplores as the enemy of film when he writes: "Audiovisual materials exist everywhere at once today—they're as common as air, and are consumed about as thoughtfully" ("Readjustments," April 18, 2011). This gloominess has its flip side in Roger Ebert's notion that blogging and online commentary has unleashed a "golden age

of movie criticism" (hblogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/04/the_golden_age_of_movie_criticism.html). Writing in this magazine, Jonathan Rosenbaum (spring 2007) reflected on living in a "transitional period when enormous paradigmatic changes should be engendering new concepts." But the Barthes-style ethos and the pleasures of browsing feel less like the basis for a novel critical concept than a simple matter of "The Way We Live Now," to cite the title of a 1986 short story by Susan Sontag that was obviously designed to obsolesce into a time capsule.

For me, the constant interweaving of online and offline experiences as a viewer and a reader involves imbrications of film and post-cinema that suggest a generational shift to digital culture as a *fait accompli* in which DVDs, never mind cinemas, seem outmoded. Even the idea of gathering round the television might seem old-fashioned compared with buying episodes of *Mad Men* or *Dexter* from AMC or Showtime straight from iTunes. In a similar fashion, IFC presents on-demand digital download services for movies like Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009), while other oddities and rarities not currently available on DVD, like John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966) and Jules Dassin's *Up Tight!* (1968), were recently made available on the Instant services of Amazon and Netflix, respectively. Netflix, for its part, has begun to commission original content—a remake of the BBC's 1990 series, *House of Cards*, produced by David Fincher—that will be streamed first rather than screened or broadcast, and Google's YouTube has followed suit with a hundred-million dollar investment to compete directly with cable.

Coppola reportedly rejected her father's advice to use digital video on *Lost in Translation* and decided to use film because it was more "romantic." Her filmmaking style to date, apart from *Marie Antoinette* (2006), involves carefully framed, classically shot compositions. In many ways, *Somewhere* is a deliberately old-fashioned film that weaves itself into a tapestry of art-cinema history. Having burnished its arthouse reputation by winning a prestigious prize at a European festival, the film relies on the persistence of an audience with a taste for browsing the cinematic past. Yet, on reflection, it's exactly the film's retro qualities that can be enhanced—made still more elastic, adaptable, and oddly durable—in the digital afterlife when it becomes viewable and reviewable at will on iPads, PlayStations, laptops, wireless Blu-ray players, and the like. With a progress bar and pause features, post-cinema-goers can freeze frames, loop back, consult other films, and resume viewing in an enhanced intertextual delirium—or maybe just watch the movie.

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