

Serge Daney\*

# Back to the Future

From 17 September 1987, the author, a film critic, decided to watch television systematically, in order to observe, describe and «without indulging in excessive mockery» write about the experience.

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When Nanni Moretti entitled his most recent film *La Messa è Finita* (*The Mass is Over*), he little knew how appropriate the term would turn out to be. Since when can a film critic be compared to a sort of priest whom people turn to from time to time to christen (with a little help from his pen) increasingly inferior audio-visual products as «films»? Since when has there been neither mass nor sermon? Since when has the audience —adults, at the end of the day— ceased to do just what they felt like? And since when has the great Cannes «party» become a catholic slaughter? Be that as it may, now, in 1987, faced with the crisis in cinema (above all a crisis in cinema halls), in the little world of the «professionals of the trade» some are beginning to lose their spirit, and others to lose their cool. It was at that point that I first began considering the most elementary of questions: what is the point of being a film critic today? I used to really like television. I liked it all the more because it was never important for me. Already very much a cinema-lover, I began watching television late in life, and somewhat perversely, I immediately applied the —inappropriate— criteria of cinema to it. Thus, for me television extended —even through its absurdity— the emotions and customs that had been born in the *cinématheque* in the 1960s.

I came from a journal —*Cahiers du Cinéma*— that had always placed cinema on a pedestal and seen the real as «impossible». Working alongside Jean Douchet, I had learned to take a close look at films, a «close-up», as Eisenstein used to say, as if my head should be the ultimate projection room. As a result, I mistrusted those who thought nothing remained of a film the moment it passed from the large to the small screen. It soon became clear that «love of cinema» embraced a number of different elements. Some, perhaps, felt more for the cinema hall than for the film itself, and from that perspective they were right to talk of nostalgia and treason. But others —myself included— preferred the film to the hall. The first group worshipped the Saturday night social ritual; the second group, on the other

hand, preferred to invent all sorts of personal rites in the dark anonymity of the non-stop cinema. The former still belonged to the theatre and its rituals; the latter already had one foot in the global image of the audio-visual flows.

The first group would never get over their lost object of desire —*Casablanca* or *Les Enfants du Paradis*, for example; the second group would follow it to the end of the world— and even beyond, unto television itself. For this reason, the comparison, exalted or Manichean, between cinema and television, had nothing to say that I found important. It prevented any discussion of what had been brought from cinema to television. So I made up my own *pro domo* theory, a theory of the incest between cinema and television. In brief, it was enough to note that all filmmakers who had to some extent or other revolutionised the way films were made seemed to have based their reasoning more on a «history of communications» than on some hypothetical «history of cinema». The real impact of filmmakers such as Vertov, Rossellini, Bresson, Tati, Welles, Godard and Straub (among others) lay in their unstable position, half way between the poetic requirements of cinema and the global advance of the mass media. Few of them actually despised television, however (Rossellini even warmly embraced it in the late 1960s), and most would have worked for television had it not insisted on making sickly-sweet melodramas and educational films that ultimately followed the lines of the Autant-Laras and the Delannoy of the 1950s. Good and bad procedure became utterly confused and things became unnecessarily complicated.

Chewing over these issues, I began to watch television systematically from September 15, 1987. I decided I would observe, I would describe and I would not indulge in excessive mockery; that and writing about it every day were the only rules I set myself. A hundred days later, the view seemed to have cleared, and even become simpler. Like a return to common sense after fruitless complication. Like the *terra firma* of first principles. Firstly, I realised that all that was

a single shared element in all that was hateful about television. Programmes that dispensed «culture» and entertaining talk show hosts all did things in the same sickly-sweet way, pitying us for having nothing else to turn to fill the tragic deficiencies in our supposedly senseless lives. They made us feel that we would be nothing without them. They whispered to us that real life was not «elsewhere»; that there was nothing comfier or more friendly than the corner of a well-lit studio. They tried to persuade us that the *de facto* monopoly television exercises over the suffering solitude of its viewers — especially the elderly— was proof of their greatness of soul and their sympathy for others.

My first (mental) cry of revolt was: «Television compensates for nothing». I immediately realized that my old theory about cinema-television incest (another way of describing the thirty-year adventure of «modern cinema», from Rossellini to Godard) was no longer true. The art of cinema had undoubtedly consisted of answering in advance questions that no one had previously asked. But in 1987 there was no longer any reason to hesitate. At best, television — adult television— might take up these questions again.

Cinema, on the other hand, had no choice but to ask new questions. It had ceased to be the trailer for the all-powerful myth of effective and happy communication, to become what was left of communication, before or after it had been transmitted.

Thereafter, one could stop reproaching television for not giving us what it did not have. As he always does, Godard, in high tone after the launch of *Soigne ta Droite* made two or three provocative remarks full of common sense. He said that culture is television because culture is transmitted and television can only transmit. He said that cinema had transmitted itself, and thus had sometimes become an art.

However it became equally possible to criticise television whenever it distanced itself from its

function, which I think can best be summed up as «ecological». Television would accompany our lives without replacing them; it would give us «news» about the world, it would be the least pollutant of all landscapes.

Had I been channel-hopping only to come back to those primary truths? Should I accustom myself to effortlessly dissociating cinema from television? Had a new order been ushered in, with each actor taking up his «roles» anew? Had the virtues of impurity and the charm of incest been exhausted?

One only had to listen to the commotion over recent films to realize that an era was coming to a close. Accustomed to fighting for Straub, I was surprised to find myself «defending» the latest Fellini films; not because they were being criticized, but because they had incited the same reactions of indifference and exhaustion among their admirers and detractors alike.

Now definitively a minority taste, cinema no longer had to be «*de auteur*» because the *auteur* had offered a personal response to obligations and commissions. This type of commission was no longer to be found in present-day cinema: anyone making a film, large or small, French or African, traditional or daring, would now do so from a personal standpoint. Defunct as an industry, cinema would once more become a craft, poor or affluent, and it would address everything left outstanding after the steamrollers of mediated communication had passed by. Anyone want to resist?

And so I gave up my channel-hopping feeling somewhat more optimistic. Ultimately, things seemed simple and one could at least imagine a physical separation of cinema and television. Television was ecology because it spoke to the responsible citizen in us, that is to say, to the adult. It is the adult that must stand up to the constant risk of puerility. But cinema had derived its strength and its longevity (one century!) from the very fact that it was partly built on childhood. It was an aspect it might

lose, but it would be unviable without it (an «adult audience» is an unachieved utopia).

If love can be defined as «making a virtue of necessity», and if television is powered by love (or as Lacan would have it, the love that comes from «yum-yum»), cinema is clearly powered by desire.

If television is a vehicle of culture, cinema transmits experience. If television requires its own de-ontology, the tracking shots of cinema have been «moral» questions.

If there is talent to be found in television scheduling, nothing will ever release cinema from the desire to produce. Finally, if television is our prose (and we will never talk well enough), cinema no longer stands a chance as anything but as poetry.