

Rethinking the Trend of Personal Films in the Post-Cinema State: Aftersun (2022) as Essay Film

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Abstract: The post-cinema era is witnessing a trend of personal films created by filmmakers of the young generation, in which the lack of public value has always been questioned in circles of criticism. However, their refreshing and acknowledged performance in recent years drives this article to reflect the former perspective of judgment. By criticizing the "public" and "private" concepts used in prevailing criticism through Deleuze's film philosophy, this article first elaborates on the philosophical foundation of the criticism in the post-cinema state. Then based on the perspective of re-building film-philosophy, this article takes Charlotte Wells's *Aftersun* (2022) as an example of the new possibilities emerging in this trend, arguing that it is an accomplished essay film in terms of open-ended texts, the multiplicity of media, and the participating audience. By analyzing the relationship between the media consciousness of the director and the reduction of personal memory, this article concludes that rethinking the trend of personal films as fertile land for practicing essay film, which is an important form of participatory art in the post-cinema era, pointing to the "cinematicity" to be realized in the future.

Keywords: personal films, essay film, post-cinema state, *Aftersun*, memory.

1. Introduction

Various new media and platforms have facilitated the production and circulation of diverse forms of videos, which to some extent confirms that "cinema as a traditional art is dead". The "state of post-cinema" as a central topic drives film studies to defend the "cinematicity" of this contemporary art, as for now the existing criterion of cinema has been challenged in the digital age, where it seems that anyone's creation using images via digital technology can be claimed as "film" without intrinsic demands. However, the exact approaches to defending cinema are worth reflecting on and clarifying. Because, it's less about reviving the prosperity of the past by emphasizing what is lost in current movies, and more about systematically re-researching the defining features and constitutive elements of cinema, based on the whole process of evolving practice, which means exploring "cinematicity" via its potentials in a philosophical sense.

At present, increasing films created by young directors tend to be generated from private experience and apply individualized writing. These unframed works are recognized as "personal films" (私电影) or "personal film-making", which are usually classified into genres like portrait films, travelogues, diary films, editorial films, and self-reflexive films [1]. Their self-consistent narrative

and the potential to serve as self-therapy have always been questioned for lacking the inherent publicness and social participation that cinema as great imaging art is expected to shoulder [2]. In contrast with the fear of losing the unique value of cinema in the public domain, the trend of personal films in recent years has achieved great success, especially evoking general approval. This phenomenon illustrates the need to criticize the way of defense by declaring the cinema ontology it relies on, and then reflecting the philosophical bases that the post-cinema state requires so that this article can realign the approach to analyze the personal films and reveal the new possibilities hidden in this trend.

2. Expectation of Publicness as Floating Signifier

There are two clarifications about the “publicness” that personal films are claimed to lack. One is the inherent feature of cinema, as the projection of images gave birth to the original form of it. As a medium of showing and expressing, especially with the development of digital technology, cinema is born to be a public form of art. So personal films naturally own this feature. Therefore, publicness as an existing fact differs from “the publicness cinema is expected to shoulder”, which is the other point to declare. When cinema became more and more socially participatory, playing a role in assisting the construction of the public sphere, people naturally started to think among vast content what kinds of films are worthy of wide circulation. If a personal family story is full of private details and subjective telling leading to a lack of metatopical common spaces, then what is the value of its public expression compared to other cultural products? Also, a self-consistent narrative tends to make personal interpretation of reality, which is more about presenting self-reflection and achieving identification instead of stating external public issues of times through well-designed plots. There are corresponding responsibilities in terms of moral requirements. This expectation of publicness consists of shared values and norms about what is worth spreading at certain stages of time or places.

This kind of judgment defends cinema in the sense of a “universal or primitive language system [langue]” [3], it focuses on the given content shown in the images and the describable interaction with reality, especially in the public domain. The expectation of publicness is in fact a floating signifier with a complicated signified trapped in specific cultural space and discourse register at certain times. However, the problem is not about the expectation itself, instead, applying the misplaced and evasive signified to evaluate a becoming form of meaning or even framing the creation of movies is what misleads the future development of the film. The expectation of publicness that can not be satisfied in personal films is looking forward to a symbol system that covers the temporarily stable states of the public and also private spheres in the near past, and the writing of cinema plays Kant's transcendental subject, which defends the self-disciplined, autonomous, reflexive and rational subjectivity by constructing human history based on divine reason.

3. Cinema as Projection of Thoughts and Trauma Subjectivity

Stressing the expectation with a confusing signified can easily result in the binary opposition between the public sphere and private domain, as it only defends the by-products of cinema, which are constrained by the rigid semiotic systems. This approach fails to distinguish cinema from other forms of art and has trouble interpreting self-reference in personal writing without the generated symbolic system. Thus, it is important to find a suitable philosophical foundation for reviewing personal films in the post-cinema age.

Gilles Deleuze, in his two books about films *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* proposes a revolutionary approach to film theory, which is looking at film that explodes static views of the work that the work of art does. Rather than “representing” something, film, for Deleuze, has the potential to create its own fluid movements and temporalities [4]. In *The Movement-*

Image, the image is human's mental imitation and reproduction of external objects as the subject. Movement, as physical reality in the external world, and the image, as psychic reality in consciousness [5], and “movement- image” is the mutual mapping and unity of the objective world and the subjective world [6]. Simply put, it is to move and be felt. This form of cinema can be dated back to one of the origins at the beginning, which was the “attraction film” created by Merieux turning the film into the landscape, into the narrative, into the theater.

The time-image in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, however, breaks itself from sensory-motor links. The emphasis shifts from the logical progression of images to the experience of the image-in-itself [4]. Deleuze considered cinema as a “whole psychomechanics”, which consists of movements and thought-processes (pre-linguistic images), and of points of view on these movements and processes (pre-signifying signs) [3]. Deleuze seized the powerful constitutive element of cinema in modern times, especially after World War II, when a lot of things happen that people don't know how to deal with, the old narrative logic and linear structure are broken, and some moments present a “pure state”. As for cinema, it becomes a purely mental space that reflects the movement of the brain, and the subject becomes the developer of time through its own emptiness and depression. When time unfolds itself, it turns from a line into a reality in which the past, present and future coexist [6]. This real time has vitality, and man becomes an unconscious non-subject embodied in the unfolding time. Cinema is no longer ruled by the rational movement that is structured by closed framings, reasonable progressions, and continuous juxtapositions, instead, the utterable images gain their duration and movement in the flooding but reflexive time series, so that the thoughts are not indexed by certain linguistic system but verge on the pre-linguistic and pre-signifying state of thinking itself.

The time-image emphasizes the experience of unfolding time, and it seems that there is no place for the subject in the endless creation of life. Nevertheless, most discussion of subjectivity today is more about experience, trauma, and vulnerability, because that's how we sense subjectivity in the post-human era, especially in the age of post-pandemic. How can we take ourselves as subjects when technology, materiality, the Internet, and the emerging Black Swan events in our movement of life affect the main, making us unable to choose our destiny? That is also why young directors tend to explore from the inner sphere, where the trauma subjectivity can reflect in the thoughts that float within unfolding time.

4. *Aftersun* (2022) as Essay Film

The time-image theory of cinema as a reflexive projection of thoughts operated by itself reveals a strong connection between the imagery and thinking, which to some extent reminds people that though the post-cinema state is shoved by the evolution of media and digital technology, the intrinsic power of cinema owns the potential to generate thinking and create concepts without other symbolic systems. Meanwhile, Deleuze fears that the new method will destroy the potential will or turn it into a commodity, pornography, Hitlerism. It is from these considerations that Deleuze concludes, “When we must no longer ask ourselves, ‘What is cinema?’ but ‘What is philosophy?’ Cinema itself is a new practice of images and signs, whose theory philosophy must produce as conceptual practice”.

Alexander Astruc wrote an essay called *The Future of Cinema*, in which he began by saying that the most important function of cinema is not merely to record or to narrate, it is about thinking in pictures, and only in the medium of film can we find the most fundamental relationship between images and human thinking [7]. For this reason, the practice of personal films is not only about healing the trauma, but also embracing the advantages of practicing the new projection of thoughts, constructing the inter-subjectivity, or discovering new possibilities of relationship between the I and the Other. Among all the practices, essay film is not just a style or genre, it not only allows for the creation of fluid and changeable identities and forms of subjectivity but also enables reciprocal and open dialogues between the author and the audience by taking experiences as the nexus and thought

experiments as the method [8]. In the following paragraphs, this article argues that *Aftersun* (2022) as a well-acknowledged personal film is an accomplished essay film in the post-cinema state.

Analysis below refers to a literature that cites several classic texts of essay film study and sums up its three basic characteristics, namely, open-ended texts, the multiplicity of media, and the participating audience [8]. *Aftersun* is self-described by director Charlotte Wells as an “emotional autobiography”, as it was inspired by a summer vacation the director spent with her father in the 1990s. The movie is from the adult Sophie's point of view, an adult—a new parent herself—looking back on a vacation with her father in Turkey 20 years ago, curious about what her father must have been going through. She knows her memories of the vacation. But what was going on with him? To reach out to the other, including father Calum and the younger self of Sophie, the film presents the process of recalling a fraction of hazy memory, during which the limited childhood sight, the domain view from the present and the imaginary but temperate infer blends in a way that serves the film as a form that thinks, or according to Phillip Lopate, the film “tracks a person’s thoughts... a search to find out what one thinks about something” [9]. Rather than applying the narrative of memory as a basic framework for the creation of a personal story, *Aftersun* distinguishes itself from a home movie or a self-documentary by the consciousness of reflection and decipherment, exteriorizing personal expression determined and circumscribed by an always varying kind, quality, and number of material contexts in which to think is to multiply one’s selves and reach out for the other [1].

An essay film as open-ended text firstly depends on the attitude of abandoning clear demarcation lines and closed systems, it shall try to constantly open up the new forms of objects and things themselves, and thus activate the critical reflection and even creative reconstruction of thoughts on themselves. The reconstruction of the personal memory sets gaps to achieve openness, that is, to set an absolute distance between the I and the other, thus ensuring that the other can be as open as possible outside the violent totality. As for the projection of the personal memory, there are many subjective close-ups from the eyes of little Sophie, to reveal how Sophie spies on other young girls and how she perceives her own identity in her formative years. But for Father Callum, there is never a scene that shoots directly from his height of sight, especially when Sophie is absent. In those imaginary parts, the film is always vigilant about the “tyranny of the I over the other” [10], thus the access to father is trying to get a glimpse of Callum's hidden inner self from mirrors, glass-topped tables, TV screens, Polaroid photos and other media with his reflection or projection out of frame. Instead of filling the objective gap between Sophie and Calum, and also between viewers and characters with concrete details or complete storylines, the intentional presence of tangible media with distanced moving images projected on them rather fuels the emotional tension that the author longs to explore.

To express a thought, essay films can take material that traditional films have ignored, despised or even opposed, and straddle the artificial boundaries between reality and fiction, private and public, and even amateur and professional. For example, as a medium, DV images are placed in the middle zone between reality and fiction, reality and fantasy, and this intermediary constantly emerges in the process of reconstruction as blurry images, setting up the absolute distance between the recalling subject and the other in the space, thus making the interaction between the self and the other in an inter-subjective state. *Aftersun* is different from strong narrative films, in addition to using a single narrative subject, paying attention to trivial daily details and presenting the de-narrative images of the characters, the film uses the characteristics of various media to carry out concentrated audio-visual reproduction of the triple narrative space. With DV footage, the typically activates or subjectively reactivates the events of history as “an aesthetic of ruins” and a “counter-history” which becomes “an often radical and experimental rethinking of context” [11].

Film is visualized thinking, questioning thinking, and experiential thinking with the audience. How does a film really “reflect on itself”? In addition to the dynamic and open field of forces, it is also obvious that it must be implemented on the subject: who is reflecting? Who reflects in the film?

Reflect on what? To whom do you ask for reflection? It can be seen that the subjectivity of the essay film is never just the author of the film, but also the audience to whom the author questions and talks. The reconstruction of the memory is based on the existence of an important medium, that is, the family DV video introduced at the beginning of the film. Everything starts from the action of Adult Sophie, who plays the DV footage intentionally, which means that beyond her childhood and present self, Sophie has a curiosity based on individual care for her father, who is strange, abnormal, and always somehow out of touch. Therefore, the reconstruction serves the questioning of "What was going through his mind at that moment? What emotions were gripping him?" Thus, the narrative subject will acquiesce to the priority of his father Callum in the memory projection, and "let himself present his inner world" through various narrative and audio-visual means. At the same time, the projection should also reflect on the young Sophie, to complete the identity of self-existence, as her upbringing took place in a misalignment with her father. As for the interaction with audiences, in the age of digital and networking, interactivity has become a prominent feature of new media, which makes the audience of an essay film obtain an active and participation status. They can not only freely change the content and form of broadcasting, but also participate in the continuous generation and construction process of "open-ended essays" with their feelings and thoughts.

In the note that director Charlotte Wells wrote to her audiences, she shared her inspiration from this projection of memory, "A memory of a memory endlessly corrupting itself. I've caught myself recently claiming that feeling is more robust, but it's tricky. Because in recalling a point in time and how that moment made you feel, it is framed by a new feeling—the feeling of what that moment means to you now" [12], the corruption of memory and the robust feelings that are framed by new ones, all of the thinking she has mentioned above are coded and projected in *Aftersun*, which evokes collective affection and reflection through multiple media. She communicated with her audiences, wishing that "It's best experienced without context, without having seen our gorgeous trailer, and with patience and an open mind. It accumulates to a feeling that I found myself best able to express through the language of cinema ("ch-inema") and not in words or by any other means. And there is room for you in this film too. I hope you can take it, fill it, in order to feel it" [12]. Significantly, director Charlotte Wells used to be a writer using texts as the medium of creation, but as a filmmaker in the digital age, she said that when she wanted to represent this memory, she couldn't think of a better way, in any language, in any medium than film/cinema. Therefore, in this film, she has a high degree of media consciousness, and this media consciousness is also reflected in the film to constantly switch between various media, playing an essential role in thinking and reflecting.

5. Conclusion

Essay film facilitates the creation of flexible identities and subjectivities, and fosters interactive dialogues between the authors and viewers, using experiences as a connection and thought experiments as a technique. Openness underscores the realm of forces at play, multiplicity embodies the blending of diverse media, and participation confronts the intricacies inherent in viewers' subjectivity. Both subjectivity and experience are of course the products of discourse, and rather than stabilize and harmonize the encounter between these two discourses, the essayistic creates clashes and gaps in each and across their meeting with each other as a place that elicits, if not demands, thought [1].

Essay film in the post-cinema state is able to act as a strong connection between cinema and philosophical practice. Not only is it an important form of participatory art in recent times, but it also provides a possibility for change in the future development of the film. The trend of personal films among the young generation is based on the intrinsic drive of the time-image mode generated from the post-human era. Here, digital media becomes tapped and developed precisely in terms of its essayistic potentials: Televisual space becomes a public space uninhabited by temporal motivation, a

space in which the private drifts, as in the final sequence, into horrifying complicity with the undifferentiated action of killing, indistinguishably oneself or the other, as a temporal logic [1]. Nevertheless, if the practice of essay film today makes full use of the advantages in the digital age and develops its intrinsic potential as “Thinking belongs to the outside” [13], modern cinema may live up to the irreplaceable ontology that owns its heterogeneous prior in producing ideas and extending subjectivity through an outside world. Take *Aftersun* as an accomplished essay film that benefits from this age: the open dialogues projected in representational time-image capture the continually changing memory, during which the media retrieving materiality within and the digital media spreading the projection outside open up multi-layered space between the author and the audiences where the reflexive thinking is mutually aroused. Upon this account, the cinematic experience of thinking outperforms the original movement of memorizing and the personal writing of memory only within texts in exploring the implications of the face of the other.

Therefore, as the post-cinema state requires the approach to defend cinema by rebuilding film-philosophy, this article argues that the trend of personal films is a fertile land for practicing essay film in the post-cinema era, pointing to the “cinematicity” to be realized in the future.

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