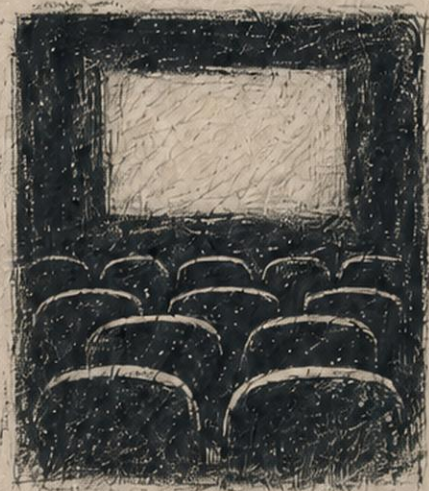


IN DEFENSE OF CINEMA

AN INITIATION



(a.k.a. An Antidote to AI Slop)

TOM THUDIYANPLACKAL

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Preface — The Difference Between Seeing and Watching

Cinema as an art form isn't just a coincidental transfixing effect achieved by the assemblage of random ingredients with the expectation of catching lightning in the bottle. Though that has resulted occasionally, the repeatable brilliance of certain auteurs can only be attributed to a commitment they've displayed towards the investigation into the human condition, similar to intellectuals who have, before this medium arrived, recorded through works of scientific inquiry, metaphysical discourses, dreamlike paintings, and godlike prophesies. It's a highly distinguishable perspective that is arrived at only through the thorough distillation of ideas, down to their essences, and therefrom, formulating a style that is the result of careful curation, orchestration, and presentation of these disparate elements to impact the audience in a manner akin to sorcery: through dreams and nightmares that feel our own, we are transplanted into other forms and lifetimes, transcendent and sublime experiences nudge us into states where we are no longer able to return to who we were prior to this journey, often planting memories that live with us and shape who we are, well beyond our immediate engagement with life. Though all works deemed deserving of this title are also classified as movies, not all movies should be confused as cinema. Even those works, so astute and evolved as to emulate the celebrated qualities of ageless narratives that survive generations and influence society, which are cinematic, but they fall short on several fronts, and haven't earned that title. The majority, however, isn't even trying to be anything more than entertainment; cheap thrills and titillation, gloss and spectacle, that's about the extent of what's available there. These may find popularity, earn big at the box office, but for certain, that doesn't prove there's anything much else

here that humanity should crave or support. But sadly, in a capitalist society, quality and decency are not what's central to much of what governs choices. Cinema is a virtue that only the initiated attempt to attain, knowing well, similar to enlightenment, it's never guaranteed, and much of the journey will make one hyper aware of the shortcomings and failings, and the best efforts may go unnoticed by a multitude that remains fixated to hedonism and escapism. But the pursuit of the sublime must not be ceded to the lethargic obsessions of heathens. Cinema must be pursued, and every so often, manifested to acquaint us with truths that are undeniable even when the masses lack the vocabulary, deservedness, and readiness to be enlightened.

Another thing I wish to establish through the writing of this book is my role over the past decade as an explorer of the outer regions, where the transformation that's upon us had already started to cause ripples, and several harbingers surfaced along the way.

I started my engagement with the medium early in life and was never wholly out of its spell. Whether it was a period of fascination with its grandeur or rawness, or when I was repulsed by the imitation that was alluring enough to draw me in and heartbreaking to discover that most would turn out to be such con acts.

I hadn't met some of the more prolific masters whose works I list in the witness chapters until much later, so it felt as though I'd met some giants early on among the Hollywood greats, then had to make do with rip-offs for a while, and later was introduced to the real gods.

Though I grew up in a nation where the movie business was largely corrupt and immoral, with the true practitioner as scarce as yetis in a salon, the prospect of my being involved with the medium as a career option was impossible to consider or even bring up with my parents.

Also, the business was mostly a family affair for those who'd entered it and had any success. The rest who worked in it were folks with dreams for which they'd willingly or under coercion trade more than was ever going to be fair. Whether they were victims of casting couches or wage theft. A few made a killing and played demigods, while their footsteps traced back to a mountain of blood-let lambs.

I've always felt that, despite my love for the occasional glorious discovery of life-affirming truths from this medium, much of the field and what it seems to attract had continually dissuaded me from ever having anything to do with it. That is the irony of the medium. In some ways, it's no different from what seems to happen to almost all forms of divine transmission; much of it is populated with con artists, wannabes, and dealers. Often, the real deal folks hide away as soon as they realize staying in the midst of such a brutal bunch would only end badly for them.

Truth be told, even after having been professionally engaged in one aspect or another of this field, I've skirted the problematic aspects that still persist and, in some ways, despite the loosening grip of blatantly nefarious elements of society, may have landed in the hands of a more dangerous class, the social engineers of doom.

I am being cryptic on purpose, and whoever can read into it will likely get the images I've unfortunately glimpsed and don't hope to have much to do with.

Even when I felt I was close to the few who had a certain familiar panache for the touch of cinema, they, too, disappointed me when it came to the disparity and duplicity in the way they conducted themselves, treated their collaborators, and leached off the brilliance, solidarity, and exuberance of others who were there for the real thing.

In my teens, one of my uncles, an advocate at the Bombay High Court, directed me to a client who was a financier of B-movies. I landed on a film set, my first time in this regard, and, of course, I had high hopes. What resulted from the exposure was the quick realization that beyond the bounds of the frame captured by the camera, the world in which that scene is orchestrated might be precisely where a different story writes itself: one that no one might ever know, and the truth of which might have a deeper implication for the world we live in than anything that was committed to film.

I had witnessed how poorly the young hopefuls who had agreed to be taken advantage of as mere warm bodies fueling the egos of the few who were profiting from the enterprise would be treated. I had heard the expletives that flew so casually toward them every so often, and even the occasional physical abuse. I was certain that if I were placed in their position, someone would leave the studio on a stretcher, so I decided to spare them and start my career in advertising instead.

Mind you, I knew the outcome I predicted would hold true because I was about a foot taller than most of these predators and worked out five days a week. But the alternative, choosing to use my stronger assets, turned out to be the better choice for me: my creativity and intellect.

How three decades have passed, and I transitioned through roles, working across industries and continents, advertising at Ogilvy, creative supervision for India's fastest growing mobile network at Reliance, film school in Prague, Bollywood blockbusters, shadowing a leading Hollywood producer on a tentpole, working on an Oscar campaign, producing an Emmy-nominated documentary, and several other things that shaped me, and made me hungrier to use all of it into a few films and shows that would deliver to the world a unique vision I had developed for what should be possible within this medium despite the rigid and often ill-fitted mechanics of this industry.

When I moved to the U.S., it soon became clear that creativity wouldn't work in my favor the same way it had in my culture of origin. I didn't possess the nuanced understanding of society I had taken for granted, shaped by my upbringing in a densely populated migrant community in Bombay and by extensive travels throughout the nation, using every means of transportation and relying heavily on locals who had welcomed me wherever I went. Conversely, in America, I realized that the color of my skin served as a kind of shield, putting several members of the dominant Western culture off from seeing the human behind it. Members of law enforcement were equally possessed by this strange proclivity and even assaulted me during a local scouting and research trip to New York.

It felt wise to lean on my education in physics and the sciences instead, and so I turned to a different chapter, one that would have me dig deep into how production technology shapes the narrative. I forayed into real-time technologies and virtual production, and Epic Games' valiant effort during the pandemic exposed me to a community of some of the most brilliant and gifted individuals, with enviable creativity and scientific minds. The Unreal Fellowship remains one of the most supercharged events I have participated in, for the sheer audacity of this global venture to unite and empower minds with such varied dreams and unbridled potential.

That's where I first learned about USC's Entertainment Technology Center, and immediately afterward, I was introduced to Erik Weaver, the mastermind behind the institution's research grant that put several yet-to-be-released technologies to the test on an active production. I gravitated toward the then-active production, Fathead, and the rest is history. These engagements on production after production activated a joyous and fulfilling aspect of filmmaking I hadn't explored to this extent or been curious about before this chance encounter, and probably an answered prayer.

On Fathead, I authored a nearly 200-page white paper after serving as the virtual production

producer, learning about the technology and contributing to the conversations that helped that method proliferate in those early years. On later productions, Erik invited me to join him as a fellow Executive Producer to help shape them from the ground up.

I got to handpick the vendors, technologies, and collaborators, and piece together the workflows and tests that result in the final pipeline. The quality of engagement with each contributor led to rapid growth in my sense of what the future of our medium held and what it'd take to deliver it. Our presentations to the various studios that are sponsors at ETC, and careful listening to what they respond to and how the temperature in the room shifts for different parts of the discussion, allowed me to map those out to trends that emerged across the industry for decisions in hiring, greenlighting, and acquisitions.

There's more than one simple product line for this business, but the revenue stream comes from engaging the same audience regardless. That's the critical piece — the audience. The high demand for this single source of revenue, and the business model of converting their attention into dollars, led to more strategic and highly unsentimental forces swooping in and devising tools to engineer that attention grab to an extent that has almost immediately incapacitated the Goliath of entertainment.

Befuddled and bewildered might be extreme, but isn't that how the industry has acted over the past few years? There hasn't been leadership at any major studio to act with confidence, and almost everyone is severing arms and legs to keep the head and torso alive, hoping to come up with that one big idea while fighting the poison pill: investing in streaming was a harsh wake-up call for most who bit into it, revealing that technology isn't their strong suit and that there are more blind sides here than on the other turf they engineered and designed to confuse and entrap others.

The immediate gut punch delivered by AI's arrival and unprecedented adoption couldn't have come at a worse time. The move by AI companies to go for the jugular was again not anticipated. Though the strikes may have suggested that a unified force would defend the workers, and that for the studios, there'd be no way out but to continue with business as usual, greenlighting productions that'd stick to the old ways, the wait-and-watch approach is seemingly the only one that has worked out for everyone. Some will have enough savings to survive to see the other side, and most others will need to adapt and evolve into something entirely different from anything they'd ever hoped to be, even in some future version of themselves.

Though these changes may seem forceful and uncomfortable, those who see them as a natural event of greater consequence than one worth spending time looking for someone to blame will discover a new self well beyond the dreams of their old self.

I was five years old. The theater was named the Regal. The country was India. The household I had been born into was Catholic, in a primarily Hindu nation, which made us a minority. I had not seen much about Christ's teachings in practice in the society around me. It felt rather duplicitous to go to a Catholic school with my Hindu classmates and neighbors, and strangely to be placed in the same environment that meant one thing to me and another to them. The symbols, the rituals, the walls meant something sacred to me. They were merely functions and objects to others, who could easily express their impish proclivities without censure despite the atmosphere. Christ was missing in action.

I had, at five years old, no reasoning capacity beyond doubts that I could not yet formulate into questions that would have inspired useful responses from adults. Much of what I asked resulted in a disgruntled adult needing to unleash a degree of lashing that would teach me never to rely on them

for knowledge or reason. The institutional Christianity that surrounded me was not delivering what its symbols had promised. The doubts had begun to accumulate before I had any way to express them.

Then I walked into that theater. The film was *Ben Hur*. The lights went down. The screen began to throw light into the dark space where I was sitting. And what unfolded was a portal. I had traveled two thousand years in time. I had entered the life of an adult human who bore such sacrifices, an ego that was built up and torn down, all that could be won was had and lost entirely, for the loss to feel complete. I had never earned anything to know what that felt like. But there, in that darkened hall, I knew. I also saw Christ through the eyes of Judah. And again, I knew.

Those things I knew remained with me. That knowledge did not belong to a five-year-old. But it was known to me regardless. I could not articulate what I had learned, what I had felt, what I had been in communion with. But it was inseparable from my spirit from that moment forward.

This book exists because of what occurred in that theater. Not because of the specific film, though the film delivered what it delivered. Because of the structural event the film conducted. A child in a body too young to have earned through experience what the film transmitted received, in the dark space the medium had constructed for receiving, knowledge that the surrounding institutional apparatus had been actively obstructing for years. The transmission was real. The transmission persisted. The deposit the film placed in me has continued to operate in my consciousness across the decades that separate me from the five-year-old who walked into the Regal.

Everything the book that follows argues about what cinema is, what cinema has been capable of at its highest, what cinema is now being prevented from doing by the surrounding apparatus that has captured and weaponized and bastardized what once was given freely — every claim the book makes is grounded in the experience the previous paragraphs have described. Without that experience, or one like it, the book would be theory. With it, the book has its evidence, and the evidence is mine, given honestly, with the texture of the actual experience preserved.

I do not pretend that the experience was unusual. The experience is, in fact, the standard outcome of the genuine encounter with cinema at its highest. Millions of viewers have had experiences of this order, in various theaters, through various films, at various ages. What is unusual is not the experience itself but the willingness to take it seriously enough to write a book in defense of the medium that made the experience possible. Most viewers who have had such experiences allow them to recede into the general inventory of cultural memory without taking up arms in their defense. I have not been able to do this. The deposit was too consequential. The threat to the medium that produced the deposit has become, across the decades since, too severe to ignore.

This book is positioned in a tradition of visionary human inquiry — scientific, metaphysical, painterly, prophetic — that has, across the millennia, produced practitioners who recognized when something the human community required was being lost and who took up the work of defending what was being lost regardless of whether the defense would prove sufficient. I am not claiming that this book belongs in the company of the great works in this tradition. I am claiming that this book has been written within the tradition, in the register the tradition requires, with the recognition that the work is being conducted under the conditions the tradition's previous practitioners have always been conducting their work under — conditions hostile to the work, with audiences

uncertain about whether they want what the work is offering, with cultural apparatus organized largely to prevent the work from reaching the audiences who would benefit from it most.

The book is not academic. The voice is not the voice of a scholar conducting a balanced examination of available positions. The voice is the voice of someone who has accepted what the book argues, who has been changed by the encounters the book defends, and who is no longer interested in pretending that the question of cinema's future is one the contemporary culture is equipped to answer correctly without the kind of intervention this book attempts to provide.

If the voice is uncomfortable to readers accustomed to the academic register, the discomfort is the point. The argument the book conducts cannot be conducted in the academic register without losing what the argument requires. The academic register has its uses. This is not the work for which it is suited. The prophetic register, in the precise sense the tradition the book operates within has used the term, is the register through which the argument can be made at the depth the argument requires. I have tried to use the register honestly. I have tried not to inflate the register into theatrics. I have tried to speak plainly about what is at stake, with the recognition that what is at stake exceeds what plain speech can entirely capture.

The book is structured in five parts. The first part establishes what cinema is, in the strict sense the book defines as cinema rather than as the broader category of moving-image entertainment. The second part traces the lineage cinema inherits, from the pre-cinematic visionaries through the moment the medium arrived, and what the medium was made of when it began its first century. The third part examines the practitioners who carried the function across that first century — the witnesses whose work the book holds up as the demonstration of what cinema at its highest has been capable of. The fourth part diagnoses what has been done to the medium in the conditions that have developed across its second century — the captured world, the weaponized mind, the cookie cutter, the three deceptions. The fifth part addresses what remains, what is required of the practitioner and the audience in the present moment, and what the lineage continues to make available to those willing to receive it.

The book is dense. The book asks the reader for sustained attention. The book does not apologize for either of these. The argument the book conducts cannot be compressed beyond what the book has already compressed it to. The reader who is not prepared to give the book the attention the book requires is invited to put the book down and return to it later when the conditions for sustained attention can be reassembled. The book will wait. The deposit the book is attempting to make does not depend on the urgency of any particular reading.

The book is also, in places, repetitive. The same arguments return in different chapters, examined from different angles, with different specific applications. This is not the failure of editing the contemporary publishing apparatus would identify it as. It is the deliberate structural choice the argument requires. The contemporary culture has trained the reader to receive a point once and consider the point delivered. The arguments this book conducts do not deliver in a single statement. They require the accumulation of the same observations across multiple contexts before the structural point becomes visible. The repetition is the instrument by which the structural point is made available to readers whose surrounding stimulation environment has trained them out of the ability to track sustained argument across long distances.

I have been working on the book for many years. The book has been written under conditions

specific to my own life, my own work, my own commitments to the institutions and practices that occupy my time outside the writing. I am not a professional theorist. I am not a film critic. I am a practitioner in adjacent fields who has watched the medium I love progressively dismantled by forces the surrounding cultural apparatus has been unwilling or unable to name accurately, and I have written the book that I believed needed to be written because no one else was going to write it in the precise terms the diagnosis required.

It is a way I am processing my grief, turning it into a manifesto, and sending it into the world as a war cry for those who care to rise up in arms and use all they have in them to deliver to Cinema what is needed of us to keep it alive for future generations to receive it as providence.

I have given close to forty years of my life in devotion to this entity that I have sought to understand, become worthy of, and remain in service of. The grief is real. The determination to fight for what must be preserved for future generations is equally authentic.

The language I chose is closer in kind to a sermon delivered at a funeral by someone who actually loved the dead — full of the specific bitterness and specific tenderness that only proximity to the loss permits.

The book is unapologetic. The book is uncompromising. The book does not soften its diagnoses to make them more palatable to readers who would prefer not to have them. The book does not flatter the contemporary cultural apparatus by pretending that its accomplishments are more significant than they are. The book does not pretend that artificial intelligence is a continuation of the artistic tradition the book honors rather than the latest and most comprehensive instrument for replacing the tradition with simulations of the tradition that contain none of the substance. The book does not pretend that the streaming platforms are restoring access to cinema rather than progressively replacing cinema with content that has been engineered for the platforms' algorithmic priorities.

If readers disagree with the book's diagnoses, they are welcome to do so. The disagreement is part of how the conversation the book hopes to provoke proceeds. What I ask is that the disagreement engage with the actual arguments the book makes rather than dismissing them on the grounds of the prophetic register or the perceived severity of the conclusions. The arguments are available for examination. The evidence is in the films the witness chapters examine and in the diagnostic chapters' specifications of the contemporary apparatus. The reader who wishes to disagree can do so. The reader who wishes to accept the diagnosis is invited to consider what the diagnosis implies for their own participation in the cultural apparatus the book has named.

I dedicate this book to the practitioners who have carried the lineage across the first century of cinema, to the practitioners who continue to carry it across the second century under conditions that make the carrying more difficult, and to the audiences who continue to receive what the practitioners deposit despite the surrounding apparatus that has been working to prevent the receiving. I dedicate it to the five-year-old in the Regal who walked into the theater carrying his accumulated doubts and walked out carrying knowledge that did not belong to a five-year-old but that he carried regardless. I dedicate it to my mentees and students and to the children of practitioners and audiences I will never meet, who are growing up in conditions that have organized

themselves more comprehensively against the encounter the book defends than the conditions any previous generation has faced.

The cinema that taught me what institutional Christianity had failed to teach me is the cinema this book has been written to defend. The medium that opened a portal to a five-year-old who had no reasoning capacity for what the portal delivered is the medium I am asking the reader to consider participating in the defense of. The defense is not abstract. It is not theoretical. It is the practical commitment to participating in a tradition the surrounding apparatus has organized itself to dismantle, and to doing so with the seriousness the tradition's previous participants brought to their own work in their own conditions across the centuries that placed the medium in our hands.

The book that follows attempts to specify the terms of the defense. The reader who has reached this point in the preface is invited to continue. The reader who decides, at this point, that the work is not for them is welcome to put the book down. The argument continues regardless. The lineage continues regardless. The five-year-old who walked into the Regal carries what was deposited in him for the rest of his life regardless of who reads the book or who does not.

What follows is the book.

* * *

The defense continues for another hundred thousand words.

Thirteen witnesses. Five parts. One Standard.

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