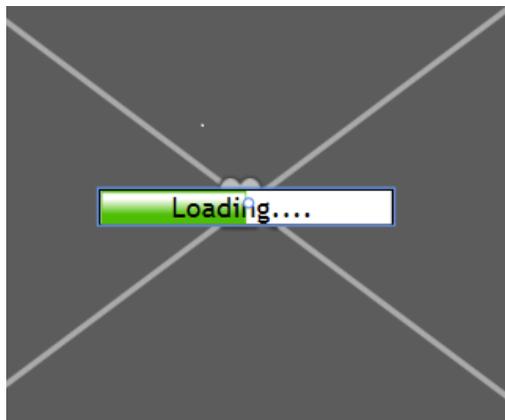


## Empty Moments 2.0: the cinephilic experience and the buffer zone



by Rebecca Jackson

Defining the cinephilic experience escapes even the most perceptive, astute film theorists today. Faced with the overarching, exceedingly difficult task of defining this phenomenon, especially in light of new modes of watching, pinning down the cinephilic experience escapes further into outerspace, empty space, or, for the sake of this paper, cyberspace. This paper explores the buffer zone; the space of unintentional "empty moments"<sup>iii</sup> that invade texts via online streaming, and, through hermeneutic discussion, I hope to discover the meaning of a new cinephilic experience interrupted by the liminal space of buffering. Are these empty moments a productive player in understanding new cinephilia? From mimesis to memory, punctums to powerlessness, Bazin to Benjamin, this paper interrogates the cinephilic experience from benign to barrage.

The buffer zone exists in the interim of bandwidth shifts, the techno-term for this is buffer underrun or buffer underflow. The buffer underflow occurs when a buffer used to communicate between two devices is fed with data at a lower speed than the data being

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read from it. It creeps-up unaware of its devious, although unintentional, ability to shock the viewer into reality, jolting the suspension of disbelief to a hard end, and invading the sacred space between art and audience. The buffer underflow can intercept one's attention for a few moments or snatch one's viewing experience entirely. As clips, movies, or television shows are not designed to be interrupted by disturbances in bandwidth, the buffer underflow can have ravenous effects on texts. Whether moments, minutes, or marathons, the buffer underflow lurks behind the veil of streaming media sneaking-up on the unsuspecting audience.

**buffer** <sup>iii</sup>

**Main Entry: 3buffer**

**Function: transitive verb**

**Inflected Form(s): buffered; buffering  
 \-f([1]Y-)riK\**

**Date: 1845**

**1 : to lessen the shock of : cushion**

**2 : to treat (as a solution or its acidity) with a buffer; also : to prepare (aspirin) with an antacid**

**3 : to collect (as data) in a buffer**

Unlike a glitch, which acts as a sudden, complete failure of the system, the buffer zone repairs itself automatically with the probability of occurring again as bandwidth is interrupted. Each buffering sequence is a moment of renewal, but a glitch is a failure within the system. The glitch is static and permanent. The buffer underflow is mobile and transformative.

In "Nostalgia for a Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of QuickTime," Vivian Sobchack critiques the function of quicktime movies likening the quicktime "little boxes" to Joseph Cornell's boxes. Her argument rests within what she calls the,

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"confrontation of past and present" (2). The examination of past and present and the lacunae which appear like palimpsests within the buffer underflow rests at the heart of my interrogation. These empty moments resound fervently in my cinephiliac experiences as I try to essay a new way of defining the digital pillow shots that makeup the buffer underflow.

The preemptive nostalgia Sobchack feels for quicker quicktime movies acknowledges the discrete boxes of moving fragments as independent works of art. "The movie is not the medium; it is the organizing principle." (Sobchack 4). For Sobchack, the quicktime



<sup>iv</sup>movie should be revered for its uniqueness and not dismissed for its inability to keep up with its predecessor for which it gleans its name. Understanding Sobchack's take on quicktime movies creates an avenue for the positive interpretation of the buffer underflow as

a discrete and unique portion of the streaming process.

Labeling the buffer underflow as a discrete unit of the streaming process is problematic, however, as this assumes the image represented by the buffer underflow is in itself independent from the text. From my personal experience, the buffering interruption is an uncomfortable experience as I am separated without warning from the streaming process, jarring my gaze and resuming belief<sup>v</sup> as consciousness invades the experience, reminding me I am in the process of watching streaming content.

Obviously, another option is to include the moment of streaming interjections as a fluid part of the streaming whole. The process of viewing online becomes complicated further as this interpretation capitulates to a new text; a brand new text unable to duplicate itself

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and without authorship. I wonder what happens to the cinephilic experience when new texts are derived from existing works. Does the text change or is it just the "organizing principle" (Sobchack 4)?

For Sobchack, quicktime movies are precious works and through the process of looping, duplicating, and repeating, these movies create a "mnemonic aesthetic" derived from the "gap between resemblance and identity" (Sobchack 14). The buffering icon explicitly demonstrates this gap through its primary function of continual preservation and enhancement of the streaming image. Though the representation of this function may change according to various media players, the implemented buffering icons for particular media players never waver. Ironically, the buffering underflow is used to keep streaming images from fleeting, however, in the process, the buffering icon manages to establish its unique presence akin to the vitrines and "memory boxes" of which Sobchack refers. "In QuickTime "memory boxes," mechanical serialization and mnemonic repetition often combine - each "encouraging" the other to keep in mind - to re-collect and re-present - the ephemera of memory that would otherwise disappear from view" (Sobchack 16).

Re-collecting and re-presenting are the fundamentals behind the buffer underflow enabling them to act as digital pillow shots, thus, producing a shock in a trice, but does this jolt come at a detriment to the cinephilic experience? Using Heidegger's existential views on technology and humanity, Sobchack draws a parallel between the electronic age and the photographic. She credits the use of television screens and computer screens with the human ability to engage technology. Incorporating technology into the human experience creating metaphors with which humankind can seemingly anamorphisize new

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technologies, thus making them more familiar and user friendly. In a Manovichian style, Sobchack explains the humanizing of technology as a means to place ourselves within the world.

Our engagement with new media affords a new understanding of new technology. "Seeing images mediated and made visible by technological vision thus enables us not only to see technological images but also to see technologically." (Sobchack 139). What would Bazin have to say about this? The engagement with the digital image as metaphor for an entire process of perfecting texts, or buffering them always into the present turns Bazin's mummification on its head. Buffering is not immortalizing the mortal, but perfecting the past into the present. Where Bazin's triumph is teasing out the plastic arts' desire to perpetuate into the future, the buffer underflow can never exist beyond the present. It is always already in a trice which vanquishes upon propulsion into the future.

According to Bazin, photography removes the artist's fingerprint leaving behind an analagous display of realism. The buffer underflow comes in two distinct varieties one which mimics Bazin's realism and the other which favors Manovichian ideas of metaphors. Of course by this I mean the represented and the unrepresented buffer zones. Both perform the same function, but the represented buffer underflow signals metaphorically to the audience, usually by use of an animated icon signaling time passing, that the image is in the state of buffering. However, the unrepresented buffer underflow presents itself without metaphor or symbol in the form of frozen or choppy images. The latter is the purest form of the buffer underflow. Yet, without a physical analogue for the buffer underflow in real life, the realism of the buffer zone is seemingly moot. Perhaps the most influential link between Bazin and the buffer underflow lies in

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the objectivity of the buffer zone. Without warning or partiality, the buffer underflow acts accordingly to bandwidth changes interrupting streaming media signaling real time disruptions in bandwidth without concern or premeditated thought for the streaming text. However, unlike the photographic image, the buffer underflow cannot represent distinct moments. According to Sobchack, "with a photograph what you see is what you get" (143), but with the buffer zone what you see is the bridge between the imperfect past and mended present. The buffer underflow represents an empty moment interjected objectively. "Thus, rather than sustaining the illusion of a narcissistic ego-logical identity, the electronic screen is able to provide a symbolic paradigm of impermanence and insubstantiality" (Sobchack 160).



I think Barthes is here in this instance of objectivity, but instead of leaving the movie theatre the theatre is leaving us. Buffering poses similar effects of Barthes' experiment but in a passive way. Forcing the distance between screen and spectator, the buffering process interjects itself without warning, zapping the traditional cinephilic experience into what Barthes hoped for all along - critical distance from the object. Barthes would enjoy the buffer zone because it does not give the spectator everything all at once, but interjects itself like ponderous punctums along the narrative journey.

Leo Charney coined the term "empty space" referring to moments within cinema without present, or moments susceptible to drift. He argued that empty moments facilitated a period, however brief, to recollect and reconnect with the text. The drift felt in these moments is a way in which to experience the present, or as close to the present as

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one can obtain. Drifting is a period of seemingly unconscious productivity utilizing empty moments to attain a self-awareness otherwise not possible through traditional means.

"The absence of tangible present moments gave rise to a culture of re-presentation in which experience was always already lost, accessible only through retrospective textualization. Re-presentation as a mode of experience took the form of drift, which transfigured empty presence into a new modern epistemology. Drift aimed to re-present the experience of vacancy, the lived sensation of empty moments, the consequence and corollary of empty moments" (Charney 7-8).

A glitch is an empty space experienced as loss, but the buffer underflow acts as a productive empty space. The buffer zone which invades my space and interrupts all train of thought thrusting me back into reality, Bazin would be proud, but I am infuriated! These moments drive out the worst in me as frustration fills my gaze instead of the long-lost stream. A glitch would end my streaming experience totally through compromising the media player, the web site, my computer's visual card, etc..., but the buffering zone looms above, or beyond, the streaming media. Charney argues the cure for this desperation can be found in letting go, surrendering to a power greater than ourselves - what he deems "the drift." (80). It appears Charney holds the key to the new media cinephilic moment. Surrendering to the stream whether fast or slow and engaging the buffer underflow as an organic part of the process, one can regain cinephilia in the digital age. The realization of time passing as a man-made device impervious to art can release the

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viewer from the bonds of buffering as a negative notion and enable this empty moment to catalyze productive realizations of profound absence.

"The "falling into lostness" as Heidegger puts it," (Charney 31) is a recognition of the nonexistent present. Much like Charney, Heidegger is convinced of a sensational gap from mind to body producing a corollary that presence is absence. Heidegger's Sausserian principle of "seeing-as" asserts archetypes as immediate responses to sight. But what happens when something new is produced? The buffer underflow has no archetype, it does not bear any resemblance to anything one might interpret beyond digital streaming. It is a pause, a sudden burst of unexpected delay from a present which, according to Charney and Heidegger, does not exist. In the moment of buffering, the audience is expelled from the narrative and forced to participate in physical lacunae which range from minimal to marathon.<sup>vi</sup>

Sobchack would argue the technology behind buffering is the sufficient reason to analyze the buffer underflow. In *Carnal Thoughts: embodiment and moving image*



*culture*, the human-technology relationship is interrogated as Sobchack identifies, "our expressive technology also becomes our perceptive technology." (135). Interactivity turns us into embodied subjects through traditionally objective media. Exploring our world through the phenomena of representation encourages new ways of seeing ourselves as

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well as our place within the world. "In sum, just as the photograph did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so in the late twentieth and early twenty-first, cinematic and electronic screens differently solicit and shape our presence to the world, our representation in it, and our sensibilities and responsibilities about it." (Sobchack 136).

The buffer underflow undeniably affects the streaming experience. For Sobchack, "the cinematic brings the existential activity of vision into visibility in what is phenomenologically experienced as an intentional stream of moving images" (147), but the buffer zone invades the cinematic's autonomic movement breaking the illusion of moving images, yet, not necessarily breaking the cinephilic experience. There is a way to view this distance as a positive and productive accessory to screening.

Innervation suggests the fragmented parts of a whole can breathe new life into a being or entity. For Benjamin, innervation elicits emotional experiences from the human-technological relationship. If one interprets buffering as an addition to familiar texts, then buffering is a productive act of making something new from the act of streaming texts online. Emotional responses derived from mechanical encounters is the basis for innervation. The frustration I feel experiencing the buffer underflow is an innervational response. The dialectics of nature and technology blend in the buffer zone as new ways of seeing are produced from traditional texts.

The act of buffering can be interpreted as a positive, postmodern streaming accoutrement. However, a negative point of view can be derived from interpreting the buffer underflow as a distinct unit of time completely separate from the text. Barthes would be tickled with the idea of objective obstruction from the image where Laura Mulvey probably weeps for the traditional cinephilic experience.<sup>vii</sup> The cinphilic

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experience, though, is more alive than ever as it fearlessly rolls with the punches morphing into a new binary language always adding new elements for interrogation. The buffer underflow must be considered a productive part of cinephilia 2.0 assisting the evolution of cinephilia into the digital age.

Lessening the shock of the image, Barthes would be pleased with the buffer underflow concluding that its presence signifies a new moment for cinephiliacs everywhere. Benjamin and Sobchack would agree that the presence of the buffering zone produces a new wave of experience, an experience that perpetually drives to improve the moment of present. The empty spaces Charney experiences through drift are pronounced jarringly in the form of moments of narrative interruption. The objectivity of these spurts is consistent with the photograph, but instead of mummifying the present the buffer underflow exists solely to perfect the past in a trice.

Cushioning the cinephilic experience by adding new dimensions of seeing, the buffer underflow, like Sobchack's quicktime movies, will one day be a part of the past. As bandwidths improve the buffering zone will wither away, but will its mark on the cinephilic experience be remembered as an important part of cinephilia? My guess is no, but for right now the cinephilic experience is ever changing, morphing into new ways of seeing through new ways of streaming.

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<sup>i</sup> Loading\_image.png <http://blogs.msdn.com/synergist/archive/2007/10/04/a-simple-buffering-progress-indicator-for-silverlight.aspx>

<sup>ii</sup> Leo Charney, *Empty Moments* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998)

<sup>iii</sup> Buffer definition from Merriam Webster <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/BUFFER>

<sup>iv</sup> Buffering image <http://www.sheriffoliver.com/images/>

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<sup>v</sup> as opposed to the suspension of disbelief

<sup>vi</sup> Netflix buffering image <http://www.appletell.com/apple/comment/netflix-watch-instantly-first-impressions/>

<sup>vii</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2004)

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