

Killing Time: Stanley Schtinter's *Last Movies*

(notes for a marathon screening)

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As artist-curator Stanley Schtinter puts it, *Last Movies* allows us to "see what those who see no longer last saw." This screening of the final films watched by famous individuals brings the medium of cinema into contact with the matter of death. Between the two, there is not the shock of juxtaposition but the bleed of likeness: they curl cosily around one another like the intimate friends they are. There is the cliché, as familiar as it is unverifiable, that when your time is up your whole life flashes before your eyes, like a film experienced in a dilated instant. (Does this mean these last movies are in fact penultimate movies?) And then there are the many evocations of the cinema as a modern *memento mori*: it is "death at work" (Cocteau), "change mummified" (Bazin), "death twenty-four times a second" (Mulvey). The medium brings us face to face with finitude, not because the stories it tells about death are particularly compelling but because it captures ephemeral traces of life and reanimates them forever after, infusing the petrified past with spectral vitality. In 1929, Jean Epstein ventured that "death makes its promises via the cinematograph." Schtinter's epic undertaking yokes these vows to the moment of their fulfilment.

Normally, the flickering screen only quietly whispers *vanitas vanitatum*. This murmur likely turned into a roar for Bette Davis when, in 1989, aged 81 and sick with cancer, the star watched the last movie of her life, one of her own: James Whale's *Waterloo Bridge* (1931). In it, she has only a small role, sixth billing in the credits. Yet she is nevertheless there, her youthful self preserved across the decades like an insect in amber. Among Schtinter's selections, Davis's last movie stands out for its apparent deliberateness. It is as if the ailing star sought to at once defeat and welcome death by revisiting one of her earliest on-screen appearances. Of course, it might have been just another professional obligation: Davis was receiving an award from the San Sebastian International Film Festival, where a Whale retrospective was also taking place. She probably had to be there, like it or not. Who knows if she knew it was to be her final visit to the cinema. But wait – was Davis even at the projection? It is possible, probable even, but the historical record cannot confirm it.

Last movies tend to be like that: they aren't chosen in the way that a last meal would be chosen by a prisoner awaiting execution. And depending on the circumstances, their lastness can throw up some

resistance to verification, plunging curator and audience into the pleasures and perils of speculation. Death is a certainty – but the moment of its arrival, for most at least, is anything but. A last movie is just another unremarkable beat in the rhythm of life until the reaper visits. Then a sea-change occurs; retroactively, the movie becomes a crepuscular artefact it had never before been, coloured by the shadow of death's imminent approach, bound forever to the end of an illustrious life. Even though Schtinter includes deaths that were planned (the Heaven's Gate cult) and deaths that were perhaps somewhat anticipated (Bruce Chatwin), his endeavour is a macabre tribute to the curiosity and horror that this radical contingency inspires. As the many hours of the programme pile up, questions might pop into the viewer's mind: is the lastness of these last movies significant in any way or is it a mere fact? Is it but a plausible fiction? What do these films reveal about the lives to which they belong? Perhaps something; likely nothing. Each title sparks a desire for meaning – each last movie is an incitement to discourse, a story to be told – and each equally allows the threat of meaninglessness to run riot.

Last Movies brings together its selections by the force of an external event, one which bears not on the films themselves but on little-known details of their exhibition histories, and then orders them not according to any curatorial vision but by date of disappearance. It abandons all those calcified criteria most frequently used to organise cinema programmes: period, nation, genre, director, star, theme. Nothing internal to these films motivates their inclusion, their "quality" least of all. Although Schtinter can choose a death to research, the title to be shown is dictated by history. This is all to say that *Last Movies* embraces chance, an avant-garde strategy its orchestrator has been known to marshal in previous undertakings.

And so it should be for a programme about death. The tenacity of the "life review" flashback as a trope in fiction films could be attributed to the fact that people who have had near-death experiences claim to have encountered the phenomenon. It is more likely that this convention endures because it satisfies a reassuring fantasy: that life will ultimately attain coherence. The fantasy of that "last movie" is undone by the reality of Schtinter's *Last Movies*. They are often random and in large part unchosen; they throw significance into crisis and demand acquiescence to externality. They are, in other words, like death itself.

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LAST MOVIES

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