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**Pauline Kael and the western genre as critical displacement of self & nation:
Metaphorics and affects of 'taste' in American film criticism**

Abstract:

Pauline Kael (1919–2001) is one of the most influential American film critics of the second half of the twentieth century. Many people are writing on her presently, with at least half an eye to her future cultural, political and historical importance. Certainly the full impact of Kael's work, both within and beyond the borders of cinema (however defined), has not yet been established. This article unpacks the mechanisms and operations of 'taste' in Kael's writings by using two notions drawn from Roland Barthes' observations about another key figure of current cultural critique: Julia Kristeva. The comparison of Kael with Kristeva is not dwelt upon; instead, the article focuses on how Kael used the concepts of 'taste' and 'dis-taste' to draw her readership into a field of what might be termed 'permanent dissent'. This article concludes by sketching out why Jewish-American Kael's taste might endure, through the dual transition she occupies from a Cold War to a post-Cold War period, and from an era when cinema was the supreme, undisputed, screen artform, to the rise of the myriad screen technologies of the networked, Internet age.

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Pauline Kael (1919–2001) is arguably the most influential of all American film critics. Almost certainly, she was the most significant critic of her generation, which took in the years from the early 1950s to the early 1990s – an absolutely seminal period in the development of the modern, American film industry. Furthermore, unlike the vast majority of critics, she has been much written about in her own right, both during her lifetime and, in particular, in the years since her death. Algis Valiunas recently noted that Kael ‘has left her mark. It will not be erased any time soon’ (2011: 53). What, however, is the exact nature of this ‘mark’? And, a different but related question, why might it endure? Kael’s career runs roughly parallel with the course of the Cold War (which is usually dated 1947–1991). Then, she died a week and a day before 9/11. This article will conclude with the suggestion that the persistence of Kael’s mark, as a Jewish-American, is best explained by noticing how the dissent and cultural difficulties that she encouraged might travel into the future along pathways of historical continuity and, just as importantly, of historical difference. With the end of Kael’s career and, especially, her death, America and the world have moved into a future very different to the past in which her writings were initially disseminated; and yet there are certain continuities. Together, these continuities and differences explain her ongoing mark.

Despite Kael’s fame in her own time and today, the first full-length biography – Brian Kellow’s *Pauline Kael: A Life in the Dark* – did not appear until quite late: 2011, in fact. Two decades on from Kael’s death, Kellow’s book has, in a measured way, re-stimulated both popular and academic interest in her life, in her critical writings, and in her place within American (movie) culture in general. Kellow’s book was itself very widely reviewed, both in the mainstream press and in more literary and specialist outlets, including on the Internet. In addition, at least one collection of academic chapters on Kael is forthcoming, in 2014 or 2015, from a respected publishing house. Kael’s largely short-form writing output remains easily accessible for the most part; indeed, much of it is being re-collected and re-published in different formats. Kellow’s biography is likely to become the standard reference book for Kael scholars for some time to come. Even though Christos Tsiolkas calls Kellow ‘a woefully unimaginative writer’ (2012: 54), the information and descriptive material about her life and writings contained in his book provides the necessary base matter for the gradual transformation towards deeper and more reflective analysis and critique (2012: 55).

Special note might be made here of Craig Seligman’s more imaginative *Sontag and Kael: Opposites Attract Me*, which came out in 2004. Although it pre-dates Kellow’s book by seven years, this ‘two-in-one’ biography, which is heavily filtered through the personal responses of the author to Kael and to her cultural peer Susan Sontag, did not generate any significant return to Kael by academics. Apart from the fact that it was a somewhat strange text, a joint and at times quite claustrophobic comparison of two lives, perhaps it simply came out a little too soon after Kael’s death to have gained sufficient purchase on the cultural displacements, alterations and re-contextualizations that her writings have brought about or, at least, have intimated. That is to say, perhaps Kael’s aura as a film critic was still a bit too dazzling, even in 2004, to enable a cooler appreciation (here, on Seligman’s part) of what her work

meant, and continues to mean, for the intersection of the cinematic world (and particularly the apparatuses of film criticism) with broader cultural trends in late-twentieth century America, not to mention elsewhere, and for that matter afterwards. The question of Kael's (persistent) influence, of the rise and fall of her 'mark', is an issue for the past, for the future, and also for the near present.

Given this, what can film criticism hope to do? What might its realistic (and not-so-realistic, even utopian) ambitions be? Under what conditions might a set of reviews ever become primary, free standing texts, rather than merely secondary and reactive? Kael's example brings these sorts of questions freshly to life. This article will attempt to unpack them to some extent. To do this, it will presently evoke a definition of 'taste' that plays across the scales of the metaphoric and the literal, and seeks to exploit those 'notes', those moments of anastomosis, where the two scales intersect.

For his part, Seligman is a self-confessed and willing fan of Kael's – he writes at one point of being 'under her spell' (10). Others, though perhaps less acquiescent, were similarly bewitched. Writing of David Denby, a critic contemporary of Kael's, Kellow notes that 'By [his] own admission, he [Denby] was so drawn to, so dominated by, Pauline's voice on the printed page that it crept into his own writing' (2011: 215). As is well known amongst even casual admirers of Kael, Kael also found willing recruits for the circle of followers (acolytes, budding critics, piss-in-pockets) known as the 'Paulettes'. She imprinted her taste on theirs.

As Kellow notes, 'Pauline's group resembled a Renaissance court, where people tended to seek her approval by agreeing with her about the film they'd just seen, or trying to move to the head-of-class position by outdoing each other with sharp, barbed comments' (2011: 186). Other critics, Andrew Sarris most notably, tended to maintain feuds with her even when she herself had stopped feeding the fires of disagreement (Kellow 2011: 346). Furthermore, Kael took it upon herself not only to comment upon, but also to seek to actively influence, the fortunes of particular directors, actors and other film personnel. She played favourites (for example, championing Debra Winger and Brian De Palma); and she came down especially hard on those she disliked (like Clint Eastwood or Meryl Streep). (Interestingly, Woody Allen was one of the relatively few figures about whom she wavered, changed her mind.) On the page, the usually set certainties of Kael's views jostled with the lively, mercurial nature of her ideas and writing style. The net result of her writings, however, was a sort of *activism of taste* – an attempt not just to comment on the world, but also to change the world. At times, Kael brings to mind Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' line, 'Up until now philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point now is to change it' (qtd. in Kristeva 1986: 302).

As part of this (broadly political) activism, Kael's electric presence on the page – her literary pyrotechnics – made it hard for anyone to become involved with her work without having to make a decision to be either with her or against her. She tended to polarize her audience. Like Seligman, I am happy, proud even, to admit that I too love Kael's reviews (Seligman 2004: 2). It remains difficult to be merely indifferent to Kael.

To this extent, Kael can be linked to another cultural critic about whom opinion is similarly divided, polarized and exaggerated: I mean Julia Kristeva. Albeit that they worked in very different professional, intellectual and cultural traditions, they are similar in several ways. In particular, what Roland Barthes (as a reviewer) wrote of Kristeva in 1970, in the following much translated and anthologized, two-sentence passage, applies as well, I suggest, to Kael:

Julia Kristeva changes the place of things: she always destroys *the last prejudice*, the one we thought we could be reassured about and be proud of; what she displaces is the *already-said*, that is, the insistence of the signified, that is, stupidity; what she subverts is authority, that of monological science, and filiation. Her work is entirely new, exact, not through scientific puritanism, but because it takes up all of the space of the site it occupies, fills it *exactly*, obliging those who exclude themselves from it to end up be in [sic] a position of resistance or censure (this what one calls with a shocked expression: terrorism) (12).

I will return to the significance of the first of the two long sentences in this quotation below; for what Kael changed, destroyed, displaced, subverted, above all, was the genre of the American Western.

At the same time though (looking at the second sentence), like Kristeva, Kael's work 'takes up all of the space of the site it occupies,' forcing either agreement, or what Barthes calls 'censure' (1970: 12). There is not the available room here, nor really the need, to enter into a long discussion about how Barthes meant to imply the special brand of completeness of Kristeva's work. To the point though, in this article, is how this notion of 'taking up all of the space it occupies' emerges through Kael's criticism. I want to suggest that the dazzling affect of Kael's writing, the way it simultaneously occupies (in both senses of that word) the mind and the (sensory) body of her readers can be considered, in itself, not only as a strategy of critical writing and (pace Barthes) authority, but as a matter of *taste*.

For most film and performance critics, who use words to refer to another space or site (for instance, that of the screen, the stage or the sound-space of radio), taste is transparently a metaphor for a range of attitudes extending, for argument's sake, from supposedly neutral aesthetic discernment at one end of a continuum to mere personal belief, even prejudice, at the other end. But Kael's use of the word 'taste' simply cuts across any such extension of metaphor. For her, the taste expressed in her reviews is both metaphoric and *as literal as one can get within the medium of words*. That is to say, Kael's writing takes in the body, through its appeal to all of the senses, of which taste is just one. Gravitating towards the innumerable possible intersections of the metaphoric and the literal, her texts converge on those moments where words best evoke the operations of the senses. In this way, her reviews often recall the passage from Michel Serres' *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*:

language is closed on the language side, shut in on its qualities of exactness, precision, rigour; on the world side, on the other hand, it opens out. Inchoative and inexact, undecided but full of promise. Professors, critics, theoreticians and politicians live on the closed side, the writer takes up residence on its outskirts, in the open, facing things that are sometimes hard (333).

On Serres' slightly prejudiced taxonomy, Kael was a *true* writer, neither dryly professorial, critical, theoretical nor political. She was always fixating upon the 'world side', or more particularly, upon a certain sort of 'world' (preeminently the architectural space of the movie theatre), into which language could, as Serres puts it, 'open out'. This coincidence of spatial transgression and the intensification of the powers of language is crucial.

Such a special metaphors of Kael's taste might be conveyed best through a single comment of Valiunas', to the effect that, of the films Kael loved, 'she loved them: brashly, brazenly, like a teenage girl embracing her boyfriend with such prehensile abandon on a street corner that respectable passersby mutter, "Get a room"' (2011: 53). Valiunas' spatialized metaphor (of embraces, passersby, street corners and rooms) reiterates this notion of Kael as a writer interested in how the literal, the sensory, might be evoked at the titillating cusps and margins of worlds adjacent to worlds (spaces, theatres, rooms). Desire in language pushes one elsewhere, certainly. But the pushing itself (pushing as in what Serres refers to as the 'opening out' of language onto 'the world side') is what creates desire at the same time (2008: 333).

Out of literally thousands of possible examples from her writing, the following instance from Kael's oeuvre might serve to prove the point: 'When you come out of the theatre after seeing David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*,' she writes, 'you certainly know that you've seen something. You wouldn't mistake frames from *Blue Velvet* for frames from any other movie' (Kael 1985b: 202). Insistently in Kael is this fast-paced, high-stakes, hyperbolic tone—Craig Seligman writes of getting 'caught up in the cataract of [her] thought' (2004: 17). That 'you certainly know that you've seen something' seems, to me, to capture this sense of Kael's *own* writing as an almost bodily confrontation through words (Kael 1985b: 202). The word 'certainly', which seems directly motivated by the conveyed sensation of walking out of the theatre (crossing the boundaries of worlds), takes us past mere intellectualization. Crossing spaces is the strategy. Sensory affect is the outcome.

Kael's appreciation of *Blue Velvet* extends beyond metaphor, then, into the territory of (bodily, sensory) affect. That is, into the space of taste as synecdoche for the literality of the senses. According to Seligman, 'she said she wanted to talk about movies the way people talk about them leaving the theater, and her prose does seem to replicate the human voice' (2004: 14). There it is again, that crossing of spaces (leaving the theatre) as a strategy of affect (the human voice). With Kael, at times, words and the literality of the body seem almost to be fused. She leaps off the page. Take this, for instance, from her review of *The Big Easy*: 'This is the first time I've felt myself pulling back from [Dennis] Quaid's image on the screen; I drew back even further from [Ellen] Barkin' (1985a: 358). In this, 'taste' is precisely the right word for Kael's activity as a critic, so long as it is accepted that 'taste' refers not just to any partiality of critical attitude, so much as to the entire apparatus of words, affect, senses and the body by which Kael engaged, or better yet captivated, her audience.

The very notion of Kael's 'taste' explains her influence beyond (mere) words. It was this, I suggest, rather than other apparatuses of criticism such as places of publication, that allowed her to create such a huge impact on the critical scene. Specifically, as

Barthes noticed about Kristeva, it dis-allowed the reader from ignoring Kael's words. To be outside her work was at best to disagree with it, if not to become (in Barthes' terms) a resistor or a censor (1970: 12). One would always be drawn back in through the forces of (bodily, sensory) affect, knit tightly to words. The point here is that affect, when combined with linguistic and literary devices operating at a particularly high pitch of intensity, makes Kael's writings (to paraphrase Barthes' second sentence) impossible to exclude one's self from. Her taste was inescapable. It was the 'taste of her taste' that became addictive through words and affect (bodily, sensory). Kael had the knack of merging what could be called her singular taste with that of her audience's. As Tsiolkas comments, 'Part of her genius as a critic ... was to give priority to the experience of being in the audience, to understand that going to the cinema was to partake in a communal activity' (2012: 54). Here, all singularity is unraveled.

Thus far, I have been working with the second sentence from the passage by Barthes. In Kael's case however (if not so much perhaps in Kristeva's, funnily enough), the second sentence has a very close relation to the first sentence, and one worth expanding upon. I am interested, for the purposes of my discussion of Kael, in the moment or instant of transition between the two sentences in the passage from Barthes. For as much as Kael's criticism engaged the personal spaces of her individual readers (second sentence) it also made an extraordinary bid for control of the national (American) space that her readership largely occupied or was aligned with (first sentence, in effect). At the level of form, Kael's taste was spell-binding in its amalgam of words and affect. At the level of content, her taste was singularly marked by its audacious 'dis-taste' for that most American of icons: the Western genre.

Brian Kellow notes that 'there was one movie genre whose appeal eluded Pauline from the beginning' (2011: 15). He then cites a quite extraordinary admission for any film critic to make: 'Pauline observed in the mid-1960s [that] "If you're going for *a* Western (the same way you'd sit down to watch *a* television show), it doesn't much matter which one you see"' (Kellow 2011: 15). (Such a comment would also be extraordinary, of course, for a modern television critic to make. How Kael dismisses the possibilities of appreciating television as a serious artform is perhaps what most dates her approach for a twenty-first century critical sensibility.) Now, many critics might claim not to like a particular genre, but no others spring to mind that would so audaciously write off a whole genre, not admitting to any variations in individual examples of, say, the Western, the Horror, the Romantic Comedy, the Fantasy. Again though, what most interests me here is how Kael wrapped a serious and, as already observed, hugely influential career trajectory around such a dis-taste for, not just an entire genre, but for just such a genre as the American Western. Film critic William McClain underscores 'how closely American critics identified the Western with American national culture'; as he observes, 'The Western, for American audiences, was not only one more genre; it was a – perhaps *the* – national genre' (2010: 57). Why did Kael profess to hate it so much?

The key passage for starting to unpack Kael's dis-taste for the Western comes from her essay 'Saddle Sore: *El Dorado*, *The War Wagon*, *The Way West*', published in August 1967:

There is a fairly widespread assumption that no matter how bad American movies in general are, the Westerns are still great. The people who take this for granted probably don't go to them, but they have an idea that Westerns are authentic movie-making – the *real* movies – and are somehow pure (as Western heroes used to be), exempt from the general corruption. They assume that the Westerns are still there, as pristine and "great" as ever for their kids, as if the air of the wide open spaces would have kept the genre clean.

I don't believe that there ever were the great works in this genre that so many people claim for it [second italics mine] (40).

Elsewhere in this essay, Kael goes into more detail about exactly why she does not share the 'fairly widespread assumption' that 'the Westerns are still [or "ever were"] great' (1967: 40). She indicts the way that Western film directors maintain a pretence of openness to the otherness of Indian peoples (Native Americans) even as they play on what she views as the underlying racist tendencies of most American film audiences. For Kael, Western film directors 'emphasize the sympathy they are going to build up as if they did not know that this was necessary dramatic preparation for the fear and carnage to follow, which is what dominates their own memories and will dominate memories of their films, too' (1987: 39). In the case of Whites as portrayed in Westerns, she concludes, 'their images don't carry the kind of fear that the most meant-to-be-sympathetic Indians do when they turn warlike' (1987: 40).

So far as it goes, Kael makes a powerful case against the Western. I don't disagree with it. Again though, why was it that Kael placed herself in the position of representing (or more precisely, annexing) the vanguard cinematic taste of her public (which was largely but not exclusively American) while, at the same time, going against the prevailing, national if not nationalistic taste of America through her powerfully expressed dis-taste for the genre of the Western? Apparently, there is a sort of cleft stick of taste in evidence and operation here.

Still, only apparently, for I can't stop feeling that something else is also going on here. Her dis-taste for the *whole* Western genre suggests to me more than just a matter of taste modified by political sensibility and concern for the marginalized figure of the American Indian (important as this undoubtedly is). It suggests something more strategic. Within a certain Cold War moment of American expansion, ambition and paranoia, Jewish-American Kael's approach suggests even broader horizons, and greater (cinematic, critical, cultural) becomings.

That is, I see the two dimensions of Kael's taste (the first and second sentences from Barthes as it were) as working together to produce a certain outcome of (film) criticism. This outcome might be defined as 'built-in' or 'permanent dissent'. 'Taste' here is a matter, firstly, of drawing the reader in (Barthes' second sentence) through a widespread appeal to both the metaphors of the intellect and the literality of the senses (the 'taking up all of the space it occupies' move). The reader becomes

implicated with the force of Kael's taste, unable (so far as this is possible, and certainly Barthes thinks it is for Kristeva) to innocently exclude themselves.

That's the first step. And the second is just as clever. The reader, now tied up with – implicated in, captured by – Kael's taste (through the impact described in Barthes' second sentence) is then forced to confront this key characteristic of Kael's criticism: her dis-taste for the veritable foundation stone of American film culture, if not (to the extent that film culture accompanies culture in general) of American culture in general: the Western – America's 'national genre', according to William McClain (2010: 57).

As far as possible then, Kael appears to have thereby promoted her notion of criticism as 'permanent' or 'inexorable dissent'. Criticism was to be forever (and inescapably) critical of what it encountered. To be against the 'national genre' as a permanent position of taste made her capable, I think, of doing what Barthes says of Kristeva: changing the place of things (1970: 12). If one dislodges the authority of the Western – '*the last prejudice*, the one we thought we could be reassured about and be proud of ... the *already-said*, that is, the insistence of the signified, that is, stupidity' – who knows what else may follow, what else might change (1970: 12)?

In short, it's not just about the Western It's about America, and (potentially at least) about the world or the spaces beyond America.

In this article, I have argued that Kael was a remarkable species of dissenting American critic and (by extension) engaged citizen, and that the two aspects of her criticism that I have singled out (as paralleled by Barthes' two sentences: Kael's appeal to the singular space of the reader, and her destruction of that same reader's sense of national space) suggest a very particular, portmanteau strategy of 'taste' and 'dis-taste'. The full implications of this strategy, within a broadly political space – its becomings, if one likes – are no doubt yet to be discovered or to have eventuated. At this time, Kael is still more or less of our present historical moment. Still, what are the limits of her 'mark' looking to the future? Brian Kellow observes that she 'occupied the spotlight ... in a more vital and *ongoing* way than any other movie critic ever had' [*italics mine*] (2011: 344). In conclusion then, I will provide some thoughts on why Kael's influence of taste might continue to endure, two decades after she stopped working professionally, and more than ten years since her death a week and a day before 9/11. How might Kael remain in the spotlight?

To answer this question, it is relevant to recall that Kael's career (which ran from the early 1950s to the early 1990s) closely paralleled the course of the Cold War (roughly, from 1947 to 1991). This makes the terms of our enquiry into her enduring influence more precise. To wit, how might Kael's writings keep influencing American and possibly international cultural life across the historically seismic shift from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period?

In his study of the late Australian author Patrick White (1912–1990), Simon During concludes that it is precisely White's *recalcitrance* to official, mainstream Australian culture that warrants his continuing influence on that nation's life. White, according to During, will endure because he is a thorn in the side of how 'most of us' picture 'good citizens or a good society' (1996: 100). To support his case, During singles out

‘the elitist White, the White who fictionalised contemporary Aboriginal life away, the misogynist White, the White who affirmed incest’ (1996: 100). Kael was none of these things, of course. Rather, her point of recalcitrance, her difference, as I have argued, lay in how she savaged the reputation of that American icon: the Western genre.

In the reverence it shows towards the so-called Spaghetti Western, Quentin Tarantino’s 2012 *Django Unchained* is just one example of how the Western continues to be held in such high regard in the American cultural landscape. Kael’s influence may well continue to be felt in her sheer resistance to the level of esteem that accompanies the very notion of the Western. In this, Kael’s difference from American mainstream culture straddles the transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period. That is to say, the endurance of cultural influence likely requires not just difference or recalcitrance – in short, discontinuity – but also continuity. Simply put, the continuity of the Western genre sustains the possibility of (Kael’s, or anyone’s) resistance to it.

There is, however, a deeper and more severely under-cutting discontinuity that perhaps threatens the ongoing relevance of Kael’s fierce critique of the Western. Christos Tsiolkas comments that:

In our age, where film reviewing has been reduced to a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down, the fury generated by Kael’s writing might strike us as odd. The internet has made critical relativism a given and the cinema is no longer the dominant screen technology. Kellow’s prose doesn’t do justice to the passions aroused, doesn’t give us a sense of the *history* (2012: 56).

From an era when cinema was the supreme, undisputed, screen artform, we have now witnessed the rise of the myriad screen technologies of the networked, Internet age. What will this mean for Kael? Is the loss, to some extent, of cinema, going to be the end, eventually, of her influence? On the other hand, no doubt we will keep on watching Westerns, if only in a more solitary way on our iPhones and iPads rather than in a crowded theatre. Does this then mean that her influence may even increase? In a sense, the rise of the Internet might serve to introduce into the future, so far as Kael is concerned, just another mode of germinal difference, recalcitrance or discontinuity: that is, the very strangeness of the cinematic experience itself, as this is expressed by the *disappearance* of movie theatres (with all their associations), but just as importantly as it is expressed by the continuing *appearance*, as a persisting strangeness – as some sort of revenant – of the cinematic experience that Kael is always writing about.

Cinema, so twentieth century; the Internet, so twenty-first century! And Kael somewhere in between, the words of her reviews lingering, in their very strangeness, even as (if not due to the very fact that) the artform that inspired them becomes increasingly more foreign. Of course, we could dance all day across this divide of influence, of the stretch between continuity and discontinuity. Ultimately, whether Kael’s taste will continue to have impact into the future will be left to the future to show.

I will finish, however, with one more twist in this particular story. The Cold War of Kael's period of greatest influence is well over, of course, but what persists is a certain hotspot of international relations that dates from around the start of the Cold War and continues to smoulder until today.

The State of Israel was founded in 1948. As an American Jew, Kael's biography could not but be implicated in this historical event, even though the relationship between Zionism and Jewishness is infinitely vexed. As is, of course, the relationship between personal history and history on a public scale. Kellow brushes over the significance of Kael's Jewish background, arguing that she 'always maintained a neutral, detached attitude toward her own Jewish past' (2011: 11). Tsiolkas, however, disputes this. Of Kellow's book he observes, 'We get no sense of what the Californian Jewish community [Kael] was raised in was like, or what her own feelings about this heritage were. *You can't help but sense there was conflict here*' [italics mine] (2012: 55).

Kael would have been around 30 when Israel was formed. On what scale can we think about influence? Might her career as a film critic be seen as the tiniest bit of grit (the influential irritation) in quite possibly the grandest of historical, even mythological clashes? I refer to the clash of the Hebraic and the Hellenic traditions, of the Hebrew and the Greek, of the Eastern and, yes, of the Western (Spaghetti or otherwise).

Here perhaps, just perhaps, lies the warrant of the persistence of Kael's taste.

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