

INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt and the iPhone: Modern Technology, Cinema, and Loneliness

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DR THURMAN: Donnie, what did Roberta Sparrow say to you?
 DONNIE: She said that every living creature on earth dies alone.

DR THURMAN: How did that make you feel?
 DONNIE: It reminded me of my dog Callie. She died when I was eight, and... She crawled underneath the... the porch...
 DR THURMAN: ... to die?
 DONNIE: To be alone.

DR THURMAN: Do you feel alone right now?
 DONNIE: I dunno... I mean, I'd like to believe I'm not, but I just... I've just never seen any proof, so I... I just don't debate it anymore, you know? It's like... I could spend my whole life debating it over and over again weighing the pros and cons and in the end I still wouldn't have any proof. So, I just... I just don't debate it anymore. (*He laughs uncomfortably.*) It's absurd.

DR THURMAN: The search for God is absurd?
 DONNIE: It is if everyone dies alone.

DR THURMAN: Does that scare you?
 DONNIE: I don't wanna be alone.

During this poignant scene from Richard Kelly's intricate 2001 cult film *Donnie Darko*, the character experiences an emotional moment of epiphany. Speaking to his psychotherapist he realises that, because of the likelihood that there is no divine authority, he is afraid of dying alone. Kelly's film had its début at the Sundance Film Festival six months after the publication of the third (twentieth anniversary) edition of Philip Kolker's important work *A Cinema of Loneliness*. The thematic connection is interesting but was no more than pure coincidence. However, a quarter century later, with attention on noteworthy anniversaries in the academic field, the serendipity offered enough of an opportunity to consider the theme and title "Cinema and Loneliness" for the *Irish Screen Studies* conference at University College Cork in 2025. Some reincarnations of papers and research presented at that event had creative longevity and

enough fascination for their authors to be reworked and revisited. They have been assembled here – in long and short form – for your consideration.

Donnie Darko was not the first film to ask questions about the loneliness of its protagonist, but it was a rare instance in which the theme was juxtaposed with death and self-sacrifice. Cinema-going audiences would have witnessed the demise of Donnie in the same way that earlier spectators had watched the downfall of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*: as a collective experience of outliving the protagonists. Gathered in a dark film theatre with other strangers, the events might have even provoked questions about their communal loneliness; together but individually responding to the tragic outcomes of both characters, and the impossibility of being outside their own moments of passing.

Technological developments in the decades between the surge of the Video Home System market in the 1980s and the present film and television streaming experience might imply that solitary spectatorship is relatively new and a uniquely domestic phenomenon. However, film has been celebrated historically for its socially unifying capabilities and for its ability to captivate a viewer viscerally and imaginatively in isolated and personalised ways. There are accounts of early audiences' homogenous reactions of wonderment at the first projected Lumière motion pictures (Gunning 1990; Gaudreault 1990), and similar ones have been repeated in later descriptions of collective responses to film content, whether angry remonstrations or triumphant celebrations. We might recall historical tales about vociferous reactions to D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 (Stokes 2007; Stokes and McEwan 2023), or the unifying of counterculture audiences by the socially and culturally rebellious cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s as examples of the collective fervour purportedly energised by the medium (Biskind 1999; Hoerl 2018). Accounts by film historians and filmmakers have also attested to the potent force of moving images in creating or reinforcing group identities and identifications. In his 2006 Irish Civil War film, *The Wind the Shakes the Barley*, Ken Loach includes a scene in which a 1921 Cork audience cheers and jeers with aroused passion at Pathé newsreel depictions of Michael Collins in London during the signing the Anglo-Irish Treaty at the end of the same year (Chambers 2020).

Films have also frequently offered representations of the cinema as a place for solitude, personal escape, or private reflection. Some depicted experiences or special moments that are universally identifiable: the prurient covert interest of the individual fan (*Fade to Black*, 1980) or instances of nostalgia by cinephiles who fondly recall special cinema-going events from their youth (*Amarcord*, 1973; *Cinema Paradiso*, 1988). Filmmakers often paint pictures with genuine sentimental affection. The protagonists of Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997), Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulin* (2001), and Terence Davies' *The Long Day Closes* (1992) enjoyed solitary visits to the cinema and their scenes were infused with a nostalgic ambience. At times the scenarios are comical like the one of transformative existential self-realisation that concludes Mickey's personal story in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (Woody Allen, 1986).

Others have a darker edge. Less affirmative representations of the solitude of cinematic spectatorship are used to depict the psychopathological unravelling of Travis in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, and a softer melancholy pervades the wistful cinema theatre scenes in films like *The Last Picture Show* (Bogdanovich, 1971) and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Ming-liang, 2003).

Consequently, loneliness and solitude on and in front of the screen have had long histories running alongside celebrations and affirmations of how films have brought us together and depicted our collective experiences. In the dim light of the shared cinematic space our deepest, latent emotional and physical dispositions are susceptible to enticement and incitement. It is there that audiences have been as roused collectively by Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), as others have been singularly secretly excited by pornographic movies; both of which effect arousals that have more in common than we might care to admit. Hannah Arendt could have been gesturing towards the former when she described "mass society or mass hysteria, where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor" (2018, 58). There was definite prescience in Arendt's condemning the displacement of intimacy (in the broadest sense of the word) from a healthy reality "which comes from being seen and heard" to one in which

the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses [come to] lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. (*ibidem*)

It may well be that the medium – its mode of public address, and the ways in which it tells its stories – occupies an important and somewhat unique social position. It differs from theatrical performances because it is inorganically fixed in time so different viewers encounter the same product asynchronously, transcending temporal logic in imagining communities. In its scripted, finalised form it lacks the openness of sporting events and the vociferous spontaneity of crowd reactions prompted by open-ended possibilities. And it requires a different regulation of personal conduct to live music events, whether the chanting of the rock concert crowd or the silence of the opera congregation. These other forms of social gathering have different codes of behaviour to the manners of cinema-going, which are noteworthy in their variability depending on the occasion, the architecture and reputation of the screening venue, the profile of the spectators, and the genre screened. The acknowledgement of varying codes of etiquette in these assemblies is an important indication that wider social connections are at play. As a medium, cinema has actively defined and redefined how narration takes place within the communities and communal spaces in which its communications occur. At the same time, we should acknowledge the role it has played in reimagining and reconstituting those same communities. Its continual changing reiterations

through historical and technological developments might say a lot about the relationships between individuals and societies: revealing as much about our motivations for telling ourselves stories as it does about the constitution of the audiences to whom those stories are told. It is the contention of this piece that cinema – the actual communal experience of film – has always had a capacity to foster, protect, and observe a healthy relationship between the personal identity and the public self. I propose that we should examine this potential taking our cue from Arendt who has invited us “to trace back modern world alienation” (2018, 6) so that we might “think what we are doing” (5). According to Arendt writing of the human condition in the 1950s, this embarkation point of self-awareness may help us avoid another totalitarianism born from the condition that a technological mode of living can nurture. We must be cautious that we do not allow a situation arise – if it is not already too late – in which it is the “social rather than the political that constitutes the public realm” (43).

Philip Kolker’s *A Cinema of Loneliness* begins by focusing on the isolation of a group of filmmakers within and outside a system of production and distribution that was undergoing radical transformation at the end of the 1960s. The stories of lone *auteurs* assembled by Kolker present a narrative of how a new generation of directors was creating film art from positions of incidental marginality: not as self-made radical, political recalcitrants. Their situation arose because industrial standardisation and the mechanisms of production that had dominated the labour relations of the classical Hollywood studio system had begun to crumble at the time. They often depicted elements of their loneliness on screen. Experiences of solitude thematically permeated many of the films of Kolker’s case studies, and are evident in their representations of existentially, psychologically, or socially alienated characters. Altman, Coppola, Kubrick, Penn, Scorsese, and Spielberg were not just a new generation of film aficionados steeped in the history of European and art house cinema and intimately acquainted with their native American film culture. They were also interested in telling stories about liminal, displaced protagonists and anti-heroes struggling for social acceptance and recognition. What is significant for us today is that Kolker’s identification of distinct aspects of the film industry and its artistic practices in the 1950s and 1960s – technology, television, and changing corporate circumstances – are the very elements central to the question of cinema and loneliness today.

We should not assume that the words “solitude”, “alienation”, “seclusion”, “isolation”, and “individuality” are synonymous with their melancholic (even pathological) counterpart “loneliness”. Whether in a crowd or alone, the latter condition requires either consciously elected, unconsciously ratified, or externally imposed feelings of marginalisation. Therefore, in the context of what writers have had to say historically about the topic, there is a significant connection between different degrees of singularity of personal experience, a rupture and feeling of separation from the crowd, and the experience of loneliness. It is a situation that identifies and diagnoses its own malady: it is not merely an awareness of being alone,

it implicitly acknowledges a problem with the very situation of solitude. The malaise that Donnie describes to his therapist is not that he feels alone: it is that he has an existential fear of that quality. The nuances of many of the perceived or misconceived interconnections between solitude or social separation and the actual conditions of loneliness are usefully unpacked by Lars Svendsen in his monograph *A Philosophy of Loneliness*.

Before humanity takes its ineluctable step into the solitary realm of virtual reality, and to cope with the existential impact of that turn, it is worth pausing to trace what some of the consequences of that step might be. To do so, I believe it is useful to chart our complex and changeable relationship with cinema (and cinema-going) over the last century. If we consider the medium as emblematic of cultural modernity, and look at the relationships between cinema, loneliness, and community, it might be construed as offering the first modern simulacrum of a receding reality that future generations will eventually abandon completely. In the prologue to her 1958 book *The Human Condition*, Arendt might have been speaking of virtual reality or an immersive version of Artificial Intelligence when she described what we have to sacrifice if we fail to acknowledge that the “human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment” (2018, 2). She goes on to explain that

life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life, man remains related to all other living organisms. For some time now, a great many scientific endeavors have been directed toward making life also “artificial,” toward cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature. (*ibidem*)

Arendt’s book should be read in the light of her preceding works from the same decade, and especially *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1951. What is noteworthy about the 1958 study is its affirmation of the plurality of humanity, which it calls us to acknowledge, celebrate, and protect in all its richness and variety. But Arendt’s positive call to reflection is not offered without a caution. Her caveat is the Achilles’ heel of the human situation, one leaving us susceptible to possible alienation from the world, the earth, and ourselves. This warning involves the potential risk of our inadvertently nurturing a new totalitarian regime, such as was witnessed in Germany from 1933 to 1945 or in Russia at the same time. *The Human Condition* is noteworthy for the specific contemporary outlook that it offers and invites us to consider. Arendt makes a clear distinction between the “modern age” – from roughly the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth – and the “modern world” since then, that has been informed and driven by science, and alleged scientific progress. For Arendt, the chief characteristic of the latter period is the rise and mobilisation of atomic intelligence. At the heart of the transition from the modern age to the modern world, Arendt locates the rise of alienation. She focuses on how new forms of division have occurred between the private and public realms in ways entirely different from those that she cites from ancient Greece and Rome, where she begins her account. That Arendt’s work considers the

“modern age” as distinct from the “modern world” does not render her two-millennium historical consideration irrelevant. On the contrary, the range of her search for the roots of social alienation is revealing for our twenty-first century experience precisely because cinema, as the modern medium *par excellence*, was born from and is deeply integrated with technology. This resonates with Kolker’s identification of themes of loneliness in the films of his directors when he acknowledges the terrifying possibility that “for all the challenge and adventure, their films speak to a continual impotence in the world, an inability to change and create change” (2000, 10). Furthermore, any attempt at individual action, emerging from one’s social alienation and detachment as depicted in these films, bears witness to Arendt’s implicit connection between communal fragmentation and the roots of totalitarianism. Kolker argues that in many cases, when the isolated individuals finally emerge from their solitary spaces and undertake action “it is invariably performed by lone heroes in an enormously destructive and antisocial manner, further affirming that actual change, collectively undertaken, is impossible” (*ibidem*).

Arendt insists on the centrality of technology in individual humans’ becoming apart: from themselves, from their society, and from the world. Her discoveries helpfully support the present argument: across the course of “modern world” history, cinema has provided a significant force not only preserving an important aspect of the relationship between humanity and its political formation, but also in ensuring the interaction between humanity’s sense of solitude or loneliness and its political, communal identity, and feeling of connection. Because both private solitude and political participation are integral qualities of the human condition, the experience of cinema, and our engagements with its stories, personalities, and ideas, have been essential attributes contributing to our existential well-being.

Arendt notes, in reference to the denial of civic rights to slaves in ancient Greece and Rome, that their domestication – the definition of their role and identity by and through the private sphere – was commensurate with the deprivation of their voice in the political dialogues of the public space. Arendt reminds us of a useful etymological connection: “We no longer think primarily of deprivation when we use the word ‘privacy,’ and this is partly due to the enrichment of the private sphere through modern individualism.” (2018, 38) Taking the homes of ancient Greece and Rome as her templates, Arendt shows how the domestic and public spheres provided different domains of hierarchical relationship: the master was politically active in the city and at home was served by the slave, the non-citizen, whose identity was defined based on (de)privation and containment within that space. In the mid-seventeenth century – the beginning of Arendt’s “modern age” – individualism began to be romantically reinscribed as an admirable condition, worthy of pursuit. This coincided with the rise of the notion of “society”. Elsewhere she summarises her take on ancient slaves: “Privacy was like the other, the dark and hidden side of the public realm, and while to be political meant to attain the highest possibility of

human existence, to have no private place of one's own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human." (64)

The ancient home (*domum* or *oikos*) was the domain away from the public arena and it preserved privacy from that space. For the modern world and for us it has been increasingly constructed around technologies and appurtenances that link us to external society while reinforcing our independence from it. The home and house were reconstructed along synecdochal lines as microcosms of the social environments from which they contained their inhabitants. Built into the technology of domestic instruments that catered to our move from public spaces into domestic solitude, was an illusory palliation to the discomfort of isolation. Many devices seemed to offer a reconnection to the world beyond our walls. The automobile became a prosthetic of peripatetic isolation that promised a genuine but tentative connection to other people and places. The wireless radio and television presupposed our isolation from the outside world, to which they provided a simulated reconnection. The development of the telephone is most noteworthy in this respect because it became the ultimate household possession for enabling social connection. More than any other modern convenience, it has exemplified our technological progression towards isolation. In the beginning, a single household might have had one line to a receiving party. Within decades, families possessed several handsets, often further sequestering occupants to the inner private spaces, offices, and bedrooms of their home, until wireless developments permitted roaming throughout the house. Nowadays a solitary individual can connect with billions of others and every information stream on the planet, from anywhere.

Arendt identifies a shift away from the ancient negative implication of the non-public life when she traces a re-evaluation of solitude in the eighteenth century. Lars Svendsen has comprehensively charted a range of modern philosophers who advocated the values of a solitary life apart from others, fronting de Montaigne, Emerson, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche as passionate proponents of the benefits (2017, 112–14). The emotive appeal to individualism by Rousseau and the Romanticists worked against what they perceived to be a social levelling, a dehumanising conventionality "against what we would call today the conformism inherent in every society" (2018, 39). To advance her argument Arendt makes a crucial distinction between the ancient notion of "the political" (participation in the realm of the *polis*) which she contrasts with her contemporary reading of "the social" (universal acceptance of norms of regularised behaviour). The former was the space in which genuine individuality was expressed, defined, contested, and thus strengthened. The latter, on the contrary, establishes a muted, impotent equality which "based on the conformism inherent in society and possible only because behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship, is in every respect different from equality in antiquity" (41). Arendt contends that this equality, albeit limited to a certain class of society, was unlike its contemporary social counterpart. In the ancient public arena freedom was obtained through the

right to be different and by holding alternative opinions with freely oppositional voices. Individuality within the public realm – the place where individualism could be expressed – manifested itself in ways entirely dissimilar from the conformism of society. Where the *agora* and *polis* facilitated, fostered, and thrived on the active participation of individuals, the social realm compromised and even suppressed the constructive advancement of individualism.

If our current political situations are not enough to inspire this kind of reflection, it is worth noting the reasons why the ancient Greeks limited the number of citizens with the right to participate in their cities: “Large numbers of people, crowded together, develop an almost irresistible inclination toward despotism, be this the despotism of a person or majority rule” (43). While the condition of closely gathered multitudes may account for “conformism, behaviorism, and automatism in human affairs” (*ibidem*), these qualities emerge with equal ferocity when groups of people are atomised, unified in an illusory way within the simulacrum of a social identity. Of course, Arendt did not condone the segregation of populations based on categories of “enslaved” and “free citizen”. She was interested in emphasising how inclusion in the *polis* encouraged eligible citizens to reinforce their individual identities. Against the rise of the discipline of economics – the reductive depictions and graphic taxonomic mapping of interpersonal trading, commodification, and calculation – and the “behavioral science” of sociology, Arendt argues for less prescriptive accounts of the relationship between individual and collective selfhoods. In the twentieth century, the continued growth of both forms of statistical representations “indicates clearly the final stage of this development, when mass society has devoured all strata of the nation and ‘social behaviour’ has become the standard for all regions of life” (45).

Contemporary software programmed to harvest information for anonymous and inadequately regulated corporations uses algorithms designed to mine and manage data for commodification and the creation of further self-modulating interface programmes. It is as if Arendt’s worst fears have been realised. The experience of our interactions with technology no longer remains within the pages of what had previously “been buried in the highly non-respectable literature of science fiction” (2), a genre that Arendt was not actually citing disparagingly. Her following lines confirm the seriousness of her point about our missed opportunities for warnings from that literary source: “unfortunately, nobody yet has paid the attention it deserves as a vehicle of mass sentiment and mass desires.” (*ibidem*) Sophisticated algorithms have superseded regular, population-standardising statistical analyses and sociological reports. They neutralise individualism by their accommodation of, provision for, and adjustment to, difference. In contrast, traditional cinema-going, as a communal practice, gathers individuals and facilitates the real-time interface of private and public spaces. Both create a sense of solitary selfhood (and perhaps at times loneliness), however they do so differently. One unifies with depersonalising standardisation while the other brings groups together and

maintains miscellany, underscoring and not muting the difference between individuals and their communal environment. The radical isolation of the lonely spectator, solitary in her spectatorship, does not causally contribute to the rise of the tyrannical regime, but it is one of the conditions that enable its development. In another cautionary note, one that might bring to mind images of individuals in public on their mobile phones, Arendt says: “men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times” (58). The tyranny of the mob is strengthened by this kind of standardising multiplication. It is the point at which depersonalised individuals become capable of maintaining a singularity of behaviour *en masse* even, and especially, when they are not sharing the same physical space. This is the breeding ground for totalitarian ideology. Tyranny feeds off a singularity when individualised civilian objects fit a mould, follow its messages, and fix their identities when they recognise themselves within a “total” system. Loneliness is not the cause of totalitarian regimes, but the dehumanising, atomising conditions that produce them across populations can provide fertile ground for tyrannical growth and domination. Citing *The Lonely Crowd*, the 1950 study by David Riesman that considers the modern life as one of systemic and pandemic loneliness, Arendt proposes “this deprivation of ‘objective’ relationships to others and for a reality guaranteed through them has become the mass phenomenon of loneliness, where it has assumed its most extreme and antihuman form” (58–59).



Deprivations of objective relationships?

On our mobile phones we interact with algorithms that manage bespoke interfacing with information streams. Even as they purport to enhance and enable our access to a global community, the same devices deny our transcendence of predetermined and inflexible social norms of behaviour and melting-pot thinking. The kind of cinematic engagement we experience through our private handsets epitomises the disqualification and denigration of political value that the cinema-going event offers. As one of the newest forms of film viewing, the narrowing singularity of its use runs the risk of socialising or normalising the tolerance of an apolitical position. Arendt succinctly describes what could be lost with her affirmation that

people “in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves” (4). The stories of cinema, communally shared, have always presented a cultural space for discussions that create meaningful reflection on the human condition. It is not the collapse of the public space, as an active site of interlocution and communal contact that we will observe: the ultimate disintegration of that domain will be manifest in the dissolution of even the sanctity and security of the private space. It could well be, Arendt observes, that it is “in the nature of the relationship between the public and private realms that the final stage of the disappearance of the public realm should be accompanied by the threatened liquidation of the private realm as well” (60–61). How far this “liquidation” has already advanced and whether the rise of far-right and populist movements and new totalitarian regimes might be connected to our latest technologies, are questions certainly worthy of attention.

In 2017, a conference titled “Cinema is Dead” was held at University College Cork. The theme provided a motion for the debate and it gave rise to numerous papers exploring variations on the topic, sometimes arguing one side, sometimes another. The majority of the papers left open the possibility that what might be a postmodern postmortem could also offer a potential for modish revival of the modern medium. Rod Stoneman closed the conference with a keynote speech in which he defended the idea that cinema was truly dead. He used two lines of argument predominantly in this. One referenced certain heydays of cinema cyclically appearing across its history since 1895, when activities of pioneering filmmakers innovatively pushed the limits of the technical apparatus and its capacity to tell stories. But the second line related to cinema in a far wider sense: as a communal event, a cultural mechanism, and a social apparatus. With this emphasis, Stoneman predicted a continuation of current spectatorship trends by tracing declining numbers at box offices and the increased popularity in observing, encountering, and enjoying films in solitude. What we might be seeing as we watch films that depict loneliness, alienation, isolation, and experiences of difference, is more than just a mirror-image of ourselves as spectators. If cinema is dying in front of us, we should take care that our role as active, engaged political participants is not dying in front of it. Our collective responsibility and investment in creating a healthy, integrated, and enriched community may be diminishing before the screens that once created collectives. Like Donnie Darko, our final disengagement may occur in solitude. It is worth concluding with a cautionary, prescient note by Arendt from a section in *The Human Condition* in which she pauses to consider humanity’s relationship with questions of a more otherworldly value: “There is perhaps no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the modern age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality, a loss somewhat overshadowed by the simultaneous loss with the metaphysical concern with eternity.” (2018, 55)

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