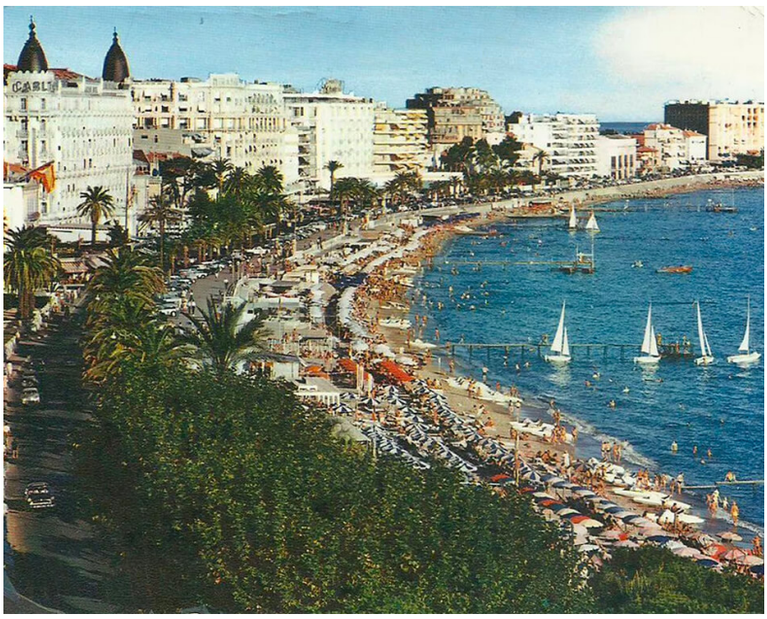

Postcard from Cannes, ca. 1960s.

James Wham, June 6, 2023

Côte d'Illusion

History real and imagined at the Cannes Film Festival

WORD FACTORY

> "As its fabricated name suggests, the Côte d'Azur is an entity only to the foreigners who took over an impoverished strip of land and transformed it into the landscape of their dreams, a place to bend the rules and sometimes break the law. Illusion is its chief industry."
> –Mary Blume

A SIX-HORSE CARRIAGE gallops along the French Riviera, bound for Italy. Henry Peter Brougham, First Baron of Brougham and Vaux, fastens a blanket atop his ailing daughter, Eleonore-Louise, and wipes the sweat from her brow. She suffers from consumption, and Brougham hopes the dryer climate will do her some good. At the river Var, their carriage is stopped by security guards; a cholera outbreak requires them to turn back and quarantine. Brougham protests. "Don't you know who I am?"

He has become something of a celebrity in England, having helped pass the Slavery Abolition Act one year earlier, in 1833, and the Reform Act the year before that. In 1826, he founded both University College London and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge—an autologous organization aimed at people unable to afford education. As a young man, he inaugurated the *Edinburgh Review*, becoming a regular and well-read contributor; and in this moment, fifty-six years old and hurrying toward a sanatorium near Genoa, Brougham is Lord Chancellor of the British parliament. None of this fazes the guard. "I'm afraid I can't let you in."

Brougham knows better than to reason with bouncers. He has the coachman turn back to Le Suquet, a small fishing village with just three hundred inhabitants, and stays the night at its only inn. The next morning, he rises early and leaves his daughter to rest, descending the hill for the beach below. As he walks, history passes by: the remnants of the Ligurian oppidum; the twelfth-century Castellum Marcellini and its nearby watchtower, built to ward off pirates and Saracens and other would-be invaders; the forts of the Middle Ages; the burgeoning fisheries. Brougham reaches the water and surveys the glistening shores of the Côte d'Azur—yet unnamed, much like Cannes, where he now stands. He smiles and turns to stone.

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Brougham's statue adorns a fountain in the Cannes main square, where I currently sit, eating a crêpe (*avec noo-tella*) and drinking iced coffee. When ordering, I asked for a "café *froid*" instead of "café *fwah*," which made the over-tanned crêpe-man snicker with a cruelty that can only be described as *French*. "*Fwah*, *fwah*!" he mocked. I consider drowning myself in the fountain. Perhaps the faux pas is cosmic punishment for skipping the new Ken Loach film, about a pub, *The Old Oak*—what would have been my final viewing of this year's festival. Comrade or not, he's nearly ninety, and the plot concerns immigrants in the north of England, which sounds about as appealing as warm beer. The choice was to return to the UK a day early—its miseries, its pubs—or stave off cinema and soak up the sun. After twenty-eight films in ten days, the choice was obvious. But this is one of Cannes's great curiosities: Why would anyone come to the Côte d'Azur just to spend all day in the dark?

Brougham is with me on this. Looking out over the "old port," his statue is wedged neatly between a McDonalds and Gelato Junkie; all around, festivalgoers flit from screen to screen, but despite them, Brougham drinks the sun all day. After the few nights he spent at Le Suquet (his daughter dies, by the way), he bought some land and convinced his friends to do the same. They started the trend of *hivernants*, or winterers: an emergent product of the new leisure class in England, these "tourists" would enjoy their homeland's summer and then bugger off when things got cold, which, if you've ever lived in England, is perhaps the only sensible way of doing things. Unless you *really* like pubs, which a lot of them do. (Somewhere, Loach bows his head in anguish: But what if those pubs were racist?)

Lord Brougham and family in Cannes, 1862. | Charles Nègre, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Brougham may have "discovered" Cannes, but Stéphen Liégeard made the myth. The French poet published *La Côte d'Azur* in 1887, giving the riviera its new name and providing advertisers with ample copy: "Yes, the favourite daughter of the sun is Cannes, a patrician of supreme distinction, reserved in its welcome, a trifle proud at first, whose good graces can be gained only by elegance or conquered by merit"—or, apparently, Ruben Östlund. Liégeard's book drew such intrigue it essentially sold in tandem with train tickets; its second edition was printed in a smaller format, compact enough to fit inside a tourist's pocket. As the host of *hivernants* grew, they needed something to do, and so came the hotels and casinos. Photos from the late nineteenth century remind us that most riviera towns comprised a single strip of road with two lampposts and a donkey, some fishing boats and barrels, a portly man more foie gras than human flesh, and a few big buildings with a ballroom each. The chief pastime in 1888 was wearing a hat; cinema was still a few years away.

In desperate need of entertainment, casino owners summoned courtesans for their guests, much like publicists today summon critics. Among them was La Belle Otero, who, according to Mary Blume's excellent compendium of Cannes-adjacent anecdotes, *Côte d'Azur*, "won 15 million of today's francs by putting ten *louis* on red, which came up 21 times in a row." The notches on her belt reportedly include Edward VII, Czar Nicholas II, Leopold II, Alfonso XIII, Reza Shah, and a Vanderbilt; she died penniless in Nice. She was so beautiful that "her exemplary breasts served as the model for the twin cupolas of the Carlton Hotel in Cannes in 1912."

A hundred years of gravity calls for a boob job: the Carlton reopened this spring after a two-year operation, giving its sagging Belle Epoque façade a much-needed lift. The city celebrated by protesting on its front door. Banned from the red carpet, a small group of General Confederation of Labor representatives gathered in the rain holding a banner that said "No to pension reform." The month prior, Macron had signed a bill raising France's retirement age from sixty-two to sixty-four, despite historic protests—something this year's Palme d'Or–winner Justine Triet would later raise in her acceptance speech.

Cannibals, fishmongers, aristocrats, and cannibals again: a brief history of Cannes.

Even with all the goodwill at the festival, very few attended the demonstration, though it's not hard to see why: Cannes is a rotating door for conventions of all kinds; its Palais des Festivals et des Congrès (the big white one) is fully booked year-round. For the film festival, the space is provided gratis by the state, along with one hundred gendarmes, plus their horses and hounds. It goes without saying that cinema (and its celebrities) is sexier than an insurance exhibition, or the September rendez-vous for "aging well," but it also generates $300 million for a city, which, less than two hundred years ago, didn't exist. Now the descendants of Italian-blooded fishmongers wait on Leo DiCaprio and are paid quite well. They lunch with celebrities and have selfies to show for it. "*Heureuse capitale, heureux peuple!*" Liégeard wrote of Monte Carlo. Might we call La Belle Otero Cannes's matriarch?

The Carlton was previously renovated in 1989, adding nearly two-hundred million francs' worth of marble and gold, a twelve-room suite with its own private health center, and a restaurant named for Otero. Their policy, they say, "is to nourish ourselves with the past while being completely up to date." Today, it seems Cannes has sucked the tender teats of history dry. The festival's insistence on replicating a Gilded Age forgets that such an era was named for its emptiness, its grand illusion. For all the francs the festival reaps, this hollow materialism has, ironically or not, diminished the patina of Liégeard's rippling sapphire.

"The Riviera when I was young had a kind of legitimate elegance," the Romanian-American director Jean Negulesco once said. "Now it's less interesting, it's like Hollywood." When Grace Kelly married the Prince of Monaco in 1956, it set this relationship in stone. Brougham's sunny winters came to end; *les estivants* had arrived. The festival itself was only held in Cannes—rather than Biarritz, or Vichy, or whatever arbitrary spot—thanks to the lobbying of powerful casino owners and hoteliers; initially set for September, its purpose was to extend the summer season, which had only begun, by consensus of capital, in 1931. "The essential goal of the festival is to bring paying customers into the hotels and casinos at a time when business is poor," Truffaut would later recognize.

Cannibals, fishmongers, aristocrats, and cannibals again: a brief history of Cannes.

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Jonathan Glazer's *Zone of Interest* won the Grand Prix award this year—essentially second place. Most people would've happily seen him take the Palme. A loose adaptation of Martin Amis's 2014 novel of the same name, the film shifts focus to Rudolf Höss, SS officer and longest-serving commandant of Auschwitz. I felt the film was as much about America as Germany, something Glazer seemed to confirm in his acceptance speech, in which he reminded us that such horrors are never too far away. Proximity is the film's great theme. Shot as a formalist melodrama—an immediate commentary on the twin poles and problematics of Holocaust representation—Höss becomes something like Dön Draper, a self-disgusted suburbanite whose only outlet is work. He calls his wife from the office to share good news and bad; on the weekend, he wears all white for a family barbecue. He has five beautiful children and a dog: the American dream. Occasionally, you spy the coal-black plumes of trains passing by, just above the barbed-wire fences that surround the Höss's colorful flowerbeds. Core and periphery are layered like rose petals. Visualizing this distinction, making it literal, clarifies something of America's postwar empire and suburban bliss: *their* holocausts occur somewhere else.

When this distance collapses, buildings do too. Explicit depictions of the Algerian War were excluded from Cannes until 1975, whereupon Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina's *Chronicles of the Years of Fire* won the Palme d'Or. Hours before the festival began, on the morning of May 9, two small bombs were detonated, one outside the Palais's artist entrance. Among others, former members of the Organisation Armée Secrète, France's far-right paramilitary group opposed to Algerian independence, had made threats on the director's life; the small but specifically targeted explosions seemed a final warning. The state intervened to have Lakhdar-Hamina and his three children protected for the remainder of the festival, while the Socialist Party took the opportunity to raise the temperature still, hosting its own festival of political film at the Lido cinema, attended by representatives from Palestine, Chile, and Cambodia. When Lakhdar-Hamina accepted his Palme, he said: "This time the festival has become international. This prize recognizes the existence of the third world." The festival had only recently dropped their policy of inviting nations rather than films.

Chronicles of the Years of Fire begins in 1939, the same year the first Cannes Film Festival was supposed to take place. Frustratingly, a few days before opening night, war became imminent, and programmers had to call the whole thing off. The party didn't stop, mind you: Cannes's other entertainments carried on. "Pleasure became sharper as people began to realize it would not last," writes Blume, even as tree-slung signs in Antibes declared Mort aux Juifs and Goering attended a military parade in Nice. Mere months before the war broke out, Cannes newspapers were advertising resorts in Nazi Germany—one subheading read: "International Friendliness Established Through Tourism." I imagine the accompanying image looked something like a scene from *Zone of Interest*, an idyllic summer swim in a river of poisoned bones.

Watching Glazer's film, I couldn't help but think of Le Train Bleu. Even before Liégeard's book, the population of Cannes had trebled between 1867 and 1878, and to accommodate the increasing number of *hivernants*, the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits introduced the Calais-Mediterranée Express, a luxury overnight train nicknamed for its dark-blue sleeping cars, which ferried Brits and other tourists from France's top to bottom in accordance with winter demands. The rich enjoyed racing the train from Paris in their cars. But in the run-up to the war, its carriages were filled with Jewish refugees, all pretending they were simply taking vacation, hats and all. (Le Train Bleu was sometimes called "the train to paradise.") With the influx of Jews to the south of France, a Paris newspaper labeled the Côte d'Azur "*Le ghetto parfumé*," but the locals didn't seem to mind. "By the end of the summer of 1942, 43,000 Jews were crowded into 30 miles of coastline," writes Blume. "Casino and hotel owners were happy to have them."

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On the subject of sleeping cars: I fell asleep during several films this year, briefly during *Zone of Interest*, despite the nightclub next door pumping bass into the Debussy theater (a strange way to experience the Holocaust). Also, Todd Haynes's *May December*, which I regret, because I hear good things, and Wes Anderson's *Asteroid City*, which I don't regret at all. I slept for a few minutes during Wang Bing's *Youth (Spring)* and at the very beginning of Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon*—two of my favorites from the festival.

It's a hard life. You get out of some screenings at 1 a.m. and obviously need a drink to unwind, so you wander down to one of the many beach parties and gorge yourself on complimentary Campari cocktails, until, after meeting various pan-European filmmakers all trying to fund their first feature, invariably a horror film with "A24 vibes," you trek back, hop on the bus, listen to overloud American teenagers talk about what was cringe and what was poggers, which storied auteur had sadly taken an L that evening, and then go to bed—only to wake a few moments later, at *6:55 a.m.* to claim your tickets for the day because the official app opens at 7 a.m., and those teenagers have highly trained thumbs. *Le plaisir passe, le mal de tête reste*.

The films play a restorative role in this sense, especially this year, when several features cleared the three-hour mark. Durational cinema has always been understood as an antidote to cultural acceleration, but in Cannes it's more of a hangover cure. Thankfully, the nature of "slow cinema," as it's sometimes called, is that you can doze off with a man walking one way through a field and wake to find him walking back. *Ah, so György filled the bucket after all. Mr. Hagelmayer will be pleased*. Jonathan Romney, veteran film critic and long-time Cannes attendee, relayed an old joke about the press screenings, where a man starts loudly snoring. His neighbor wakes him up: "Would you please keep it down, sir, we're trying to sleep!"

During a 9 a.m. screening of Kleber Mendonça Filho's documentary, *Pictures of Ghosts*, I looked around for anyone else still awake. Mendonça's soothing voice apparently has a hypnotic quality, and his film had lured us, unknowingly, into a dream. I let my eyes close too: *An eco-bike zips along the Croisette, bound for the Carlton. Thierry Frémaux, delegate general of the film festival, fastens his bowtie and cranks the accelerator. He is apparently making a statement about the festival's carbon footprint. At the hotel's entrance, he is shoved back into the street; riding on the footpath is strictly prohibited. Frémaux protests, and his words echo through history: "Ne sais-tu pas qui je suis?"*

Durational cinema has always been understood as an antidote to cultural acceleration, but in Cannes it's more of a hangover cure.

For much of my festival experience, Brougham's statute was like a baryon particle, drawing everything toward it: he and Blume, whose book I carried under my arm, had thrown time into flux. I saw Cannes all at once—fishing huts and high-rises, castles and palais. In Old English, *tima* refers to the "limited space of time," a conflation of the spatial and temporal that calls to mind the city itself: a small strip of beach, ancient at one end and modern at the other. It still has its horses and hats; its fishing, however, has been mined. Certain qualities of history resound and confound: Is this the dizzying present, or have I overindulged in free wine?

I wondered this during Alice Rohrwacher's *La Chimera*, which was well-met with a few too many muscadets. The film speeds and slows in peculiar ways, like a drunken clock, and sometimes flips the frame entirely. Arthur, our leading man, arrives to us by train, that emblem of modernity, twin invention of the cinema—both spaces where one stays fixed while the world flutters by. Recently released from prison, he is a man out of time; special powers allow him to divine the sites of ancient artifacts, which he and a troupe of merry men, the *tombaroli*, dig up and sell. When Arthur finds himself atop one of these gravesites, disequilibrium sets in, like vertigo, and he falls to the ground.

The Cannois are picky when it comes to preservation: like the *tombaroli*, they know desecration brings good business. After the war, fascist money was poured into property development—the setting of a trend, it seems. Brougham's former home, Château Eleonore, was among the first of many villas to be carved into condominiums. The English church of Nice did its own tomb raiding, selling off a portion of its cemetery to make way for more apartments, since the slumbering dead, Blume reminds us, "have no place in a world of booming real estate prices." The Cannois used to cart uncovered corpses through the streets as a funeral rite. They stopped when the tourists arrived. "The proximity of sacred and profane, of death and life, that characterized the years in which I was growing up has always fascinated me and given a measure to my way of seeing," Rohrwacher claims in an interview. "This is why I decided at last to make a film that tells this layered story, this relationship between two worlds." She asks the question: What do we do with our past?

One of *La Chimera*'s pivotal scenes sees Arthur stuck between the *tombaroli* who want more money and the wealthy gallerists who sell their stuff. They fight over an artifact—the head of a statue, some old celebrity—the two parties framed as frenzied dogs. Fed up, Arthur intervenes, snatching the relic and tossing it back into the water. It sinks to the ocean floor and disappears. In another two hundred years, will Cannes do the same? The future ripples and swells.

Enjoying the sunset from the Palais roof, I look down at Brougham's statue and imagine him beneath the waves. The first "tourist" in Cannes. That word comes to us from the lathe, spinner of circles, the idea being that you must always go back. When the fishmongers of future centuries dredge his head from the water, what will they do with history: Will they have the good sense to leave it be? Claus von Bülow—a British socialite who spent time in the Côte d'Azur was twice acquitted for trying to murder his wife, and whose father collaborated with Nazis—pondered this same problem: "What do you do with a place that is beautiful? Destroy it."

Hey, one last thing.

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James Wham is a writer based in London. His work has appeared in *Film Comment*, Reverse Shot, and the *New Left Review*.

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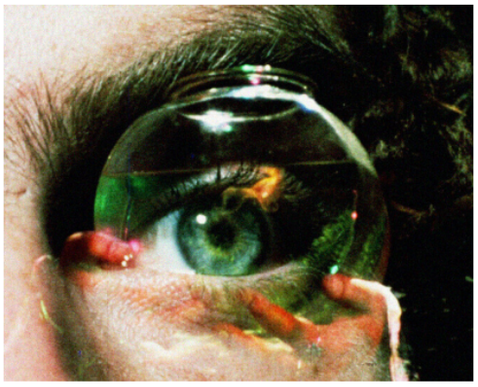

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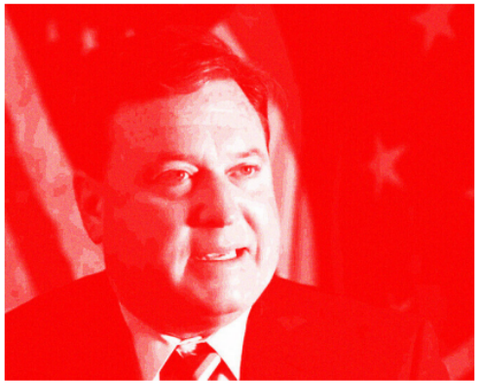

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