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Images on the Move: Circulations and Transfers in film

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## Introduction

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# Introduction

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- 1 In 1960, film specialist and occasional director of experimental and political films Lewis Jacobs edited an anthology of influential articles and essays from 1910 to 1959. As made explicit in its subtitle and its preface, the direct goal of the copious selection was “to explore the nature of motion picture art” (Jacobs xi). If the early articles make the case for film as a distinct art form that deserves critical attention, overall the task undertaken by all the authors is to define the “nature” of film. At approximately the same time, in 1958, André Bazin embarked on a similar theoretical journey by asking: “What is cinema?” One of his objectives was to define the ontological specificity of the cinematographic art. In the following decades, this fundamental question was taken up and amplified, moving the questioning about the nature of film ontology in seemingly contradictory directions. With a clear philosophical approach, some authors pursued the Bazinian effort to circumscribe the inherent realism of film (Cavell), while others analyzed films through the prism of concepts that went beyond the notion of realism (Deleuze, Rancière). Following the heydays of post-structuralism when Marxist and Lacanian theories were applied to particular films and to the entire cinematic apparatus (Rosen), David Bordwell, for example, offered a neo-formalist approach that aimed at focusing on aesthetics anew. If today the theoretical battles of old times have somehow been appeased, the original question as to the very nature of film remains.
- 2 This is due to the recent technological developments that beg us to redefine the ontology of cinema, based as its first definitions were on the physical experience of the dark movie theaters and on the celluloid as the material inscription of the reality of films. As demonstrated by André Gaudreault, technological developments (from the advent of sound to the new technologies now used to produce and watch films) have always triggered both a lament that something of the supposed essence of cinema was lost and a necessary critical reappraisal of its definition. Dealing with the documentary, Brian Winston also contends that the history of the form is too overly determined by technologies (Winston 3). If this remark could be fruitfully extended to the history of film in general, it appears that the digital age offers a paradigm shift that is at least equal, if not more important than, to ones generated by sound, color, television and VCRs. Today, in an era of digital images, with the democratization of cinematographic

practices – in terms both of production and reception – it seems necessary to return to a definition of cinema in its technical specificity. The main purpose of this collection of articles is thus to offer a contemporary and updated perspective on this new age of cinema.

- 3 This new era can be loosely defined as the articulation of two phenomena that extend beyond the world of cinema: on the one hand, the digitalization of the entire film apparatus and its experience by spectator, and, on the other, economic and aesthetic globalization. Both impact our perception of film as the art of moving images. With celluloid, the cinematic movement was mostly circular, within the camera and within the projector. Onscreen, movement is at least double as it includes the motion of figures and that of the camera itself. But circulation also happens in between images thanks to editing. Can we say, following Jean-Louis Comolli's lead, that there is such a thing as a specific cinematic form of circulation, in its technical dimension, that would make it different from other types of audio-visual circulations (television in general, TV series and music videos in particular)? Is this specificity still the same for digital movies? In other words, what exactly circulates in and between images, and between images and spectators? Then, films also circulate between countries. Globalization indeed calls into question the very notion of national cinema: in its place we find international and runaway productions, films taking place in several countries or continents. Beyond filmmaking, it seems that globalization also influences the way films are actually seen, often bypassing the collective experience of the movie theater in favor of individual screenings: DVD, Blu-Ray, streaming, legal or illegal downloading. Do these new modes of viewing films automatically ask us to reconsider the status of films as commodities? Within films themselves, what is the most adequate aesthetic mode for representing globalization? It is our hope that the following chapters will help answer some of these pressing questions.
- 4 The first part of this collection, entitled "Theorizing Film Movement: Space and Rhythm," aims at founding a new theoretical framework to not only *see* films, but also *perceive* them within a complete bodily experience. Antoine Gaudin's adequately ambitious contribution offers nothing less than a radically new perspective on our apprehension of film space. Rather than being a simple aesthetic motif (setting) or a profilmic reality always already there, waiting to be captured by a camera, film space, the author contends, should rather be construed as a dynamic phenomenon produced by the film itself. Borrowing from the tenets of phenomenology, Gaudin moves beyond the traditional conceptions of film space, those of semiotics or of Deleuze, to offer a new concept, the space-image, that literally opens up new areas for our collective understanding of film. The common theme between Gaudin's text and the following is that of rhythms. Indeed, Massimo Olivero begins by reconsidering Eisenstein's theory of the "rhythmic drum" before considering the potential connections between this approach of montage and that of American and Canadian directors such as Ernie Gahr, Paul Sharits, and Michael Snow. Beyond the continents and the decades that separate the Soviet master and his later putative epigones, lies the deep belief that film history is not linear but, on the contrary, demands a constant back and forth movement between practices of the same core idea.
- 5 The three following articles all question film movement within a strict generic approach. The genre that has most often been associated with film movement is quite obviously the road-movie. Anne Hurault-Paupe proposes a typology of the various film

movements at work within this largely American genre. Far from suggesting a liberating trend, too often associated to the genre, Hurault-Paupe suggests that the movements of the road-movie are often contradicted by numerous formal elements. This inherent contradiction of the genre then allows the author to offer a method to classify films as either static or dynamic. The main mode of transportation in the road-movie, the car, is the special focus of Yann Roblou's seemingly strange comparison between *Cars 2* and *Drive*. Beyond their obvious aesthetic and thematic difference, Roblou envisions the two films as symptoms of American ideologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both Refn's mysterious *Driver* and Lasseter and Lewis' aptly-named *McQueen* are used as springboards to reflect on fluctuating identities in an ever-expanding world. It is precisely within this international framework that David Roche's analysis of *Kill Bill Vol. 1 and 2* operates. He demonstrates that the celebrated fight scenes are not mere pauses within the narrative and that they should rather be construed as the precise locations where the cultural and generic hybridity of the two films is revealed. By blending in Asian and Hollywood genres, Tarantino displays how intertextual references cease to be hints at the spectator in the know and truly become the formal locations of international and generic celebrations of the potential of film movement.

- 6 The third part of this collection, devoted to the impact of new technologies on the circulation of films, precisely opens on this issue, that of the contemporary trend to refer back to previous works to question the very ontology of the films under study. Both Lynch's *INLAND EMPIRE* and Monte Hellman's *Road to Nowhere* can be qualified as metafilms and both were shot using the new digital technologies now easily available. Julien Achemchame analyzes the two films and the ways both embed the cinematic apparatus. He contends that they do not revel in the so-called death of the medium, this paralyzing idea that cinema has died with the new digital cameras. On the contrary, Achemchame shows that the two films should be read as examples of cinema's perennial capacity to renew its own potentials. If acclaimed directors have now turned to digital filmmaking to better express the potentials of the medium, what can be said of the digital circulation of avant-garde film, specifically made with and for celluloid, onto Internet platforms. André Habib discusses how the experimental films of avant-garde filmmakers are now available online. Is it possible to say that one has seen, say Snow's *Wavelength*, without the physical presence and collective experience of the movie theater? Can an (often) bad copy of the film online replace the actual projection of these films? In his article, Habib envisions the remediation of experimental films as a new mode of cinephilia, in between the worrying pretense that one had access to this specific rare film work and the democratic desire to grant it a wider access or even to the artistic re-appropriations of older experiments for a new audience by an inventive generation of spectators/exhibitors. In the following article, Cécile Martin similarly wonders about the way the conditions of projection impacts the spectator's appreciation of films and other moving images. Her perspective is at least double: she first offers an etymological history of the screen. Martin thus proceeds to explain the necessary historicization of the screen. Her second perspective is spatial or, rather, influenced by proxemics. If screens preceding cinema can be mapped out along two lines opposing public and private, and collective and individual, these opposite notions fail to account for the emergence of screens, the function of which moves beyond that of the classical cinematic screen. In order to fully appreciate the extent of these screens, Martin offers a new typology opposing the mobile screen to the screen in-situ, and its open or closed nature. The last article in this collection, written by Christel

Taillibert, comments on the new phenomenon of online festivals, which explicitly try to engage films by emerging directors with a worldwide audience. If the phrase “online festivals” can read as an oxymoron, as a festival implies the physical presence of people in a movie theater, Taillibert analyzes the various strategies used to make films available and to create an online community of like-minded film lovers. All in all, the articles in this final subpart aptly demonstrate that the new digital technologies help the dissemination of films, which can, in turn, be starting points for the emergence of new, unexplored film experiments.

- 7 Far from decrying the death of cinema in a globalized context of democratized film practices, it is our hope that this series of articles will, quite on the contrary, show that film and its elusive essence are still alive and well. From the proposal of new film theories to the application of rediscovered theories to better appreciate avant-garde films, from the redefinition of film genres that were not as well known as it first seemed to an understanding of genre beyond its original national context, from the digital experiments of established film directors to the digital propagation of old and new film works, the articles in this collection all point at the livelihood of the current research on film. The globalized and digitalized world that is ours does not mark the end of our questioning of what truly constitutes cinema. Rather, it demands our constant critical attention.

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