

**THE KEY DEBATES**

Mutations and Appropriations in  
**European Film Studies**

# POST-CINEMA

**Dominique Chateau  
and José Moure (eds.)**

88

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# The Key Debates

Mutations and Appropriations in European Film Studies

*Series Editors*

Ian Christie, Dominique Chateau, José Moure, Annie van den Oever

# Post-cinema

*Cinema in the Post-art Era*

*Edited by  
Dominique Chateau  
and José Moure*

Amsterdam University Press

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# Editorial

The *Key Debates* series has reached its tenth birthday with this eighth volume, which addresses a concern that has far-reaching implications for the entire field of screen media studies. The original aim of the series was to revisit the concepts and indeed controversies that have shaped the field of film studies. Our intention was twofold: to clarify what was initially at stake in the founding texts and also to clarify lines of transmission and reinterpretation in what remains a hybrid field of study, which has “appropriated” and thus modified much of what it uses.

The seven volumes published to date have taken different approaches to this central mission. They have reviewed how early film theory adopted and developed literary theories of “strangeness” (*ostrannennie*); shifting concepts of subjectivity engendered by film; the variety of ways that film’s audiences have been conceived; the persistence of debate around film as a technology; the continuing proliferation of screens; the foundational link between modern feminism and film theory; and most recently the centrality of “stories” to modern media discourse.

All of these have retained a commitment to *debate*, bringing together scholars who belong to different traditions and schools of thought, and indeed language communities. With the support of our institutions in three countries (the Netherlands, France and Britain), and our enterprising publisher Amsterdam University Press, we provide a platform to air differences, while also demonstrating that film and media studies – transnational and transmedial – occupy a central position in contemporary intellectual and cultural life. Coincidentally, at the time of this present volume’s preparation, a public health emergency occurred that has affected all our countries and communities and which has dramatically drawn attention once more to the role that “domesticated” screen media play in all our lives.

The recent shut-down of communal cultural activity may also have created a new appreciation of the place of film and cinema in the contemporary media environment. It therefore seems timely that our latest volume should address what would be called in vernacular English discourse “the elephant in the room.” Have we indeed entered a “post-cinema” era; and what are the implications for concepts and theories shaped by more than a century of film and cinema seeming synonymous?

As the series enters its second decade, with future volumes under discussion, we are confident that there has never been greater need for a

shared international space of debate, enabling and encouraging constructive engagement with the major issues affecting how we think about the dominant media of our era.

Paris / Amsterdam / Groningen / London

Dominique Chateau, José Moure, Annie van den Oever, Ian Christie

# Acknowledgments

*Post-cinema* is the eighth volume in the series *The Key Debates*. As with previous books (*Ostrannenie* 2010; *Subjectivity* 2011; *Audiences* 2012; *Technē/Technology* 2014; *Feminisms* 2015; *Screens* 2016; *Stories* 2018), it is organized around a key topic that crosses and shapes the field of film studies. We are very grateful to Amsterdam University Press for offering us the opportunity to enter into a debate that is at the heart of questions about the changes that the cinema is undergoing after more than a century of existence. The concept of “Post-cinema” asks us not only to think of moving images in terms of media theory and transformations of film and cinema but also to focus on the relationship between cinema and art, especially contemporary art.

This volume explores new ways of considering, experiencing and making films in a time of technological transition. It brings together an international group of scholars and artists from a variety of countries, who speak different languages and come from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds. This book is dedicated to the memory of our colleague and friend Céline Scemama and Agnès Varda. For their generous contributions, we sincerely thank Dudley Andrew, Wang Bing, Victor Burgin, Francesco Casetti, Richard Conte, Gérard Courant, Miriam De Rosa, Giovanna Fossati, André Gaudreault, Christophe Génin, Malte Hagener, François Jost, Philippe Marion, Andrea Pinotti, Gabriela Rivadaneira Crespo, Annie van den Oever, Christophe Viart, and Eugénie Zvonkine. Additionally, we wish to thank the translators and in particular Naòmi Morgan for her translations from the French.

The project has depended vitally on generous funding from the Research Institute ACTE (Arts, Création, Théorie, Esthétique) – Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, and the University of Groningen, without which it would not have been possible. Special acknowledgment and warm thanks are due to the Senior Commissioning Editor, Film Media and Communication of AUP, Maryse Elliott, who provided us with extremely generous support.

We also thank heartily the editorial board of the *Key Debates* series, in particular Annie van den Oever and Ian Christie who have offered us invaluable and friendly help and advice. Finally, we would like to pay tribute to copyeditors Wendy Stone and Viola ten Hoorn, whose ceaseless efforts and professionalism have made the process of piecing the essays together

so much easier for both of us, and to acknowledge the continuing support of Chantal Nicolaes, Head of Desk Editing and Production at AUP.

Dominique Chateau and José Moure  
Paris, summer 2020.

# 1. Introduction

*Dominique Chateau and José Moure*

For some time now, in newspapers and books, a series of words keep appearing that begin with the prefix “post-.” As for these new words, the key to understanding seems to be a semantics of ambiguity. Post does not indicate something absolutely different but something in-between: postcapitalism would be a new phase of capitalism; postmodernism, a new figure of modernism; and post-history, history again. In all these cases, to the same question – does “post-” mean a clear break or the more or less identifiable result of an evolution? – the same answer arises: “post-” is a “problematic prefix” that “debates over postmodernism and postmodernity taught us to treat not as a marker of definitive beginnings and ends, but as indicative of a more subtle shift or transformation in the realm of culturally dominant aesthetic and experiential forms” (Denson and Leyda 2016, 6).

This astute remark can be found in Shane Denson and Julia Leyda’s introduction to *Post-cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, a high-quality collection of texts published in 2016. In addition to the editors, the contributors include Lev Manovich, Steven Shaviro, Vivian Sobchack and Francesco Casetti. Considering this title and ours, it is obvious that the two projects look very similar. Apart from our call for new contributors and the fact that most of the texts in this volume are newly published or translated into American English (in Denson and Leyda’s book all the texts are republished in a more or less revised form), we can clarify the different points or nuances that specify our approach of the hypothetical notion of post-cinema.

Not surprisingly, this differentiation is particularly notable in the subtitles (that are, in fact, most often used for this purpose): Denson and Leyda’s *Theorizing 21st-Century Film* becomes our *Cinema in the Post-art Era*. Two crucial points can be made here: in the subtitle to this volume “cinema” seems to be rid of the embarrassing “post-” (which is, admittedly, contradicted in advance by the title); a second “post-” emerges at the same time as a new partner is introduced, art. Despite its sophisticated appearance, it means something very simple: we have chosen to focus the attention on the relationship between

cinema and art, especially contemporary art and on the current transformations of films and cinema that attest to such a relationship. At present, it seems the practice of art is also seen through the same lens, pointing us in similar directions: art is supposed to have metamorphosed into post-art and thus is simultaneously non-art, or a kind of almost-art, quasi-art, may-be-art, and so on – at any rate, it is ambiguously identifiable as art. *It so happens that cinema is part of this change and the resulting state of ambiguity ...*

### Interpreting “Post-cinema”

However, to begin with, ambiguity is also a characteristic of post-cinema. Considering the different ways in which this word can be interpreted, we also observe the same kind of ambiguity that affects words such as postmodernism. Whatever the interpretation, post-cinema is not seen as encompassing an absolute change in terms of film form and, correspondingly, the emergence of a new medium, nor an absolute change of cinema *dispositif* and, accordingly, the end of theater, projection and cinemagoing. Post-cinema is in a state of unstable equilibrium between the original, persistent cinema *dispositif* and new ways of making and considering the film, as well as its mode of working in the postmodern cultural context. As Denson and Leyda write, “post-cinema asks us to think about new media not only in terms of novelty but in terms of an ongoing, uneven, and indeterminate historical *transition*” (2016, 2). This reflects the prevalent state of mind in this book and anticipates some subsequent research tracks.

To be more precise, as soon as we consider the ways of interpreting post-cinema, we are led to thinking about key issues, not only in terms of media theory but also in terms of art practice. When measuring the scope of post-cinema, we find a scale of radicality from “cinema death” to intermediality, through decay or metamorphosis. The cinema death theme, at the height of radicality, cannot be discussed without considering three aspects of media definition: the medium, as such; the *dispositif*; and spectatorship. The question then arises as to whether the death of cinema can be decreed on the basis of one of these criteria or whether the theme involves all of them. Transposed into the media theory question, it means: is cinema defined by film, theater, cinemagoing, or any combination of these characteristics? It seems that the scale of radicality is established according to the degree of requirement we impose on our response.

If we require that the three criteria be met, we must consider that the film watched on a smartphone screen is not cinema. But if this film is a

Hollywood classic with famous stars, how can we refuse to associate with it the memory of cinema? Post-cinema presupposes the imaginary aspect of cinema. It is not only an “after” of the cinema that would replace it, that would have absorbed or liquidated it. Firstly, it was born before term since this kind of word is always fixed after the fact. There has already been a post-cinema at the time of cinema, from its birth until the present, but it was not yet clearly distinguished as such. In a way, behind the scenes, it is the more or less noticeable introduction of various kinds of film practices and conceptions in relation to its form or the ways of receiving it. Similarly, considering the current state of affairs which is of primary interest to us in this book, many present experiences deviating from mainstream cinema do not seem to have cut the umbilical cord; quite the contrary, they are haunted by the cinema from which they are supposed to differ.

Some texts at the beginning of the present book return to the lasting debate around the radical question of cinema death. By this point, this debate is beginning to take on *GROUNDHOG DAY*-like characteristics – the 1993 film by Harold Ramis was renamed *UN JOUR SANS FIN (AN ENDLESS DAY)* in French release – with its constant narrative restarts; that said, it does lead to a fundamental question about cinema as an anthropological and aesthetic phenomenon. But it does not lead to a definite answer; moreover, it is during this discussion that a doubt arises about the relevance of radicality. It does not mean that we should give up. On the contrary, it means that film- and media theory require subtlety in a dialectic sense. Cinema has not lost itself in its metamorphosis into post-cinema because, while it has lost some of its characteristics and prerogatives, it has gained others. After all, the possibility of watching a Hollywood classic on a mobile phone in public transport, even if the result is obviously less desirable than a theater screening – at least a good one under technically impeccable conditions (which is not always the case today) – is a privilege in the same way that using this mobile phone to communicate with friends or call for help is an advantage.

If it is a mere fact that the production-distribution-reception of many films, however artistic they may be, still have the form of a work in the “traditional” sense, it is just as relevant to speculate that their form is shifting as these “regular” films are affected by the post-art culture. Among other changes, these films that remain works can be displaced in conditions more or less remote from the *dispositif* of the theater, such as the “relocation,” as Francesco Casetti calls it, using devices of all kinds that change the films. This suggests, instead of repeating what is now well-known about this topic, an interest in measuring the feedback of the new modes of audiovisual

practice on films, more precisely, how they are designed, structured and manufactured. Parallel to the integration of contemporary art in “regular” cinema, we need to think of the integration of cinema into contemporary art in all kinds of forms of creation and exhibition.

Since we have chosen to open up the field of research by integrating the post-cinema question *within* the post-art question, let us recall that it would be simplistic to imagine a state of culture where art would have disappeared entirely (just as cinema death is only metaphorically, not literally, physically acquired). We are rather in a place envisioned by postmodern artists who claim an art that is at the same time non-art, or vice versa. Facing the introduction in various art fields of things or acts that differ from the work of art that is fully recognizable as such, cinema seems both to resist and to collaborate. It still produces works in the “old” format but is simultaneously immersed in many aspects of art in its current state.

The study of this subject from any angle shows that sooner or later any problem relating to post-cinema ends up looking like Russian dolls. Moreover, we can consider the series of dolls from the point of view of their decreasing size or from the opposite direction. In decreasing order, we go from the global context of the cultural industry to the form of the film, including the *dispositifs*. In increasing order, the perspective seems to be broadened. However, at the same time, we seem to lose the accuracy that film analysis promises. This book will, undoubtedly, give the impression of broadening the scope in terms of a comparison of texts focusing strictly on the movie arena. Nevertheless, our wish to reformulate the question of post-cinema through the topic of the relationship between the cinema and contemporary art also signifies the assumption that the objects of this transaction must not be left on the sidelines in favor of too many theoretical generalities.

## About the Book

The first part of the book begins with a tribute to “Influential French New Wave Filmmaker” (*The New York Times*) Agnès Varda, who passed away March 29, 2019 at the age of 90 – we don’t know what conclusion to draw from the repetition of the number 9! Her death was announced by various newspapers and websites, whose headlines – “Beloved French New Wave Director” (*The Guardian*), “Legendary French New Wave Director” (*The Local.fr*) – all seemed to include the New Wave label, providing a convenient location, both justified and lazy. When considering the career of such a great artist, we are inevitably referred to a glorious past. Paying tribute to

Agnès Varda by analyzing *BEACHES OF AGNÈS*, her 2006 autobiographical film, José Moure draws attention to the fact that the film itself intermixed with its “making of” has the singular form of a *narrated puzzle* from which a new kind of documentary emerges. (Further on, in chapter 14, Dominique Chateau completes the tribute by considering Varda’s forays into the world of contemporary art.) Through her most recent films, as well as her exhibitions, Agnès Varda can be considered a major figure in post-cinema.

PART II of the book – *The End of Cinema?* – revolves around the question of the fate of cinema which, according to disparate hypotheses, goes from end to rebirth. In what at first appears a book review of Francesco Casetti’s *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, Dudley Andrew’s text provides an overview of the most general and crucial discussion that the post-cinema theme has called attention to. First released in *Cultural Critique* in 2017, it highly deserves to be included in this volume because of the synoptic view it offers. Dudley Andrew not only brings together several theorists who participate in the debate throughout the globalized world – Laura Mulvey, Jacques Aumont, Raymond Bellour, Philippe Dubois, André Gaudreault, Philippe Marion, David N. Rodowick, Francesco Casetti – but also reignites this debate that could be considered a scholastic quarrel about a process whose outcome is still uncertain – the end of cinema! – if it were not a historical mutation, the practical consequences of which we experience every day. Some partners in the dialogue initiated by Andrew appear in this book with new questions.

In their text, André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion give a new formulation to the end of cinema issue: “What remains of cinema?” Arguing from a mainly nominalist perspective, they find their answer in cinema’s “resilience”: cinema is “*hanging tough*.” This resilience of cinema depends on what we are talking about in terms of technological evolution (digitalization) and cultural differences (are we talking about cinephilia or the ordinary practice of cinema?). They examine the different hypotheses arising from the point of view of the range of words it mobilizes (cinema, movie, moving images, and so on). Referring to a, rather comical yet telling, Bogdanovitch-Welles dialogue and the recent Netflix controversy during the Cannes or Venice festivals, Gaudreault and Marion iterate that differences in naming are “highly significant.” Finally, the authors consider the question: is it more important to define cinema (whatever the name!) or to produce “interesting film stories” as Guillermo del Toro suggests?

The next contribution by Céline Scemama is of special value to us. A Godard specialist, Céline scrupulously deciphered the multiple artistic references contained in Godard’s masterpiece *HISTOIRE(S) DU CINEMA* (that

can be understood here in the sense of the companion-worker's tour de force). For her arduous work she received a brilliant doctorate from the Panthéon-Sorbonne University, Paris 1, which was followed by a book that is now a standard reference work: *HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA de Jean-Luc Godard – La force faible d'un art*. She beamed forth affection but, disappointed by life, took her own in 2017. The present text, which constitutes the introduction to her book, is a double tribute: to Céline, a very dear friend, and to JLG who, from the start of his oeuvre to *LIVRE D'IMAGES* (2018), sought in the obstinate invention of a post-cinema the very essence of this art. Halfway between Montaigne's essay and Rembrandt's self-portrait, *HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA* is also halfway between the origin of cinema and its destiny as post-art.

PART III examines various *Technological Transformations* due to digitalization. We are very happy to welcome in this part, Victor Burgin who, as a renowned artist<sup>1</sup> could just as easily have been included in the last section *Post-cinema, an Artists' Affair*. But instead opens this part of the book with his proposal of a theoretical reflection on the technological transformations of what he calls the "field of 'photofilmic' practices." He postulates that "cinema" directs our minds to "technological mutation," while "art" evokes the "ideologico-economic appropriation." Using as a framework of reasoning themes that gave rise to the publications of the *Key Debates* series – screen and stories – and adding the idea of the virtual object as resulting from the convergence of the digital with the contemporary, he highlights the advent of new "photofilmic narrative forms" which, characterized by the combination of complexity and affectivity, "offer alternatives to the mass-produced verisimilitude of hegemonic mass culture."

Dedicated to Thomas Elsaesser, "a leading figure in film criticism" (*The New York Times*, December 19, 2019) and a friend who died on December 4 in Beijing at the age of 76, Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever's dialogue reflects on the "death of cinema" topic but from the perspective of film archival practice and national film institutes. Their starting point is both the fact that some of these institutes remain – an index of the cinema persistence – and Giovanna Fossati's reflection on processes of digitalization which raises the question as to whether the notion of film is still relevant in this new technological context. Analogous to the way in which Walter Benjamin treated the new phenomenon of mechanical reproduction, digitalization concerns both reproduction and creation. Today, the digital creation

1 For example, we recently watched his "digital looping video" *THE LITTLE HOUSE* (2005, 17') inside the Carmelites Chapel at Saint-Denis Museum of Art and History (France) as part of the exhibition *Enfermement (Confinement)*, April-October 2019.

aspect is discussed frequently; whereas, it is less common to consider the problems of the archival practice in the digital age. Thus, the exchange of views between Fossati and Van den Oever in this volume provides a useful perspective on the issue of digital archiving. It also deeply enriches the idea of post-cinema, more precisely, the idea of “a new post-cinematic ecology.”

Despite a series of material changes to the medium throughout its history, cinema has remained a “common immersive experience” insofar as it was based on the illusion of reality. However, the most important change is that this is no longer true: post-cinema, writes Christophe Génin, can be considered a defection of the original experience of watching movies. This situation has to do with social and economic transformations, implying the conversion of the cultural industry to service to the person and a deep variation in the aesthetic experience, which Génin proposes to understand through an analysis of the experience of individual screens in aircraft. A confined space such as an aircraft seat isolates the individual to whom it is offered in a moment of “solipsism of caprice.”

At the beginning of PART IV – *New Dispositif, New Conditions* – François Jost asks: “What kind of art is the cinema of interactions?” With this question, he promotes the concept of interaction, but his intention is not to extend the current theory that defines by interaction the use of cinema, both in the early stages of its history and in the post-cinema situation. Rather, it is to analyze “a work that presents itself as openly interactive: *BANDERSNATCH*” (2018), a part of the science-fiction anthology series *BLACK MIRROR*. He proposes to carry out this analysis with the help of Goodman and Genette, especially the two major concepts previously coined by the former: autography and allography. This duality helps to answer the question as to whether the opposition between film and TV series has to do with differences in artistic quality; a debate exacerbated by Netflix’s candidacy at film festivals. Additionally, using a comparison with music partitions (Pierre Boulez’s third piano sonata in relation to Netflix!), he wonders whether the viewer of the interactive work may be called an operator, a performer or a player ... or, more likely, an interpreter. His/her status has to do both with the model of the musician who has the choice to structure parts of the work and the hermeneut who gives meaning to it.

Designing his text according to the model “Engführung,” a musical technique of the fugue where a new theme overlaps with the previous one, Malte Hagener considers two dimensions of the changes in the audiovisual field: the first is exemplified by the Netflix platform on the economic and logistical level; the second concerns the aesthetic consequences of this new model of production and distribution. Characterized by a high level of autonomy and

self-consciousness of this status, Netflix's system is transforming the practice of film and the notion we have of it. A striking aspect of the strong link that is thus established between the production system and the film form can be observed in the fact that Netflix's productions are self-allegorizations of Netflix's system. Referencing *BIRD BOX* (2018), the "post-apocalyptic thriller" (Wikipedia) directed by Susanne Bier and starring Sandra Bullock, Hagener exemplifies that a post-cinema movie may be positioned between cinema, television and new media, appearing as a "self-allegory of its own position in a new media environment, especially concerning its production logic."

With Francesco Casetti and Andrea Pinotti's point of view in their "Post-cinema Ecology," we return to Christophe Génin's issue, albeit from a different perspective more similar to Jost's. Instead of developing the general theme of the immersive experience, they exemplify it by way of a special focus on Alejandro G. Iñárritu's *CARNE Y ARENA*, an interactive virtual reality installation presented at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, insofar as it testifies to the formal and spectatorial transformations that are rightly referred to as post-cinema. More generally, emphasizing the characteristics of "unframedness, presentness, and immediateness," this kind of work draws our attention to the phenomenology of the film experience. Drawing from Charles Peirce, Adolfo Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel* and the zoologist Adolf Portmann's theories of animal perception, they propose going beyond phenomenology (and ontology) with the project of an iconic ecology based on the concept of *phaneron*, the appearance as it is perceived for itself.

PART V, *Transformations in Film Form*, deals with the idea of identifying among the vast field of film production those that can be considered "part of a contemporary way of thinking and making art in a postmodern era" as Gabriela Rivadeneira Crespo writes. It means that some filmmakers or artists decide to put art at the heart of their creation, that this relationship between cinema and art may be applied to its concept, as well as to various aspects of the process of creation. One way in which to consider this kind of "art contemporary turn" is to examine the different incursions of cinema from the point of view of the contemporary art space. But, instead of following this track, instead of asking how cinema participates in this contemporary art experience, Miriam De Rosa asks "how the contemporary experience of moving images is articulated when it enters art spaces." This topic deals not only with the hypothesis of a change in film form and medium from the moment the film is destined for an unusual space but also with the reverse movement of the presence of film transforming the foreign space into a different and personalized place. From this point of view, Miriam De Rosa analyzes a series of exhibitions: *SLEEPWALKERS* (2007), Aitken's five

video pieces projected on MoMA's external walls; Marta Minujín's *Mesunda Reloaded* (2019) at the New Museum in New York; and the work of the Milan-based collective Studio Azzurro, especially their *Sensitive Environments* exhibition which reflects the space-image in an artistic context.

For her part, Gabriela Rivadeneira Crespo analyzes a Mariano Llinás film, *EXTRAORDINARY STORIES (HISTORIAS EXTRAORDINARIAS)* because, with this 2008 movie by the Argentinean filmmaker, the "productivity of cinema devices" is brought into question so that it fully exemplifies the type of postmodern film where cinema and contemporary art collaborate. Paradoxically, this kind of film, given the radical choices that govern it, places it in an expanded film, but marginalizes it in relation to the cinema industry. The locations and modes of reception of such films are also part of the definition of post-cinema in the post-art era.

For Dominique Chateau, post-art can, essentially, be characterized by the formula: *art, otherwise than art*. It means that in the institutional context presently governing art, the artworks or what serves as such, including objects or acts claiming non-art, are explicitly exhibited as art while different kinds of physical or mental attitudes are allowed toward them that have nothing to do with art in the first place. It is in this *art, otherwise than art* context that cinema and contemporary art are mutually challenging. This is quite obvious when we consider the meeting of cinema with the *dispositifs* of exhibition spaces; the intrusion of cinema into art or post-art places. More generally, this possibility opens news paths for creation: new filmic form (which is well exemplified by the race to make the longest film); changes in creators' status (as we can see with the examples of the Japanese filmmaker, Hamaguchi Ryusuke;<sup>2</sup> the French artist, Pierre Huyghe; or the French filmmaker, Michel Gondry); and the advent of exhibitions of a new kind (Agnès Varda and David Lynch). The text concludes with the symptomatic example of Agnès Varda and JR's *VISAGES, VILLAGES*, a collaboration that has produced a singular *documentary road movie* ...

To remain with a somewhat outdated division of labor, post-cinema in the post-art era can arise from the meeting of filmmakers and artists, but also from the collaboration of two artists, as in the case of *ZIDANE: A 21ST CENTURY PORTRAIT* (2006), a film created and directed by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno. Cameras placed around the Bernabéu stadium in Madrid where a match is taking place follow the well-known football (or soccer as the Americans have it) player, Zinedine Zidane, from the beginning

2 Asian names – Japanese, Korean, Chinese – are written in this book in their traditional form: surname first.

of the game until his dismissal. In this volume, Richard Conte examines this special portrait paying particular attention to how the film focuses primarily on Zidane, that is, on somebody who is in a state of what Diderot calls absorption in his task – in this case, playing a football match – in the kind of dance that a football game resembles. Conte also focuses on details that could only be captured by the artistic filmic device. By providing an in-depth analysis of this new device and its astonishing filmic result, Conte is able to call attention to a social aspect of post-cinema that deserves to be mentioned: mere artistic influence can elevate just about anything to the rank of art and thus in *ZIDANE* “elitist contemporary art meets the most popular sport of the world and one of its most emblematic figures.”

PART VI of the book, *Post-cinema, an Artists' Affair*, is devoted to artists and their work. Previously considered, Godard and Burgin could as easily have been involved here, as much as, for example, Llinás and Huyghe, even if their ways of investing in the field of creation differ. In this part, we consider a kind of filmmaker whose behavior or works can be considered from the viewpoint of the artist's contemporary standard. However, we start with the opposite movement: an artist making films. It could well have been Marcel Duchamp, insofar as the avant-garde of the 1920s foreshadowed post-cinema and, moreover, post-cinema integrated within the (post-)art issue. Among the most interesting and humorous artists that Duchamp has inspired, Christophe Viart proposes considering another of Marcel's incursions into film: Marcel Broodthaers was a Belgian contemporary artist whose range of activities covered poetry and (post-)cinema. A single film can have considerable theoretical power. This is the case with *LA PLUIE* (*PROJET POUR UN TEXTE*) [*THE RAIN (PROJECT FOR A TEXT)*], a 1969 two-minute 16mm black-and-white film, which portrays Broodthaers attempting to write on a paper in the rain. Is it a film? Is it cinema? This the material of a regular film, but not the spirit. We are definitely in the post-art era ...

Next up is Russian film director Ilya Khrzhanovsky, whose film adaptation of Kora Landau-Drobantseva's book *The Academician Landau: How we Lived* (1999) resulted in an immense project, entitled *DAU*, spanning several years, encompassing cinema and art among other things. In her text about *DAU*, Eugénie Zvonkine delves deeper into Khrzhanovsky's ambitious project. Because what is *DAU* exactly? Is it Ilya Khrzhanovsky's project as a whole or his films or the main character? In order to clarify this complexity, Zvonkine proposes “write[ing] *DAU* for the whole project, *DAU* for the films and *Dau* to designate the main character.” On the face of it, it seems to resemble Aesop's *The Frog and the Ox* whose moral is: “Do not attempt the impossible.” Yet, that's exactly what the young filmmaker did, who at that time was merely

known for “a single, although much remarked, feature film, *FOUR* (2004).” *DAU* tells the story of Kora Landau-Drobantseva’s husband, Lev Landau, a remarkable man, known by the nickname *Dau*, who professed freedom in private life in stark contrast to the political USSR Stalinist regime of fear and terror under which he lived. Not only did Khrzhanovsky make thirteen feature films of a duration from 1.5 to 6 hours but he also decided to include the screenings in huge installations, investing, in particular, in the Parisian Théâtre du Chatelet and the Théâtre de la Ville which were in reconstruction at the time, giving the whole *DAU* project the fascinating scale of a total artwork.

Independent filmmaker Gérard Courant is a fan of *early post-cinema*. Since the mid-1970s, he has been one of those pioneers who seeks to test its limits (from the very beginning of cinema), from within and without, from the center of the medium to its peripheries. This does not mean that he belongs to the past. On the contrary, he continues his quest, never ceasing to accumulate a considerable number of films and, in particular, one film or series of films, which continues to grow, the *CINÉMATON(s)*, which is at the heart of our dialogue. Courant was kind enough to receive us in his apartment at Montreuil (Paris suburb), a place full of films and books – not only books on cinema but also on cycling since Courant is a big fan of the Tour de France. No matter the field, he has the mentality of a collector. As regards cinema, it would be more accurate to say: an encyclopedic mentality. His work, an accumulation of numerous filmic portraits of personalities as well as filmed street inventories, is of considerable extension. It is in this very principle of infinite proliferation of films of varying lengths that we find a kind of Mnemosyne cinema challenging the “de-definition” (Harold Rosenberg) of cinema that transforms it into post-art.

Born in 1967 in Xi’an in the Shaanxi Province, Wang Bing is one of the greatest representatives of contemporary Chinese cinema (along with Jia Zhangke). After studying photography at Luxun Arts University in Shenyang and film at Beijing Film Academy, he directed *WEST OF THE TRACKS* (2003), *FENGMING, A CHINESE MEMOIR* (2007), *COAL MONEY* (2008), *MAN WITH NO NAME* (2009), *THE DITCH* (2010), *THREE SISTERS* (2012), *TILL MADNESS DO US PART* (2013), *TA’ANG* (2016), *MRS. FANG* (2017), *BEAUTY LIVES IN FREEDOM* (2018) and *DEAD SOULS* (2018). We were fortunate to meet him when he came to the Bachelard Amphitheater at the Sorbonne for a Master Class on April 27, 2019 (at the invitation of Richard Conte and Jacinto Lageira, as part of a series of Interface meetings at the Panthéon-Sorbonne University, Paris I). In the final dialogue of this book Wang (whose films are off the beaten track in many ways) clarifies his connection to various issues raised

by post-cinema, in particular, the consequences of technological changes with regard to film creation and distribution, and evolution in the aesthetic conception of cinema.

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## About the Authors

**Dominique Chateau** is Emeritus Professor of Aesthetics and Cinema at the Sorbonne School of the Arts at Panthéon-Sorbonne University, Paris I. His books include: *Cinéma et philosophie* (2003), *Philosophies du cinéma* (2010), *Subjectivity* (ed. 2011), *L'invention du concept de montage. Lev Kouléchov, théoricien du cinéma* (2013), *La direction de spectateur* (ed. 2015), *Après Charlie: Le déni de la représentation* (2016), *Screens* (ed. 2016), *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage* (2019), *Esthétique de la recreation* (ed. 2019), and *Une esthétique japonaise* (2019).

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# **PART I**

A Tribute to Agnès Varda



## 2. The Incipit of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Les plages d’Agnès)

An Installation in the Form of a Self-portrait

*José Moure*

### Abstract

Agnès Varda’s recent death at 90 was received by various newspaper or site titles: “Influential French New Wave Filmmaker” (*The New York Times*), “Beloved French New Wave Director” (*The Guardian*). Paying tribute to Agnès Varda by analyzing BEACHES OF AGNÈS, her 2006 autobiographical film, José Moure draws attention to the fact that it has the singular form of a *narrated puzzle* from which (the film itself intermingled with its “making of”) a new kind of documentary emerges. (Dominique Chateau, in chapter 14, completes the tribute by considering Varda’s forays into the world of contemporary art.) Through her most recent films, as well as her exhibitions, Agnès Varda can be considered a major figure in post-cinema.

**Keywords:** Varda, installation, self-portrait

In 2006, twenty years after having painted the filmed portrait of Jane Birkin in JANE B. BY AGNÈS V., and eight years after a few appearances in THE GLEANERS AND I, as she approached her 80th birthday, Agnès Varda decided to devote herself to an autobiographical project, BEACHES OF AGNÈS. This project would be placed under the prestigious double patronage of Montaigne for the autobiographical essay and Rembrandt for the self-portrait. “It’s a strange idea,” she admits,

to stage oneself and to film a self-portrait when you’re almost 80 years old. This idea began to form in my mind one day, on the Noirmoutier Beach, when I realized that other beaches had stood out in my life. The beaches

became the pretext and the natural chapters of the film. I wanted to share with my family and a few other people some of the facts and projects from my life's journey. And even more: to turn the mirrors towards others, towards those who had shaped me, whom I had met, whom I had loved.<sup>1</sup>

Beaches – already very present in the multimedia exhibition *L'ÎLE ET ELLE* (*THE ISLAND AND HER*), which she presented at the Cartier Foundation in 2006 – constitute the main theme of this singular film by a visual filmmaker, co-produced by Ciné-Tamaris and Arte France cinema.

Agnès Varda divides her work into five chapters which follow the order of the beaches that are linked to different periods in her life and places of memory and/or sources of inspiration for her creations (the Belgian beaches, the beach of Sète, the beaches of Los Angeles, a beach in Noirmoutier, and the imaginary beach represented by the rue Daguerre in Paris where she lives and works). She films herself in mid-invention, in the process of putting up installations on each of these beaches, using heterogeneous material (photos, paintings, extracts from her films, images of installations, reconstructions ...), following the thread of sinuous memory with all its gaps, proceeding by means of collages, digressions, associations of ideas, analogies, *mise en abyme* ... Agnès Varda stages herself, paints herself, tells her story in a narrated self-portrait in the form of a puzzle. Midway between sincerity and representation, as she plunges into the past, always from the present, she invents an original type of self-documentary where the film, a specular space for exhibitions and installations, is both the work itself (the self-portrait of Agnès Varda as a woman, filmmaker, and visual artist) and its “making of.”

The pre-credit sequence that opens *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* illustrates, in an emblematic and very original way, the creative process that underlies Agnès Varda's approach. This sequence, inserted as a prologue to the film and known as the mirrors sequence, ensures a programming function by means of its strategic position and singular status. It announces the rules of the game and the poetics of this attempt at self-representation that is film. Here, the filmmaker first presents her project with the help of young students from a film school in Louvain. She sets up a dozen mirrors of various sizes and styles on a windy North Sea beach. It is as if the significant events in her life that she is about to narrate are seen as several images reflected by mirrors scattered on a beach, as if, in this free play of fragmentation of shapes and reflections created by the mirror installation, something of the art of self-portraiture were at stake, somewhere between wind and tide, between sky and sand.

1 Varda's quotes come from *LES PLAGES D'AGNÈS* (2008).

The sequence lasts about three minutes. It consists of 25 shots framed by a shot of the logo of the production company, Ciné-Tamaris, which initiates the film, and the first shot of the credits, which interrupts the mirror installation sequence, firstly, by a written credit and, secondly, by “a few living, spoken credits to thank the team of young people who carried the mirrors.”

## How Does One Talk about Oneself?

### Between Autobiography and Self-portrait

After the production company's logo, Ciné-Tamaris, the film opens with two introductory shots in 16:9 format, which were shot when the film was finished. The filmmaker felt the need to add an introductory scene in which she presented her autobiographical project. “I wrote this monologue in a few days while on vacation in Noirmoutier,” explains Agnès Varda, “and I asked Melvil Poupaud, a family friend, to handle the camera. He did a hand shot in two takes, and got up to do a crane effect. These two shots were taken on one of the Noirmoutier beaches.”

Shot outside, in the evening, the foreground shows Agnès, accompanied by left-right camera movement, walking backwards on a deserted beach, and then heading toward the camera that lifts as she approaches. “I play the role of a plump and talkative little old lady, who tells her life story. Yet it is the others who really interest me; it's them I like to film. It is the others who intrigue me, motivate me, challenge me, disconcert me, fascinate me,” says Agnès, coming forward while facing the camera.

This first shot sets out the principles of the film to come: to inscribe the figure (Agnès) as a character in a logic of creating distance in the form of an assumed diegetic word (“I play the role of a plump and talkative little old lady”); to inscribe it in a maritime landscape (the beach) that structures the five chapters of the film; and, finally, to inscribe it in a double movement, both retro- and introspective. The retrospective movement is represented by the right-left travelling shot and the “character” walking backwards, thus getting ready to travel back in time, into her past and her memory; the introspective movement is represented by Agnès's advance toward the camera. She looks at the spectator and addresses him/her directly, testing a specular practice of the self which is both “objectifying” (the image) and “subjectivating” (the voice). The second shot, which shows Agnès in a medium shot in front of the camera, extends the announcement of the autobiographical and artistic project: “This time, to talk about me,

I thought: if people were opened up, we would find landscapes.” But the voice is no longer diegetic; it seems to have detached itself from the figure presenting herself to the eye of the lens in all her fragility, turning her back on the infinite surface of the sea, while the soundtrack, accompanied by the sound of the waves, already seems to evoke an immersion into memories.

Here, the affirmation of self-representation (talking about oneself) involves placing the figure of the artist at the center of the image: not in the posture of the filmmaker (she is filmed by another person), but in that of the character or model. The subject poses as the object, while the subject of the enunciation poses as the subject of the utterance. Inscriptions in landscapes (beaches as a connection between sea and land) and in temporalized spaces create tension between autobiography and self-portrait. It is a question of both telling and representing oneself, of affirming *in situ*: “this represents me, this is me.” If autobiography (talking about oneself, talking about one’s life) belongs to the literary genre of retrospective narrative and is located on the side of narrativity, however disjointed, the self-portrait (recomposing or decomposing one’s face), inherited from painting, moves the introspective project toward the performative moment of creation, toward a more fragmentary form. This hesitation between autobiography and self-portrait, between talking about parts of her life and showing representations of herself, runs through the entire film. The questions that Agnès Varda tries to answer, already in this prologue, include: “How does one talk about oneself?” and “How do you represent yourself in a visual proposal?”

### Setting up the System

An initial answer to these questions is provided by the third shot, which introduces the sequence known as the installation of mirrors on the beach. The direction of this sequence was entrusted to Didier Rouget, Agnès Varda’s first assistant since JACQUOT DE NANTES (1991), who directed the filming on the beach of Knokke-le-Zoute in August 2006, following which, Varda understood that it would be difficult for her to delegate her directing choices, and took control.

The scene opens with a wide-angle shot in daylight, outside. On a deserted and windy North Sea beach, a small digital camera is placed on a tripod, the lens facing the sea. Agnès, in a red burgundy raincoat, at a slightly low angle, enters from the right of the frame and heads toward the camera, repeating the course she took in the two previous shots, but from behind, while continuing in an “off” voice the monologue she started on another



Shot 3 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)

beach, at another time of the day, in another outfit, in the two previous shots: “If I were opened up, they would find beaches.”

The effect of the break between the first two shots and this third shot is marked not only by a change of place (the Belgian beach of Knokke-le-Zoute) and light (daylight, outside) as well as by the dissociation between sound and image (the “in” voice in the first shot is now “off”) but also by changing the image format from a 16:9 to a 4:3 ratio. This is the format that Agnès Varda adopts throughout the film to paint her filmic self-portrait.

Thus, the system is revealed and set up: a beach, a camera and a character, Agnès, designated as a filmmaker. The self-documentary and its “making of” can now begin.

### **The Installation of Mirrors or the Plastic Adventures of a Self-portrait**

The continuation of the prologue (shots 4 to 25) proposes a strange ritual of placing mirrors on the beach. Using the principles of plastic installation to the benefit of cinematographic production, Varda, wrapped in a scarf that floats on the wind, imagines a sequence in which, with the help of young assistants, a collection of mirrors, the very instrument of the self-portrait,

are placed on the ground, mirror by mirror, reflecting not only herself but also the North Sea, the beach, the dunes, the sky, the bodies and faces of her assistants and the kite surfers who pass and disappear. This constellation of mirrors generates a myriad of reflections, glimmerings, split images, frames and *trompe l'oeil*; the filmmaker, herself, admits to not knowing what it means and associates it with “a reverie” or “something imaginary.”

Through this highly visual and poetic ballet of mirrors dancing around Agnès as though they were trying to capture and retain her elusive and fragmented image in a puzzle, an entire poetics of the self-portrait according to Varda is sketched and reflected here. In the course of a non-chronological, slightly trembling succession of hand shots, the spectator witnesses a vertiginous deployment of frames and unpredictable mirror games that question representation and identity, and give rise to a fragmented world, in perpetual re-composition.

### **A Matter of Frames: Between Cinema and Painting**

Agnès precedes two assistants carrying a wooden frame and shows them where to put it. The camera, carried shoulder-high, follows their progress on the sand as well as their hesitations (shot 4). By means of a shutter effect, two people carrying a huge inverted mirror suddenly mask the action, merging the two shots (shot 5). By once again revealing the setting, the characters and the wooden frame have been conjured away, as if by magic. Instead, we see a mirror on an easel and, at the foot of the easel, a partially, reflected female assistant. A right-left lateral camera movement accompanies the march of those carrying the mirror, followed by Varda, who supervises the setting up of the mirror by means of words and gestures.

A reverse-angle shot (shot 6) shows the face of the mirror with Agnès's reflection facing us from the center, and her back to the sea and sky. The spectator is totally “despatialized” by this image-within-an-image which suddenly depicts the front (in shot) and back (reverse angle) in the same frame *en abyme*. Appearing for the first time as a reflection, as in a cinemascope screen, Varda is shown to advantage by her placement in the center of the image, which gives it its power: she is master of both space and frame.

In a wide-angle shot of the beach (shot 7), with an easel in close-up, in the right-hand part of the image, Agnès and a female assistant bring a mirror with golden molding and place it on the easel, the same one we already saw being set up in shot 5, thus showing the non-chronological nature of the sequence of shots during this sequence. At the same time, the mirror, associated with the easel, refers to the idea of the self-portrait in painting,



Shot 6 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)



Shot 7 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)



Shot 9 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)

and to the pictorial reference in which Agnès Varda inscribes her approach of self-representation.

The moment the mirror is placed on the easel, Agnès, in a close-up shot (shot 8), motions her assistant off-camera and, with her head down, enters into a first, tense, face-to-face encounter with her own reflection.

The installation of the frame on the easel continues in a wide-angle shot (shot 9) reflected in a slender mirror planted in the sand; the bottom part of the frame emphasizes the line as a reflection of the horizon. A third assistant has come to assist the two women. The installation once again has a “despacialization” effect on the spectator. The oscillations of the mirror placed on the unstable easel generate changing reflections and suggest the fragility of the images produced by the space-fragmenting device. In this *mise en abyme*, the mirror with golden molding, a frame-within-a-frame, becomes an animated painting projecting a “pictorial” image of sky and clouds, devoid of characters, standing out flatly in another, more cinematographic reflection. The largest of these mirrors evokes a cinemascope screen in which space widens and which is not only animated by the three protagonists’ desynchronized gestures inherited from burlesque cinema but also by a red kitesurfing kite. Here, painting and cinema seem to overlap in a game of doubling frames and specular images that interpenetrate one another while interpenetrating and cohabiting within Agnès Varda’s aesthetic project.



Shot 10 of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

A medium close-up shot (shot 10) shows Agnès Varda from behind while, with the help of two assistants, a small mirror with moldings is placed on a framework of crisscrossed wooden logs planted in the sand. By means of this small mirror placed on a makeshift easel, the reference to the self-portrait continues. Incidentally, because of its inclination, the mirror only fleetingly captures bits of unidentified bodies followed by a corner of gray sky, as though Agnès's face refuses to be captured in the reflection.

### **A Certain Idea of the Portrait: Veiling/Revealing**

The following shot (shot 11) marks a return to the first wooden frame from the beginning (shot 4); this installation is, in a way, the common thread of the sequence. The assistants, who have reinforced the base by means of a wooden stake planted in the sand, remain doubtful as to the solidity of the setup. Agnès regains possession of the frame and uses all her authority – voice, intonation, gestures – to convince them: the north wind is their best support; “that’s the idea ... it’s holding up, isn’t it? When the north wind is like this, it shouldn’t fall.” Left alone in the image, she is pushed around by a gust of wind, which makes her scarf take flight, transforming her into a chimeric creature with imprecise contours and in perpetual recomposition.



Shot 12 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)

A reverse-angle shot (shot 12) connected to the scarf flying in the wind, shows Agnès in a half-set shot in the foreground, with objects (ladder, bed structure) in a heap at her feet. In the background the assistants are busy carrying new mirrors. The film thus reveals what goes on behind the scenes and becomes its own making-of. The wind shakes Varda's scarf, masking and unmasking part of her face in turn. With her left hand, she adjusts the scarf to cover her face completely. Here we touch on the singular nature of the project: a documentary film that has another side to it, one that plays around with what is real and with its own staging, and assumes responsibility for both. In a joking tone, which is more than a declaration of intent, Agnès addresses the camera and the person filming her (Didier Rouget, her first assistant) and delivers her poetics of the portrait: "I think I do the thing with the scarf a little bit on purpose. But it's funny, isn't it? Because I have such high hopes that at some point it will do *that*, and that will be *all* that you'll have filmed. You see, that's my idea, my idea of the portrait; my idea of the portrait is to be in bugged mirrors and behind scarves."

In quick succession, the next two shots illustrate this idea of the portrait as a veil, as a mask. Firstly, Agnès's reflection is almost erased in a spotted mirror (shot 13) and then in a mirror lying on the sand, like a puddle of water, her face is partly covered by a scarf (shot 14). Here, as in the entire sequence, the mirror is closely linked to the theme of water, as they share the same



Shot 14 of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

characteristics: both reflect and shimmer. However, unlike Narcissus, when he faced his own reflection, here it is the sand mirror which reflects the veiled face. There is no choosing between the oval portrait being sketched here and that of Edgar Allan Poe.

Thus, by masking the features of her face, the scarf reflects Varda's desire to retain gray areas in her portrait, to erect a barrier between the public woman and the private person. "Even if we show everything, we don't reveal much," Jane Birkin already commented in *JANE B. BY AGNÈS V.*, quoted in *BEACHES OF AGNÈS*. Placed at the opening of the film, this scarf-covered face announces future reconstructions of works characterized by veiled faces, to which Varda refers, evoking her relationship with Jacques Demy, in particular, Magritte's *The Lovers*.

### **Childhood Memories or the Mirror as Proustian Madeleine**

While reflecting veiled, erased or fragmented faces, the mirrors, or at least their frame, help the filmmaker to bring out fragments of memories of her childhood in Belgium in the form of reminiscences.

Varda has her back to the sea, staring at the wooden frame whose installation opened the sequence. In order to catch her words, the camera makes a transitory movement toward her, a movement of introspection and retrospection that



Shot 17 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)

opens the story of childhood: “It reminds me of the furniture that was in my parents’ bedroom in Brussels” (shot 15). By means of a reverse-angle shot, the wooden frame reveals itself to be a memory-mirror in which a crouching Varda is reflected, as well as the cameraman filming her (shot 16). The cameraman becomes Minotaur, tracking Varda-Ariane in the tortuous labyrinth of her memory. For the filmmaker, the wooden molding becomes Proust’s Madeleine: it brings to life the memory of the furniture that once adorned the parental room: “The bed was a little like that and Mom’s wardrobe was like that ...”

The immersion into memory that becomes sonorous is achieved through the shot of a new frame (shot 17) erected on the sand. At its center is a reflection of the mirror with golden moldings placed on an easel, representing in a kind of animated painting a young man (an assistant) walking on the dune. The *mise en abyme* image combines three elements – sea, sky and earth – causing a new vertigo of perception in the viewer by means of a succession of frames-within-the-frame inside a false depth which, in the style of Magritte, seems to say, “This is not a painting.” The soundtrack gives life and substance to the filmmaker’s Proustian reminiscence with the sound of the squeaking wardrobe mixed with the sound of the waves: “but it’s not the sound, that squeaking sound of the wardrobe that I liked so much.”

A wide-angle shot (shot 18) reveals Agnès Varda to the camera, in the background, drowning in the middle of an installation of screen mirrors,



Shot 18 of *BEACHES OF AGNÈS* (Agnès Varda, 2006)

oriented differently and reflecting fragmented images. As in a kaleidoscope, three of them, in turn, reflect the refracted and fragmented image of two kite surfers pulling their sails on the beach that Varda is filming. The soundtrack, in *off*, evokes a ritual: Varda's father listening to records on the family record player: "At home, there was a crank record player. On Sundays, Dad listened to Tino Rossi and Rina Ketty."

With the emergence of childhood memories, the shots show an ever greater fragmentation, orchestrated by the installation, whose setup has been shown by the sequence up to this point. A high-angle close-up shot (shot 19) reveals a mirror on an easel capturing the bottom part of the reflectors, a mirror and a kite's canopy. Disparate and fragmented elements, a diagonally transformed skyline: everything contributes toward visual vertigo, while off-screen, Agnès's voice continues to list the musical memories of her childhood: "And during the week, Mom sometimes listened to Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*."

### **Between a List of Memories and the Fragmentation of Self-images: The Unfinished Self-portrait**

While a wide-angle shot (shot 20) shows the installation of an imposing, standing mirror on the sand by three assistants, the first notes of the allegro



Shot 20 of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)



Opening credits of BEACHES OF AGNÈS (Agnès Varda, 2006)

moderato of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* can be heard and, in *off*, provide a melancholy accompaniment to the scene: "As a child, I never heard classical music, except for that piece, whose title I liked." Facing the triptych-shaped mirror, Agnès unfolds the wings one by one, thus allowing a volley of images to cascade from this Pandora's box. The images multiply her face, which is caught up in a perpetual Cubist recomposition of reflections that reveal the incompleteness of every portrait (shots 21, 22, 23, 24, 25).

Here, fragmentation no longer has a playful dimension: in front of her image, Agnès seems to experience a feeling of strangeness and otherness. By intensifying the cinematographic effect of the scintillating mirror, the installation has led to fragmentation, which expresses Agnès's vertigo of identity and the artist's inability to connect the various aspects of her life in the form of a continuous and linear narrative, and to present her image as a composed and finished self-portrait.

Now the credits can begin to roll ...

*Translated by Naòmi Morgan*

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# **PART II**

The End of Cinema?



### 3. Announcing the End of the Film Era<sup>1</sup>

*The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* by Francesco Casetti, Columbia University Press, 2015

Dudley Andrew

#### Abstract

In what at first appears a book review of Francesco Casetti's *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, Dudley Andrew's paper provides an overview of the most general and crucial discussion that the post-cinema theme brings to the fore. Not only does he bring together several theorists who participate in the debate throughout the globalized world – Mulvey, Aumont, Bellour, Dubois, Gaudreault, Marion, Rodowick, Casetti – but Andrew also reignites this debate that could be considered a scholastic quarrel about a process whose outcome is still uncertain – the end of cinema! – if it were not a historical mutation, the practical consequences of which we experience every day. Some partners in the dialogue initiated by Andrew appear in this book with new questions.

**Keywords:** End of cinema, history, aesthetics

The titles of a great many – too many – recent film books are alarming, literally alarming. It was something of a shock when, two summers ago, I opened a package I received in the mail to discover a book with a dark cover blaring the following words in large type: *The End of Cinema?* The marketing offices at publishing houses (larger I suspect than their editorial corps) urge authors in every field to deliver headlines like this for titles, a strategy that has helped books on, say, ecology or cosmology take off in sales (like *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, or *Death by Black Hole and*

<sup>1</sup> First release in *Cultural Critique* 95 (Winter 2017): 263-285. Accessed August 16, 2017, 19:57 UTC. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/culturalcritique.95.2017.0263>.

*Other Cosmic Quandaries*). I confess to having contributed my loud voice to this trend, when, egged on by my own press's publicity manager, I let the haughty boast *What Cinema Is!* challenge anyone to find me wrong – only after purchasing the book, of course. Actually, that declarative title was how I had facetiously labeled the electronic folder where I provisionally lodged early drafts of chapters. So I was startled when told – indeed ordered – by the press's publicist that I could not change it. After all, *What Cinema Is!* would appear in Wiley-Blackwell's *Manifesto* series. I don't know if the title boosted sales, but it raised the temperature of an already overheated discourse that has taken place less as a conversation than as a barrage of manifestos. This is to say that I include myself when I charge film studies with staging something like self-immolation on the public square.

Susan Sontag lit the match with "The Decay of Cinema," her poignant 1996 article in the *New York Times Magazine*. Morbidity has followed. In a section they call "Investigation of the R.I.P. Effect," the authors of *The End of Cinema?*, André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, do a credible job – relishing the task – of laying out the spectrum of apocalyptic themes and opinions by well-known scholars: Paulo Cherchi Usai, Jacques Aumont, D.N. Rodowick, Philippe Dubois, Tom Gunning, Raymond Bellour, James Lastra. I come up briefly in his account as one of those who have lost touch with the world that young people inhabit.<sup>2</sup> Marginal to today's adolescents, is cinema's health worth fretting over? Let's face it: most of us who fret are men whose careers in film studies date to 1970s and early 80s.<sup>3</sup>

*The End of Cinema?* is provocative and genuinely entertaining; it dances at Finnegan's Wake, so to speak, spinning elaborate metaphors to lay out and adjudicate the many reactions to "a medium in crisis in the digital age" (its subtitle). Such a topic has inevitably led to brash rhetoric and sweeping categorization; in their survey Gaudreault and Marion deftly corral a bevy of spirited opinions into a three-ring arena, consisting of cine-nihilists, cine-diehards, and evolution-deniers.

Well, I am not about to deny the existence of what they rather callously call "The R.I.P. Effect." Ever since Sontag's piece, cinema has been

2 André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion cite "Cut! That's All, Folks," from the *Times* (London), August 28, 2010, 2, where Will Self declares that his children and their friends have "no sense of film's centrality; instead they are at the vortex of so much full-motion imagery on TVs, computer screens, game consoles, CCTV, 3G phones that the silver screen hovers only in their mid-distance" (Gaudreault and Marion 2015, 14).

3 Laura Mulvey is a key female scholar concerned with this issue, of course. But the stakes may indeed mainly concern a certain gender and generation. See, for example, Karen Beckman's (2015) astute and contentious discussion of the premises of my manifesto.

repeatedly laid to rest, regretted, mourned, and eulogized. Sontag felt the loss of cinephilia acutely, and with it the community of those whose lives were somehow guided by the films they saw or the conversations those films elicited in other film lovers. Twenty years of later Gaudreault and Marion report the end of an outdated technology (mechanical and chemical) as well as a social institution, while I have spoken more about the decline of the intense study of films. Someone should calculate the percentage of publications in the discipline of cinema studies that fall into the genre of the obituary. I haven't the heart to count, but it wouldn't surprise me if cinema's predicted demise had received more attention from professional films scholars than topics that used to concern us, such as early cinema, or literary adaptation, or the war film, or Orson Welles. Welles is pertinent here because in his case I did count, 2015 being his centenary. At that year's conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, just one of the 1,500 announced papers dealt with arguably America's greatest filmmaker [...] and that paper treated not his films but "The Invasion from Mars," the media event of his radio play. So much for celebrating cinema, or even studying it!<sup>4</sup> It looks as if, by "exploring the R.I.P. Effect," we may also be burying our exploration of cinema's achievements, its contribution to aesthetics and to culture.

Has interpreting and historicizing films become quaint, replaced by media sociology (a discipline in which few film scholars have doctoral training)? Didn't most of us enter this field because of films that called out for attention? We had the talent to identify fertile ones, to open them up and examine what they were made of and how they worked, as well as how they themselves opened onto broader issues of biography, industry economics, national culture, the other arts, the history of various media techniques and technologies, the status of stars, etc. The outpouring of ingenious and organized ways of treating films that irrigates our classes, our articles and our books, is trickling off.

I go too far, for we've long known that "Le cinéma est d'ailleurs une industrie," as Malraux wrote to conclude his 1940 "Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma." Indeed, for over a century cinema has been a major media industry, as well as a powerful sociological force and index, like the communications or the airlines industries. All three of these industries, by the way, were born and matured in parallel, and all three are undergoing massive mutations in the twenty-first century. They do indeed call for economic and

4 To be fair, the flagship journal of the association published an important article on Welles last year: "Orson Welles, Author of Don Quixote" (Müller 2016).

sociological analysis; and they attract straight scientific study too because of the technologies by which they function. Still, I contend that its “product” makes cinema a special kind of industry; for films are ontologically different from airplanes – that’s why the discipline that pays them attention rests in the humanities rather than in the business school or even in the social sciences. True, many are calling for the Last Rites to be administered to the humanities. Perhaps this accounts for our discipline’s turn from the interpretation of films and the history of cinema (quintessential humanities enterprises) to concerns and methods pursued elsewhere on campus. After all, universities, responding to pressures from their regents and from their anxious students and pragmatic parents, have been diverting attention and funding from the humanities to these more hardheaded schools.

Whether applying for a death certificate or demanding a death warrant, one is obliged to name the subject of concern; and so Gaudreault and Marion have issued a writ of habeas corpus, as they interrogate the identity and whereabouts of a notoriously elusive character, cinema. Known to adopt disguises, cinema is thought by some to be a phantom or mere fabrication. Effective lawyers, they probe the claims of witnesses who boldly come forth to testify to the essential character of the medium. Jacques Aumont and Raymond Bellour are so succinct that Gaudreault and Marion have their statements read into the record: cinema “must provide that absolutely essential result of the canonical apparatus: *the production of a way of looking over time*” (Aumont, 84, qtd. in Gaudreault and Marion 2015, 154). And for Bellour: “Digital technology is not enough to kill cinema [...] it does not touch its essence: the screening, the movie theater, the darkness, the silence, the viewers gathered together over a period of time” (Bellour, 19, qtd. in Gaudreault and Marion, 184). Other witnesses could provide additional testimony (my *What Cinema Is!* does so ostentatiously, citing Serge Daney concerning cinema’s capture of something of the Real, and Godard concerning public projection), but Gaudreault and Marion actually require no more than a single witness who claims to be acquainted with the essence of cinema, the being on trial, and Aumont serves them perfectly well. For next they turn to “relativists” who would dispute that cinema has anything essential about it. Christian Metz is called to testify (“Cinema is nothing more than the combination of messages which society [...] calls films” [Metz, 26, qtd. in Gaudreault and Marion, 153]) before they call themselves to the stand to deliver the nominalist retort to the realism of the cine-essentialists. “*Here, at a certain time and in a certain society and culture, is what was commonly understood to be cinema*” (Gaudreault and Marion, 153; emphasis in original). Since times and society are changing so rapidly this century, cinema is not

exactly dying; rather, as their title intimates, cinema is presumably coming to its “end,” losing its grasp on contemporary culture.

With mere terms and categories at stake, nominalists are seldom melancholy. The Renaissance “masque,” as it was called, had a brilliant hundred-year heyday before losing cultural traction in the mid-seventeenth century after which it can be said to exist only in what are literally revivals; a broader view may see the masque as a precursor of the “baroque opera,” which itself might be subsumed under the more capacious category of “musical drama.” For nominalists, forms don’t die; instead, their functions atrophy or mutate over time until different names are needed to capture the more current functions these transformed phenomena help comprise. The authors call the sequence of semi-stable but related phenomena a “series.” In the series we are concerned with, that of audiovisual entertainments, one can always treasure and study the cinema that dominated most of the twentieth century, for it genuinely served a definable role in specifiable ways; but we should let go of its impertinent attempt to remain “cinema” in the digital age. A larger term is needed to convey the diversity of functions and forms that coexist as moving images in the digital era. Accordingly, these nominalists satisfyingly supply a clever neologism, “animage,” to fuse cinema’s tried-and-true realism with animation’s vigorous and technologically novel inventiveness. A triumphant conclusion to what first appeared to be an autopsy, this offering is meant to assuage Aumont, who lamented that “what is needed is a word – a single word that would say ‘the diverse social uses of the moving image’” (Aumont, 59-60, qtd. in Gaudreault and Marion 2015, 187). Presto! We now have that word, “animage.” Time will tell if it takes hold.

Although Gaudreault and Marion feel certain that history is already eroding the protective banks of cine-essentialism, they claim their own relativism to be moderate. For they don’t believe cinema to have died; rather it has been knocked “off its pedestal,” demoted from the center of the growing “patchwork” that makes up the cultural series of moving images (107, 149). If we once floated on a stream of films, we have now been ushered into the rapids of a river of digital moving images. Thus they grant cinema at least a “provisional” existence, even if it is waning, while “complete relativists” like Francesco Casetti “[do] not hesitate to make the claim that cinema never existed” (qtd. in Gaudreault and Marion, 154). Is Casetti just mimicking André Bazin, who famously pronounced that “the cinema has not yet been invented”?<sup>5</sup> Gaudreault and Marion are far more careful in their discussion

5 Gaudreault and Marion 2015, 155. At the end of their book (184-186) these authors subject Bazin’s famous sentence to intense philological scrutiny, finding that in republishing his 1946

of Bazin's single paragraph than of Casetti's elaborate position, which they seem to know only through a couple of his articles leading up to *The Lumière Galaxy*. Think of the debate these authors might have had out both books just weeks apart (Casetti's on March 3, 2015, Gaudreault and Marion's on April 14, 2015). Their proof pages could have crossed in the mailroom. Did both books have the same copyeditor, and what opinion might she have of their stances, if not their prose?

By happenstance, Gaudreault and Marion hit on one metaphor that leads right into Casetti's main position, while resonating with his title. In the course of refuting Bellour's insistence that cinema not be conflated with myriad types of moving images that proliferate at an accelerating rate, they write: "If cinema has become a supernova (that is, all the phenomena resulting from the explosion of a star), it is because it is already dead, despite the extreme yet fleeting light it is giving off" (19-20). They let Wikipedia expediently make their point: "Seen from the earth, a supernova thus often appears to be a new star when in fact it represents the disappearance of a star."<sup>6</sup>

Casetti discovers more in *The Lumière Galaxy* than dying supernovas – far more, especially since he tunes his instruments to look not for heavenly bodies in the universe but for the energy that makes them up and that circulates among them, what he calls "experience." Certainly our cinematic experiences under the great projector of the movie theater remain prime and indelible. They are treasured and perhaps overvalued by Bellour, by me, and by many others. Yet something of that experience emanates even in the desacralized light of Vimeo and other miniaturized sources. No unified field theory can account for the movement of this cinematic energy nor for the diversity of the objects floating in the vast universe, especially when that universe will seem (and become) bigger and bigger as the century plunges like a spaceship further into the future, and at higher speed. And so to register the "red-shift effect," Casetti turns to the instruments identified in his subtitle: "Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come."

Refusing to establish cinema's (evolving) identity in its apparatus (camera), its location (theater), or its product (movie), but rather in the particular character of our cinematic experience, he organizes the book in tabular

"Myth of Total Cinema," within his collection *What Is Cinema?* he became "more intransigent and thus more idealistic" about his doubt that cinema could ever become what the name makes us believe it to be, the reproduction of reality in all its aspects, including motion.

6 Gaudreault and Marion 2015, 19-20; their citation points to the French version of Wikipedia, from which I have translated this text.

fashion rather than linear argument. This fits a phenomenon that is at once dispersed (incessant expansion and transformation) and multidimensional. This phenomenon, the cinematic experience, he takes to be governed by seven “processes,” each distinct enough to command its own chapter, headed by a key word: Relocation, Relics/Icon, Assemblage, Expansion, Hypertopia, Display, Performance. Unlike Raymond Williams’s (1976) 155 “Keywords” that comprise an alphabetically organized “vocabulary” of sedimented cultural concepts, Casetti’s “Key Words” (written as two words) are library aids that open up immense, yet distinct, bibliographies of issues and concerns. Familiar with the general contours of “what’s out there,” Casetti doesn’t justify what makes these words “key,” or what keeps their number to seven, or what orders them. This freedom allows him to search the media galaxy as if it were an electronic catalogue he can access at will, moving at hyperspeed from region to region, without one key word requiring him to move necessarily to the next. Undoubtedly one word is trump: “relocation.” In 2008 and again in 2012, Casetti effectively announced the project of his book in acclaimed essays introducing this key word (2012). Adapting it to lead off *The Lumière Galaxy*, he establishes the stakes and method. After that he and the reader can play hopscotch through the book, until reaching chapter 8, where all ideas converge in “The Persistence of Cinema in a Post-Cinematic Age.” The striking conclusion (there must be both death and transfiguration) once again draws in the “Relocation” article, giving this book more argumentative coherence than its form portends.

A master of simplification, Casetti opens each chapter by evoking a film that sounds the key for the particular key word under scrutiny. While less essential than his use of the same strategy in *The Eye of the Century* (2013), these dips into the pool of movies are refreshing. While they point enticingly toward the many others that could be adduced, Casetti, like most scholars concerned with the fate of the medium, has no reason to examine, interpret, or explore any particular text. His subject is the galaxy, if not the universe, of cinema, probed from Earth by registering redshifts and dark matter.

At the end of the introduction, many of his wonderful title’s implications unfold. Updating Marshall McLuhan’s *Gutenberg Galaxy* ([1962] 2011) with our era’s own revolutionary technology, Casetti attributes the existence of digital media not to some computer whiz but to the inventors of the Cinématographe, Auguste and Louis Lumière. Whereas the printing press created a hot culture of books that television cooled off, cinema, if Casetti’s title holds, was so hot that it exploded like a massive star extruding its magma into an array of smaller heavenly bodies, all of them twinkling with slightly different qualities of intensity and color, and in some cases

forming constellations. While the sun (cinema) may still appear the brightest and densest star in our sky, cinema no longer commands worship and no longer stands as the absolute center of our entertainment universe, for the sky is full of celestial screens of many sizes. And if films still captivate our conversations, it is because they twinkle on many kinds of screens, doing so intermittently, it must be said, and often sharing time and space with other “applications.”

Invited to open the book wherever we want, let’s follow the metaphor we’ve been chasing and go straight to chapter 4, the one named “Expansion.” This strong key word characterizes cinema as one of the mightiest capitalist enterprises of the twentieth century, France’s second leading industry in the immediate postwar years, for instance.<sup>7</sup> Now expansion should be measured not just in the number of films produced year upon year but in the innumerable enterprises that cinema draws on or has ushered into existence. Without even running down the litany of the role listed in the endless tail credits of any film made today, these include inventors and engineers, specialized optical and chemical companies, intermittent-motion machinery, agents and lawyers for patents and contracts, theater designers and management, distribution networks, reviewers and gossip columnists, specialized magazine and book publishers, and fan-clubs and ciné-clubs; and don’t forget the popcorn concession, evidently a crucial subindustry.

Among all these functions and developments, let’s focus on technological expansion, because this conceivably compromises the identity of the medium. Can something expand beyond recognition yet remain itself? A single sonnet – let’s say Shakespeare’s number 14, his “astronomy sonnet”<sup>8</sup> – can grow into a cycle of related sonnets or become part of a book of sonnets; but it can’t add or subtract lines without becoming another sort of poem. A carriage, to take an example from the industrial domain, might have first been powered by people (slaves), then by mules or dogs, oxen and horses; it was nevertheless always a carriage until a new species altogether came along, the “horseless carriage.” This expansion is normally thought to have initiated a new series labeled “motor vehicles.” With Gaudreault and Marion in mind, we must ask if the advent of the digital merely adds another variant (like sound in 1928, color in the 1930s, widescreen and 3D in the 1950s) to a

7 Expansion can also be measured by use of natural resources. Film and television account for an astounding demand of electricity in Los Angeles, and are second to the oil industry as that city’s source of pollution. See Bozak 2012, 4-5.

8 Anna Shechtman directed me to this particularly pertinent sonnet when I had chosen another at random. She deserves my thanks as well for her careful reading of this text, as does Xiao Jiwei.

recognizable phenomenon, motion pictures, or has the digital inaugurated a new series altogether, something called “new media”?

For different reasons cinema’s identity was at stake again around 1970 when Gene Youngblood wrote *Expanded Cinema*, a book that both Casetti and Aumont deploy for their own intentions. Casetti approves of the book and its title; he streamlines its trajectory into four “tendencies.” The first shows how a few gifted experimental artists from the 1950s onward began to exercise all of the medium’s registers so as to stretch what the movies had settled for, producing full-body films exuding synesthesia. The second tendency goes in the other direction, toward the ubiquitous use of films (and newly available video portapaks) in everyday situations, permitting everyone to be a film-maker. Then there is the expanded role of the audience in theater situations that include discussions and other forms of feedback. Cinema’s most pertinent growth, the fourth tendency, has been to merge with other media, particularly theatrical ones, in museum settings or elsewhere, with videotape contributing to experiences that go “beyond” cinema and television. Youngblood already understood in 1970 that the computer could erase divisions; he predicted videographic cinema, cybernetic cinema, and computer films. All these modalities are still “trending,” to use a current term; and all of them, Casetti believes, “allow cinema to stay on its path while expanding the field of possibilities and increasing the number of additional routes” (2015, 110). But in joining other media in a world of screened, kinetic phenomena, cinema risks losing touch with the experience that made it what we believe it to be when we talk about it. His book goes on to remind us how we still have cinema with us, and in abundance, even if in a different manner than held sway from 1915 to 1985.

A couple years before Casetti, Jacques Aumont brought Youngblood’s book to bear on today’s situation. In his pithy hundred-page pamphlet called *Que reste-t-il du cinéma?* (2012) he lays out opposing viewpoints straightaway. On one side stands D.N. Rodowick, who flatly denies RUSSIAN ARK the status of cinema, since it is not a “filmed” record of a situation unfolding in time but a complex string of numerical codes, most but not all of which are fluctuating transformations that a device makes within an audiovisual situation. “The digital event corresponds less to the duration and movements of the world than to the control and variation of discrete numerical elements internal to the computer’s memory and logical processes” (2007, 166). There are no “shots” in digital cinema, only “takes” that are immediately manipulable because transformed instantly into codes that invite intervention (filtering or adding light and color, if not objects) until the desired look is composited. Despite the famous 96-minute athletic fete that made RUSSIAN ARK famous,

no original shot remains, no photograms of the sort that are specific to cinema and ground it in the moment “the shot.” Technically *RUSSIAN ARK* records nothing except countless micro digital events, distinct computations that express in pixels the look of the Hermitage Museum (2007, 166-167). More accurately, they express the desired look of the museum once the indefinitely variable code has been worked through in postproduction. Digital events are not equivalent to the reliability of a photographic substrate; they are changeable, ever on the verge of evanescence, and needing to be constantly refreshed. Hence at base *RUSSIAN ARK* might be called computer animation, a stunning example of a significant artistic and social practice, but one that is distinct from cinema.

Aumont will not go this far, since watching *RUSSIAN ARK* in a theater is, for him, a cinematic experience no matter how its images were generated (2012, 16-18). But neither will he countenance the extreme view on the other side, expressed dramatically by his friend and colleague Philippe Dubois. Dubois openly hails the new era of cinema that is now

ouvert et multiple, cinéma “expanded,” sorti de ses formes et de ses cadres. Du cinéma hors la salle, hors les murs, hors “le” dispositif. Finis le noir, les sièges, le silence, la durée imposée [...]. La pellicule n’est plus le critère, ni la salle, ni l’écran unique, ni la projection, ni même les spectateurs. Oui, c’est du cinéma. Du cinéma aux mille lieux. Du cinéma hors “la Loi.” Sauvage, déréglé, proliférant bien plus que disparaissant. (Dubois, 7, qtd. in Aumont 2012, 19)

Aumont finds this risible. “Bigre!” he blurts out, meaning “idiocy.” Growth and mutation are to be expected in cinema as in any cultural phenomenon, including evolutionary leaps like sound, color, widescreen, and home viewing, but Dubois, like Youngblood before him, instead of “expanding” the definition of cinema, has “exploded” it, until the noun no longer “defines” anything. “Définir en extension, c’est ne pas définir,” where “define,” carrying something of its application in geometry, means “to determine or fix the boundaries or extent of,” to “make clear the outline or form of” (Aumont 2012, 25).<sup>9</sup> Aumont regrets the “wishful thinking” of those who celebrate cinema everywhere (on LED advertising screens, for example, or in surveillance cameras) and therefore nowhere. Just because these phenomena involve images that move, they needn’t be called “cinema.”

9 Aumont 2012, 25. The geometrical application is evident in the fourth and fifth definitions of the word “define” given in the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*.

Exasperated, he turns where I have turned, to the more temperate Casetti, whose views had already been previewed in articles. But when, two years after Aumont's book, *The Lumière Galaxy* appeared, the expanding universe of cinema had undergone in Casetti's view something far more than relocation. "A cosmic deflagration has taken place, and that star (the brilliant and immediately recognizable star shining over our heads) has exploded into a thousand suns which in turn have attracted new celestial material and formed new systems" (16).

Casetti introduces these new celestial systems and material only after insisting that we block out local light pollution so that we can look more deeply into the heavens. His purifying filter is a postulate that Aumont insists on as well: "From the moment of its birth cinema has been considered a particular form of experience" (21), and "relocation emphasizes the role of experience" (29). This is why the ontology of the digital image behind Rodowick's genetic argument does not trouble the phenomenology behind Aumont's experience of *RUSSIAN ARK*. And Rodowick has recognized this: "I still hold that the experience of the imaginary signifier is something of a psychological constant in theatrical film viewing [...]. What has persisted is a certain mode of psychological investment—a modality of desire" (22). I suspect that Aumont would find this formulation dualistic: on the one side, a "psychological constant" limited to a particular mode of viewing (the engulfing one characterized best Metz), and on the other, an ontology of the digital that surpasses what we thought we had understood about the nature of film. Aumont and Casetti make room for other modes of experience than that of the engulfing fiction film, and neither is so concerned about the material substrate of that experience.

Rodowick shows himself to be a philosopher more than a theorist of film; and this is just how he characterizes Paulo Cherchi Usai, whose stunning realization that film is an unstable, almost quicksilver object, was published under an unforgettable title: *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (2001). This book seems to have sparked Rodowick's reflections and stirred us all; for it argues that if a film is said to exist only when a projector animates still frames, then that film further decays each time it is born again, as the machinery wears away the celluloid. Paradoxically, some studios are now protecting their best 35mm prints, refusing to project them, burying them in deep storage as insurance against the likely dissolution of their video avatars. In Usai's vocabulary (actually Plato's) these prints have become "models" or "ideal images," which digital versions aim to replicate and that may need to be unspooled if the digital world really does go dark sometime in the future. Film as mummy.

So, Rodowick's philosophical view finds an unbridgeable ontological break between film and the digital media; he awaits theorists of the latter to account for digital media that are so genuinely new that film theorists need not apply, although the concepts they have accumulated will be crucial as digital forms develop (183-184). Now Aumont and Casetti are film theorists and historians to the core; they bank on a continuity of the cinematic experience no matter what its substrate. The dispute they have with each other concerns the "extent" of any "extension" beyond the normal experience. In a lapidary three-page article entitled "Cinéma étendu, cinéma détendu, cinéma prétendu" (2015), Aumont concludes that the only authentic extension of cinema is that which happens within the viewer as we extend ourselves when a film proposes new rhythms, sensations, perceptions, and ideas. Such extension in depth, with its corresponding reach into the world the film points toward, characterizes my view in *What Cinema Is!* Although neither Casetti nor Aumont mention it, Youngblood had acknowledged this dimension of expansion (41). But his book remains famous for baptizing a movement by filmmakers and audiences aiming to break free of the traditional frame, allowing images to hemorrhage from the screen out into the audience, or beyond the theater, perhaps reaching a sea of related phenomena and experiences where the particular intensity of cinema may dissolve.

Aware of the danger of dissolution, Casetti returns to the traditional experience again and again. For instance, up until the introduction of the remote zapper, a film's time regulated that of the viewer. Now we can take charge of the movement of images (pausing, fast-forwarding, randomly accessing a DVD). Similarly, for nearly a century directors worked to establish the trajectory that their immobile audience would be obliged to follow, scene after scene, a trajectory repeated at each rescreening. But look at the video-game player; hyperactive, he madly alters the trajectory of his own experience with clicks and gestures. Casetti, liberal and relaxed (*détendu*), indulges this new generation that plays while watching; and he welcomes other new modes that partake of the cinema experience even as they dilute its classic situation. His book catalogs such alternative modes, and it does so by distilling the function that cinema has classically served, since this is a key criterion that permits new media to come into definition. In a development Casetti doesn't mention but that follows his logic and predictions, "A Dutch horror film APP (Bobby Boermans, 2013) was released with a fully integrated application synced to inaudible audio marks on the film's soundtrack" to allow viewers to play with the film as they watched it. On a larger scale, Disney's "Second Screen Live Companion app" accompanied

the 2013 re-release of *THE LITTLE MERMAID* and *THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS* so that young viewers at the movie could simultaneously extend and personalize their experience (Hassoun 2016, 106). Might this become the norm? Might we soon be receiving instructions like this before the feature starts: “Don’t forget to turn *on* your cell phones”? Perhaps a section at the back of each theater will be reserved for those who opt to multitask in tandem with the movie, while other viewers sit closer to the screen, so that, in greater darkness, they can immerse themselves in the kind of rapt experience most movies continue to promise.

Nor do all such new modes thwart the traditional model. The digital may have put control of cinematic temporality in our hands, but examine Laura Mulvey’s *Death 24x a Second* (2006). She manipulates the flow of a film through random access and by retarding and repeating image movement; but she does so only to improve the kind of in-depth viewing that Aumont believes may be on its way out. Would he countenance the way the analyst controls the images being studied on a small monitor? Only as a prelude to a genuine viewing, I would guess, wherein the director’s temporality once again rules the room. After having slowed and stilled its movement, Mulvey and her students will have become so knowledgeable about a given film’s interior that their experience can then extend itself all the more into unaccustomed rhythms and emotions.

Casetti uses Mulvey’s evocative phrases (adapted from Bellour) to serve his own: the “possessive spectator” who owns the DVD and aims to “own the film” by stilling it or replaying fetishized sections at home and at will can become transformed into the “pensive spectator” who, thanks to the same digital operations, can think with and through the film, can understand it and live it at its pace and according to its discourse. The new spectator can be very much like the traditional one, Casetti claims. Aided by digital manipulation, he or she reclaims the intensity of viewing that some worry had dissipated completely (Casetti 2015, 192).

Mulvey’s methods owe much to Roland Barthes, whose slow-motion reading of literary texts, as in *S/Z*, produces not just more knowledge about textuality but a deeper reading pleasure. At the cinema, however, Barthes was less interested in the movies he saw (their textuality) than in the social experiences he commented on so memorably.<sup>10</sup> Casetti lets Barthes’s ambivalence about *cinéma* point in the two directions of our discipline. Barthes himself noted that, in French, *cinéma* refers both to the film being projected

10 See Watts (2016), which examines in detail Barthes’s famous essay “En sortant du cinéma,” available in English as “On Leaving the Theater,” in Barthes 1986, 345-49.

and to the movie theater where this occurs (Casetti 2015, 56-57). And film theorists have always had to choose which direction to follow. For the fact is that the experience of cinema can, without contradiction, be thought of as private and psychological – “the imaginary signifier” – or as social and cultural. Barthes cared more about the latter dimension, Mulvey cares about the former. But they are dimensions of a phenomenon that includes both.

If *Death 24x a Second* reminds us that the digital has by no means thwarted the quest for deeper and better private experiences with films, *The Lumiere Galaxy* aims similarly to find redemption for the movie experience when we can no longer quite say what the standards of that experience should be. Students routinely watch films on small devices; so is it proper for us professors to introduce a 35mm classroom screening as “the real thing?” Casetti is at his best in calculating the impact on any screening situation of the countless elements that have traditionally played a role or are newly doing so. Some screenings (like Tarantino’s *THE HATEFUL EIGHT* [2015] in 70mm) may advertise their rapport with what is familiar, while others (such as IMAX or direct-to-computer streaming) attract us as new ways of processing images. A screening can be a ritual (the theater treated as a “relic” or an “icon”) or it can be part of an adventure in which an “assemblage” of elements congeals at a given moment, perhaps to disappear the next, as in certain mixed media works by artists like Peter Greenaway.

Today a film theorist needs to be an anthropologist just to properly characterize the phenomenon he or she wants to interrogate; indeed anthropologists and historians have increasingly alerted us to the many modes of the film experience that we neglected in our rush to generalize about “the imaginary signifier” or “the ideological effects of the basic cinematographic apparatus.” Some counterexamples could be held up, such as the impact of the benshi on the movie experience of the Japanese. The Japanese themselves worried about this, as their “pure film movement” reminds us. Apparently in the 1920s there were a couple of distinct ways to experience cinema; you could choose, by deciding which type of theater to enter.

More recently the influential South Asian theorist Ashish Rajadhyaksha questioned the famous three looks of the cinema that undergird “the imaginary signifier” and were crucial to an earlier phase of Mulvey’s ideas (1997). In India, he noted, there exist not just the look of the camera on reality, the look of the spectators at the screen, and the look of the characters at one another; there is in addition the look of the spectators *at each other* triggered by the screen *looking back at them!* When musical numbers begin (as they generally do seven times in each Bollywood film), audiences in Mumbai are wont to recognize each other’s recognition of this moment,

occasionally even dancing in the aisles. This Bollywood case might seem to favor the cinema hall over the film-as-text, yet it actually plays into Aumont's privileging of the latter, for Rajadhyaksha has said that the web of relations that interlock the four looks of Indian cinema is fragile; the film in its (specifically engineered) temporality must keep all looks in play: "If this transaction is ever threatened with interruption, it potentially collapses."<sup>11</sup>

The case is different when, in his excellent *Signal and Noise* (2008), the trained anthropologist Brian Larkin took up the state of cinema in the Nigerian city of Kano, which has since been ruined by Boko Haram. The vibrant life within and around Kano's theaters before the terrorist era concerns him far more than the hundreds of video-films you could purchase on the streets. Although he devotes a chapter to two key video-films from the vast Nigerian corpus, he has implied that they are nearly unviewable, both because such works exist in disposable video format, hence rarely survive, and because they have been so hastily and cheaply put together that they were not made to be shown in theaters.<sup>12</sup> Nollywood video films are wont to blare advertising messages on their margins or even across the image itself. Yet cinema was sensationally alive in Kano's theaters, mainly through Hindi films that till recently came in tattered prints. Larkin reports that a reel of the following night's offering would often be spliced into the middle of the current evening's featured film, to lengthen the program and as a preview. A Western viewer would likely be outraged to see a film's trajectory hijacked by the theater owner in this way. However in Kano, interruptions are expected, if not welcomed, by a public that enjoys Bollywood movies that already interrupt themselves with songs (Gopalan 2002). A collection of numerous attractions (stars, songs, plot, landscapes, etc.), films could be said to comprise just one of the theater's attractions in Nigeria, alongside distinct food, sounds, and social interactions, including trade (Larkin 2008, 148-167).

Casetti doesn't take up such far-flung uses of movie theaters, but he does examine, like a sociologist, some of the repurposed uses of our Western model. Not only is attendance often astoundingly high at blockbusters where collective infatuation remains the goal, but new types of audiences have been lured to theaters to experience operas "Live from the Met." This may

11 Rajadhyaksha in a letter published on August 23, 2002, at [http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/commons-law\\_mail.sarai.net/2002-August/000057.html](http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/commons-law_mail.sarai.net/2002-August/000057.html).

12 Larkin 2008, 184-208. Larkin's two examples are *GLAMOUR GIRLS* (1994) from Lagos, the Southern Christian part of the country, and *WASILI* (2000) from Kano in the Islamic North. Both are well-remembered hits, yet they are difficult to access today.

seem more like the relocation of television than of film, since it involves the live streaming of theatrical events, but many elements of the traditional experience apply. Casetti is a master at ticking these off and at finding categories that encourage comparisons of a huge array of screen phenomena. He may be so welcoming of new trends in entertainment and communication because these afford him the opportunity to distinguish the various traits in play, case by case. Believing with Bazin that cinema has always been an impure medium, he feels at home in the current climate of invention and mixture, where text, social setting, *dispositif*, and spectatorial activity are ever under construction. *The Lumiere Galaxy* relishes such sorting out. Casetti eagerly takes up each new challenge coming at him (or, rather, coming at the cinema), wrangling one problem after the next until it falls into its proper slot, which is the place from which it can best be viewed, the place where we can recognize its relation both to traditional cinema and to the larger universe of media and culture that surrounds it and that it helps populate.

His lists of cinema's sites proliferates, from the "heterotopic" to the "hypertopic." I would classify the return to 3D among the former, since the obligatory glasses and the volumetrics of the image make it a parallel universe that we pay extra to descend into for a couple concentrated hours. Yet on the way home from intense 3D experiences, we are likely to encounter cinema's hypertopia as we notice animated billboards or glance at a preview to some film on our iPhones. Casetti has no doubt: the *screen* has ceded its viewers to the *display*.

Of all his claims – and for all his moderation – this to me is the most trenchant and troubling. The reflective film screen, the screen that encourages us to "reflect on" its images, exists today only as a relic. In its place he points to the varieties of information "displayed" on all sorts of glass surfaces. Where once we *explored* the film screen, now we *read* our displays, be they iPads, game consoles, or monitors of vital body functions in the hospital. Movies often muscle their way onto these displays and beg for intense viewing (rather than the glances that we usually give to monitors). But the director of the film or of the episode of a television series is no longer in charge of the way the image looks and sounds (its aspect ratio, for instance) nor certainly of the ambience of its reception. The film may be on display, but it is likely to share space with the viewer's social messages, personal reminders, and an array of icons any of which, on a single click, can supplant it with breaking public news or private solicitation.

Ever the optimist, Casetti points to the multiple uses of the display that fulfill virtually all the functions traditionally associated with the screen as

window, frame, or mirror. I say “virtually,” because for Casetti images exist independent of the support that gives them intermittent actuality in our lives. Today humans pass among innumerable displays of different sizes and importance, while images pass on and off those displays. Citizens form at best a virtual community, since individuals actualize different images from an indefinite range of possibilities. Even when clustered in a sports arena, “spectators” check iPhones or glance at the giant overhead playback display while the game takes place “before their eyes.” In this distracted era, movies on big screens serve to stabilize and focus our fragmented image life for a time (though many in the audience cannot overcome their addiction to checking their phones). It’s true that the titles of major films baptize privileged images in the culture (*THE BOURNE IDENTITY* [2002] becomes, across a decade, *THE BOURNE LEGACY* [2012]), and these produce progeny of related movies or even franchises that include previews, video games, and so on. Yet movies are themselves mobile, and before long they are shunted off onto smaller displays (on airplanes, YouTube, etc.) then slide into the reservoir pool of available images from the past. For the fact is that today “transitory spectators [...] localize transitory images” (Casetti 2015, 177).

Does such a phantasmagoria as this – this *Lumiere Galaxy* – amount to the end of cinema? This is the question that forms not only the title of Gaudreault and Marion’s book but the title of the wonderful essay that concludes *Andre Bazin’s New Media*: for the great humanist directly asked, “Is cinema mortal?” (Bazin 2014, 313-316). Nor did he flinch in replying yes, for cinema is a technological art, at the mercy of the development and obsolescence of the apparatus that gives it life. Unlike universal human artistic practices like music, which originates in our voices, or like fiction, which comes from our instinct to tell stories, or like drama, which formalizes our drive for mimesis and performance, technological arts (the cinema as well as the new media that pester it) evolve and devolve with the machinery they depend on. Where Bazin appears resigned to the outcome of a long impersonal evolution, Casetti implicates human beings whose use of technology is directly altering evolution in the process, producing a kind of global warming of images. For many consumers of films have become “prosumers.” Active viewers, especially in Asia, don’t just watch high-flying films but re-subtitle them, often in irreverent ways, or clip fetishized moments in one film to mash them up with other fetishized images that they then upload on YouTube. Some spectators now create previews to movies that will never exist; such paracinematic practices may amount to enthusiastic or caustic responses to cinema as a whole, but deploying computer technologies that attach

themselves to cinema in this way may hasten the end of the “filmocene.” Feature films, the dinosaurs that ruled over the media landscape in Bazin’s era, now coexist alongside innumerable other technical images, including some that specifically hound films and feed off them.

To return to the astronomical analogy of Casetti’s title, the variety of displays unknown half a century ago but so highly visible today constitute a cosmos of newly discovered comets, planets, dwarf stars, moons, and cosmic dust. Some of this material whirls in complex patterns around the gravitational force of the great heavenly bodies known as feature films. Their generative energy can be redistributed or amplified by these other astral phenomena. The sky today appears befuddling but it looks livelier than ever to Casetti; cinema, which once attracted all our attention, still plays a significant role, but now it does so in a relative and interactive situation. For we no longer sit beneath the silver screen gazing out at movies; post-Galileo, we realize we are hurtling through the heavens ourselves, unable to quite locate a fixed star, as we observe everything visibly shifting – and we do so from our own continuously shifting positions.

How should the film scholar behave in this century of permanent transition? Bazin concludes “Is Cinema Mortal” nonchalantly: “In the meantime,” he says, “let’s just play dodgeball; I mean, let’s go to the cinema and treat it as an art” (2014, 316). And this is how I approach – and reprove – our current academic discourse on cinema’s demise. Did makers and lovers of frescoes hang their heads when oil painting challenged their dominance in the Renaissance? And did the Old Masters give up when a younger cohort, carrying easels, took painting into *plein air*? Art historians today study all these forms with the same intensity, devotion, and air of discovery that is accorded the most contemporary installations or performance pieces. Indeed painting could be said to have gained an afterlife in the new materials, new surfaces, and new situations available to it within and beyond today’s museums.

Yet cinema may truly be different. Bazin held that it was not quite an art at all but a technological phenomenon that, while astoundingly important for our era, would go the way of its technology and likely be superseded. With this in mind the nostalgia in essays like Sontag’s seems to exude directly from the celluloid whose images are ever in a state of slow but inevitable decay. When celluloid no longer is produced, the end of cinema, should it come, would seem to differ from, say, the end of the era of fresco or the reign of the Music Hall. For drawing on walls and singing on stages are innately human activities. When the Music Hall was bested and banished by the technological medium of cinema, nostalgia came quickly to keep it alive in

a vestigial state. You can still pay to see such spectacles in ornate theaters that civic groups have lovingly preserved.

But “nostalgia isn’t what it used to be”; it is not the proper word to associate with photography, phonography, and, particularly, cinema. Films arrive with a constitutional time lag that can be drawn out or attenuated. I rue the arrival of new technologies that may abolish cinema but only when they promise to abolish its specific and literally haunting temporality, the embalming of time. And so I counter Casetti’s fascination with the ubiquity of “display” in the space of today’s media culture with the drag of “delay” that the cinema obtusely retains. Insofar as new technologies deliver presence, cinema recedes into the past to which, in a sense, it has always belonged.

By the time you read this, Ang Lee’s experiment with ultrahigh frame rates and 3D may have succeeded in rendering the trauma within *BILLY LYNN’S LONG HALFTIME WALK* not in flashbacks but as spectacularly, vividly, *immersively* present. A half century ago, another trauma from another war led Alain Resnais to the opposite tactic. He punched a hole in the screen of the present with flickering 8mm images of a young woman named Muriel. Those impoverished images, registered on a film gauge that even then was in danger of going out of fashion, affected the protagonist and, through him, anyone who watches *MURIEL* (1963) to this day. Haunting is not the same as nostalgia. Hands were wrung when singers like Mistinguett and Edith Piaf were finally escorted off the stage, victims of their own aging, as well as of a declining Music Hall. But the feelings generated each time we screen Yale’s 35mm print of *NOTORIOUS* is different; Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman are there and not there, just as they were to the audiences who saw the film in 1947. Actually, given Usai’s principle, we should say that they are a bit less there each time our gradually deteriorating print runs through the projector.

Since this piece has been a meditation on titles, let me conclude by returning to Mulvey’s: cinema has always been “death 24x a second.” But each viewing reanimates those mummified stills, giving us the illusion of motion that makes cinema “almost like life,” as well as “modernism’s photosynthesis.”<sup>13</sup> Such experiences are worth watching, rewatching, and studying. Let neither the inevitable end of projectors that run at twenty-four frames a second nor the purported end of cinema as a social form in the age of new media bring about the death of that haunting experience of mortality that this art has knowingly, and charmingly, carried within it all along.

13 “Almost Like Life” is the subtitle of Richard Suchenski’s edited volume *Hou Hsiao-Hsien* (2014). “Modernism’s Photosynthesis” is the subtitle of Garrett Stewart’s *Between Film and Screen* (1999).

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## 4. Cinema Hangs Tough<sup>1</sup>

*André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion*

### Abstract

Starting from a new formulation to the end of cinema issue – “What remains of cinema?” – Gaudreault and Marion answer: “cinema is *hanging tough*” and argue that the “resilience” of cinema depends on what we are talking about with this word both in terms of digitalization and cultural differences. They examine the different hypotheses arising in this regard from the point of view of the range of words it mobilizes (cinema, movie, moving images, and so on). Differences in naming are “highly significant” as we can observe in a Bogdanovitch-Welles dialogue or at the occasion of the Netflix controversy during the recent Cannes or Venice festivals.

**Keywords:** Digitalization, resilience, Netflix

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What remains of cinema? This is not a new question. It is even a nagging question.<sup>2</sup> One could very well suggest that it has served as the vanishing point for the entire history of this complex and powerful medium, which also boasts of being an art, the seventh art the French call it. Today there are those who maintain that the upheavals tied to digital technology are changing the state of things more radically than ever before. And yet cinema is *hanging tough*. Today it may even be going through a period of true resilience. This resilience, in our view, has a special connotation in the French context, in which the word “cinophile” carries a very particular meaning, without parallel in any other cultural space on the planet. There is indeed a quantitative difference between the love for cinema felt by the gentle citizens of France and that found in the 193 other countries in the world. In fact there may very well be a uniquely French way of loving cinema. Questions like these will run through the present text, where they will meet up with, as we shall see, questions of imperialism, hegemony and even fascism ...

The cultural uniqueness of French cinephilia deserves, first of all, to be resituated in the context of a broader uniqueness: that of cinema’s place in the “overall audiovisual magma” of the present day. This is the expression used by Stéphane Delorme in the editorial “Pourquoi le cinéma?,” found in the March 2018 issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* to describe the ragout, the Russian salad, the bouillabaisse created in the production of “so-called animated pictures” today. Or rather, should we say, of so-called “*animated pictures*,” an expression so bland, in the end, that we do not know how, in 2010, it managed to rise to the level of being part of the banner of that flagship of French cinema, the CNC ...<sup>3</sup>

We might ask ourselves, moreover, whether the addition of this impertinent expression, “animated pictures,” which here adjoins the word cinema, does not in a sense represent the symbolic death of the latter, of the cinema which never finishes dying, despite in particular the repeated assaults of all the world’s Netflixes. These, as we will see below, are much further from the *flicks* than they make out, just as, as we will also see below, they are far from being as *net* (“clear” in French – Trans.) as they make out ...

2 It is even the title of a book by Jacques Aumont, 2012: *Que reste-t-il du cinéma?*

3 France’s principal cinema institution, the Centre national de la cinématographie (CNC), changed its name in 2010 (while retaining the same acronym), to become the Centre national du cinéma *et des images animées*. The adoption of the expression “cinéma et ... images animées” (replacing the more old-fashioned term “cinématographie,” little used in French in this way today) shows that this French institution was sensitive to today’s tastes and prepared, in order to “modernize” its brand, to downplay the role of cinema in the chorus of media.

We should note in passing, and this observation is not without interest, that it is not just our dear “CINEMA” which is hanging tough. And which knows resistance, resilience and persistence. There is also the *word* itself we use in French, “CINÉMA,” which lasts and outlasts, beyond the recurring and seemingly imaginary deaths of the medium it describes. It must be said that this French word “CINÉMA” has a tough hide, as tough as the hide of cinema itself. The word has a tough hide and certainly a not particularly discreet charm, if we consider that it is at the root of a strange phenomenon which occurred around 1912 in the English speaking world of this seventh art. We refer to the way this French word “cinéma” was imported into the language of Shakespeare and Faulkner, after the borrowed term was “stripped” of the acute accent overtop the “e.”<sup>4</sup> And so “cinéma” became “cinema.” The strange thing about this story is the way a Gallicism was created to describe the “kinematic thing” in the English-speaking world despite the fact that English speakers already had a quite substantial vocabulary to describe every sort of cinematic activity: movie, film, moving pictures, motion pictures, motography, flicks, etc.

Let’s stop here for a moment and consider the *imperialistic, fascistic* and *hegemonic* dimensions of the topic introduced so enigmatically at the outset of the present discussion. Here we refer to none other than Roland Barthes! This man, whose death was re-imagined in 2015 as a murder at the center of a “semiological thriller” by Laurent Binet (entitled *The Seventh Function of Language*, [2015] 2017), had in 1961 denounced what he called “the imperialism [...] of cinema over other *visual information* technique,” as the language of the day would have it. Barthes maintained that this imperialism “could be understood historically,” but “could never be justified epistemologically” (1961, 223-225).

If we accept this observation by Barthes, we must acknowledge that things have changed considerably today. The blurring of boundaries which has given rise to what we have called the “gradual digitalization of media” (see Gaudreault and Marion 2015) appears to have had as one of its most forceful consequences that of making cinema lose its lustre and fall from the pedestal atop of which it reigned. For every more or less portable screen of the cruel world in which we live has flattened and placed on the same level the first-run film, the most ordinary television program, the most dazzling music video, the most maladroit amateur film and the most boring home movie.

4 This stripping is not absolutely necessary when a word passes from French to English. Think for example of the term “mise en scène,” which preserved its accent (a grave accent over the “e”) when it was introduced into English.

Every screen in the world or, to speak like Guillermo del Toro, all the world's "rectangles" (see Tartaglione 2018), appear to be of equal merit, unless one of them rises above the rest: the oldest of the bunch, the one which reigns over all our dear movie theaters, which today, moreover, screen not just cinema, precisely, now that they have been invaded by the non-film ...<sup>5</sup>

For those who hang tough in loving cinema, we should introduce a little flashback here. Let's go back to the 1960s, to the restaurant where Peter Bogdanovich met Orson Welles for a long interview, which has the distinction as well of having burst onto the scene in 2018 (as we will see below):

Peter Bogdanovich: Was it true, Orson, that one director told you not to call them "movies" but "motion pictures?"

Orson Welles: Ah, that was a friend of yours, Peter – that was George Cukor. . . . Nowadays, I'm afraid the word is rather chic. It's a good English word, though – "movie." How pompous it is to call them "motion pictures." I don't mind "films," though, do you?

P.B.: No, but I don't like "cinema."

O.W.: I know what you mean... In the library of Elèonora Duse's villa in a little town in Veneto, where we've been shooting just now [THE MERCHANT OF VENICE], I found an old book – written in 1915 – about how movies are made, and it refers to movie actors as "photoplayers." How about that? Photoplayers! I'm never going to call them anything else. (qtd. in Rosenbaum 1998, 23)

As we can see in this exchange between Welles and Bogdanovich, which took place in Rome, the importing of the word "CINÉMA" by English speakers did not please everyone. In any event the word cinema is flatly rejected by both Bogdanovich and Welles, who mention in turn numerous terms for describing films or cinema: cinema, motion pictures, movies and films, without overlooking indirect reference to another term, a far from insignificant one: photoplay. This word was chosen by the nascent industry among several others through a contest in the trade press in 1910 to find a name capable of giving the greatest degree of respectability to cinema.<sup>6</sup>

5 On the non-film, see Gaudreault and Marion 2015. In French, the expression "contenu alternatif" is also found. There is a greater variety of expressions in English, as Timothée Huerne describes in a recent master's thesis at the Université de Montréal (2017): "alternative content," digital broadcast cinema (D.B.C.), relay, livecasting and cinemacast. As a French translation of the English expression cinemacast, Huerne proposes to speak of *ciné-transmission*.

6 See the introduction to Grieveson 2004, 1-2. See also a recent article by Louis Pelletier, which remarks: "As we have seen, *photoplay* and *movie* both appeared in 1910 in the MHD data set,

The rejection of cinema by Welles and Bogdanovich would catch up to the two buddies nearly a half century later, at the time of the clash between the Cannes Film Festival and the video-on-demand platform Netflix in May 2018, as we will see below.

Cinema is thus *hanging tough* and even, if one will permit us this little play on words, feigning to offer *tough love*. Tough love: stern support for someone with their long-term welfare in mind, in the present case feigned. For it appears that cinema's various *milieux* today feel themselves obliged to make a show of demonstrating sympathy or at least a degree of affected, if not cynical interest, in many contemporary practices forming a part of the broad spectrum of present-day activities encompassed by the "cinematic" and the "moving image," in the context of the "great audiovisual magma" typical of our digital age. This is true at one and the same time on the expressive, medium and institutional levels, as well as on the level of what Henry Jenkins has identified as "delivery technologies," establishing, to quote Jean-Marc Larrue (2015, 46), "a clear distinction between the media themselves and [...] media content 'delivery technologies'" (Jenkins 2008).<sup>7</sup> For Jenkins, these delivery technologies are connected to these media or to aspects of some of them, which are placed in the service of kinds of content in order to propagate this content and to make it available, audible, visible, consumable, etc.

This is true, for example, of the new kinds of audiovisual productions now screened in our movie theaters (the non-film, including live broadcasts of operas but also plays, to mention just these two kinds among a boundless choice of live or delayed broadcasts). Such "performances" on movie theater screens are clearly not, strictly speaking, "films" (something that is clear if you consider one of the names used to describe them in French: the *hors-film*, or the outside-of-film, precisely), even in cases where they are not transmitted live and must be "inscribed on a support," to talk like one did in the old days, for later projection. Indeed, even though they are screened in a *movie* theater, that does not make these "non-film" productions a form of "cinema," even if some people are tempted to claim the opposite, based on a number of arguments with respect to the formal qualities of the product which appears on-screen in the end.<sup>8</sup>

but *photoplay* initially spread more rapidly. *Photoplay*, however, went into a quick decline after its 1916-17 peak" (2018, 23).

7 This book was published in a French edition in 2013 by Armand Colin under the title *La culture de la convergence*, where "delivery technologies" is translated as "technologies de fourniture" ("supply technologies"), which for us is not as meaningful, at least with respect to our discussion here.

8 These operas, particularly those of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, are always advertised as mere satellite "transmissions" of an on-stage performance in New York, and there is nothing in

Questions around the *delivery technologies* of media content will take up a significant part of the present discussion, particularly by viewing them through what we might call the distribution crisis or quarrel (tied up with, among other things, debates around whether films must pass through the “movie theater”). The controversy that has arisen recently between Netflix and the Cannes Film Festival is something like the visible, media tip of this quarrel, echoing the quarrel between *dispositifs* described by Raymond Bellour (2012). The visible tip, because in a more radical and fundamental sense the submerged part of the iceberg here is the question of yet another identity crisis of the means of expression which is trying to remain cinema. For if cinema is offering feigned tough love, it is also, as an outmoded media institution, widely offered feigned tough love in return by major competitors whose strength and institutionalization were precipitated by the digital. At the same time, this crisis and feigned tough love also raise the question of naming; as we are about to see, these names continue to be highly significant.

### The Lessons of Naming

We must never forget that naming a medium such as cinema is never an inconsequential task, in that it always carries with it the “baggage” of an at least implicit definition of the medium. It is not inconsequential to choose “*vues animées*,” “motion picture” or “moving images.” Or even to speak of “film art” instead of “cinematic art.” Every “calling card” a medium may present, both synchronically and diachronically, carries with it an undoubtedly teleological and even ideological choice of identity. Recall that Barthes (1977), once again, did not hesitate to denounce language’s fascist dimension. By deciding on a name for a medium, we more or less choose to highlight one constituent element among others identified by the institutional authority that has been built up around this medium. It is understood that the identity of a medium is always a homeostasis, a singular yet temporary federation of pre-existing cultural series, as moreover we demonstrated a dozen or so years ago (Gaudreault and Marion 2002, 2006). This is an evolving and at the same time consensual federation, meaning one in tune with the social uses of several cultural series.

the promotional material to indicate that a production crew, headed up by a “putter into images,” is at work with a battery of movie cameras, and that what the viewer will see is not a neutral transmission of a scheduled opera. See in particular Gaudreault 2014; see also Gaudreault and Marion 2015.

To shed some light on the matter, we might digress and look at a remote language, one full of imagery. In Chinese, “comics” are *lian huan hua*, or “linked images,” and “cinema” was at first expressed as *xi yang ying xi*, meaning “Western shadow plays.” One also said *huo dong ying xi*, meaning “moving shadow plays,” and *dian guang ying xi*, or “electric light shadow plays.” What won out in the end was a shortened variation of the latter expression, *dian ying*, or “electric shadows.” In other words, while China imported the apparatus and its techniques, it left the device’s “baptismal” name (cinématographe, kinetograph, Bioskop, etc.) at the border in order to inscribe “animated pictures” in a properly “local” cultural series: Chinese shadow plays (or, as they are called in China, *zhong guo ying xi*). Indeed these images were projected onto very familiar screens which until that date had been home to shadows which may have been strongly Chinese, but were not at all electric. This is a screen, or perhaps a “rectangle,” in the words of del Toro, which we will discuss below.

It is not just the Chinese, however, who have hesitated when choosing a name for the new apparatus, and it is not just the Chinese also who have come up with names closely linked to pre-existing cultural series. In fact when the French spoke of “*vues animées*” in the early twentieth century, they too were inscribing cinema in a pre-existing cultural series, that of *light shows*. The same is true of English, with “animated views.” As for the hesitation in Chinese between *xi yang ying xi*, *huo dong ying xi*, and *dian guang ying xi*, Westerners cannot preach, when you consider that even Orson Welles, as late as the 1960s, was still wondering how best to name cinema! From one point of view, we might say that in the end names have a “crisis engendering” quality: once a name highlights and brings out a parameter of a medium, or gives precedence to one of its constituent cultural series, this works in a sense to *frustrate* the other elements (or series) not chosen for the medium’s name. It also serves to highlight some connotations and not others.

With these preliminary thoughts in mind, let’s return to the use of the word “cinema” itself in the English-speaking world. First of all, we must acknowledge that this borrowing consists first of all in that of the lexical unit itself: once imported into the English idiom, the word cinema resembles like a sibling the word from which it was derived, but this is not necessarily true of the meaning the word would come to take on. What is more, from 1912 to 2019 the English word “cinema” followed its own path in the English-speaking world, a different path than that of the word *cinéma* in French. In fact each of these lexical units had, in each language, its own avatars, ups and downs and distortions. This means that we have found ourselves, a

hundred and some odd years later, in the presence of two almost identical lexical units (differing only by the sharp accent on the “e”) in two different languages, but which nevertheless carry with them various connotations which are resolutely specific to each, making communication between the two languages difficult.

### Cinema’s Distinction (A Very Select Cinema!)

When we discuss this topic with English-speaking colleagues, it becomes fairly clear that for them the word cinema suggests something more, something bigger, something grander than the word film. Bigger than the word film, used not in the sense of an individual work (as in “a film by Martin Scorsese”), but rather in the sense of cinematic works as a whole (as in the title of the first English-language edition of the Rudolph Arnheim book *Film* in 1933. This is also true of French, for example in an expression such as “histoire du film français,” which one sees from time to time but which is relatively rare compared to “histoire du cinéma français.”<sup>9</sup>

The English word cinema, for its part, suggests something which transcends the word film and, it would seem, other terms with the same status: movie, moving pictures, motion picture, flicks, etc. If we accept that the English word cinema carries with it a kind of all-encompassing strangeness for English speakers who prefer film, movies or even motion pictures, we might wonder whether the identity crises which *cinéma* as an institution is experiencing in the French-speaking world (with all its variations on the level of the medium, its expressive qualities, film production, distribution and consumption, etc.) are not, therefore, experienced less virulently in the English-speaking world.

In fact we might imagine that the English word cinema has a slightly exotic connotation, and even that this might have as a consequence that its canonical rules are taken less seriously, such as that of the supposed necessity of consuming this cultural product in the ceremonial space of the movie theater, called a *cinéma* in French, with a captive audience. Once English speakers start to use the words film or movie to speak of cinema, we can suppose that this necessarily indicates, unlike the French, a kind of crossover, a degree of transmedial circulation, or a way of recognizing the multiplatform plasticity of the “cinematic,” in a sense, or even of legitimizing this.

9 Or in a “festival of films on art,” such as the one in Montreal (FIFA). See: <https://www.artfifa.com/en>.

What we have just suggested with respect to the varying connotations associated with the way the “kinematic phenomenon” is named in English is perhaps no more than a series of suppositions, and that at a minimum some nuance is required. But recall what Susan Sontag wrote nearly a quarter of a century ago about cinema and cinephilia:

The conditions of paying attention in a domestic space are radically disrespectful of film. [...] To be kidnapped, you have to be in a movie theater, seated in the dark among anonymous strangers. [...] If cinephilia is dead, then movies are dead too. [...] If cinema can be resurrected, it will only be through the birth of a new kind of cine-love. (1996, n.p.)

It is interesting to note that Sontag passes from film (“disrespectful of film”) to movies (“then movies are dead too”) to cinema (“if cinema can be resurrected”): cinema, then, seems to be a kind of final stage in Sontag’s argument, its high point, as if the privileged future of film will have to be carried out through the cinema of cinephilia. By associating it in this way with the happy few, with the cinephiles – if we take Sontag’s thoughts where they lead us – the word cinema appears at first sight to have little compatibility with the flexibility and transmedial tolerance we just mentioned, in tune with the flexibility of the names (movies, motion pictures, etc.) found in the English-speaking world. But a closer look shows that this may only be a seemingly opposite meaning. For we could follow through on our thinking and consider that, given the cultural pragmatism which characterizes them, English speakers (perhaps we should say instead “Americans?”) accept both sides of the “cinema” phenomenon:

- on the one hand, there is the expressive principle of filmic images and moving pictures, which can be distributed and consumed in multiple ways and by means of a variety of delivery technologies. And this is further amplified by the great plasticity of the digital. We could add that here again we find the concrete prosaic side of English speakers: does the expression “moving images” evoke something like “getting your hands dirty” as a way of refuting the elitist and sense of the word cinema, looking down from on high?
- on the other hand, precisely, and on the other side of the bundle of media that is cinema, there is the “cinema of distinction,” whose definition is more restrictive and more elitist, in keeping with the highly debated canonical definition of cinema in the French-speaking world (and the source of the controversy at the Cannes Film Festival in particular) as a screening in a movie theater for an audience both captive and passive.

If we are concerned with the former – moving images and the filmic – movie theaters would be just one possible application for viewing a film. But if we put ourselves in the shoes of the defenders of the “cinema” position, more restrictive conditions apply, similar to those of the canonical cinema system. Depending on whether one is in camp A or camp B, the idea of crisis is considerably different. In camp A, everything is fine and dandy and the cinema is gaining ground, as Philippe Dubois argues (Biserna, Dubois, and Monvoisin 2010). In camp B, on the other hand, there are plenty of reasons to be worried... As we shall see, this tension strangely resembles that more or less implicitly behind the crisis pitting Netflix and Cannes against each other.

### Orson and His Posthumous Misadventures

Creating a Gallicism to describe the “kinematic thing” was thus not always unanimously endorsed, as seen in the exchange between Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich. Each of these figures was in the headlines in 2018 because of an immense brou-ha-ha that occurred in the heart of the “cinema” industry. We refer to the unfortunate event at the Cannes Film Festival, where Netflix hurriedly withdrew Welles’s final film, *THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WIND*, which had never been completed before being finished by the good graces of Bogdanovich himself (thanks moreover to coin from Netflix ...). *The film was supposed to launch at Cannes in a world premiere*. What Welles and Bogdanovich were subjected to was thus a true outrage. They were the collateral victims of this war between two conceptions of what cinema *should* henceforth be: a new, multiplatform conception, according to which watching a film in a movie theater is, in the end, only one way among others of seeing it (a cinema app), in a sense; and a more “traditional” conception, according to which multiplatform viewing is accepted, yes, as long as the movie-theater presentation is *preserved, protected, privileged, etc.*

This war<sup>10</sup> recently brought into conflict champions of each of these camps: in the left corner, Netflix (represented here by Ted Sarandos, chief content officer for the famous round-the-clock broadcasting platform), and in the right corner, the no less famous Cannes Film Festival (represented here by Thierry Frémaux, the delegate general of the festival, which is said to

<sup>10</sup> And it is a real war, if we are to believe the journalists who are constantly using the metaphor. See in particular: [https://www.challenges.fr/cinema/pourquoi-la-guerre-est-declaree-entre-netflix-et-le-festival-de-cannes\\_580389](https://www.challenges.fr/cinema/pourquoi-la-guerre-est-declaree-entre-netflix-et-le-festival-de-cannes_580389).

receive more media coverage than any other film festival in the world<sup>11</sup>). In this war with Cannes, Netflix decided, for the May 2018 edition of the festival, to boycott the event because of its decision to exclude from competition any film not intended to be distributed to movie theaters. Netflix thus packed up its marbles and went home, withdrawing all its films from Cannes, even those being shown outside competition: “The festival has chosen to celebrate distribution rather than the art of cinema,” declared Sarandos, who said that he was thinking of “the future,” while Cannes, he claimed, was “stuck in film history.”<sup>12</sup> You would think the world had been turned upside down, with Netflix, through Sarandos, championing cinematic art and creation. Netflix, the king of continuous streaming and multiplatform circulation. It is such a powerful force that some commentators have not hesitated to brandish the symbolic date of a new era in film history: “ANN,” for Ante Netflix Natum ...

But is it truly *cinema* history which is in question here? We should write instead “in the history of *moving images*,” or of “*images in movement*” ... In order to avoid saying too bluntly that Netflix is still *cinema*. And yet ... who knows if streaming platforms will not soon be seen as one of the last refuges of cinema itself? Perhaps public opinion will think this. In any event, one must not forget the words of Christian Metz, who demonstrated quite well that it is not our prerogative to decide what is and what is not cinema: “cinema is nothing more than the combination of messages which society calls ‘cinematic’ – or which it calls ‘films’” ([1971] 1974, 26).

## Netflix, or the Paradoxical Memory of “Flicks”

In this sense, going back to the “naming” question confirms this idea of a topsy-turvy world. And, while we’re at it, let’s look at the label “Netflix” itself. The name of this California-based firm seems to us to fit perfectly with our argument. Netflix is a kind of portmanteau word in which we see, on the one hand, a direct reference to the “Net,” without which the company would surely not be what it is, and on the other hand the word “flix,” at first glance more unexpected. As mentioned above, flicks (or flickers) is a

11 It should be noted that Frémaux is also president of the Frères Lumière association and director of the Institut Lumière in Lyon, which will be important to our remarks below.

12 See <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/04/netflix-not-going-to-cannes-ted-sarandos> and <https://newsbeezer.com/portugaleng/netflix-arguments-and-feminist-pressures-set-the-tone-for-the-cannes-film-festival-07-05-2018-illustrated/>.

term used to describe the film medium. The term is metonymic, because it refers to a singular quality of projecting images on film: the flickering or blinking of the image, or if one prefers the traces left by the instability of the image, whose luminosity periodically wavers – a little like television, in fact. Reading Lillian Gish's memoirs, we learn that the word "flickers" was in use in the early 1910s. The actress reports that D.W. Griffith threw a fit when one of his actresses or extras said, without a second thought, that she was working in the "flickers": "Never let me hear that word again in this studio," Griffith is said to have remarked, continuing:

Just remember, you're no longer working in some second-rate theatrical company. What we do here today will be seen tomorrow by people all over America – people all over the world! Just remember that the next time you go before the camera. (1969, 76)

We must not forget that the word flickers carries with it, in the view of some, a whiff of scorn for cinema, that "entertainment for serfs." Flickering was seen as a defect, an imperfection of the moving image, or if one prefers a noise in the communication. We know that in communication theory, however, while noise is everything that impedes communication, it is also what enables artistic expression. Without noise there is no art! This is what happens with cinephilia, but it is also what happens in the world of silver gelatin purists, who resist the supposedly clinical and sterile smoothing out of the digital, with its legendary coldness. This, moreover, is the view of someone such as the American filmmaker Babette Mangolte, who rails that "the lack of a shutter is what lies at the heart of the difference between the digital and silver gelatin film stock. No more flicker. No more heartbeat" (2004, 419).

For Mangolte, then, the "noise" of flicker lies at the heart of the movement generated by the images filing past. This is the filmic's living palpitation. Mangolte does not hesitate, moreover, to compare flicker to a heartbeat. For her, the "interference" of flickering is in a sense the very symbol of resistance to the digital. As we can see, the connotations of the word flick are loaded, and similar to the distinction we mentioned above with respect to the Gallicism cinema. By bringing together these two senses with such different connotations (the sense "net" refers to the digital, and the sense "flick," rather, is a reference to human palpitation, to cinematic art and distinction), Netflix appears to want to indicate a vocation, a mission: that of being capable of doing the splits and championing cinematic excellence by using the digital as a springboard and megaphone.

A quick glance at the company's first logo (1998-2000) confirms this interpretation.<sup>13</sup> There we see an old piece of film unspooling from between the words "net" and "flix," naming the firm. We know the extent to which celluloid, almost as much as the movie theater screening, was for a long time a powerful ingredient of canonical cinema. This "mission" (to establish itself as the agent of the living filmic on the Net, to be the "strong arm" of the *digitized* filmic), which to our mind is seen in the name Netflix, is a good match with Sarandos's triumphant remarks, which hold that "film art" is now in the hands of Netflix. The paradoxical and vaunted identity of the Netflix paradox has also been confirmed more than once by film critics: "Netflix is the savior of highbrow cinema," reads the headline of an article by Lorenzo Codelli about the Venice film festival. In this article he quotes from a letter by Gilles Jacobs dating from the start of the event in Venice. He means that authors have no need of movie-theater distribution or of the canonical definition of cinema in order to *hang tough* as fully fledged authors. Even better, looking back we can agree with Natalia Aspesi, who writes that "with streaming, Fellini's last film would have found the money." In this respect, the conclusion of Codelli's article appears to us to be especially edifying:

The complete freedom that Welles, Cuarón and the Coen brothers had, who can give you that today? Not only in terms of money. I refer to the kind of creative freedom which intoxicated Welles in Hollywood at first. Freedom from the worry of being dared to rid oneself of all pre-established rules. Neither Cuarón nor the Coen brothers, nor the winners of an Oscar or a Palme d'Or, would succeed in the classical cinema milieu. That Netflix has made distribution immaterial to the all-powerful may appear to be a paradoxical farce of destiny. I don't envy filmmakers, film festival directors or movie-goers in rickety traditional movie theatres, in Italy or elsewhere. Scattered, shocked, unnerved, disconcerted at what's happening. And it is happening, hoo boy, at the speed at which, in the masterpiece by the Coens, the singing cowboy Buster Scruggs (Tim Blake Nelson [in *THE BALLAD OF BUSTER SCRUGGS*]) goes to heaven! (2018, 10)

In response to Frémaux – whom Codelli nicknames Scaramouche after the Cannes crisis – Guillermo del Toro, president of the 2018 Venice Film

13 The two logos in question can be found at: <https://me.me/i/net-flix-com-first-logo-used-from-1997-to-2000-netflix-831f23c1395642a7893bcfa43b051829>.

Festival jury and a filmmaker not necessarily beholden to Netflix, insisted on returning to the fundamentals of the content and know-how of filmmaking:

I think that films are judged by what exists in that rectangle. Everything else that exists outside we can discuss and have an opinion on. But the quality of filmmaking and storytelling is what we will occupy ourselves with; it's only in that rectangle that we allow life to exist in cinema. (See Tartaglione 2018)

This argument in favor of a kind of cinematic know-how is undoubtedly tied up with the “getting your hands dirty” aspect which, in our view, characterizes the English-language film vocabulary. At the same time, by advocating a return to the content of the rectangle (and not to that of screens, which for him is perhaps a term with too many connotations), del Toro may have been wanting to confirm the spirit of Netflix: the interface and delivery terminal are not important. What counts is what happens on the screen interface (whatever that screen may be).

Here we find the idea we have developed about the “who cares” cinema crowd: it does not matter how one defines this media machine, as long as it produces interesting film stories. Del Toro insists, moreover, on the continuity he believes is being carried out by Netflix: “Netflix is not the end of cinema, it's the continuation of a process that began a century ago.”<sup>14</sup>

One thing is certain, and that is that the “cinema” industry is in tumult, and the advent of the digital is still producing gigantic shock waves, even in the field of cinema studies. Think, for example, of the fully justified complaint by some people in the field, including Jacques Aumont, who here points out an unfortunate linguistic void:

What we lack in the end, to put this relatively simple situation simply [he is referring to the fact that cinema is no longer the only form of moving images], is a word – a single word which would say “diverse social uses of moving images.” (2012, 59-60)

In fact the French word *cinéma* refers to only one of the “social uses” of the above-named *moving images* (which include television, video, holography, the Internet, opera transmissions in so-called movie theaters, museum

14 Quoted by the France-Press news agency. See: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1122683/mostra-venise-alfonso-cuaron-recoit-lion-or-film-roma>.

installations, performances with projection, etc.). In any event, the French word *cinéma* is more evocative, more appealing and much more glamorous than the expression *images en mouvement*. We might even say that it has a touch of poetry and brings with it a hint of enchantment and mystery. This is even truer, it appears to us, for English speakers who employ the Gallicism *cinema*, a highly abstract and evocative term, whose status as a word from a borrowed language is keenly felt. In any event, it is clear that this glamorous element of the French word *cinéma* is at the root of its importation and implantation in the English language in the 1910s.

*Translated by Timothy Barnard*

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## About the Authors

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## 5. Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* or Cinema Surpasses Itself

Céline Scemama

### Abstract

This text, which constitutes the introduction to Céline Scemama's book *Histoire(s) du cinéma de Jean-Luc Godard: La force faible d'un art*, is a double tribute: to Céline, who scrupulously deciphered the multiple artistic references contained in Godard's masterpiece and to JLG who, from the start of his oeuvre to *LIVRE D'IMAGES* (2018), sought in the obstinate invention of a post-cinema the very essence of this art. Halfway between Montaigne's essay and Rembrandt's self-portrait, *HISTOIRE(S) DU CINEMA* is also halfway between the origin of cinema and its destiny as post-art.

**Keywords:** History, cinema, self-portrait

The prejudice is dryly and violently expressed as follows: Godard is impossible to comprehend, he actually has nothing to say, it's all just blowing in the wind.

The public recognized and crowned Godard as king of the New Wave, but it was perhaps because his films still bore the traces and the visible cannons of the Old Wave. What is disturbing about his last work is the absence of stitching on the fabric and of main (filmic) threads.<sup>1</sup> More and more words, more and more images. But also more and more mystery. By positioning himself on the fringe of all possible categories, Godard exposes himself to different kinds of criticism: he is a ghost speaking an unknown language, an impostor illuminated by his media aura, or a living legend that one hardly dares to contradict. Filmic experiments, self-portraits, film concepts ... Godard is accused of complicating his discourse. It is true that he himself

1 In the French source text: "fil(m) conducteur." *Editorial note.*

gives his detractors a stick to hit him with: “Why make it simple when you can make it complicated?,”<sup>2</sup> he writes on the screen of HISTOIRE(S).

After the screening of a Godard film, it is difficult to make the connection between the floods of images, sounds and words, or to link them to a possible subject. Some viewers are afraid of misunderstanding, think they are not up to the task and overestimate his reasoning, while others suspect him of pretending to be a virtuoso thinker, while being no more than an empty shell. That is why he is sometimes a cult object and sometimes demonized. We tend to think that Godard should be taken seriously, or that he takes himself seriously. The fact is, however, that we mistake the object: it is not about the filmmaker and his sometimes dogmatic discourse on the world, it is always and only about cinema. What Godard takes seriously is cinema and more generally the question of image in a world where we learn to read and write, but never to see.

The very title, HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA<sup>3</sup> with its plural “s” is already an enigma and the subject of a misinterpretation. HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA and not “les Histoire(s) du cinéma:” the plural in the title is only visual. The title suggests that the film is about cinema, and yet it is about all the (hi)stories: it is not a history of cinema, but about the Histoire(s) or (hi)stories told by cinema. The article in “du” (“of the”) makes the title even more equivocal: our understanding is that the object of the film is to tell the story of cinema, but cinema is firstly the subject. It is not Godard who tells us the history of cinema because *the only storyteller is cinema*. And yet, the filmmaker is omnipresent in his works, although he does not expose himself in his own name: the filmmaker has been replaced by the cinema. From Descartes’s “cogito ergo sum” to Godard’s “cogito ergo video,” the transformation is not a rhetorical one: he actually thinks what he sees. In other words, he *thinks*, i.e., he *sees*. Godard’s thoughts do not exist outside the images that meet on the screen.

Before HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA, Godard’s films, however marginal, could always be generically identified: for example, JLG/JLG, AUTO PORTRAIT DE DÉCEMBRE / SELF-PORTRAIT IN DECEMBER (1994) or FOR EVER MOZART (1996) could be called self-portraits or film experiments. Here, we are dealing with something completely new: neither fiction nor documentary nor

2 The quotation is from a cartoon, LES SHADOKS, which was popular in France in the late 1960s. It was the motto of a group of funny, plump and anthropomorphic birds, perched on very thin legs, who were nasty and stupid, and spent their time building complicated and useless machines. *Editorial note*.

3 *Translator’s note*: in French, “histoire” means both story and history; the “s” in the plural “histoires” is silent. The closest equivalent to the original title was *Cinema (hi)story/ies*.

experimental film. HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA is not really linked to any place: neither film location nor screening space. HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA does not fall into any category: it is a wandering work of art.

The author is usually behind the camera. Not here. Or not really. Almost all the images come from somewhere else. Except for a few quotations read by Alain Cuny, Sabine Azema, Julie Delpy or Juliette Binoche, the interview with Daney, and lastly, a few images of Godard himself.

With its chapters, film is similar to books, but it is not a book. Two book series complete the film: the *Livres blancs* (or *White books*) from Gallimard's White Collection and the *Livrets bleus* (or *Blue booklets*) which accompany the discs of the film's complete soundtrack.

Since Godard could not show everything, why this particular length? Why four hours and twenty-five minutes, and not one hour and thirty minutes or two hours, i.e., a more traditional format? The length of the film puts it in the category of monumental works.

This monument-work does not tell a story, it makes history. History is usually associated with a succession of dates. In HISTOIRE(S), however, periods of history have been dispersed, and the only dates between 1940 and 1944 that are actually mentioned, perpetually return in incantatory mode. Godard's view of the twentieth century is articulated and buttressed across these years. The repetition provides emphasis in the film by reminding, rejecting and commemorating at the same time. The repetition in the work obliges the analyst to return to certain figures, fragments of sentences, images and recurring sounds to grasp the convolutions of these (hi)stories unleashed by the jolts and spasms of a past which has been buried alive.

The fact that the film is a-chronological does not prevent it from finding an arrangement and from putting together its vision of history. Any chronological expectation is already a misunderstanding. The historian's work is no different from his formal research: the principles of dispersion and coming together are not distinct from his theses on history. These are the gestures by which Godard fashions a work: a work of history.

This unclassifiable work resists any convenient summary, any systematization in one overview. The dispersion assumed by the filmmaker's gesture must not be circumvented but, on the contrary, confronted. The mode of approximation, collision, counterpoint, friction, superimposition, intertwining and confusion begins with the genesis of the work, with its heterogeneous material awaiting questioning, i.e., to come together. What posture and what gaze should one adopt to look at an oeuvre for which our analytical tools are inadequate or insufficient, and how should we talk about it?

Music, photography, painting, engraving, sculpture, literature, archives, philosophy, poetry, discourses, history and ... cinema. Godard added an "s" to his HISTOIRE(S), but not to be trendy. With its scintillating array of references, the work sometimes seems to push the spectator toward some sort of concentrated, active and erudite attention. Even the most attentive viewers will quickly be knocked over by a mighty wind which unremittingly dislocates bits of history and culture in a kaleidoscope of permanent electro-shocks. We are tempted to try and organize this abundant and fragmented material and to draw immediate conclusions from it; similarly, we are tempted to channel this flow of incessant and apparently chaotic movements, these layers of overlapping sounds and words with their continuous interferences and flickering. The eye and ear can never rest on anything stable, everything is always immediately transformed, and within such a short period of time that it is often impossible to grasp the object of this transformation. If nothing can be done in a truly autonomous way: the text *on its own*, the images *on their own*, the soundtrack *on its own*, and if *only* the film can bring everything together, it finds no harmony, however: its order remains disorder and dissonance.

However, some images, some notes or some words do escape the flood of HISTOIRE(S) and are suspended for our attention for the duration of a mirage. But outside the deluge from which they were taken, they persist for a moment in a void and then vanish, evaporate and disappear. During the time it took them to disappear, countless ocular and auditory cataclysms occurred on-screen that we saw and heard, almost in spite of ourselves, but of which there are only traces left, like a persistence of vision. The flow of images, sounds, spoken words, written words and words read out, compels the most attentive of us to a form of *wandering attention* that accepts the dispersion as a form of contemplation. Paradoxically, Godard's work imposes a violent contemplation in which all the elements of the composition explode and yet offer unity within the explosion. How can we let ourselves be carried away by a movement that is always contradictory, violent, pulling in all directions, in which, every second, new constellations appear and then disperse into a thousand shards that escape our senses, which have become impotent by the trial of such a dislocation? The moments of contemplation offered to us are no different from short circuits and shocks that never leave any respite. Most often, we do not even have time to discern what can be found in a single shot. One must accept to let the images escape at the same time they appear, like shooting stars.

Faced with this convulsive mechanism, we can stand at a distance for an overview punctuated by a detailed analysis of certain striking stylistic

figures or surprising proposals. This is a possibility, but the risk is remaining outside the work and deliberately missing what makes it a true work on history. The risk is in fact to separate what Godard takes care to combine: the work of the filmmaker/historian. On the contrary, we can insist on our analysis never distinguishing the work of the artist from that of the historian. This means never extracting words and sounds from the images. The position we have chosen as our own is one of analysis, with the vocation to respect things as they are exposed in various places without attempting to manipulate them: that is, without wanting them to say what we have more or less decided to hear before listening and looking with the special attention that the work requires. We leave it to the filmmaker/historian to manipulate the poetic matter, which is also his historical matter. As for us, we will make do with studying his theses on history, which, moreover, is no small challenge.

What does this mean in practice? It is not to comment on a passage in evocation mode from the outside, but to immerse oneself in the details of each crystallization of atoms, each constellation. It also means starting to disperse the objects around the screen, i.e., managing to spread the material of the work without decomposing it entirely. It is a very acrobatic posture, let's admit it, to prolong the dispersion of a work for that which one is studying. It is scarcely enough to decipher the infinite fabric of references that crosses the film. It is not our intention to produce thoughts *on* the HISTOIRE(S), but to try thinking along *with* it (them).

*Thinking* along with, first of all means knowing how to surrender to the flows of associations. But nothing is simple, because it also means knowing how to interrupt the flow through which the association acquires its beauty and all its scope. This becomes even more complicated because it is not so much a question of stopping the flow of associations by freezing the image but of suspending the very moment of the connection by means of which the "speech of sight" happens, i.e., the thought behind the film. "Baudelaire, describing a shock experience, talks about a 'conscience-endowed kaleidoscope'" (Benjamin 2002, 361). To capture the moment when an idea occurs on the screen like a spark, we will not be able to avoid this shock experience.

Godard, on the other hand, questions the images. It is a matter of questioning *with him*, and not in his stead, the implication of this or that image on another image, the association with a particular instrument, a certain melody, sentence, word, or voice ... However, the details of each arrangement and their mode of appearance are not immediately clear to us; perhaps we are even troubled. A multitude of details appear and further deepen the abyss of interferences and correspondences deployed by the film, this "form

that thinks." On the one hand, images and sounds must be allowed to flow without attempting to retain them. On the other hand, contrarily, there must be reconsiderations of the whole, of a specific chapter, a particular constellation, and especially of certain link shots.

Images reflect one another, fragment, mix, transform, repeat, collide, fuse, superimpose, duplicate, multiply into infinity like a thousand mirror fragments or a constellation of stars. These swirling images, words and sounds disintegrate or intertwine in a process that escapes a linear arrangement. The flashes that punctuate history sometimes form a constellation. It explodes in turn, disperses; then in another arrangement, elsewhere, it becomes something different. One must try to capture the movements, the to and fro, the shocks or the repetitions that run through the entire oeuvre. This phenomenon of fits and starts is conveyed to the image through flashes, superimpositions, iris effects, shutters, fade in-fade-outs, quick fades, repetitions ... where images, words and sounds meet. Those who want to see, that is to say to understand, will have to accept this torsion which consists in resisting the desire to put in order, to classify, to globalize. It is thus not a very comfortable position to have to focus one's attention to such an extent, only to lose immediately what enlightened us for the duration of the spark. Maybe it is because Godard's experience of loss is itself part of his vision of history.

All the elements that make up the HISTOIRE(S) are removed from their context; they have lost their place. All documents constitute the test of time. Godard composes a history film with what History is made of: inventions, words, wars, paintings, assassinations, births, films, poetry, novels, dictators, texts, engravings, monuments, speeches, betrayals, lies, machines, filmed, narrated, forgotten events ... "Things exist, why manipulate them," said Rossellini (1984, 54; qtd. in 3a, 25'28). Godard does not invent historical matter, but nevertheless everything is different, transformed, manipulated: "Without changing anything, let everything be different," says Bresson (1975, 136; qtd. at the very beginning (1a), but transformed as follows by Godard: "Change nothing, so that everything is different"). This paradox governs the work of the historian. For the film historian, this work is essentially based on editing, and editing is, in the literal sense, a matter of manipulation. But what kind of manipulation are we talking about here? Is it the one that deceives, that "makes people believe" and "makes the images say" what they don't say? This manipulation implies deception that conceals the transformation process as skillfully as possible. Things are manipulated, archi-manipulated, but the transformation process is far from being camouflaged; on the contrary, it is in pole position. Godard manipulates words, images and sounds, and by means

of substitution, the driving force of this visual thinking, he questions the mass of documents that constitute the very material of history. Everything in Godard's film is treated as archives, evidence and historical testimonies. The proximity between fiction and archival documents corresponds to a concept of history which does not intend to establish a hierarchy between the nature of the challenges left by time.

If a fiction commonly tells a story and if the archives allow the historian to make history, the "s" in Godard's title tells us that not all stories are fragments on the periphery of History with a capital H, because History is made up of these stories. In other words, this History is not made up of a single, hard, fixed and homogeneous nucleus, but of disconnected electrons which are what is called the *weak force* or *weak interaction* in physics. From a historical point of view, this weak force is for Godard the very material that History is made of.

Fragments out of context and dispersion mode formally agree with his conception of history. His HISTOIRE(S) are inseparable from the very notion of diaspora. The diaspora is a form of wandering linked to exile, i.e., to loss, however distant and indeterminable it may be. The HISTOIRE(S) Godard tells are the stories of everything that will wander forever in History and of everything that has never been able to hope for any deliverance. These "stories of wandering," to use Perec's (1980) beautiful expression, are the weak forces of History. Forces, because, for Benjamin as for Godard, disaster and injustice is the unremitting and lasting rule. Weakness, because they concern the victims, the oppressed of all times and everything that has never received the slightest assistance in History. The only possible help for these eternal wanderings is to be saved from oblivion.

Dispersion is thus the method adopted here by the historian who composes history with everything that is forever dispersed in the maze of time. The historian is inhabited by a feeling of melancholic loss: in order to "relive the past" and to grasp "the true historical image," he must go through the "method of introathy and of *acedia* [...] a sadness that renders mute" (Benjamin 1971, 187). Without testing such a method, we will have to be sensitive to it to test the historian's theses. For those who want to venture into HISTOIRE(S), it will be necessary to accept to leave things as they are: scattered, in suspense. At times we think we grasp the scope and implications of a metamorphosis that emerges from several elements brought into contact. But the following second there is almost nothing left, or rather nothing that can be formulated. It is this flash at lightning speed that makes the image of history, such as Benjamin describes it, appear: "The one that shines in a fleeting way" (1971, 187).

Godard's enterprise is thus, "in the face of an amnesic and illiterate world" to remember by questioning the images themselves, because the images remember and bear the imprints of their time. They are the very material of memory. All images are traces, and in the labyrinth of associations, archival images find disturbing equivalences with art images that have a separate status in HISTOIRE(S) because they allow us to "look at what we don't see" (Bernanos qtd. in 1a, 47'06). In other words, art images reveal in the form they invent what is latent and still invisible in their time, the possibilities of human beings and the world. Cinema images have an even more special status. Being the most realistic of all the arts and being the "only truly popular art," cinema could, Godard thought, have a real impact on the world. On the world indeed, because it has the ability to touch the masses. It is thus a historical force more than all the other arts. This is why "for him, the cinematographic act implies a strange responsibility" (Aumont 1999, 213). In 1998, cinema could still be the screen of the world's memory, but when it reached the dawn of the twentieth century, it had the potential to be more than a force of commemoration. In its early stages, it could, and did, according to Godard, intervene to prevent what it could see, glimpse and foresee with its "humble and tremendous power to transfigure." The tragedy of HISTOIRE(S) is partly due to this: cinema foresaw, saw and caught a glimpse, but nobody wanted to give it credence. Thus it witnessed the worst, and its power was transformed into a terrible weakness: the weakness of the spectator who knows and yet cannot prevent anything.

Right in the middle of the twentieth century, that which has permanently affected humanity in its flesh occurs: crime against humanity. Cinema witnessed the disaster, it warned, but nobody believed it. What is worse, long before that, it fabricated fictions that had repercussions on reality, Godard explains. This is why the tragedy of the century is, more than ever, the tragedy of cinema. Godard proposes this argument which establishes the tragedy and paradox of the "weak force" of his art: cinema has created myths that have inspired reality, and cinema has been unable to control its impact and its power of fascination on the masses. According to Godard, cinema has thus projected the worst of what humankind is capable of, in spite of itself. And the worst possible things happened. He is thus guilty and responsible, in spite of himself, for what has forever fractured the world and the idea of being human. What the cinema promised, turned against it and against reality at the same time. Faced with the most terrible thing that was predicted, cinema continued to forecast; faced with the worst thing that happened, it continued to show. But no one believed it. The power of cinema was transformed into pain and weakness. What cinema still has

left in *HISTOIRE(S)*, while seemingly putting its final spotlight on us, can no longer save anything. It can only fight against oblivion and this is its “weak messianic force” (Benjamin 1971, 184).

Godard's argument seems disconcerting, but we can understand the gravity of the tone he adopts by testing his vision of history. His discourse is not that of a crank. He sincerely believes and shows that cinema could really influence the world. That's why all the *HISTOIRE(S)* revolve around the tragedy of the twentieth century and why the images of the camps produce the most violent turmoil in history and henceforth permeate all the images.

Godard's gaze acts as a substitute for cinema's eye, and cinema's eye acts as a substitute for the “eye of History.”<sup>4</sup> This view of the work, that of the historian, sinks into a deep and painful “anamnesis movement” (Bergala 1999, 234) and projects all the sufferings of the past. It is all the injustices, all the victims, all the tragedies and all the assassinations that innervate the screen of the *HISTOIRE(S)* in “image blinkings” (Aumont 1999, 231), similar to the heartbeats of a dying man. That is why Godard sometimes has this strange expression when he looks away with a stupefied look and a half-opened mouth. He adopts the posture of the “angel of History,” without the wings, as described by Benjamin: “He stares wide-eyed, his mouth is open, his wings spread. This is what the angel of History must necessarily look like. He turns his face to the past [...] sees the pile of ruins, he would like to watch over the dead and gather the defeated” (1971, 189).

This “weak messianic force” that remains in cinema is precisely the possibility of bringing back images as we bring back the dead. In other words, the strength that remains in cinema is that of editing. Montage, which for Godard is “a resurrection of life” (1998, 246), never really existed. He explains that the big names of the silent movies came close, but that there was an unconscious reaction of fear. So “words specific to seeing” (Godard 1992, 139), i.e., the principle of coming together, could never be achieved. However, montage can neither save nor raise the dead, it can only bring them back by means of the image, by which it can still “save the honor of all reality.” “Bringing back” the oppressions of the past through images, this is how Godard understands Saint Paul's precept: “The image will come at the time of the resurrection.”

What cinema could do, it didn't. Cinema was not allowed to accomplish its purpose. Entertainment, “the power of Babylon,” the strong force, that of the powerful, was victorious over the power of revelation of the cinematographer.

4 Didi-Huberman (2003, 45) re-uses an old expression by Du Haillan.

The powerful of this world exploited fiction to take “control of the universe.” Through the great ability of cinema to reproduce life, they *used reality* to exercise their power over the world, while the cinematographer promised to *present reality*. What remains of the cinematographer’s strength now concerns the past. The only resurrection of HISTOIRE(S) is that of montage. But its return is short-lived. All the images of HISTOIRE(S) seem to be the last flashes of the cinematographer. Its weak strength continues to reveal “what is unseen in the real world” (Aumont 1999, 23) and the terrible underside of time.

But when Godard tries to shed light on the present in the light of the past, when he thinks with words and not with images, it produces unfortunate accidents. Hiding behind the precepts and icons of the “holy Montage,” he slips in images of demonstrating Palestinians before tacking on the word “muslim” instead of the word “jew” on the image of an emaciated, dead body dragged by two kapos in the death camps. Here, Godard is no longer in the register of reconciliation, but in that of confusion. He begins by confusing all Muslims with Palestinians and ends with an insinuation that is still obscure and yet already too clear. When Godard confuses the current situation of the Palestinians with the fate of the Jews in the concentration camps during the Second World War, it is neither the “humble and tremendous power of transfiguration” of the cinema nor the “weak messianic force” of the montage at work, but a poor force. This poor force is deployed when ideology replaces thought and when the activist takes the place of the historian. Apart from this “monstrous capture” (Cohen-Halimi and Cohen, 2005, 301), where Godard has his say instead of letting the images talk, he lets cinema make history.

What cinema has not accomplished forever leaves a gaping openness and this gaping openness is that of HISTOIRE(S). Saving the honor of what is real does not mean saving what is real, because “the victims are really dead” (Horkheimer’s letter to Benjamin, dated March 16, 1937, qtd. in Benjamin 2002, 488). To save honor is to fight against oblivion, that is, to show what is suppressed in time and repressed in people’s consciences. In this respect, Godard’s gesture is an act of violence, it is an act of resistance: “A struggle against the murderers of Memory” (P. Vidal-Naquet qtd. in Didi-Huberman 2003, 129). He commits an act of violence through continuous remembrance. Each image of HISTOIRE(S) commemorates that which disgusts and shames: stifled screams, tortures, humiliated lives, uprooted lives. In these a-chronological HISTOIRE(S), all the images of the century are inevitably perceived through the prism of what has permanently fractured the century and the idea of humanity along with it: the Shoah.

The “true face” of History slips into the cracks of every splice. This face, which reflects all kinds of expressions, remains serious, irreparably serious. Even the brightest colors, the most languid dances, the purest faces, everything exhales mourning, cries, blood, murder. Each image mourns and conceals the dead, the screams for all eternity, injustices and all the disasters of history. Behind each image a symptom of horror that nothing masks shows through, that nothing erases and that always lasts. The eye of History has printed on the sensitive plate of his memory that which now permeates all things in the world.

The continuous commemoration and the position of the filmmaker/historian experiencing the sufferings of the past give HISTOIRE(S) an unquestionably religious character. The screen, where all the details of the memory of the world are projected into the infinite networks of its white canvas, is like a divination surface and the tone then becomes, in fade-in fade-out, messianic. But this mystical accent never arises as a foundation or as relief. The miracle of resurrection through the image never constitutes an explanation, an atonement or a solution. The historical undertaking does not aim to save anything, no redemption is possible. Godard is busy with history, not theology. There is no end to the sufferings of the past. History finds no salvation in any form of reconciliatory “beyond” unifying the world. The gaze once fixed on the work turns to the past, enters into a gigantic anamnesis and starts descending into the darkness of time. The only way to deliver the past is to fight against oblivion; such is the “weak messianic force” of cinema in his HISTOIRE(S).

*Translated by Naomi Morgan*

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### About the Author

Céline Scemama (1972-2017) was a film scholar and Godard specialist. She obtained a doctorate from the Panthéon-Sorbonne University, Paris 1 in 2005 and compiled what has since become a standard reference work on Godard's demanding and densely layered masterpiece HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA: *Histoire(s) du cinéma de Jean-Luc Godard: La force faible d'un art* (2006). By scrupulously deciphering the multiple cinematic, sonic and literary references contained in HISTOIRE(S), she created a unique cinematographic criticism of Godard's work; an indispensable contribution to Godard studies and film and media studies in general. She is also the author of *Antonioni: Le désert figuré* (1998) and has appeared twice in the *Key Debates* (2011, 2014).

# PART III

## Technological Transformations



## 6. Mutation, Appropriation and Style\*

*Victor Burgin*

### Abstract

Victor Burgin's text provides a theoretical reflection on the technological transformations of what he calls the "field of 'photofilmic' practices." He postulates that "cinema" directs our minds to "technological mutation," while "art" evokes the "ideologico-economic appropriation." Using as a framework of reasoning themes that gave rise to the publications of the *Key Debates* series – screen and stories – and adding the idea of *virtual object* as resulting from the convergence of the digital with the contemporary, Burgin highlights the advent of new "photofilmic narrative forms" characterized by the combination of complexity and affectivity."

**Keywords:** Technology, screen, virtual

Il n'est pas une culture du regard qui ne soit une culture  
de l'invisible au cœur de la visibilité elle-même.

[There is not a culture of looking that is not a culture  
of the invisible within the heart of visibility itself.]

– Marie-José Mondzain (2017, 45)<sup>1</sup>

\* What I have to say about cinema is based mainly on a paper I presented at a 2018 conference in Paris devoted to the work of Laura Mulvey: *Féminism, énigmes, cinéphilie: Trois journées d'échanges avec Laura Mulvey*, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3, April 6, 2018. My intervention is reprinted in full as "The End of the Frame," 2018a. My summary account of the evolution of contemporary art is based on a talk I gave at Raven Row, London, on March 3, 2017 in the context of *This Way Out of England: Gallery House in Retrospect* – a series of events and exhibitions revisiting the activities of Gallery House during the period 1972-1973. The paper is reprinted as "Now and Then: Commodity and Apparatus," 2018b.

<sup>1</sup> "There is no culture of looking that is not a culture of the invisible at the heart of visibility itself."

The subtitle of the *Key Debates* series contains the phrase “mutations and appropriations.” These two ideas respectively characterize the two histories alluded to in the title of this present volume: *Post-cinema. Cinema in the Post-art Era*. Broadly speaking, for “cinema” the last half-century was most marked by technological mutation, while for “art” it was primarily a time of ideologico-economic appropriation. Across the same historical period the two institutions responded to the same technological and economic forces in different ways and according to different temporalities. Nevertheless, as the present conjunction of terms “post-cinema/post-art” may suggest, there is also now a sense of common ground for interests historically sited on the peripheries of the mainstream film industry and the official artworld. In this present context I take these interests to be schematically indicated by the titles of two previous volumes in the *Key Debates* series: *Screens* (2016) and *Stories* (2018). Under the former heading I shall say what appear to me the most substantive changes in a field of “photofilmic”<sup>2</sup> practices transformed by digitalization. Under the latter I envisage the possibility of a virtual theoretical object: “virtual” not only in the sense of its location in immaterial space but also in the sense – etymological and political – of *potential*. First, however, I shall briefly sketch what I understand here by appropriation.

## Appropriation

Shortly before his death in 1975 Pier Paolo Pasolini repudiated the three films that comprise his “Life Trilogy”<sup>3</sup> on the grounds he could no longer maintain the convictions that had inspired them. Alberto Moravia observed that Pasolini had formerly viewed the rural and urban underclasses as: “a revolutionary society analogous to protochristian societies, that’s to say unconsciously bearing an ascetic message of humility to oppose to a haughty and hedonistic bourgeois society.”<sup>4</sup> Asceticism aside, Pasolini had also seen the “archaic violence” inherent in the sexuality of the lumpenproletariat as a source of vitality for the revolution to come. By 1975 however he had witnessed the assimilation of the sexually charged heterogeneity of popular culture to the uniform hedonism of mediatic mass culture. He writes:

2 I prefer to use this existing neologism rather than invent another, albeit my own application of it may differ from that of its authors. See Streitberger and Van Gelder 2010; Cohen and Streitberger, eds. 2016.

3 THE DECAMERON (1971), THE CANTERBURY TALES (1972) and ARABIAN NIGHTS (1974).

4 Cited by Philippe Gavi, “Preface” in Pasolini 1976.

I have seen “with my own eyes” behaviour imposed by the power of consumerism remodel and deform the consciousness of the Italian people, to the point of an irreversible degradation; which did not happen during Fascist fascism, a period during which behaviour was totally dissociated from consciousness. (Pasolini 1976, 49)

Neither the popular culture in which Pasolini had believed nor the culture of the intelligentsia to which he belonged could any longer prevail against assimilation to the new totalitarianism. Reviewing Pasolini’s late writings, Alain Brossat finds the recognition that: “[high] culture is not that which protects us against barbarism, and which must be defended against it, it is the very milieu in which the intelligent forms of the new barbarism thrive” (2005, n, 18).

The dissolution of “high” and “popular” cultural practices in a monoculture of spectacle, presciently described by Pasolini in 1975, became apparent in the field of “visual arts” a decade later. Writing in 1986 about the state of contemporary art, I observed,

in a society where the commodification of art has progressed apace with the aestheticization of the commodity, there has evolved a universal rhetoric of the aesthetic in which commerce and inspiration, profit and poetry [...] rapturously entwined. (1986b, 174)

In a book of 2003 the French philosopher and art critic Yves Michaud notes an “epochal change” in the passage from “modern” to “contemporary” art in which “the aesthetic replaces art” (2003, 169). The literary theorist Philippe Forest remarks on the waning of the term “modern” and the waxing of “contemporary” to mark synchrony with the present. He finds that, at least since Baudelaire, to be “of one’s own time”<sup>5</sup> in the sense of “modern” is to test what may be envisaged beyond both the status quo ante *and* the status quo. Like the word “modern,” “contemporary” implies the new; unlike “modern” however, “contemporary” connotes:

[A] “new” that implies no contestation of the world in which it arises, which satisfies the criteria of a society that manages, in its own best interests, the circulation of forms and the turnover and diffusion of works [...]. (2010, 89)

5 “*Il faut être de son temps*,” an expression attributed to Daumier by Edouard Manet. See Nochlin 1971, 103.

As Brecht had earlier observed: “an innovation will pass if it is calculated to rejuvenate existing society, but not if it is going to change it” (Willett 1964, 34). The ascendancy of “contemporary art” accompanied a fundamental transformation of the Western economy described by the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre in their 2017 book *Enrichment. A Critique of the Commodity*. Boltanski and Esquerre bring together domains previously considered separately, with contemporary art now identified as a key element in an interrelated complex that includes the luxury goods industry, the trade in old objects, the creation of foundations and museums, and the national heritage and tourist industries. In these and other areas the enrichment economy, unlike the prior industrial economy, does not produce new things but rather exploits what already exists. It might be objected that although this observation may apply to such things as antique watches and medieval castles it cannot, by definition, be true of *contemporary* art. Here however Boltanski finds that “what is called ‘creation’ is most often nothing more than the art of reinterpreting.” He notes: “The question of knowing how [contemporary] works will be inscribed in the history of art to come is central, this is what is at stake when the collections of big collectors are transformed into museums” (Boltanski and Esquerre 2017b).<sup>6</sup> Across the period analyzed by Boltanski and Esquerre – years inaugurated by financial deregulation – the source of authority in debates and judgments about art passed from artists and critics to curators.<sup>7</sup> Declining levels of state support compelled public museums to seek private funding and ever larger audiences to repay their corporate sponsors with “visibility” for their newly purchased cultural capital.<sup>8</sup> From its etymological sense of “custodian” the word “curator” took on the de facto meaning “entrepreneur.” Consistent with a growing cultural and political populism, art became treated as one form of attraction among others and art museums opened their doors to exploitation by the fashion and entertainment industries. Massively attended art biennales, fairs and other international tourist mega-exhibitions extended the boundaries of the Western art world by showcasing “contemporary art” by non-Western artists – mining previously unexploited commodity resources under the

6 The institutional authority of the museum positions such recycling of the inventions of the twentieth-century avant-garde as if they were viewed from the future as “already classic” and therefore inoculated against criticism by the cautionary example of the reactionary reception of that same historical avant-garde.

7 See, for example: Foster 2015; Michaud 2007.

8 The Serbo-American economist Branko Milanovic (2019) has given the term “moral laundering” to, “the use of dubiously acquired wealth to fund educational or art institutions in order to acquire philanthropic status and enter ‘respectable’ social circles.”

cover of cultural decolonization. Serving an aggressively expansionist multibillion dollar international art market. “Contemporary Art” became a glaringly visible means of effecting a seamless transition between power and the people through kitsch gigantism and other crowd-stupefying stunts (see Le Brun 2018). No longer a counterbalance to the society of the spectacle, as Jean-Paul Cunier observes in his own commentary on Pasolini’s late writings: “Today [...] all of artistic production is from the very beginning a pitiless competition to win the possibility of being recuperated” (2006, 79).<sup>9</sup> It is against this general backdrop of cultural appropriation that the technological mutations of screens and stories emerge.

## Screens

### 1. Image and Spectator

For most of modern history, to juxtapose “cinema” and “art” was to evoke the difference between the still and the moving image – a distinction that digitalization has eroded. In her 2015 essay “Cinematic Gesture: The Ghost in the Machine,” Laura Mulvey discusses the image of Marilyn Monroe in a thirty-second sequence from Howard Hawks’s film *GENTLEMAN PREFER BLONDES* (1953), a sequence she digitally slows down in order to isolate four moments of arrest – “gestures” – in the dance Monroe performs. In her 2006 book *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Mulvey writes:

[F]iction films are not necessarily structured to move inexorably, uniformly and smoothly forward [...]. Privileged moments or tableaux are constructed around an integrated aesthetic unity that is detachable from the whole, although ultimately part of it. (2006, 147)

In my own essay of 1984 “Diderot, Barthes, *Vertigo*,”<sup>10</sup> I outline the origins of the concepts of “privileged moment” (*peripateia*) and “tableau” in

9 I offer my summary overview of contemporary art not as a comprehensive and even-handed account of all current visual art practices, but rather as an explanation of why so many in this field today may feel they are in a “post-art” situation. To those unfamiliar with the artworld to which I refer I recommend Ruben Östlund’s film of 2017, *THE SQUARE*.

10 The paper was first presented at the colloquium *Film and Photography: An International Symposium*, May 18-19, 1984, jointly organized by the Department of English, Department of Art History, and Film Studies Program, University of California, Santa Barbara.

seventeenth and eighteenth-century theories of painting ([1984] 1986a, 112-139).<sup>11</sup> My 1984 paper intervened within the context of writing on photography rather than film, and drew on a different emphasis within Freud's work from that which informed Mulvey's writing. The dual basis of Freudian thought is the theory of the unconscious and a theory of sexuality.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Mulvey's essay focuses on sexual investments in looking, my own essay draws on psychoanalytic theory to describe the processes by which a materially poor still photograph may become enriched with associative meaning – not least, narrative meaning. Discussing a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film *VERTIGO* I suggest that what may lead us to find equivalents of *peripateia* and tableau in photographs and films is our unconscious recognition of the *mise-en-scène* of a fantasy.<sup>13</sup> There are of course reasons other than unconscious ones for isolating a sequence from a film. The scene may belong to the image repertoire of a fully self-aware cinophilia – for example, to stay with Marilyn Monroe, the “subway dress” sequence from *THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH*.<sup>14</sup> On other occasions the reasons may not be immediately apparent, but accessible to introspection. In the course of thinking about Laura Mulvey's work I recalled a scene from Max Ophüls's film *LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMEN* (1948) in which the ill-fated heroine sits opposite her forgetful lover in the carriage of a “railway panorama” fairground attraction. The most immediately obvious explanation for this would be that Mulvey has written eloquently about the films of Max Ophüls. But she has written no less eloquently about films by other directors and about many other scenes, which invites the psychoanalytic question: “Why has this sequence come to mind now rather than some other?” I find that the sequence in the carriage succinctly evokes

11 The program of history painting dominated painting in the West from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century. As the painter of “histories” had to show in a single instant that which took time to unfold, it was recommended that the moment selected by the painter for depiction should be the *peripateia* – that instant in the course of an action when all hangs in the balance. This idea returns in the work of Denis Diderot in the concept of the *tableau*. The tableau represented the ideal of an image whose meaning would be communicated at a glance. It is in this context that Diderot invokes the hieroglyph, he writes: “discourse is no longer simply a suite of energetic terms which expose thought [...] but a tissue of hieroglyphs gathered one on the other which paint what is to be represented” (Diderot 1875, 190).

12 The foundational texts are *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).

13 An operation I identify at work in Barthes's description of the “punctum” in a photograph by James van der Zee, and in my own privileging of a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film *VERTIGO*.

14 *THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH*, dir. Billy Wilder, 1955.



LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMEN (Max Ophüls, 1948)

the contrasting forms of spectatorship that, again in broadly historical terms, have characterized “art” and “cinema.”

In the railway panorama, seated spectators looked at a linear sequence of images for a predetermined period of time – a form of audience experience and behavior that invites comparison with cinema. The earlier “circular panorama” presented ambulatory spectators with an image *environment* they could enter and leave as they pleased – behavior we may associate with art galleries and museums. Reviewing the evolution of her own work in her preface to *Death 24x a Second* Mulvey writes:

Then, I was absorbed in Hollywood Cinema, turning to the avant-garde as its binary opposite. Now, I think that the aesthetics of cinema have a greater coherence across its historical body in the face of new media technologies [...]. (2006, 7)

To this I would add that “then,” in the 1970s, cinema studies and avant-garde filmmaking *together* formed a cultural unit that had the theory and practice of photography as its “binary opposite.” Mulvey’s critical cinephilia brought her to disengage the still implied within a narrative, I sought to explain how a narrative may be implied by the still. The opposition between movement

and still here is not to be reduced to the classical distinction between “narrative” and “image,”<sup>15</sup> it is rather a matter of two kinds of narrative structure historically located in two kinds of architectural setting, each presupposing its own specific form of audience behavior. Although it is possible to enter a movie theater after the film has begun, and leave before it ends, it is normally assumed that the duration of the film will coincide with the duration of the spectator’s viewing of it. In the gallery it is normally assumed that these two times will *not* coincide, as visitors to galleries usually enter and leave at unpredictable intervals. Moving-image works made with this behavior in mind are therefore typically designed to loop, with a seamless transition between first and last frames. As any element in the loop – image, text, sound – may be the “first” to be experienced by the visitor then the elements that comprise the work should ideally be independently significant. In this, the experience of a moving image work designed specifically for a gallery setting is closer to that of a psychoanalytic session than to a narrative film: no detail of the material produced in an analysis is considered *a priori* more significant than any other, all elements equally are potential points of departure for chains of associations. The psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclair describe the reiterative fractional chains that form daydreams and unconscious fantasies as “short sequences, most often fragmentary, circular and repetitive” (1999, 259), and characterize the fantasy as a *scenario with multiple entry points* (Laplanche and Pontalis 1985, 71). In all, the conditions

15 In his essay of 1966, “Notes Toward a Phenomenology of the Narrative” (1974), Christian Metz distinguishes narrative from both the image and description. The distinction between image, description and narrative is, Metz says, “classical,” by which I assume he means that it may be found in the philosophy of Greek antiquity. The differences between the three are differences in their relation to time. The *image* is outside of time. In the case of *description*, images are deployed over time but what they collectively describe is simultaneously present. In the case of *narrative*, images are deployed over time to signify events that unfold in an irreversible temporal order. Metz admits, however, that it is difficult to maintain the categorical distinction between simultaneous description and sequential narrative; the distinction between the two, he says, is inhabited by an “ambiguity.” The time of the panorama was never simply that of simultaneity. Panoramic scenes of battle, for example, tended to display the temporality of their antecedents in the genre of history painting, where the before and after of an historic moment may appear alongside the moment itself, projecting the diachronic onto the plane of the synchronic. Even cityscape and landscape panoramas, where there is no depiction of events but simply the description of a topography, inevitably entail the time of the viewing, as it is not possible to take in the entire image at a glance. Joachim Bonnemaison has observed that the panoramic photograph is: “a matter neither of a framed object, as in conventional photography, nor of a narrative sequence, as in cinema, but rather something in the order of a gesture. The rotation about one’s own axis [...] is a total body gesture that is transmitted, with the panoptic, into an instantaneous visual memory” (1989, 34).

of spectatorship of moving image works made for the gallery are closer to those traditionally associated with painting than to those associated with cinema. The ideal viewer is one who accumulates her or his knowledge of the work, as it were, in “layers” – much as a painting may be created. We may note however that many works made for projection in galleries have a linear structure that makes no accommodation to peripatetic audience behavior. Further, not all works made for cinema audiences unambiguously meet audience expectations of linear narrative closure; for example, José Moure observes that: “most of [Michelangelo] Antonioni’s films at the end are resolved by means of a ‘spiral’ structure [...] suspending the story in the void around which it has incessantly revolved” (2018, 111).

## 2. Mashup, Machinima, Amateur

Laura Mulvey’s widely discussed essay of 1975 “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” not only offered a theoretical analysis of the symbolic reproduction of sexual subordination in mainstream cinema, it also argued for the invention of politically alternative forms of film practice – a project to which she herself contributed as co-director of such works as *RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX*.<sup>16</sup> In 1975 even such a “low budget” film production was beyond the economic and technical means of most individuals. In the inter-World War years of the twentieth-century some artists addressed the class basis of their avant-garde practices. Such movements as *Arbeiter-Fotograf* in Germany and *Protekult* in the Soviet Union sought to put the means of visual and written representation into the hands of workers, thereby erasing the bourgeois category “artist” from the pages of history. In an irony of history such ambitions have since been realized not by revolutionary organization but by capitalist innovation. The same technologies that allow Mulvey to dissect Hollywood movies frame-by-frame also allow for practices based, among others, on the historic example of cinema but with amateur and professional artists enjoying equal access to the means of production and distribution. On social media the ubiquitous practice of “iPhonography” not only facilitates the exchange of still and moving selfies, it is also used to assemble de facto communities around a potentially infinite variety of shared interests, from broken umbrellas to urban insurrection. In a popular counterpart to some avant-garde artworks “cinemagraphs” allow the freezing of a detail in a smartphone video frame while everything around it is in motion (for example, a child leaping into a swimming pool hangs motionless

16 *RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX*, dir. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1977.

in mid-air while her reflection dances on the surface of the water below). Under the parental gaze of GAFA, endless parades of such demotic works now pass in the company of hordes of “follows,” “comments” and “likes.”

Writing in 2003, Colin MacCabe observed: “In a world in which we are entertained from cradle to grave whether we like it or not, the ability to rework image and dialogue [...] may be the key to both psychic and political health” (301). In the 1970s the *détournement* of commercially produced films through disassembling and reassembling their contents was a practice of avant-garde filmmakers. Now anyone with broadband access may make collage films from inexhaustible streams of online images and sounds. *FAN.TASIA* (2016) by Lindsay McCutcheon, is a three-and-a-half minute video described by the author as: “A mashup of almost every Walt Disney Animation Studio release since their Renaissance began in 1989 with ‘THE LITTLE MERMAID’ (also Mary Poppins just for fun).”<sup>17</sup> The video is edited to the soundtrack “Pop Culture” by the electronic musician Madeon, which is itself a mashup of thirty-nine popular music tracks by performers such as Madonna and Lady Gaga. To date, *FAN.TASIA* has received over eight million views since being posted on YouTube. Such digital practices have grown out of the pre-digital fan culture that in the late 1980s became the object of the emerging academic field of “Fan Studies.” In the early days of the discipline, academics celebrated fan culture as a site of resistance to industrial mass culture. In 1988 the prolific and influential American media scholar Henry Jenkins described fan culture as

a subterranean network of readers and writers who remake programs in their own image. “Fandom” is a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups [...] to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; [...] a way of transforming mass culture into a popular culture. (1988, 87)

Thirty years later, in common with many others in the now established academic field, Jenkins came to nuance his view of the political potential of fan culture. For example, he observes:

Too often, there is a tendency to read all grassroots media as somehow “resistant” to dominant institutions rather than acknowledging that citizens sometimes deploy bottom-up means to keep others down. (2008, 293)

17 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-6xk4W6N2o>.

Jenkins now gives credit to the French philosopher and media theorist Pierre Lévy's concept of "collective intelligence" for offering, "a way of thinking about fandom not in terms of resistance but as a prototype or dress rehearsal for the way culture might operate in the future" (2006, 134).

Mashups cannibalize media contents external to the editing software used to assemble them. In contrast, the practice of "machinima" allows the production of films shot entirely with virtual cameras in such virtual worlds as those of videogames and Second Life. In 2005 two teenagers were accidentally electrocuted while attempting to escape from police in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois. Televised comments on the incident by the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy provoked widespread rioting. Alex Chan, a young industrial designer living in La Courneuve, one of the sites of the disturbances, responded with a thirteen minute machinima film: *THE FRENCH DEMOCRACY* (2006). Beginning with a scene of the two deaths, Chan's film moves on to represent the frustration of French youth minorities in their routine encounters with racial discrimination and police harassment. *THE FRENCH DEMOCRACY* was produced within the business simulation game *The Movies*, in which players adopt the role of managing a simulated film studio. Although not a requirement of the game, players who wish to do so can write and shoot their own "films" with sets and "actors" provided within the game. In *THE FRENCH DEMOCRACY* the limitations of the game's virtual world determine that, for example, the electrical substation where the deaths occur is represented by a rustic shack, and the Paris métro is represented by the New York subway.<sup>18</sup> After Chan uploaded his film to the Internet it "went viral" internationally.<sup>19</sup> In its economy of means and breadth of exposure *THE FRENCH DEMOCRACY* invites a reassessment of what today may constitute "political" cinema, in which one might reasonably conclude that the future of the "agit-prop" film is in machinima.

In addition to mashup and machinima there is a wide range and variety of other image practices that to some extent or other owe their possibility to the advent of computer technology. By way of example, three quite different works come to mind:

18 Although machinima productions are circumscribed by the possibilities offered by the software, the practice of "modding" may extend the range of these; for example, providing additional characters by clothing existing game characters in alternative "skins." Modding requires more or less sophisticated programming skills, and different game engines are more or less amenable to modification.

19 Interviewed for the *Washington Post* Chan said: "The main intention of this movie is to bring people to think about what really happened in my country by trying to show the starting point and some causes of these riots" (Musgrove 2005).

*JenniCam.org* (1996) was a website created by the American programmer Jennifer Ringley, at the time a student, to broadcast webcam images of her college dormitory room. Remote connection to the JenniCam opened a window on the visitor's computer screen whatever other program was running, piercing the walls of spreadsheets, company reports, unfinished novels, academic papers ... What appeared in the window was a still image of the room, from which Ringley was most often absent, updated every three minutes.<sup>20</sup>

*Present* (2000) is a work distributed via the Internet by the Belgian artist David Claerbout. The host website offers digital video files of three flowers: amaryllis, gerbera, and rose. On downloading, the flower file takes root on the viewer's own hard disk and automatically opens an image that shows the evolution of the flower, from full bloom to decay, in real time over a period of about a week. After the flower dies a digital "seed" remains which may be distributed to others.

*Summer* (2013) is a work by the Russian artist Olia Lialina that may only be viewed on the screen of a computer connected to the Internet. Against a clear blue sky the artist swings to and fro on a swing that appears suspended from the location bar at the top of the viewer's browser window. Each frame of the looping GIF animation is hosted on a different server, the current URL displayed in the browser address bar changing with each successive frame of the animation, and with the speed of the swinging depending on the connection speed.<sup>21</sup>

The examples given above are all of amateur productions – if we allow that "amateur" is an attitude, a way of being in the world, rather than a social status. This is the sense Roland Barthes gives to the word. For Barthes, the amateur artist confronts the professional with the example of a practice undistorted by the market or bad faith. In a 1973 essay, he writes:

The amateur is not necessarily defined by a lesser knowledge, an imperfect technique ... but rather by this: he is the one who does not put on a show (*ne montre pas*), [...] the amateur seeks to produce only his own enjoyment (*jouissance*) [...] and this enjoyment does not tend toward any hysteria. [...] the artist enjoys, no doubt, but [...] his pleasure must accommodate itself to an imago, which is the discourse that the Other holds on what he makes. (396)

20 After she graduated, the dormitory room gave way to a succession of other rooms. Ringley maintained the site until late 2003. See Burgin 2018b.

21 See Ramirez-Lopez, "The Internet Gets Processed Here: *Summer* by Olia Lialina," <https://medium.com/@daleloreny/the-internet-gets-processed-here-summer-by-olia-lialina-d69c501c54f4>.

For Jacques Lacan, whose language Barthes invokes here, the hysteric identifies with the lack in the Other, and desires to be what the Other desires. Barthes posits an ideal of amateur practice outside the arena of ruthless competition for attention, the place of egoism and narcissism, the hysterical show of fashion and publicity, all the parade he summarizes as: “stupidity, vulgarity, vanity, worldliness, nationality, normality” (1982, 9). With digitalization the camera now offers a common ground of democratization of the material means of production necessary, albeit not sufficient (cf. *FAN.TASIA*), to the emergence of the amateur as exemplar of resistance to the hysterical representational regimes of neo-liberal market culture.

## Stories

### 1. The Real

Writing in 2013, with no apparent irony in respect of his status as a “best selling” novelist, the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard remarked:

Wherever you turned you saw fiction. All these millions of paperbacks, hardbacks, DVDs and TV series, they were all about made-up people in a made-up, though realistic, world. And news in the press, TV news and radio news had exactly the same format, documentaries had the same format, they were also stories, and it made no difference whether what they told had actually happened or not [...] the nucleus of all this fiction, whether true or not, was verisimilitude and the distance it held to reality was constant. In other words it saw the same. This sameness, which was our world, was being mass-produced. (2013, 496-497)

As Roland Barthes had put it: “always new books, new programs, new films, news items, but always the same meaning” (1975, 42). Beyond not only consensual verisimilitude but representation as such, is the *real*. In his 1977 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Barthes stated:

From ancient times to the efforts of our avant-garde, literature has been concerned to represent something. What? I will put it crudely: the real. The real is not representable, and it is because men ceaselessly try to represent it by words that there is a history of literature. (1979, 8)

In the years following the Second World War differing views of the relation of representations to the real are at issue in debates over what constitutes the political in art. We may read Barthes's book of 1953 *Le degré zero de l'écriture* as a tacit response to Jean-Paul Sartre's book of 1948 *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*<sup>22</sup> Sartre had argued that the writer has a moral responsibility to offer works that in content manifestly engage with history and society. To the contrary, Barthes says: "writing is [...] essentially the morality of form [...] a way of conceiving Literature, not of extending its limits" (1970, 15). In this perspective the political import of a work of art is to be measured not with reference to its manifest content, but by the degree and nature of its relation to taken-for-granted reality – the horizon of what may be thought and said. In the field of visual art Barthes's modernist political aesthetics has a counterpart in the writings of the art critic Clement Greenberg; but whereas for Barthes formal invention serves to circumvent preformatted verisimilitude, for Greenberg form is an end in itself that eschews any representation whatsoever. In his 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" Greenberg presents avant-garde painting as a form of resistance to the emerging barbarism of mass culture, a resistance grounded in the reduction of painting to its material specificity as "paint on a flat support," with any further content being "something to be avoided like a plague" ([1939] 1961, 5). Greenberg's prioritizing of the material means of production was subsequently adopted in post-war "structural-materialist" filmmaking. In *Death 24x a Second* Mulvey describes the way modernist filmmakers "consistently brought the mechanism and the material of film into visibility" (2006, 67) and gives the example of the Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka, who says that the "harmony [of his films] spreads out of the unit of the frame, of the one twenty fourth of a second" (66). But the 24 frames per second of film became the 25 frames per second of PAL video and 29.97 frames of NTSC video. Next came the universal digital animation standard of 30 frames per second, while the normal rate of a videogame is currently 60 frames per second. In computer generated imagery the frame rate of the virtual camera, in common with that of any other of its attributes, is not given in advance by the operation of a physical mechanism – it is a numerically variable parameter. When the film camera is immaterial, political arguments based on the real of "medium specificity" become groundless.

22 The two works originate in essays that precede their publication as books. For a succinct account of the history of their relations, see Sontag 1970, xivff.

## 2. Spatialization

Film theory in the 1970s described the “suturing” of the cinemagoer into the imaginary space of the film through her or his identification with a number of looks, the first of which is the look given by the camera and bestowed on the spectator. A digital virtual reality film knows only one look, moreover one that cannot be solicited by off-screen space as there is no longer a frame.<sup>23</sup> Even before the arrival of VR technology, videogame designers had already been required to reinvent camera and editing practices inherited from cinema, just as they had departed from inherited narrative forms. A writer on videogames observes:

When games are analyzed as stories, both their differences from stories and their intrinsic qualities become all but impossible to understand. [...] an alternative theory that is native to the field of study must be constructed. (Aarseth 2004, 362)

As if in response, another writer on games says:

[T]he change will surely be that the traditional emphasis in narrative theory on the syntagmatic (linear sequences) will increasingly be re-  
inflected to emphasize the paradigmatic (spatial) elements of all narrative experiences. (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 96)

I think here of the genre of “first-person exploration” videogames, for example the game *Gone Home* (The Fulbright Company, 2013). The player of this game is given the role of a young woman who returns to her family home after a year abroad. Rather than the welcome she expected, she finds the house empty. She (the player) slowly pieces together what happened during her absence on the basis of clues found while searching the house. Although there is interactive navigation in this type of game (the player moves freely around the house using a console or keyboard) and interactive manipulation of objects (the player may open doors, drawers and cupboards) there are no set goals and no rewards, there are no enemies to defeat nor any other

23 Ludwig Wittgenstein compares the relation between the eye and the visual field to that between subject and world. Just as a description of the visual field cannot include any reference to the eye that sees it, so a description of the world cannot contain any reference to a subject. He writes: “The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world” (1922, 5.632). In these terms, the arrival of VR heralds the end of the frame in cinema, and with it the disappearance of the very subject of the cinematic apparatus.

dangers to escape. All that happens in the game is that in the process of exploring a physical space a mental scenario comes to be assembled on the basis of what is visible to the eye. The Canadian writer Alice Munro (1932) has used the metaphor of exploring a house to explain how she reads and writes short stories.<sup>24</sup> Munro says that when she writes a short story, and even when she reads short stories by other writers, she feels she can start anywhere. She also feels she can return to the story and read it again in a different order and from a different starting point – just as, in exploring a house, she might enter a room, wander out, go into another room and stay a little longer, in a potentially limitless process.

As already remarked, to pass from movie theater to museum is to pass from one kind of spectatorial interpellation to another, from one form of narration to another, from a determinate linear time to an indeterminate recursive temporality. However, just as the advent of digital technology filled the space between the cinema screen and the gallery wall with a variety of other screens, so it has engendered hybrid forms of attention, narration and time. If, at home, I attentively watch a 90-minute film on a mobile device, without interruption and with the room lights dimmed, I behave much as if I were at the cinema (albeit with a certain disrespect). If I extract a sequence from the same film and watch it repeatedly, understanding it differently with each reprise, then I may be behaving as if I were in an art gallery. Moreover, works positioned securely within the apparatus of cinema – festivals and prizes, star performers, mediatic attention, and so on – may offer “uncinematic” forms of narration. I think, for example, of the films of the Korean director Hong Sang-soo.<sup>25</sup> The characters in Hong’s films are preoccupied with their emotional interrelationships to the almost total exclusion of such other concerns as the state of the world around them. In this, his films have much in common with classic Hollywood melodrama. In narrative structure however his films are radically different from those of such directors as Max Ophüls or Douglas Sirk. As one writer has remarked of Hong’s films: “Instead of illustrating the logical process of narrative development, each shot (*plan*) is never the first or last link in a chain of facts, but restores the impression produced in the present by an event” (Park 2018, 102).

The ensemble of Hong Sang-soo’s films produce a sense of perpetual return: much the same types of people, in much the same work occupations and life situations, go through much the same types of interactions. I am

24 My thanks to Christine Berthin for introducing me to this text. See Berthin 2019, 341.

25 Korean and Chinese names are written in this text in their traditional form: surname first.

left with the impression of a Monet returning to paint the same Cathedral facade under different lights, or a Cézanne returning again to paint Mont Sainte-Victoire.<sup>26</sup>

The paradox of narrative that resists temporal flow is at the center of Roland Barthes's 1970 essay "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills." Here, Barthes envisages a "filmic of the future" that "lies not in movement, but in an inarticulable third meaning that neither a simple photograph nor a figurative painting can assume since they lack a diegetic horizon, the possibility of configuration" (1977b, fn 1, 66). In an essay of 1975 the film theorist and videomaker Thierry Kuntzel imagines: "a virtual film [...] where all the elements would be present at the same time [...] each endlessly referring to the others" (2006, 114).<sup>27</sup> There are however already existing practices that, in Barthes's words, institute: "a reading that is at once instantaneous and vertical" (1977b, fn 1, 66). Barthes recognizes this in an aside he adds as a footnote to "The Third Meaning":

There are other "arts" which combine still (or at least drawing) and story, diegesis – namely the photo-novel and the comic-strip. I am convinced that these "arts," born in the lower depths of high culture, possess theoretical qualifications and present a new signifier (related to the obtuse meaning). [...] There may thus be a future – or a very ancient past – truth in these derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical forms of consumer subculture. (1977b, fn 1, 66)

In the decades following Barthes's essay on "The Third Meaning" there has been detailed discussion, from a mainly "cinecentric" point of view, of relations between film stills, photographs and moving images (see Bellour 2012; Mulvey 2006). Studies of cinematic "intermediality" have further taken account of the relations of cinema to such other "external" image practices as painting (see Jacobs 2011), and studies of "transmediality" have described the distribution of a "single" story across disparate media platforms (see Schiller 2018). There have however been relatively few advances in the more challenging of two directions indicated by Barthes's gesture toward "dialogical forms of consumer subculture." One path from Barthes's footnote might lead to a reassessment of previously overlooked representational practices.

<sup>26</sup> Hong Sang-soo himself passed through art schools before entering cinema. The figures of painters appear in several of his films, as do film directors who were previously painters.

<sup>27</sup> The text was originally written as a textual analysis of a fragment from Chris Marker's *LA JETÉE* (1962).

This path has been taken, the forms Barthes found “vulgar and foolish” in 1970 have, fifty years on, gained institutionalized intellectual and artistic recognition.<sup>28</sup> The creation of such new medium-specific academic enclaves as “Comic Studies” however, for all they should be welcomed, nevertheless inhibits thinking about how such “derisory” forms might presage a “filmic of the future,” and even less what this uncinematic filmic might *be*.

## Virtual Objects

The second half of the twentieth century saw an expansion of what has become generally known as “visual cultural studies”: from Art History, through Film Studies, then Photography Studies and most recently Digital Media. An effect of digital technologies however has been to challenge the primacy of “medium” implied in the widely used academic appellation “Digital Media.” In 1986, as the first digital cameras were arriving on the consumer market, the German media theorist Friedrich A. Kittler writes:

[O]nce optical fiber networks turn formerly distinct data flows into a standardized series of digitized numbers, any medium can be translated into any other. [...] a digital base will erase the very concept of medium. (1999, 1-2)

The Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky argued that fundamental changes in cultural history occur not in direct line of descent from what has gone before but rather as the Knight moves in chess, in an abrupt lateral departure from the established track. The attitudes enshrined in the expression “Digital Media” are in direct line of descent from the primacy allocated to “medium” in modernist aesthetics<sup>29</sup> and a misrecognition of the Knight’s move effected by the essentially virtual nature of the image in algorithmic culture. In the 1930s Walter Benjamin saw the arrival of cinema as accompanied by a demand for the invention of the concepts that would be required in order to understand the new regimes of the image that cinema would bring. An analogous demand may be felt today

28 For example, in 2014 the academic journal *Critical Inquiry* devoted a special issue to comics (Chute and Jagoda 2014) and in 2018 a graphic novel was cited for the Mann Booker prize: Nick Drnaso, *Sabrina*, 2018.

29 The preoccupation with “medium” is a characteristic of modernist aesthetics from Clement Greenberg to Rosalind Krauss; see my essay, “‘Medium’ and ‘Specificity,’” 2006.

in relation to the products of digital image technologies, but whereas in Benjamin's day "cinema" named a circumscribed and relatively homogeneous institutional and aesthetic *object*, what we may provisionally call "virtual image practices" now present a heterogeneous and boundless technological and phenomenological *field*. If an object of study is nevertheless to be discerned within this field it can only be through a fundamental revision of what constitutes an object. Barthes's obtuse "filmic of the future" has little to do with film as such, it concerns the possibilities of "configuration within a diegetic horizon" in general. In my 2004 book *The Remembered Film* (2004; translated as *Le film qui me reste en mémoire*, 2019) I give the name "cinematic heterotopia" to the environment of fragments of films and related publicity – YouTube clips, street posters, lobby cards, magazine features, and so on – that fill the real and imaginary spaces between actual viewings of films; elements that may be associated not only with each other but with fragmentary images and texts from sources other than films. Such signifiers may take the material form of printed matter or they may appear on screens of the various kinds known to us today. The film and media theorist Vivian Sobchack urges that we, "go beyond thinking about screens as discrete devices with different forms, functions, and contents, and attempt to describe the "screenness" that grounds and connects them all" (2016, 162). I would further recommend that, beyond the materiality of such devices, we take account of "screenness" in all its aspects – as Dominique Chateau and José Moure write: "the screen could be considered to be material, mental or, more generally, a link between matter and mind" (2016, 17). In 1973, Roland Barthes wrote: "there will still be representation for so long as a subject (author, reader, spectator or voyeur) casts his gaze towards a horizon on which he cuts out the base of a triangle, his eye (or his mind) forming the apex" (1977a, 69). The image Barthes suggests here could describe an engraving from an antique treatise on perspective. Although based on natural phenomena – the physics of light and the physiology and psychology of visual perception – the perspectival system of representation is not in itself natural; nor, as the pictorial traditions of Islam and such civilizations as those of Egypt and China demonstrate, is it inevitable. Nevertheless it has come to universally frame hegemonic representations of the world. Perspectival representation now passes as quasi-natural and is largely unremarked *as a system*. Following the automation of perspective drawing through photography, the animation of the photographic image with the advent of cinema inaugurated a further stage in the naturalization of perspective. Across the twentieth century, from Lev Kuleshov's notion of perceptual experience as "films without film," through Pasolini's definition of film as

the “written language of reality,” to Hollis Frampton’s idea of reality itself as an “infinite film,” the prevailing imaginary of the world was submitted to the organizing principles of montage: “reality” – by default equated with the real – became viewed not only as intrinsically perspectival but as inherently *cinematic* (see Levi 2012, chap. 4). Today, as the term “post-cinema” may imply, the classic fiction film no longer has the predominance it once had among contributions to the popular imaginary of the real. Although by definition the real stands outside representation we may nevertheless speak of the *real of representations* – in this sense the real has a *history*. The subject who casts her or his gaze toward the real of representations today does not immediately confront the preformatted objects of media studies, but rather the type of object formulated in recent work in epistemology and philosophy of science. In a rudimentary and opportunistic appropriation of the technical complexities of such work, two basic procedural tenets may be extracted: a *flat ontology* – a non-hierarchical attitude to phenomenologically given things;<sup>30</sup> and a definition of the “complex object” made of these things to include the intention of the observer – what the philosopher of science Anne-Françoise Schmid calls a *contemporary object*.<sup>31</sup> Schmid suggests that “we treat this object as a kind of unknown ‘X’ the properties of which are distributed in an unprecedented way between different disciplinary forms of knowledge. An object with multiple dimensions, each of which is a discipline” (2015, 65-66).<sup>32</sup> Schmid’s “contemporary object” has much in common with the “digital object.” In his 2016 book *On the Existence of Digital Objects* the Chinese philosopher of technology Hui Yuk writes: “By digital objects, I mean objects that take shape on a screen or hide in the back end of a computer program, composed of data and metadata regulated by structures or schemas” (2016, 1). A fire-breathing dragon in a videogame, the gamer’s medical records on a hospital computer, the Wikipedia entry for “Hospital,” are all digital objects.<sup>33</sup> Hui bases his conception of the “digital object” on the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon’s idea of the “technical

30 For example, the French philosopher and novelist Tristan Garcia writes: “We live in this world of things, where a cutting of acacia, a gene, a computer-generated image, a transplantable hand, a musical sample, a trademarked name, or a sexual service are comparable things” (2014, 1).

31 I assume Schmid alludes to Edmund Husserl’s notion of the “contemporary object” as one that elapses in synchrony with apprehension of it – Husserl gives the example of a melody.

32 Schmid continues: “This is the way designers and inventors think: Not by seeing the object as the result of a disciplinary rationality, even a composite one, but by putting an unknown ‘X’ in relation with islands of knowledge that cannot all be foreseen in advance.”

33 Albeit of different types. Respectively, they exemplify the two basic forms of digitization that Hui Yuk terms “mapping” and “tagging.” See Hui 2016, 50.

object.” In his book of 1958 *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* Simondon opposes the view in which technology is seen simply in terms of the *tool*, an instrument by means of which humans act upon nature. For Simondon, technology is not something added to an already existing human being, it is only through technology that the “human” *comes into being*. Simondon therefore argues that the technical object has a role in culture as foundational as that of the aesthetic object or the sacred object. He charges that Western philosophy has nevertheless largely ignored technology, and as a result is incapable of understanding either the mode of existence of technical objects or our condition of being in a world increasingly occupied and shaped by them. Gilbert Simondon died in 1989, four years before the release of the Mosaic web browser that first popularized the World Wide Web and inaugurated the commercial exploitation of the Internet. Hui Yuk aims to account for a new kind of technical object in the milieu of the Internet – the “digital object” – significantly different from that described by Simondon in that it has no material substance. In terms consistent with those employed by Schmid, Hui writes:

The existence of digital objects is constituted by the materialized milieu which gives it an identity, which does not come from the “matter” [...], nor from the imposition of form, but by the relations in it, created by it, and that surround it. [...] the materiality of form cannot be fully accounted for by the abstract notion of matter or the concrete material that the object is composed of. [...] This materiality seems to come from elsewhere (a different reality or order of magnitude). (2014, 61)<sup>34</sup>

34 Both Gilbert Simondon and Hui Yuk base their understanding of the object on a critique of the Aristotelian doctrine of “hylomorphism,” according to which all existing things result from a combination of matter and form. Aristotle gives the example of a brick, which results from the imposition of the shape of a wooden mould on clay. Simondon objects that this purely abstract picture leaves out everything essential in the production of the real brick. The mould cannot impose its form on any matter whatsoever, nor can the clay lend itself to just any form; they are preadapted to each other. When wet clay is thrown into the mould the wood resists the impact as if “pushing back” – here again there is reciprocal action, rather than an active/passive relation. Simondon finds such interdependencies and exchanges at play throughout the production of Aristotle’s brick, from the molecular level to the system of slave labor. In another example, Simondon writes: “The technicity of the automobile does not lie entirely in the automobile object; it consists in its adaptive correspondence to the travelled environment, through the intermediary network of roads [...]” (2015, 22). The image of a network of roads may easily be mapped onto the prevailing image of the Internet, but the type of object invoked may not. An “automobile object” moving down a road has physical substance, an “image object” traveling across the Internet does not. Simondon’s 1958 critique of hylomorphism redirects the

In the philosophical tradition within which Hui Yuk works there is a shift from the pre-industrial “natural object” through the industrial “technical object” to the present “digital object.” Unlike the objects of philosophical enquiry that precede it the digital object is immaterial – but it is not the *only* immaterial object, there is also the *psychical object*. The dragon on the gamer’s screen is a component of the gamer’s psychical reality, one that elapses in synchrony with their consciousness as their avatar does battle with it. The digital object and the contemporary object converge in the *virtual object*.

### Art Nevertheless

We may today confirm the terrible prescience of an observation Walter Benjamin made almost a century ago: “Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction” (1996, 289). Contemporary Art has become finance capitalism’s church. Unlike the church it replaced, there is no place in it for that “ascetic message of humility to oppose to a haughty and hedonistic bourgeois society” that in Moravia’s view Pasolini once found in the people. One should not be misled by the chorus of voices raised against capitalism within this church. As Jacques Rancière notes: “there is a whole school of so-called critical thought and art that, despite its oppositional rhetoric, is entirely integrated within the space of consensus” (2017, 239). The rapacious and unrestrained pursuit of material enrichment has led to the decimation of some human populations and annihilation of many non-human species, it has ravaged terrestrial habitats and poisoned the oceans. It is unsurprising that these and other such manifestations of the spirit of the anthropocene should find their reflection in works of art. We may however question the political value of *reflection*. In a 2007 interview Rancière indicts at length:

this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle etc. There is a whole series of forms of critical or activist art that are caught up in this police logic of the equivalence of the power of the market and the power of its denunciation. (2017, 240)

question of the identity of the technical object from physical substances to relations, which allows Hui Yuk to posit a purely relational object.

Rather than denunciation of the form of life proffered by capitalism we might better consider its *renunciation*. Like Herman Melville's *Bartleby* we might say "I would prefer not to." I would prefer not to perform in the circus of the enrichment economy. I would prefer neither to speak its language nor adopt its *style*. The French literary historian and cultural critic Marielle Macé has undertaken a detailed work of recuperation of the words "style" and "lifestyle," terms long taken into ownership by the fashion and publicity industries. In her 2016 book *Styles. Critiques of Our Forms of Life* she pays homage to Pasolini:

who dared a diagnosis of disconcerting brutality of his own present, of that which wounded him and mattered most to him: the sentiment [...] of a vast *crisis of style*, the crisis of gestures, of modes of relating, of the manners and powers of the people (which had once incarnated for him a space of exemplary stylistic, that's to say human, accomplishment). (2016, 15)

In her 2011 book *Ways of Reading, Modes of Being*, she writes:

What does it mean to give a style to one's existence? This is not the monopoly of artists, aesthetes or heroic lives, but is intrinsic to the human: not because one needs to coat one's behavior with a veneer of elegance, but because in any practice whatsoever one engages with the very forms of life. (2011, 10)<sup>35</sup>

Style is no more the monopoly of artists than is creativity, and neither of these concepts is to be abandoned to definition by the "creative industries" – any more than is the idea of "art." Macé notes, "an intrinsic articulation between style and values, or rather between style and valencies, semantic reliefs" (2016, 151). The definition of "art" has been appropriated by Contemporary Art. The recuperation of the idea, the restoration of its "values, valencies, semantic reliefs," requires that we seek alternative stylistic forms not only in the interstices of the art institution itself but also beyond it. Neo-liberal ideology naturalizes the existing order by insisting "there is no alternative," not only in the registers of the economic and political but also in the spheres of education and culture. Against this it is necessary to imagine and assert the possibility of alternative worlds, different societies, different ways of

35 The passage appears in English translation in Macé 2013. The translation here however is my own.

relating to each other. The amateur is a figure in an alternative imaginary landscape. The Barthes scholar Mathias Ecoeur insists on the *figure* of the amateur in Barthes's work:

because “amateur” in the work of Barthes seems to have neither the somewhat frozen dignity of a concept nor the supposed homogeneity of a notion. *Figure*, then, to allow a presaging of *reconfigurations*, an eruption of mobility in a wide variety of contexts. (2018, 171)

In his recent book *Capital and Ideology* (2019) the French economist Thomas Piketty substantively expands upon his widely influential study of 2013, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014). In a commentary on the book the Serbian-American economist Branko Milanovic observes that the advent of “big data” has now allowed Piketty to bring to his analyses a degree of previously unavailable empirical support (2019, 26). Summarizing his conclusions, Piketty writes:

[R]elations of force are not only material: they are also and above all intellectual and ideological. [...] ideas and ideologies count in history. They allow us perpetually to imagine and structure different worlds and different societies. (*Le Monde*, 2019, 24)<sup>36</sup>

Piketty notes that this observation contradicts the notion, “often characterized as ‘marxist,’” that “economic forces and relations of production determine almost mechanically the ideological ‘superstructure’ of a society.” To the contrary, he insists, “there exists a veritable autonomy of the sphere of ideas, that is to say of the ideologico-political sphere” (*Le Monde*, 2019). This insight may come as no surprise to those who followed the debates in 1970s Film Studies and Cultural Studies. What it may nevertheless remind us of is the extent to which attention to ideology has faltered in these academic fields in the intervening half-century. If the film theory that emerged in the 1970s may be viewed in retrospect as more than erudite fan literature it is because of its contributions to theories of ideology, without this attention it becomes talk about something that does not matter.

In the context of the *Key Debates* series, the constellation of terms “art,” “cinema,” “stories,” “screens” suggests to me critical inquiry directed toward emergent photofilmic narrative forms in which formal and semantic

36 Not published at the time of writing. Extracts published in advance of publication, *Le Monde*, Friday, September 6, 2019.

complexity are allied with an affective dimension, and which offer alternatives to the mass-produced verisimilitude of hegemonic mass culture.<sup>37</sup> In the introduction to his 1977 book *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben remarks that although it is accepted that a novel may not deliver the story it has promised to tell, it is usual to expect works of criticism to offer “working hypotheses.” However, he notes, “when the term criticism appears in the vocabulary of Western philosophy, it signifies rather inquiry at the limits of knowledge about precisely that which can be neither posed nor grasped” (1993, XV). Anne-Françoise Schmid’s “contemporary object,” Hui Yuk’s “digital object,” are at the limits of what may be discerned in our mutating real of representations; nevertheless, faced with the diversity of image practices consequent upon digitalization we may consider a quasi-phenomenological *epoché* in which the categories “cinema” and “art” are “bracketed out” in order to better discern, in the glare of the spectacle, the outlines (however sketchy) of a “culture of the invisible at the heart of visibility itself.”

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## 7. The Twenty-First-Century Post-cinematic Ecology of the Film Museum

Theorizing a Film Archival Practice in Transition –  
A Dialogue

*Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever*

### Abstract

Contributing to the cinema death topic while focusing on national film institutes, Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever observe that, while it can be said that processes of digitalization (which raise the question as to whether the notion of film is still relevant in this new technological context) have deeply affected the world of film and cinema, some of the film institutes remain – an index of the cinema persistence. Digitalization concerns reproduction and creation. The exchange of views between Fossati and Van den Oever provides a useful perspective on the issue of digital archiving. It also deeply enriches the idea of post-cinema, more precisely, the idea of “a new post-cinematic ecology.”

**Keywords:** Digitalization, creation, ecology

*In honor of Thomas Elsaesser (1943-2019)*

So far no medium has yet wholly replaced its predecessors. Likewise, new techniques do not make older ones disappear. They may, however, modify the cultural and economic context in which they function (for instance, a skill or craft can migrate from the sphere of labor to that of art) and also help establish new diegetic worlds or new media ontologies, as is the case with early – and classical – cinema practices being rediscovered by so many (digital) artists.

Media archaeology is therefore perhaps nothing but the name for the placeless place and timeless time the film historian needs to occupy when trying to articulate, rather than merely accommodate, these several alternative, counterfactual or parallax histories around which any study of the audio-visual multi-media moving image culture now unfolds.

– Thomas Elsaesser (2004, 112).

## Prologue

If film archivists would have believed that “post-cinema” must be read in terms of what is left of film after the “death of cinema,” the end of the national film institutes as we know them would surely be close. Nevertheless, some film museums thrive, though not all do. The Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, the *Museo Nazionale del Cinema* in Turin, the *Cinémathèque Française* in Paris and the Museum of the Moving Image in New York are among the thriving ones. Only recently, Eye’s Chief Curator, Giovanna Fossati, updated her standard work on the transitions taking place in the world of the film museum in her 2018 book *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. When she embarked on this study over a decade ago (the study was first published in 2009), her starting point was a reflection on processes of digitalization (the broader impact of the digital on the field of film heritage), starting with the general question: *can we still speak of film* when the film reel is replaced by the digital file and when the digital has become the dominant form? (Fossati [2009] 2018, 15).

From the start, she envisioned that the processes of digitization and digitalization, which had deeply affected the world of film and the cinema as we knew it, did not entail the end of cinema. The ramifications merely denoted a cinema in transition, a cinema that had been in transition from its very beginnings: when analog filmmaking was replaced by digital filmmaking; analog projection was replaced by digital projection; analog film technologies became obsolete and found their way to the archive’s vaults; classical cinema-going practices were replaced by online, on demand and mobile film viewing. To her as a curator, it implied that a *theory of a practice in transition* was needed, not only to study but to also monitor this process, which seemed particularly important for a national film institute responsible for so much of the national film heritage. “Curator,” as a term, stems from the Latin word “cura” for “caring” or “curing.” To curators, in the process of curing, the metaphors of death and dying are not helpful. With its dystopian overtones, the metaphor is definitely memorable and as such is embraced

by some, others – among them those who find themselves in a process of planning and steering and taking responsibility for an institute *in crisis* (as some felt) or *in transition* (as others argued) – are particularly well positioned to treat the metaphor of a dying cinema with great critical care.

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the post-Brighton New Film History Debate inspired the birth of early cinema studies as we know it. As Ian Christie (2006, 66) observes: “crucially, what began as a movement to study these [pre-1906] films empirically – to look at them as archaeological objects – soon became an exploration of their context – of production, circulation and reception – and thus necessarily a study of what no longer existed – namely the vast bulk of these film texts and their places and modes of screening.”<sup>1</sup> “Brighton” also taught film scholars and film archivists about how to work together for their mutual benefit. From then on, as argued by Fossati in her book, many of the leading scholars and film archivists embarked on a very *fertile collaboration and interplay*, affecting the fields of research, education and archiving. If anything, this was not the end of cinema. It was not even the beginning of the end, to quote Churchill. Quite the contrary, one might well argue that these last decades saw a range of new initiatives, which strengthened the fields of film studies and film archiving, among them the first film-heritage study programs (Fossati [2009] 2018, 16, 18).

For many years now, Fossati, a leading film scholar and film archivist herself, has played a pivotal role in reflecting on the transitions in the field of film and their implications for film archival practices. Her impact stems not only from her work as a prolific researcher and curator but also from her work in education. As the co-founder of the film-heritage study program “Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image” at the University of Amsterdam and of the book series *Framing Film*, published by AUP and dedicated to theoretical and analytical studies in restoration, collection, archival, and exhibition practices, Fossati’s work within the field of education is indeed remarkable. This dialogue is meant to reflect on the “post-cinematic” transitions in all these fields and on the new “post-cinematic ecology” she finds herself in within the film museum.

– Annie van den Oever

**Annie van den Oever:** In the introduction to *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st -Century Film* (2016), Shane Denson and Julia Leyda argue that the term “post-cinema” is problematic in the same way “postcapitalism” and

<sup>1</sup> Also quoted in Strauven (2013), who provides a broader reflection on the impact of FIAF Brighton 1978 on the field.

“postmodernism” are. It is just not clear whether “post-” represents a new figure of capitalism, modernism, or the cinema. Does “post-” indicate a clear break with the past? Interestingly, as Dominique Chateau and José Moure state in their introduction to this book, Denson and Leyda argue that if the postmodernism debate taught them anything, it is rather to treat the prefix “post-” as “indicative of a more subtle shift or transformation in the realm of culturally dominant aesthetic and experiential forms” (2016, 6). Would you agree with them that the “transitions” – the word you are using in your book – in the cinema were the result of an evolution rather than a clear break. Moreover, did they affect the culturally dominant forms?

**Giovanna Fossati:** I certainly agree that the term “post-cinema” (and “post-anything” for that matter) is problematic, and, actually, I think my own term of choice, “transition,” is also problematic for similar reasons. They both imply a linear reading of (film) history and are, therefore, still connected with a teleological approach, even when the intention is to break free of it as I tried to do in my work.

To be honest, I have been doubting that term of choice ever since the first version of *From Grain to Pixel* came out in 2009. A few years after publication, the Stockholm-based film scholar Trond Lundemo (2012) put a finger on the very reason I had struggled with in choosing the term, saying that though I had argued that indeed “transition” is “not only a phase that will end in a final result, but must be understood as an ever ongoing process reforming archival practice and theory” (178). Nevertheless, I did use the term “transition,” which, as Lundemo remarks, “still suggests that we are moving from one situation to another, especially with the ‘from – to’ development in her book’s title” (2012, 178).

Indeed, in my book I tried to defy the inherent linearity of the term “transition” by highlighting that I was interested in looking at “the negligible in-between A and D,” With “A” referring to all analog film and “D” to all digital. In our current state of affairs, we are rather situated in-between. In retrospect, we realize that A never was such a well-defined place to begin with. A was already an in-between, a transition in itself. In light of this, “transition” coincides with a constant in-betweenness ([2009] 2018, 181).

Still, terms like “post-” and “transition,” however nuanced, do privilege a chronological reading that assumes a before and after.

More recently the Udine-based film researcher Diego Cavallotti built further on Lundemo’s point and remarked that he agreed that the notion of “transition” can be misleading. Cavallotti (2018, 153-154) preferred

“conflation,” which addresses both the “differences and intersections between analog and digital,” as Lundemo has also pointed out (2018, 153-154).

That said, I am not suggesting to replace “transition” with “conflation” or any other term. Similarly, I would not want to replace “post-cinema” with a different term. One of the reasons I think these imperfect notions are still valid and productive is that they *do* indeed facilitate the way we talk about history and the history of practices, in our case film (archival) history and the history of film archival practice. So while they need to be approached critically, we also need to maintain a relation to how histories are (culturally) perceived. Concepts of teleology, determinism, evolution have been the object of historiographical critique at least since the 1970s; yet, they are still part of how most people read history. For this and other reasons, our role as scholars (both in research as in teaching) is, in my view, mainly that of promoting a critical understanding of any concept that is used to describe a phenomenon, including those concepts that have been chosen by ourselves. Taking the case of “transition” into consideration, though criticized by myself and others, it is a means to describe the changes in film archival practice and could, more generally, be considered an inherent characteristic of film (archival) practice.

So back to your question, do I agree that the “transitions” in the cinema were the result of an evolution rather than a clear break? Yes, I do agree that what changed in the last two decades has not been the result of a clear break (“a paradigm shift” or a “revolution,” as the digital turn is often referred to). However, as mentioned earlier, I would still prefer to talk about “transition” rather than “evolution.” Besides its linear connotation as Lundemo and Cavallotti have pointed out, “transition” is a spatial term (derived from Latin *transitio*, “going across”), and therefore also conveys a sense of “back-and-forth” movement (something that “post” does not, being a term that pertains to the temporal sphere). It is that continuous back-and-forth (or dialogue or conflation) between past and present; obsolete and new technologies; old and new practices; and theoretical frameworks developed at different points in time and in different contexts, that has been so central to media research disciplines, including those that focus on the archival objects and practices themselves. I think we can speak of this as a new academic practice in our field; a practice that gathered strength at the turn of the millennium, with Media Archeology at its forefront. Finally, and most importantly, “transition” also refers to a back-and-forth between what has been seen as relevant and/or what has been neglected as irrelevant in the past and what is being (re)evaluated today or may be in the near future.

**AvdO:** In *From Grain to Pixel*, you discuss the so-called “material turn” in reaction to the “digital turn” (Fossati [2009] 2018, 19). You contest the thought that the digital is somehow “immaterial.” Could you elaborate on this? What have been the merits of the “material turn” for the archival world so far?

**GF:** Generally speaking, the “post-cinema” era has led to a broader concern with film archives and the (material) objects they preserve. Since the so-called digital rollout – the large-scale digitization of the Western film and distribution infrastructure that took place around 2012 – a growing number of filmmakers have shown a renewed interest in traditional film production and projection. British filmmaker Tacita Dean was one of the first to publicly declare to “Save Celluloid, for Art’s Sake” (2011); since then, many experimental filmmakers as well as Hollywood directors such as Christopher Nolan, Quentin Tarantino, Paul Thomas Anderson, Steven Spielberg, and Martin Scorsese have voiced similar pleas for preserving traditional film production as an option for contemporary filmmaking.

As I consider the “digital turn” complementary to the “material turn,” I am not surprised that at a time when digital tools are enabling new research directions into the archives, some researchers are actually drawn to a more “analog” approach to the archives, and the objects and the practices contained within.

**AvdO:** The editors of *Theorizing 21st-Century Film* did not devote a special chapter to the post-cinematic world of film archiving and the changing practices in this field. However, it seems to me that the major changes in the field of film since the 1980s, which one tends to label as post-cinematic, indeed have had profound implications for the field of film archiving – a field that by its very nature reflects on and responds to the so-called transitions in the field of film. Would you, like Leyda and Denson (2016) and many others with them, primarily situate the current transitions (or transformations) in the field of film “in the realm of culturally dominant aesthetic and experiential forms” (6)? Your book seems to indicate so. I am thinking of the shifts away from “art cinema” as a dominant aesthetic and experiential form to the new post-cinematic (“multiplex” and “home video”) cultures of the 1980s and the sudden shifts in the use of digital viewing technologies impacting the transformations of both user and viewing practices. What would be your main points of attention for such a chapter?

**GF:** In a chapter on the relation between film archiving and a post-cinematic phase that starts in the 1980s, I would first of all underline that right around

that time when the term post-cinema was first employed, film archiving began to receive recognition as a profession and as an academic discipline. It was in the 1980s that film festivals devoted to restored films started growing into what have since become internationally renowned events; think of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, founded in 1982, or Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna, founded in 1986.

Simultaneously, national film archives also started receiving funding for preservation and restoration on a more structural basis as exemplified in the case of the Nederlands Filmmuseum in Amsterdam (today's Eye Filmmuseum) (see Delpet 2018). Also, the first MA programs focusing on film archiving started in the late 1980s; the first academic master program in film archiving was launched in 1984 at the University of East Anglia in collaboration with the East Anglian Film Archive in Norwich, England, and many such programs followed in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>2</sup>

Question is: was it because cinema was threatened to become marked with “post-,” dead, and obsolete labels that one turned to the practice of archiving the past, which had suddenly become more relevant and urgent? Or was it because new accessible media (videos from the 80s and digital from the late 90s) provided films with a second chance as objects of study that Western film archives started receiving more regular funding and support, and archival studies emerged as an academic discipline? Or was it because these new access media promised new sources of revenue for producers, broadcasters, and, more recently, streaming platforms, that the interest in film archives has gradually but steadily grown in the post-cinematic era? These are all questions that would be worth addressing in such a chapter on the relation between film archives and post-cinema.

Additionally, in terms of research and reflection, there is still a lot to investigate. In the last two decades a growing number of academic and professional resources have emerged that help map the changes in film archival practices in the last decades.<sup>3</sup> However, there is still much room for reflection, and the coming decades will undoubtedly offer a great deal of new topics worth researching and reflecting on. Indeed, film archival studies remains a young discipline, and, as I have argued, film (archival) practice is still (has always been and will continue to be) in transition, back-and-forth

2 See Fossati, 2018, 18 and more in general on the institutionalization of AV archiving programs, see Olesen and Keidl, eds. 2018.

3 Pescetelli 2010; Bursi and Venturini, eds. 2011; Frick 2011; Enticknap 2013; Parth, Hanley and Ballhausen, eds. 2013; and Lameris 2017, to name a few monographies and edited volumes focusing on film archival practice that have appeared since the first edition of *From Grain to Pixel* in 2009.

between its analog past, its hybrid present, and its supposedly digital future (Fossati [2009] 2018, 14-15).

In particular, there are a number of emerging areas where archivists and scholars are teaming up to produce promising results. I am thinking of projects in the so-called digital humanities where the study of digitized archives, making use of innovative digital tools, has led to very interesting results, as in the case of such projects as: Cinemetrics, Cinema Context, Digital Formalism, The Timeline of Historical Filmcolors, and The Sensory Moving Image Archive.<sup>4</sup>

However, I am also thinking of projects that are not enabled by digital tools, but rather focus on objects and practices (including analog, hybrid and digital ones), like with Experimental Media Archeology.<sup>5</sup> Concerning such an approach, the Network of Experimental Media Archeology embedded in your Film Archive at the University of Groningen, and the project “Doing Experimental Media Archaeology” (DEMA) led by Andreas Fickers at the University of Luxembourg, immediately come to mind.<sup>6</sup>

**AvdO:** When you speak about the technologies used in the digital era you remind your readers that many are hybrid (Fossati [2009] 2018, 41), that the practice of use is hybrid as it relies on a long tradition and expertise in analog filmmaking (55), and that the lens-based media did not see much of a change because they continued to use the same lenses (74). Are you perhaps warning against an overestimation of the direct impact of digital technologies on the transitions in the field of film? Are the changes in the institutes and in the user practices perhaps more gradually, less visible, yet more profound?

**GF:** Indeed, I argue that today’s practice is still hybrid and that the “digital” is not as immaterial as we tend to think it is. When working in a film archive and being involved in acquiring, preserving, restoring, and projecting born-digital films, one tends to appreciate how “material” digital technology still is. Fundamentally, the hardware to handle born-digital films is still as material as that of film-born films. Digital cameras, projectors, and tapes are all material objects that often use the same technology as when film

4 More information on these projects can be found at: <http://www.cinemetrics.lv/index.php>; <http://www.cinemacontext.nl>; <https://www.ims.tuwien.ac.at/projects/digital-formalism>; <https://filmcolors.org>; <https://sensorymovingimagearchive.humanities.uva.nl>. For a thorough discussion of these kinds of projects, see Heftberger 2014; Olesen 2017.

5 Fickers and Van den Oever 2014; Fossati and Van den Oever, eds. 2016.

6 See <https://www.c2dh.uni.lu/projects/doing-experimental-media-archaeology-dema-practice-theory>.

was fully analog (e.g., lenses). Even when talking about digital data files, one can argue that signs of materiality can be encountered. One example I find fascinating is that of the “dead and defective pixels” (Fossati [2009] 2018, 74-75), caused by sensors in a digital camera that are not responding to light. There are several other kinds of “digital artifacts” (see 119, 204, 217, 381) that show signs of a physical intervention during a hybrid workflow that transforms images through light into data.

Finally, it should also be stressed that most film practices, both in production and archiving, rely on more than a century of analog tradition and are, therefore, imbued with hybrid and digital practices that continue to develop and evolve.

**AvdO:** You have been closely studying the transitions in the world of film archiving for about 15 years now. Would you speak of a new post-cinematic ecology in the film archival habitat? When I talk about this new ecology of the film archive, I am referring to the new patterns, balances, and relationships between those involved in the museum’s work, in today’s environment of the film museum as an institution. Is there perhaps a new ecology that signals that some serious transitions have taken place in these last decades?

**GF:** In terms of a new post-cinematic ecology in the film archival habitat, I think it is time to move on from the “digital turn” discussion and shift our attention to other aspects of film archiving that are currently more urgent.

In the years to come, for instance, I intend to particularly focus on researching about film archiving on a global level. In the past, I mainly studied Western institutional archives through the lens of the analog to digital transition. Moving on from that, I want to delve into archives in the so-called Global South and expand my research to alternative or counter archives world-wide.<sup>7</sup> Film scholar and archivist Caroline Frick’s critique on mainstream film archival politics and the related assumptions of what “film heritage” is, will be my starting point.<sup>8</sup>

7 For a general idea of what these kinds of alternative archives might be, consult the program of the 4th Eye International Conference, *Activating the Archive: Audio-Visual Collections and Civic Engagement, Political Dissent and Societal Change*, <https://www.eyefilm.nl/themas/eye-international-conference-2018>.

8 In particular, when Frick writes, “film and television archivists employ the concept of heritage to support their current actions and projected budgets. Both corporate and nonprofit film archives have assumed the role of protectors of global motion picture heritage. They proceed in this weighty (and nobly viewed) task by utilizing very specific rigid methods and standards without questioning the powerful connotations of what is meant by ‘heritage’” (2011, 18).

After focusing my research on Western archives, it is crucial to learn how the archives' traditions in the Global South, as well as that of alternative archives, cope with digitalization today. In a time when the kind of high standards proposed by Western institutional archives appear to be unsustainable in the long run, it is important to look for alternatives, North and South, West and East together, and search for a global approach. I am also very curious to see if the theoretical frameworks I have identified in my research are still valid on a global level, and what other frameworks may arise when looking into archives with different histories, alternative policies, and practices.

## Epilogue

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the “death of cinema” discourse of the 1980s coincided, ironically, with the birth of a new critical discourse, if not a new discipline: New Film History. The term is closely connected to seminal thoughts on the topic by the late Thomas Elsaesser. At the end of his 2004 article “New Film History as Media Archaeology,” he argued that the new digital technologies of the 1990s had had a complex impact on our understanding of film history and the role technologies had played in it. However, in order to benefit from this new/old relation, we would need to overcome the opposition between “old” and “new” media, which, he argued, destabilizes our understanding of media practices, today’s media practices included. Accordingly, he pleaded for a “Media Archaeology” that helps to overcome the opposition between “old” and “new.” And he appealed to film historians to dedicate themselves to rewriting film history as a social history of film cultures, instead of merely an art history of the moving image.

Thomas Elsaesser returned to the topic over and over again. He had a famously critical relation to film history as well as a keen interest in all the elements the past has left to us, including the collections in film heritage institutes. As a simple manifestation: he helped establish the University of Amsterdam’s Master program, “Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image,” which Giovanna Fossati has been continually involved with since its establishment in 2003.

In honor of Thomas Elsaesser, we wish to end this dialogue referring to the archival and educational practice that he envisioned at the end of his 2004 article as a historical practice in which,

[n]ext to an *aesthetics* of astonishment for which Tom Gunning once pleaded, there [is] room for a *hermeneutics* of astonishment, where besides

curiosity and scepticism, wonder and sheer disbelief also serve as the impulses behind historical research, concerning the past as well as the present. (2004, 113)

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## 8. In-Flight Entertainment or the Emptying Process of Art in the Air

*Christophe Génin*

### Abstract

Despite a series of material changes to the medium throughout its history, cinema has remained a “common immersive experience” insofar as it was based on the illusion of reality. However, the most important change is that this is no longer true: post-cinema, writes Christophe Génin, can be considered a defection of the original experience of watching movies. This situation has to do with social and economic transformations, implying the conversion of cultural industry to service to the person and a deep variation in the aesthetic experience, which Génin proposes to understand through an analysis of the experience of individual screens in aircraft. A confined space such as an aircraft seat isolates the individual to whom it is offered in a moment of “solipsism of caprice.”

**Keywords:** Immersion, aircraft screen, solipsism

### What Do Post-art and Post-cinema Mean?

Is there a post-movie era? And why would cinema have such an era? Compared to what baseline situation? Classically, the story was conceptualized retrospectively from an event or a man challenging a historical landmark with a before and an after: pre-history, pre-Socratic, pre-Colombian, pre-Raphaelite, etc. Today, since the success of postmodern thought by Lyotard, the formulations in *post* have multiplied and we think, no longer in terms of precursors, but in terms of successors: postmodernity, post-art, post-graffiti, and so on. So the prefix “pre” thought of history, according to the pattern of a latency that awaited its coming: the eldest Greek philosophers balked, but at last, Socrates arrived! Against this progressive and too often reductive

view, the prefix “post” conversely proposes a modular variation scheme. In this sense, post-cinema would not go beyond a deceased cinema but the alteration of an entity due to a change in parameter (for example, the passage of the digital film) from a module which would be the constant unit.

Therefore, to establish the possibility of a post-cinema requires an understanding of what cinema was. Let us start with a minimal definition: cinema is a popular spectacle based on illusionism thanks to a specific device. We will have objected that this definition is reductive and debatable. Of course, but it allows us to discern a practice. The cinematographic device was not that of the painter or the photographer, and its mode of exhibition differed from the theater, even if, today, by the digitization of all artistic practices, these distinctions are fading away.

We will try to understand this “after” of cinema based on its material conditions. However, we will not examine the material conditions of creation or production, particularly the transition from celluloid film to digital encoding, or the transition from traditional trickery (by theatrical retraction, by editing) to digital special effects. In fact, the history of cinema is comprised of these technological evolutions which, each time, were supposed to revolutionize it, or even complete it: the talkies, the color picture, the cinemascope, the Sensurround effect, the digitization. What will be recorded, how and using what method, for what restitution?

In our opinion, this changes only the modalities of performance of the cinema but not its aesthetic experience, in the sense that it remains faithful to its principle to be a show, that such a show be presented under a Barnum in a fairground festival, a reformed theater, a cinema, or a multiplex hall with giant screens and 3D vision. The very idea of a “huge” screen persists in saying what cinema proposes to be: an intensive and maximum sensory experience, from the entrance of the train in the station of La Ciotat on a flat screen to extreme surfing sessions on a geodesic dome. It will be objected that this is the perpetuation of Truffaut’s 1954 “Papa’s Cinema.” What does it matter? We postulate that cinematograph, whether popular or not, documentary or fictional, is a *common immersive experience*: it is not only my personal experience of being sensitive and smart, my experience of an imminent meaning in terms of the senses, but even more a social experience of a common time, space and affect.

What does immersion mean? It is not only to be caught by synesthetic effects and an optical or acoustic illusion that would make us increase our presence in a purely fantasy world of fact, like virtual reality masks (which, in itself, is an oxymoron based on the perception of the aesthetic subject). It is a more radical consent, in principle, to accept a representation

of the world as the presence of the world itself. When I watch *RÉPARER LES VIVANTS* (HEAL THE LIVING),<sup>1</sup> I may know that the heart transplant scene is a silicone body altered by special effects. However, what matters is not the sensory-motor impact of the image on my perception, but the moral veracity of the human condition in the given situation.

For many years, cinema has been self-referencing its own technological transformation according to a principle of incorporation, the body of the receiver involved in the imaging, whether it be *TRON* (2010), *EXISTENZ* (1999), *THE MATRIX* (1999), or *AVATAR* (2009). We will not follow this baroque way of thinking because we propose that post-cinema be understood as a defection of this common immersive experience.

Thus, we will try to describe and understand the defection of cinema as art from its material reception conditions. Quite often “Dad’s movie” was a poor man’s cinema, a moment shared, commented on together, and felt together as seen in *CINEMA PARADISO* (1988). Conversely, the rich man’s cinema was that of the private projection, solitary, as in *SUNSET BOULEVARD* (1950). Therefore, we will look for a current modular variation in the aesthetic experience of individual screens in aircraft. Today, with home cinema and, especially, with *in-flight entertainment*, the private, individualized projection has become the trend that ruins the aesthetic dimension (that of a *koine aisthesis* [Aristotle 1966, 425a27], or *sensus communis*).

But to think of post-cinema as one of the modalities of post-art, it is first necessary to understand what process art itself is likely to become obsolete. How does one define post-art? Literally speaking, it is what happens “after” (from Latin *post*) art. The whole question is to understand what this preposition “after” means, which is an indicator of ranking in time or space with various meanings. Indeed, the prefix “post” is polysemous.

- What follows is a phase that follows another, as in “post-doctorate” and “post-prandial” to indicate the transition to another state or situation that requires the first step as a *sine qua non*. In this sense, post-art would follow the art of which it would be a form of development or fulfillment. So, there would be no break, but rather continuity.
- Overtaking; that’s the decisive meaning this time: from now on, we move on to something else and turn the page. For instance, we speak of “postoperative rehabilitation” which suggests that we wish to return to normal by solving a period of crisis or dysfunction, or of “post-graffiti” which implies that the period of street graffiti ends with their transfer to canvas and their sale in galleries, or of “postindustrial” which means a

1 *RÉPARER LES VIVANTS*, dir. Katell Quillévéré, 2016, France, Les Films du Bélier, 103 mn.

knowledge or digital economy. In this sense, post-art is the post-Oedipal stage of art: the resolution of an internal crisis.

- Reflexive side-by-side: the post-face or post-scriptum adds a separate element to the body text that can be a distant comment.
- The countertrend: postmodernity involves deconstructing great stories of modernity. In this sense, *post* has a critical value.
- Destruction: *postmortem*, *post-abortum*.

This prefix may seem contradictory since it may refer to continuity, change or destruction. However, a unit can be identified: *post* designates a variety of alterations that can evolve in positive intensity until deepening, or even to surpass oneself by oneself, or in negative intensity until withering.

### Is Post-art a Becoming of the Spirit?

According to two different assessments, it seems as though the first overtaking of art as a spiritual activity was conceptualized by Hegel.

In the first place, there is an overtaking of art by reflexivity as it is exposed in *Aesthetics*. At first, this reflexivity can transcend creative activity: “Under all these relations art is and remains for us, in view of its highest determination, a thing of the past” (Hegel 1970, t.1, 25; my translation). In this sense, what makes art “past?” Henceforth, it is considered “for us,” that is, subordinate to the “reflection” of “our judgment.” It is this relationship to a judging and reflecting “we” that no longer makes art an immediate manifestation of the true, but an object for the science of the spirit. This reflexivity is then imminent to creative activity, what Hegel identifies in comedy as the end of art, in the double sense of *Zweck*: either a goal or a finish. Post-art would appear as the self-dissolution of art (*sich aufheben*). Indeed, Hegel identifies in the comedy a carnival inversion of the relations of power and authority; the master and the servant inverting their roles, turning in ridicule the absurdity of a power emptied of its effectiveness. Comedy is therefore the height of romantic art that expresses the freedom of the individual mind, the absolute no longer being an objective, transcendent and perennial principle, but subjectivity itself.<sup>2</sup> It “finds its rest in itself, no longer unites itself to objectivity and real particularity, and becomes aware of the negative of this dissolution (*Auflösung*) in the humor of the

2 What Hegel also calls “the work of political art,” the one in which the will of the slave is reflected infinitely in itself, emerging from slavery by the democracy that determines freedom on the mode of equality (1963, 196).

comic" (1970, t.3, 572; my translation). If the comic shows the dissolution of the classical unity of objectivity and subjectivity, then, by transition, at the culminating point of this awareness in the buffoonery points to the dissolution of art (*die Auflösung der Kunst*) himself.

In fact, the comic exposes the self-destruction (*die Selbstzerstörung*) of this unity of the absolute and of the real existence (*Dasein*) and even annihilates (*zernichten*) the realization of the absolute truth through the free and contingent expression of subjective interests. The self-destruction of unity is the way in which the work is reflected. Indeed, in this dissolution of art in the ironic work, the subjectivity only remains self-confident and freed from any condition. This subjectivity remains self-assured in her self-censorship (*sich aufheben*) of any form of truth, unable to affirm any effectiveness (*Wirklichkeit*) of point of view in an artwork. By the way, art loses its substance, that is, "the eternal, the divine" (*das Ewige, Gottliche*) (1970, 573).

As he was able to reformulate it, Hegel thought that the art ends "in the dissolution of the objective content" in "the mood," i.e., in the irony of the artist who "is self-producing" (2005, 100). Why? Because the purpose of art is to express its content, the divine as the ideal of the spirit in itself. However, since its form is a "material sensitivity," it follows a "heterogeneity" of the form and content which does not allow it to express a spiritual truth in a lasting way, but only in an epoch of the development of the spirit by and for itself.

Hence, in the second place, there is a surpassing of art by another spiritual activity, either religion or philosophy. If one agrees to follow the Hegelian *Encyclopedia*, art would only be the embodied form of the spirit, placed in the matter's self, capable of being dissociated as pure spirit in religion, posing the spirit for oneself (2005, 40-46).

Hegel's thesis – "Art, for us, is a thing of the past" (*Bleibt die Kunst [...] für uns ein Vergangenes*) (1970, t.1, 25; my translation) – announces that it is no longer the immediate form of the real since it is now mediated by aesthetic analysis, and is replaced by science as the modern form of truth, hence the historicity of the *post*. In the seventeenth century, art is still viewed by artists as a manifestation of the real, for example by Racine. But since the creation of the history of art and aesthetics in the eighteenth century, art has become mediated, subordinate to the interpretation of this reflexive "we." It is "for us," for the philosopher who irreversibly and thoughtfully inscribes the situation of art in a history and in an Encyclopedia of the Reason. Thus, it becomes a post-art, this "art according to philosophy" that Kosuth (1991, 153-167) thought prolongs and overcomes the Hegelian overtaking: by being

conceptual and reflexive, art shows that it is not only a sensitive form of the intelligible (which would be cleared and interpreted by aesthetic science), but that it is also an intelligible form of an intelligibility which is imminent to the sensible faculty.

Post-art could thus be interpreted as the surpassing of art by itself, integrating in its production and conception a reflexive look, thus making self-reflexivity both the content and the form of the artwork. Could we also spot this in the cinema, and thus understand the post-cinema as its self-reflexivity?

It would be easy to find elements of reflexivity in various films. However, it seems to us that it would, in fact, be an error of interpretation of what this *post* can radically mean: not just a historical variation of an artistic expression but a *change of paradigm*. In other words, it does not seem to us that the “truth” of art is in its reflexive crisis, but rather in its material conditions which reveal the modalities of its efficiency.

Hegel’s spiritualist interpretation obscures the role of tools and machines in the production of works of the mind: lifting machines for architecture (of which Vitruvius speaks in *De Architectura*), foundry for sculpture. There are also planers and saws for musical instruments, hangers and machinery in the theater, looms for tapestry, etc. There is a whole substrate of engineering necessary for the production of the works. Music is nothing without musical interpretation, itself linked to the invoice of instruments (Stradivarius, Steinweg), as the choice of a specific lens conditions a rhetoric or an aesthetic of the image.

Thus, in another materialistic sense, that is to say, taking into account the material conditions of the production of works as artistic genres (finance, machines, labor forces), post-art begins with the abandonment of a formal and aristocratic system of fine arts and may appear with new devices combining mechanics and chemistry. In 1839, photography, resulting from the research of the engineers, Niépce and Chevalier, and from the improvements of the painter, Daguerre, is presented by Arago before the Academies of Sciences and Fine Arts combined, thus overcoming the age-old division between the brain and the heart.

### **Fragmentation of the Common Aesthetic Experience**

Based on which materialistic criteria do we move into this era of *post*? Post-cinema would begin with the gradual disappearance of this collective aesthetic experience: with the drive-in or open-air cinema-park

which appeared in 1915 but which was formalized in 1933 by Richard M. Hollingshead in New Jersey. Here, a car park replaces the room, and the spectators remain in their cars to watch the movie like a family in a lounge with drinks and snacks. Nevertheless, the drive-in presented a double type of common experience: that of the family unit which found itself in the car, and that of amateurs, forming a kind of sociability at a distance of mutual interpellations, generation, as seen in *AMERICAN GRAFFITI*.<sup>3</sup>

To try and understand one of the current dimensions of post-cinema, let us start with the uses and a personal trivial aesthetic experience. I'm on a plane to a distant destination. I'm in economy class with some of the other passengers. To pass the time, the company no longer distributes newspapers, but installs individual screens at the back of each seat, facing each passenger. This screen fulfills two main types of functions:

- on the serious side, it provides information on safety and flight path; it transmits the announcements of the commander or cabin chief; it sometimes allows one to geo-locate certain data to anticipate one's stay;
- on the entertainment side, it offers music or games, documentaries or movies.

I am caught here in the ancient dichotomy between the difficult matter and the pleasant, easy stuff, between the deep and the frivolous, between the presentation of the real and the expression of the imaginary, between information and fiction.

This individual touch screen or remote control brings everything back to entertainment: it's an IFE, an in-flight entertainment. The crew is no longer there to slip me a good word, to offer me a reading, to keep me company, because everything is delegated to the skimmer automaton which becomes almost my only vis-à-vis during the flight. The human being is being lost to electronic circuits. So, everything is considered "entertaining," whether it's a documentary or a children's cartoon, an author's film, or a block buster. Consequently, the worldwide cultural industries equalize every production into product designed in the light of personal leisure, without worrying about the spiritual value of a work. Proceeding according to a simple principle of multiple choices with induced logical trees, I can find quite quickly – when the screen works! – enough to kill my boredom, because the presupposition of such an automaton is that you become bored on an airplane. Unlike the train, where I can talk to my neighbor, go for a walk, change my mind at the bar car, go down to the platform to smoke a cigarette, watch the cows go by, read the newspaper or a station novel, it is readily accepted that aircraft are

3 *AMERICAN GRAFFITI*, dir. Georges Lucas, 1973, USA, Lucas film, 112mn.

a source of boredom, stress and even anguish. As a third-class passenger, I am confined to a small space where everything is narrow, crammed in a tiny airplane seat, with no space for my legs, where I bump all over the hallway, where the offset porthole, small and distant, barely allows me to see the flow of clouds, it is necessary to divert my attention with a flow of images *ad libitum*. On long haul, I can only enjoy two square meters of relaxation space near the toilets with about ten other people.

This inert screen quickly becomes my travel assistant and my bored companion. Depending on caprice, I can zap the different menus before I find something to satisfy my mood. I can enjoy a freedom of indifference, all choices being equivalent to me, being the supposed master of the unfolded menu even when it is determined by commercial struggles between companies to place their cultural products. But I have the illusion of this freedom of indifference because – all tastes being in nature (or rather in cultures) – the range of offers exhaust human diversity: films of Blacks, Yellows, Whites, American or European-style comedy, thrillers and science fiction, action movies and war films, passing romances and kitsch love stories, Big Show productions or more intimate films, translated films or DVDs, etc. Multicultural, multi-ethnic, multigendered, the programming presented by the menu is the exact homothetic of globalized diversity. Or, more precisely, given the modest size of the screen, it is the *miniaturization* thereof: this screen is intended to be a representative summary of the planetary diversity in a colorful juxtaposition.

This catalogue of films is, in fact, a taxonomy of humanity – a taxonomy made, not from spiritual hopes or civilizational eras, but from behavioral frequencies reduced to consumables. I'm not a Western Christian, but a fan of crime fiction. There are categories of cinema like families of aromas in wine: we no longer talk about a soil (Japanese cinema or Chignin) or connoisseurs (in Turkish New Wave or in grape Jacquère), but individual preferences which can be classified statistically (SF or fruity taste). Taste no longer poses a tension between personal satisfaction and common sense. Rather, it is a quantifiable, predictable, exploitable frequency. Culture is no longer shared by common habits, times and meeting places dedicated to an identical passion. Instead, it is a series of pre-established silos based on mass data analyses. Even though the aircraft is, as a monospace craft, a shared public space (except the cockpit), everything is done to fragment it by means of class separations that reintroduce social segregation. And within the same class, everything is done to bring the individual back to/on himself through the personal television screen (personal television or PTV), in fact, a multimedia monitor. Thus, there is an inverse movement

between these aesthetic aggregations which order groups of preferences and these social partitions which reject individual differences.

My inquisitorial finger oscillates from music to anime, from the documentary on the Galapagos to a *kung fu* movie, and from the umpteenth remake of PLANET OF THE APES to a French thriller. This menu is not a repertoire of cinema-club that would present me with a selection of the great classics, of the good values of the universal culture, as thought by UNESCO. Rather, it is a platform of bulk products, which presupposes in the individual user a right to cultural heterogeneity, to “dissonance” to use a Bernard Lahire’s concept (2004). After all, Sartre (1990) loved THE MARK OF ZORRO, and Deleuze enjoyed the French pop singer, Claude François.<sup>4</sup> This IFE produces a cultural patchwork where everything is equally legitimate, where no pleasure might be guilty.

I make my decision about an episode of STAR WARS that I missed in the theater. Good choice: I fill a gap, and if I doze along the way, I would lose nothing in terms of understanding the plot. I launch the film. I plug in my headphones and try to focus on the 11-inch screen, but the intergalactic dimension doesn’t lend itself to this handkerchief size ... Quickly, the Jedi figurines appear to me as plastic soldiers of my childhood, and I have passed the age of childhood ... My neighbor laughs at an American show that looks very silly, but which apparently gives him great pleasure. My more inspired neighbor breathes deeply through a yoga documentary in the “well-being” section and avidly watches a filiform yogi woman whom she may be hoping to resemble.

All these individuals carried by the same vehicle and going to the same destination on the same trajectory are atomized by this IFE. Each screen is a solo universe. All these egos are not consciences with which I could enter into a dialogue, but floating and separated imaginaries as an random and discontinuous stream. The time of a flight, I myself am only a series of accidental disruptions. Where is the art in such choices and capricious consumption? If art was, among other possible definitions, a requalification and existence, and a recollection of meaning, where does one find it in this dissipation? If art carries myth as a founding narrative of common life, how does this IFE make this myth possible? Certainly, I can think that all these entertaining films are many variations on universal myths, but they do not operate – as far as my intuition is admissible – as a federator of humanities. Like a spiritual partition, this IFE surrounds each passenger in

4 Cf., CLAUDE FRANÇOIS, L'OMBRE AU TABLEAU, dir. Karl Zéro and Daisy D'Errata, Arte TV, 2017; quotation of L'ABÉCÉDAIRE DE GILLES DELEUZE at 50'.

its personalized imagination with a singularized screen of flight time. Just as it was considered rude to read over another passenger's shoulder on a bus or in a metropolitan, it is inappropriate to look at my neighbor's screen. And these are just separated screens without any common framework. So screen is well named: this projection of your intimate imagination is an obstacle to Others' Intrusion.

Standing up in my chair, I look down the corridors of the plane and observe dozens of humans, each immersed in a particular screen with different lights and figures, like so many independent alveoli. It's no longer an aircraft fuselage, but a control room with a hundred disparate monitors. Supervising this humanity confronted with the fruit of its choices, choices anticipated, in fact, by probabilities, I picture myself as the Architect of *THE MATRIX*, showing Neo the screens of its indefinite variations. What is personal and decisive in affirming a taste for one category of works rather than another? Can I consider myself in a case of "spectator freedom" (Elder 2008, 168-192) because I would produce the conception of my perception? What am I in a giant screen room, concave, with a sensurround sound! What am I in full immersion in the film? Why am I standing in front of an electronic skylight?

In other words, where is the experience of art in this situation? Should I consider that it is only accidental, casual and that in this sense, it does not alienate the cinema, the films I can see? Conversely, should I think that the very idea of including films in this type of visual distribution shows that cinema is outdated, and that there are only audiovisual productions designed to be distributed on variable, modular and segmented carriers? One might think that such an alternative is artificial, with artistic productions and aesthetic experiences being as multiple and diverse as contingent truths.

The proliferation of screens is certainly not new, nor is it specific to post-cinema. It seems to appear even with the cinema itself. But there was the convergence of looks toward a same screen (whether single or multiple), and not the current divergence of looks toward a personalized and exclusive screen. Better still, to optimize the weight of the aircraft, and therefore the consumption of kerosene, the French company, Thalès, works on a wide screen inlaid in the back of the previous chair, or plans to soon replace these tablets embedded in the seats with an online streaming service on the plane from one's personal device.

Is it still cinema that I am watching when there is anymore show, that is to say, the polarization of human diversity toward the same stage in a common experience? Is it a cultural product? It is an entertaining product designed on a global scale, which identifies the elements of diversity and finds their

logical equivalents. Therefore, it is not an author who makes sense through images, but a marketable scopical desire which is satisfied by approaching visual values, whether it be the nature or genre of the work/product.

## Where Is the Cinema?

The question is not “what is cinema?” but, as Francesco Casetti notes, “where is it?” (2016). In other words, the question of recognition and acknowledgment is secondary to that of carriers and media. The question is complicated. Let’s assume that the cinema projected by this IFE is an art of pleasure; so, where is the post-cinema?

Regarding this IFE, can I speak of an *Entkünstung* of cinema, of an “emptying process” or “desertification” (following Lacoue-Labarthe’s translation [see 1994, 131-141, 2015]), in the sense that Adorno could theorize this in the *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970)? This seems too restrictive to us because the problem lies in the relationship between industry (including entertainment) and capitalist dynamics.

Contrary to what Adorno and Eisler said in the 1960s, the mass culture of film and, particularly, film music, has not liquidated individuality (1969). In fact, massification is not consubstantial to the capitalist market which can produce large profits on small volumes with very high added value (luxury). The mercantile issue is that of sales and profit volumes. Massification was, in fact, a phase of capitalism which produced large-scale standardized products to segmented and cadenced production (Fordism), and a certain cinema corresponded to this format and formatting in the USA with Hollywood, in Germany with the UFA, in Italy with Cinecittà and in Asia with Bollywood and Hong-Kong. The fact that cinema has required industrial production since its beginnings, especially with the industrialists who were the Lumière brothers, does not mean that it is reduced to that, much less that it is the last word of show business.

For many years now, the search for capital value has been based on the customization of services. And cinema is no exception. The entertainment industry has converted to service to the person, especially thanks to the Internet, which allows traceability and exhaustive real-time analysis of the requests of each viewer/consumer to define a singular profile, through the analysis of the “favorites” and the recurring choices. The aesthetic experience disappears like that of common sense to become anyone’s *capriccio*.

Is this emptying process a death of art, or its kitsch-becoming? Before producing a tragic reading of contemporary alienation (the substitution

of the performance hall by the personal tablet), let us try to understand entertainment.

How should we think about entertainment? In French, we translate “divertissement” as “amusement” which corresponds with one of the senses of “to entertain”: to amuse. In French, this connotation has been pejorative for a long time; the anathema launched by Georges Duhamel<sup>5</sup> against cinema or the dichotomy recalled by Bernard Lahire between “culture” and “entertainment” (2004, 78) bear witness. In fact, to entertain is a sign of hospitality. “To entertain” comes from the French “entretenir” which, around the fifteenth century, meant to maintain good condition and show hospitality, and from there to welcome and put one’s guests at ease with a good word, a good dinner, a party or a show. So, there is nothing pejorative or blameworthy about it. A singer who sings Schubert Lieder on a social evening is entertaining. A hotel pianist who plays well-known pieces of classical music, jazz or variety (oldies but goldies standards) will be an entertainer, a showman who ensures the well-being of guests. Thus, entertainment is the art of welcoming people into good society; it is an art in the sense that it takes sensitivity and resources to listen to others and satisfy their tastes.

The fact that IFE is entertainment is therefore not a problem but responds well to its very principle: to welcome passengers in a confined (often frightening) space in order to put them at ease and make them happy by satisfying their tastes, either by means of drinks or the catalogue of videos. This IFE would then fall under what Kant (1990) called “the leisure arts” (*die angenehme Künste*), those arts that are only for pleasure (*Genuss*) by a representation attached to a cheerful sensation, which would promote a sociable mood. However, why is there a sociability here, since, on the contrary, all social bonds are broken by such a solipsism of caprice? Does this materialistic interpretation of post-cinema consist of taking note of a lack of spirit?

On the one hand, this type of device breaks the time of the cinema, which is made of duration. The common immersion in the flow of the film makes us lose our sense of time or, on the contrary, in case of boredom, gives us the feeling that there are “lengths,” the notion that the time of the film is no longer the time of my aesthetic experience. Similarly, the screen space is

5 “C’est un divertissement d’ilotes, un passe-temps d’illettrés, de créatures misérables, ahuries par leur besogne et leurs soucis. C’est, savamment empoisonnée, la nourriture d’une multitude que les Puissances de Moloch ont jugée, condamnée et qu’elles achèvent d’avilir [...] Le cinéma parfois m’a diverti, parfois même ému; jamais il ne m’a demandé de me surpasser. Ce n’est pas un art, ce n’est pas l’art” (1930).

above the intervention of the spectators. Thus, the duration is homogeneous and continuous, and the immersive space is given, one being that I intend to contemplate.

On the other hand, the post-cinema breaks this paradigm of duration and pure reception. This pure reception is the reason why we live in duration. Everyone is in the discontinuous time of his or her choices and jumps, and the touch screen is a space on which I can intervene (rewind, fast-forward, stand-by, etc.), being then actor of the current viewing.

Should we stick to this binary reading: change of space and, especially, of time, continuous time and duration versus broken time, and social time *versus* solo time?

We don't think so. Indeed, I am not an autistic addict to my screen, to the extent that I can, precisely because of this manipulation which is always possible, leave the show to seek better satisfaction or to direct myself to a loved one to communicate my feeling about what I have just seen. In other words, the device most probably conditions the reception of the work, but it does not condition either the aesthetic judgment or the very idea of a communicability of the aesthetic experience.

Even if I see a film through a virtual-reality headset, alone and totally captivated by the illusionism of this new machine, I seek to share this vertigo and to make this fascinating view a common experience that everyone can repeat for him- or herself but with the intention of a joyful communicability.

In other words, the "post" horizon of post-cinema consists of producing a reverse of the modality of reception, but keeps from cinema the finality: the life of the soul, even though it would begin with entertainment and a so-called leisure arts.

If post-cinema expresses a survival of the cinema beyond all its changes of production tools and modes of reception, then its place can only be that immaterial communicability of feeling (with a dual sense of emotion and judgment) which, beyond all kinds of determinations, gives the human being his or her freedom of appreciation.

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# PART IV

New *Dispositif*, New Conditions



## 9. What Kind of Art Is the Cinema of Interactions?

*François Jost*

### Abstract

“What kind of art is the cinema of interactions?” This title promotes the concept of interaction; the intention is therefore to analyze “a work that presents itself as openly interactive: BANDERSNATCH” (2018), a part of the science-fiction anthology series BLACK MIRROR. With the help of Goodman and Genette, François Jost develops two major concepts previously coined by the former – autography and allography – to help answer the question as to whether the opposition between film and TV series has to do with differences in artistic quality, a debate exacerbated by Netflix’s candidacy at film festivals. Using also a comparison with music partitions, Jost wonders whether the viewer of the interactive work may be called an operator, performer, player, or interpreter.

**Keywords:** Science-fiction, Netflix, contemporary music

It may seem surprising that, in order to define cinema in the digital age, several researchers look for heuristic analogies with *The Early Cinema* (Hansen 1995; Gaudreault and Marion 2013; Grusin 2016). At first glance, what do those ghost-like characters appearing on flickering filmstrips have in common with images and digital projections without the slightest rough patch, no scratches when the reels start turning and no crackling of the soundtrack, things we got used to over the decades? Nothing or almost nothing. Moreover, Grusin points out, it is not on an aesthetic level that we must make a connection between the beginning and what some see as an end, but the description of the historical process that has affected them both. Commenting on Myriam Hansen’s argument, according to which “the early cinema remediated the format of early commercial entertainment

like vaudevilles and travelling shows” (Hansen 1995, 38-39), he states that “we can see an analogous perceptual continuum in today’s digital cinema of interactions between the film screened in the theatre and its multiple remediation in DVDs, video games, trailers, web sites, and so forth” (2016, 70).

It is undeniable that the beginning of cinema is linked to various entertainment genres, in the same way as post-cinema. To say that the two are similar is, however, another matter. The likeness does not apply to the two of them, but to the method of approach. While using a much looser understanding of “remediation” than that of the book co-written with Bolter,<sup>1</sup> he simply notes that what others call “intermediality” is the necessary breeding ground for an emerging new medium. Television was first seen as an extension of cinema and radio and, like the Early Cinema, it extended popular entertainment at the time: cabaret, music hall shows and even the circus. However, should we see analogies with post-cinema? I do not think so. On the other hand, the *terminus a quo* is not uninteresting if we compare it to the *terminus ad quem* represented by post-cinema, not as one would do with two states, but rather with two paths. I am thus going to start from the beginning of cinema, but in order to follow a completely different path, which I cleared just before the Web 2.0 happening. Following in the footsteps of Goodman ([1968] 1990) and later Genette (1994) in the debate on the status of artwork, I have shown how, from a diachronic perspective, this status, far from being fixed once and for all, evolves between the two poles that Goodman calls autography and allography (Jost 2000).

## The Return of the Repressed

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, film is firstly characterized by its performance aspect and thus by its autography. It is accompanied or not by the commentary of a smooth talker, a piano or a sound effects machine, songs sung by the audience, etc. It may be said to differ according to the venue and the day of the week: the spectators do not all see the same object. However, over the years and decades, everything was done to reduce this diversity, confirming Goodman’s hypothesis that all the arts were originally autographic, and were gradually and unequally “emancipated” by adopting notation<sup>2</sup> systems where possible.

1 “We have adopted the word [remediation] to express the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 59).

2 The reformulation is by Genette 1994, 154-156.

Since its inception, cinema has acquired techniques that can be said to have continuously reduced the part played by the autographic author, demonstrating a continuous effort to transform the film into a score.<sup>3</sup> The introduction of cardboard signs in the first decade of the twentieth century did not create verbal narrative – before, that would have been the smooth talker’s job – but it laid down the text, which, from then onward, would be the same for all spectators, wherever they would see the film. Similarly, “talking” cinema did not introduce sound, which already existed in so-called “silent” cinema, either through musical accompaniment, sound effects or even certain attempts to synchronize living speech; it only ensured the circulation of the same score. Film music is associated with this movement toward homogenization since, instead of being left to the judgment of a pianist in the theater, it becomes an auctorial choice that makes it intangible.

Since its inception, therefore, cinema has acquired techniques that may be said to have continuously reduced the share of the autographic author (the smooth talker, the sound-effects engineer, the accompanist) by gradually developing film notation systems. From this perspective, digital technology would be the ultimate outcome of this allographic reduction: the almost immaterial work can circulate independently of its medium. In 2000, I wrote that these digital characters would certainly influence the economic structures of cinema. We are there now. However, with hindsight, what seems to me to be the most important thing in this continuous process of allographic reduction, is that we have reached a point where film has become the same for everyone. Even the scratches I spoke about above, which appeared during the screenings and gradually worsened, differentiating the copies of new releases from those shown in small provincial cinemas, have disappeared. The same applies to color calibration defects or other similar material aspects. Digital projection leveled out the differences – until the moment when the spectator took control. As we have just seen, throughout the twentieth century, the variations of the work were on the side of the author or the performance of the work. With digital technology, the viewer can modify the work, first by intervening in the audio-visual parameters (colors, contrasts, sound intensity, etc.), then by influencing the course of the story. These actions almost constitute what could be called the return of the repressed, prompted by allographic reduction brought about by the history of cinema. This is why, in this text, I will consider that the characteristic of post-cinema is interaction.

3 An early twentieth century critic explains this effort as follows: “Cinematography is a form of notation by image, as arithmetic and algebra are notations by figures and letters,” Louis Haugmard, *Le Correspondant*, May 25, 1913 (qtd. in Abel 1993).

It is also the position of Grusin who, patterning himself on the type of attraction cinema conceptualized by Gunning (1986), defines post-cinema as a “cinema of interactions.” For him, the interaction is defined both by its relationship “with other (primarily) digital media” and by its “aesthetic sense in which we find ourselves faced with a cinema of interactions – the emergence of a visual style and narrative logic that bear relationship to digital media like DVDs and video games rather than to that of photography, drama, or fiction” (Grusin 2016, 73).

The opposition between digital media and photography, drama and fiction is a blend of heterogeneous criteria. DVD is a medium that accommodates both recent films and silent classics. As a system for reproducing reality, photography, digital or otherwise, still has a pre-eminent role in cinema. Fiction, on the other hand, is a horizon that cannot be surpassed by any work of invention. As for drama, it is one genre among others that we don't see being shunned by the cinema of interactions. More convincing to me is Greenaway's definition that states, “Cinema must now become an interactive multimedia art form [...]. We are forced to confront this new medium that will make *Star Wars* look like a candlelight reading in the sixteenth century”(qtd. in Ferenczi 2007; my translation).

### Post-cinema or Post-television?

Instead of defining the cinema of interactions by means of oppositions which are in fact not so, it seems much more fruitful to me to test the concept by analyzing a work that presents itself as openly interactive: *BANDERSNATCH* (2018). The imprecision of my qualification (a “work”) puts a question I had thrown out back on the table, namely the definition of “post-cinema.” What is *BANDERSNATCH*, indeed? As a first approximation, the following minimal definition can be given with confidence: an audio-visual object or product accessible on a SVOD platform, Netflix. This formulation is enough to exclude it from the domain of cinema by those who consider that the latter is firstly and solely defined by its place of appearance, as claimed by Bellour on the back cover:

The screening of a film in a cinema, in the dark, the prescribed time of a more or less collective session, has become and remains the condition of a unique experience of perception and memory, which defines its viewer and which any other viewing situation alters more or less. And that alone is worth being called “cinema.” (Bellour 2012, back cover)

Any other filmic event would be a degraded version. I will come back to this implicit valuation of the traditional projection system, but first, let us continue the investigation into the nature of this mystery object. Wikipedia informs interested parties that “BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH is a 2018 interactive film in the science fiction anthology series BLACK MIRROR.” Film and series at the same time, BANDERSNATCH is therefore halfway between two universes often conceived as opposing; cinema and television. Post-cinema or post-television? Critics are hesitant. Some insist on the serial filiation linking it to BLACK MIRROR, others on the filmic experience. The awarding of prizes confirms this hesitation. BANDERSNATCH was honored with a 2014 British Academy Television Award as Best Dramatic Telefilm. In 2019, BANDERSNATCH received an Emmy Award in the “Outstanding Television Movie” category which, as a genre, brings it between film (Movie) and television; for a BAFTA Television Award in the “Drama” category, which clearly places it on the side of television and in a category much more difficult to relate to one of these two universes, “Outstanding Creative Achievement in Interactive Media Within a Scripted Program.” Finally, BANDERSNATCH received a Golden Trailer Award as “Best Drama/Action Poster for a TV/Streaming Series.” This designation reflects one last difficulty: talking about TV series; whereas today, although formally close to what television has accustomed us to see, they are rather produced by streaming platforms.

This discussion on the generic identity of an audio-visual object is not a simple matter of ontology. It is not so much a question of finding a definitive answer as noting that the answer given to this question also triggers a debate on the artistic status of this object. Spielberg’s opposition to the presence of Netflix films at the Oscars testifies to this: “From the moment you commit to televisual format, you make television films. If it’s a good film, you certainly deserve an Emmy, but not an Oscar.”<sup>4</sup> The idea that any filmic event other than a cinema screening is a degraded version leads to an aporia that is perfectly exemplified by ROMA’s (2018) fate. As we know, in 2016, the Cannes Film Festival selected two Netflix productions, OKJA, by South Korean director Bong Joon-ho,<sup>5</sup> and THE MEYEROWITZ STORIES, by American director Noah Baumbach. This was immediately followed by a huge protest movement by producers and distributors, who criticized the fact that these films would not be released in theaters.

In France, regulations prohibit a film that has been shown in cinemas from being offered on a Netflix type of service before three years have

4 See <https://www.ozap.com/actu/steven-spielberg-veut-evincer-netflix-des-oscars/575522>.

5 Korean names are written here in their traditional form: surname first.

elapsed; the platform refuses this obligation, which would deprive its French subscribers of the films in question. In 2018, the question arose once more with *ROMA*, which, for the same reason, was excluded from selection for the Cannes Film Festival. A few months later, the film received the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, followed by the Oscar for Best Film. In response to Spielberg, the platform announced that his films would henceforth be screened in Californian cinemas for a few days before putting them on their website. What is the status of a film like *ROMA* in this context: is it cinema when it is screened in cinemas, not cinema when it is on the platform and, nevertheless, hailed as the best film of the year? Clearly, the criterion of release in theaters is not so much an attempt to differentiate between the arts and the media as an axiological hierarchy – and the nostalgia of a film buff who sorts out the sheep from the goats, in this case cinema as art and television as media.

Determining whether *BANDERSNATCH* is a film or a series and whether this series is televisual or streaming thus involves an *a priori* artistic evaluation. All you have to do is listen to the Director of the Cannes Film Festival, Thierry Frémaux, who declares, “Series are industrial and films are poetry.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, there is agreement between the zealots and the denigrators of the series. To establish the artistic status of the series, they will look for works that elevate them to the rank of Quality TV. Like Jane Feuer, who states, “*SIX FEET UNDER* is highly serialized, uses multiple storylines and an ensemble cast, but it too identifies stylistically with the non-televisual genre of European art cinema. This greater structural reliance on cinema is obvious from the opening credits” (Feuer 2007, 150). This reference to cinema to define “the HBO not TV series” inevitably leads to comparisons with filmmakers considered not just as directors but as authors in their own right. Thus, the same Jane Feuer writes that the dream sequences in *SIX FEET UNDER* evoke Fellini (145).

Practically speaking, these two approaches, by seeking to enhance the status of their object – cinema for the one, television for the other – fail to see what brings it closer to one or the other art and that which is not found in the object itself, but in the viewer’s gaze. Because, when faced with those series that seem to take to streaming, there are two possible attitudes: either to consider it as a continuation of television – strictly speaking, *post-television* – or to consider it as a continuation of cinema, *post-cinema*.

6 See [https://www.francetélévisioninfo.fr/culture/cinema/festival-de-cannes/les-series-c-est-de-la-production-industrielle-la-remarque-du-delegue-general-du-festival-de-cannes-enerve-les-internautes\\_2742507.html](https://www.francetélévisioninfo.fr/culture/cinema/festival-de-cannes/les-series-c-est-de-la-production-industrielle-la-remarque-du-delegue-general-du-festival-de-cannes-enerve-les-internautes_2742507.html).

The first attitude consists in playing the series-game or, more exactly, the soap-opera-game. While the channels asked their viewers to wait for the next episode for a period of time determined by the programmer, the net surfer can space the viewing of two episodes of a time that he determines himself, remaining within the logic of serial broadcasting, which is to gradually deliver the episodes, separating them by a certain period of time. The second attitude, which is that of the binge-watcher, consists on the contrary in watching episode after episode, as many as possible, even an entire season, in a very short time, to get to the end. DVDs and the advent of platforms such as Netflix encourage this practice. The sites of certain channels have adopted the same strategy to compete with them. The result is a kind of long feature film, which, on the one hand, neutralizes the curiosity inherent in the soap opera genre and, on the other hand, puts an end to the temporal community that brings actors and viewers together in soap operas; insofar as, from season to season, they age at the same time. Ultimately, the user chooses to turn the streaming series into a post-cinematographic or post-televisual object. Moreover, this freedom of use is close to being the defining feature of all things *post*.

Does this mean that “the viewer has become proactive and that audioview has become an action” (Gaudreault and Marion 2013, 183)? Moreover, what action are we talking about here? For Gaudreault and Marion, it is firstly a matter of choosing the device on which a film will be shown, of deciding whether to watch it all at once or not, to watch it at home or elsewhere, etc. Talking about action seems a little exaggerated to me in this case and not very new. The 1980s viewer could also choose to quench his film thirst by deciding to go to the cinema, or to the video rental company or to watch a tape, then to stop the tape with his remote control, or even fall asleep on the couch during its projection. I find the arguments of those who speak about the *spectator* more conclusive. As early as 1999, starting from a reflection on multimedia, a group of academics interested in “the recorded image” proposed this term, which they specified as follows: “Actor of his show (in collaboration with the software installed by the designers), spectator of the effects of his acts: such is the posture of the person who confronts these devices, constantly crossing the next semiotic barrier delimiting the interior (the presentation) and the exterior (the device organizing access)” (Barboza and Weissberg 2006, 17). Here, interactivity is compared to the position of the viewer in relation to a statue whose appearance changes according to whether the viewer comes closer or moves away from it, but without formally changing the work itself. Other terms have been suggested, such as “the interactor,” for whom “everything that is going to happen on

the screen now depends on the decisions, actions and initiatives taken by the subject connected to it, the computer user" (Machado 2007, 142). These definitions certainly strike home, but the definition of the spectator leaves the relationship with the designer-programmer or what we must surely call the author in the shadows, while the first definition relegates him to a parenthesis. What about this relationship, which would be opposed to the "dictatorship of the work which imposes itself on me, at the discretion of the television channel programmers" (Gaudreault and Marion 2013, 192)? This is what I now propose to clarify based on *BANDERSNATCH*'s narratological analysis.

### **"It's Like TV Online. I Control It."**

The film (or the episode of the *BLACK MIRROR* series) offers a story in which the user (the most neutral word I can find right now) will have to make choices. However, what choices there are and how they impact on the unfolding of this story is for him or her to find out? To answer this question, I viewed the film several times, taking different paths, while at the same time using the programming flow chart developed by an Internet user after the screening of the film (see the end of this text. It contains some errors, but is very useful). I also watched it in its entirety in automatic viewing, i.e., by letting the machine choose the direction of the story for me. This fruitful journey to understand how it works lasted 45 minutes (half as long as what is announced by Netflix).

The story begins on July 9, 1984. A young man, Stefan Butler, wakes up. It is a big day: he is going to put forward a game project to the Tuckersoft Company, managed by Mohan Thakur, in the presence of a game design expert, Colin Ritman. There are two sequences in succession to get there: breakfast with his father, and a bus ride. Two choices were offered: the first concerns his food (Sugar puffs or Frosties), the second the music he will listen to on his Walkman during the journey. Already during the first five minutes, two very different types of user actions are emphasized: choosing one's cereal is a purely paradigmatic choice that does not involve the story at all, insofar as what Barthes (1966) called the cardinal function remains, whatever it may be.<sup>7</sup> Only what he called catalyses changes, i.e., those details

7 "For a function to be cardinal, it is sufficient that the action to which it refers opens (or maintains, or closes) a significant alternative for the rest of the story, in short that it opens or concludes an uncertainty; if, in a fragment of a story, the telephone rings, it is also possible that

that embellish the story without changing its direction. Another item to be included in the same file, is the choice between “biting your nails or scratching your ear” when it comes to expressing Stefan’s anguish when consulting his psychoanalyst. Alternatively, opting to “bury the body” (of his father) or “cut it into pieces.” Whatever the choice, it does not change the narrative structure that the narrator-programmer wants to convey. Even more simplistic is the choice concerning “More action”: *Yeah or Fuck Yeah*. As for the choice of music, it has only an aesthetic consequence without affecting the narrative structure. It cannot be denied, of course, that the repercussion of these decisions on the image tape – we see the father giving the package indicated by the son, the music cassette decided on by the user – prompts a feeling of power and temporary satisfaction, even freedom.

The first possible change of direction comes when Stefan meets Mohan Thakur and developer Colin Ritman. Tuckersoft’s boss accepts his project and asks him if he wants to work in the company or at home. *Accept or refuse*: the Internet user must reply. It is now a syntagmatic choice since it influences the evolution of the story. If he accepts, we end up with a television sequence in which a game critic gives him 0 out of 5. Colin slips to Stefan, “Sorry, man, wrong choice ...” To continue this quest for the implementation of the BANDERSNATCH game, you have to follow Stefan who states, “I’m trying again”... and the story starts again at the very beginning, with the alarm clock ringing, until it catches up with the sequence at Tuckersoft. From now on, he will work from home.

As we can see, the choice offered by Thakur is not a choice. To prevent the story from ending, the user is forced to start from scratch and accept that Stefan works at home. The apparent freedom of choice is therefore curbed by the program, which neutralizes what Genette called the arbitrary nature of the story. To this constraint is added another one, the impossibility of going back if it is not an option proposed by the film.

To pass on the narrative structure, which is necessary to understand the plot, the narrator-programmer has softer means, close to those that have been exemplified by the “nudge” theorists. As we know, the latter consists of making indirect suggestions, without forcing, influencing motivations, incentives and decision-making without giving orders, without ordering

it is answered or not answered, which will inevitably lead the story in two different ways. On the other hand, between two cardinal functions, it is always possible to have subsidiary notations, which agglomerate around one nucleus or another without modifying their alternative nature: the space between ‘the phone rang’ and ‘Bond answered’ can be saturated by a host of small incidents or descriptions: ‘Bond went to the office, lifted a receiver, put down his cigarette,’ etc.” (Barthes 1966, 9).

openly. This is exactly how Stefan's psychoanalyst proceeds. The boy finds himself in his office after his appointment at Tuckersoft. He explains that he preferred to work at home because he does not want to be constantly monitored. Nevertheless, he also feels watched by his father. Faced with his growing anxiety, she suggests that he talks about his mother, as it is apparently the anniversary of her passing. It is up to the user to accept or not. If he refuses, she returns to the attack: "you could learn things ... I ask you again: yes or no." Curiosity is this nudge that pushes the user to go and "make" the boy do what he had refused at first. Once again, the user is forced to follow the path offered to him. For the rest of the story, this passage is essential because it tells us in what circumstances, for which Stefan feels at fault, his mother died. In the event of a persistent refusal, the flashback that developed the details of the accident is skipped and another sequence is started.

The term "bad choice" that we have just encountered actually indicates that the user has made an unnecessary detour. Thus, if he refuses to let Stefan talk to his psychoanalyst about his mother, he is put back on track by the program that forces him to talk about it anyway. There is then a flashback in which Stefan is seen at the age of five, looking for his stuffed rabbit, which will delay the mother's departure from the house. Following this departure, she will board a train that will derail. For this cardinal structure to work, when the question is put to the child, "Are you coming?" the program answers "No," without it being possible to do otherwise. Similarly, "spilling tea on the computer" is a choice that leads to a dead end, a "bad choice" that the program corrects by putting the user back on track by forcing him to go back: there are two TV sets on the screen and you have to choose the other term of the alternative: "answer Dad with a scream." This method is used several times. The reversal can be ordered by an extradiegetic source thanks to the options on offer or those that have been decided upon, without further ado, from within the diegesis by the character who decides to "try again."<sup>8</sup> The ultimate constraint occurs when

8 In an interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*, the director of this somewhat out of the ordinary episode invited the audience to be "themselves." "Don't think there's a better way, go your own way," he says. "Otherwise, you'll be paralyzed by the anguish of having to make choices. And don't go back: always go forward." See [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/12/28/apres-avoir-vu-toutes-les-narrations-possibles-de-Bandersnatch-il-resume-tout-avec-un-schema-attention-spoilers\\_a\\_23628750/](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/12/28/apres-avoir-vu-toutes-les-narrations-possibles-de-Bandersnatch-il-resume-tout-avec-un-schema-attention-spoilers_a_23628750/). It is a strange recommendation. Firstly, because you cannot hesitate for long, the choice has to be made in a few seconds, because it cannot be made by the machine alone. Then, because, as I have shown, there are at least two procedures that take the user back, wherever there may be.

the user chooses to spill tea on the computer and the character refuses to do so (“No!”) in the following sequence. A softer process, since it leaves the authority of the narrator-programmer in the shadows.

The user’s choices do not in any way disrupt the system of probable primers put in place by the scenario. Indeed, the skill of the program is to distribute the narrative primers in the mandatory “common core” of the first sequences (until the meeting with the Tuckersoft Company). Already in the first shots, Stefan swallows pills, thus anticipating his tormented character which the psychoanalyst will tend by an increase in treatment. He shows his father the book *BANDERSNATCH* which was given to him by his mother, whom we understand to be dead (why? we would like to know). The author of this book beheaded his wife, an event that will be repeated later. Regardless of the routes taken, these notations may be extended later.

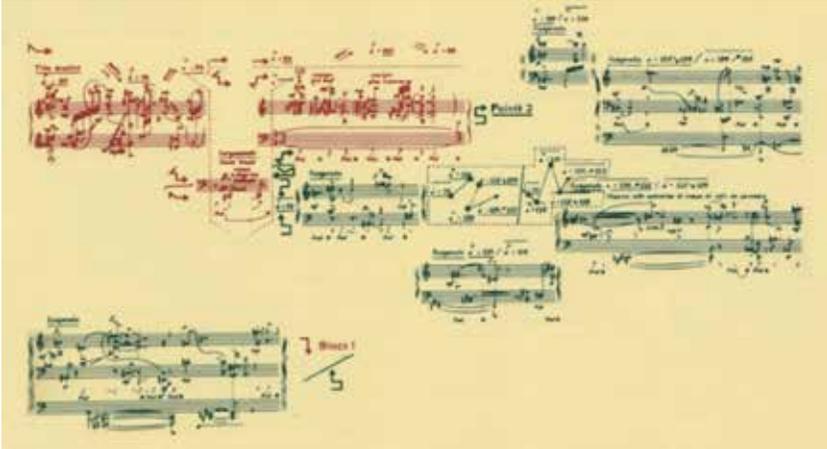
Finally, we must insist on the sense of global architecture that survives whatever happens, illustrating the words of the developer, Colin: “there is a message in every game.” If the user is subject to constraints, it is nothing compared to those that weigh on Stefan’s character, who fears above all to be watched and who feels more and more controlled. At first, he tells his psychoanalyst that he prefers to work from home to avoid control of the company, that he feels like his father is watching him, going so far as to say “I lose control, as if someone else were making my choices (choosing my cereal, yelling at Dad, listening to the music).” If, during the interview with the shrink, one prefers to follow the meeting with Colin, the paranoia becomes a little more widespread. The developer explains to him that “we pay people to play our loved ones [...] they drug us and film us,” that Pac-Man, the 1980s game, is an acronym that means “Program and Control Man.” “If you listen, you hear the numbers,” he concludes. The only way to continue the story beyond the two ends offered to the user is a sequence where Stefan, as he looks up, shouts, “Give me a sign!” The choice is then between a “branching pathway symbol,” inherited from the book on Davies’s life, and the Netflix logo. As expected, the automatic route leads to the Netflix option. When this last option is selected, whether you go via “Tell me more” or “Try to explain” – another false choice – you learn that Netflix is a twenty-first century entertainment platform (I remind you that the story takes place in 1984), and that “it’s like TV online but I control it.”<sup>9</sup> Stefan complains about being controlled by “someone from the future [...]. All this would be happening to entertain someone.” The psychoanalyst points out

9 To explain to Stefan what Netflix is, the following sentence appears on his computer screen: “I am looking at you on Netflix. I make decisions for you.”

to Stefan that in terms of play, there is not a lot of action. The user is then asked to choose between “fight her” and “leap through the window.” This is a final thumbing of the nose at the user’s illusory freedom; this choice is not a choice because, if we decide to take the second path, the director intervenes on the set and explains to the actor, Mike, who plays Stefan, that this ending is not that of the scenario which she hands him as proof. However, the actor has difficulty accepting it since he identifies with his character. This ending thus leads to a final metalepsis where the actor thinks he is the character.

Let us pause for a moment on the complex relationship between *mise en abyme* and metalepsis. At the same time, Stefan’s feeling of being constantly controlled is a *mise en abyme* of the novel *BANDERSNATCH* which, while related to *Choose Your Own Adventure* literature, claims that we are controlled (a chapter in the book on Davies is called “Mind Control Conspiracy”). But above all, it is a *mise en abyme* of the mechanism itself, based on communication between the diegetic level of Stefan’s story and the reality of the play mechanism, which constitutes a metalepsis understood as the contamination of two levels. Although the novel provides examples of “an extradiegetic narrator [who] suddenly comes into direct contact with one of his diegetic characters” (Cohn 2005, 123), it is more rare for a character to complain about his narrator (I have no example in mind). However, that is what happens in *BANDERSNATCH*. A fictional being feels controlled by a higher power, (who searches in the upper regions by lifting his head), which he does not identify, but which is recognized by the twenty-first century player, who feels directly targeted! A player who is himself controlled by a programmer. Of course, one thinks of the situation imagined by Borges: “chess pieces that are unaware of being guided by a player, who does not know that he is guided by a god, a god who does not know that he is guided by another god” (1970, 192-193). Except that here, the character feels it instinctively. The director’s intrusion on the set and the ensuing confusion between character and actor is, in that sense, a more frequent metalepsis although, in this case, it is decided on several levels. At first glance, as I have just said, we suddenly move from the character to the actor, whose condition worries the director to the point of calling a doctor. In fact, it is an additional illusion, as the credits inform us, since Mike is not the name of the real actor (Fionn Whitehead), but a new diegetic mask.

Let us summarize the rules of the *BANDERSNATCH* story: it is impossible to go back when you want to, there are paths you are forced to take, there is a suggested global meaning ... The constraints are numerous and the actions are limited by the decisions of the programmer, who does little



Score of Pierre Boulez's third piano sonata (third movement)

more than develop what is called a “narrative program.” “Spectator” and “interactor” are in fact actors whose actions are largely controlled. It is clear that we must fall back on the freedom of this new user who is placed at an equal distance from the movie viewer and the video game player. Let us say that he is on probation and that, whatever he does, he is carrying out a program that defines his field of action. How must he be characterized when, instead of emphasizing freedom, more emphasis is put on constraint? As we have seen, the supporters of the “spectator” conceded a temporary reconciliation with the subject, which revolves around a statue. As for me, I prefer to turn to music. This is the meeting-place of all the digressions, the random passages executed or not according to the orders of a higher authority. They can be found, for example, in some of Pierre Boulez's pieces, where certain bars of the score may or may not be played. Take the third movement of his third piano sonata. It looks like this:

Here is how they should be read according to musicologist Dominique Jameux:

These musical fragments appear on the score – made up of 9 sheets paginated from a to i and measuring 39 x 60 cm – according to their structural role. Three are green and are called Points; the two in red are Blocks. Points and Blocks, in contrast as the name suggests, are played alternately, with the Points appearing in odd-numbered places. Thus, the fragments written by the composer follow one another *in an order left to the performer's choice*, knowing that the latter can afford to choose to overlook certain fragments. (Jameux, n.d., n.p.: my translation)

Isn't this the exact case of the BANDERSNATCH player-spectator? He too will follow the score put together by the programmer, *according to an order* he has chosen.<sup>10</sup> We can apply this description to him in the words of the musicologist without hesitation: "The main characteristics of this open form, where the interpreter receives a text which is determined in minute detail, but for which he has a certain freedom of arrangement, will only be summarized in broad strokes."

The agent of this production, also known as a "performer" in music, is neither an author nor an executant, but the "operator" of a project that aims to be anonymous." In addition, Boulez concluded: "If there were any profound motive for the work I have tried to describe, it would be the quest for such 'anonymity.'"

This comparison allows us to return to our reflection on the opposition between autographic and allographic arts. If, as I said, the history of cinema has shown that, up to and including digital, it bears witness to a constant effort for allographic reduction, the cinema of interaction has a new status, close to contemporary music.

The musician's work, writes Goodman, is "freed of dependence upon a particular author or upon a place or date or means of production"(1968, 195). So many characteristics that could just as easily be applied to post-cinema. The score defines his oeuvre, including the optional paths. The performance, from this point of view, is an exemplification of the partition. The BANDERSNATCH user, like the performer of a Boulez piece, chooses to play a course that is part of a very precise scoring system. Just as the listener of the third movement of the third piano sonata is unaware of what has not been played, he has no knowledge of the path he could have taken, until he decides to start his journey again.

If, as a result, spectator or interactor overestimate an unspecified action that goes far beyond what they lead us to imagine, what do I call what has been a *user* until now? A word combined with "actor" would be possible, provided it were specified that it is more in the sense of an actor who plays a text written by someone else than as an acting actor. Faced with the cumbersomeness it generates, I prefer to dismiss it. Operator, performer, player ... and if this user were simply called an "interpreter?" That would have the advantage of referring both to the musician (performer) who structures part of the work according to his own choices and as a reminder that any spectator, whatever the form of the audio-visual narrative he is considering,

10 See <https://i.imgur.com/4oagidK.png>.

is always a hermeneut capable of giving meaning, even to what seems to be the most unstructured stories.<sup>11</sup>

To consider the user of a post-cinema film as an instrumentalist who can choose which way to navigate through a score – both in the musical sense and in the sense of a notation system given by Goodman – is to extend his freedom and draw its outlines. It is the ambition of this text: to substitute euphoric and approximate discourses on the transformation of the user of the narrative for a more precise and accurate evaluation of this activity tested by the heuristic virtue of analysis.

*Translated by Naòmi Morgan*

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11 It is a very difficult word to translate into English; *player*, which denotes the musician-performer, is a too obvious reference to the manner of playing without specifying how it functions on a musical level; *performer* would lose all the nuances I actualized in this text. *Instrumentalist?*

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## About the Author

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## 10. Thinking Inside and Outside of the (Black) Box

BIRD BOX and Netflix's Algorithmic Operations

*Malte Hagener*

### Abstract

Malte Hagener considers two dimensions of the changes in the audiovisual field: the first is exemplified by the Netflix platform on the economic and logistical level; the second concerns the aesthetic consequences of this new model of production and distribution. Characterized by a high level of autonomy and self-consciousness of this status, Netflix's system is transforming the practice of film and the notion we have of it. Referencing *BIRD BOX* (2018), the "post-apocalyptic thriller" (Wikipedia) directed by Susanne Bier and starring Sandra Bullock, Hagener exemplifies that a post-cinema movie may be positioned between cinema, television and new media, appearing as a "self-allegory of its own position in a new media environment, especially concerning its production logic."

**Keywords:** Fugue, Netflix, self-allegory

The debate around post-cinema has been going on for some time and can therefore already be called historical. At least since the centenary of the cinema in the mid-1990s, when it became apparent that digital tools, methods and platforms would sooner or later pervade all dimensions of film production, distribution and reception, the term and the arguments have been not only rehearsed many times over but also shifted and transformed. While a first phase which lasted well into the new century revolved around questions of the indexical nature of the medium, concentrating on the ontological

dimension,<sup>1</sup> a second phase which roughly began around the mid-2000s was rather concerned with topological considerations, namely to which spaces and places the cinema migrates in its process of transformation (see Casetti 2015; Hagener 2008, 15-22). As we look back on the first two decades of the twenty-first century, we might want to shift the debate once more to different ground in order to stay attuned to the relevant transformations and developments in the increasingly dynamic media ecosystem in which we live.

What I propose to do in this text, is to connect and jointly consider two dimensions of the changes we are currently witnessing (I am well aware that this “currently” is a very long now insofar as it has been going on for about 25 years). The method is what you could call an “Engführung” in German, originally a musical technique most commonly used in the fugue (where it is named “stretto”) in which a new theme enters before the first one has properly ended, leading to an overlap and a merging of two entities which are normally considered apart. I am particularly interested in two dimensions of the changes of the audiovisual moving image: firstly, the concrete (economic and logistical) operations of a platform such as Netflix which self-consciously positions itself between the cinema, television, and “new” digital media (Lobato 2019, 43ff). Secondly, I want to examine the specific *aesthetic* features and practices that Netflix’s original productions exhibit. The increasing shift of Netflix toward original programming can be seen in this context as a sort of self-articulation of the company. My argument is that the parallel discussion of these two strands opens up a new dimension by reframing the whole debate around the transformation of film. The speculative argument would not only be that the aesthetic and the economic dimension are connected (in its most general form, this argument is a commonplace and truism), but rather that the aesthetic dimension is directly linked to the production model, in particular that Netflix’s original productions can be seen as self-allegorizations of the underlying dynamic of the platform’s operation. The film under consideration in the second half of this essay is *BIRD BOX* (US 2018, Susanne Bier, Netflix), a post-apocalyptic thriller and one of the most notable original productions in feature film format of Netflix (as opposed to series).

1 For two influential and important contributions that succinctly sum up this phase, see Rodowick 2007; Andrew 2010.

## What Netflix Knows about Netflix (Users) – Epistemological Uncertainty

What does Netflix know about its own operations, about the desires and wishes of its customers, about the practices and uses to which the audiovisual material that it provides is being put? Certainly a lot since they are in a position to gather all kinds of data about their users and preferences: what I and you see, at what time of the day we watch, when we pause or stop, which days of the week and times of night are more preferable for watching than others, what genres are popular in which parts of the world and so on and so on ... There are doubtlessly tera-bytes of data sets that Netflix collects and stores on its servers concerning the micro-activities and macro-trends of its users. Yet, what does Netflix tell the public about its operations and its knowledge – very little, one could say, if one takes knowledge to mean concrete information about their business decisions and the basis on which they are made. Most notoriously, Netflix does not participate in the ratings game. Ratings have been the currency of commercial television for many decades because the number of viewers set the price for advertising which in turn was the main source of income for traditional TV stations and networks. More eyeballs meant higher prices for advertising time with a particular focus on the demographic stratification of the audience (age, income, place of residence). By contrast, Netflix does not release information regarding the number of spectators who have watched a particular film, episode, or series. Obviously, part of the reason why Netflix does not talk a lot about these issues has to do with precaution and fear of competition, but I believe that there is also an additional reason for this silence which one could call “epistemological uncertainty.”<sup>2</sup>

Even if Netflix is usually very secretive about its viewing numbers and the exact data regarding users, recently the company could not help it, when it bragged about 45 million accounts that had allegedly streamed *BIRD BOX* in the first seven days that it was available via the streaming platform.<sup>3</sup> This rare occurrence of Netflix announcing concrete numbers points to the significance this had for the company. Yet again, is 45 million viewers a lot if we consider that the platform is available in basically every territory with the exception of China, Iran, North Korea and a few others?<sup>4</sup>

2 Similar issues to the ones discussed in this section, regarding Spotify instead of Netflix, can be found in Eriksson et al. 2019, 31-67.

3 NetflixFilm, “Took Off My Blindfold This Morning...” Twitter, January 14, 2019. <https://twitter.com/NetflixFilm/status/1078735051406204928>.

4 At the time of writing, in summer 2019.

If we compare this number to other big-budget mega-sellers like the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, we can put a perspective on the data.<sup>5</sup> A mega-blockbuster like *AVENGERS: END GAME* (US 2019, Anthony Russo & Joe Russo) made \$ 473 million in its first week in the US alone.<sup>6</sup> If we calculate the average ticket price for the film to be \$ 11 (the overall average ticket price in the United States, according to Statista, in 2018 was \$ 9.11, but I have set it somewhat higher in order to account for extra cost regarding duration, the film is three hours long, and 3D), then roughly 43 million people have seen the movie in its first week in North America alone (remember that Canada is part of the domestic market for Hollywood). By now, the North American market accounts for less than half of the box office results of most films, so that it is safe to assume that a Netflix hit still does not beat a mega-blockbuster such as *AVENGERS: END GAME*, but it already plays in the same league. *AVENGERS: END GAME* had, according to my estimation, roughly twice the spectators in its first week if we include foreign territory.<sup>7</sup> We should also not forget the difference in the transactional value: watching an MCU film at the cinema means considerable more effort than clicking the icon on an already existing Netflix subscription (finding a cinema, looking up the screening times, possibly arranging the visit with friends of family, going to the cinema, being on time, buying a ticket ...). Going to the cinema is furthermore often connected with additional transactional costs such as reaching the cinema (transport, parking) and other services (pre-movie dinner, concessions, post-movie drinks).

This opens up the question what it means that a certain number of accounts have streamed a film online?<sup>8</sup> It means that someone has clicked on the icon and initiated a stream, but apart from that we know very little. Have they all streamed the film until the very end? How much percentage of a film needs to be streamed in order to count into the statistics? And, as 45 million refers to the number of accounts that have streamed the film, how many people have really watched the film? What happens if no one watches or if ten people watch a specific film on Netflix? And while going to the cinema is a relatively clear transaction in which you buy a ticket for a specific film at

5 For theatrical releases, numbers are usually given as box office gross (in USD), not as individual viewers which makes the comparison more complicated because Netflix operates on a subscription basis.

6 Numbers are taken from [boxofficemojo.com](https://www.boxofficemojo.com) (July 23, 2019).

7 Indeed, one can find mention of 100 million spectators globally in the first week. See Mondello (2019), <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/29/718394120/avengers-endgame-turns-previous-box-office-record-to-dust?t=1568954277647>.

8 For the pitfalls and ambiguities of "big data" see Boyd and Crawford 2011.

a specific cinema at a specific time (and normally a specific seat), a Netflix account continues streaming until closed. So, hidden in the official number of spectators there might be accounts which streamed the film without anyone watching, but others (shared accounts) which streamed it multiple times.

These are some of the important difficulties and instabilities in the epistemology of the digital object. Even if we have a lot of information, it does not necessarily mean that we understand a lot. The dangerous seductiveness of big data lies in the appeal it has at first sight. Data seem to show infallible and indisputable evidence because data is usually generated by an algorithm, something which is run by a machine and knows no bias.<sup>9</sup> What is lost though in the process are all those decisions that go into the programming, the spoken and unspoken assumptions that underlie the design process, the missing context which data often does not show, the way a specific angle is chosen by such digital methods as an algorithm. In short, the more we try to get rid of the problem of interpretation by resorting to big data, the more it comes back to haunt us. Data is never neutral and given – raw data, so to speak (see Gitelman 2013) – but data is always already harvested and cooked, mined and debugged, cleaned and validated, standardized and trimmed. All these processes imply interpretation and active work on the data that therefore is always a cultural artifact. No collection of data does naturally belong together and so any given basis contains many unspoken presuppositions and assumptions. Data, in other words, is always already cultural and has to be treated accordingly – not as objective measurements of a pre-existing reality, but rather as artifacts that are always shaped and already formed by humans and their cultural assumptions.

## Netflix's Original Productions

The story of Netflix is well-known: it started off as a mail-order service for (mainly) cinephile clients, but with its shift to streaming it became more

9 Interestingly, the problem of what happens if a machine is involved in facilitating a specific result was an important factor in the discussion around the question whether photography and film could be art forms. The adversaries argued that film lacked a subjectivity that would inflect a certain view on the world, that something needs to pass through a human being in order to be elevated to the status of art, while the advocates such as Rudolf Arnheim argued for the many factors that played a role in choosing a camera angle and shot size, length of a shot and montage, specific techniques and choices. Basically, their arguments were contextual and concentrated on the specific co-creative power of humans and apparatuses. See, as a classical example, Arnheim 1933.

dependent on mainstream products.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in the hybrid model of digital orders and mail delivery, it could carry niche DVDs and Blurays in large numbers, this was no longer an option in the realm of streaming because now rights – which had been cleared by the DVD producers before – needed to be managed for each title separately by Netflix, reintroducing economies of scale into a business that had before catered also to the long tail. The solution of Netflix was to radically shift to original productions, a shift – and this is significant – that has been data-driven from the very start. The (television) series *HOUSE OF CARDS* (US 2013-2018, six seasons, Netflix) was notoriously built on the premise (and a large amount of data that backed the premise) that the majority of subscribers were fond of political drama, of David Fincher as a director and of Kevin Spacey as an actor. The resulting series was constructed accordingly in such a modular form, putting variables together as an answer to a very formalist question determined by the (big) data available.<sup>11</sup> If you think about it, it is absurd that such a formalist plot really turned into a success story.

It is significant that Netflix poured its energy into series in the beginning because they are more strongly dependent on character and dramaturgy than on aesthetics. Indeed, a case could be made that Netflix series have a different relation to narrative and plotting than earlier examples from the HBO-period; just consider how *THE WIRE* (US 2002-2008, HBO, David Simon), *THE SOPRANOS* (US 1999-2007, HBO, David Chase) or *LOST* (2004-2010, ABC, J.J. Abrams/Damon Lindelof) are different in their tight plotting and deadline construction from the looser and more episodic structure of *NARCOS* (US 2015-2017, Gaumont, Chris Brancato) or *STRANGER THINGS* (US 2016-, Netflix, The Duffer Brothers). The trend of the series toward spin-offs and the flat expansiveness of the narrative world (as opposed to a linear drive toward the resolution of specific problems) could also be seen in the transition from *BREAKING BAD* (US 2008-2013, AMC, Vince Gilligan) to *BETTER CALL SAUL* (US 2015-, AMC/Netflix, Vince Gilligan) – whereas the first has a clear ending date, as the main character is terminally ill, the other is one of several possible spinoffs which stresses the expanse of the diegetic universe.

Yet again, I do not want to look in detail at the production of series which still is the most sustained effort in terms of original programming that the platform is making. Instead, I am interested in Netflix's original productions in the field of film. In the last 2-3 years, Netflix has expanded seriously into what one could call film production because of the length, the aesthetic properties and the way these audiovisual objects are positioned

10 A popular, journalistic account of the early years of Netflix is to be found in Keating 2012.

11 For an example of the reporting at the time, see Carr 2013.

in the public sphere, especially in competitions of major festivals and in the Oscar race. Prominent examples here include the controversies around the Cannes screening of *OKJA* (US/SK 2016, Bong Joon-ho) and around the Oscar nominations of *ROMA* (MX/US 2018, Alfonso Cuarón). Yet again, things are not quite as simple as they seem here. The inherent problem is to first of all identify what could be called a Netflix production in an age of infinitely layered rights and risk management. Budgets have become more vulnerable and creative, as well as the most worked-on item of the whole production, so that many individuals and institutions nowadays share production credit. At what stage does a company such as Netflix step in, how strong do they influence the development process of material, and how much does Netflix consequently “own” a film, not just in legal terms, but also as a shaping, creative force. There is no easy and no conclusive answer to these questions, but one indicator would be that the amount of activity in marketing a film shows a certain relation to the amount of involvement in the production.

Despite these inherent problems, there are still some aspects that characterize a Netflix production: they occupy the position formerly taken by independent hits aimed at an upscale mainstream market typical of Miramax and Good Machine in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They have moderate budgets for Hollywood standards (if compared to the huge sums nowadays invested in the blockbuster cinema), they often have a high concept story and either a bankable star in a genre framework – *BIRD BOX* would be a prime example of both – or a festival experienced global director with a topical, often political, story such as *OKJA*, *BEASTS OF NO NATION* (US 2015, Cary Joji Fukunaga), or *MUDBOUND* (US 2017, Dee Rees). Nevertheless, it is too early to settle on clear distinguishing features, as the company is probably still experimenting with these parameters. Adrian Martin has recently (2019) asked, in a somewhat ironic mode, whether there is such a thing as an identifiable genre of Netflix films. His answer is “maybe,” as he hints at “genre-hopping,” the not too perfect digital effects and the various scenes in which characters unexpectedly converse in a foreign language, mostly in Mandarin. While some of these observations might be incidental, others – such as the use of genre – might be more central to the attempts of finding formulas which have already been found for TV series.

### **Allegorizing Production**

In what follows I propose to understand *BIRD BOX* as a self-allegory of its own position in a new media environment, especially concerning its

production logic. For this, I turn to J.D. Connor who has, in two recent books (2010, 2018), proposed a theory – or maybe it is rather a method – of how the mode of production can be found in the narrative and aesthetic structure of a given film. In *The Studios after the Studios* and *Hollywood – Math and Aftermath*, Connor understands Hollywood since the mid-1960s as a systemic self-allegory of its own industrial structure and financial potentiality. His approach combines three specific methods which have been very distinct and seldomly mixed in the past: first of all, he employs industrial analysis in the sense of political economy based on numbers and data. Here, budgets and box-office revenues, overheads and profit-sharing are studied, *Variety* and studio documents are read, contracts and internal memos analyzed. Secondly, Connor uses “production studies” and film industry analysis, as it is practiced by John Caldwell and Jennifer Holt.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, self-descriptions and, more generally, the self-understanding of the creative and less creative personnel working in the industry becomes important. These two approaches are combined with – and herein lies the actual radicality of Connor’s proposal – film philosophical readings which are, in a wide sense, indebted to Gilles Deleuze’s cinema books (1985, 1989). While for Deleuze the films of Antonioni, Bergman and Resnais ponder the ramifications of time and movement as expressed through film, Connor sees the US films of the past 50 years obsessively revolve around one topic: money.

Connor, though, is not interested in the operative business of the classical studio eras, as analyzed by Thomas Schatz in *The Genius of the System* (1998), or in the mode of production, as studied by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson (1986). Instead, he examines the contemporary financial economy which is shaped by mathematical models and algorithmic simulations. The current investment banking has conquered Hollywood and its tools and methods determine which film is being made in which way. Beyond the seeming stability of labels, names and companies the capital-intensive production industry always generates new ideas of financing and windowing for different platforms which – and this is the innovative aspect of the approach – is in strong interdependence with form and content of the film. All of Hollywood turns into a self-allegory as a consequence:

allegory emerges where industrial pressures intersect and where creative actors are able to imagine symbolic solutions to real problems. As we trace the overarching question of the relationship between particular

<sup>12</sup> See Caldwell 2008 and Curtin et al. 2014. See also the peer-reviewed open access journal *Production Studies* (September 6, 2019).

movies and the particular financial and labor relations underpinning their making and marketing, broader questions arise. There are questions of prevalence and significance, history and possibility, method and epistemology. (Connor 2010, 5)

What he is especially concerned with are the financing models which are increasingly data-driven and the economic dimension which relies on algorithms – and how these qualities can be found abstractly in the films themselves. If we want to follow Connor's lead we have to ask ourselves what production model Netflix proposes and how the film positions itself. In this sense, Hollywood always had a strong tendency to include within the films a sort of guide to how they want to be understood. Connor cites Peter Krämer in relation to *TITANIC*: "An important aspect of Hollywood's hold on the public imagination is its ability to generate, from within the films themselves, the very terms in which its major releases are going to be discussed" (Krämer 1999). If we follow this lead, then films always reach beyond their diegetic world, opening up toward the surrounding debates and discourses which are included in its narrative and aesthetic structure.

### **"If You Look You Will Die!" – What We See If We Don't See**

*BIRD BOX* starts with Malorie Hayes (Sandra Bullock) staring into the camera and sternly commanding two children, generically named boy and girl, as if individuality does not matter anymore, never to take off their blindfolds: "If you look, you will die." The frightened children nod silently and after this scene, the film cuts to the chirping birds in their cage that will act just like canaries in the coal mine – warning the humans of impending dangers. The fact that the children are nameless is obviously attributable, within a diegetic logic, to Malorie's character – she does not care much about human attachment, as we learn in the brief expository sequence with her sister Jessica (Sarah Paulson). As Jessica quickly dies afterwards, Malorie is emotionally affected, showing that her brazenly displayed harshness is just an armor against life's hardships. Yet again, the absence of names given to the children, one her own and the other one adopted, are a reminder of how one survives in an environment characterized by unknowable quantities. Attachments and affects are dangerous instincts, instead clear orders and sequences of routines (algorithms, so to speak) provide constant guidance as how to behave. Interpretation and uncertainty are thus reduced to a minimum, affect and error of margin are blocked out because they might

endanger survival. The sequences with the group in the house discussing whether or not to let other survivors enter who might already be infected circles this issue of compassion vs. rules. The case of Gary (Tom Hollander) who is let in by the “soft” Olympia (Danielle Macdonald) and who turns out to be a threat is a case which proves Malorie’s point that protocols have to be maintained.

Pointing in a similar direction, none of the characters that assemble in the house gets much of a backstory apart from little snippets of information such as “my husband works in an army base far away,” “I grew up in Sacramento” or “I was three times married.” In fact, this reduction to ciphers, this minimalistic exercise in providing characters with just about enough information to give us a very rough idea without making the characters “round” approximates how an algorithm treats entities and reduces them to a few criteria in order to make them computable. Yet again, this phenomenon is not simply an effect of the digital age, as much of classical and modern storytelling did the same with minor characters. At a deeper level these abstractions that stories and algorithms share point to the unknowability of the individual and to the complexities of (human) behavior. In the context of this film in which everyone can turn out to be a threat, it shows how a community insulates itself against the contingencies of environment.

At heart, *BIRD BOX* is telling a highly cautionary epistemological and environmental tale – the story of how to navigate and survive in a world which is full of unknowable quantities and qualities. How can we gain knowledge about the world and by which mechanisms? What do we do when our usual modalities, channels and institutions that used to provide security have broken down? How do we protect ourselves from harm and danger in situations of unknowable risks? The film can be easily read as dealing with environmental damage and the as of yet unknown risks that humanity faces in the anthropocene, but the threat could also result from aliens, a virus or supernatural beings. The film never offers any explanation as to the nature and origin of the threat – it remains wholly mystical and metaphysical, so it stays open to various interpretations. Moreover, the threat is not only unknown in its origin, it also has no recognizable form. It appears to only manifest itself indirectly through the violent behavior of humans, through a gust of wind or through the nervous reaction of birds.

The cinema is all about looking and visibility – and film theory has been preoccupied with how vision can be theorized.<sup>13</sup> Yet, this particular film is

13 So-called “gaze theory” is a case in point here, but book titles also demonstrate this predominance of looking such as Williams 1996; Mayne 1993.

about closing one's eyes and the dangers of looking. The dialectics of seeing and not-seeing are played out across a number of fields and the film finds various aesthetic ways to deal with the absence of optical information: often we see the blindfolded characters from the outside how they move about with arms stretched out in small, careful steps. Sometimes the camera gives us the inside look of blurry fields of light, a sense impression of what the characters perceive at the moment, as well as a phenomenological reminder of how we probably all remember being blindfolded from playing blind man's buff.<sup>14</sup> The film is paradoxical in its insistence on looking away, looking elsewhere, but not to discover something that you have not looked for, but rather to avoid something that we do not know what it is (except for the fact that it is lethal). Quite unlike the traditional approach to blindness – not seeing the outside directly leads to greater inner insight (Ripplinger 2008) – here the voluntary deprivation of perception is just a survival mechanism.

### Space Measured and Controlled

If television is, as Ramon Lobato has argued, first and foremost concerned with “a particular way of ordering space” (2019), then Netflix which operates beyond traditional media definitions and relies as much on the infrastructure of television as it does on that of the cinema and the internet should have something to say about its (re)ordering of space. Of course, Netflix is first of all engaged in slicing the world into markets to which specific products are then delivered. These products (“streams,” they are called, the metaphor denotes a seemingly frictionless flow) come in bit-sized packets via the Internet, a gigantic material and immaterial network that consists of corporate satellites and state-operated undersea-cables, of server farms and local hubs, of private wireless LANs and various screens (see for example Starosielski 2015; Parks and Starosielski 2015). The cinema had (and continues to have) a similar infrastructure and material base which usually only became visible in allegorical form. A potent example here is D.W. Griffith's *THE LONEDALE OPERATOR* (US 1911), a film dealing with the railway and the telegraph system in an early capitalist setting (the film connects the city and the country not only through manifest infrastructure but also through bureaucratic actions and objects such as typewriters, forms, and dispatches). In Tom Gunning's seminal reading, filmic narration becomes one modern

14 Indeed, these scenes are reminders of how Vivian Sobchack (2004) has written about *THE PIANO* (NZ 1993, Jane Campion).

technique/ology that constitute the modern world: “Griffith reveals the film’s basis in the modern network of transportation and communication; from the center to far-flung-reaches, all locations and events are connected by technology as well as by narration” (2004, 29). I want to argue that *BIRD BOX* could be said to occupy a similar status and thus has something to say about the reordering of space in the digital age, about virtual, actual and medial space which are complexly layered and interconnected.

Netflix’s own productions, as I argued above, have exactly one goal regarding space – making it smooth and homogeneous, flattening it and getting rid of (economic, cultural, juridical) resistance in order to let the “content,” a magical potion of sorts, flow unhindered. This is what one could call “the annihilation of space by digital technology,” according to Netflix-CEO Reed Hastings in 2016, a typical millennial statement from the Silicon Valley (qtd. in Lobato 2019, 181). This idea of digital markets as borderless, “flat” spaces of circulation and consumption are ideological constructions aimed at promoting a certain type of globalization. According to this logic, circulation is a natural flow that never ceases, but reality shows that things are usually messier and more complicated. In actual fact, things are never quite so easy because space is not an empty and neutral vessel, devoid of any features of its own, but it is smooth or striated, as theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), offering itself to different kinds of nomadic movements and sedentary settlings. In this perspective, *BIRD BOX* appears to contradict Hastings by stressing the continuing significance of space as a relevant category and complex phenomenon also in the (post-) digital world.

On the surface, the film appears to be more concerned with time than with space because the story unfolds in two parallel strands which take place five years apart: the first one shows the spread of the epidemic and the small group that finds shelter together by chance in a house, while the second one is concerned with the voyage of Malorie and the two children down the river to the compound. Titles give exact temporal markings, especially regarding the boat trip on the river (“So and so many hours of the river”), but structurally space is as important as time: from the living arrangement that Malorie is discussing with her sister in the beginning all the way to the layout of the house, the film exhibits a keen sense of spatial dynamics. A key scene here shows how the deadly force is able to invade the house: Greg (B.D. Wong), the home owner’s husband, is an architect and he is shown in front of floor plans when he conducts the experiment that will cost his life. Significantly, he monitors the home protection system in which colors designate temperature. As he proposes that “it’s neutered

information,” Malorie instead insists that “images still have power!” Of course, she is proven right, when Greg is quickly affected by the lethal spell even through a system that measures temperature and translates it into colors on the interface. It is highly ironic that a protection system designed to allow the home owner to monitor the outside without getting into danger turns out to be a deadly weapon that turns against the one who installed the system in the first place.

Over the course of the film, the narrative presents a series of spaces that are sealed off against the outside (where the unknown danger is located), but at the same time also construct little apertures that allow for a contact between inside and outside. The house is the prime example here, just as the car with the painted windows, but one could also point to the boat and the sanctuary as such spaces of closure to the outside and selective penetration. Questions of access and permeability, of staying in and going outside – that are highly relevant to streaming services in an economic sense – are becoming matters of life and death here. While the house appears at first sight to be a binge-watching dream come true – just stay in and block out all daylight which is the most dangerous and disturbing thing – it turns out to be a trap from which one has to eventually escape. Spaces increasingly turn into capsules to which input and output must be controlled, improvised black boxes, which helps survival. The blinded car is a black box going through the streets, guided by algorithms (GPS continues to be active, even though everything else – like TV – has broken down), just like the black box of the house and the improvised black box of the boat. It is only in this *reductio ad absurdum* that the humanity can continue to exist.

### **Closeness, Affect and Touch – Building an Assemblage of Objects and Actions**

If space is such an important factor in the film, then distance and proximity become central elements in the orientation within the diegetic universe. This is most obvious in the sequence when the group of survivors goes to the supermarket to stock up on supplies. Painting all the windows of the car black to block the view of the unknown threat, the car is being guided through the streets by the still-working navigation system – not quite a driverless car, but one in which electronic assistance systems through satellites have taken over the place of orientation on the ground by vision. The bird’s eye view – the map-view of the satnav – is complemented by the distance sensor of the car which allows the driver to swerve around

obstacles on the road. But the distance sensor also indicates the presence of the uncanny force that kills in one of the scariest scenes that the film has to offer: Noises and shadows on the outside indicate that something is enveloping the car on all sides, the sensors show a dangerous proximity and give a warning sign. Seemingly, the force cannot enter the car which acts as a Faraday case, a black box protecting the inside passengers from the forces outside, but also a cage which leaves them blind to what is going on outside. Media-based assistance systems are diverted from its intended use in order to substitute for the dangers connected with everyday perception.

This strategy of improvisation, work-arounds and tweaking is found throughout the film: the heroine reacts by adapting in a very direct and immediate way to the danger. Apart from the iconic use of blindfolds, blocking out the possibility of direct sight contact between the inside and the outside, Malorie is employing tools such as bells, strings and other objects that either react to movement or allow movement without needing one's eyesight. In a way, this eclectic mixture of things, actions, as well as visible and audible signals are assemblages that could be seen as a low-tech version of how complex Internet applications work. As Ramon Lobato has argued, "an infrastructural view reveals that Netflix is not really a singular platform; it is an ecology of small, purpose-built systems that work together to produce the effect of a singular platform" (2019, 79). In a similar way, the film presents a modular ecology of survival tools and techniques that are developed in response to experiences that the group makes with the threat. It is not a unified system, but rather an assortment of found objects and learned tricks. Tactics (rather than strategy) and practice (rather than theory) are survival tools in a hostile environment.

If placed within a genre logic, the film can be seen as a mixture of some predominant motives from recent horror films and thrillers such as suicide as an epidemic illness, as prefigured in *THE HAPPENING* (US 2008, M. Night Shyamalan) and sense deprivation and the voluntary blockage of perception, as in *A QUIET PLACE* (US 2018, John Krasinski) or *HUSH* (US 2016, Mike Flanagan). Indeed, the fascination that the film triggered as a meme when it turned into the "BIRD BOX challenge" in which people were trying to perform mundane tasks and household chores while being blindfolded, hints at the participatory nature of much of recent media culture. Moreover, the film – and its surrounding discourses – highlighted our dependency on sense perception. Access to the world is never clear and easy, there is always a problematic dimension toward phenomenological notions of getting to know the world because there is danger in unrestricted access.

As mentioned before, the danger that the film presents – the force that makes people suicidal – remains shapeless. It is a lethal life form that has no form, a shape-shifting or formless energy that seems to become visible only indirectly. Significantly, it is in natural environments that the threat comes to the fore: leaves that blow in the wind, the play of shadows on the floor, the film exhibits a fascination with tiny lifelike movement like in the Lumière brothers' very first films. If you look you are doomed, hence do not trust your natural instincts. The danger is something looming in the off, beyond the frame that never becomes visible. Indeed, this emphasis on the body as a perceiving surface is potentially linking this film to the mind-game variety: "Often, the somatic body is privileged over the rational mind" (Elsaesser 2018, 13).

## Conclusion

Before briefly reflecting on the positionality of my reading, I would like to relate *BIRD BOX* to the mind-game film because I see some similarities, but also some strong differences.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, the film does not fall easily into this category in the strict sense, despite its similarities to Shyamalan's *THE HAPPENING*, a director who remains central to the tendency. As I have argued, *BIRD BOX* is concerned with survival in the face of a real and imminent danger, even if that danger is ungraspable and not understandable. What distinguishes *BIRD BOX* perhaps most strongly from the films of the mind-game variety is the fact that it does not deal with the question of ontology. Indeed, one could say that the denial the film puts up concerning the nature of the threat can be seen as an open rejection of ontological questions. Instead, the film proposes the question of practice and agency – how to act and deal with uncertainty – as its central problem. In this sense, it is a differently configured mind-game film, with the conundrum shifted from the ontological to the epistemological level. At the same time, the way the problem of the film is set up as one concerning knowledge and mastery of phenomena beyond the everyday is highly reminiscent of the mind-game film. Moreover, as I have argued in my reading of the film, "sensory apperception [becomes] a valid alternative form of knowledge ('intuitive understanding' as opposed to deductive or inductive reason)" (Elsaesser 2018, 17).

If understood in relation to post-cinema, the film articulates its borderline position between different media forms in its simultaneous use of classical

15 For the mind-game film see the two articles by Elsaesser 2009, 2018.

genre frameworks and star vehicles, thus evoking traditional forces of the cinema, while it drafts a scenario that is characterized by radical novelty and unknowability. In its self-articulation as a film that sits squarely between the cinema, television and new media, BIRD BOX insists on flexible and piecemeal solutions in the face of radical transformation and unprecedented situations.

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## 11. Post-cinema Ecology\*

*Francesco Casetti and Andrea Pinotti*

### Abstract

Instead of developing the general theme of the immersive experience, Francesco Casetti and Andrea Pinotti exemplify it by focusing specifically on Alejandro G. Iñárritu's *CARNE Y ARENA*, an interactive virtual reality installation presented at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, insofar as it testifies to the formal and spectatorial transformations that are rightly referred to as post-cinema. More generally, emphasizing the characteristics of “unframedness, presentness, and immediateness,” this kind of work draws our attention to the phenomenology of the film experience. Casetti and Pinotti propose going beyond phenomenology (and ontology) with the project of an iconic ecology based on the concept of *phaneron*, the appearance as it is perceived for itself.

**Keywords:** Ecology, interaction, phaneron

Film studies no longer blame digital post-cinema for losing contact with physical reality and for replacing it with a purely artificial world. A new theoretical framework is emerging, as Lisa Åkerwall (2018) has noticed,<sup>1</sup> in which post-cinema's modes of working are questioned from a wider perspective. This text wants to move farther in this direction. Relying on Vilém Flusser's concept of “technical image” – a category that at once includes and exceeds the idea of digital – focusing on Alejandro G. Iñárritu's post-cinematic installation *CARNE Y ARENA* – a piece of interactive filmmaking that premiered at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival – and re-reading Adolfo Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel* – a

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<sup>1</sup> The references are in particular to Denson and Leyda 2016; De Rosa and Hediger 2016; Hagener, Hediger and Strohmeier 2016.

futuristic novel published in 1940 – this text explores some characteristics of post-cinema, in particular its attraction for unframedness, presentness, and immediateness. The attempt to display a world in its fullness, proximity, and abruptness, on behalf of an “immersive” experience, not only recalls some of the crucial stylistic changes in post-cinema, like the break in the story’s continuity, the progressive remodulation of images, and the misalignment of spectators’ perception. This attempt, performed by sophisticated dispositives, also uncovers the fact that post-cinematic images are neither a testimony nor a reminder of a reality that is absent, but a calculated aggregate of data. This aggregate, that displays the world in its mere appearances, invites spectators to raise some hypotheses about reality, be they simply perceptual, or sensory-motor, or abductive hypotheses. In our media landscape, these hypotheses are often “sterilized,” when spectators and users either surrender to a certain passivity or are by-passed by images that circulate from a machine to another machine, without human intervention. Yet, when these hypotheses surface, they can corroborate reality’s appearances and make them an element of mediation with the world. Post-cinema holds this possibility open: it does not harness appearances within a gaze, as the classical cinema used to do; it offers appearances that involve spectators’ sensibility without implying any appropriation or privilege; and yet, in doing so, it elicits a mutual engagement with reality. We will say: post-cinema overlaps a phanerology and a phenomenology, but not forcedly, nor even necessarily, and yet often productively. It is precisely this complex playground – a terrain in which techno-capitalism often considers subjects’ entrance neither necessary nor allowed – that defines the aesthetic and political assets of post-cinema. The ultimate reasons for post-cinema lie in its ecology.

## Technical Images

Thirty-five years ago, Vilém Flusser (2011) envisioned the advent of a new kind of image, which he called the *technical image*. Rather than embody actual observations of the world, technical images assemble the data to which our universe is now reduced<sup>2</sup> and elaborate what ultimately is a reality’s potential

2 “The world in which [men] find themselves can no longer be counted and explained: it has disintegrated into particles – photons, quanta, electromagnetic particles. It has become intangible, inconceivable, incomprehensible, a mass that can be calculated. Even their own consciousness, their thoughts, desires, and values, have disintegrated into particles, into bits of information, a mass that can be calculated” (Flusser 2011, 31).

configuration.<sup>3</sup> With technical images, we no longer deal with depictions of precise states of things, but with “mosaics assembled from particles” (Flusser 2011, 31),<sup>4</sup> mostly operated by “blind” machines, that nevertheless make visible “bits of information” that are arranged and rearranged according to different possibilities.<sup>5</sup> The paradoxical effect of this process is to create worlds that are self-evident and self-sufficient. These worlds no longer stand in for an absent reality that they are expected to remember or to recover – in this way, they do not respond to the sense of loss and the desire of repossession that this absence elicits.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, these worlds come to the fore in their fullness. They literally display a reality that we experience as actual and present, despite its artificial nature; in doing so, they epitomize an act of exhibition. Images cease to be a trace or a pointer of what is no longer at-hand; they become mere pictures, and consequently, with respect to the tradition, they negate their very nature of re-presentation. Self-negating images – in some ways, “an-icons”<sup>7</sup> – technical images nevertheless construct the world through the multiple visualization of both its actual and possible aspects, and that consequently echo the *multiverse* in which we now live.

The accomplishment of the digital revolution, as well as the emergence of a new generation of optical devices, fulfil Flusser’s prophecy. Today, virtual, augmented, and mixed reality, 3D movies, immersive videogames, flight or driving simulators, navigation systems like GPS, artificial interactive environments, and so on, bear witness to the advent of new practices of imaging and consequently to new forms of visibility, which do not necessarily rely on an eye that tries to fill the gap between reality and its representation.

In this new visual landscape, pervasive digitalization plays a crucial role. As Flusser underscored, pixels are exemplary of the “particles” in which our universe is fragmented; and in technical images, the assemblage of visual data obeys certain forms of algorithms.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, digitalization’s role is not exclusive. An “ontological” approach to technical images that pays all

3 “The production of technical images occurs in a field of possibilities: in and of themselves, the particles are nothing but possibilities from which something accidentally emerges” (*ibid.*, 6).

4 Flusser insists on the “technical images” very nature as a calculated assemblage of data: “The mass [of particles] must be computed to make the world tangible, conceivable, comprehensible again, and to make consciousness aware of itself once more. That is to say, the whirring particles around us and in us must be gathered onto surfaces; they must be envisioned” (*ibid.*, 31).

5 “That is what a technical image is: a blindly realized possibility, something invisible that has blindly become visible” (*ibid.*, 16).

6 On this idea of image as memory and recovery, see, among others, Bettini 1999.

7 The idea of “an-icon” has been recently elaborated by Pinotti 2020.

8 “The difference between traditional and technical images, then, would be this: the first are observations of objects, the second computations of concepts” (Flusser 2011, 10).

its attention to the passage from analog to digital, ignores the reasons that underpin the advent of technical images. At stake there is the reconstruction of a world that follows automatic procedures – something that film and photography had already begun, and that the digital pushes to the limit. To this core, other elements are added. One is the *ubiquity* of these images. Technical images play crucial roles in several and apparently contradictory cases: from social encounters with others via visual dispositives (video-conferences, Skype, webcams, etc.)<sup>9</sup> to ways of simulating real situations or intertwining the real and the virtual (interactive training videos, virtual tours, or augmented reality games). Another element is their *support*. Today, most images are screened – and interconnected: the networked screen exponentially increases their retrievability, mobility, and workability. Technical images arise not only because of their digital form of codification but also because of their expansive and flexible mode of existence.

The outcome of technical images' pervasive presence is a mutation of *visuality*. While watching a technical image, the beholder is not asked to remember or to recognize anything. Images cease to be re-constructions of an actual or assumed-as-actual world, or the trace of a reality that engendered their representation, or a sort of finger pointing to an individual or an object. Images are just constructs that automatically assemble bits of information.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that technical images cease to have an impact on reality, or worse, that they lack any truth. Bound to the situation in which they live, technical images speak of this situation. Quite paradoxically, both a video game console and a plane cockpit host images that ultimately respond to, sustain, and adjust to the purposes and context in which they surface. In this sense the truth of technical images is contingent not on their content, but on their own conditions of existence.

If the technical image is a construct, then this construct is based on, and opens to, a set of *operations*. Among the operations that buttress the technical image's life are the aggregation and the calculation of data according to different algorithms, their visualization in different formats, sizes, and degrees of definition, and their circulation in different circuits. Technical images do not reflect a natural view of the world, but rather a process of manipulation performed by an agency. On the other hand, technical images also ask us to do something: they are agents on their own. Indeed, they provide "instructions about the way society should experience, perceive,

9 See the concept of *synthetic situation* in Knorr-Cetina 2009.

10 Mark Hansen (2015) underscores the passage from data record to data elaboration and re-elaboration.

evaluate, and behave.”<sup>11</sup> Technical images literally “design” our sensibility and our action.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, they do not simply address our eyes: they involve our hands, legs, behavior, orientation – our full mind and body.

The limited role of our eyes is redoubled by the fact that technical images are often captured from points of view that are non-human: they are “phantom images,” as Harun Farocki (2004) has termed them. Moreover, the operations underpinning technical images are often performed by machines whose processes and logic do not conform to or are inaccessible to users: human eyes become “anachronistic,” as Trevor Paglen (2014) has suggested. Finally, there is an increasing number of images that are made by machines for other machines, without the involvement of human scrutiny. Consequently, they become literally invisible (Paglen 2016). Think of drones: they fill these three conditions – they go beyond our mode of looking, they process images according to their own algorithms, and they are in dialogue with other machines, not immediately with an operator (Chamaillou 2015). Nevertheless, they prompt human assessments and actions that are fraught with consequences.

While eliciting such a radical break in the history of visibility, technical images do not necessarily represent a turn in the history of *visual notation*. On the contrary, the need to make visual data consistent, transferable, comparable, and combinable in order to grant intellectual, political, and economic possession of the world – what Bruno Latour calls the creation of “immutable mobiles” (Latour 1986, 7) – finds in the operations that support technical images a further step. Technical images enhance the process of *inscription* that flattens the act of seeing on the presence of visual data. They support the “datization” of the gaze.

## What Is Post-cinema?

Film Studies’ first reaction to the “digital revolution” was alarm. Movies need some physical reality in front of the camera; a shooting is a direct record

11 The operational nature of technical images was already emphasized by Flusser, when he defined them as “instructional programs” (2011, 50). This characteristic has been further highlighted and radicalized by Harun Farocki in his renowned essay “Phantom Images” (2004), and later by Trevor Paglen in his contribution “Operational Images,” 2014. See also Pantenburg 2017.

12 “Technical images are not mirrors but projectors. They draw up plans on deceptive surfaces, and these plans are meant to become life plans for their recipients. People are supposed to arrange their lives in accordance with these designs” (Flusser 2011, 51). In this context, it is worth remembering the idea of media as “design experience” in Eugeni 2004.

of this reality, and consequently a preservation of its presence even in its absence.<sup>13</sup> Technical images do not need reality: they rely on an algorithm, not on the actual presence of the objects that they depict. In this sense, they do not imply any tension between presence and absence, and consequently they strip cinema of its very essence. Paraphrasing Serge Daney, they belong to the visual, not to the visible (1991, 163). Such an “essentialist” approach, which in the 2010s was still dominant (see Rodowick 2007), has now lost its grip; its persistent legacy is an implicit definition of post-cinema as a deviation from a correct lineage – as a bastard son of the true cinema.

If the hostility against digital images ceased, it is also because cinema increasingly incorporated technical images into movies, and in doing so it expanded the range of its action. We are thinking of CGI (Computer Generated Images), whose elaboration is entirely based on algorithms. But we are also thinking of images from surveillance cameras, drones, satellites, and so on, whose primary task is to capture data more than provide a representation in the traditional sense. Or stereoscopic images, whose task, like virtual reality, is to create an immersive vision. The progressive incorporation of this kind of image in current movies, be they installations of popular franchises or more experimental films, elicits a totally different perception of post-cinema: no longer a bastard son, post-cinema is instead a new territory where the filmic experience can be relocated, but also where the filmic experience can face new challenges and new paradigms.<sup>14</sup>

In this theoretical framework, it is worth asking what technical images convey to post-cinema. What kinds of trends, conflicts, negotiations do they imply? Do they give rise to new forms of sensibility, or even new epistemes? And to what extent do they characterize current cinematic forms?

On the one hand, when hosted by post-cinema, technical images bring to the fore a sort of vacillation in the depiction of the world. Analyzing *CORPORATE CANNIBAL* (2008), a Nick Hooker video with Grace Jones that

13 Let's recall the renowned metaphor of the holy shroud by André Bazin: according to Bazin, more than a testimony, cinema is a relic of something that is no longer with us, but still matters to us (Bazin 2004, 14).

14 Introducing their collection, Shane Denson and Julia Leyda offer an insightful characterization of post-cinema: “Post-cinema is not just *after* cinema, and it is not in every respect ‘new,’ at least not in the sense that new media is sometimes equated with digital media; instead, it is the collection of media, and the mediation of life forms, that ‘follows’ the broadly cinematic regime of the twentieth century – where ‘following’ can mean either to succeed something as an alternative or to ‘follow suit’ as a development or a response in kind. Accordingly, post-cinema would mark not a caesura but a transformation that alternately abjures, emulates, prolongs, mourns, or pays homage to cinema” (2016, 2). On the idea of a “relocatio” of cinema in new geographical and technical environments, see Casetti 2015.

can be rightly seen as exemplary of post-cinema, Steven Shaviro notes that every image undergoes an ongoing manipulation that ceaselessly transforms its configuration (2010, 11ff). As an effect, every image looks like a variation of previous images. It is not a traditional process of metamorphosis, which “gives us the sense that anything can happen, because form is indefinitely malleable.” Rather, it is a process of *modulation* – in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s sense – which “impl[ies] that no matter what happens, it can always be contained in advance within a predetermined set of possibilities. Everything is drawn into the same fatality, the same narrowing funnel, the same black hole” (Shaviro 2010, 13). In this sense, the vacillation of images reveals a flexibility within a pre-established pattern which mirrors the conditions of post-Fordist capitalism: in our world, “the only fixed requirement is precisely to maintain an underlying flexibility: an ability to take on any shape as needed, a capacity to adapt quickly and smoothly to the demands of any form, or any procedure, whatsoever” (14). Consequently, on the screen we see a protean reality in which the actual and the possible merge and coexist. “There is no proliferation of meanings, but rather a capture of all meanings” (13).

On the other hand, technical images overwhelm and often defeat spectators’ sensibilities. Shane Denson speaks of a *discorrelation* of moving pictures on-screen from the norms of human perception. “Digital cameras and algorithmic image-processing technologies confront us with images that are no longer calibrated to our embodied senses, and that therefore must partially elude or remain invisible to the human” (2018, 1). If classical cinema was based on a structural homology between spectators’ embodied perceptual capacities and film’s perceptions as embodied by its apparatus, in the “post-perceptual media regime,” as Denson calls it (2016, 194), this homology goes astray. Film images are increasingly ambiguous, split as they are between a purported realism and an ostensible artificiality. Consequently, spectators are put in a state of uncertainty from which they cannot find a way out (see Denson 2016, 197ff). Film images are also increasingly rich, to the point of displaying much more than what a spectator can see. This is the case of franchises like MARVEL’S AVENGERS, with its frantic action and its overabundant worlds: hence the ongoing effort by fans to fill in the gaps via a public discussion about the movies. These images are often cryptic. Especially when they are produced by devices that go beyond what the human eye can see, but nevertheless are implied in an act of visualization – I am thinking of satellites, drones, infrared cameras, and so on – these images put spectators in distress, revealing their weakness. Finally, these images are also often hidden: taken by a machine, they are read by machines. The

discorrelation of technical images from the human eye elicits a look that is unable to grasp the whole scene on the screen – when it is not completely out of play. Spectators must “scan” the filmic image in a ceaseless effort to “appropriate” what is shown and to “locate” themselves in front of it.<sup>15</sup> The process of “suture” gives way to a sense of dispersion and disconnection.

The images’ modulation and the discorrelation of images from the spectator’s perception deeply change traditional film’s propensity and performance. If, in its overall aspects, filmic experience is preserved – as we mentioned, in many cases, cinema just “relocates” to new physical or technological spaces, be they a home theater, a tablet or smartphone, or a public square (see Casetti 2015) – film’s sensibility explores new paths. This does not mean a loss of contact with reality. Speaking of post-continuity – a mode of editing of which modulation is an example – Steven Shaviro notes that “we enter into the spacetime of modern physics; or better, into the ‘space of flows,’ and the time of microintervals and speed-of-light transformations, that are characteristic of globalized, high-tech financial capital” (2012, n.p.). Thanks to technical images, post-cinema engages in reality – the flows of money, data, humans, and power – that classical cinema was able to capture only symbolically. And Shane Denson, commenting on the disconnection of images from human perception, resolutely speaks of “affect without feeling” (2016, 208): post-cinema bypasses the human component, and reaches an affectivity that has not been shaped and negotiated by a subjective mediation. Denson concludes that “beyond the visual or even the perceptual, the images of post-cinematic media operate and impinge upon us at what might be called a ‘metabolic’ level” (194). Post-cinema elicits a new kind of relationship with images and reality – a relationship that can be described as a form of “tuning” more than an intellectual awareness.

In an enlightening comment on the pixel’s processual logic – so different from the logic of the shot and sequence that dominated classical cinema – Mark Hansen notes that post-cinema offers “perceptive hypotheses” through which we can be in contact with Peirce’s “firstness” – the quality of real before it is shaped and named. This happens through a mediation which is neither intellectual nor immediate. “The categorically invisible operation of computation impacts sensory experience *unconsciously, imperceptibly* – in

15 “Classical cinematography and editing techniques directed our attention, literally showed us where to look, but postcinematic images often require us to view them differently, to attend to the full frame and all of the elements it contains as potentially equal in significance (or insignificance). Such images elicit not so much the investment of a gaze but a more fleeting, dispersed, and scanning form of regard” (Denson 2018, 4).

*short, at a level beneath the threshold of attention and awareness*" (2016, 70). Technical images address us silently and operationally. They do not openly address us, as cinema did for a long time; they just build a meeting ground – which is also a practice field – to which we are often, but not always, invited.<sup>16</sup>

## Unframedness, Presentness, Immediateness

We can further explore this framework through an example: the post-cinematic VR installation presented by Alejandro G. Iñárritu (with the collaboration of Emmanuel "Chivo" Lubezki) *CARNE Y ARENA* at the 70th edition of the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, and subsequently featured at the Fondazione Prada in Milan,<sup>17</sup> the Tlatelolco University Cultural Center in Mexico City, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and in other venues. Convinced that the traditional filmic medium would not have been effective enough to present the odyssey of the Mexican people striving to cross the US border, Iñárritu chose to realize a solo virtual experience which eschews the "dictatorship of the frame" and aims to elicit in the user a powerful feeling of empathy toward the migrants, bringing her to put herself in their shoes:

My intention was to experiment with VR technology to explore the human condition in an attempt to break the dictatorship of the frame, within which things are just observed, and claim the space to allow the visitor to go through a direct experience walking in the immigrants' feet, under their skin, and into their hearts.<sup>18</sup>

The installation is only six-and-a-half-minutes long. Though a short piece in itself, it is nevertheless part of a more complex structure that articulates this experience in different chronotopic stages: the web reservation of your personal allotted time slot; the leaving of cell phones and other devices at the cloakroom; the signature of a waiver exonerating the institution from any responsibility for damages caused by the experience;<sup>19</sup> the passage through

16 On the corporal implication of the observer in front of technical images, see Alac 2008.

17 The authors of this text both experienced this virtual installation at its 2017 run at the Fondazione Prada in Milan.

18 A.G. Iñárritu, as quoted in the Fondazione Prada press release: [http://www.fondazioneprada.org/wp-content/uploads/1-Carne-y-Arena\\_Fondazione-Prada\\_press-release.pdf](http://www.fondazioneprada.org/wp-content/uploads/1-Carne-y-Arena_Fondazione-Prada_press-release.pdf).

19 "Carne y arena." Waiver and Release of Liability, <http://www.fondazioneprada.org/wp-content/uploads/here.pdf>.

a first room, displaying texts with Iñárritu's explanations of his method in building this work; the wait in a preparatory anteroom, a cold chamber (evoking *las hieleras*, the "cool boxes," as they call the cells in which captured migrants are held), where shoes and sandals are scattered on the floor, and visitors are invited to take off their shoes and socks and sit barefoot on standby; the actual VR projection via an Oculus Rift head-mounted display (HMD) in a room whose floor is covered with sand; a room in which one can put back on her socks and shoes; a corridor delimited by a metal barrier (a section of the actual border fence between US and Mexico); and finally, the last dark room, where nine small screens display the protagonists of Iñárritu's installation, whose faces are alternated with texts narrating what happened to them after the events occurred in the desert.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, the visitor gets out in the open.

This sequence of heterogeneous environments forms a complex assemblage that could only simplistically be called a mere virtual immersive environment. The last room, in which videos of migrants are displayed, especially evokes the indexical power of photographic and filmic recording as a documentary testimony released by witnesses of a historical event.

Nevertheless, if we focus on what has been celebrated as (and what Iñárritu himself believes constitutes) the novel core of this installation, namely the HMD-accessed virtual immersive section, we find ourselves deeply challenged in our traditional spectatorship.

What are the main characteristics of an immersive experience such as the one implemented by *CARNE Y ARENA*? Three main axes appear crucial: unframedness, presentness, immediateness. *Unframedness* refers to a very basic, and at the same time very decisive, modification of our traditional image experience: once I have put on a helmet, I enter in a 360° visual field where I cannot see anything but images. I turn my eyes and my head together with my torso, and even walk if the system allows for the user's mobility, and the iconic landscape keeps unfolding in a seamless continuity around me. This experience constitutes a novel horizon compared to pre-virtual modalities of iconic reception: when contemplating a painting or a photograph, when watching a movie at the cinema theater or on the screen of my laptop or smartphone, I always have the possibility to direct my gaze "off-image" beyond the borders of the image, toward a portion of the visual field which is occupied by non-images, by actual reality. This extra-iconic

20 For an analysis of this complex multi-stage structure see: D'Aloia 2018; Dalmaso 2019. The former is inspired to the embodied cognition approach, the latter to the phenomenological tradition.

orientation is typically adopted when, for instance, I become too intensely absorbed in the narrative of a horror film, and I want to be reassured that it is after all “just a movie”: so, I take a look at the person sitting beside me, or at the restroom or exit signs.

The very etymology of “contemplation” (from “temple,” Latin *templum*, Greek *temenos*) implies a cut (evoked by the Indo-Germanic root *tem-*) instituting the separation of the sacred from the profane space.<sup>21</sup> If we transpose such argument onto the iconic domain, we will find the *dispositif* of the frame in all its historical and formal variants: from the pedestal of the statue, through the frame of the painting, to the edges of an electronic screen. Looking at the intense conceptualization of the frame that has occurred all along the twentieth century – from Georg Simmel to Victor Stoichita, and including Ortega y Gasset, Meyer Schapiro, Jacques Derrida, Rudolf Arnheim, the Groupe  $\mu$ , Louis Marin among others<sup>22</sup> – we can easily understand that, beyond the individual nuances of these conceptual articulations, a tripartite cluster of issues is at stake here: *formal*, *phenomenological*, *ontological*. *Formal*, because the shape of the framing device (a rectangle, mostly, which is not a “natural” form but has become a second nature for our image experience) governs and pre-formats our gaze (see Schapiro 1994; a situation that is all the more true if we think of the cinematographic framing, the selective cutting of a portion of the visual and experiential field operated by the director’s or the apparatus’ gaze). *Phenomenological*, because the frame structures our attentional disposition toward the image, and at the same time allows us to switch from the directly perceptual state of consciousness to a quasi-perceptual state of image consciousness (see Husserl 2005a). *Ontological*, because the frame “brackets” the actual existence of the framed picture, underlining its special iconic status in comparison to the other objects of the environment: a painting hangs from the wall just “like a hunting weapon or a hat” (Heidegger 2002, 2-3). It possesses a “thingish” character. And nevertheless, while I can say that I am one meter away from the frame or from the canvas, saying that I am the same distance away from the face depicted in the portrait is nonsense. The spatial and temporal relations instituted within the picture are radically resected from the actual chronotopic connections which entangle me in my real existence. The frame assures the “island-like” nature of the image, and no bridge should be allowed to permit the trespassing of the threshold separating it from reality (see Simmel 1994).

21 On the “templum,” see Arasse 2004.

22 See the anthology edited by Ferrari and Pinotti 2018.

Such framedness tends to be obliterated in the experience of the virtual immersive environments accessed via HMD. Of course, one could argue that the framing is only shifted: from the material edges of the image to a sort of temporal frame (I decide to wear the helmet, I have to take it off when the virtual experience is finished) and even to a material one (I constantly feel the weight of the helmet on my head while enjoying the virtual display). But once I have put on the visor, I find myself in an iconic environment which does not allow me to glance beyond its borders. Should we complain about this loss of liberty (a liberty we were not even aware of, before losing it)? McLuhan has taught us to look at any medium as an oxymoron of empowerment and impotence, of prosthetic implementation and narcotic blunting (1994, 41-47). In this case, as well, the tyranny of the iconic all-over is mitigated by the fact that the user is emancipated from the dictatorship of a heteronomous framing (the director's or the apparatus's gaze) and can autonomously choose her own visual organization and narrative paths via sensorimotor operations that constitute a material and bodily anchorage.<sup>23</sup>

Intimately linked to the property of unframedness, the character of *presentness* is a second and equally relevant axis structuring our image experience in virtual immersive environments. Presentness should be understood in a double sense: of the user feeling present in the environment (a condition frequently referred to through the formula "being there"), and of the digital objects perceived as actually present in the space-time of the user. This feature implies a complex transformation of the status both of the image and of the subjects relating to it: the image ceases to be a re-representation of a reality it refers to (be it actual or imaginary) and tends to erase the tension between the two poles of the *representing* and the *represented*, presenting itself directly as reality in the flesh. It is a "presentification" rather than a representation. In this respect, this contemporary modulation of the iconic experience appears to evoke archaic modalities of the relationship between the sign and the signification, based precisely on the identification of the two terms.

As clearly shown by Jean-Pierre Vernant in his brilliant essays on iconic practices in archaic Greece,<sup>24</sup> what we have traditionally understood as the beginning of our Western visual culture, namely Plato's theory of mimesis as the conceptualization of the image as an ontologically and gnoseologically

23 "Far from tools for dematerialization, these applications of virtual reality rematerialize representation by anchoring it not only to users' bodies as they interact with virtual environments but also to the users' physical environment" (Rogers 2019, 150).

24 See Vernant 2006.

inferior representational imitation of a prototype, is actually a late stage of a complex development, preceded by a phase in which the image *was* the represented, as its direct presentification, as in the case of the *kolossos* or the *xoanon*. In his prophetic analysis of modernity in the *Arcades* project, Walter Benjamin remarked that highly advanced urban cultures are characterized by the resurfacing of archaic and even prehistoric traits; for instance, the entrance of the Parisian subways can be seen as the modern variant of the ancient descent into Hades.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, his characterization of photographs and stereoscopic images as tactile, haptic, manipulable objects (prefiguring our contemporary digital pictures to be grasped with our fingers on the touch screens) reminds us of a time in which religious icons were not just looked at, but rather touched and kissed. Analogously, we might conceive of contemporary virtual environments as the resurfacing of an archaic condition of presence.

Again, contemplation in the traditional (we could say Kantian, disinterested) sense gives way to operation: in virtual immersive environments the iconic space-time is experienced by the user in a relationship of continuity with her own space-time (it appears precisely as an environment, as an *Umwelt*, a surrounding world in Uexküllian terms, 2006), and as a rich source both of perceptual and motor events, of affordances and agencies: engaging in inter-avatorial interactions, touching and moving digital objects through VR gloves, transforming yourself into a bird flying over New York or into a pterosaur soaring in a Jurassic sky,<sup>26</sup> intervening as a remote operator in VR telesurgery (Choi et al. 2018). In this regard, an entire range of possibilities is to be considered, according to the level of interactivity allowed by the system. The user loses the privilege traditionally accorded to sight as the highest and noblest aesthetic sense, in favor of a progressively more and more multisensory integration of sensible stimuli. The history of 3D cinema, incessantly (albeit intermittently) moving toward further numeration (4D, 5D ... nD) is a telling symptom of this process (see Elsaesser 2013).

Interestingly, such integration (at least in the present stage of technological development) appears to go hand in hand with a *dis*-integration: the feeling of “being there” elicited by virtual immersive environments, especially when the user is embodied in her avatar (a digital proxy through which it is possible to interact with other avatars and artificial objects in the

25 See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1999), the convolute C (“Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Decline of Paris”), and in particular the annotation (C1a, 2).

26 See the flight simulator *Birdly* in the two versions: “New York Experience” (<https://vimeo.com/316890451>) and “Jurassic Flight” (<https://vimeo.com/268133291>).

virtual world),<sup>27</sup> institutes a perception of proximity which conflicts with the distance produced by the *dispositif*; while wearing a HDM I cannot see my hands, feet, body, I am close to the virtual environment and somehow far away from myself. Moreover, conflicting information transmitted to the brain by different systems (the vestibular and proprioceptive centers inform me that I am comfortably sitting in my armchair, yet the visual center indicates that I am riding wildly on a roller coaster) can induce what is called cybersickness (Gavagni 2018). This dialectical polarization confirms that the conceptual couple of farness/nearness, already identified by Simmel and Benjamin as the key to understanding the metamorphosis of *aisthesis* in modern times, retains its heuristic validity for the comprehension of our contemporary iconoscape, as well.

By evoking reality in the flesh, the second axis of *presentness* consequently leads us to the third axis, *immediateness*. This is probably the most paradoxical feature of virtual immersive environments, considering that non-mediateness, transparency, is an effect obtained through a massive employment of highly sophisticated technological media. Traditional image theories have underlined in different ways the double possibility of focusing either on the represented entity or on the material conditions that make representation possible. For example, while contemplating an icon, I can concentrate my attention either on Christ or on the *craquelures* of the wooden panel. While watching a movie on my laptop, I need to adjust the angle of the screen in order to be able to focus on the picture and not on my face reflected on the glass surface, which is revealed as such exactly because of the reflection, of the mirroring.

The level of the material support – variously designated as “pre-iconographic” or “primary” (Panofsky 1972, 5), “image-thing” (Husserl 2005a, 21), “medium” (Wollheim 2015, 140) – is precisely what is perceptually negated when I am immersed in a virtual environment: once I have put on my HMD, I lose the possibility to direct my gaze on the material features of the medial support. The effect of the unframed presence of reality in the flesh prevents me from developing an adequate awareness of its being artificially constructed. Again, as above discussed with reference to unframedness, the very perception of the device weighing on my head, the fact that it is “head mounted,” constantly reminds me that I am being absorbed within an artificial world. But the tendency to reduce and ideally suppress these limitations is very clear, and very powerful. If we consider the rapid pace of technological progress in this field, and the combination of biotechnologies

27 On the avatarial condition see Amato and Perény 2013.

and nanotechnologies, we might expect that in a few years what Marx and Benjamin would call the “innervation” of such devices will mean less and less wearable and more and more implantable (and therefore “transparent”) machines. Actually, at Elon Musk’s *Neuralink* brain VR implants are already being tested on rats; first tests on humans are expected by the end of 2020.<sup>28</sup>

If the experience of the image implies the appreciation of both the represented object and the representing medium, can we still speak here of an image experience at all?

In spite of the fact that writing imposes the successive disposition of one element after the other (and in this sense we have enumerated the three axes one after the other), we should think of them as intimately intertwined and in a relationship of co-determination and reciprocal conditioning. As such they also frequently appear referred to in the state-of-the-art literature, when for instance presence is defined by the absence of a framing device and awareness of a medial support or, vice versa, unframedness or immediateness are explained on the basis of the feeling of being there or of the triggering of interactivity. Such mutual co-determination is confirmed by the experience of *CARNE Y ARENA*, whose subtitle – “Virtually Present, Physically Invisible” – is particularly telling for the illustration of the three axes above described.

“Virtually Present”: you feel that you are there, in the middle of the desert, among the migrants. They surround you, in a 360° unframed visual and experiential field which keeps unfolding while you turn your head and move in the room. A menacing helicopter hovering above the scene nails you to the ground. As yelling border agents point their shotguns at your face, you become one of the migrants who are routinely approached in this way. The “dictatorship of the frame” that Iñárritu wanted to overcome is resolved in favor of a framing which ends up coinciding with your own gaze.

“Physically Invisible”: you are there, present in the dramatic scene, but the migrants cannot see you. If you try to approach them physically, they explode in a pulsing red heart. Interaction is banned, and the user is confined to a helpless passivity.<sup>29</sup> The only recognition allowed seems to be the tracking system that detects your position in the scene and orients the direction of the policemen’s shotguns. But “physically invisible” is to be understood

28 Elon Musk’s *Neuralink* implant will “merge” humans with AI, see Hitti 2019.

29 According to Pietro Montani, this is a fundamental feature of this installation: “That passivity is a structural element of the whole spectacular machine and is eventually the only really meaningful way to participate in the real experience of the small group of migrants and, perhaps, more generally in the experience of being a refugee as an existential condition. It is a condition that you have to feel in your own flesh” (2017, 135; our translation).

in a reflexive way as well. The closeness elicited by the virtual presence is counterbalanced by an uncanny farness: your body, so near to them, becomes distant to itself, you cannot perceive your hands or your feet, because the screen of the HMD cuts them off. The living body becomes the new frontier of the “off-image” in virtual immersive environments, calling for an adequate account of the dissociative implications produced by this peculiar “variety of presence.”<sup>30</sup> Eventually, we might add that the medium itself is also physically invisible: no reflection on the surface of the HMD screen can reflect my own eyes, as in the case of a smartphone or computer screen. No border (other than the limits imposed by my visual field, varying according to the orientation of my gaze) can allow me to focus beyond the iconoscape offered by the installation.

### Morel Revived and Revised

If we collect together the three axes succinctly described above – unframedness, presentness, and immediateness – we obtain a picture which is very close to Morel’s invention as imagined by Adolfo Bioy Casares in his famous 1940 novel. The machine designed by Morel was not only able to record reality in all its multisensory aspects but also to indefinitely reproduce it. And so he, using a group of friends gathered in a villa on a desert island, made a week of elegant parties and witty conversations immortal. When the protagonist of the first-person narration – a castaway, a fugitive escaped from a prison – is shipwrecked on the island, he does not realize at first that what he sees are images, he simply and immediately takes those projections to be reality in the flesh. Only the lack of reciprocity – he sees and hears the friends, but they do not see and hear him – allows him to develop a state of image-consciousness. Bioy Casares did not include interactivity in Morel’s *Umwelt*; otherwise, all the aforementioned properties are there: unframedness, presentness, immediateness.

It would be easy to number Bioy Casares among the advocates of illusionism. After all, only a few years later, in 1944, the French theorist René Barjavel introduced the notion of “total cinema” in order to refer to a moving picture capable of rendering reality in its perfect totality. According to Barjavel, “every progress achieved by the seventh art [...] allows to come progressively closer to the real, up to the perfect illusion” (1944, 53; our translation).<sup>31</sup> Two

30 A variety unfortunately only touched by Noë in his study *Varieties of Presence* (2012, 44).

31 On Barjavel’s ideas see Leotta 2018.

years later, though in a different tone and for a different purpose, André Bazin speaks of “the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief” (2004a, 20). Around the same time, Sergei Eisenstein enthusiastically reacted to Soviet experiments in stereocinematography as an effective response to the “need for a thorough recreation of reality” and as an effort to achieve “a complete illusion of reality, in all its minutest detail,” striving for “the near identity of reality and its representation” (2013, 35, 37). But in reconstructing the genealogy of such a powerful drive we could go back much earlier than the forties of the last century. We could actually convene the entire tradition of the *trompe l'œil* in all its secular variations and all the inventive attempts made in each epoch (according to the available techniques) to blur the threshold separating representation and reality, namely to *environmentalize* the image: from Pompei's villas through Baroque ceilings and panoramas to cave environments.<sup>32</sup>

However, it would be profoundly misleading to reduce Morel's invention within the media-archaeological frame of the ancient dream of perfect illusion, as it were of the most perfect *trompe l'œil* becoming *trompe l'expérience tout court*. In fact, when we refer to the notion of illusion, we always – explicitly or implicitly – imply a subject who is deceived by a false perception, an observer who takes one thing for another, misjudging the match between the subjective percept and the objective thing perceived. One could say that this is precisely what happens to the fugitive after his shipwreck: at first, he falls victim to an illusion, mistaking the projections provided by Morel's machine as an actual reality happening in front of his eyes; only subsequently he realizes that this reality is just an illusion, the playback of a previously-recorded sequence of events. This way of reading Bioy Casares's novel is encouraged by the first-person narration from the point of view of the castaway. But the occurrence that a human being could land on the desert island is not only contingent and fortuitous but also violated Morel's original plan, which was scrupulously designed to keep visitors out (hence the exclusion of interactivity). As we find out thanks to a letter in which he exposed his intentions to his friends (the letter that he read out loud in front of them during their stay on the island), the choice of that particular island had been determined by three very specific reasons:

Three factors recommended it to me: (1) the tides, (2) the reefs, (3) the light. The regularity of the lunar tides and the frequency of the meteorological tides assure an almost constant supply of motive power. The reefs are a

32 For an overview see Grau 2003; Griffiths 2008.

vast system to wall out trespassers, – the only man who knows them is our captain, McGregor, – I have seen to it that he will not have to risk these dangers again. The light is clear but not dazzling – and makes it possible to preserve the images with little or no waste. (2003, 75)

Morel had thus deliberately excluded a future human addressee of the reproduction of his recordings, that had to be indefinitely iterated through the immortal persistence of the medial iconic support and the motor power eternally supplied by the tides.

For this reason, while on the one hand it is historically and culturally justifiable to put Morel in the same line with other conceptualizations that in the same years (as we have seen above) strived toward a “total” cinema (Barjavel, Bazin, Eisenstein), it is on the other hand necessary to emphasize what radically distinguishes Bioy Casares’s idea from theirs: while Barjavel, Bazin, and Eisenstein still linger over the concept of illusion, which is constitutively anchored to a receptive human subject (and the same could be said of many contemporary conceptualizations of immersive virtual environments, which prolong this “illusionary” line of thoughts), Morel dramatically undermines this approach, bypassing the human addressee and linking together in a non-human iconoscape nature (light, tides) and technique (the projectors), thus realizing a techno-natural environment.

And yet, the investigation of the very ontological status of such virtual immersive images cannot neglect the simple fact that they are electronic entities, technical images. Their mode of existence, as Trevor Paglen (2016) has convincingly pointed out, is dominated by the regime of invisibility much more than by that of visibility. Only, when they are invisible, they are not so in the way statues and paintings are hidden in the stock room of a museum, or in the way old photos are closed in a family album. In these cases, statues, paintings, photos keep being images even when they are not actually perceived by a human gaze. Electronic images cease being “images” in the moment in which they cease to be displayed for a human eye on a screen, and start interacting in a machine-machine communication (the domain of surveillance is a major example) which excludes the participation of humans for most of their existence. A machine-machine communication which is only improperly (and way too anthropomorphically) designated as “machine *vision*.”

At first sight, this extra-human interrelation might be traced back to the concept of “interpassivity,” put forward by Robert Pfaller (2017) and Slavoj Žižek, and clearly exemplified by the case of the VCR addicted:<sup>33</sup>

33 On this topic see also: Žižek 2008, 33. See also Pfaller 2014 (chap. 1: “Interpassivity”), 2017.

Almost every VCR aficionado who compulsively records movies (myself among them) is well aware that the immediate effect of owning a VCR is that one effectively watches fewer films than in the good old days of a simple TV set. One never has time for TV, so, instead of losing a precious evening, one simply tapes the film and stores it for future viewing (for which, of course, there is almost never time). Although I do not actually watch the films, the very awareness that the films I love are stored in my video library gives me a profound satisfaction, and occasionally enables me to simply relax and indulge in the exquisite art of *far niente* – as if the VCR is in a way *watching them for me, in my place*. VCR stands here for the big Other, the medium of symbolic registration. (Žižek 2007, 24)

The VCR recorder interacts with the recorded video: the former becomes the “viewer,” the latter the “viewed.” And yet in Žižek’s and Pfaller’s argumentation the emphasis is not so much on the machine, but rather on the “delegated enjoyment” of the human subject, who gives up her personal direct pleasure and accepts a vicarious satisfaction via a technical device (like in analogous cases, as for the so-called “canned laughter” in TV shows or the Tibetan prayer wheel which can pray for me).

The situation described by Paglen is definitely more radically machinic, stressing the fact that the human pole can be part of the picture, but not necessarily must. In this perspective, are “ontology” and “phenomenology” still valid notions and useful conceptual frames to understand our contemporary post-cinematic iconoscape? A parallel drawn between technique and nature can help here understand the *ecological* implications of this post-cinematic condition. Zoologist Adolf Portmann had remarked upon an apparently inexplicable paradox concerning some species living in the depth of the ocean where light cannot penetrate or which are not equipped with visual organs able to form a coherent perceptual image (like the opisthobranchs). Regardless of this objective invisibility or subjective blindness, their bodily surfaces are beautifully colored, so they keep sending visual messages with no addressee able to receive them: “We have to do with innumerable optical transmissions aimlessly sent into the ether, with self-presentation [*Selbstdarstellung*] which is not destined to any receptive sense, but simply ‘appears’” (Portmann 1958, 170; our translation). Their ontology seems to be dissociated from their phenomenology (if we stick to the key concept of phenomenology as a description of the correlation object-subject and of the experiential structures). In other words, phenomenology gives way to *phanerology* (from *phaneron*, the manifest), the study of mere appearance, auto-presentation, not appearance as perceived by others, “the doctrine – as

Portmann puts it – of the genuine manifestations [*Lehre von den eigentlichen Erscheinungen*]” (1958, 161; our translation):<sup>34</sup> “Whether this appearance is actually seen, that is, whether it appears to the eyes of higher organisms, is perhaps beside the point in this context; we are not yet within the realm of ‘visual’ structures which are, it is generally assumed, meant to camouflage the organism or make it strikingly noticeable” (Portmann 1955, 25).<sup>35</sup> A similar recourse to the *phaneron*, derived not from biology but rather from Peirce’s phaneroscopy, has been recently proposed by Mark Hansen, precisely with reference to the post-cinematic iconoscape of digital images, which “operate *without being phenomenally apprehended*” (Hansen 2016, 806).<sup>36</sup>

Of course, phanerology does not exclude phenomenology. We can imagine a deep-sea diver equipped with technical devices allowing immersion in the oceanic depths and visual perception of their remote inhabitants. Only her actual presence and perceptual activity in the abysses would be inherently contingent, not necessary; precisely as the castaway shipwrecked on Morel’s island. Morel’s invention attains an iconic condition quite similar to the one described by Portmann with his animals displaying their beautifully colored liveries to no eye at all: a self-presentation, an absolute manifestation (in the etymological sense of absolute: *ab-solutus*, loose, freed, detached), which represents a radical challenge to traditional accounts of both phenomenological intentionality as subject-object correlation and of ontology as an investigation of the properties of beings per se regardless of their relation to us. Morel’s recording machine represents the technical pole, Portmann’s ocean animals the natural pole of an iconic ecology which obliges us to reframe the very connection of ontology and phenomenology in new terms, namely conceiving an ontology which is structurally phenomenological, but not in exclusively human terms; an ontology which makes itself manifest in the *phaneron*.

34 On the limits of a phenomenological interpretation of Portmann’s biological theory of animal phenomena see Prévost 2009.

35 On the notion of *Selbstdarstellung* (translated as “self-expression”) see also Portmann 1964 (chap. VI: “The Realm of Images”).

36 As Hansen argues, “the continued relevance of, indeed necessity for, a philosophy of the movement-image in our world today hangs upon a certain coupling of the analysis of the image with a certain phenomenology, specifically with a logical or objective phenomenology that – following Peirce’s governing insight – decouples appearance from any avatar of the subject, consciousness included. With the advent of digital imaging procedures, the image has attained a certain autonomy from synthetic operations that necessarily involve human forms of perception and sensation; in a world where images self-propagate, at the level of the pixel, following purely machinic protocols, what is needed is a theory of the movement-image that detaches the intensity of the image’s content from the activity of its being perceived” (2016, 785-786).

We eventually face here two major implications of what we have previously called “an-icons”: on the one side, the images that we have described aim to negate themselves as images as re-presentational entities supported by a material medium and separated from reality. Their unframedness, presentness, immediateness institute a tension between their being images (*icons*) and their appearing not (*an-*) as images offered to a visual beholder, but as actual operational environments offered to a user. On the other side, these entities are an-icons in the sense of their being technical images that lead for most of the time a non-iconic existence, an inter-machinic electronic life, and that can, but must not necessarily, entail a human experience. Phanerology as the study of manifestation in the broadest sense of the term accounts for both these implications. A human subject can eventually come into the picture (even in a literal sense, given the immersive nature of these iconic environments), though not to regain possession of her subjective mastery over the iconoscape, but rather to ecologically resonate with it. The post-cinematic iconoscape embraces the possibility of a human spectator, but does not necessarily need her.

In this sense, phanerology appears to constitute the future horizon of post-cinema.

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# **PART V**

**Transformations in Film Form**



## 12. Dwelling with Moving Images

*Miriam De Rosa*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Some filmmakers or artists decide to put art at the heart of their creation, applying not only the relationship between cinema and art to their concept but also to various aspects of the process of creation. Miriam De Rosa addresses this kind of “art contemporary turn” by examining the different incursions of cinema from the point of view of the contemporary art space: “how the contemporary experience of moving images is articulated when it enters art spaces.” The presence of film in this foreign space, transforming it into a different and personalized place, can be observed in recent exhibitions: *SLEEPWALKERS* (2007); Marta Minujín’s *Mesunda Reloaded* (2019) at the New Museum in New York; and *Sensitive Environments* by the Milan-based collective Studio Azzurro.

**Keywords:** Space, exhibition, environments

Moving image production and reception practices at the time of “post-cinema” do not simply result from a process of increasing replacement of old modes of creation and consumption with new ones. In the era of “film as an experience” (Harbord 2002; Casetti 2015), much of the debate has been focusing on shifting definitions and revised categories moving across the territory of ontological enquiry (Friedberg 2000; Krauss 1999a, 1999b; Cherchi Usai 2001; Rodowick 2008; Aumont 2012; Gaudreault and Marion 2015 among others). In this chapter I shall contribute to such debate, attempting in fact to relaunch it further, beyond the constrains of medium specificity. To do so, I look in particular at how the contemporary experience of moving images

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Wanda Strauven for championing my work, Greg de Cuir Jr. for his kind feedback on this text and Studio Azzurro for allowing me to include pictures of their work.

is articulated when it enters art spaces, tangentially feeding the discourse about post-art, too.

Situating “post-cinema” in relation to the spatial turn in film studies (Connolly 2009; Rhodes and Gorfinkel 2011), I am interested in the contamination between cinema and art with regards to spectatorship and in particular in the ways in which the agency of spectators/visitors unfold. Moving from a phenomenological perspective the kind of moving image experience I look at is the one belonging to the subject – a subject that is embodied and embedded in space. Put it differently, the contemporary experience of moving images does not simply raise issues revolving around the increasingly algorithmic creation, distribution, recycling, remix and reordering of cinema but it poses the question of dwelling, that is, of how “post-cinema” (or new forms of cinema) is woven into the networked texture of everyday life and practices, of how it inhabits our space, and allows us inhabiting it through the image.

The increasing presence of moving images in gallery spaces is certainly not a new trend but, entering its second century, cinema is at the center of a process of interaction, at times integration, and exchange with a system of image consumption that does not only influence its language but powerfully impacts on it as a medium (Cowie 2009). Observing these dynamics from a slightly different point of view, art critic Nicholas Bourriaud coined the fortunate phrase “relational aesthetics” to describe precisely a kind of art that defines and constitutes itself in the act of opening outward, and in particular toward the public. If in the case of the art Bourriaud has in mind, “the exchanges that take place between people [...] turn out to be as likely to act as the raw matter for an artistic work” (2002, 37), cinema in the age of the “post-” also opens up, namely to a variability of modes of production, distribution, reception, subsequent elaboration and recycling, as well as to a myriad of possible formats. This reshuffles the relationship of moving images with other media, with themselves and their histories. Committing to a reflection on “post-cinema” is then a way to rethink moving images in light of a relational system based on the interconnections among processes, discourses, and disciplines.

Already in the 1960s and 1970s, but more systematically from the 1990s, “[f]ilm or filmic effects are so pervasive in the art world they have begun to reformat all kinds of other practices” (Foster 2003, 93). With the benefit of living some fifteen years after this statement was first shared, I would argue the situation is now possibly even more exacerbated: it is very rare *not* to encounter moving images in museums and art spaces, regardless of the content of the collection or the selection they exhibit. In fact, moving

images do not enter art spaces only in the form of objects on display *per se*, on the contrary they are employed according to various strategies that involve and insert them in the mechanics of galleries as *dispositifs*. We tend to forget or take it for granted because this is by now an entirely naturalized practice, but it is worth reminding how moving images in art spaces are not limited to the presence of artists' films or video installation projects. On a more procedural, technical, and subtler level screens and displays are used as digital signage tools that require the public to watch them. While this is certainly not comparable to the experience of watching a film or a video art work installed in the gallery, such an experience demands nonetheless a specific set of actions and establishes an equally specific set of expectations from the viewer. In other terms, a "screen-sphere" (Sobchack 2016) emerges in the art space implying a number of practices and establishing an economy of the attention that borrows from the etiquette and the mechanisms characterizing cinematic experience.

Looking more closely, what happens to the space where these dynamics unfold is that the introduction of screens and moving image-based tools in the museum build a sort of bubble that gathers the subjects around them and determines – albeit with a fairly wide range of possibilities – their attitudes and behaviors within the art space. Such bubble, such screen-sphere, might give the idea of a process informed after a centripetal force; however, this is not simply an inward-looking event that solely acts upon the interior of the museum. On the contrary, the same screening situation eliciting and favoring a viewing experience that is typical of cinema occurs when the museum space itself is remediated into a viewing surface which takes the pieces on display outward, allowing for an outward-facing distribution and consumption of the art that is otherwise only accessible once it overcomes the institutional and economical barriers that generally regulate the access to it. The examples in this instance are countless but works such as Doug Aitken's *SLEEPWALKERS*, commissioned by the MoMA in 2007 for its central Manhattan venue, are a case in point. Composed by five video pieces, the artwork has been installed taking advantage of the external walls of the museum building, both those facing the Sculpture Garden and those actually facing outward. This seemed to respond to a logic of extension and opening, whereby the moving image literally "made room for itself" discarding the binary interior/exterior, and re-designing the balance between the two, as well as the relationship between the private/institutional and the public spheres. As in a sort of reverse configuration, the gallery walls become in this case a double-sided surface for art – meaning by that Aitken's art film. They articulate a trajectory and provide an architecture to the public's visit at

the museum if taken in their internal side, where they divide the exhibition space, articulating the path designed by the curators, and containing art. Contextually, however, the same walls work as outdoor screens too, making the artworks public,<sup>2</sup> with no requirement to pay any tickets to watch the films, no indications of where to stand, sit or stop to have the best view of the screens, nor of the duration, temporal development, beginning or end point of the screening.<sup>3</sup> All in all, these aspects contribute to metaphorically (but also very practically) show how the spread of moving images outside the classic cinematic precincts works, what challenges it poses and what the reactions of the public are.

As I have briefly mentioned, the reading of such processes that I shall argue for is one considering first and foremost the spatial element and the position of the entities situated in the space alongside the moving image. In this view, the subjects, as much as the moving image itself, have a power to practice and activate the space they are in. In the framework I am sketching, I propose to define this action on the space as *design*. This function is very often followed by a second action that puts into practice the concept offered by the overall design, whereby the space undergoes a *disposition*, that is, a rearticulation that functionally facilitates the design by establishing the conditions for it to move from a status of potentiality to one of reality. Worth specifying is also the impact of these processes on the definition of the environment where they unfold. I have thus far used the term space to mean the spatial extension where the subject, the moving image and any other entity is located. To be entirely precise, however, I would suggest to differentiate the environment taken in its neutral character and the practiced, lived environment once this is informed by the entities it contains, as it is rather incontestable that when an entity enters a certain environment this is marked by his presence. In line with phenomenology and more specifically with Martin Heidegger's philosophy of space (1971, 1993), I term the neutral environment *space* and the marked environment *place*. Now, the main difference between space and place is that, because marked by its presence and action, that is, by the design it informs around itself and the disposition it elicits, *place* is the specific space of an entity – the space where I live is “my place”; the space where I go see art pieces is a museum,

2 For reasons of space I cannot delve into a close analysis of SLEEPWALKERS, further details and visuals can however be found online. See <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2007/aitken/>. Accessed August 20, 2019.

3 A rich literature addresses the characteristics of gallery films and their pattern of consumption. In the impossibility to provide a full overview on this, please see the key contributions in this area, such as Fowler 2004, 2011; Leighton 2008; Connolly 2009; Uroskie 2014.

the place of art; the space where I watch a film is the place of cinema, and so forth. However, this categorization may be perceived as too rigid for our fast-paced, multitasking, hyper-flexible way of life. This is why positing a strictly ontological reading of the processes I am discussing is in my view not the most suitable: focusing on the presumed death, survival, second or virtual life of cinema and so on is too restrictive, to me the debate about “post-cinema” is an amazing opportunity to realize and acknowledge that the terms of the question shall change because the objects we are looking at already did. Shifting the attention from ontology to phenomenology and interdisciplinarity is the option I propose to take on.

The framework I am borrowing from Heidegger to do so, focuses on the conditions of not simply being but of *being-there*, that is, on a spatially-mindful horizon of existence which is articulated in direct response to space and time. While this relationality of sorts is not made explicit as such in the essays that constitute the base of the philosopher’s thought on spatiality, I suggest it would indeed be of particular relevance for the development of the debate informing the current film studies, so as to put them in relation with other areas of the humanities and therefore to truly practice interdisciplinarity. Our contemporary moving-image forms mix up and mingle with other media configurations, therefore anticipating to grasp them by only adopting film studies tools is simply insufficient to offer an overview on “post-cinema” (not so to produce, for example, a solid close analysis of a film). Conversely, looking beyond the classic borders of the discipline is in my view an important move to mirror the historical moment we live in, a historical moment whereby “crisis” seems to be the keyword to interpret many phenomena to the extent that a quick online search of the term offers no less than 1,210,000,000 results in 0.73 seconds (Google, September 9, 2019). In such a historical moment “post-cinema” may easily be seen as an expression of the crisis of cinema, and this is precisely why situating the object of our inquiry in a broader space, understanding if and how it is interconnected with other entities, how it responds to this proximity and to the generalized regime of “ongoingness” that makes contemporary media increasingly fluid (Marchessault and Lord 2007; Marks 2012; Kim 2016), in what way it does unfold, morph, contaminate or strengthen its identity may suggest not a solution to the crisis but perhaps a realistic capture of the situation.

In Heidegger’s system of thought, the main shift describing the passage from space to place is that by “gathering” the pure spatial extension around itself and making it suitable for its needs, making it – so to say – its “home,” the entity inhabits the environment it is contained in. In other words, once

space is entered, practiced by an entity, designed and disposed around it, place is founded and *dwelling* is possible. When articulating his framework, Heidegger had mostly in mind man as the entity activating space and turning it into place, but I believe the process well suits the mechanism in a broader fashion, this is why I suggest applying it, as I already anticipated, to any entity entering a certain space. In the conviction that, if anything, any entity has in itself a certain potential for action and that this is mirrored in the area around it, I mean to apply this scheme to the moving image. Better yet, design, dispose and dwelling are the three key processes that I argue can be applied to moving images as they enter art spaces.<sup>4</sup> In this view, I shall contend that the experience of moving images at the time of “post-cinema” allows for a new sense of inhabitation of space, on the basis of a temporarily contamination and integration between image and space.

Coming back to Aitken’s *SLEEPWALKERS* in light of this, what occurs on 5th Avenue is that a street with its own characteristics and destination of use ceases to be only a space of transit, of motion, a way connecting point A to point B or the back side of a major cultural institution, turning it into a place of viewing modeled after the presence, action and experience of moving images. A viewing situation, as transitory as it may be, is created, the design of a screen-sphere is set, and the elements articulating the situation are disposed so that this very design can be created and its ultimate function activated. Albeit only for the temporary duration of the screening, the viewer can dwell within this situation where moving images become part of the texture of the environment s/he lives in, practices and inhabits.

Of course, the variability of the setting mirrors, in turn, a high degree of variability of the situation resulting from the processes of design, disposition, and dwelling. Offering a taxonomy of situations exceeds the purposes of this reflection, but for the sake of exemplifying, the variability of moving-image configurations may well range from immersive, large-scale works such as Richard Mosse’s *INCOMING* (2017), to interactive projects such as the audiovisual performance and digital environments by Refik Anadol (2008 onward), or, again, to the architectural quality of works that re-articulate the gallery space as in Stan Van der Beek’s classic *MOVIE MURAL* (1968) refashioned for the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, or maybe play with the same rearticulation

4 This does not apply to art spaces only. In *Cinema e Postmedia: I territori del filmico nel contemporaneo* (2013), that represents a first formulation of this argument eventually further developed in this chapter, I offer a wider overview of other possible real-life situations where the moving image triggers a number of mechanisms impacting on the spaces it enters so as to activate the processes I discuss here.

of the gallery/movie theater nexus literally bringing the black box into the white cube as, notably, in Janet Cardiff and George Bures-Miller *PARADISE INSTITUTE* (2001). In all these as well as in other cases, a re-writing of art spaces is put into action in light of/by the presence of the moving image, allowing for an experience that is different from the classic film viewing as much as it is different from the traditional museum visit. In fact, cinema and art exchange visual and aural materials, languages, codes and formats mixing and borrowing from each other to create new configurations.<sup>5</sup> As Janet Harbord has observed in her study of contemporary film cultures,

the relationship of form and content, of mimesis and abstraction, becomes reconfigured through the different contexts of exhibition. What emerges is a binary of a different order: on the one hand a desire to maintain the purity of the singular object of the film text, and on the other, the dissolution of the film into a range of ancillary products in a context of consumption. Or, more simply, film as a discrete object or film as an experience. (Harbord 2002, 44-45)

Some fifteen years after Harbord, it is enough to observe our contemporary artistic moving images to discard a binary model (the film *or* the constellation of products emerging around it; the object *or* the experience it enables) in favor of a much more complex, multifaceted, fluid one. However, well in line with the idea effectively proposed by Harbord that the moving image as a component of a temporary configuration that enters a(-n art) space can be also understood in terms of experience, I shall also posit that when this happens a *spatialization* of moving images is favored. As a fiber of an organic whole, moving images weave into the environment becoming part of its texture, a component of that place, of that screen-sphere I have already introduced. They make room for themselves, activating an audio-visual regime which impacts on the behavior of the subject – not just a gallery visitor any longer but a spectator, too – onto her/his mode of navigation of the space s/he is in, and the way s/he will consume the art objects s/he is going to encounter therein. As a matter of fact, by way of the design, disposition and dwelling processes I have discussed, the configuration of the space and the creation of a place on the one hand, and the approach of the subjects toward them on the other result profoundly altered. What does this mean in relation to art spaces? How does their setup, organization,

5 The first proposition to look at these moving image forms as fluid configurations is part of a conversation I had with Vinzenz Hediger (see De Rosa and Hediger 2016).

pattern of use, and functions change when they are entered by the moving image? What experience do they favor? Is it an artistic experience, a filmic experience, none of them or both at once?

The disposition of the elements featured in art spaces, both structurally and in terms of setup, define the environment *formally* and *functionally*, that is to say, the regime of (audio-)vision offered to the visitors/spectators and its practicability. A modulation of the light conditions, for example, which has historically determined the difference between black box and white cube undergoes a sort of short circuit as the two are contained one in the other, paired side by side within the same context, or, again, mixed, their boundaries blurred (Leighton 2008; Fowler 2011; Bovier and Mey 2015; Uroskie 2014). Alongside this, and as a consequence, the focus of the attention and the ability of the image to hook the subject's eyes are played out differently than in the movie theater, having to open up the classic viewing scheme to a not necessarily frontal, not necessarily single-channel viewing situation conceived for a not necessarily static viewer. The distance that characterized the position between the spectator and the screen in the theatrical setting, albeit imposed,<sup>6</sup> is altered as the classic apparatus is basically invested by a certain flexibility that reassembles its components in various different ways, which in turn implies a variable unveiling, closeness, and interaction with the *dispositif* itself. As a result, the psycho-motor stasis typical of the contemplation mode and the inquisitive attitude of the moving and interactive visitor are combined differently from time to time. A negotiation between the instances of cinema and those of art enabled by the design and disposition of the space turn the latter into a place for viewing and support the spectator/visitor in her/his experience of the space which will be practiced according to the design that the moving image has traced for her/him therein. In so doing, the trajectories crossing this space contribute

6 As many films have shown with exquisite meta-linguistic efficacy, in the movie theater we have a desiring spectator who is caught by the cinematic image on-screen. Her/his posture is notably one of stasis and his object of desire is kept away from her/him by a distance which in fact allows her/him seeing it on-screen. As Gabriele Pedullà states, "the movie theater forces the eye into a uniform" (2008, 129; my translation), that is to say the classic cinematic apparatus works on the basis of a "don't touch" discipline, which in turn exercises a strong appeal on the spectator. In the classic museum we encounter the same interdiction, where artworks are kept at a distance from the visitor. Differently from the cinema situation, the latter has the opportunity to browse around the gallery, to move and turn her/his desire to come closer, touch and perhaps become one with the artwork into a sort of *flânerie* allowing for a spatial prehension. A couple of key references in this regard are Strauven 2012; Van der Vall 2008.

7 I do not translate *dispositif* as apparatus as this would be reductive. For a similar use of the terms, please see Bellour 2012.

to a dwelling experience that is offered by the moving image and that in effect re-organizes the space itself as a new, hybrid, reconfigured place bringing together cinema and art.

Echoing Brian O'Doherty (1999), David Joselit has described such a resulting form as "light cube" (2004), a crasis combining elements coming from both the cinematic and the museum spheres. For him, in fact, this context does not particularly activate a response in the viewer; on the contrary, systems such as CCTV and video projection alike, which are heavily employed in much video and installation art in the 1960s and 1970s, would instead ultimately lead to a rather passive attitude:

Projection undermines one of the most progressive effects of the closed-circuit apparatus: its conceptualization of spectatorship as interactive, even if the interaction afforded is the arguably passive one of inserting one's body within a media circuit in order to view it relayed back to oneself, often in distorted form. Projection reintroduces a more conventionally theatrical mode of spectatorship in which the audience remains outside the media feedback loop rather than participating as actors within it. [...] Indeed, in this regard as well as in its adherence to the planarity of the gallery wall, video projection is as much heir to the traditions of modernist painting as it is successor to closed-circuit video. (Joselit 2004, 154)

In this view, the moving image entering a gallery space by way of video projections would "introduce figuration into the rigorously flat virtual space that had been associated with modernist painting" (Joselit 2004, 156). Joselit does not delve too much into the consequences of this genealogy he proposes in terms of the posture and attitude adopted by the spectators. If this implies a similarity between the posture of the visitor going to see a modernist painting exhibition and visiting any of the moving image works I have mentioned earlier, all of which technically include a video projection, I would suggest his argument is easily contestable. As a matter of fact, the position of the spectator/visitor embeds her/him in the same environment where the image is also present and embedded. Here, the latter designs the space and disposes it to be watched, while the former has indeed the agency to take on the invitation and practice that same space as a screening place, where s/he can most often browse and articulate her/his own experience of the space and the image. A recent experience, very much in line with the kind of closed-circuit video works Joselit relates to in his article, may serve as a good example. Recently I had the opportunity to experience Marta Minujín's *Mesunda Reloaded*

(2019) at the New Museum in New York. Originally presented in 1965, the work in itself is an incredible circuit that takes visitors on a journey across eleven very different environments that basically reflect upon visuality, tactility, but also participation and media hyper-saturation in general; one of these environments is a two-storey path monitored by CCTV with vintage TV-sets placed along the space the visitor is invited to walk through, which broadcast the recording with a slight delay. The result is reminiscent of many famous antecedents: precisely as Joselit mentions, the visitor's image is relayed back to her/him and although the space does not really allow for a long stop, nor the journey s/he is supposed to walk through allows for any bold reactions at first, the effect is not one of passivity. The model of reference does not quite seem to be that which sees art and its public – or the film screen and the spectator – situated at a distance in a “arguably passive” interaction. Seeing my own image in *Mesunda Reloaded* certainly disciplined my spectatorial posture as much as it challenged its creative and interactive possibilities. The opportunity to react to the image arises and the narrative proposed by the artwork is scrutinized in search for a crack to penetrate it and subvert it, even just subtly or gently. In my case, I repeated the journey across that particular environment multiple times, going against the indications to move onto the next one; I did so pushed by the desire to observe better, to see where exactly the area recorded by the cameras was and how long the delay took, but also I was curious to check the orientation of the cameras and to search for a way to walk past them so that my body was caught in the most minimal way, or conversely, in its fullest. Discarding the model Joselit associates to closed-circuit camera works, my own experience is one of stimulation, of direct address which triggers a response. Well aware of not being a representative sample, it was however interesting to see that most of the visitors reacted to the camera and the moving image relaying the recording of their body back. This, to me, demonstrates the relevance of this reactive/interactive configuration based on the co-presence of the visitors' bodies and the image within the environment. In a way, this is a timely representation of what “post-cinema” means and, more broadly, of our contemporary visual culture. The sense of a mutual contribution between artwork, environment, and visitors to produce the reality the latter were temporarily in was also rather strong, emphasizing the agency determining the experience of a constant writing and rewriting, interpretation and practice of space. In my own case, what was specifically stimulated was my media literacy; my symbolic and pragmatic encyclopedia as a screen media user kicked in quite automatically, inviting me to find ways to employ my skills and



M. Minujín, *Mesunda Reloaded* (2019), New Museum, NYC. Photo credit: Author's personal archive

participate. As for many like me, this meant at least taking a picture of this experience and re-circulate it within a wider mediasphere (to which this reflection contributes as a paratext).

Minujín's work suggests that there is a deeper implication between subject, moving image, and space than what the notion of light cube promises. The configuration that results from the encounter and reciprocal action of these three elements assesses the sense of *being there* of the subject, her/his sense of inhabiting the space alongside and through the image. I term this configuration *space-image* to stress the mutual interconnections and exchange among the elements involved. By way of the processes of design, disposition and dwelling, moving images are woven into the networked texture of the practices regulating the space they are in, making it practicable to the visitor/spectator. As *Mesunda Reloaded* shows, the negotiation between the elements at stake takes place in an organic fashion: the encounter between black box and white cube does not produce a third, possibly gray, area, but rather makes possible a space-image, that is, a configuration of experience which brings together space, image and subject, predicates their phenomenological co-presence and is based on their mutual, temporary influences on each other.

This active attitude of the visitor/spectator and the idea of spatialization of the moving image go hand in hand and characterize much of the experience of "post-cinema." A final example that tackles both aspects and shows their intertwined nature is the work by Milan-based collective Studio Azzurro. In particular, their *sensitive environments* represent a case in point when it comes to how the space-image in an artistic context looks like. One project in particular, SENSITIVE CITY (SC hereafter), stands out in this instance, as it speaks both from a structural and a thematic perspective to the dynamics



Studio Azzurro, *SENSITIVE CITY*, 2010. Photo credit: Studio Azzurro

of design, disposition, and dwelling that I described. In other words, the actual exhibition space where the installation is set up and presented on the one hand, and the narrative it develops on the other both revolve around and favor a critical reflection on spatiality and spatialization.

Centered on a novel interpretation of Thomas More's *Utopia*, SC also promotes the values of ideal communal living in space and with others. Instead of a centralized model planned by a visionary creator, however, it brings together in a unique narrative; the portrait of a series of mid-size

Italian cities as they are experienced by their inhabitants. This is why SC is defined as a “counter-utopian city” (De Rosa 2010, 18). Embracing the perspective of the people living in Matera, Chioggia, Trieste, Syracuse, Spoleto, and Lucca allows the collective to enter into the depth of their features, histories, memories, to connect to specific spots of the narrated places that are eventually filmed, photographed, and mapped by the artists. The result is an exquisitely subjective geography of the places, in the Heideggerian sense of the term. To render these aspects, the objective of the installation was to offer an urban texture that is not structured *a priori*, but that instead takes shape and unfolds on the basis of the inhabitants’ personal knowledge of the cities, by embedding in the representation their stories and affection for the corners of the cities they talk about, their drawings or sketches of their beloved place or fond childhood memory. Such a dense symbolical dimension speaks well to the kind of experience contemporary artistic moving images (as an example of “post-cinema”) have to offer insofar as the freshness and live character of oral history, the transitory nature of mnemonic processes as well as the placemaking and dwelling dynamics deriving from them well respond to the idea of space-image as a fluctuating, morphing configuration of experience. The sensitive environment translates this sense of ongoingness into a specific technological choice. Thanks to a system of sensors and large-scale touch screens, Studio Azzurro has redesigned the exhibition space disposing a set of complex devices which ensured the spatialization of the moving images across the space.

First presented at the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai, the installation was organized in three main areas: closer to the entrance is the photographic documentation of the cities explored in the project; next to these and moving more toward the bottom section of the pavilion are the portraits of the inhabitants of these cities who contributed to the project – space and subject, paired as essential ingredients of a dwelling recipe. Moving images soon join space and subject in the third section of the project, leading to the creation of a space-image. This last section is the bigger and core component of the project, and is located diagonally across the entire space. Projected on a long screen crossing the pavilion, moving images bring together the city and the people that the visitors had the opportunity to meet in the previous two areas of the installation. Not simple faces anymore, the inhabitants of the sensitive cities are now presented in their full body presence thanks to a life-size projection. They walk along the screen almost mingling with the visitors walking around the pavilion. In the artists’ words:

[the filmed subjects are] projected and triggered by interactive technological devices so that they become nodes of a reticular network and the core of our narrative structure. Each “story carrier” can be consulted, as he walks along, only if the visitor halts him or her with their hand. In which case they will turn towards them and begin their narration, which will last for as long as the hand will remain in contact with the projection surface. What we are suggesting is a very common relational gesture, the same we perform when we wish to stop someone in the streets to ask for directions. A simple gesture, yet endowed with a strong communicative symbolism which in this instance, in order to be complete, must persist to ensure that our virtual exchange is not cut short. (De Rosa 2010, 22)

The surface of the image does not only provide a space to make a story visible and watchable as any screen would classically do, but becomes a sensitive interface activating and maintaining alive the connection between the narrative and the public. The co-presence of the image and the subject in space, their *being there* is indeed independent one from the other, but their encounter is what constitutes the core of the project. This allows for a humanist reading: the fact that the installation is activated when characters and public actually come together suggests that not only they are there, but they are there for each other:

Listening to the stories couched in the sound of footsteps, in the instability of water, in the balance of wind, the surprise provided by darkness or the sudden appearance of light, means introducing one to think of a city in terms of the stories that are woven through it, the invisible shapes that permeate it, the emotional layers of which it is made [...] the quality of the relationships that are born out of it. (*ibid.*)

SC takes its cues from a relational map able to connect heterogenous elements. The result is a multicentric city whose exterior aspect moves and evolves as those inhabiting (the interviewed people) and crossing it (the viewers) practice its space. Metaphorically corresponding to the installation space, the narrated city is constituted by the images transitorily substantiating its views, spots, streets, and anecdotes throughout the exhibition space. This is why I find this installation perfectly exemplifies the concept of spatialization I presented above. And that is not all: captured by the moving image and thus translated into a graspable, perceptible material, narrative and relationships become the fibers of the sensitive city’s texture. The resulting construction is based on multiple layers made of the drawings,

annotations, video, and graphic images explaining what inhabiting the city means for the interviewed people. Located in a tridimensional space these elements spatialize the dwelling experience of the story carriers with the aim of eliciting a similar one in the viewers. This is precisely the main feature of Studio Azzurro's video-environments: SC offers the depiction of a city that literally explodes in the pavilion and fills it. The moving image makes room for itself across the exhibition space turning it into a place for viewing and dwelling, it works in other words as an organic material facilitating an interface, interaction, and appropriation of the space so as to allow a dynamic configuration to come to the surface. By means of the above-mentioned spatialization, this accounts for the emergence of an artistic space-image. The moment the visitors touch the screens the image is activated, the exhibition space is turned into a place of art and cinema, as a number of assemblages restructure the organization of the elements concurring with the disposition of the installation, and articulate the experiential materials of the interviewed people as a trigger to spark a new experience in the audience.

The concepts of encounter, touch, and interface play a key role in SC. Specifically, it is thanks to the latter that an opportunity to explicate their agency is given to the visitors – an agency which is an integral part of the symbolic value imbued in the installation, as it puts forth the principle of the encounter; an agency which is also very practically planned by the artists, as the encounter it promotes is technically possible via the touch. Subverting the golden rule of museum/cinema going, the public is requested to touch the moving image. The interface selected by Studio Azzurro requires the public to practice and participate, and hints at the materiality of a gesture – touching the screen – that alludes to an interactive quality which relies on a potentiality eventually becoming a real experience of exchange. Through such a gesture fiction and reality come together. Along the surface of the interface virtual and bodily qualities meet and the image finds its consistency anew. If, borrowing from Bourriaud, “any artwork might [...] be defined as a relational object, like the geometric place of a negotiation with countless correspondents and recipients” (2002, 26), then SC pushes this assumption further offering to the public a city which is primarily a place of encounter on both the diegetic and the extra-diegetic level because the very idea of encounter is celebrated, mixing the inputs of subjects, space, and image altogether.

In this view, the embedment of the subject within a texture of images dispersed throughout the space produces and enhances the sense of immersion, which represents the main formal characteristic of Studio Azzurro's sensitive environments. On a functional level, this translates

in the installation's ability of enveloping the visitors and implicating them in a visual and tactile relationship with the moving image. SC offers emotional interstices and prehensive possibilities which overcome the spatial constraints of the representation appearing on-screen, activating a placemaking process which reconstructs the selected cities through the words, images, drawings, and notes by the inhabitants. These elements work as bridges connecting memories and stories to the present experience of the visitors, their desires to know more about what they see, their curiosity for some faraway places and some foreign faces that are now "spending their time" with them to explain about their places and sharing a space that becomes common ground. Additionally, the immersion and co-presence typical of sensitive environments such as SC favor a situation where the image does not imply addressing the subject with a direct interpellation (or inspires some sort of reaction and pragmatic engagement, as in my New Museum experience); rather, it cannot literally be activated without her/his participation. A mutual and constant exchange, epitomized by the touch that the hand of the visitor is invited to perform, shows how the employed interface implies a synaesthetic process: one has to touch in order to see. At the time of widespread touchscreens, the fingers of the public in contact with the skin of the moving image (Marks 2000) create the body of the sensitive city. Differently from the classic scheme typical of the museum as a collection to look at, the installation allows for a radically diverse experience, where the moving image works as a relational platform, an interface designed to create a room for dialogue, exchange, encounter. Hence the visitor ceases to be solely and purely a contemplating observer and becomes a player, meaning by that an actor that has a say in constructing the architecture of the space. If the artistic space-image describes the shapes experience can take in a place of art, here the engagement of the subject sits precisely in her/his active role in causing or being part of the event that generates the experience itself. The key process is the activation of the system that shows the city as it is taking shape. The installation space is therefore ever-changing, an ongoing assemblage of signs and images that emerge and dissolve. Conceptually, then, it is only by way of a complete superimposition of the physical gallery space and the symbolic fictional space that an appropriation of the narrated place is possible through a contact with the inhabitants of the city appearing on-screen. Such appropriation and inhabitation of the museum space, as if it was the city space, enables a construction of place: the visitors touch the screen and see the urban environment coming into existence, they listen to the narrative about it and are involved, invited, implicated in it.

In this sense, the itineraries and the images describing the city contribute to both the representation of the real Italian cities they refer to and the constructed texture of the counter-utopic, unique, sensitive city that serve as organic material constituting the space-image. The video-testimonies, the photographic portraits, the maps appearing next to the inhabitants who share a story or an itinerary throughout their place are visual and cinematic tools concurring with a relational configuration, guiding the visitors along the paths documented and captured by Studio Azzurro's movie camera. Analyzing this correspondence closer, it is possible to see a process of deixis: the exploration of the cities narrated by the inhabitants is continued by the visitors in the exhibition space, a connection between represented and practiced dimensions, between fictional and physical space, occurs and it is here that dwelling becomes a shared horizon of experience.

As Alison Butler has efficaciously argued, processes like the ones we encounter in SC are the effect of a “deictic turn” (2010). I shall posit this is to be considered in relation to the spatial turn in film studies I have mentioned earlier, which served as methodological premise of these pages. Talking about “post-cinema” is talking about the result of these processes, whose ultimate outcome to me is an experience similar to that elicited by SC that I have tried to describe. In this experience the text can be fragmented and vary, the context does not simply work as a container but substantially contributes to the content of the piece as much as the moving images do. The configuration they take, finally, is established on the basis of a highly variable pattern, which may include various degrees of activity and inter-activity – cognitive, perceptual, and intellectual alike – on the part of the public. All of this mirrors a situation where certainly the processes of design, disposition and re-disposition, and finally the chance of dwelling represent a complexification of previous canons, models, and apparatuses but also open up the precious opportunity to be there, with the moving image, for the moving image, and to use it to re-affirm its relational potentialities and creative power. Which is ours too.

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### 13. EXTRAORDINARY STORIES, a Mariano Llinás Postmodern Art Film

*Gabriela Rivadeneira Crespo*

#### **Abstract**

By analyzing EXTRAORDINARY STORIES (HISTORIAS EXTRAORDINARIAS), a 2008 movie by Argentinean filmmaker Mariano Llinás, Gabriela Rivadeneira Crespo questions the “productivity of cinema devices” to fully exemplify the type of postmodern film where cinema and contemporary art collaborate. Paradoxically, this kind of film, given the radical choices that govern it, places it in an expanded film, but marginalizes it in relation to cinema industry. The locations and modes of reception of such films are also part of the definition of post-cinema in the post-art era.

**Keywords:** Device, postmodern, contemporary art

Our approach to the post-cinema subject will consider movies and their production process as a set of determinant decisions regarding its engagement or disengagement with the art field. We understand art-making as a self-conscious operation in a complex field, where different contradictory forces come into conflict. When artists build their work, they also problematize an idea of art that is mobilized by its form. This process constitutes the very condition for art to emerge, the occasion through which art can appear. From this perspective, a film can be considered a work of art if it is the result of an artistic investigation, that is to say, a reflection on the idea of cinema as an artistic medium, device, form and way of pushing art boundaries and definitions.

Although cinematic films are generally considered part of the “seventh art,” we support the idea that art is not always present in films. It is true that since the invention of photographic film, cinema, television and video, a long history of audiovisual devices has been traced. In view of the existent multiplicity of uses for filmic objects (for the most diverse purposes, whether

artistic, political, educational, advertising, industrial, propaganda, etc.) as part of our research, it seemed fundamental to dig in and differentiate within the films themselves, which makes them part of a contemporary way of thinking and making art in a postmodern era. We will propose certain examples of films, artists, and filmmakers that have placed art at the center of their explorations, focalizing the idea of art and the artistic universe as their horizon of work.

Therefore, more than looking into new ways of making films, the analysis will focus on specific artistic research behind the filmmaking process. We would like to propose a film that is very likely to be unknown in Europe, as well as in most parts of the world, *HISTORIAS EXTRAORDINARIAS* (*EXTRAORDINARY STORIES*), a 2008 film by Mariano Llinás (Argentina).<sup>1</sup> We think Llinás's movie is a postmodern work in the sense that it brings the productivity of cinematic devices into question; it also generates certain disorganization through the appropriation of generic forms (such as literature and other film genres), pointing to their validity and reflecting on their operability by deconstructing their forms, thus generating tensions and intensities.

### **“I Think That the Film Looks Like Those Reckless Gamblers: It Is Born, It Enjoys and It Dies in Its Law” (Llinás and Koza 2009)**

*EXTRAORDINARY STORIES* is structured into three acts of 80 minutes each and a total of eighteen chapters to tell three alternating stories, and is usually projected with two ten-minute intervals. It tells the story of three characters named X (Mariano Llinás), Z (Walter Jakob), and H (Agustín Mendilaharsu), three ordinary men whose lives will be modified by different fortuitous events which, in turn, will generate new stories. The first character, X, kills a man after witnessing a violent event and decides to hide in a hotel. The second, Z, begins to obsessively investigate the life of a man who has just died and whom he has replaced in his new job, while the third, H, oversees a mission that he does not fully understand.

The protagonists are “non-characters”; they are mere conductors of the narrative, without psychologies, backgrounds or previous characteristics. This is assured by the decision to avoid naming the principal characters,

1 The film was first shown at the BAFICI (2008) and was projected at several other Film Festivals: Torino, Cinequest, Miami, Los Angeles, Vancouver, Nantes, and Wisconsin, and was released in New York in 2011. *HISTORIAS EXTRAORDINARIAS* (2008). Release Info. IMDb: [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1225831/releaseinfo?ref\\_=tt\\_dt\\_dt](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1225831/releaseinfo?ref_=tt_dt_dt). Accessed May 9, 2019.

instead identifying or differentiating them by means of a letter of the alphabet. The letters X, Z, and H emphasize the absence of needing to give them a personality, a psychological depth, becoming a signal of the characters' selflessness. Evacuating any specific trait of identity is an operation that places us, from the very beginning of the film, far from the aesthetic of expressing the old traditional self, or the modern subjectivity depth model. On the contrary, we are placed before multiple characters as image surfaces, over which a voice-over narrative is developed.

The first story begins in an unknown town in an Argentinean province with an unknown man called X by an unknown male voice-over. The only thing we are told about him is that he is travelling for a sort of "bureaucratic and gray work. Any work" (Film voice-over; my translation). Next, he is described in terms of what he is not: "he is not a journalist; he is not a detective, nor a writer, photographer or scientist; he is nothing that can arouse emotion or interest in advance. We may rather imagine him as a technician or a municipal inspector or a land surveyor" (Film voice-over; my translation). The second protagonist has a similar presentation:

A man who arrives in a town to take over someone's job. That man, our protagonist, we will call Z. The only thing that we need to know about him is that it's his first time in a high-ranking position, his first time as a boss. The man who hired him tells him, "Don't worry. It's a quiet job, no decision-making, nothing new, you won't have any problems. It might be routine though, but you get used to it quickly. You should work there for a few months while you look for something better. But don't misjudge it either; the guy before you stayed there for twenty years. Be careful." That will never happen to me, Z says to himself, I am not like that. (Film voice-over; my translation)

The third main character is part of a nested story which may be considered a ramification of the second story. Through the same voice-over, we are introduced to the third man: "H receives a call from a strange man who hires him for a very strange job: to travel the river in search of forgotten monoliths, checking on their condition and taking their photographs. H doesn't fully understand these monoliths. The upset man who hired him says he doesn't understand them either: 'Just don't ask me questions and don't cause me more trouble.' One hour later, H is already in the river. His journey has begun" (Film voice-over; my translation).

The structure of the film is organized by the fragmentation and interlacing of the three main stories, as well as multiple other secondary nested stories.

Fragmentation is also what defines the three main characters; they are a pure fragmentation of themselves. The voice-over presents an empirical description of X, H and Z, that operates as a decentering and deconstructive machine (we are in a totally opposite logic to that of the modern subject or psyche). We are confronted with three individuals, three average men, dissolved in an unclear contemporary organizational bureaucracy, in which old, strong emotions are replaced by surface intensities. One of the most enigmatic secondary characters is literally defined by a series of fragmented elements, by indexed surfaces: series of words, cryptic notes in a notebook, marked places in a countryside map, lists, postcards, various passports, money, books, etc. Others are built on the basis of newspapers, TV or radio news or police reports. It is as if most of the characters are cursed by impenetrable fragmented surfaces: columns, lines, traces, writings, clues, remains and impersonal floating intensities from which an uncertain past is recorded.

Therefore, the film is composed by a group of random inert objects and characters, with no link to an original vital world; they assure the manifestation of a general absence of depth, where the objective world itself is transformed into a set of simulated images. Llinás's universe uses any insignificant, neutral or ordinary character or element of daily life as potential material for the activation of fiction as a promise of an enigmatic mystery. The three omniscient narrators are the ones who carry out the narrative. The peculiarity of the procedure is that these voices are not there to explain what happens in the image, but to refute that tautology: they anticipate the story, cast it in doubt, contradict it, impregnate it with sense or suddenly take it away. An omnipresent storytelling where ingenuity, observation skills and a pataphysical interpretation of facts put together a larger system, a huge fiction machine that persistently disseminates stories of different calibers and sizes, which are intertwined with one another although they do not necessarily have points of contact. The three main stories are merely the trigger of a profusion of other stories. More than a road movie, *EXTRAORDINARY STORIES* is a long river movie, which will develop its current in an infinity of streams, secondary courses and even dry beds, which do not lead to anything.

The philosopher, Fredric Jameson, states that one of the functions of a work of art is to situate us in the world. Llinás's film situates us in a postmodern, cultural, imaginary world (fragmented, undetermined, intertextual, hybrid, parodical), as well as in a deconstructed view of the world (mistrust of truth categories and of grand narratives, doubt of filmic image, etc.). The different formal elements that constitute the film can be seen as interpretative vehicles designating a system of work to structure the film.

To the already mentioned, the director's statements must be added, given that Llinás declares his commitment to a project related to art forms and art space. He explicitly places his movie in the art and cinema tradition in which he positions himself:

Initially, my intention was to build a film as close as possible to a novel, almost like a nineteenth-century adventure novel, with the voice-over as the guiding instrument. The intention was to explore the extent to which this was possible, in a discipline such as cinema in which the notion of classic narration had exploded more than half a century ago. How can that emotion and narrative vigor be re-situated today? How can one be sure of not making a film that is too self-conscious, satirical or absolutely nonsensical? The construction of the film was the progressive answer to these questions. (Llinás and Koza 2009; my translation)

Llinás developed the three central arguments based on three classic premises: a man who is accused of a crime he did not commit, a treasure map, and a bet. These structural elements of the intrigue, the predominance of the voice-over giving sense to mute and non-action film footage and photographic images, but also Llinás's declaration of his intention to build a film like a novel, as well as all the references to film genres made through the film's image and soundtrack (road movie, river movie, thriller, comedy, melodrama, false documentary, adventure film, local costumbrismo, war film, etc.), place his movie explicitly in the field of art. As Fredric Jameson affirms, generic concepts have a strategic value that lies clearly in their function, which makes it possible to coordinate "an immanent formal analysis of the individual text with a double perspective: the history of forms and the evolution of social life" (Jameson 1983, 92).

Jameson asserts that a generic concept basically operates as a reception category, allowing for the anchorage of work in the world and for its placement inside a historical perspective (of both social life and artistic forms). The genres are classificatory artistic notions and, according to Jean-Marie Schaeffer, they serve less to label than to provide references, less to classify than to interpret. Additionally, Schaeffer says that the genres are operative notions and, almost exclusively, artistic (Schaeffer 1989). As Jameson says, through the use of generic forms, artistic works are proposed as social contracts; they have the function to lead the eye and offer a reading frame:

Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of

a particular cultural artifact. The speech acts of daily life are themselves marked with indications and signals (intonation, gesturality, contextual deictics and pragmatics), which ensure their appropriate reception. (1983, 92-93).

The artistic genres therefore function as a form of mediation between art and the public, which not only place the work in a precise aesthetic and social history but also serve to provide benchmarks, self-regulating perceptual signals that will ensure and condition our perception and our experience of the work. In other words, they are frames of interpretation previously adopted or reinvented by the artist during the process of creation, but which the spectator also adopts during the reception process of the work.

### **The Reasons of the Strongest**

From a cultural, industrial and market point of view, *HISTORIAS EXTRAORDINARIAS* is a marginal film. This condition is determined by several reasons that we could describe as immanent to the film. We could start by mentioning its 245-minute length. Its projection duration challenges the conventional or preformatted film circulation logic and cinema exploitation structures (that materialize in a series of reception devices involving programming, schedules, box office, cinemas, etc.). We could affirm, without the fear of being wrong, that the main reason for its invisibility is its duration. In today's cinema culture, it is simply not profitable; a cinema culture that historically has been a battlefield for filmmakers, researchers and artists. It might be illustrative to recall Eisenstein's critical position on the new possibilities offered to the cinema during his lecture given on September 17, 1930 in Hollywood, before the Congress of Technicians of the Academy of Cinematographic Art and Science. The conference attendees were invited to discuss the new proportions that the big screen had to adopt (3x4.3 or 3x5 or 3x6) and defended formats with arguments centered on the sovereignty of an aesthetic tradition (an alleged predominance of horizontal frames in visual arts), physiological characteristics (the configuration of the eye and its muscles), and commercial reasons (standardization would reduce costs).

On this occasion, Eisenstein strove to dismantle each of these arguments while highlighting the artistic potential of cinema as a new form of art entirely to be explored – an art, he says, based on the phenomena of dynamics and speed, with a possibility of an intrinsic existence to itself, whose lasting quality is independent of the shown schedules (as in theater, music

or dance), and for whom all formatting undermines future experiments and creative research on cinema. Eisenstein supported the figurative potential of the screen format, seeing the possibility of questioning or reformulating all the aesthetics of the spatial composition of cinema. He lamented that for 30 years the experimentation was rendered futile precisely because of the standardization of the proportions of the frame of the screen. He also pointed out the enslavement of the mind to routine, traditionalism, and commercial pressure that seek to limit cinematographic devices to the exclusion of all artistic research (especially at the level of vertical compositions). On the contrary, Eisenstein proposed that the cinema screen be dynamic, of variable dimensions, and able to show with absolute magnificence any geometrically conceivable shape of the image, as well as all the tensions that the camera finds in reality (Eisenstein 1988, 206-218).

What is particularly important and interesting about Eisenstein's position is that in his lecture, he does not simply expose a personal opinion, but instead, analyzes the state of things: he analyzes the watchwords that engage the cinematographic practice in stagnation, making its artistic development rather difficult. Eisenstein not only makes a denunciation or an inventory but takes the floor to make a real proposal; he brings with him a project; he opens up a possibility, a way to question and change the cinematographic world as it was. Eisenstein thus contributes to a reflection on the technical possibilities still unexplored and yet already domesticated by "the reasons of the strongest" (Jean-Luc Godard, in *CHAMBRE 666*, a Wim Wenders film, 1982).

It is compelling to notice today that upon questioning the *artisticness* of cinema, it immediately creates a certain level of tension. One can probably attribute this to the fact that the struggle for recognizing cinema as a seventh art has been long and "bloody," or rather that it is quite recent, or even the fact that this recognition still is not well stabilized. However, when one questions the artistic nature of television, then one feels much more at liberty and does not have to fear violent reactions; on the contrary, one could even envisage a certain unanimity. Yet, both are techniques which are primarily dependent on a market for the production of images and sounds, and powers in accordance with interests and logics quite far from those of art. Both techniques have been explored and authenticated as artistic means. Again, it can be said that television has, at least in part, conquered a market that was hitherto occupied by cinema, adding a characteristic of its own which is remote, live and simultaneously broadcasted.

In the industrial context, the worlds of both cinema and television can be defined as a sort of organization and set of activities and services that

exploit a technical process and ensure the development, marketing and dissemination of audiovisual products resulting from said technical process. In principle, this industrial context is facing an imbalance and conflict with the different guiding forces that drive the artistic context. It seems to us that this tension is particularly visible and heightened in certain contexts where art mixes with industrial reproduction and diffusion techniques (music, literature, radio, television, etc.) and, in particular, as far as our research is concerned, with filmmaking. Above, we have seen the case of Eisenstein and the tension which has existed for a long time between the artistic interests which sought to explore the potential powers of techniques, on the one hand, and the economic powers which sought to freeze and standardize technical devices in order to save costs and achieve greater profitability, on the other.

However, the struggle of interest that we report here is not precisely for an economic capital unequally distributed within the cinema or TV since the artistic struggle does not target the egalitarian sharing of said profitability. The artistic struggle is centered on the redefinition of what is held as art, of what is likely to have an artistic value. The tension is thus placed at the heart of the interests peculiar to each position, in the conflicting encounter between the position of the artistic agents and that of the economic agents. The Letterists have clearly noted the conflict between these two principles and have made it very clear in the Letterist International: "USEFUL TO REMEMBER. Everything that maintains something contributes to the work of the police. Because we know that all ideas or behaviors that already exist are insufficient. Today's society is divided only into Letterists and Indicators" (Dahou et al. [1953] 1996, 12).

If we want to talk about the audiovisual field and, specifically, cinema as a technique of art or as a territory for artistic creation, we must take into account that the artistic struggle has never been partisan of the management of definitions or the perpetuation of identifications (maintained by a minority in a power position). If there is something in common within the artistic work – of any art made by means of any technique or medium – it is the search for the exception to established rules; art has always been a form of dissent, a perpetual self-redefinition and creation of the new. Moreover, Jean-Luc Godard also had identified the conflict between these two different principles, and he situates the problem not exactly within a specific field but in a more general structure that crosses all domains: in culture. Godard argues that there is the rule and there is the exception: "There is the culture that is the rule, which is part of the rule. There is the exception, which is art, which is part of art. [...] and it is the rule that wants the death of the exception" (Godard 1996, 14, 18). In this sense, to be able

to make art, we will definitively need to dissociate any work procedure from cultural expectations. This point of view clearly goes against more widespread positions that draw little distinction between art and culture or the cinema industry, positions that align their arguments with the value of the “cultural use” of devices, whose validation is achieved by measuring the dominant uses in cultural history.

As previously mentioned, *EXTRAORDINARY STORIES* is 245 minutes long and is usually projected with two ten-minute intervals. It is Llinás's second film; the first, *BALNEARIOS* (2002, 80 min.), is a documentary (as well as a mockumentary) about beach resorts and bath stations in Argentina. His third film, *LA FLOR* (2018, 814 min), took him almost ten years to complete. It is important to mention that if *EXTRAORDINARY STORIES* has difficulties in terms of being projected or accepted nowadays, in regular programming at standard commercial movie theaters, *LA FLOR* geometrically multiplies this same difficulty due to its duration of almost fourteen hours.

For *EXTRAORDINARY STORIES*, Llinás worked with a limited production team, that is, four people – in addition to the actors – sometimes reaching a number of ten, whose roles were interchangeable. Hence, according to the needs, the director, the actors and the technical team may exchange roles and be production-, props-, makeup- or catering assistants as well. For instance, the three omniscient voice-overs are done by Llinás's close friends and older sister (Daniel Hendler, Juan Minujín, and Verónica Llinás). *EXTRAORDINARY STORIES* cost around 40,000 USD for the entire production.<sup>2</sup> Llinás has repeatedly declared his commitment to a research process aimed at renewing the collective field of cinematographic art and points out the obsolescence of certain legitimated ideas about cinema:

The issue with regard to the INCAA (Argentinean National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts) is that it only thinks about cinema from an industrial perspective, while I and those who work with me, consider it from an artisan's point of view. It's simple: we want to show that cinema can be an activity that is as accessible as any other artistic discipline, to the extent that it involves risk, the search for innovation and a certain sense of adventure, so to speak, in terms of its production. [...] However, the INCAA insists on ignoring those forms of production and obliges the films that want to enjoy its support to become huge cumbersome things (*bodoques*) tied to the classic production forms. We believe that these forms are obsolete and that they serve to make films that inherit

2 Financed by Canal I. Sat and the Cultural Institute of Buenos Aires Province.

something of that obsolescence. We are interested in vital films, made in a vital way. And vitality is not a coin that runs too generously through the corridors of the INCAA, I can assure you of that. (Llinás and Koza 2009; my translation)

This statement seems to us of utmost importance since it is a reflective moment ending with a revealing and clear position in relation to art. Llinás makes a choice that entails a declarative dimension, since, in one way or another, he affirms that he is committed to a specific task in the name of the common project of art. It seems useful to recall the notion of true choice that has been theorized recently by several theoreticians and philosophers.<sup>3</sup> The notion of the authentic choice, “where the very core of our being is at stake” (Žižek 2009a, 63), is the fundamental choice which exposes us to a choice that we did not desire and by which “I choose myself.” The notion of true choice refers to an existential choice that presupposes the decision of an individual to engage in a project that acquires the status of a symbolic mandate. For Llinás, this begins with a radical non-compromising position of rejecting institutionalized and standardized conceptions of filmmaking, by the very act of refusing blind submission to established procedures. His motivations are explicit: beat the assumptions and preconceptions of what cinema *is* or *how* to make films, start with modest means to guarantee full freedom and, above all, avoid annoying interlocutors with economic power who understand nothing about the project or about cinema.

This radical attitude and, of course, the films that he has produced until now place his work in an expanded field, in the field of cinema as art and, at the same time, “marginalizes” his films from the cinema industry and commercial theaters, or at least makes them circulate almost exclusively in the film festival network or academic cinema spaces. Llinás’s statement reminds us of another fundamental and radical statement from Jean-Luc Godard. In 1987, when Godard was asked about his contribution as a filmmaker and after the journalist had said to him “you broke everything, you made everything possible,” Godard answered with firmness and clarity: “No, we said and we did and we showed that the possible coexisted, that a path can be opened, and I still believe that today” (Godard and Ardisson 1987).<sup>4</sup> Llinás shares this

3 Butler 2001; Badiou 2008, 2009; Badiou and Žižek 2009; Žižek 2006.

4 Godard later says: “One addresses to the viewer’s part – me in particular, now I consciously realize it – who is the director of his own life, telling him perhaps – in a metaphorical way because it is only a set of images – that his own life is possible to live since I managed to make a film” (Godard and Ardisson 1987; my translation).

vision of cinema, wanting to show that cinema can be something different, and that it can be as accessible as any other artistic discipline.

As Gilles Deleuze (1953, 1) says, a choice is always defined according to what it excludes, and Llinás consciously moves away from what is agreed upon as cinema, and turns away from institutional expectations. Instead of doing what he could have done to be accepted and programmed more easily, he made the choice to stand aside. In other words, he made a risky choice, a choice that would expose his film to rejection, to have a hard time finding a market, and so on. Llinás freely assumes and identifies with the task of resisting rules and questioning the dominant forms of cinematic discourse, which comes with accepting risk as part of his research, making “decisions in a situation that remains opaque” (Žižek 2009a, 101). This stance is to bet on the unknown, the new, that which has never been done. It is to throw oneself alone and without any guarantees onto a path that is still to be paved and that very few have dared to tread.

In this way, when Llinás recognizes himself as a filmmaker engaged in a specific artistic project, he simultaneously declares that art is his ultimate frame of reference, and participates as much in the utopian idea of art as in a framework of unwritten, implicit rules that structure and govern the artistic tradition. Thus, the act of engaging authentically indicates the transition from an individual mode of being to one of collective being. Llinás’s true choices and renovated film production procedures show a fidelity to the idea of cinema as an art form.

Besides, Llinás believes that cinema envisioned as art is meant to be transformed into something different from what cinema is today: “the democratization of small cameras and editing machines has reached such a point that we can all make films today without dealing with the number of factors with which our predecessors were forced to deal. Within a very short time, cinema should be called different” (Llinás 2014; my translation). Llinás considers that the so-called “professionalization” is a sort of last refuge of aesthetic good sense, a kind of bourgeois common sense of how cinema should be made:

The closer the industry is to a professional organization, the lower and more ignoble the interlocutors are. Think of the conversations, the words that those people use. [...] That is the cinema where film professionals rule and impose a kind of average taste. That has nothing to do with either challenge or risk but with a kind of average good behavior that arbitrates what deserves to be called cinema. Everything that caused problems at some point, and where daring proposals are now being incorporated into

what is conceived as an official cinema language, where fulfilling the shooting plan or finishing a movie within a fixed time is seen as a value, when this, on the contrary, is actually the great enemy of cinematographic freedom. (Llinás 2014; my translation)

Finally, Llinás affirms that making a movie implies being aware that every film idea sets up its own small ecology that will allow that film to be made. It is a permanent and incessant reworking of the pact. Each film project must state its own production structure. As a filmmaker, one must invent that process and determine its logic and processes:

I refuse to think that the Cinema Business is the only way to think about making movies; I do not want to be a business enterprise that has employees. I refuse to think that this is the only way of generating an economic organization. That the only way to obtain public money is to be a small factory with employees. It's an agreed symbolic notion of a system that I'm not willing to accept. (Llinás 2014; my translation)

### **Josephine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk**

After watching *EXTRAORDINARY STORIES*, we stay with a feeling of having experienced something profoundly familiar and, at the same time, profoundly anomalous. It is an unusual film because of its formal originality, the narrative exuberance it displays and its artisanal production methods which, paradoxically, demonstrate a level of professionalism capable of putting the most bureaucratic forms of filmmaking into crisis, and not only in Argentina. Its anomaly, its extreme singularity, is precisely what interests us.

It is the experience of a small difference that ultimately establishes a different relation, a singular relationship with cinema that somehow defers from previous experiences with similar kinds of film objects (a relationship that nevertheless transforms the object into something more than a simple film). This might be attributed to an awareness that postmodern artistic phenomena has, which functions as a language that, by deconstructing the codes that link them with a kind of aesthetic truth, disorganizes the canon, and produces new narratives; a cinema that questions the devices and their productivity, that generates disorganization that points more to intensities than to coherence. In addition to another author (or creator) model, the whole post condition demands another spectator model because the level

of proposition does not generate coherence (or correctness) in the manner of a master text or a master key; on the contrary, it generates complex or rhizomatic structures of the phenomena.

That is why this film uses the strategic concepts of genre. The novel is the ultimate dialogical genre, a polyphonic device. Bakhtin's notion of dialogisms is attested to here; that means the dialogical relations between content, material and form, where the individual and the social operate simultaneously, take place in the significant interaction with the receiver. On a pragmatic level, the action-reaction of the film on the spectator, allows or demands a much more open possibility of organization, connections, inscriptions, identifications and dialogical processes, through narration seen as series of minor stories and minor becomings.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to convene a singular literary character: Josephine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk from Franz Kafka's last novel, written a few months before his death in 1924. Josephine is a mouse who has a singular voice and when she starts to sing – or, more precisely, to whistle – all those who hear are irresistibly captivated. A crowd formed around her, to the point that some called her the singer, though nothing really justified the term. Whatever Josephine does, what one can be sure of is that it produces a strong effect; her hissing appears both as a power of affirmation and as a tiny difference. As some authors suggest (Dolar 2006, 217-218; Žižek, 2009b, 318-320), through the story of a little mouse, Kafka reflects on the artistic activity, seen as an activity that is both ordinary yet enigmatic. He talks about art as something that is not distinguished in any way from the non-art; and yet something else, elusive or indeterminable, happens all the same. It is therefore an art that is sensitive, which is noticeable, and spreads doubt among those who perceive it (Kafka 1980, 773-774).

The story of Josephine the mouse could be used as a metaphor for Llinás's political position on cinema and filmmaking (as well as Godard's, Eisenstein's and many other artists'), but also for the fragile status of art itself in this postmodern culture or, as Jameson called it, the culture logic of "cynical reason" in late capitalism (Jameson 2011, 74). When Josephine the mouse does her whims, aware of the strong effect of her voice, demanding special privileges (to be exempted from any kind of work in consideration of her singing, to be deprived of her concern for the daily bread and burdens of a mouse struggling for existence, and even – her supreme pretension – to be

admired and glorified), she asked the impossible because the acknowledgment of her wishes or of her hissing as an art, is at the same time the loss of its enigmatic force, the loss of the minimal difference. It will be reduced to a social function and the unexpected rupture will become the institution, acquiring the power of the law and becoming, at best, a recreation.

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## 14. Art, Otherwise Than Art

### Cinema and Contemporary Art: A Mutual Challenge

*Dominique Chateau*

#### Abstract

Dominique Chateau posits that post-art can be characterized by the formula: *art, otherwise than art*. It means that in the institutional context presently governing art, the artworks or what serves as such, including objects or acts claiming non-art, are explicitly exhibited as art while different kinds of physical or mental attitudes are allowed toward them that have nothing to do with art in the first place. It is in this *art, otherwise than art* context that cinema and contemporary art are mutually challenging, as can be seen in the meeting of cinema with the *dispositifs* of exhibition spaces; the intrusion of cinema into art or post-art places. More generally, this possibility opens news paths for creation: new filmic form, changes in the creators' status, and the advent of exhibitions of a new kind.

**Keywords:** Contemporary art, long movies, aesthetics

For some years now, I have been developing the topic “art, otherwise than art.” While I now propose a new version that features the same basic idea, it has been modified and expanded to improve the mutual challenge between cinema and contemporary art. Not only is cinema increasingly playing a part in contemporary art, but filmic forms are also influenced by contemporary art. Included in the “expanded field” (Krauss 1979, 30) of contemporary art, cinema takes part in the current state of art that, in many ways, may be conceived of as a post-art state where, although it has not disappeared altogether, art is different from what it was originally intended to be (in terms of its state of fullness during the nineteenth century). However, the paradox is considerably more complex because at the same time, as new *dispositifs* emerge – computers, cellular phones, tablets – the “old” *dispositif*

of cinema-going remains, i.e., watching a film projected onto a more or less large screen in a theater. Moreover, the editing software (i.e., Final Cut Pro) is designed from pellicular fragmentation into photograms, no longer the unit of the digital medium. While participating in post-art, cinema is the last art form in which it is not a shame to produce artworks in a “classical” form – in other words, presented as an autonomous form animated by the artistic aura.

### Art, Otherwise Than Art: A Clarification

Unless “otherwise than art” looks like Emmanuel Levinas’s “otherwise than being” (1998), it has nothing to do with his philosophy. Besides, I am not only interested in “otherwise than art” but also in the whole syntagm: “art, otherwise than art,” insofar as it suggests my intention to consider a new kind of artwork, not only of which the artistic characteristic may be ambiguous but also requiring or allowing more or less explicitly an attitude that is different from the expected one *given that the object is once again supposed to be an artwork* – and by artwork, I mean *something which is supposed to belong to art*. Thus, the question is not only the possible ambiguity of the artwork but also the possible ambiguity of the way in which the artwork is received.

We can distinguish four cases: art received as art, non-art-received at art, art received otherwise than art, and non-art received otherwise than art. In this kind of logical square, only art received as art is clear. For example, while visiting the Prado in Madrid, a certain amount of time lapses while standing in front of Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (c. 1656). *Non-art received as art* can be seen in Bertrand Lavier’s *Brandt on Haffner*,<sup>1</sup> and it seems very simple to explain why: if we had to describe the “work,” we would say that it is “a fridge on a safe!” But what can we imagine or understand from this assemblage? Bertrand Lavier says that “*Brandt on Haffner* is half way between the museum and the department store, and this place cannot be found” (Lavier 2012), except that these items are exhibited in a museum, probably in order to question the definition of an artwork; it seems to be directed at people who enjoy this ambiguity despite their being used to it, and who are neither shocked nor appalled by what they see. Unless *Brandt on Haffner*’s meaning is a conceptual one, people stand before it, contemplating it, as if it were a “classic” painting. In other words,

1 251 x 70 x 65 cm, Centre Pompidou, 1984.

in such a case, the *art, otherwise than art* scheme is limited to the audience's mental process.

My main interest in this paper involves acts rather than only minds, dealing with *art or non-art (whatever) received otherwise than art*. The main fact that I wish to emphasize is that, from this viewpoint, venerable paintings and poor objects are put on exactly the same level. We could say that the venerable paintings are degraded while the poor objects are elevated. Is there a pilot in the plane? That is, who decides? According to the well-known Breton-Éluard definition of the readymade, the artist decides – “an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist” (Breton 1992, 837). Closer to George Dickie's institutional theory, I think that every candidacy to artistic instauration needs to be certified by an institution.

I wish to make two remarks in passing:

1. Instauration is also a French concept coined by Étienne Souriau (Souriau 1939, 10, fn 1), and is a word as uneasy as *dispositif* (see below) to translate into English: establishment seems to be the best equivalent unless the word instauration means something which has to do both with institutions and ontology: artwork as a new concept introduced in the present world.
2. Concerning artistic candidacy, Dickie speaks of “appreciation” (Dickie 1974, 34), but I think that we would rather speak of “confirmation” – I mean, the fact that the candidate receives the artistic label in the frame of an institution which has the power to give it (whatever the members of this institution feel about the artifact).

The otherwise than art reception of art or non-art is a new habit of artistic institutions. It is not the decision of a singular artist or curator. It is a global habit determined by the postmodern process which has been applied to art since the 1980s. It is the habit of a new behavior in relation to artworks or something similar – a new habit determined by the cultural evolution that has started to change art and its reception throughout the world since the 1980s. I would not call this “revolution”; instead, I would refer to this as evolution. Though it is a rapid evolution, indeed, it took us a while to become conscious of this rapidly developing state of art, especially since the postmodern ideology has mistakenly transformed it into a kind of fairytale where, as if by waving a magic wand, it could abruptly end the so-called great tales. We once again find ourselves in a great tale. But while the tale's content has changed, the fact that we participate in a tale, i.e., human history has not.

## Comment about the Word “Dispositif”

The post-art era is the era of the *dispositif*. This French word is not easy to translate even though people have tried to find possible English equivalents from time to time: dispositive, device, apparatus, machinery. Like most researchers, I will use the French word. We know that it appears in Michel Foucault’s writings. However, I am less inclined toward his version than the one George Dickie suggests when speaking of a “framework for the presenting of artworks” (1974, 31) or Louis Marin’s definition of “the dispositifs of presentation as the conditions for the possibility and efficacy of representation in painting, such as the frame, the décor, the layout of the representation, etc.” (1989, 10). Directly concerned with cinema, Frank Kessler provides more accuracy when he specifies that a *dispositif* involves three aspects: a material technology, a spectatorial positioning, and an institutionalized form of art presentation – the theater, for example (2003, 24).

We are fully in the time of *dispositifs*. The otherwise than art mode of reception is fully linked to this fact for two reasons. Firstly, many artists are so concerned with *dispositifs* that they consider them part of the artwork. Moreover, the necessary *dispositif* of exhibition has become the surprising exhibition of *dispositifs*. For example, André Rouillé writes:

[I]n a fully postmodern approach of mise en abyme, one does not enter into the traditional exhibition-dispositif to see and contemplate artworks-things, but to discover, experiment and activate other dispositifs: artworks-dispositifs. [...] While artworks-things primarily appealed to the eyes of viewers, artworks-dispositifs appeal to all their sensory abilities, their dispositions to act and react, as well as their ability to conceptualize. (2008, n.p.)

Secondly, we are simultaneously in the time of the greatest amount of growth in terms of cultural events, exhibitions of many kinds, and cultural and artistic tourism. The *dispositif* is more and more important as a mediation between us and artworks or what is supposed to be such. It guarantees spectatorial positioning as envisaged by the curators. But at the same time that this *dispositif* is, to some extent, helping to guide our behavior, it makes more or less unexpected attitudes possible – otherwise than art attitudes in front of art.

We could assume that this double emphasis regarding the *dispositif*, as art or as a condition of art spectatorship, means that the specificity of art has increased substantially in recent years. It is not far from being the contrary.

In other words, within the *dispositifs* that establish us as beholders of art, it happens to be more and more possible to do or to act in a way which combines the conventional attitude toward art with some additional and new attitudes, and even with attitudes which have nothing to do with art. In the context of contemporary art, the best exemplification of *art, otherwise than art* may be found in works that can be both contemplated and penetrated.

The *Too Too – Much Much* exhibition was a *dispositif* established by Thomas Hirschhorn in 2010 at the Dhondt-Dhaenens Museum (Deurle, Belgium). It was surprisingly opened to the outside, while indoors people were invited to move about laboriously on a carpet of soda cans. In this way, a focus on waste was emphasized by making it difficult to walk. Similarly, in the Berlin Jewish Museum, Daniel Libeskind's remarkable architecture, vertical *voids* (both in the sense of emptiness and nothingness) signifies the absence of Jews from German society; among these *voids*, there is *The Memory Void*, with an installation by the Israeli artist, Menashe Kadishman: in this installation called *Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves)*, the ground is covered with 10,000 steel faces dedicated to war and victims of violence; when visitors step on these faces strange and jarring sounds are heard.

The “art, otherwise than art” topic suggests looking at the proxemic point of view from which the spatial relationship between the outside and inside is of particular interest: what do we know about the inside space of an exhibition before entering? What can we see from an outside place which is more or less close to the exhibition space? How do we enter the exhibition space? Where is the doorstep, the threshold between the outside and the inside? Is there an in-between space, a transition, like an airlock, at the doorstep? And so on.

Among the exhibitions I visited in Tokyo in 2017, Kusama Yayoi's<sup>2</sup> display at The National Art Center has been one of the most thought-provoking. Having crossed the threshold of the museum, visitors received colored stickers and access to a so-called “Obliteration Room” where they could place the colored stickers on the walls or on some objects. This intermediate space had two functions. The first was to regulate the queue, whose length could be measured by the fact that it was almost impossible to access the library after having visited the exhibition. The second was to prepare the visitor for a kind of active involvement in the exhibition *dispositif*. Incidentally, this involvement concerned a tactile aspect that requires emphasis. In aesthetics, the notion of haptic is quite commonplace thanks to Riegl and Deleuze! Haptic denotes the fact that even in purely visual works, such as paintings

2 Japanese names are written here in their traditional form: surname first.

or sculptures, there are some aspects that deal with touch; coming back to the word tactile, in Kusama's "Obliteration Room" physical touching is an option rather than only the transmutation of touching into visual signs.

### Film in Places of Exhibition

Film exhibition is particularly interesting in terms of envisaging the *dispositif* and an *art, otherwise than art* attitude. Victa de Carvalho and André Parente write:

The introduction of cinema into galleries and museums raises new questions. The fixed duration imposed on the spectator by regular movie theatres, for example, no longer applies in cinema of exhibition. Its conditions of reception imply an elasticity of time, allowing viewers to follow their own trajectory, to participate in an experience unique to them only. Instead of a definite sequence, it offers different modalities of perception, editing and temporality. (2008, 50)

This is a kind of in-between situation – “a cinema which is simultaneously the same *and* different”(51). Film exhibition is not a pure substitute for the *dispositif*, a pure replacement for the so-called “institutional cinema” *dispositif* by the exhibition dispositive. The best way to represent it is Hegel's *Aufhebung*: something is deleted, something remains, and it produces a more or less new thing or category of things. It is quite understandable if we remember the consensus definition of the “institutional cinema” *dispositif*, i.e., a film, a screen, and a theater: all have changed, but each remains the same to some extent. Indeed, within the exhibition room, one once again finds the film, the screen and a place more or less arranged according to the reference model of the theater space.

The only relevant distinction between the two kinds of *dispositif* has to do with the *art, otherwise than art* situation. Raymond Bellour describes the flow into and through the screening room where Mark Lewis presented four films based on the museum collection – PYRAMID, 8' 18"; CHILD WITH A SPINNING TOP, 4' 39"; THE NIGHT GALLERY, 4' 50"; and IN SEARCH OF THE BLESSED RANIERI, 23' at the Louvre from October 9, 2014 to August 31 – in the following terms:

It is 2:10 p.m. I am sitting on the front bench beside an attentive woman. A group of people comes in; one of them says: “It's a projection,” and all

leave. A family of three arrives; the daughter sits with one buttock on the bench to my left, the parents look as if they have been stopped in their tracks, ready to escape; she gets up almost immediately; they move away. 2:15 p.m. An old man comes in, sits and leaves immediately. [...] A couple enters; they sit behind us, speaking loudly. Two strollers arrive from the back of the room. [...] Someone comes up, stops, takes a photo with his iPad and leaves. A young woman leans against the entrance door just long enough to catch the long movement revolving around the *Victory of Samothrace*. Still chatting, the couple gets up and leaves. 2:25 p.m. My faithful screening companion abandons me. A horde of people comes from behind and leaves while, in the huge room, a crowd of visitors are attracted by the artworks. (2016, 239)

Bellour is wondering “who had actually watched Mark Lewis’s Films at the Louvre.” Indeed, in this case, the screening-exhibiting room is both a place where one can sit and a place of museum transit. People who try to stay in front of the screen can do so (on a very limited number of seats) but will probably be disturbed by people going through. It could be properly theorized by Benjamin’s scheme of the dialectical image, a halt in the dialectical process adapted to understand phenomena that, unless being one-sided, are divided between opposite things or characteristics. In view of such situations now being both *art, otherwise than art* and *movie, otherwise than theater*, Steve McQueen, artist and filmmaker, known as much for his exhibitions in galleries or Biennials as for his feature-films (*HUNGER*, 2008, *TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE*, 2013) explains why he does not merely settle for the theater system:

I try to get away from this kind of “popcorn mentality,” as I call it. Projecting the film onto the back wall of the gallery space so that it completely fills it from ceiling to floor, and from side to side, gives it this kind of blanket effect. You are very much involved with what is going on. You are a participant, not a passive viewer. (1996-1997, n.p.)

The reason that McQueen turns his gaze to exhibition clearly has to do with *art, otherwise than art*: the old condition of the passive artwork contemplation in a museum is reinterpreted as an up-to-date attitude of the *active visitor immersed in the work*. It is worth bearing in mind that post-cinema mutation refers to a change in the modes of receiving cultural products. Incidentally, the growth of tourism throughout the world is presently the main factor transforming art, a mutation working very deeply; consequently,

aesthetics, especially aesthetic attitude, is changing too – that is, the attitude of visitors not only in front of artworks but also inside exhibition rooms. However, the mutation is not only a change in aesthetic attitude which could be produced by a sociological mutation. The new audience faces new art challenges, new movie challenges.

### Cinema in the “Expanded Field”

The present explains the past as much as the past illuminates the present. There were, without a doubt, premises of post-cinema before the full awareness of its ins- and outs, but the advent of this consciousness may also be considered as an event of this kind that means a transformation. If we take into account, for example, the premises that Lettrism exemplifies, we can measure what distinguishes the before and after: characteristic of an avant-garde climate specific to the twentieth century, Isidore Isou's statements in *VENOM AND ETERNITY*, his 1951 film (*TREATISE OF DROOL AND ETERNITY* would be a better translation of the original title: *TRAITÉ DE BAVE ET D'ÉTERNITÉ*), both partially anticipate post-cinema and have rather outdated accents:

I believe firstly that the cinema is too rich. It is obese. It has reached its limits, its maximum. With the first movement of widening which it will outline, the cinema will burst! Under the blow of a congestion, this greased pig will tear into a thousand pieces. I announce the destruction of the cinema, the first apocalyptic sign of disjunction, of rupture, of this corpulent and bloated organization which calls itself film (translated in Verrone 2012, 66).

As much as we can agree on the widening or expansion of the field of cinema, we know that it has not caused any break-up. Unlike the anarchist prophecy of a burst, it is an endless enrichment that must be observed.

It is in this regard that Rosalind Krauss's “expanded field” concept is relevant. Coined in reference to sculpture, she felt the medium had come to mean “surprising things” to a point where it is “almost infinitely malleable” (1979, 30). She adds that it is “an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity, a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything” (30). She describes a Mary Miss installation (*Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, Nassau County Museum of Art, 1977) as a *sculpture* which is “*more precisely, an earthwork.*” This kind of semantic elasticity manifests that,

impacting the reception of art, there has been a major evolution whereby artworks now have one foot in the category denoted by their name and the other in a new category which can be more or less vague. Harold Rosenberg (1964) called these kinds of artworks *anxious*. As the subtitle of Rosenberg's book *Art Today and Its Audience* already suggested, new kinds of artistic objects mean new ways of making and receiving them.

As far as the "expanded field" is concerned, we sometimes forget that this kind of cultural evolution was already known in the movie field. While Krauss's concept appears at the end of the 1970s, the concept of "expanded cinema," which was coined in the mid-1960s, applied to underground cinema. Here, *expanded* derives from drug vocabulary where "expanded consciousness" means "expanded or exploded consciousness" (Noguez 1979, 170, fn 1). The word, which was first publicized by Jonas Mekas and then by Gene Youngblood in his eponymous book (1970 – see also Andrew 2017), has been used to denote marginal kinds of movies, such as experimental films. This is particularly the case when considering film form or independent films, or the modes of production and post-production. Currently, the so-called mode of expanded cinema is no longer exclusive to the underground due to the fact that, in the meantime, cinema has been connected to the expanded field of art, i.e., post-art – what amounts to the same thing: *post-* does not imply an ultimate denial; rather, post-art is art after itself.

Regarding this expansion, we can also speak of intrusion: the intrusion of cinema into art or post-art places. There are four kinds of such intrusion: cinema as a theme or referent of contemporary artworks; introduction of the cinema *dispositif* in artistic installations; cooperation between filmmakers and artists; and contemporary art exhibitions made by filmmakers. I will develop some of these cases of intrusion on the grounds of, dialectically, the *art, otherwise than art* situation.

### Hamaguchi Ryusuke's Case

*Art, otherwise than art* is not only a new way of receiving art but also a new way of creating and instaurating it, resulting in a major change in the status of filmmakers. In terms of its form and production, Hamaguchi Ryusuke's *HAPPY HOUR* (2015) contributes significantly to this point. The storyline of this movie appears very simple: four women, who live in Kobe (Japan), are great friends and frequently meet and travel together until one of them (Jun) disappears; the group disintegrates and the friends, who discover hidden feelings, must face their own personal situation. Richard

Brody rightly considers this film as “a work of distinctly modern cinema [that] reaches deep into the classic traditions of melodrama – along with its coincidences and its violent contrasts – to revive a latent power for grand-scale observation through painfully close contact with the agonizing intimacies of contemporary life” (2016, n.p.). Nevertheless, it is not mainly in this respect that the film challenges us. Brody writes that this “movie is extraordinary both in its artistry and in its dimensions: it runs five hours and seventeen minutes,” notifying that “MoMa is showing it only once daily, at 4:30 p.m.,” and observing that “it’s a tough film to release at all” – release, “as opposed to a scattered handful of screenings.”

MoMa’s screening context is one of several release locations; you can also watch such a film in a theater, on a TV screen, a computer, or a smartphone screen, and so on. I bought it from Orange VOD; it is now downloaded onto my iMac; I watched it on my TV, and then by means of a video projector on a larger screen in my living room. Despite its length, the film actually consists of different “films” or parts of the film – five parts grouped into three (1, 2-3, 4-5, and 5) – which can be seen in one go or one by one, giving the viewer the additional opportunity to interrupt vision and resume it after a shorter or longer period of time. There are different terms used to denote a series of successive films sharing the same diegetic universe: film series, movie series, and movie (or film) franchises. HAPPY HOUR belongs to a different category: the “film broken into parts” as David Lynch says about TWIN PEAKS 3 (Chateau 2018, 138). The parts of this kind of series share the same diegesis, but we are invited to consider the whole as a single film. It is highly symptomatic that HAPPY HOUR and TWIN PEAKS 3 can be wrapped up into one package although the first is a film and the second a series. As time goes by (without allusion!), film has come closer to TV series as much as TV series have come closer to film. It simply remains a distinctive criterion that decides in favor of cinema: authorship – i.e., it comes down to the question: could you name the author, or the main author (in the case of other screenwriters), like we do with David Lynch and Hamaguchi Ryusuke?

Concerning the Japanese filmmaker, art making and acting – *poietic* in the sense of Paul Valéry (1944) – have to do with authorship. By authorship I do not designate the film owner (who has the final cut?), but the one who appropriates the work by expressing its singularity. This attitude seems to be characteristic of post-cinema filmmakers even though the post-art atmosphere seemingly implies an authorship downturn, especially due to the spectator being more or less deeply involved in the process of creation. These new filmmakers, who are university graduates and who often refer to the French New Wave, are less determined by the model of the Hollywood

filmmaker than by the model of the contemporary artist (an avatar of the romantic model). Hamaguchi is a graduate of the Tokyo University of the Arts, where he studied filmmaking. He began his career with his graduation film, *PASSION*, selected by the 2008 Tokyo Filmex Festival. Paying tribute to Rivette and Cassavetes in an interview about *HAPPY HOUR*, he explains the *poietic* context for his film in a way that confirms his leaning toward the contemporary artist, in particular the artist in residence who leads workshops:

When I was a residence artist at KIITO, a design center in Kobe, from September 2013 to February 2014, we had “Improv Acting Workshops in Kobe” once a week, which didn’t require the participants to have any acting experience. We were supposed to shoot a film when the workshop ended, but what we were doing were lessons to be listeners, not lessons for acting. (2015, n.p.)

### Film Length as Post-cinema Form

In *The Philosophy of Art: The Question of Definition – From Hegel to Post-Dantian Theories*, Tiziana Andina proposes the following definition of the artwork: “An artwork is a social object, an artifact, that embodies a representation, in the form of an inscribed trace upon a medium that is not transparent” (2013, 166). As with all definitions, it is the same for definitions of art: they can be found to be both too short and too long – too short to exhaust all the essential features of the object in question, and too long to coincide with the intuitive idea we have of it. More interestingly, elsewhere, Andina chooses to exemplify her “post-Dantian” definition of artwork with “Christian Marclay’s *THE CLOCK* (2010), a film that has an impressive duration of 24 hours.” She writes:

*THE CLOCK* is a true gem of cinematographic assemblage in which the separation between reality and the worlds of fiction marks the almost absolute erasure of the boundaries of temporality. Time, which is measured and indicated with obsessive constancy throughout the entire film, coincides with that of our lives in an astonishing way. The spectator realizes this immediately—at first with surprise and then with mounting unease combined with authentic enjoyment. Time passes and is measured; it is spoken of and considered throughout the whole of the film, for 24 extraordinary hours. It is measured not only by clocks that capture its

rhythm, but also by memory, which travels through Marclay's excerpts, contextualizes them, and experiences the irony of scenes that belong to a past in black and white, only to open itself to a world of colors. (Andina 2013, n.p.)

Is the length of movies a symptom of post-cinema? Does the category of the long film deserve to be considered a typical post-cinema form (or genre)? According to this hypothesis, post-cinema means a new form: a speedy montage of movie excerpts,<sup>3</sup> sometimes called *supercut*, associated with a new filmic, or metafilmic experience: "The medium is never transparent, Andina adds; in fact, we do not watch the kaleidoscopic collage as a collection of images but rather as a revisiting of the history of cinematography and, at the same time, of our memory" (2013, n.p.). In addition, to be seen, *THE CLOCK* requires the contemporary art *dispositif*.

When asked about the length of his film (four hours and seventeen minutes), Hamaguchi says he thought that the film, previously called *BRIDES*, would last two hours and thirty minutes, but adds the following about the naming of his work using the French title *SENSES* (in reference to the film's subdivision in five parts corresponding with the division of the five senses: touch, hearing, sight, smell, and taste):

[T]he length and content are totally different in the final *SENSES* editing. In the end, the script was completely rewritten seven times. It was a never-ending process. During the shooting, we wondered how to finish the film properly. In a way, we can say that all the time we spent looking for that ending is reflected in the length of *SENSES*. (2015, n.p.; my translation)

This difficulty in finishing is symptomatic. Coming back to film exhibition, it is curious to note that this kind of movie relocation to the museum space allows one to show very long movies despite their length; the route and rhythm of the exhibition visit do not encourage standing in front of them for a long time, so that more often than not, you see only a fragment of them.

*HAPPY HOUR* has not broken the world record in terms of movie length. Although it seems odd, movie length is a challenge that well suits the post-cinema atmosphere and *art, otherwise than art*. Under the conditions of movie screening in the theater there is already a general tendency to extend duration. Moreover, films appearing in the context of the gallery or museum

3 For an overview of the films used in *THE CLOCK*, see: <https://letterboxd.com/thisisdrew/list/the-clock/>. Accessed August 28, 2019.

do not need to comply with traditional standards. Under these special conditions, film and its reception do not need to be shaped to the “seated beholder” model; to the extent that in addition the film can be perpetually relocated to a whole range of devices – TV, computer, smartphone – the beholder pecks at pieces with no regard for film length. If we wanted to be more precise, we would notice that the form of a film such as *THE CLOCK* requires the contemporary art *dispositif*, despite it not being the best condition in which to experience the endless projection (of which Andina accurately speaks).

### The “Longest Film Ever”

To be honest, in accordance with the hypothesis that post-cinema began before it was explicitly recognized and consciously practiced as such, the increase in film length is no novelty as shown in the following non-exhaustive table:

Director	MOVIE	Year	Duration (minutes)
Louis Feuillade	LES VAMPIRES	1915	421
Louis Feuillade	VINDICTA	1923	320
Abel Gance	NAPOLEÓN	1927	562
Zhang Shichuan	THE BURNING OF THE RED LOTUS TEMPLE	1928-1931	1620
Andy Warhol	EMPIRE	1964	485
Sergei Bondarchuk	WAR AND PEACE	1966	511
Jacques Rivette and Suzanne Shiffman	OUT 1	1971	773
Gérard Courant (see chap. 18)	CINÉMATON	1978-2020	12048
Claude Lanzmann	SHOAH	1985	566
John Timmis	THE CURE FOR INSOMNIA	1987	5220
Peter Brook	THE MAHABHARATA (TV)	1989	360
Alain Resnais	SMOKING, NO SMOKING	1993	298
Béla Tarr	SÁTÁNTANGÓ	1994	440
Peter Watkins	LA COMMUNE	2000	345
Matthew Barney	THE CREMASTER CYCLE	2003	398
Christian Marclay	THE CLOCK	2010	1440
Danish artist group Superfex	MODERN TIMES FOR EVER	2011	14400
Wang Bing (see chap. 19)	DEAD SOULS 1	2018	506
Mariano Llinás	LA FLOR	2018	840
Ilya Khrzhanovsky (see chap. 17)	DAU	2019	1000?
Anders Weberg	AMBIANCÉ	2020	43200

While this table is far from being exhaustive, it suggests a few thoughts. As seen in the early examples, long films may be serial ones, like *THE VAMPIRES* or the considered lost *THE BURNING OF THE RED LOTUS TEMPLE*, consisting of sixteen parts and released over a period of three years, and which holds the record for having the longest duration. But it may also be a feature-film, such as *NAPOLÉON*, an epic historical drama which is divided into three parts and lasts 9 hours and 22 minutes in its uncut version. To these we may add experimental film such as Warhol's *EMPIRE*, fiction film such as Bondarchuk's *WAR AND PEACE*, or documentary film such as Lanzmann's *SHOAH*, and the range of possibilities seems complete.

However, something special dealing with *art, otherwise than art* bases the discernment of post-cinema on the longest films. To be limited to a few cases,

- it may comprise a part-whole dialectic: in Gérard Courant's *CINÉMATON*, composed of silent shots where a fixed camera frames someone who does what he/she wants, the length of the reunion of thousands of portraits is potentially infinite – see chapter 18;
- it may be included in an artistic installation: Ilya Khrzhanovsky's *DAU* contains a set of fourteen films that can be seen in a huge and complex *dispositif* ("baroque" in the vulgar sense of the word) recreating the Soviet Union atmosphere – see chapter 17;
- it may be a strange experience of transienceness: *AMBIANCÉ* is an upcoming film whose existence will be as short as its first, and only, screening is long. *The Guardian* described Swedish artist and filmmaker, Anders Weberg's project as follows:

The film-maker, who says *AMBIANCÉ* will be his last movie, describes it as an "abstract nonlinear narrative summary of the artist's time spent with the moving image" that will show how "space and time are intertwined into a surreal dream-like journey beyond places." Weberg has made more than 300 short films in a 20-year career. He plans to screen his latest work, which from the trailer looks set to take an abstract and experimental form, just once simultaneously on every continent from 31 December 2020. It will then be destroyed. (Child 2014, n.p.)

### Cinema as a Reservoir of Contemporary Art: Pierre Huyghe's Case

In order to evaluate the scope of post-cinema, we can look through the other end of the spyglass, and ask the question: what is the image of cinema in the expanded field of contemporary art? *Art, otherwise than art* generously

offers a context in which old habits are outdated, but to the extent that *movie, otherwise than theater* is only partially true, or only true within the orb of the contemporary art field: as expanded as it is, can it accommodate the traditional conception of cinema?

Two works by Pierre Huyghe provide a good example of a reinvestment of cinema in the personal imagination of contemporary artists involving, in this case, not only the “imaginary museum” (films, stars and so on) but also the cinematographic *dispositif*: *REMAKE* (1994-1995), which reprises Hitchcock’s *REAR WINDOW* (1954) in the context of a Parisian suburb, with amateur interpreters and by transposing the action near a building under construction; and *DUBBING* (1996), which shows filmed dubbing in the process of reading the dialogue of a horror film (Barikin 2012). Pierre Huyghe’s relationship with cinema is ambiguous. He says:

What interests me today is seeing how a story can go through different modes of visibility, whether it is an exhibition, a film, a book or a show. At one time, history may have passed through cinema, but today it no longer does. But if cinema has made history for a while, it is interesting to question what made the story and to see how this story was transmitted, how it was produced and how it was broadcast. [...] It would never occur to me to say that I want to make films or that I want to make art; it is a question that we are entitled to ask a second time but we first want to talk and only then, this word must find its place. (2017; my translation)

In such a case, cinema is clearly invoked and reinvested in the context of contemporary art exhibitions as an art of the past and a witness to a bygone era. Indifferent to the medium as such, the artist assimilates himself to the post-art denial of art. Whether or not Huyghe has a desire to make art, he does it all the same – in this respect, the phrase “we want to talk first” is not innocent since it refocuses the source of creation on the subject, the artist’s idiosyncratic attitude. This denial of the artistic posture, which expresses both postmodern ideology and an individual decision, suggests that the artist’s disposition (romantic, if you will) is persistent in the very context in which the ideology claims to erase it – it is a bit like the bloodstain on the carpet that the assassin washes in vain.

With regard to this ambivalent behavior, it is not surprising that Huyghe may say that he does not make films. But there is another reason, which is simpler and more essential: he does not enter, nor has desire to enter, the institutional field of cinema. His field is resolutely the expanded field of contemporary art. He rejects, at the same time, the specific filmic form,

having chosen to relocate the cinematographic residues that he borrows and/or parodies to his own institutional place of speech. This is no longer a question of denial, but of a simple positioning with regard to the institutional field and the forms of work recognized within it. There is, undoubtedly, a link between the idea that cinema would be an art of the past and the rejection of the film form – *cinema, otherwise than cinema* – which, it should be stressed, essentially maintains the form of “traditional” work.

### Cooperation between Filmmaker and Artist: Michel Gondry’s Case

A question haunts this entire discussion: the artist question (what is an artist?). Announcing my intention to talk about filmmaker-artist cooperation presupposes the distinction between the filmmaker and the artist as if they were two separate entities; the filmmaker cannot be considered an artist and vice versa. Post-cinema could be involved in post-art but only in the way a technician can be involved in a movie. Hamaguchi Ryusuke’s case has already shown this not to be true. This is once again corroborated in Michel Gondry’s case and his collaboration with Pierre Bismuth, who is a known artist. In 1993, Gondry began to make a video clip for Jean-François Coen’s song, *La tour de Pise*, using as his starting point one of Bismuth’s contemporary artworks, *La pièce de Châteauroux*. In 1998, Bismuth’s idea of a narrative based on the agreed and controlled erasure of memory became a synopsis on which Gondry and Charlie Kaufmann (scriptwriter for Spike Jonze’s *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH*, 1999) based their script for *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND* (2004). Having collaborated on Bismuth’s video *LINK* (1998) and Gondry’s music video for a Kylie Minogue song, *COME INTO MY WORLD* (2002), Bismuth and Gondry would once again join hands, this time in contemporary art, with the installation *The All Seeing Eye* (Cosmic Galerie, Paris, 2005): on the four walls of the exhibition room images are projected in panoramic mode; these images are taken by a camera which, pivoting on its 360-degree axis, shoots a bourgeois apartment whose furniture appears and then disappears with each rotation until it is completely emptied (among the objects is a television set which broadcasts *ETERNAL SUNSHINE*).

McQueen may be said to be both filmmaker and artist since he embodies two cultural roles. In qualifying Gondry and Bismuth, however, the most immediate response would be to appoint Gondry as the filmmaker and Bismuth as the artist. This reflects the ideology attached to cinema and contemporary art respectively which, in turn, reflects their respective cultural status. As we know, artistic cinema is a subset of the cinema which also includes

productions that have no artistic aim; while, on the side of contemporary art, everything is deemed art. In this sense, Gondry clearly joins these new filmmakers who, as I said, are less determined by the feature-film model than by the model of the contemporary artist; more precisely, like McQueen (or Mary Miss, *mutatis mutandis*), he operates within both models. If we can name Gondry as an artist, it is by a specification of the field of cinema, whereas Bismuth is considered an artist by right despite the contemporary art field expansion, despite the *art, otherwise than art* situation that more or less concretely (and honestly) involves the sharing of authorship.

In order to complete Gondry's portraiture, we see also that in his person, several different postures are gathered: he stands on the advertising creative side with many audiovisual advertisements, on the side of "traditional" filmmaking with *HUMAN NATURE* (2001), *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*, *THE SCIENCE OF SLEEP* (2006), *BE KIND, REWIND* (2008) and so on, on the TV production side with the recent *KIDDING* (2018), and halfway again between creation and production with his video clips for Björk, the Rolling Stones, Daft Punk, Kylie Minogue, Massive Attack, etc. Gondry's case shows that post-cinema allows the filmmaker all kinds of practices more or less linked to cinema, that it is possible to belong to different artistic spheres at the same time, to circulate between these spheres and have ideas, themes and projects circulate between them, to enjoy this vertiginous intermedial exchange, while keeping a cool head toward each specific regime. People who seek out creatives, like Gondry, are adamant: *they want his signature, knowing that he is an artist, but they do not want him to make a work of art instead of an advertisement.*

When an advertiser needs an art-like advertisement, they know who to call. So when Apple orders a movie from Gondry, asking him to make it on an iPhone 7, the resulting work, *DÉTOUR* (2018) – a ten-minute film about a girl's tricycle abandoned on the road while the family continues their journey to their summer holiday destination and the tricycle's subsequent arduous route in search of its owner – is a demonstration of artistry which is used to enhance the value of the industrial device. In this case, we can consider that films "are among other things fossils of economic life," as Michael Baxandall writes about painting ([1972] 1988, 2). Gondry however shows that it is possible to transform an advertisement into an art film with considerations to film genre and the limits of the device. He explains:

The idea was to shoot a film with the iPhone, without any machinery during shooting or in post-production. To obtain a certain simplicity, as on a holiday film, while applying a rather rigorous cutting that uses classical

cinema. Which you do not necessarily feel, because it is supposed to be invisible. But the approach to the staging was quite rigorous. [...] These devices offer real flexibility; they allow you to do more things. But they also have their limits that have an influence on the staging. (2017, n.p.)

## Filmmakers and the Post-art Exhibition

*Art, otherwise than art* is challenged by another way of exhibiting: aiming at scientific knowledge in astrophysics or anthropology, these postmodern expositions are designed based on artistic models. In these cases, *art, otherwise than art* means that essentially, non-artistic matter is aestheticized. Chased out of the door by post-artists, including those who are conceptual, the aesthetic once again slips in through the window, but in a rather different form. This triumph of aesthetics clearly means that the ambiguity of art no longer dominates or that it is superseded by the ambiguity of the practice of art or anything presented as art. In the present context of syncretic culture, the practice of art oscillates between art ritual and tourism. Tourism provides aesthetics with a second chance. Even the hardest science benefits from this aestheticization (defined in the same way by Benjamin who coined the concept).

Filmmakers also benefit from this aestheticization; paradoxically, art or post-art benefits from that as argued throughout the theme of the *aestheticization of art* (Chateau 2014). I will consider two cases of filmmakers, namely Agnès Varda and David Lynch, who, at some point in their career, chose to turn to exhibition. Or more precisely, they were enticed by the artworld (or post-art world). In such cases, *art, otherwise than art* clearly means the welcome reserved for a foreign body by the artistic institutions in the hope of refreshing themselves. Indeed, cinema is already artistic from the viewpoint of its specific system of production and evaluation: given its industrial nature, the cinematographic system of production raises doubts about the artistic character of its products to the extent that an artistic film overcomes the constraints of its own production system. One time, I asked Agnès Varda why she was moving from film production to the artworld; she responded significantly: "In the film system, I have to beg for money in a process which is exhausting in addition to the fear of not being able to do what I want to do. The artworld is asking for me and lets me do what I want, offering me the conditions to do what I want to do."

L'ÎLE ET ELLE, Agnès Varda's exhibition at the Cartier Foundation (June 18-October 8, 2006) testified to the vitality of current exchanges

between cinema and contemporary (post-)art. Significantly, Varda's work places her squarely within the artist's model: "I worked on the spot, like the painters on the motif" (2006). Similarly, with regard to the *VEUVES DE NOIRMOUTIER*, she highlights the specific nature of the work made possible by the exhibition system:

If there are more widows than widowers in the world, there are many widows on the island if I judge, first of all, by my neighbors. I imagined gathering some of them, by the ocean, dressed in black as it should be (a collective imaginary cliché for widows of sailors and fishermen) and placing around this central image fourteen portraits of women, set in monitors acting as a frame. In a film, I couldn't have shown so many faces simultaneously in moving images. (2006)

This awareness of the specificity of the exhibition device, of its rules and constraints, reinforces that of the film, even when the two meet in a kind of productive *paragone*.

This kind of filmmakers' exhibition in the contemporary art context can be considered a cultural symptom in terms of the extent to which it proliferates, as David Lynch's *The Air is on Fire*, also at the Cartier Foundation (March 3-May 27, 2007), attests. Lynch's interview began with this significant introduction:

Director, painter, musician [...] David Lynch's happiness depends on diversity and transcendental meditation. If *INLAND EMPIRE*, his latest UFO [film just released in France], leaves some in the dark, an exciting exhibition by the Cartier Foundation allows us to penetrate a little further into the head of this iconoclastic creator. (Lynch 2007, 4)

Far from giving the exhibition a didactic role only, *The Air on Fire* is described as "self-collection" since it proposes a kind of autobiographical journey that refocuses a diversity of media and devices (watercolor, mixed technique with oil, installation, photography, film, etc.) on Lynch himself. In addition, the highlight of the *TGV* article is preceded by this quote from the author: "Film language can, and sometimes should be abstract" (2007, 4). But the complexity of the film, its abstraction, differs from the complexity of the exposure in that the film remains a compact form that organically holds together various materials of expression, beyond the semantic and structural transgressions it involves.

As the Gondry-Bismuth system has been borrowed from Michael Snow (*LA RÉGION CENTRALE*, 1971, and other films, photographs, installations,

music), Lynch's diversity as "director, painter, musician" is still reminiscent of the Canadian filmmaker who, long before the postmodern discourse, proposed the inclusion of cinema in an intermediate practice where mediums exchange while being respected. As early as 1967, Snow said:

I am not a professional artist. My paintings are made by a filmmaker, my sculptures by a musician, my films by a painter, my music by a filmmaker, my paintings by a sculptor, my sculptures by a filmmaker, my films by a musician, my music by a sculptor ... who sometimes work together. (1978, 5)

Far from aiming at a mere amalgamation of the arts, he adds:

Moreover, my paintings have been made in large numbers by a painter, my sculptures by a sculptor, my films by a filmmaker, and my music itself by a musician. There is a trend towards purity in each of these media as separate companies. Painting as fixity, static image. Sculpture as an object. Light and time.

### Remark Instead of Conclusion

Agnès Varda did not abandon cinema. One of her last works was *VISAGES, VILLAGES*, a documentary made with JR in 2017. A representative of *art, otherwise than art*, the artist JR (Jean René) exhibits black-and-white images in public locations throughout the world. He says that the street is "the largest art gallery in the world" (2009). *VISAGES, VILLAGES* is a kind of *documentary road movie*, a trip on French roads in order to meet people, but its main feature is the meeting between the filmmaker and the artist, not unlike the Gondry-Bismuth meeting, and further back, the Picasso-Clouzot meeting.

Addressing the linking of film and post-art helps us to refresh our memories which have become numb as a result of the postmodern ideology of unbridled intermediality. The point lies less in the exciting or debilitating observation of the current success of this ideology which, certainly, is gaining in people's minds, than in the apparent contradiction of the way in which cinema is once again conditioning its forms with those that dominate in contemporary art: both a work attached to a single medium and a dissemination of the work in a multimedia form. In view of its traditional packaging, what does cinema do in this playground of contemporary art where new toys are constantly invented? Or, to give the question a more controversial turn: why is cinema not ashamed of remaining attached to a cultural form of the past?

We do not know whether the *art, otherwise than art* situation leads to the metamorphosis of cinema in post-art, in a more or less near future. Hypothetically, it would probably mean that the recession of the single medium leads to a kind of undifferentiated mixture. What we can do is simply to observe the paradox of the inclusion of cinema in the sphere of post-art where the uniqueness of the medium is in crisis. Where, on the one hand, the various relations between cinema and contemporary art are increasingly being promoted; while, on the other hand, there exists a persistence of uniqueness in its own sphere, by the way of feature films, alongside the persistence of the position of the filmmaker as the main person responsible for the film – which is the main prerogative of the artist. These two sides are currently in a state of unstable balance, *to be continued ...*

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## 15. The ZIDANE Film

*Richard Conte*

### **Abstract**

Post-cinema in the post-art era can also arise from the collaboration of two artists, as in the case of *ZIDANE: A 21ST CENTURY PORTRAIT* (2006), a film by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno: 17 cameras placed around the Bernabéu stadium in Madrid where a match is taking place follow the well-known football player, Zinédine Zidane, from the beginning of the game until his dismissal. Richard Conte examines this special portrait, paying particular attention to how the film focuses primarily on Zidane and on details that could only be captured by the artistic filmic device. This in-depth analysis of such an approach and its astonishing filmic result also concern a social aspect of post-cinema that deserves to be highlighted: here, “the elitist contemporary art meets the most popular sport of the world and one of its most emblematic figures.”

**Keywords:** Football (soccer), portrait, dance

### **Football – Cinema – Contemporary Art**

“Acclaimed as one of the greatest football films ever made, *ZIDANE: A 21ST CENTURY PORTRAIT* (2006) is a unique real-time study of one of the beautiful game’s greatest icons: Zinédine Zidane.

During an entire Real Madrid vs. Villarreal match in front of 80,000 fans on April 23, 2005, at the Santiago Bernabéu stadium, 17 movie cameras under the direction of acclaimed cinematographer, Darius Khondji, were set around the playing field focusing solely on Zidane. Featuring the legend’s thoughts and observations on his playing career and a magnificent score by Scottish rock band Mogwai, this extraordinary feature – conceived and co-directed by Turner Prize-winning artist Douglas Gordon and French artist Philippe

Parreno – captures, in stunning detail, all the drama and excitement of a football genius in action.”<sup>1</sup>

This film was presented in Cannes out of competition.

## Prelude

Sitting in front of the television, tonight, December 2019, I am watching the PSG/Marseille match. On the screen, the image is perfect, constantly clear. There isn't the slightest distortion or interference with the reception. When the action requires it, the overall plans make room for tighter plans, but whatever happens, at every moment, the synchronized cameras focus on the ball's trajectory; open sesame to the football dramaturgy.

There isn't the slightest blur, except for a few transitions to slow-motion or accelerated replay. It is about showing the game with the best visibility, in the empathy of the movement and the clearness of the game. When the situation requires it, the producer might not lose the agonistic track of the match.

## A Unique Portrait

As kids, the two plastic artists Philippe Parreno and Douglas Gordon, eyes glued to the screen of the family television, were wondering what the football players were doing when they were not playing football. It is true that at the stadium, each person is free to watch where one wants to and thus break free from the course of the game. In front of the TV, you have to follow the ball tracked steadfastly by the cameraman. So, what would one see if, instead of following the ball, the cameras only accompanied one exceptional player, a true football legend? This is what the two artists imagined. Thus, in 2005, who was more inspiring than the star of Real Madrid, Zinedine Zidane ... Thanks to the intercession of a journalist, the two artists offered the project to Zidane who accepted, conscious that it was a singular project quite unlike the regular filmed televised matches. The notion of “portrait” is advanced.<sup>2</sup>

1 ZIDANE DVD, *Artificial Eye*, France 2006 (film and special features). This study was greatly facilitated by the existence of this DVD.

2 The genre of the portrait, in any art form, shows an interest in the individual; it is not only the human being in general, or this type of whole species, that makes the portrait painter; he is such a person insofar as he is himself (and this, even though through the individual an idea of general significance is revealed: the portrait cannot be reduced to it).



ZIDANE: A 21ST CENTURY PORTRAIT (Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, 2006)

However, this is a new kind of portrait with considerable risk: “If I get hurt at the eighth minute, the movie is bugged” warns Zidane. It is also like the portrait of a moving unconscious mind, a portrait in which the subject does not pose; a portrait in which he is acted on by the game more than he acts. Thus, he is not playing a role as an actor but remains in a performing situation. The character disappears, but in a certain way, the person does too. The player on the football field is seemingly outside of himself, deprived of the customary use of the hand which is forbidden by the rules of the game. However, the portrait of a focused being, who is on watch as a hunter searching for the perfect moment, is very different from the synthesis of a personality which constitutes, for example, the *Portrait of Monsieur Bertin* by Ingres,<sup>3</sup> or in another different format, the numerous biopics so loved by the modern-day public.<sup>4</sup> Instead of the traits being gathered in the same image as an aggregation of temporalities, in this film, hundreds of expressions and behaviors, minute details to reckless acts – as the fight that earned him a red card at the end of the game – draw a contradictory portrait which can only be captured by a documentary film.

Because of the seventeen cameras and cameramen situated all around the stadium on different levels, the regular convention which gives the spectator a sense of the game (a team on the right, the other on the left, with a switch during half-time) is shattered, disorienting the film viewer. On the contrary, in this film, we never really know who’s watching, who’s directing our gaze, so that it can be any of the 80,000 spectators present at the stadium.<sup>5</sup> With its zoom shots<sup>6</sup> and close-ups offered only by a film intended for theatrical release, this is a match that has never been seen before. Unlike with conventional orientation, the abundance and variation of points of view permit an understanding of the dramaturgy of the match. Here, the focus is neither on the ball nor the action of the 22 players and the goals but on Zidane alone, as if we were with him on the field. We are

3 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Portrait of Monsieur Bertin*, 1832, oil on canvas, 116 × 96 cm (Louvre Museum). Ingres took a long time to find the masterful pose of his subject, a representative of the liberal bourgeoisie of the time and director of a French Newspaper.

4 What the audience expects from cinema when football is filmed looks more like the *MARADONA BY KUSTURICA* (2008), evoking the youth, the achievements and the demons of this other great player.

5 “The only way to record reality,” said Pasolini, “is to multiply the points of view that look at it endlessly” (qtd. in Parreno 2014, n.p.; my translation). Initially, for both artists, the ideal would have been to have as many cameras as spectators in the stadium. It was from this utopia that the idea of 17 shooting teams was born.

6 Two Panavision zooms, the best at the time (2005), were provided by the United States military.

there with him and yet not; we never see what Zidane is seeing from his own point of view.

The artist filmmakers offer a discontinuous alternative to the continuity of the game, to its general movement. Where the pursuit of the ball induces the continuity of the action (drama), the filming of Zidane shows the gaps, the attempts, the sudden accelerations, the ball-to-foot races, like the paces of equine (the step, the trot, gallop), the shouts and gestures of ball calls, the heavy breathing, the backups ... it is not the behind-the-scenes but the exertion of the body which are expressed here.

### Different Sliding

Zidane clearly says it: "It was not the game of my life, but I was in my game; why did I say yes? Because I wasn't playing a role." Indeed, Zidane is not Bruce Willis, neither a hero from an American movie nor an actor. He is a football player who plays his match, as is the case for him at this time, twice a week. At the same time, he is a "Stadium God," a ball artist and an employee fulfilling his contract with mastery. In this way, during the match between Real Madrid and Villarreal, by a perfect pass, he kicks the ball on Ronaldo's head who scores.

However, just by reading the comments about the film at the time of its release, the deception of a great deal of "supporters," "football lovers" and/or "Zizou fans" (Zizou is Zidane's nickname) can clearly be felt. They had expected to see a biopic, a biography of their idol or a film providing a "very high level" psychological analysis. Instead, they ended up "dying of boredom" in front of an amphigoric and redundant-style artistic experiment, which did not even show the exciting game, depriving them of what mattered most. Moreover, at various points during the film, it is blurry, out of focus, and ribbed. In brief, all of this is "nonsense" as expressed on the French entertainment website Allociné.<sup>7</sup>

This clearly indicates, albeit rather negatively, the different shifts that the film operates: from biographical to the activity of a portion of the present.

7 The viewers' critique is more scathing than that of the journalists, for example: "We are immersed in the heart of a match but condemned to understand nothing ... by wanting to get closer we forget the essentials: football is a collective adventure!"; or again: "Unconvincing for lovers of contemporary art, frankly boring for moviegoers, ultra-frustrating for football fans, this film only seems to exist to flatter the megalomania of its directors, amplify or accelerate the canonization of the great Zizou and bring contemporary art in cinemas for the general public [...]" (2006; my translation). See [www.allocine.fr](http://www.allocine.fr).

There is almost no interest in the narrative suspense despite the game and its dramatic tension provided by the music and the cheering supporters from the stands. The conventions of the documentary have changed in that there is no step back or analysis and the live shooting of the game lacks the usual commentaries of the televisual transmission. The disruption of visual performances of screens by interference, besides noises and contrasted editing, leads to a break in continuity between the filming of the game on the screen and the out of the ordinary dispositive of all-out shots (even for the Hollywood cinema).

While some football lovers may be frustrated, for many others, it is a new experience. For the first time, the elitist contemporary art meets the most popular sport in the world and one of its most representative figures. At half-time, news images of what's going on elsewhere in the world on April 23, 2005 (Iraq war, refugees, and explosions) are edited in to hint at the polemological significance of football and its policy. The violence of these images reminds us that, in Pierre Bourgeade's words, "football is the war continued by other means" (1981; my translation). While we are playing here, a real war is in fact taking place elsewhere.

As there are no camera shots from the subjective perspective, only the subtitled quotes by Zidane announce the thoughts of the player; thoughts that have little to do with what's happening on the field.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, these Zidane quotes replace the voice-over technique often used to provide an intimate look into the mind of a character, in this case Zidane. On the other hand, what we can hear are the many small injunctions or calls for the ball by means of short bursts of Hispanic onomatopoeias – let's not forget that he is Real's playmaker – expirations, and even spitting. As he wipes the sweat of his forehead using the ends of his sleeves he remains on the lookout like a predator, meticulously scanning the field to at any moment take advantage of the slightest opportunity.

For the artist filmmakers and their teams, everything is played out between sickle cutting and lace editing. The story's multiple viewpoints are skillfully darned together using the thread of time; because, ultimately, the chronology of the game is strictly respected. Thus, they find a narrative force intrinsic to any football match, even if in this case, we only see the ball at Zidane's feet or from far away on the control room screen.

Even if the football lover can be bored during watching the film, the contemporary art lover enjoys the way in which sport is turned into art,

8 For example, "As a child / I had a running commentary in my head / When I was playing / It wasn't really my own voice / It was the voice of Pierre Cangioni / a television anchor from the 1970s/ Every time I heard his voice [...]."

breaking with the conventional television aesthetics of the sport. Indeed, today like yesterday, the TV screen is a washing machine that standardizes the iconic materiality.

### The Part Played by Sound

Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno felt that despite their very clear principle of mainly filming a player instead of the game, they could not escape a certain disparity and multiple breaks in rhythm induced by their subject. This is where the function of the soundtrack intervenes, linking disparate visual to composite sound. The murmurs, clams, foghorns and applause of the crowd, as well as the exchanges and sounds coming from the players, create an acoustic depth between the close voices on the “green square” and the distant sound coming from the bleachers. A permanent oscillation between the sounds being broadcasted to the Spanish TV with their hissing noises and the sound captured live is maintained and combined with music by Mogwai.<sup>9</sup> This music is at once present, almost repetitive, almost absent, functioning as the nervous system of the film. It is simultaneously inherent to it and distant. It beats to the pulse of the film by according itself to the speed of the player, to his remoteness in a universe of brutal and rowdy confrontations. It is generic in the sense that it imports into the world of sports documentaries the memory of fictional films. It compensates for insufficient narration and reinforces the hypnotic dimension of the film.

### A Cinematic Film Produced by Contemporary Artists

Between what is known as contemporary art on the one hand and cinemas (which must now be used in the plural form) on the other, a new paradigm has emerged for addressing these creative developments. In 2005, Gordon and

9 “Mogwai is a British post-rock group from Glasgow. Mostly instrumental, the songs of the band are most often based on a bass or guitar line, to which are added as the theme changes. These compositions oscillate between atmospheric ambiances and sonic violence”; see Wikipedia, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mogwai\\_\(groupe\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mogwai_(groupe)). In 2006, they made the original soundtrack for ZIDANE. Without extrapolating too much, we can clearly see what guided the directors in their choice: an unprecedented combination of calm tension, almost sweetness and the potential for contained violence (their concerts usually ended in complete chaos, in a rain of feedback). This is what characterizes the portrait of Zidane.

Parreno speculated that three foreign elements would be combined: football (even when, since and during the 1998 World Cup, artistic initiatives were multiplied [Conte 2002, 167-171]), mass cinema (an industry that remains driven by profitability obligations), and contemporary art (an inclusive field of art that continues to “annex” all forms of expression, art or otherwise). Usually, artists who tackle cinema, with some exceptions,<sup>10</sup> use modest means. While *ZIDANE* can be considered an artist’s movie, having been made by renowned visual artists, the importance of the technical measures and the performance of the material (far removed from the experimental cinema, super 8, videos and smartphones of today) links it to high-budget cinema. Unsurprisingly, the film was presented in Cannes out of competition in 2006.

Apart from the different shifts mentioned earlier concerning the diegetic conception of the film, it is also necessary to reflect on the plasticity of the screens, the grain of the images, the blurs ... And it starts with the credits, which immediately provide the opportunity to expose the visual and sound project as well as the typographic research<sup>11</sup> (a sort of *ex-libris*, the name of Zidane).

Grids and screens in complementary colors and the hypnotic, crystal-clear music provoke a dream-awake effect, a form of hypnosis, almost a trance, in front of the scrolling of shots. This effect is not always specific to artist films but underlines that the cinematographic projection has to ability to induce sleep or drowsiness.

In this context, does the football game resemble a form of hyphen drawn by both artists between the contemporary art and the cinema (see Chateau 2014; especially chap. 4, 89-106) or, more precisely, as specified by Jacques Aumont:

In order to make an interval between things surface – and to make people see it – one must film scenes without staging them (whenever possible) so that they do not begin to convey a story. One must film them for

10 For example, the series of five *CREMASTER* films by Matthew Barney made between 1994 and 2002 and, of course, the work of David Lynch; these works are constantly in transit between cinema and contemporary art.

11 This is a typo from the family of the lineal drawn in the 1920s and 1930s. This family of characters carries all the refined modernity of the 1930s, with the refusal of serifs (of History, therefore). The assertion of geometry for immediate readability (the famous Gestalt describing “pure” forms as easier for humans to decipher). It is also a period in the history of forms that removes all references to the past, a sort of typeface without roughness, without belonging, without the past, for more universal openness. The extra light type is a desire to completely decrease the letter, which suddenly disappears, dematerialized. This favors the medium and the image over the letter.

themselves and I would even say with themselves, in themselves. Showing is not embracing a point of view of things [...]. Showing is a move within itself, a motion not bound or, at least, not entirely bound to conscience and accounts for a dynamic of things, phenomena, and events. (2006; my translation)

Could this be what the two filmmakers intended when making the film? It very well could be, the film does seem to reflect this, but in parts only.

## Red Card

The heated moment of the game, placing Zidane front and center, comes a few minutes before the end of the match when Zidane receives a red card, not his first,<sup>12</sup> and is sent off; the offense in question concerned a mischievous heel kick to a player who was down.<sup>13</sup> Quite uncharacteristic for someone known to be calm and civil. So, where does this sudden, almost irrational violence come from? I hypothesize that it is inherent to football; it's written in its DNA. Let me explain.

The underlining content of this film, what is represented as a portrait, is the reveal of this permanent tension inherent to the secret of football, its drama, and its beauty, and its name, which reaffirms that one should play ball with the foot, not with the hands! It took time to pry this name from the hands of *rugby* football, and for *association football* to become exclusively about football. Banning the use of one's hands is the founding rule; a rule that has not been highlighted enough, in my opinion. In football, the arms' only function is to keep balance while moving. Between the head and the feet, a direct relation short-circuits the customary use of the hand, its language function, its delicate coupling with the eye and the human brain. The ban on the voluntary use of the hand may

12 Coinciding with the release of the movie a famous incident occurred involving Zidane that was widely discussed in the media at the time and that even extended its reach to the field of contemporary art. On July 9, 2006, during the World Cup final in Berlin, Zidane, captain of the French team, headbutted the Italian player, Marco Materazzi. In the media, this incident gave rise to many questions in France about what had provoked Zidane. An investigation was launched by the International Federation of Football Association (FIFA). Countlessly parodied in the media, Zidane's gesture was later immortalized by Adel Abdessemed as a bronze sculpture and exhibited on the forecourt of Beaubourg (temple of contemporary art) in 2012.

13 June 18, 1998, saw the second meeting of Pool C between France and Saudi Arabia at the Stade de France. In the 71st minute of play, when the score was 2-0 for the blues, Zidane lost his nerve. Number 10 of the Blues received a red card.



Zidane receives a red card in *ZIDANE: A 21ST CENTURY PORTRAIT* (Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, 2006)

let one believe that football permits actions of the feet used as if they were hands (like painters whose upper limbs have been amputated). This is not possible because the anatomy of the foot does not allow one to capture the ball; thus, there is no functional transfer from the hand to the foot as in the case of a disabled painter. However, the brain-foot connection does have a specific use; the brain signals the hand to reach out to its surrounding environment. In the game of football this innate urge to relate to the world by using one's hands needs to be suppressed at all times; the success of football hinges on the removal of this universal relationship between men and world – that of grasping. Thus, the absence of capturing the ball with one's hands results in the amazing fluidity of the game, an intense circulation of the ball, a desperate quest for control. In short, this is what makes football a unique sport, an art performed by the feet of Zidane.

However, prohibiting the use of the hand opens up a yawning gap, removes a floor to humans and perhaps allows expressing “archaic” freedom by removing the legs from their pure function of support and extension. Here, the feet beat, trap, curl the ball. In sum, they more or less perform all sorts of operations apart from the seizure and capture of the ball. Of course, it goes without saying that feet also tackle, mow down, and give low blows, but these excesses are all the more systematic because they lack tact. The player is also a victim of this pedestrian excitement because, after having “sheared” an opponent, he then courteously offers him a helping hand. Therefore, my hypothesis is that the symbolic amputation of the hand constitutes at once

the nobility and brutality of football. Thus, trying to control the impossible would only add to the violence on the football field.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, football is fundamentally a tragic sport that carries within it a latent violence that authorities try to regulate through sanctions, exclusions, and suspensions. But basically, all is in vain and thus we see a player at the level of Zidane caught in this anthropologic trap. The cinema is of course drawn to this flaw of humanity: when the subject cannot escape his/her own destiny ... Such a dramatic consequence always underlies a football game, where everything can happen in 90 minutes. The match is like a film: it consists only of movements within a specified time, where nothing is played in advance. As in cinema, we enter a rectangle of fiction where the field duplicates as the screen. Incidentally, this theme of the rectangle, the window, runs through the film at every possible turn: the “green square,” the stadium, the retransmission screen, and the cinema screen ... All this superposition of visible and visual is made more complex by the artistic ambition that works its synchronic relationships by inserting disorder, rupture, and displacement of a formal reflection in the dramatic diachrony of the match. Therefore, football, cinema, and contemporary art have found, with Zidane as pretext, an unpredictable *meeting place*.

*Translated by Marion Majourau*

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14 There are, of course, other factors which instigate violence in the terraces, notably sociological factors (see the works of G. Vigarello, A. Ehrenberg and J. Baudrillard). However, one should not underestimate the role of the forbidden hand in what this sport sets in motion among the spectators of the stadium and its effects of contagion, the source of repeated violence.

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# PART VI

Post-cinema, an Artists' Affair



## 16. The Happy Failure\*

LA PLUIE (PROJET POUR UN TEXTE) by Marcel Broodthaers, 1969

*Christophe Viart*

### Abstract

Among the most interesting and humorous artists that Marcel Duchamp has inspired, Christophe Viart proposes considering another of Marcel's incursions into film. Marcel Broodthaers was a Belgian contemporary artist whose range of activities also covered poetry and (post-)cinema. A single film can have considerable theoretical power. This is the case with LA PLUIE (PROJET POUR UN TEXTE) [THE RAIN (PROJECT FOR A TEXT)], a 1969 two-minute 16mm black-and-white film, which presents Broodthaers attempting to write on paper in the rain. Is it a film? Is it cinema? This may be the material of a regular film, but not the spirit. We are definitely in the post-art era...

**Keywords:** Avant-garde, poetry, post-art

"I'm not a filmmaker," warned Marcel Broodthaers ([1968] 1998c, 58) regarding the misunderstanding that the production of his fifty or so short films sometimes elicited, within a disparate body of work also comprising poems, books, images, paintings, objects, installations, and a modern art museum. And Broodthaers responded to the question of what cinema

\* The expression is borrowed from the title of Herman Melville's short story, *The Happy Failure* ([1924] 2009). In the edition of the fourth volume of Melville's works published by La Pléiade (2010), Philippe Jaworski adopts the expression of "the happy failure" for this story that takes place on the water, with a project that doesn't work out (in French "*tombe à l'eau*" – literally "falls in the water" – and its use here is both figurative and literal). The conclusion of this apologue concurs with one of Melville's major themes, combining absurdity and fiasco, as in *Moby Dick* and *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*: "He who has never failed somewhere, that man cannot be great. Failure is the true test of greatness," we find in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850) (qtd. in Melville 2010, 1132) as well as in *Bartleby, the Scrivener; Billy Bud*, and other novels.

therefore represented with: "Film for me is the extension of language. I started with poetry, then art, and finally cinema, which brings together several elements of art" (58). It will be recalled that Marcel Broodthaers, who was born in 1924 in Brussels and died in Cologne in 1976, created poetry, art criticism, journalistic reporting, and documentary photography in equal measure, before becoming an artist in 1964 at the time when he uttered the mocking and oft-repeated phrase addressed to the holier-than-thou: "*Moi aussi, je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et réussir dans la vie*" ("I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life").<sup>1</sup>

Despite the important role that cinema plays in his work, his films constitute a relatively understudied facet compared with his production of objects crossbred between pop art and conceptual art and combining eggshells, saucepans with mussels, heaps of coal, and jam jars. No less related to his art, they nevertheless anticipate the notion of an exhibition cinema no longer shown in an isolated room, but in a specific environment among the artworks presented. Taking the role of the spectator into account in a different way, they thwart any kind of contemplative position while obstructing their reappropriation in commodity form. The attention that they demand calls less for a hedonistic identification than for a critical relationship, within which the spectator is guided into becoming a reader.

It is in a manner akin to a Buster Keaton gag that *LA PLUIE (PROJET POUR UN TEXTE)* [THE RAIN (PROJECT FOR A TEXT)], shot on 16mm black-and-white film, presents Broodthaers attempting to write in pelting rain only to be forced to give up as a last resort. A film about the artist at work, *LA PLUIE* arose out of the failure of the story that he was staging. For two minutes, he therefore lives out a paradox, of being at once a film on creation and the expression of its vanity, its ruin. Countering the heroic self-portraits of painters or tormented figures of writers seen in films, the image of Broodthaers drenched to the bone invites us to consider the difference between the arts – film, poetry, and the fine arts – in the less glorious and far more tragicomic light of the mute artist grappling with his thought.

1 Marcel Broodthaers, invitation card for the exhibition at the Saint-Laurent Gallery, Brussels, April 10-25, 1964 (Broodthaers 1998, 39). In the follow-up to the text printed in recto-verso on magazine double-page spreads, Broodthaers wrote: "I've been good for nothing for a while now. I'm forty years old ... The idea of finally inventing something insincere crossed my mind and I set to work immediately. Three months later, I showed my production to Ph. Édouard Toussaint the owner of the Saint-Laurent Gallery. 'But, that's Art,' he said, 'and I'd be happy to exhibit all that.' 'Okay,' I answered. If I sell something he'll take 30%. Apparently those are the normal conditions, some galleries take 75%. What is it? Objects, in fact."



Marcel Broodthaers, *LA PLUIE (PROJET POUR UN TEXTE)*, 1969

### **Comic Movement That Animates 24 Images per Second**

The scene unfolds before our eyes. A fast pan shows the situation from a high angle just as Broodthaers begins writing a text, sagely installed in a garden and sitting on a folding chair in front of a crate serving as a table. Just like a sketch, the performance makes the spectator – whether real or imaginary – its main accomplice. It cannot take place without the presence of a third party. For that, there is no need for the insistent gaze of the joker inviting the adherence of his audience, as in certain painted self-portraits that refer the spectator to the representational space while it is being created. At no time does Broodthaers look at the camera.

The film is shot outside his home, 30 Rue de la Pépinière in Brussels, at the address where, in 1968, his famous fictional museum of modern art was

inaugurated, the Musée d'Art Moderne. Département des Aigles. Section XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. The inscription "Département des Aigles" (Eagles Department) painted in capital letters on a whitewashed brick wall appears behind his back at the start of the film. The detail is not as irrelevant as it might appear if we relate it to the closure of the Nineteenth-Century Section of the Eagles Department, announced on September 27, 1969, one year to the day after its inauguration, when Broodthaers whitewashed this very inscription, following an action analogous to the one portrayed in *LA PLUIE*.

Writing outside rather than inside is not the only remarkable displacement of a film that presents a man of letters in place of an artist, who we would instead expect to see in a workshop rather than in a curatorial role. The opposition between the horizontality of the writing and the verticality of the downpour, coupled with the opposition between the lively movement of the quill and his position, fixed to the spot, contribute to the contradictions that *LA PLUIE* emphasizes by associating work and chaos, impassivity and surprise, sense and nonsense. Would it be possible to avoid thinking of Buster Keaton when the rain starts to fall in a discontinuous deluge? Following the swimming pool episode in *THE CAMERAMAN*, shot by Edward Sedgwick in 1928, Luke Shannon was distanced from Sally by his rival and relegated to the back seat behind the roof of his convertible just as a torrential downpour was on the brink of falling. Common sense and propriety do not easily adapt to the elements, which urge the amorous suitor to bail out the water from his seat using his hat before putting it back on his head for a final cold shower. Reminiscent of *L'ARROSEUR ARROSÉ* [*THE SPRINKLER SPRINKLED*, 1985] by the Lumière brothers, the spurt of water manipulated by Picabia himself in *ENTR'ACTE* abruptly ends the chess match between Duchamp and Man Ray on the rooftop of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Picabia entrusted the production of the film to René Clair in 1924 with the intention of inserting it into the middle of the dadaist ballet *RELÂCHE* [*RELEASE*, 1924] to cause "the audience to leave the room" (qtd. in De Haas 1996, 102).

Adding to the manifest humiliation denoted by the spurt of water is the disillusionment that undermines the narrative. The watering can that soaks Broodthaers shares the same function as Picabia's hose, by amplifying the devastating effects of the shower based on a cliché of burlesque cinema. It is not so much a matter of breaking away from our suspension of disbelief, but of updating the manufacture of fiction. We immediately observe that the gush of water mainly strikes the page and Broodthaers's head. The exhibition *Film als Objekt-Objekt als Film* that the Mönchengladbach Museum devoted to his cinematographic work in autumn 1971 included certain accessories that had been used to shoot his films, such as the chair and watering can used in

LA PLUIE. The title of this exhibition attests to the inversion that it intends to apply to things, on the one hand associating the film with the gravity of reification and on the other, raising the object to the status of a candidate for aesthetic appreciation. In Broodthaers's view, here, everything comes down to placing "the idea before its materialization" (Broodthaers [1965] 1998b, 46). In 1948, he published a poem under the title "Projet pour un film" in the sole issue of the magazine *Surréalisme révolutionnaire* (Broodthaers [1948] 1997c, 17). The primacy accorded to the idea is indicated again when he passes from the poem to the film and substitutes the terms by writing "project for a text" to give LA PLUIE its title. It is on the tenth and final shot of the film that the phrase "projet pour un texte" is superimposed on the image at the moment when the hand stops writing and sets down the quill in conclusion. Unlike the downstrokes and upstrokes so highly prized by Broodthaers, according to the old-fashioned image that he presents of the writer dipping his quill into the inkwell to write his thoughts, the title is typed out using the traditional characters of the typewriter. Here, the author has not yet reached the mechanical era and assiduously and dispassionately continues his task of scribe. Questioning the means of adopting new techniques in vogue at the time, such as laser, he confesses in a poem of the same name, "Projet pour un texte," inserted within another film from 1970-1971:

You must first be born into a technological world in order to use this kind of method successfully. And here I am cruelly torn between something immobile that has already been written and the comic movement that animates 24 images per second." (1997c, 91)<sup>2</sup>

Although we may think of Jean-Luc Godard's HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA, in which he is glued to his electric typewriter, the character change Broodthaers suggests, as an artist and not a filmmaker, by playing the role of a man of letters, reveals all of the importance of the creative process at the expense of the completed artwork. In the 1960s, Godard already spoke of his hesitation between the novel and the essay to define his approach: "I consider myself to be an essayist, I write essays in the form of novels or novels in the form of essays: only, I film them instead of writing them" ([1962] 1985a, 205).<sup>3</sup> The essay

2 And pp. 184-186 for the reproduction of the text inserted into the film PROJET POUR UN POISSON (PROJET POUR UN FILM), 1970-1971, 35mm, black and white, 9 min, silent.

3 See also, while *Histoire(s) du cinéma* was still a "work in progress" in 1997, Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote: "For me, the reason why I was not so commercial was that it wasn't very clear to me whether I was writing a novel or writing an essay. I like both of them, but now, in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, I'm sure it's an essay. It's easier for me and it's better that way" (1997).



Marcel Broodthaerts, *LA PLUIE (PROJET POUR UN TEXTE)*, 1969

presented by *LA PLUIE* does not aim to reactivate the comparison between the arts but to highlight the mental labor that interconnects them. Shot without sound, the action is reduced to an on-the-spot movement as though endlessly returning to an obsession. For Godard, “writers have always had the ambition of making films on a blank page: to have all the elements available and allow thought to circulate from one to the other” ([1965] 1985b, 280). The quill captured on the spot leaves no legible trace in its wake. It remains dumbfounded, as is said of a voiceless person, paralyzed in amazement; condemned to silence under the downpour. The eye follows its absurd movement while producing no meaning, nor bringing any ideas into being. It is as if it were running after his phrases without being able to pin them down, just as powerless to stem the flow falling down in buckets. Like the figure of Broodthaers washed out and defeated, the “projet pour un texte” is a wash.

### Take a Closer Look

In *LA PLUIE*, writing and erasing proceed by proximity. The film juxtaposes the order of conventional signs of language and their dissolution under the comic development of an impromptu shower. The absurdity of wishing to resist the

unexpected, rather than protecting oneself from bad weather, exemplifies the end of an artwork heading for its own ruin under the assault of ice-cold water. Incessantly washed away by the torrents, the ink escapes from the quill in ephemeral stains while also overflowing its recipient in tempestuous waves. Two static shots, the fifth and eighth, linger for a moment on the submerged inkwell, streaming out and flooding in turn the writing space in a dark, liquid gush. The words are effaced, giving way to haphazard painting that is neither narrative nor representative. Just as Broodthaers stripped himself of his tawdry poet's rags before becoming an artist, we might say to paraphrase Baudelaire in *Les Bons Chiens* that the writer here dons the painter's vest ([1865] 1973, 155). A powerless spectator, he witnesses the blind destruction of his work.

"Bring your dark glasses and something to block your ears with" recommended Picabia for *ENTRACTE* (qtd. in De Haas 1996, 101). Associated with the theme of erasure and obscuring, the notion of a blind gaze – or deaf listening – refers to the reconciliation of contrasts that underpins the invitation to observe the visible in a different way and develop a reflexive attention. A sequence from *BERLIN ODER EIN TRAUM MIT SAHNE*, shot in 1974, shows Broodthaers, his face impassive, striving to read a newspaper through glasses covered with cream. The corollary of deprivation of sight is the discrediting of the visible in favor of a life of the mind. It was on the occasion of the screening of his first film, *LA CLEF DE L'HORLOGE* [*THE CLOCK KEY*], in 1957, that he was to later repeat an anecdote about his father who was going blind, facing the screen and protesting that this film was all black and he couldn't see a thing. This seven-minute short film, which could be catalogued among art films, was created based on Kurt Schwitters's artworks exhibited at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels during the winter of 1956. The film was shot outside of opening hours using borrowed equipment and on film stock past its expiry date. While it was selected at the Experimental Film Festival of Knokke-le-Zoute in 1958 (*EXPRMNTL*), Broodthaers recalls that at the time of its release, "people mocked me" with respect to this *Poème cinématographique en l'honneur de Kurt Schwitters*. In 1971, he wrote in a catalogue dedicated to the Dada artist: "Nighttime is incomprehensible. Daytime is black as Africa ... It is a poem or a thick volume of prose that resolved me to create this film whose naivety today no longer surprises me. It is the consequence of a fatal logic inherent to the maintaining of the image of the self in the artworks of others" ([1971] 1997a, 25). He continues with his father's inability to understand the cinematic approach that he had adopted earlier for the collages created by the inventor of *Merz*:

My father and I both shared a love of Schwitters, but the figures we drew in 1957 were in opposition. The first represented certainty, balance, and

security, but by downplaying visual characteristics in favor of a poetic system, the second represented instability, fragility, and threats. Now more than thirteen years later, these figures have been obscured and replaced by other versions in keeping with the object's new situations. In today's world, the object has disappeared. It is no longer the object that integrates the concept, but the reverse. The object is the very inverse of spoken, written, or filmed languages. ([1971] 1997a, 25)

For Broodthaers, the body is blind when confronted with figures. It is not that there is nothing to see, but that we see nothing. It is therefore significant that he embraces cinema not as a way of recording what takes shape, like the "change mummified"<sup>4</sup> evoked by André Bazin, but rather of revealing that which evades materiality as well as duration. As we read the few rare lines that Paul Valéry wrote on cinema, we should perhaps not judge the father's reaction too rapidly, as he fulminates in the darkness. His reaction reveals the impression of inconsistency that the author of *Monsieur Teste* notices in film's evasion: to him everything appears "without duration" and "without material" before becoming aware that "it won't remain fixed more in one's mind than on the screen" (Valéry 1957, 1791). The incoherence of the situation that *LA PLUIE* stages stems as much from the occultation of material as from the dissolution of the illusion. It validates Valéry's criticism of the artificial movement of images combining "real landscapes" with "insincere decors." The rain shower clearly does not come from the sky but falls from a watering can, as a kind of rudimentary special effect. The scant allure of Broodthaers, destined to failure, does not aim for compassion but pertains to a parody of the artist at work, which he interprets stoically; because if we are willing to accept it, the fiasco that he enjoys acting out is no less ridiculous than the role an actor would have us believe by pretending to be a writer at work. It is equally mocking of the stance that certain artists take while being filmed at work.

As an explicit reference to the silent world of slapstick, *LA PLUIE* can be read as a compendium of quotations borrowed on one hand from the painting of René Magritte, and on the other, from the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. Troubled by the contradiction between words and objects in Magritte's art, Broodthaers saw Mallarmé as a different "source of contemporary art" (Magritte 2006, 103), one at the root of the celebration of white in an artwork and of the poet's silence.

4 "Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were" (Bazin 1985, 14).



Buster Keaton, *ONE WEEK*, 1920

Speaking of Buster Keaton, this reminds us of the scene in *ONE WEEK* (1920) where an imperturbable Keaton opens a large umbrella to shelter from the cascade of water flooding his new house. Here, the *Witz* defies all logic. It is based on a marriage between contradictory relations, similar to the oxymoron that Magritte paints in *Hegel's Holiday*; that is, a glass of water balancing on an open umbrella, suspended in the air, against a monochrome salmon-colored background in a school-book style, clearly drawn and without any show of affectation, specific to Magritte. He wrote in a letter to Maurice Rapin on May 22, 1958: "I [...] thought that Hegel [...] would have been very sensitive to this object which has two opposing functions: at the same time not to admit any water (repelling it) and to admit it (containing it). He would have been delighted, I think, or amused (as on a vacation)" (Mallarmé [1894] 1970b, 651).

Between opaque and diaphanous, stable and liquid, the dialectic entails holding together the opposing elements in order for full and empty to be in agreement. Similarly contentious, in *LA PLUIE*, the association between water and ink renders the act of writing a text with a quill meaningless. Nor can we see how Broodthaers will be able to smoke a cigarette from the packet of Gitanes placed in front of him. This final detail is vital for understanding the way in which he intends to present his situation, by assimilating it with

that of the poet within society, who, according to Mallarmé, “does not fail to uncover some difficulty, or something comic” (Pierre-Henry Frangne in Mallarmé 2010, 153). He is engaged in a conflict that does not claim to express ideas about art, but, more importantly, attempts “to produce them (through what the Greeks called *poiesis*), to try them out, and to embody them in a concrete movement that allows to experience them oneself and to make them live” for the viewer (Mallarmé [1887] 1970a, 310). He demonstrates how by ending up with a white page, he inexorably returns to his place of origin.

This is, in effect, the consequence of the rain (albeit entirely artificial); it creates an obstacle to writing and therefore renders words illegible, removes all trace of them, and ultimately reproduces an immaculate subjectile, just like a “ghost, white as a yet unwritten page” (Mallarmé [1895] 1970c, 387). It is a matter of fulfilling the Mallarméan wish so that “unfailingly the blank returns, gratuitous earlier but certain now, concluding that there is nothing beyond it and authenticating the silence” (Broodthaers [1974] 1998a, 117). For Broodthaers, *LA PLUIE* accomplishes what he had begun some years earlier, in 1964, when he left literature behind in order to move toward the visual arts. This choice takes the form of a sculpture made up of a bundle of copies of his collection of poems *Pense-Bête*, held against a globe in a shapeless plaster base. The texts from the book had initially been concealed by pieces of colored paper before the last fifty unsold copies were used for the eponymous work presented at his first exhibition in the Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels. By making them impossible to read “without destroying their visual aspect,” Broodthaers added to his notion of the void, which he invites us to reflect on in *LA PLUIE* ([1970] 1991, 139). He did give, however, an account of the viewers of *Pense-Bête*: “Not one of them was curious about the text, unsure whether it referred to the burial of prose, poetry, sadness, or pleasure. Not one of them was moved by the interdiction” (1998d, 117).<sup>5</sup>

## The Melancholy Silence

The third approach, connected to the loss of materiality and the impediment to writing, refers to the breakdown in sound. In *LA PLUIE*, these three approaches respectively assert the elimination of meaning, the collapse of the artwork, and, finally, the suspension of the intellectual and artistic

5 “Mallarmé is the source of contemporary art ... He unintentionally created the modern space. [...] A throw of the dice. It will be a treatise on art” (Broodthaers [1970] 1991, 139).

activity typical of a melancholy state. By reflecting on silence, this final part reveals how the amputation of language and the quelling of noise relate to the staging of the artist at work, subjected to the invisible aspect of his mind.

The issue at stake here is the self-portrait, as well as the difficulty a film about art has in recording thought while its own imperceptible activity is at work. How do we grasp what cannot be grasped at the very moment when thought expresses itself in secret? How do we authenticate a presence that becomes absent in a film? How do we reveal the inside of a mind in the grips of that which submerges it? How “to explain oneself in front of a camera,” as Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, tried to do for the first time by speaking about himself in front of Alexandre Astruc and Michel Contat in 1972.<sup>6</sup> For Broodthaers, there is no continuous solution between the mind absorbed in its speculations and the body inundated with torrents of rain. The physical body crushed under masses of water must not be opposed to mental faculties but to the splendor of indelible works and to the steadfast glory of their authors. The distraught face responds to the overwhelmed body in the same way that feeling does not override the idea of thinking. Instead, they both agree to exhibit their deficiencies, in comparison with the academic stances displayed by painters in front of their easel and philosophers writing at their desk. Far from comparing himself with typical models such as Saint Luke painting the Virgin or Saint Paul seated and writing the Gospel, the solemnity that Broodthaers adopts is less likely to be dressed in an intellectual dignity than to discredit him and reduce him to the state of a dripping mop. But although the effigy of the thinker draped in a himation does not correspond with an ideal, the image he gives of himself, simply dressed in a dark jersey and light trousers, contrasts even more with the disheveled garb of the original artist or cynical philosopher refining their provocative appearance.

The striking idea that *LA PLUIE* exploits is related to Bergman's liminal definition of laughter. Henri Bergson evokes, in his famous book on the meaning of comedy, various anecdotes borrowed from everyday life to draw a comparison between the victim of a joke and the unlucky passer-by that stumbles unintentionally in the street:

Now take the case of a person who attends to the petty occupations of his everyday life with mathematical precision. The objects around him, however, have all been tampered with by a mischievous wag, the

6 Filmed in 1972 by Alexandre Astruc and Michel Contat, *SARTRE PAR LUI-MÊME*, was finally released in 1976. See the full script of the film in Sartre 1977.

result being that when he dips his pen into the inkstand he draws it out all covered with mud, when he fancies he is sitting down on a solid chair he finds himself sprawling on the floor, in a word his actions are all topsy-turvy or mere beating the air, while in every case the effect is invariably one of momentum. (Bergson 2005, 5)

What is comic in *LA PLUIE* owes a debt to this “mechanical rigidity” that the stance of an aphasic Broodthaers emphasizes when the situation demands an entirely different reaction. The man who persists in writing is not waiting for inspiration; he does not suffer from fear of the blank page, even though he is not able to cover over it. He demonstrates that the result cannot be reduced down to the effort expended nor to the time spent, and that, quite the opposite, just as it is possible to write by erasing text, an active action can erase a completed production, as incoherent as that may seem.

Practically omnipresent in the film’s ten shots, Broodthaers’s hands, one holding his dip pen and the other fastened to the sheet of paper (when they are not abandoning their task), speak for themselves in this story without words. Four close-up shots thus place their vain activity, shaken about by turbulence, under the viewers’ eyes. Portraits of thoughts in action, humorous in themselves, they accomplish their sterile duty with unthinking scrupulousness, calmly at first then hastily as the droplets begin to gain force. Puppets in a silent play, they perform a final act before leaving the stage in the last shot, after having vigorously crossed out lines, like signed initials, on the wet paper covered in stains. The rain then stops at the very moment the film ends, on the image of the abandoned dip pen. The story recounted is that of pantomime’s legacy<sup>7</sup> at the time of early silent burlesque film. For Jean-Louis Schefer, this period is not devoid of meaning, but on the contrary, “we are able to hear something, because there is a link that is at once mysterious, inseparable, and obvious between the body and the word: bodies represent the word. They are speaking bodies” (2006, 62).

We can reflect once again on Keaton’s “calm hypnotism” (Benayoun 1987, 158) that refrains from smiling or crying, always busy but indifferent to external tribulations. We see him in *THE NAVIGATOR* (1924), fitted out in an enormous diving suit so he can seal a hole in the boat’s hull; Rollo washes his greasy hands in water, in a bucket he had carefully filled, before

7 See Charlie Chaplin [*Cinéa*, July 15, 1929]: “The talkies? You can tell ‘em I loathe them! They are spoiling the oldest art in the world – the art of pantomime. They are ruining the great beauty of silence” (qtd. in Mongin 2002, 26).

tipping it out and drying them with a rag. Jean-Louis Schefer notes that bodies in silent films are designed to be “hieroglyphs” and appear as “bodies of writing” (2006, 62).<sup>8</sup> The body occupied by Broodthaers asks nothing less than to be deciphered alongside the logograms he leaves on his paper. The obstinacy of his mechanical gestures do not, however, assimilate him with the frenzy of the English Pierrot, whom Baudelaire described as a paragon of the “comique absolu.” The frivolity and neutrality that generally typify the mime do not prevent the overflowing of impetuosity to which the English Pierrot is continually subject. If he should walk past a woman cleaning her windows (to use Baudelaire’s example): “after having rifled her pockets, he tries to push into his own her sponge, her broom, her pail and even the water” (Schefer 2006, 258). Broodthaers, however, does not act to the detriment of others but works alone as a consenting victim doomed to yield to lassitude and boredom; after having resisted for nothing, he has to interrupt his *Projet pour un texte*. His attitude integrates the artist’s conventional representations of melancholy; without necessarily imitating the typical position of the hand holding up the head, the film shows him several times at rest, as if suspended, legs apart, the right hand motionless and the other resting on his knee. As the rain falls, washing away all traces, it is no longer the ink that inscribes, but the body that is silently transformed into text, making way for inaction and opening up to thought (Baudelaire 1990, 257ff).

The crate used as a table, at which Broodthaers is seated, is empty. It is a crate specifically designed for the transport of works of art. But in his fictional museum, no original work will ever find a place in this accessory. Writing on this makeshift surface, drenched in rain, is not only to resist the fetishization of work but also to do away with the need for explanations. In the same way, filming the pathetic result of a collapse is a way of avoiding the commercialization of the object. It demonstrates the power of poetry in action at the expense of the result. Paul Valéry wrote: “For a poet, it is never a matter of saying *it is raining*. It is a matter of ... making rain” (1971, 403).

The silence through which Broodthaers transforms himself into an apostle (Broodthaers 1965) is no less eloquent than the embarrassed monologues of the artist forced to speak of his work while carrying it out. It belongs equally to the project for an erased text, to the two minutes of a silent film in 16mm, and to the viewer of *LA PLUIE*. Left hanging, it does not come to a close; it is like an eternal conversation where words are exchanged in turn,

8 “The body in silent film is a body of writing. And fundamentally, once the body is gifted with the word, it is no longer itself writing” (Schefer 2006, 6).

interrupted, and then taken up again, and so on. “This is not cinematographic art,” objects Broodthaers, challenging the use of certain terms applied to his work, such as “essential complements to his artistic body of work” and “experimental films.” His work, he adds, is “no more and as much an object for discussion, just as a painting by Meissonnier or Mondrian could be, they are films ...” ([1972] 1997b, 210).

*Translated by Anna Knight*

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## 17. *Per aspera ad astra*, or Through Post-cinema Toward Cinema, the Reverse Journey of Ilya Khrzhanovsky's DAU

*Eugénie Zvonkine*

### Abstract

What is DAU? Is it Ilya Khrzhanovsky's project or films or main character? In order to clarify this complexity, Eugénie Zvonkine proposes "write[ing] DAU for the whole project, DAU for the films and Dau to designate the main character." Fascinated by the story of a man known by the nickname Dau who professed freedom in private life in contradiction with the political USSR Stalinist regime of fear and terror, young filmmaker Khrzhanovsky decided to adapt this story into a series of films, DAU, which include huge installations, investing, in particular, in the Parisian Théâtre du Chatelet and the Théâtre de la Ville, giving the whole DAU project the fascinating scale of a total artwork.

**Keywords:** Contemporary art, installation, total artwork

Shane Denson and Julia Leyda postulate that "rather than positing a clean break with the past, the term post-cinema asks us more forcefully than the notion of "new media," for example, to think about the *relation* (rather than mere distinction) between older and newer media regimes" (2016, 2). The project we are interested in for this text is a fascinating example of that shift that maintains a very intricate and close relationship with its supposedly past form, cinema.

## The Post-cinematic Shift

*This place was conceived for Dau, but he slipped away.*

– Quote from DAU 13 (qtd. in Rutkovskij 2019, 31).

DAU by Ilya Khrzhanovsky, as it was presented to the public for the first time in Paris in January and February 2019, first appeared as a project of post-cinema on several accounts. (I will write Dau in three different ways throughout my text: DAU for the whole project, DAU for the films, and Dau to designate the main character.)

Already the history of its making seems to indicate a conscious shift from classical fiction cinema toward something quite different. Having only made a single, although much remarked, feature film, *FOUR* (2004), young film director Ilya Khrzhanovsky, the very next year chose to make a screen adaptation of the book *The Academician Landau: How we Lived* (1999) by Kora Landau-Drobantseva, Lev Landau's widow. Kora Drobantseva's account of their life sheds light on the extreme freedom Landau (commonly known by the nickname Dau) professed in private life, with his invention of the "pact of marital non-aggression" and his promiscuous lifestyle. Khrzhanovsky, fascinated by the contrast between the political situation of excessive fear and terror in the Stalinist USSR and the individual freedom of this man, decided to make a feature film about Landau.

He asked the famous Russian writer known for his provocative texts Vladimir Sorokin to write the script, and then went into production. The project was supposed to be a monumental one, demanding enormous sets and thousands of extras. Many papers published during this first part of the shooting focus on its gigantism and its meticulous reconstruction of the epoch (see Openok 2009). The film was to be a fiction with very colorful images and symbolic sets and costumes. For instance, when Olga Openok, props decorator, described the creation of the set of the university auditorium, it revealed the project's ambitious but rather classical aesthetics since she said that "in order to obtain the 'prison' or 'zoo' effect, to have the image riddled by shadows, we created special window binders" (Openok 2009, n.p.).<sup>1</sup>

To play Dau, Khrzhanovsky chose the famous orchestra conductor, Teodor Currentzis, because "it is impossible to play the genius, it is impossible to fake with actor technique!" (Khrzhanovsky 2009). The project also required

<sup>1</sup> This citation and all those by Russian or East-European writers that follow have been translated by me.

a thorough recreation of the epoch, not only through sets but also by the insistence that people wear epoch underwear under their costumes and do not use contemporary devices on set: "I need to create for the person who plays this or that part such an environment that he can enter the frame with his whole previous life" (Khrzhanovsky 2009). Following this logic, if only a genius can play (or rather *be*, in front of the camera) a genius, then any character, even secondary, needs to be experienced in their everyday functions: even the waitress in the cafeteria needs to perform the same actions over and over for months, so that none of her poses or gestures strike us as possibly counterfeited.

At some point, the project changed drastically. When the largest of the sets had been constructed – the Institute where *Dau* is supposed to live and work – Khrzhanovsky abandoned the script and transformed the very essence of the project. During three years, from 2009 to 2012, many participants would live on location. Khrzhanovsky insisted on not calling them actors, but participants: most of them embodied characters who were often called exactly as they were in real life with biographies inspired by their real life-stories, but transposed in the past. During these three years, these participants lived through different epochs of the Institute: the 1930s, the 1940s, and the 1960s. They accepted to be occasionally filmed, while they were supposedly just living their lives without any exterior intervention. During the whole process they were completely cut off from the real world (no communication possible, unless they were to definitely exit the project). The result was 190 days of shooting and 700 hours of filmed material, according to the information delivered by the production. The goal was obviously not just to make a film, but to create a "unique experiment" as the production company, Phenomen Films (funded by Khrzhanovsky) put it, and to produce something that would surely result in more than one film. For many years it was completely unclear what form all this material would ultimately take. Khrzhanovsky's comment on this shift clearly reveals his state of mind and his sense of living in a post-cinema period:

I keep in mind the result, but it is not the most important thing. The result is not my goal. My goal is the process, during which (if I don't give up on anything) will emerge the only true result. I am not the director, I am the manager of this project. I don't even understand what a director is nowadays. Today, an author, if he is not stupid or crazy, has no chance and no hope to change humanity – it is in the spirit of the times. There is only one thing one can oppose to this [...]: to move against the current and run an unpredictable course. (2009, n.p.)

Thus Khrzhanovsky clearly refuses the status of director as the one person who is responsible for the global meaning of the oeuvre (he would refuse most interviews after that point) and rejects the idea of an art product as a finished object.

This shift in the production mode and goals resulted in a quite unprecedented event, the Russian Ministry of Culture suing his production company for not delivering the film they had helped fund, and getting back the invested money (30 million rubles; see Kornatski 2015). The famous film critic Zara Abdullaeva later characterized it as “a disruptive event, that revoked all the previous ‘reflections’ of Soviet civilization” and as “cinema after art” in the same spirit that Joseph Kosuth spoke in 1969 of the “art after philosophy” (Jürgens 2019, 92-95).

## DAU as a Total Artwork

*I am very much excited by the unfinished artworks*

– Dau to Krupitsa, DAU 4

When the project was finally presented to the audience in 2019, it was done in a quite different way from the usual cinema screening: one had to get a “visa” to enter one of the two theaters where the project took place, there was no possibility to know the schedule of screenings beforehand, several films were projected simultaneously in several auditoriums, people could at any moment wander in and out of screenings. Before any screening, the lights would go out and for around ten minutes, spectators would listen to experimental musical pieces in complete darkness. The inaccessibility of the films outside the project and the impossibility for the spectator to organize his or her visit in advance clearly align with the contemporary “flow of images” that are impossible to control and fathom and by which the individual is overwhelmed.

The project also gathered in two spaces, the Théâtre du Chatelet and the Théâtre de la Ville in the center of Paris, in which all kinds of art forms were presented: screenings of films and series, installations, performances, concerts and conferences (among which a conference on post-cinema by José Moure, making obvious the interest of the project creators toward this concept). The project thus presents itself as an attempt to create a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk (Trahdorff 1827), a total artwork, which, as Odo Marquard notes, tends to abolish the boundary between art and reality (1983, 40-49). As a matter of fact, DAU does attempt to propose an alternative life experience to the participant, just as the Institute existed as a parallel

reality throughout the shooting period. The spectators could spend a whole day inside one of the theaters, since a canteen was open in each theater, allowing them to taste epoch dishes using epoch tableware that were both (food and utensils) as much part of the whole project as the films. Both during the shooting in Kharkov and while visiting the installations in Paris, people in attendance were required to give up their mobile phones, so that they would be cut off from their "normal," contemporary life. The first part of the project was supposed to take place in Berlin in the fall of 2018, but was finally refused by the city authorities. Going even further in developing the idea of a parallel life experience, the idea was to reconstruct a part of the Berlin wall and isolate and transform an entire district of the city where one could only penetrate holding a DAU visa.

Another element that would make us regard DAU as a post-cinema project is that its video part appears inexhaustible, thus challenging any traditional spectatorial attitude, since one is unable to physically see all of DAU. As the film critic Anton Dolin put it, "the legendary vastness [of the project] is impressive, overwhelming and annoying" (2019, 37). There are thirteen feature films (numbered 2 to 14, each of them varying in duration from 1.5 to 6 hours); three series with episodes of at least half an hour; science films, focused on a scientific conference or an "experiment" (each one between 30 to 60 minutes, the exact number of these is unknown). And of course, there are the individual booths in the basement of both theaters where the spectator can allegedly watch any random excerpt from the 700 hours filmed during the Institute experiment. So DAU is much more than a film or a series of films and one spectator can never cover all of DAU, however motivated he or she would be. In fact, the project was open 24 hours a day from January 24 until February 17, 2019, making it physically impossible, even for someone who would stay in there for the whole duration without ever stopping to sleep or eat to watch all of the (600 hours worth) visual material. To say nothing of the accompanying performances and lectures. Which obviously makes any possible account of the project by critics or witnesses all the more subjective and necessarily biased because it is incomplete. Abdullaeva (Jürgens 2019, 95) argued that this extensiveness of the project transformed every spectator into one of the project's editors. Moreover, the project's intent went so far as to absorb the spectator as a direct participant, since after the screenings anyone could discuss his or her emotions with a "professional discussant" (a shaman, a psychologist or a prostitute) and if one accepted to be filmed and agreed for the interview to be part of the project, he or she could watch all the other interviews already recorded.

The subjects the project touches upon seem to be equally inexhaustible. Anton Dolin noticed that the films often focused on rather intimate

relationships and their complexity: “love, dependency, jealousy, solitude, obsession, fear, envy, devotion” (2019, 37). This enumeration makes sense not only because of the vastness of the project but also because Khrzhanovsky expressed his refusal to pick one axis as the base of this work as early as 2009:

Everything is more important to me. [...] All of it together. Politics, physics, physiology, psychology, everyday life, metaphysics, love, friendship, happiness, unhappiness, career, big discoveries, talent as a blessing, talent as a curse in cursed times, the problem of choice ... The destiny throughout History. (2009, n.p.)

The post-cinema is often characterized by its redefinition of the attitude toward the spectator, among other things, by allowing him or her to take a more active part in composing the narration. DAU was also announced as an interactive project – one had to fill in a questionnaire online in order to get a long-term visa and, upon arrival on location, a Dau-device that would guide him or her through the screenings, performances, concerts, and installations on an individualized journey. In reality, it was at least several weeks in the project before any Dau-devices (specially reconfigured mobile phones) would be operational and even afterward, it was quite obvious that they were not based on a personal questionnaire but just mimicked such an interactivity. All the same, the idea of interactivity and of indistinction between art and reality clearly connect the project with the context of post-art reflexivity.

### **Forward to the Past**

However, many of the aspects of the DAU project actually bring the spectator back to the cinema experience of the twentieth century.

First of all, whereas Denson and Leyda note that “post-cinema [...] is primarily demarcated by the rapid and pervasive shift from analog to digital technics of cinema” (2016, 16), Khrzhanovsky made the conscious choice to film all of the Institute parts of the project on 35mm film. When asked about this surprising choice (quite unpractical and expensive for such a lengthy and chaotic shooting), the operator Jürgen Jürgens answered: “The idea was to film in this medium because it is closest to how films were made at the time. Films of that period were mostly shot on 35mm” (2019, 51). Moreover, the decision was made to shoot with a not very sensitive film, 400 ASA, and thanks to the grain of the images this choice (preferring film to a digital camera) became evident to the spectator.

DAU films never resort to digital special effects either. Lev Manovich (2016) makes a distinction between cinema and post-cinema by underlining that the latter is a “cinema-brush,” rather than a “cinema-eye” and reconstructs reality on computer after shooting. While in what he calls “the analog era,” “for a scene in *ZABRISKIE POINT* (1970), Michelangelo Antonioni, trying to achieve a particularly saturated color, ordered a field of grass to be painted” (2016, 30). In this sense, it is obvious, that DAU with its Institute, reconstructed almost from scratch and with no special effects, belongs much more to the analog era than to the digital one.

One could even argue that DAU forces one to watch movies in the way it was done many years ago. The idea of films going on throughout the day (and night) almost in an interrupted way, reminds us of the “permanent screenings” of the silent cinema era. The interdiction of any exterior distraction by the withdrawal of mobile phones and the impossibility to watch films elsewhere than in the theaters of the project also reminds us of bygone times and modes of consumption of cinematic contents when films were available only in theaters and the only distractions from the film could happen among the present audience and not through devices such as computers or mobile phones. Here, the “relocation” (Casetti 2015) of the films in the two Parisian theaters actually works as a “relocation” back in time, to the movie theaters from the old days.

Thus, the status of DAU is a complex one, and we find it problematic to decisively determine it as post-cinematic, even though it clearly aims at breaking our habits. Anton Dolin responded to this complex status by proposing yet another category:

“It is not cinema,” I obediently repeat after Khrzhanovsky when I first discover DAU. “It is many different films, and not only films,” I decide after having watched a dozen of different DAU films. After some time it becomes clear at last: DAU is still a film. But a film such as it has never existed before. (2019, 46)

But what could this film “such as it has never existed before” be? What relationship does it entertain with the classical fiction cinema, with the spectator and with the concepts of aesthetics and meaning?

## Desire of Fiction

Although Khrzhanovsky and Phenomen films frequently and insistently proclaimed that everything happening in the DAU films was genuine and

spontaneous, the attentive observation of the films makes it obvious that this issue is much more complex and subtle. For instance, while he was already filming in the Institute, Khrzhanovsky said during an interview:

To attain the wanted result, I had to invent a special method of the everyday psychological existence, which is to immerse people in a specific context, so that the dramaturgical moments seem documentary. You have to work with every artist so that he finds himself inside the circumstances, inside his own nature. From the methodological point of view, these are rehearsals but organized in an original way. The participants of the shooting consider themselves not as actors in a constructed universe, but as real inhabitants of this new world. (2011, n.p.)

Thus, he clearly resorts to the lexical field of classical fiction film by talking of “rehearsals,” “artists” and by revealing that he is the author of the “method” used for the shooting, that is, still a film director in a rather classical way. That is why I continue to call him a director in this text, despite his denying this status. Later on, in the same interview, he even more openly reveals his relationship to the project at this stage of its shooting: “There are a lot of documentary films, but I am making a fiction film” (2011).

So it comes as no surprise that many critics describing the project resort to characteristics that tend to inscribe the film in the field of fiction cinema: Dolin says that the “outcome of the plot” in *DAU 5* is “tragic, or even melodramatic, just as in an authentic city romance” (2019, 15), Nikita Kartsev argues that “*DAU* has its own limitations [...] determined by its genre – a tragedy” (2019, 57), Alexandra Smolina compares the project to a “saga” (2019, 87). The critics also willingly resort to comparisons that put the project in the filiation with silent cinema: Iampolski (2019) compares it to Eisenstein and Dolin describes the vile Azhippo, the terrifying KGB agent, as “bearing an imperceptible resemblance to the devil played by Emil Jannings in Murnau’s *FAUST*” (2019, 44).

## DAU as a Screen Adaptation

*She went on living a strange life, not in the present,  
but in the past, where Dau was.*  
– Bessarab (1999, 491)

Incidentally, when you watch the 13 films that compose the main “object” of this limitless project, you can observe a constant tension between the

desire to find something new and chart unknown territory and the constant attraction toward the classical form of fiction storytelling.

Whereas the official statement about the project is that nothing was fictional and that, on the contrary, everything that we see spontaneously occurred between the participants of the project, many elements point to the contrary. For instance, at the end of *DAU 7 (NORA AND MARIA)*, Dau is quite upset, because he has just been involved in a fight with his wife Nora and then with his lover Maria. By night, he goes out of the house to return to his office. When he steps out of the house, he leaves the door open (which seems quite unnatural), while the camera follows Nora doing minor domestic tasks. When she goes back to the door (supposedly to close it behind Dau, who has left several minutes ago), we see Dau in the distance, in the depth of the frame, as he finally turns away and starts walking, after clearly checking that the camera has returned to film him, and making a step to the left to ensure that he is captured by the camera and nicely placed in the frame.

Moreover, whereas Khrzhanovsky claimed to have abandoned the idea to adapt Kora Drobantseva's book, the *DAU* film(s) are much more of a screen adaptation than your first impression would have you believe.

First of all, some of the characters are clearly inspired by real-life persons described in the book: Kora Drobantseva herself, who becomes Nora in the films and is played by Radmila Shchegoleva, the only professional actress of the film. But also, Piotr Kapitsa, who becomes Anatoly Krupitsa in the films and who helps liberate Dau, arrested under Stalinism, which is discussed in *DAU 4*. There is also Alexey Trifonov, who is clearly modeled on Evgeny Lifshits, a close collaborator of Landau, that Drobantseva portrayed as a disgusting character in the book, a mediocrity thinking only about profit and money, helping Landau meet women and betraying him when he is at his weakest. In *DAU*, he appears mostly like that (he even bears some physical resemblance to the real prototype), he is close to the family, and there is a scene where he introduces three young girls to Dau, and another one where he tries to push a secretary to have forced sex with him.

Other elements are similar to the book: in *DAU 2* (another title: *BRAVE PEOPLE*), we see what clearly corresponds to the Institute Wednesdays described in the book, when physicians gathered to listen to any theory that might be interesting and mercilessly condemned those who were unable to convince them. In this same film, the physician Losev says during a meeting that scientists must search for the truth. Those who have failed to get to the truth have helped the enemy. This sounds a lot like Landau quoted by Drobantseva in her book: "The scientists must remember that they live off

the working class. Science is costly, only those who make science progress should work in it" (Drobantseva 1999, 63).

One of the main impressions the reader gets from the book is that of the Institute as a stifling community, where people sleep with each other, betray each other, and get into nasty fights. For instance, Kora does say that Piotr Kapitsa "saved Landau's life under Stalinism" (1999, 89) but, just a few pages later, she uses his nickname to proclaim, "The Centaur is the centaur! Half-human, half-bastard" (1999, 94). This is how she describes a quarrel with Lifshits whom she disparagingly calls "Zhenka":

I had no time to explain myself. I pushed him from the table, he fell down. Seeing me furious, he crawled on his fours toward the stairs. With my foot, I helped him down the stairs in one instant. Dau stepped out in the hallway because of the noise, Zhenka spread out at his feet. (Drobantseva 1999, 140)

That is in many ways quite similar to what one observes while watching the DAU films and series: long, exhausting alcoholic benders, scenes of dereliction and fights between people who are supposed to be representatives of the intellectual elite. For instance, in DAU 2, after having been interrogated by the KGB, Losev comes home shaken and, instead of being consoled or receiving friendly support from his intellectual *milieu*, he is subjected to a long, harassing argument with his wife, who forces him to quarrel with another physician and close friend, Blinov, vulgarly insisting that he should say to Blinov "to go fuck himself."

Many other elements of the DAU films and the DAU project remind one of the book. For instance, Drobantseva recounts the numerous visits by foreigners and her difficulties to understand or express herself. One episode is especially significant:

My foreign guests [...] started asking me for the recipe. When you don't speak English, how to explain? I thought of the words they might understand, and said: "Eto sekretno" [this is classified]. All the guests burst into laughter. The foreign physicians knew the Russian word "sekretno" [classified]. (1999, 222)

Here, in one instant, are brought together the (difficult) contact with foreigners and the inevitable relations of the physicians with the KGB. It reminds us of the episodes where any person entering the Institute has to go through "special services" and sign a promise not to divulge information, the ritual shown several times in the films. The above quote also echoes

with the part of the project when many famous artists and scientists from all over the world were invited over the course of three years to visit the Institute. Remember the difficulties of Olga Shkabarnya, waitress at the local cafeteria, when she tries to talk with the neuroscientist James H. Fallon about morals, alternating Russian and English words, or Natasha, another waitress, who, in DAU 11, seduces a French scientist while not having the slightest knowledge of either English or French.

Even the separation of installation spaces into distinct areas entitled “Body,” “Mind,” “Freedom,” “Sex” finds an echo in the original text, when the widow laments on the errors in Landau’s treatment by the doctors after his car accident:

If my husband had been a locksmith or a driver [...] nobody would have thought about the privilege to treat him. The locksmith would have woken up, started complaining about constant ache in the stomach [...]. The doctors would have thought about his retroperitoneal hematoma, would have opened up his stomach and dealt with the problems in his gastrointestinal tract. [...] The man would have been saved. But the doctors [...] they all forgot that Landau did not only have a brain, he also had an intestine.” (1999, 457)

Finally, in the memories of her niece, the journalist Maya Bessarab, that conclude the volume, she describes Kora as “one of those mothers that are called crazy. She madly loved her son” (1999, 491) which could explain Khrzhanovsky’s incestuous extrapolation of this mother-son relationship.

As for the way the project was received, in the minds of the critics and of the director himself it had obvious links to the vast literary heritage of the twentieth century. For instance, Dolin compared the Institute to the Kafkian *Castle* and remarked that “Khrzhanovsky, carrying out the old pun, makes Kafka come true” (2019, 43). The pun comes from the Soviet slogan: “We were born to make the fairy tale come true!” and the phonetic proximity in Russian between the words “fairy tale” (*skazka*) and Kafka. Speaking about his desire to render a specific atmosphere in DAU Khrzhanovsky mentioned another of his literary inspirations, involving two famous Soviet writers:

Once I read *The Epilogue* by Kaverin. [...] There is an episode in the book. Once he came to see Tynianov [...]. His windows overlooked a small, deep pit-like courtyard. Tynianov came close to the window and asked him: don’t you find the air strange? There was a slight fog in the yard, like a faraway fire, with its smoke brought here by the wind. Tynianov said:

people are burning their papers. Burning letters, diaries, documents, photographs, archives. A small courtyard. Many windows. [...] Many doors. And behind all these doors, people burn papers, destroy any traces of their lives. How can one convey this? This air? In which people used to live not one or two days, but years, decades, an eternity. (Khrzhanovsky 2009)

## Desire of Continuity

While Steven Shaviro poses that post-cinema is characterized by what he calls the “post-continuity” since “we are in a ‘post-continuity’ situation when continuity *has ceased to be important* – or at least has ceased to be as important as it used to be” (2016b, 56), in DAU, the continuity is pursued as a wished-for goal.

Whereas the shooting is in a large part based on improvisation and spontaneous actions by the participants of the DAU project (with Khrzhanovsky manipulating participants in several cases in order to nudge the events in the wanted direction), the films tend to reconstruct the most coherent fiction narratives possible. The films have, for instance, different stylistic signatures, which seems to have been a conscious choice in the process of editing (different editors worked on different DAU films and series). DAU 3 (NORA AND HER MOTHER) opts for long shots that remind one of Antonioni or Bergman (many critics have mentioned this resemblance in the subject and the visual treatment, see e.g., Renanski, 2019), whereas DAU 5 (KATIA AND TANIA) favors blurred images that remind one of impressionistic paintings.

Moreover, during the Paris part of the project, one could purchase scripts of several films. These scripts were printed as books, with dialogues presented as in a classical script or theater play and short descriptions, such as “Another day. In the living room” (Script 2019a, 52). There were no indications of actions, only of place and eventually of time. The script pages were illustrated by photographs of the film. On the one hand, it is obvious that such a text is a huge help for the spectator. Don’t forget that it was impossible to rewatch the films outside the project and that no synopsis or introduction was offered before the films that were discovered by the spectator quite at random, so these scripts provided useful and reliable information while the films themselves seemed to slip through the spectators’ fingers (and memories). Each published script is introduced by a page where the characters are listed, with their names, nicknames and their professions, making the film much easier to decipher. The chosen illustrations also

emphasize the stylistic signature of every film – geometric spaces and mainly long shots or American shots for DAU 3, closed spaces and a preference for close-ups for DAU 8 (SASHA AND VALERA).

The latter film is an especially striking example: it tells the story of two male janitors who have a homosexual relationship. It depicts the lives of those who are supposed to be the lowest class of the Institute: cooks and janitors. The two main heroes, in real life homeless people, had been invited into the project. This jolly group drinks and throws up every evening until we get to a long, extremely brutal and vulgar, but at the same time very moving, seduction scene between Sasha and Valera. This film, much debated in Russian cinema press and often qualified as one of the best films of the project, might be considered as mainly documentary – the scenes of drinking and throwing up are quite real, so is the sex that finally occurs between the two men at the end of the film. When they quarrel, one of them bleeds for real after getting hit by his partner. The unbridled emotions seem to be unraveling before our eyes without meddling of the director and the operator. But the film concludes by the sequence of Valera sittings on the toilet and loudly praying to God, speaking about tolerance, his suffering and his misguided ways. Putting this sequence in the end *a posteriori* turns the whole film into a fiction. Actually, it does not seem plausible that this prayer could be uttered as if nobody (except God) was listening. The door of the toilet remains open throughout the prayer (see the photogram in Script 2019b, 113). The very idea of making a script for this particular film, where none of the principal fictional characters ever appear, clearly indicates the desire to turn this/these film(s) into a coherent, literally readable fiction.

This does not correspond to what Gilles Deleuze qualified as “the second period” of images: “Images were no more linked in an unambiguous order of cuts and continuities but became subject to relinkings, constantly revised and reworked across cuts and false continuities” (Deleuze [1986] 1995, 70). It is quite interesting to observe that, while filmed in a fragmentary, non classical fashion, the DAU films tend to rediscover the coherence that characterizes rather the “first stage” of images, if we follow Deleuzian terminology. In fact, the DAU films are made almost as though such filmmakers as Chantal Akerman or Straub and Huillet have never existed. One could attribute this to a lack of cinematic education but that is hardly believable for an heir of a cinema family like Khrzhanovsky (his father is a famous film director of animation films). So it appears that the gravitation toward fiction, narrative and psychological continuity is a voluntary effort made throughout this cinematic material.

## The Rise and Fall of Fiction

In the same sense, the project makes us question what is believable and what is not in a context where everything filmed and edited in a fictional audiovisual text is supposed to be “for real.” For instance, whereas we find many scenes of non-simulated sex, other moments that usually do not provoke any resistance of the audience, appear as not believable in the context of the project and challenge the spectator’s identification (see Smith 1995).

For instance, whereas spectators are traditionally emotional when characters die in classical fiction films, here on the contrary the “fictional contract” with the spectator is disrupted when the Institute is dismantled and all of its inhabitants murdered. While nowadays, contemporary cinematographic techniques allow very believable deaths on-screen, in DAU we will only see the actors dragged around and laid down in a truck with blood painted on their faces or bodies, mimicking death quite unconvincingly. In the same way, when Nora and her son (performed by Nikolay Voronov, a pop culture figure in contemporary Russia) are supposed to have incestuous sexual intercourse, it is obvious to the spectator that the moment is fake, since the actors are not mother and son.

Thus, in a surprising way, some of the highest dramatical notes of the DAU fictions “reconstructed” through editing fall flat, since they appear less moving and convincing than in a classical fiction. The emotion rather seeps from more ordinary and everyday moments, when their sudden outbursts strike us as the participants’ truth – humiliations, small everyday betrayals, inconsolable solitudes. In this sense, one of the most memorable films is DAU 9 (*TANYA AND NIKITA*) where Nikita Nekrasov, a famous physician in real life, talks with his in-project wife Tanya what she could accept in way of infidelity from him. They talk in an everyday manner, she weeps quietly, they walk around the institute, talk some more, and she weeps again. And again.

## The Necessity of the Metaphor

Since the dramatical effect of the highest points of the fictions is neutralized by Khrzhanovsky’s unique approach, the films have to use metaphors, just as in a classical fiction. For instance, before seeing the dead bodies dragged around in the debris of the Institute, we watch a long sequence of material destruction of the furniture and sets by the young neo-Nazis commissioned to destroy the Institute. This sequence clearly stands in for the murders that cannot be filmed without special effects.

In a striking way, Khrzhanovsky even goes back to the “attraction editing” used by Eisenstein, since in *DAU 13 (DEGENERATION)*, before the destruction of the Institute, we (and its usual inhabitants) become witnesses to a cruel pig-slaughter. Khrzhanovsky said this killing was improvised by the neo-Nazis he invited into the project, with Tesak (Maxim Matsinkevich), a real-life neo-Nazi, as their leader. Even if it is true, the pig-slaughter, filmed and edited in detail, makes us think of Eisenstein's *STRIKE* (1924), where the cutting of a cow's throat at the slaughterhouse conveyed the horror of the massacre of the workers on strike. In this sense, Mikhail Iampolski makes a more general statement that “some of the aspects of *DAU* poetics are directly borrowed from the early Eisenstein” (Iampolski 2019, n.p.).

An interesting case is the role and character of *Dau* himself. As mentioned above, Khrzhanovsky cast Theodor Currentzis for this part, because in order to “play” a genius convincingly, one had to be one to perform as one. But while Currentzis was cast as the genius *Dau*, this character is actually played throughout the films by two persons. In the main part, it is the talented and charismatic Currentzis who plays *Dau*, but later on, in the films representing the period after *Dau*'s accident, he is played by another “actor.” (Lev Landau had a terrible car accident in the 1960s. He miraculously survived but it left him heavily impaired until his death a few years later.) In the last films, he is performed by an old man, hardly bearing any resemblance to Currentzis, who is disabled and almost incapable of speaking or moving by himself. Here the desire of fictional continuity is challenged in an unsolvable way: either it is the same person (Currentzis) that will embody *Dau* before and after the accident, but then the director and the actor would have had to resort to classical fictional ruses (Currentzis would have had to “play” the handicapped version of *Dau*) or Khrzhanovsky could change the actor, using a really handicapped person (not performing but living in front of the camera) thus destructing the “non fictional” global construction (since two people are playing the same “part”). Here we can observe that Khrzhanovsky prefers to maintain the fictional turn of events. He could have abandoned the idea of the accident, but decided to keep it, despite the fact that it clashed with his previously stated principles, once again, choosing to be closer to the book adaptation than he would have cared to admit. Thus Khrzhanovsky sticks to the book and the biography of Lev Landau, rather than insisting on the coherence of his “non fictional” approach. In the same way, some participants, like the scientist Alexey Blinov, who appear in the episodes that are supposed to take place in the 1930s, wear make-up in order to seem older in the last episodes.

So what is *DAU* and in what way can we inscribe it into the history or post-history of cinema and art? It cannot be considered as a mere reconstruction

of the Soviet past. Primarily because of all the discrepancies it contains: there was a lot of criticism concerning the historical inaccuracies in the films, starting with the products on display in the Institute cafeteria and ending with the discussions between scientists or with the neo-Nazis. Qualifying the project as a “kitsch and nostalgic Disneyland” (Franck-Dumas 2019) does not hold true either since many elements of the interior of the two Parisian theaters were not a true imitation of the past Soviet reality (like in the hilarious film *THE SOVIET PARK* by Yuli Gusman in 2006, its title a nod to *JURASSIC PARK* [1993]), but rather a metaphorical reflection on it. For instance, the tableware in the two cafeterias reminds one of prison dishes and cutlery (and one could even purchase a spoon with a hole in its middle, a typical object of Soviet prison life). Dolin argued that *DAU* was neither “reconstruction” nor “memories” of the Soviet past, but rather that it was about “the eternal fascination for the Soviet” (2019, 43). This argument is confirmed by a very interesting account of one of the short-term participants of the project, who stated that during his first “interrogation” upon his entry in the institute, he felt “the presence of a dormant and suddenly awoken intuition” of the historical past (Snegirev 2019).

This idea of triggering an almost unconscious and involuntary response, making the memories of the traumatic past resurface, is quite central in *DAU*. It is therefore not surprising he wanted to rebuild part of the Berlin wall, which would have evoked recent memories for many Berliners. In the same way, participants often stated that it brought back not only their own memories but also those of their parents or grandparents as if it had been encoded in their DNA. But even in Paris, many elements (like the obligatory bag checks upon entrance in the theaters) aimed at conveying an atmosphere of close control and persecution. In this sense, *DAU* tells us more of the unending struggle for the individual freedom and of the eternal conflict between the strive to create and the desire to oppress and destroy others that can be born in all historical and social contexts, even if it proliferates more readily in totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies. In this sense, if we remember the Kaverin quote, we can note that Khrzhanovsky’s interest for atmosphere and *affect* rather than *emotion* (the death of the protagonists leave us emotionless) also poses it as relevant for the context of post-art, since affect “works transpersonally and transversally” (Shaviro 2016b, 132).

Thus, with a refreshing enthusiasm, and after a thorny road throughout post-cinema, Khrzhanovsky seems to reaffirm art as pleasure, which has the ability to question and mould the world around us. In this he contradicts Kosuth’s statement that art would survive through its “unique capacity to remain aloof from philosophical judgments” ([1969] 1991).

By blurring the lines between cinema and post-cinema, between art and post-art, between reality and fiction, between improvisation and grand design, DAU forces the spectator to permanently question what he sees and witnesses, to put it in the historical perspective, to try to find landmarks in past oeuvres that would help him or her navigate this colossus. The question whether the symbolism and metaphors of DAU films are intentional or “read into” the films by the spectators can finally be considered as secondary, since the project images belong, at least in some aspects, to what Deleuze qualified as the “third period” of the image:

The question is no longer what there is to see behind the image, nor how we can see the image itself – it's how we can find a way into it, how we can slip in, because each image now slips across other images [...] and the vacant gaze is a contact lens. (Deleuze [1986] 1995, 71)

But at the same time, it seems that through a project that presents itself as post-cinematic and all-encompassing (all forms of arts, all subjects), one of the main goals of its creator was to declare his love to the cinema in its most classical form and to reaffirm its potency as an art form.

*Translated by Naòmi Morgan*

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## About the Author

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## 18. CINÉMATON: The Shortest Films for the Longest Film – A Dialogue

*Gérard Courant, Dominique Chateau and José Moure*

### Abstract

Since the mid-1970s, Gérard Courant has been one of those pioneers who seeks to test cinema's limits from within and without, from the center of the medium to its peripheries. He continues his quest, never ceasing to accumulate a considerable number of films and, in particular, one film or series of films, which continues to grow, the CINÉMATON(S), which form the heart of this dialogue between Gérard Courant, Dominique Chateau and José Moure. Courant's work, which comprises numerous filmed portraits of personalities as well as filmed street inventories, is of considerable extension. It is in this very principle of infinite proliferation of films of varying lengths that we find a kind of Mnemosyne cinema challenging the "de-definition" (Harold Rosenberg) of cinema which transforms it into post-art.

**Keywords:** Portrait, longest film, mnemosyne

**Dominique Chateau/José Moure:** CINÉMATON is an adaptation of the Photomaton for the cinema. Originally, Photomaton was the name given by its inventor, Anatol Josepho in 1925, to the automatic photo booth. While four or six still photographs would come out of the Photomaton, a very short film comes out of the CINÉMATON. How did you conceive this project you call CINÉMATON?

**Gérard Courant:** I started the CINÉMATONS series on February 7, 1978. I had already done zero issues before, including my self-portrait on October 18, 1977, which I later included in the series as a zero issue. In the beginning, my idea was to transpose identity photography to cinema. I was very surprised that



Gérard Courant, 2019. Photo credit: Dominique Chateau

there are so few cinematographic documents on famous artistic personalities from the first half of the twentieth century, such as Marcel Proust, for example, at a time when cinema was becoming more and more important. Perhaps there was some rare cinematographic footage on great artists, but they were invisible on both television and cinema.

I was a hard-liner film enthusiast who often went to the cinema, to the Cinémathèque Française, to festivals, etc., a regular reader of French film magazines, and that is how I began to learn the profession of filmmaker. The post-68 utopian era was a perfect time to embark on extraordinary artistic experiences. It was a time when there was a telescoping with fashionable art: the art of repetition was practiced by all kinds of contemporary artists in music, photography or the visual arts. The idea of creating a series that would run over time gradually matured in me, slowly gathering strength.

In fact, I had been thinking about it for a long time. At least since the late 1960s. In 1972, I told a cinematographer friend at the CRDP (Centre Régional de Documentation Pédagogique) that I was looking for film to familiarize myself with the very subject of cinema. He suggested that I film images of my choice at the Cannes Film Festival. Instead, I asked him to film the festival and a great filmmaker, in static shot, if possible in close-up and silent. He filmed Alfred Hitchcock, the year of *FRENZY*! This little 16mm film is, in a

way, the precursor of CINÉMATONS, but, of course, I didn't know it would become a series, I didn't know I would become a filmmaker. When, in 1978, I started shooting the CINÉMATONS, I had no idea I would still be filming them 42 years later!

My main objective was to produce an artistic work that would be out of the ordinary, which stood out from the norm. I wanted to make a portrait that would represent a panorama of the artists I frequented at the time. They were often young artists doing experimental cinema, poetry, or painting and I wanted above all to film them in an innovative cinematographic setup. I wanted to create a cinematographic memory of all these artists, irrespective of whether they would become famous or be forgotten. I wanted to film them at the beginning of their artistic journey and to keep a record of their presence in the art world. While my intention was modest, the project was ambitious at the same time. Everything went very fast, and it quickly went beyond that, to include celebrities: by the end of the first year, I had made 44 CINÉMATONS, the complete version of which was presented at the Galerie de l'Ouvertür, at 21 rue de l'Ouest, in Paris. I had first considered limiting myself to 100 CINÉMATONS, but it was soon clear to me that it would go much further ...

**DC/JM:** CINÉMATONS are not filmed in a booth designed for that purpose. What remains of the Photomaton setup is essentially the situation of putting a camera in front of a person for a short time. It is a nomadic setup. Can you describe, by means of a few examples, the conditions in which decisions regarding the shooting are made and where it takes place? Do you give instructions to people who agree to be filmed?

**GC:** CINÉMATON is the adaptation of an identity photo for the cinema, but the filming is not done in a booth. I ruled out the booth setup, even though I had filmed some of the issues in tiny spaces that looked like a booth. It sometimes happened during a film festival that the organizers offered me a small studio that looked like a photo booth. From the beginning, one of the rules was to film the portraits where I was at the time, just about anywhere. For the first nine portraits, I did not have a camera. My roommate from rue de l'Ouest in Paris, the film director Martine Rousset, had lent me her 16mm camera. I quickly realized that it would be impossible for me to continue working on a project spread over a long period if I did not have my own filming equipment. At the end of March 1978, I bought a Super 8 camera with which I could shoot everywhere, both at home and in the homes of my subjects and during my travels, as well. It was very important to have this kind of light equipment.

Today, the equipment available is much lighter, but in the 1970s, the Super 8 camera was revolutionary when compared to the 16mm cameras, even the smallest of them.

On this basis, the principle was to offer filming to all personalities linked to the world of art, entertainment and culture, in all possible fields – music, cinema, comics, literature, philosophy, painting – by means of a setup that never changed: a close-up sequence in static shot, silent, in a single shot lasting 3 minutes and 20 seconds, the duration of the Super 8 spool at 18 frames per second. The filmed subjects were free to do what they wanted. These rules were the same for everyone. No one could depart from the rules. Some people would have liked to appear full-length in the frame. It was not possible: CINÉMATON is always a close-up.

That said, the artist Jakobois, the author of experimental films and performances in the 1970s and 1980s, manages to appear full-length in the static close-up with a still camera by moving and writhing about. In the CINÉMATON, you are allowed to move, you can even get out of the frame. Nevertheless, I refuse to intervene, even when a filmed subject wants me to, when he or she lacks inspiration or does not know what to do. What matters is that the behavior of the filmed subject comes from him or her alone, that everything he or she does in front of the camera is done by his or her own will and by that alone. I do not want to bypass that freedom by even giving advice, however well informed.

Sometimes, of course, I think it might be better if the person I am filming pursues a direction that is only being suggested ... But deep down, I know that the freer the subject as far as movement and action are concerned, the more revealing the behavior will be of his or her personality. The principle of CINÉMATON is not the success of a performance, such as that of an actor in a fictional film. On the contrary, the most interesting and powerful moments are often the failed attempts. When a subject's premeditated staging fails, aspects of his or her personality are revealed to a greater extent than when he or she seemed to have control over the situation. Some subjects push their self-direction to the extreme; others remain stone-faced as if for a photo shoot – as in the first photography sessions of the nineteenth century when the subject had to remain still for several minutes for the film to be exposed ...

**DC/JM:** The relationship to the camera in the Photomaton setup is preserved in the CINÉMATON setup. Depending on the case, this relationship is serious or playful. Most often, we enter the Photomaton booth with a purely utilitarian lens, mainly for an identity photo for which we are not supposed to smile, but sometimes, we go there to have fun, alone or with friends.

From this point of view, since CINÉMATON is not utilitarian, could one say that it is playful?

**GC:** It is a serious business, even if you can present yourself in a playful, funny, even burlesque way. The filmed subjects know that it will be shown. During the very first CINÉMATONS, the subjects may have thought that the film would never be screened and may not have anticipated its reception. But very quickly, after the first shooting on February 7, 1978 and the first screening of the first nine portraits on May 11 of the same year, during the *Journées du cinéma militant* in Rennes, which celebrated the 10th anniversary of May 68, the screenings began to follow one another at a regular rate with screenings at film festivals and conferences (Lyon, Colmar, Belfort, Zürich), theaters (Avignon) and the French Cinémathèque. Often, these projections turned into happenings and exceeded all my expectations as the enthusiastic participation of the public surpassed my predictions, even the most optimistic ones. To my surprise, it worked right away, which gave me even more strength to continue the adventure.

**DC/JM:** In the list of filmed subjects one sees different categories of people, more or less famous, more or less anonymous, besides the “regulars.” How do you imagine this sociology of the CINÉMATON?

**GC:** There are a few rare cases of people who have been filmed several times, but the rule is to be filmed only once. The case of Dominique Noguez, who participated in several CINÉMATONS, one of which was under a pseudonym, is particularly interesting. Turning on himself, seated on a stool, hiding behind two masks, one on his face, the other on the back of his neck, he hid behind the name of an imaginary Belgian filmmaker, invented for a book on the history of Belgian cinema. It is a very beautiful text by Dominique Noguez; readers are convinced that this film director actually exists.

We could have fun classifying CINÉMATONS into two categories: famous personalities and unknown persons. However, there are also people who are not famous when I film them and who will become famous, like Sandrine Bonnaire (whom I was the first to film on July 17, 1982) or Julie Delpy. There are also people who were famous at the time I filmed them and who have now been forgotten (of course, I will not mention any names).

In terms of behavior in front of the camera, two main categories can be identified, depending on whether the subjects are doing something or not. However, in the latter category, there are those who pretend to do nothing, such as Philippe Sollers. Toward the end, he smiles in the direction of the

spectator, as if to say, “I have fooled you. You thought I wasn’t doing anything, but I actually played the part of someone who’s not doing anything.” Of course, there is a multitude of intermediate behavior types, as numerous as there are CINÉMATONS! In terms of socio-professional categories, filmmakers and actors behave differently, as do writers and painters. Visual artists are generally quite at ease, while film actors experience the most difficulties. In a fiction film, besides some improvisation, a film actor is guided by a script, by dialogue, or, if there is no dialogue, by a framework within which he must compose his character. He never experiences the total freedom I propose. He is often distraught. Theater actors are more relaxed because they are used to managing themselves once the director has laid out his production plans.

There are also differences between famous filmmakers, such as Youssef Chahine, Wim Wenders or Jean-Luc Godard, who tend to do as little as possible, to limit themselves to the bare minimum, probably because they know, better than anyone else, the power of images, especially when it comes to close-ups; lesser-known filmmakers tend to express themselves more, to stage a small scenario, to make themselves noticed and make themselves known. The first people who were filmed had not seen a CINÉMATON, the very first did not know if it would be shown; in front of my camera, their attitude was more carefree, unlike the people I film today, no matter where in the world they are.

In 1994, I received a “Villa Médicis hors les murs” scholarship from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I chose the city of Moscow to film Russian artistic personalities. I already had 16 years of filming behind me, but I was going to arrive in a world where no one knew the CINÉMATON anthology or me so that I found myself in a situation that reminded me of my very first shoots. I was delighted to hear that. I rediscovered an authenticity I had lost a little, somewhere along the way. When you film people who know what the real issues are, who know that it will be shown, studied, commented on, the main risk is that it will change their behavior, even if it is in an infinitesimal way. The advent of the Internet has completely changed the situation in this regard: CINÉMATON is now within reach of all Internet users, on YouTube and other video hosting websites, which contributes to the behavior of the filmed subjects changing even more.

**DC/JM:** In the collage, which features in the credits of each portrait, there is this inscription: “the longest film.” We could just as easily consider that the 3,037 films, shot from October 18, 1977 to February 4, 2019 (at least, that’s what it said when we consulted your site in March 2019) are, each one, an autonomous form in their own right.

**GC:** CINÉMATON is primarily ONE film that has continued to grow as the days and years pass, to reach 203 hours in 2019 (and probably even longer when readers read this interview). However, it is possible to show only one CINÉMATON. For example, when the Cinémathèque Française or a film festival pays tribute to an actor or director, it sometimes shows the CINÉMATON. However, on the other hand, there have been 17 full retrospectives to date in France (Paris, Lille, Chalon-sur-Saône) and around the world (Montreal, The Hague, Hamburg, New York, Lucca). The first, held at the end of 1978 in Paris, consisted of only 44 films, which ran for just under three hours! The last one, in 2014, in Lille, consisted of 2,821 CINÉMATONS for a duration of 188 hours and 4 minutes. The next retrospective, scheduled for September 9-22, 2019, will be held in Berwick-upon-Tweed, in the north of England, with 3,055 CINÉMATONS for a duration of 203 hours. Thus, the CINÉMATON anthology is at once 1 and 3,055 film(s).

In the “Events” section of my website where film screenings, DVD releases and festival selections are announced, there is a sub-section entitled “Compteur courant” (Current Counter) which is constantly updated and which provides information on the exact number of filmed portraits as well as the “Carnets filmés” (Documentary Shorts) and films with the precise number of hours and minutes corresponding to each category. CINÉMATON is only one of the 1,162 films I have made. But Philippe Truffault, who made *VOUS CONNAISSEZ LE CINÉMATON D’ALFRED HITCHCOCK?* last May for Arte television channel’s *Blow up* magazine, a scholarly film about my cinematographic adventure, calculated differently. To the number of CINÉMATONS, he adds: the number of my other filmed series – *PORTRAIT DE GROUPE* (1985-2020), *LIRE* (1986- ), *COUPLE* (1985- ), *TRIO* (1986), *DE MA CHAMBRE D’HÔTEL* (1991) and so on; my short and feature films – *LES AVENTURES D’EDDIE TURLEY* (1989), *CŒUR BLEU* (1980) and so on; and my “Carnets filmés” (Documentary Shorts). He counted 8,118 movies! I am much more reasonable than he is!

**DC/JM:** In this volume, we consider the question of post-cinema and in particular the future of cinema within the current artistic context, which, in many respects, can itself be considered as post-art. What do you think of the new categories that have appeared in criticism and aesthetics? Where does CINÉMATON stand in relation to the idea of crossing the previous borders of cinema and art?

**GC:** In 2019, few filmmakers are still shooting with film. In France, Philippe Garrel is one of the last to work in 35mm. In the United States, a group of filmmakers have decided to continue filming in 35mm to promote the

preservation of this format. However, it is a drop of silver in the digital ocean, as the vast majority of filmmakers now shoot on memory cards. Today, we have moved on to post-cinema. Even if, here and there, some filmmakers continue working with traditional film, we know that there are many countries where this has become impossible. To prove my point, in South Korea, where I recently visited, I learned that there is no longer any laboratory for developing and printing copies. If a Korean filmmaker wants to shoot in 35mm, he must have his films developed in Japan.

The films that are currently being shot are thus no longer shot in film, or even in video. Therefore, it is no longer cinema and it is no longer video. Should we talk about post-cinema? I do not know what to call what we are filming with our memory cards. Is what we are doing today still cinema? As for the CINÉMATONS, until 2006, I still filmed them in Super 8 and I was one of the last to shoot in this format. However, from August 2006, when the manufacture and development of the Kodachrome Super 8 was discontinued, I stopped shooting with film and changed to digital video, more precisely MiniDV. From that moment on, so as not to contradict myself, I should have changed the title CINÉMATON to VIDEOMATON. Today, I still shoot in video and I am one of the last to do so (for various series: CINÉMATON, LIRE, PORTRAIT DE GROUPE and a number of my other films) since most filmmakers now shoot with a memory card. Talking about post-cinema is reminiscent of pre-cinema, when primitive filmmakers made films that could not be shown. The Lumière brothers did more than invent cinema: they invented the possibility of showing it in public; their genius is to have designed a machine that could film, develop, and project at the same time.

With CINÉMATON and my other film series, I used cinema without constraints from the start. The length of the shooting (42 years), its duration (203 hours), and the choice of a permanent and perpetual work in progress, means that this is both in and out of cinema. By way of proof, the book that Salah Sermini published in Dubai on my work in 2011 is entitled: *Is It Cinema?* There is nothing left to say! I was in a form of post-cinema from the start!

**DC/JM:** How did technological changes and in particular the arrival of digital technology change the way you approach your CINÉMATONS?

**GC:** Since the 1970s, I have used all possible formats available, in film and video. In addition, I have always mixed my media, while filmmakers who shot in film did not venture into the world of video and vice versa. The technological change has not disrupted my way of conceiving things since I have always practiced both cinema and video. When, in 2006, I switched to

digital video, I was on familiar ground because I had already been practicing this medium for years on all kinds of other film projects.

The most notable change was that from that date on, I became a truly independent filmmaker. Before, I was not completely independent: when I shot on film, I had to work through a laboratory, wait for development, and, if there was sound, I had to make sound reports in the laboratory. In short, I was dependent on the film industry. From the moment I went completely digital, I was able to do everything myself: film, produce sound, edit, mix, calibrate, copy, master, DVD. For the first time in my life, I became a very independent filmmaker! So, no, I am not nostalgic! I know some filmmakers who are nostalgic for the Super 8 and others who are nostalgic for analog video which, it is true, had a certain cachet that digital or digital video does not have, being too cold and realistic. However, far from being nostalgic, I have always adapted to the technology of my time. Maybe you will say that it means that I put my head in a bucket so as not to face reality. However, one must have few scruples in this regard when, like me, your work is spread over time. If we question everything at the slightest technological change, we risk doing nothing at all. If I look at the evolution of my cinema since I started making films, I see that every technological change has been an accelerator of my film research. Far from slowing me down, these changes have always stimulated me, pushing me each time toward research that would have been impossible and unimaginable previously.

**DC/JM:** From number 2,332, you start filming in black and white. What is the reason for this choice?

**GC:** A serious answer to your question requires us to take a step back in time. Initially, in February and March 1978, the first nine CINÉMATONS were filmed in 16mm black and white. Why black and white? Since one of my main references was the cinema of the Lumière brothers, it seemed logical, natural and obvious to me to shoot according to this process, which is neutral, timeless and untouched by fashion trends at the same time. It also seemed to me that color was too close to reality, too contemporary, too modern. Also, many of the movies I loved were in black and white. When, on April 13, 1978, while filming my tenth portrait, I switched to Super 8, I was obliged to film in color because there was no black and white Super8 to be found in France. Why? To his credit, Bertrand Jubard, the Director of Kodak's Film Division, was a real stickler for quality. He had been confronted on several occasions with an insoluble situation. For Super 8 Kodachrome, only Kodak was authorized to process the films (which ensured infallible

quality); for black and white, in addition to Kodak, several other laboratories were competing for the development market.

Unfortunately, some did not have the level and quality of the Kodak laboratory and those filming in black and white Super 8 were disappointed by the average, sometimes mediocre, quality of their work. They often complained directly to Kodak, believing that the company was responsible for this poor quality. Bernard Jubard grew tired of constantly having to explain this situation and simply withdrew black and white film from the French market in the 1970s. When he retired in the early 1990s, it reappeared; his replacement, Monique Koudrine, reintroduced it. She did not have much of a choice: during the previous decade, the Super 8 market had completely collapsed and it would have been difficult, in those circumstances, not to revive black and white, which had always had its supporters even when it could not be found in France. And then, a new generation of young filmmakers arrived and grouped together in small entities to create small, independent laboratories to develop their films themselves.

Thus, it was under duress that I switched to color in April 1978. I then discovered the flamboyant Kodachrome colors, which quickly filled me with enthusiasm. The Kodachrome colors, very pronounced, very sharp, reminded me of the Technicolor ones. When I switched to digital in 2006, I naturally continued to film in color. Concurrent with *CINÉMATONS*, I shot more and more films, short and feature films, some episodes of my black and white digital Documentary Shorts and the results fully satisfied me. I realized that I could work on contrasts and obtain results that I could never have achieved with color. Therefore, I was ready to go back to black and white.

It is worth mentioning that the last *CINÉMATON* in Super 8 was number 2,116, featuring the Franco-American filmmaker Lisa Rovner, filmed on May 23, 2006, and that the first in digital color, number 2,117 featured the actor Philippe Loyrette, filmed on June 12, 2006. As for the first black and white portrait (I filmed several portraits beforehand for testing purposes and to familiarize myself with the process), it was number 2,332 featuring Nicholas Petiot, artistic director of the Cinémathèque de Bourgogne-Jean Douchet, filmed on December 22, 2010. Since then, all *CINÉMATONS* have been filmed in black and white. Thanks to black and white, I was able to shoot some portraits that I would never have been able to film in color when, for example, the light conditions were insufficient. I am thinking in particular of Stan Neumann's portrait, filmed in the cellar of a very dark bistro in Metz and without any lighting. It's the very example of what I couldn't have shot in color. The result would have been disastrous, with faded colors. By pushing black and white contrasts to the maximum, I

found a grain that reminded me of film! I have now made more than 700 CINÉMATONS in black and white, which corresponds to nearly a quarter of the collection.

On the subject of post-cinema, I would like to mention the Pocket Films Festival, which was organized for about ten years by the Forum des images in Paris from 2005 onward. It was a film festival featuring only films shot with mobile phones. In 2007, I was invited to participate in the festival by making a film. The festival lent me a Nokia first generation mobile phone for six months. Well, what a surprise it was to discover a fascinating machine with results that were beyond my imagination! This mobile did not shoot at 25 frames per second like all video cameras, but at around 15 frames per second. To edit these rushes and turn them into a film, I had to transform them to 25 frames per second. I then obtained tiny light variations and slightly bumpy movements. This result was close to the effect produced by silent films. In the latter, because turning the crank by hand was never performed at exactly the same speed, small variations in the light and slightly jerky movements occurred. With this Nokia camera, I had rediscovered a certain aesthetic quality of cinema's first films. I took full advantage of this opportunity and came up with a result that was no longer video and no longer cinema. It was post-cinema but, at the same time, a return to the origins of cinema. It was in 2007, 112 years after the invention of cinema ...

With this process, I shot *LES AVENTURES D'EDDIE TURLEY II* (2008), a remake of my feature film *LES AVENTURES D'EDDIE TURLEY*, a film that I had presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 1987. Having this camera at my disposal during those six months, I took the opportunity to shoot ten episodes of my Documentary Shorts that I grouped under the title *LA DÉCALOGIE DE LA NUIT*, for a total of about ten hours, shot in Paris and its Western and Eastern suburbs, in Dresden, Nantes and Vendée, Marseille, Dijon and Bourgogne. The result is amazingly impressive. The writer Alain Paucard said "It is no longer cinema, but the principle of cinema" and the critic Vincent Roussel speaks of "primitive cinema, a tribute to the Lumière Brothers."<sup>1</sup>

**DC/JM:** Your approach and the protocols you set could be described as originating from contemporary art rather than cinema? What is your cinematographic or artistic affiliation? Have you ever been tempted to show and install your CINÉMATONS in an art gallery or museum? Is the question of the space where your work is shown an important one?

1 These quotes are taken from an oral dialogue.

GC: CINÉMATONS have been presented in all kinds of venues ranging from movie theaters to art galleries, outdoor screenings, walls of buildings, museums, contemporary art centers, street art festivals, monitors in shopping malls, etc. But I am above all a child of the cinema and I always prefer making the most of the cinema ceremonial with its darkness and large screen. When the filmed subject appears on the big screen and looks the viewer straight in the eye, it releases a very strong emotion. The most insignificant detail (scratching your nose, blinking your eyes, inhaling smoke from a cigarette) takes on dimensions that would be unexpected in a normal film. The audience is sensitive to that, and reacts with laughter and screams; sometimes the responses are quite surprising. Nevertheless, I am open to all possible presentations, existing and unknown to date. In the past, there were projections that were out of the ordinary. I am thinking in particular of a "Cinématon" night organized at the Opéra Garnier in Paris in 1985, or the outdoor screenings on the occasion of the *Nuit de la photo* in Lausanne in the early 1990s. In 1995, the *Fête de l'Humanité* presented the complete set on a wall of eight video screens. On *eight* screens, instead of 116 hours, it only lasted 14 and a half hours!

Other integrals took place in a cinema that was closed for the duration of the film, without intermission. The one organized in Montreal in October 1985, in a drugstore open 24 hours a day, mobilized six projectionists who took turns day and night. This event was in the news because a female spectator, a film student, watched the 42 hours of screening without leaving the cinema and without sleeping. The screening began on Friday evening at midnight and ended on Sunday at 6 p.m. The organizers mobilized to make it as easy as possible for her by providing her with food, drinks, and blankets so that she could withstand the cool of the night. She was honored on television and on the first page of *The Gazette*, Quebec's largest English-language daily newspaper, which had the following headline: "The viewer who saw the longest film in the world"... It was not an article about Gérard Courant who had made the longest film, but about the viewer who saw the longest film! Of course, I kept this document as I kept all the documents on CINÉMATONS I have accumulated since I started shooting this anthology.

DC/JM: New technologies have not only brought new filming conditions but also new conditions of reception. With the new communication equipment, mobile phones, tablets and the like, social networks have grown considerably. What was and what is the impact of these innovations on CINÉMATON?

GC: Until the creation of YouTube, CINÉMATONS circulated in France and abroad on an individual basis, with programs often limited to a single

screening except, of course, when a complete screening was organized that could last several days or even several weeks, or even more like the one at the Nicéphore Niépce Museum in Chalon-sur-Saône in 2011 which lasted one and a half months. YouTube changed everything. YouTube was created in the United States in 2005 and became available in France in 2007. In that year, a first CINÉMATON, that of Philippe Garrel, was put online by an Internet user. When, in January 2012, I created my first YouTube channel (now I have three), only about twenty portraits had already been broadcast on this video hosting site and had been put online by various Internet users. Starting from that date, I put all the portraits online, as well as those of my other film series and most of my short and feature films and Documentary Shorts. What is absent is mainly commercially released films on DVD so as not to compete with the publishers and most of my COMPRESSIONS series for copyright reasons, because each film represents the compression of 25 times its duration of a classic film.

Today, on YouTube, there must be about 6,500 of my films online. My CINÉMATONS and other films can finally be seen all over the world. It should be noted that there are countries where there are no more cinemas. For economic reasons, for example, some African countries no longer have any cinemas in their territory! Others, such as Saudi Arabia, have banned them for ideological reasons (but cinemas are starting to reopen after a ban of 40 years). In all these countries, there are film lovers who know and love cinema like any other film buff in Paris, London or New York. For them, the only way of seeing and discovering films is via the Internet. Thanks to the Internet, through free access or video-on-demand, they can enter the world's largest film library, 1,000, 10,000 or 100,000 times larger than the French Cinémathèque! Until 2011, YouTube limited the duration of its videos to 11 minutes, but as from that date, the American company has allowed videos of any length to be posted online. With this change, it became obvious that I had to put my films on YouTube. In addition, my first surprise was to see that each video was seen across the world, even in the smallest, least populated, least known countries. When you have a YouTube account, you can see the number of views per country for each video. After a few months, I discovered that more countries were connected to my YouTube channel (200, then quickly 210, 220, 225) than there were UN member countries (193)! How is that possible? Some countries are not members of the United Nations, either because they do not want to be part of it (such as the Vatican), or because they are not accepted as a state (such as Kosovo), or because they are not completely independent (such as Gibraltar, the Faroe Islands or Greenland).

In 2019, my YouTube channels in total are approaching eight million views. I receive almost daily feedback from Internet users who have seen my CINÉMATONS and other films. Since 2012, I have reached a large, diversified and international audience. Before, my audience was limited, probably elitist. YouTube has changed the way moviegoers view my cinema a lot. Before, I was just some vague name, a filmmaker lost in the cinema ocean. Now, anyone who is interested in my films is able to discover them, talk and write about them and even rank them in the charts of the best films of the year or the best films in the history of cinema. I regularly discover CINÉMATONS and some of my other films listed on cinema sites that specialize in these rankings. I am thinking in particular of the New Zealand film website Letterboxd, which is made up of thousands of film fact sheets and thousands of lists of the best films from film critics and film lovers. Before the advent of YouTube, people who take part in these lists could only classify films that were commercially released in theaters or, if they lived in major Western cities, certain films that they could see in festivals or film libraries. It limited the possibilities. Now, the film buff who lives in Mongolia, Africa or India can select my films from his lists and charts. Of course, there are only a limited number of film lovers interested in discovering independent and out of the ordinary films like mine. However, in recent years, I noticed that more and more critics chose my films for their lists. Recently, in Letterboxd, I discovered that I was on the list of 32 favorite filmmakers of the Anglo-French-Russian-Czech critic and filmmaker Edmund Von Danilovich. Along with Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, I am the only French filmmaker. In addition, his list of 140 favorite films in the history of cinema contains six of mine: CINÉMATON (1978- ), VIVRE À NAPLES ET MOURIR (1978), ADITYA (1980), VIVRE EST UNE SOLUTION (1980), À PROPOS DE LA GRÈCE (1983-1985), AMOURS DÉCOLORÉES (1986-1997). The most fun was to find VIVRE À NAPLES ET MOURIR among them. This episode of my Documentary Shorts, recorded at the Cannes Film Festival in 1978, is an audio encounter with the German filmmaker Werner Schroeter, which I then put into images with extracts from films, photos, collages, posters, etc. This is all the more surprising since there is no Schroeter film on the list! I would be delighted to meet Edmund Von Danilovich whom I have never met and with whom I have never had any contact. Besides, this could be an opportunity to film him!

Only ten years ago, this situation would have been unimaginable. New technologies have changed my status as an artist and my life as a filmmaker. However, I know some filmmaker friends, like Joseph Morder, who do not put their films online for free. It is a pity because they miss a strong and

unique experience and cut themselves off from an extraordinary openness to a world that dreams of discovery.

I forgot to mention that my films are not introduced by advertisements and that if there are any, it is because YouTube imposes it for musical rights issues that allow you to remunerate the rights holders. In my life as a filmmaker, I have met many programmers, in particular for art houses, who used to say to me, “What you do is great but I can’t program your films because they’re too difficult for my audience.” Of course, it is a form of censorship that does not speak its name, because now I have proof to the contrary. Some of my films, among the most radical, are successful on YouTube even though they would not have the slightest chance of being shown in official cinemas that are far too timid in their programming. Thanks to this tool, I can now bypass the censorship of programmers, a censorship that hits out not only at experimental cinema, but at all forms of cinema that are off the beaten track. YouTube is an extraordinary freedom to discover movies. It is a freedom that has never existed before. Will YouTube still exist in a year, two years or five years? No one knows that. In any case, it must also be said that free access does not affect the sale of DVDs, comics or VODs because it is not aimed at the same audience. It is an opening toward another, different audience.

**DC/JM:** You film yourself from time to time, from number zero to number three thousand and other numbers as well. CINÉMATON is a kind of *self-portrait by oneself* insofar as the filmmaker remains in the background while the subject invents an attitude. What do your appearances in some CINÉMATONS mean? Do you consider yourself an artist, a filmmaker or someone who films?

**GC:** A film of any kind and a work of art of any kind is already the self-portrait of a filmmaker and an artist. An artist who creates a work with sincerity cannot escape himself. I may be stating the obvious, but it is important to say it again. CINÉMATON is, more than any other film, a self-portrait of its author because it is similar to a filmed diary, spread over more than four decades, of my encounters, my travels and my interests.

With regard to number zero, my official self-portrait in a way, filmed on October 18, 1977, it should be noted that this is not the first number zero that I have done. If I quickly move on to the portrait of Alfred Hitchcock, filmed in 1972, because I wasn’t the cameraman, I am mindful of the fact that, in January 1977, when Henri Langlois, co-founder of the French Cinémathèque, died, I had directed M M M M... – a three-minute short film with Martine Rousset, shot in close-up. A film which heralds CINÉMATON, unfortunately

cut into sections of about twenty seconds each, because I had used a 16mm Bolex spring-wound clockwork camera that did not allow me to take shots of more than 20 seconds. If I had had an electric camera at my disposal that day, which would have allowed me to film a three-minute sequence shot without interruption, this film would have been the first real CINÉMATON number zero.

For my official number zero, I had the precious help of the same Martine Rousset who filmed me at the Montparnasse cemetery. I wanted to be filmed in front of Henri Langlois's tomb, but as we could not find it and as the sun was already dangerously low, I was filmed in front of an anonymous tomb. I had decided not to do anything in front of the camera but when I saw the result, that a lot of little things were happening on my face, I understood that I had a strong, profound concept that was viable. And if my own result was so surprising, it should be equally surprising with the other people I would film.

I made other CINÉMATONS as filmed subjects. The first was when I reached number 1,000 on December 31, 1987, which signaled ten years of shooting. I thought it would be nice if this CINÉMATON were mine. However, it was not easy to do because on the morning of December 31, I had only (in a manner of speaking) filmed 997 portraits and if I wanted it to be the 1,000th on this day, I would have to film two other people before me and before the end of the day. Luckily, the visual artist Mirella Rosner invited me to her New Year's Eve party. Before the party was in full swing, I was able to film her and one of her guests, a mutual friend, Catherine Belkhodja, the mother of Maïwenn and Isild Le Besco whom I had both filmed a few days earlier. At a symbolic time of the year, I had vague doubts about whether to continue with the anthology. What about stopping at number 1,000? It would have been a round figure to end ten years of assiduous filming, especially since the Centre Pompidou had programmed the complete film – the first 1,000 CINÉMATONS – for the month of March 1988! A beautiful final fireworks display! However, during the night of December 31, 1987 to January 1, 1988, my doubts faded and, to prevent me from going back, I filmed myself again on January 1, 1988 – number 1,001. In addition, the machine was kick-started ... However, at that moment, I had no idea that I would one day reach the 2,000 mark. It seemed so distant and inaccessible to me that, if I could reach it, I promised myself to film myself again for a 2,000th portrait. Thirteen years later, luck was with me because I was able to do this CINÉMATON on January 1, 2000, on the day the Y2K bug was supposed to strike ... which did not happen. Miracle: I did not have to slow down or accelerate my shoots to be the subject of the 2,000th CINÉMATON on January 1, 2000! However, it would

have been enough for me, for example, to have a unique opportunity to film one single important personality visiting Paris in the days before January 1, not to be number 2,000! The first 1,000 portraits were filmed over 10 years and the next 1,000 over 13 years. What if I reach the third thousandth? The portraits of the third thousand took longer to bring forth because it took me nearly 17 years of shooting and it was only on December 4, 2017 that I filmed myself for my fifth CINÉMATON and the 3,000th of the collection, on the day of my 66th birthday.

I am not talking about other cases, outside the collection, in which I staged myself, just like that, to have fun, to test a new camera, a new film or to explore a new special effect. I am not talking about television shows either (TF1, Antenne 2), nor about filmmakers who asked me to make a CINÉMATON. By adding all the self-portraits that can be described as official and outside the collection, unofficial and for television, I must have made about twenty CINÉMATONS.

Even if I am not physically present in the CINÉMATONS, I have always considered the anthology as a *self-portrait looking at others*. Compared to the population of the world, the 3,000 people I filmed is a very small number and yet it is a magnificent sample of the human species on Earth. I am always present during the shootings because I want to be the first spectator. Of course, I could very well set the camera rolling and leave the set immediately or operate the camera from a distance and the shooting would be done without me. However, during the shooting, I am always silent, in the background, and I refuse to intervene in any way even if the person being filmed asks me to. This choice of being transparent is specific to CINÉMATON shoots but not, of course, to my other films. Often, the filmed subjects look at the camera lens, they look at me and, indirectly, at the viewer. If the series has any interest, it is because the immutable rules I have decreed are radical. If the portraits had had sound, for example, most of the filmed subjects would hide behind the mask of speech and the portraits would become conventional and similar to what is usually done in film and television. Because the portraits are mute, the filmed subjects are forced to discover themselves, to drop the mask even if, for a while, they try to resist. Nevertheless, the device is so diabolical (as historian Jacques Goimard wrote) that the filmed subjects are forced to make concessions, to discover themselves and, ultimately, to reveal more or less large parts of their being and personality.

I have always considered myself as a film-artist or a film-poet. My research is not only limited to CINÉMATONS but to all possible forms of cinema. In this respect, I am a filmmaker, an artist and someone who films at the same time!

**DC/JM:** In your work, there are other forms than CINÉMATON, in particular, the Documentary Shorts, medium or feature films which show that you have the same desire to make inventories as Georges Perec. An article on your site is in fact entitled “Gérard Courant, le ‘Perec’ du cinéma français à cinémaginaire” (1997). In *L’Infra-ordinaire*, Perec says, “Describe your street [...]. Make an inventory of your pockets [...]” (1989, 9). You make an inventory of the streets of Lyon. In addition, you have dedicated a film to Joseph Morder, entitled *LE JOURNAL DE JOSEPH M* (2000). He is a filmmaker who is very close to you. What is the significance of this desire to actively make inventories and build up collections that you and Morder have in common?

**GC:** Together with Joseph Morder, since 1978, I have made a significant number of films. More than a hundred! Including six CINÉMATONS! The first in 1978 and the last in 2006. Joseph Morder also participated in some of my other film series: *PORTRAIT DE GROUPE*, *TRIO*, *CINÉMA* (1991- ), *GARE* (1984-2020); short films – *COCKTAIL MORLOCK* (1980), *SHIVA* (1979), *MORT DE TRIOS PRESIDENTS À VIE* (1984); feature films – *LES AVENTURES D’EDDIE TURLEY*, *CHAMBÉRY-LES-ARCS* (1996), *LE JOURNAL DE JOSEPH M*, *2000 CINÉMATONS* (2001), *PÉRISSABLE PARADIS* (2002); and a significant number of episodes of my Documentary Shorts, some of which are entirely dedicated to him – *UNE CÉRÉMONIE SECRÈTE* (1996), *JOSEPH MORDER FILME LE DÉFILÉ DU PREMIER MAI* (1997), *LE CHEMIN DE RESSON: JOSEPH MORDER REND VISITE À MARCEL HANOUN* (1999), *PLACE SAINT-MICHEL* (2001), *JOSEPH MORDER TOURNE ‘LA DUCHESSE DE VARSOVIE’* (2013), *L’ARBRE MORT DE JOSEPH MORDER À NICE* (2014). Our film routes are parallel. Apart from our respective films, we have both been shooting “work in progress” for almost 50 years. He has been working on his *JOURNAL FILMÉ* since 1967, while I am busy with the CINÉMATONS and my other filmed series, without forgetting my Documentary Shorts, which I started in the early 1970s.

This relationship with an extraordinary filmmaker is not the only link I have with other filmmakers in the independent film industry. Since 1975 with Philippe Garrel, 1978 with Werner Schroeter until his death in 2010, 1979 with Luc Moullet and 1982 with Vincent Nordon, I have been doing an immense amount of remembrance work on their film work as with Joseph Morder (and also literary work in the case of Nordon) by involving them in my many film projects, in particular in the Documentary Shorts in which I follow their artistic journey. If I take the example of Philippe Garrel, all the films I have made about him and with him since 1975 – mainly Documentary Shorts – exceed 20 hours! I even followed him to Seoul where we participated in Master Classes on his work which were very successful.

As for Werner Schroeter, when I was writing the book I had dedicated to him in January 1982, he had agreed to get involved on one condition, that I organize a meeting between him and Michel Foucault, that the conversation be recorded and form part of the book. That is what I managed to do. It also resulted in a mythical episode of the Documentary Shorts: MICHEL FOUCAULT WERNER SCHROETER, LA CONVERSATION, filmed on December 3, 1981, in which Michel Foucault agreed to open up and talk about himself.

If, with the CINÉMATONS and my other series, I preserve the memory, a cinematographic trace of the artists I met during my life, with my filmed street inventories, I keep a trace of the places I had the opportunity to explore. These inventories, which are grouped under the title MES VILLES D'HABITATION, are a tribute to the Lumière views. Indeed, the principle is a very simple one: I film all the streets and squares of a city in fixed sequence shot for about twenty seconds each. At the beginning of each shot, I film the plaque with the name of the street or square. The streets and squares are arranged in alphabetical order. These inventories only concern cities in which I have lived. My first inventory, filmed between 1994 and 1996, is that of the 57 streets of Saint-Maurice (filmed inventory of the streets of Saint-Maurice, Val-de-Marne, France), a small town on the southern edge of the Bois de Vincennes in Paris where I lived from 1985 to 2000.

A second inventory, À TRAVERS L'UNIVERS, was filmed in 2004 and 2005 in Saint-Marcellin, at the foot of the Alps, in the Dauphiné, a small town in which I lived between 1952 and 1960. I entitled it that way because I had considered the hypothesis (it's only a hypothesis) that if aliens, who didn't know planet Earth, wanted to know more about our world, they could get a precise idea from this tiny film sample of a city of 8,000 inhabitants, *À travers l'univers*. Because the film is both a synthesis of the town of Saint-Marcellin and, by extension, a synthesis of all the cities on Earth.

A few months later, in November 2005, I made an inventory of the 112 streets, roads and alleys and the 14 squares and public gardens of the Bois de Vincennes, which borders on Saint-Maurice where I lived at the time. The film is called UN MONDE NOUVEAU. Then, between 2006 and 2014, I tackled the 157 streets and 20 squares of Semur-en-Auxois (INVENTAIRE FILMÉ DES RUES ET PLACES DE SEMUR-EN-AUXOIS), in Burgundy, where I was a boarder at the city's high school between 1963 and 1965. However, the largest part of MES VILLES D'HABITATION was the filming between 2002 and 2013 of LYON, AUTOPSIE D'UNE GRANDE VILLE, my hometown, divided into 18 episodes: nine street inventories and nine square inventories corresponding to the nine *arrondissement* or districts of Lyon. The collection of 1500 streets, 400 squares and public gardens that make up this inventory lasts 16 hours.

Cities inspire me a lot because, apart from these inventories, I film them assiduously within the framework of other cinematographic projects, a large part of which is integrated into my Documentary Shorts. For example, I sometimes film entire episodes in a one hour-long sequence shot. These films were unthinkable and impossible to make when I did my first work because technology did not allow it. And then, I keep coming back, camera in hand, to the cities I lived in (to which I must add Dijon and Valencia, which do not have their street inventories) and those I love (Dubai, Burzet, Marseille, Priay, Nice, Lucca) to film new places or film the same places again a few years later.

I started the Documentary Shots without knowing that I was embarking on a long-term project. At first, I was filming all kinds of little things without knowing that they would form a collection closely resembling a filmed diary. It was after about ten years that it really took shape and that I understood that this multitude of short sequences created a whole that, put together, made sense. Moreover, from the mid-1970s, I conducted interviews and recorded audio debates or conferences with filmmakers such as Philippe Garrel, Werner Schroeter, Luc Moullet, Louis Skorecki, Teo Hernandez, Michael Snow and Joseph Morder, which, years later, I put into images by injecting extracts from films, photos, collages, posters, ads, letters, programs, etc. Today, thanks to the miniaturization of technology, everyone records everything and anything. However, in the 1970s, few of us did. These Documentary Shorts have grown steadily over the years and today there are 373 episodes, spread over nearly 50 years, for a total duration of 455 hours. It is a parallel, complementary work to the CINÉMATONS. Perhaps more romantic and, above all, less conceptual.

Each filmmaker has his or her own preferences as to the stages of making a film. Some prefer writing the script, others prefer the preparation, still others prefer editing, and some even prefer the promotion of the film involving travel, press conferences and meetings with the media. As far as I am concerned, it is the shooting itself that fascinates me. What interests me above all else is to be able to film as much as possible. Thanks to my work in progress (CINÉMATONS, my other film series and the Documentary Shorts) I have found the ideal way to film regularly. I am in a permanent state of shooting although I do not have a camera with me all the time. Many people who do not know me well think that I always have a camera in my pocket and that I am always filming. Fortunately, this is not the case! Better still: I only have a camera with me when, I have decided beforehand to film something specific (a person, a place, a city). So yes, in this case, I am equipped because I am mentally prepared for the action of filming. I have always marked a boundary between life and art. It would be dangerous

to mix the two, to confuse life with art. Personal balance depends on this separation. When there is interference, there is danger.

**DC/JM:** Isn't post-cinema also a kind of innovative creative experience for you, which is linked to the particular conditions of filming? But what is the link with the history of cinema?

**GC:** I learned to film with expensive film. When I worked in traditional film, I filmed much less. Today, thanks to digital technology, I shoot a lot more, but with the mentality and rigor of a filmmaker who learned and practiced cinema with film and who was forced to think before filming. For example, before starting the CINÉMATON series, I thought about it for several years and it was this reflection that allowed me to establish strong rules, so that the project could last over time. Today, for a young filmmaker, it is not necessary to think before filming because it is possible to do all the tests you want without it costing you anything financially. Whether you film for 1 minute or 100 minutes, it will cost you the same price. It is a trap that is difficult to avoid when one did not experience economic (and, indirectly, aesthetic) austerity during the age of film, when you had to count every meter of film.

When I take part in workshops with students, I am always surprised by their difficulty in finding ideas. However, I should not be surprised because it is a logical situation. They are like a writer in front of the blank page or the painter in front of his blank canvas: they start from nothing and must create a world, their world. And since they have all the professional equipment, all the technology at their disposal, they imagine that everything is easy, that things will create themselves, that they can do everything without having first thought, prepared, organized their project and their shooting. When, on the surface, things are easier, very often it is an illusion. On the contrary, when everything is difficult to understand, when there is a citadel to conquer (cinema) as it was when I started making films, the difficulty stimulates you, makes you work miracles and forces you to ask yourself the right questions, to organize yourself better so that when you film, you know what you have to do and how to do it. Even though I arrived at a time when everything was possible, when new technologies had democratized cinema, when the avant-garde (not just the cinematographic avant-garde) had broken taboos and made many breaches, I was fortunate to have been trained by masters of the classical age of cinema, such as John Ford, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Buster Keaton, Roberto Rossellini, Alfred Hitchcock, the neo-realists, the small masters of the American B series. These filmmakers taught me rigor, humility, obstinacy, simplicity, clarity, connection with the audience.

These masters are not the only ones who taught me my job as a filmmaker. Someone like Roger Corman or Jess Franco taught me how to produce a film and how to work fast and well. And then, experimental filmmakers like Michael Snow or Andy Warhol also taught me a lot. When I discovered Snow's films, I understood that cinema could occupy other domains, create new paths, open new doors. But I never put Snow above Ford or Eisenstein. In my training, I would say that they were complementary. Everyone, at their own level, gave me keys to open the cinema door.

**DC/JM:** Our friend Dominique Noguez, who has already been mentioned, passed away very recently. This is an opportunity to pay tribute to him. What was his role in your activity as an independent filmmaker? What influence has experimental cinema, of which he was one of the most ardent defenders, had on you?

**GC:** From the beginning, my position was close to that of Jonas Mekas, who was open to all forms of cinema. He could be enthusiastic about an amateur film, praise someone like Marilyn Monroe's masterful performance in John Huston's *THE MISFITS* (1961) or speak just as highly of an Andy Warhol film as Leni Riefenstahl's *OLYMPIA* (1938). For my part, I have learned to feed on all forms of cinema, from Laurel and Hardy to Mizoguchi Kenji,<sup>2</sup> from Paul Sharits to Satyajit Ray, from Ozu Yasujiro to Douglas Sirk. In a way, they were my teachers. However, in the mid-1970s, I enrolled at the University of Paris VIII, when this utopian university was located in the middle of the Bois de Vincennes. Although I attended a few lectures by Claudine Eizykman and Guy Fihman as well as Gilles Deleuze, but this period coincided with the moment when I seriously started making films and I had to make choices: listen to teachers, even brilliant ones, or make films. I decided in favor of the second solution.

Watching films or reading about cinema were solid foundations for making my own films, but my real university was filmmaking. I made the expression "practice makes perfect" my own. Let me explain. It was by making films that I learned to make them and by solving the problems I encountered in each of them that I was able to make other films. Moreover, since I wanted to make a living from film, I learned that I had to make a lot of films because, the more films I had to my name, the more opportunities I had to show them and make a living from them. And, as a result, the more I learned to make films. Each film confronts you with a number of problems that have to be solved and it is by solving them that one gains experience to make the next films.

2 Japanese names are written here in their traditional form: surname first.

As for Dominique Noguez, before being an important and recognized writer, he was, since the early 1970s, a lecturer in film, a critic and a historian of cinema and an independent film programmer who left his mark in France and abroad. His books on cinema are an international reference and his programming work at the University of Paris I, Saint-Charles annex, where he worked for some twenty years and in other places (such as the Centre Pompidou), have marked the microcosm of experimental cinema. He was often an advisor for certain festivals (such as the one in Hyènes) and institutions and organized a large traveling retrospective, “Thirty Years of Experimental Cinema in France” which, for several years, was broadcast throughout the world and was really successful.

He was an eternal optimist who knew how to encourage young and not so young filmmakers. He did not hesitate to get involved in your work to help you improve. Even if he had reservations about one or another of your films, he always knew how to make something positive out of it. This is a very important position for a young filmmaker because when you are starting out, it is essential to be encouraged. Most of your acquaintances do not encourage you because they do not understand you or your approach. Yet, when, after May 68, he began to get involved in experimental cinema, his position was not easy. Sectarianism of all kinds (between militant cinema and experimental cinema, between experimental cinema and video art, between experimental cinema and arthouse cinema, between different factions of experimental cinema) and people’s egos were powerful and put a brake on the development of this cinema. However, with his customary and unfailing good humor, his patience, eloquence and interpersonal skills, he always pulled through, propelling experimental French cinema of the 1970s and 1980s to the top, thus regaining the lustre and splendor of its most beautiful era, the 1920s. His influence was crucial. Today. We are still reaping the fruits.

*Translated by Naòmi Morgan*

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## About the Authors

**Gérard Courant** is a French independent filmmaker, writer, actor, poet and producer. He is one of the most prolific filmmakers in cinema. He invented, directed and produced the *CINÉMATON*, the longest film in the world. In all, he has shot several thousand filmed portraits and a very large number of other films since the mid-1970s. He has been filming since his early days, what he calls *FILM DIARIES*, which are both diary and archive films. In 2011, the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) created a Gérard Courant collection, and in 2015, the Lyon Municipal Archives with all the films he shot in his native city. Important retrospectives of his films have been organized all over the world. His films can be seen on his YouTube channels. Official website: <http://www.gerardcourant.com>.

**Dominique Chateau** is Emeritus Professor of Aesthetics and Cinema at the Sorbonne School of the Arts at Panthéon-Sorbonne University, Paris I. His books include: *Cinéma et philosophie* (2003), *Philosophies du cinéma* (2010), *Subjectivity* (ed. 2011), *L'invention du concept de montage. Lev Kouléchov, théoricien du cinéma* (2013), *La direction de spectateur* (ed. 2015), *Après Charlie: Le déni de la représentation* (2016), *Screens* (ed. 2016), *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage* (2019), *Esthétique de la recreation* (ed. 2019), and *Une esthétique japonaise* (2019).

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## 19. Documentary as Contemporary Art – A Dialogue

*Wang Bing, Dominique Chateau and José Moure*

### Abstract

Wang Bing can be considered one of the greatest representatives of contemporary Chinese cinema. A meeting between him, Dominique Chateau and José Moure at a Master Class, as part of a series of Interface meetings at the Panthéon-Sorbonne University, Paris I in 2019, led to the idea of this present dialogue. Here, Wang (whose films are off the beaten track in many ways) clarifies his connection to various issues raised by post-cinema, in particular, the consequences of technological changes with regard to film creation and distribution and evolution in the aesthetic conception of cinema.

**Keywords:** China, documentary, art

**Dominique Chateau/José Moure:** The cinema you practice is in line with technological progress. Your way of filming people for long periods of time in the hope of a fruitful meeting, was difficult to envisage during the film-on-film era. What part and role do you assign to equipment in your documentary approach, and especially to lightweight digital cameras?

**Wang Bing:**<sup>1</sup> It is true that small, lightweight video and digital cameras allow for a more direct link and above all greater freedom, in the sense that it makes it possible to integrate the environment of ordinary people and their daily lives into the shot. The light weight makes it possible to approach the characters as closely as possible, which gives you greater freedom, something you realize as you get closer to the subject, to the people you are

1 Chinese names are written here in their traditional form: surname first.



Wang Bing, 2019. Photo credit: Wang Bing

filming. It is thus another type of cinema, where characters can be filmed in close proximity, accompanied in their daily existence and in their lives until all barriers are overcome. This at once gives you a type of freedom, which you only appreciate as you get closer and closer to the subjects. It's a different cinematographic sensibility, a greater proximity to the truth, both in terms of people's inner motivations and their actions. With this equipment the observation is such that I myself feel as close as possible to that which I observe of people. On this basis, thanks to this equipment, I feel that I can achieve exactly what I want to in cinema. I thus feel attracted to the characters; I find a cinematographic possibility in them, which has the advantage of not being a copy of what already exists in cinema. Every time I embark on a new documentary, it is because I am attracted to the subject of my film.

**DC/JM:** The description of your approach to documentaries seems to indicate that you conceive of them in a particular way. Moreover, confining yourself to a genre seems contrary to your conception. You belong to a moment in the history of cinema and the media when the "classical" nomenclature is being challenged, in favor of an approach that is freer. Can you clarify your position as far as documentaries are concerned? How did you choose this film genre? How does it contribute to your conception of cinema?

**WB:** Firstly, I must say that when I started making documentaries, I had not done any research nor special studies in relation to this genre; I had seen very few documentaries but, conversely, I had seen a lot of fiction. When you leave the institution where you studied, you are faced with the difficulty of looking for job opportunities. With the arrival of the Panasonic 3CDD camera, I thought maybe it was a good idea to make documentaries, that it was a more plausible project. That's when I found myself in the world of *WEST OF THE TRACKS* (2003), the world of factories. I approached the shooting and my work as a documentary filmmaker under these conditions, with the experience that I had – the films I had seen during my studies, what I had read about cinema – and it was on that basis that I formulated my ideas on how to approach making films.

From the moment you take a camera to interfere with the universe of the characters you have decided to film, with their lives, there is an attraction that puts you on track of how the film will be made. It was in this rather risky way, which was quite limited as far as filming conditions were concerned, that gradually I was able to develop my film style, thanks to a light and very inexpensive camera which nonetheless opened up very wide horizons for me.

**DC/JM:** You made a fictional film, *THE DITCH*, whose subject is very close to that of your documentaries. Is there no boundary between documentary and fiction for you?

**WB:** I approach documentaries by being as close as possible to the characters. We know how objective cinema is, whether it is documentary or fiction. But as for the documentary, from the moment I speak in terms of cinematographic sequences, I consider that a certain sequence and that which brings it to life is true. Film is like putting truth sequences end to end; once they have been placed end to end, they will tell a story. On the other hand, for fiction, each image in the film is fiction, which does not mean that once these images have been reorganized, the result will not also be true in the end, but it will be a subjective truth. The purpose of organizing these images is to enable the viewer to exercise his or her subjectivity during his or her reading of them.

**DC/JM:** In the quest for subjects and during filming, does waiting play a role, waiting for something to happen, for an encounter to take place, for that encounter to seem worthy of being filmed? For example, can *MAN WITH NO NAME* not be considered as a film about waiting in the way André Bazin defined Flaherty's *NANOOK OF THE NORTH* (1922)? More generally,

these opportunities for encounters, these simple, daily events that you film, do they happen by chance or are they prepared or even provoked in one way or another?

**WB:** Film quickly becomes a part of your life from the moment you start in this business. When we start to think “cinema,” to think about the different problems of cinema, everything relating to filmed characters and cinematographic form is very exciting and puts us in a certain state which is the desire to make films. When I met the man with no name in 2000, when this character suddenly appeared in front of me, at that moment, standing before him, I immediately wondered how to make a film about him. It was obvious to me then: from the moment I took the camera to start filming him, everything that came into the frame had an incredible attraction. If your eyes are not fixed like that by what you encounter, you will not decide to film. I think that this is anything but a waiting position. If I were to take a waiting position, not only would I not have the patience, but I would have no intention of creating. I think that when one waits, it means that the attraction, which links image to character, is absent. It would make me nervous to be in this kind of situation; in that case, I would stop everything and stop filming. As soon as the camera starts rolling and we have a frame with a character who develops, whom we observe in his daily life, all the details, everything that is happening, every movement, every act is something which attracts me, which becomes my motivation, until the action ends: at that moment I stop the camera. I wasn’t expecting the encounter with the man with no name at all, but after he had appeared before me and I had decided to film him, all these gestures, all these actions, everything that I had perceived and observed about him attracted me; there was no doubt about it then, I had to film him, if there had been any doubt, I wouldn’t have filmed him.

**DC/JM:** You say that “to film is to travel.” Gilles Deleuze spoke of “a film stroll” and, in a course on cinema, he said about people appearing in this kind of film: “what happens to them does not belong to them” (1982, n.p.; our translation). Is this a way to define the characters you film? What is your concern when you enter the dead zones that you film, where we meet the “dead souls”?

**WB:** If there is one thing that is certain, it is that to film I have to go to very different places. I am always traveling. But there are other meanings to this journey. Firstly, we suddenly find ourselves involved in the lives of others.

Then, on an inner level, it is also a sensitive, sentimental journey. In any case, I am never in a creative situation against my will. I meet someone and I want to film this person. I need to be immersed in the place before initiating the act of filming. For example, for *WEST OF THE TRACKS*, I arrived on location in 1992, but I only started filming in 1999. In most cases, when I was filming, I was already familiar with the location and the people, and the time I spent there gave me more freedom of choice. In this case, I am in a state of optimal concentration. It's as though nothing bothers me, nothing interferes with my act of filming. To film people and children in their homes, on board the trains that circulate inside the factories, the time I spent living with them makes it easier to make the film and gives me greater freedom as a filmmaker.

As for the subject of *DEAD SOULS*, it was initially a subject I did not know well. While the shooting of *WEST OF THE TRACKS* was completed in 18 months, the shooting of *DEAD SOULS* lasted three years, from 2005 to 2008. Another feature of this film: it was while shooting that I was gradually integrated into the world of these people, that I gradually conceived of the subject I had to deal with. In fact, I was still shooting for this film until 2017.

As regards the choice of film subjects, as regards the time and country in which I live, as regards what is happening in my region, I absolutely need to address subjects that make me want to move on to directing. I am not a filmmaker who can respond to commissions.

**DC/JM:** In the interaction with the characters you film, for example in your relationship with the woman you interview in *FENGMING, A CHINESE MEMOIR*, there is a certain distance and minimum interaction. It would seem that, for you, respect for the other and erasure of the filmmaker go hand in hand. Can this attitude be considered a way of conceiving the filming device? At the same time, there is the question of your own body, in the sense that filming requires physical adaptation. For example, when you enter the “hole” where the “man with no name” lives. Do you think that cinema passes through the body as much as through speech?

**WB:** From the moment you decide to make a film, what matters is the location of the film, where it takes place; what matters is to control the film situation and not the feelings that bind you to the character. Of course, during the filming process there are sometimes sudden breaks, sudden changes that require getting closer to the subject, changing direction, changing the way we film, according to a transformation which affects feelings. Sometimes, on the contrary, we allow what we are documenting to happen

and we prevent ourselves from abandoning ourselves to feelings. When we focus on the frame, sometimes, in the midst of everything happening inside it, actions, characters, gestures, something forces itself on us, so that we have to get as close as possible to the subject, to feel in the most intense way possible what is happening; we are then confronted with the question of the right distance, the perception of the right distance which will make people feel what we are feeling ourselves. For example, in the case of *MAN WITH NO NAME*, just because the cave he is living in is dirty does not mean that the camera has to stay outside; if we have to enter this universe, we enter it. I think that everything which interests me and which fits into the frame of my camera, everything that transpires from the character's living environment, because we followed him to enter his universe, also produces the interest that the viewer will experience and that will make him or her decide to continue watching the film.

**DC/JM:** Is there an aesthetic aim in your films? By aesthetic aim, we can firstly understand the choices of genre, form, subject that constitute your personal aesthetics (your personal conception of the aesthetic value of the film). How do you define your personal aesthetics? By aesthetics, we can also mean aestheticization (in Walter Benjamin's sense): to aestheticize the world is to beautify it, to eventually make it acceptable to those who are its victims; Walter Benjamin ([1935] 2003) said that fascism aestheticizes war, the masses, etc. The characteristics of your relationship with the filmed subjects suggest that you refuse this embellishment, but that you also refuse any affirmation of ideology or political position.

**WB:** When, after my studies, I started directing, my personal background differed from that of Western directors, among others. Whether in terms of cinematographic style, the conception and aesthetics of cinema and, beyond cinema, the entire artistic world, what characterizes China is strongly determined by an ideology that corresponds to a system and an ideological history that leads to a certain aesthetic, according to a certain norm in force. I started working at the turning point of the millennium, in 1999-2000, at a time when, for many artists in China, the way of working changed considerably. I remember that at the time, in a country guided by an ideological and aesthetic norm, I was driven by the absolute need to break away from that norm, by the essential objective of breaking with those habits.

I think that people's relationship to cinema, their understanding and knowledge of it, is determined by society; what is determined by society

influences us personally, even if subconsciously. What matters to me is to forget about it as much as possible. It is not only about the fact that we cannot tell a certain story, approach a certain subject, say things in a certain way, it is much broader than that in the sense that it is a form that is imposed on us, an aesthetic that is imposed on us. My first reaction is to forget all this, so that it does not appear in my films as a constraint that would pollute them. This means that we must build our own perception of things through a permanent reflection on what we want and what we do not want, in order to find ourselves in front of the blank page of a blank space of creation. The question is not simply to film something real or not, that is more true or not, but to face a culture in its entirety. It is not like asserting a political position, even if my political position is very clear, but it is about cleaning up anything that could disrupt the film itself in terms of the art form as a whole. It also means that we must return to the fundamental questions: what is cinema, how is it defined and what is our relationship to it?

**DC/JM:** In 2009, the Chantal Crousel gallery dedicated a solo exhibition to you. *FENGMING* and *MAN WITH NO NAME* were screened on this occasion. In 2018, again, there was a second exhibition in the same gallery with the projection of the long version of *MRS FANG* and *BEAUTY LIVES IN FREEDOM* (while *TRACES* [2014] was “continuously broadcast in the exhibition space”<sup>2</sup>). You express your preference for this method of distribution, which associates you with contemporary art. What does it mean to you to transfer cinema into the exhibition space and to match it with contemporary art? What is the difference between the presentation of your films in museums and in a cinema?

**WB:** You could say that a cinematographic work in cinemas is characterized by the fact that there is a story, a narrative, but it is more complicated than that insofar as each director has his own way of conceiving the story and the narrative. If a film seen in a cinema had no narrative line, it would be missing something, whereas in installations and museums the situation is different. From the moment the animated image was on film, with the Lumière Brothers or Edison, the envisaged goal was to project it in a cinema in front of an audience, while the appearance of digital technology produced new material reinvested by animated images, which does not necessarily belong to the cinema legacy. Audio-visual images are different from cinema;

2 See <https://www.crousel.com/home/exhibition/1108/Wang-Bing> (Galerie Chantal Crousel 2018; our translation).

projected in the exhibition space, they are part of an expansion of the image in relation to the material and space of cinema. Just because we are talking about moving images does not necessarily mean that we are talking about cinema: we can look at moving images in exhibition spaces or on our smartphones as well as in a cinema. It is as though the image were an independent material and then it became cinema or something else. The fact that birth determined a link between the moving image and cinema does not mean that they are linked forever. Cinema has a real tradition in terms of storytelling, narrative, but various habits that we later adopted in the audio-visual sector have been disconnected from this tradition of cinema. This is the new experiment that we are making with audio-visual material that can be used in the gallery and museum exhibition to target another form of expression. With the advent of digital technology and new materials, it is a bit like a virus that circulates at high speed and invades the whole space. It is as if the artists who used images for installations in exhibition spaces carried with them an aesthetic experience and even an experience of the narrative that was different from that which could be drawn from film practice. I can relate to that; these new ways of producing and distributing images arouse my curiosity, as well as another way of looking at documentary and a different experience in which I want to participate. On a daily basis, in my reflection, I have moved from a reflection related to cinema to a reflection more related to the conditions of exhibition in contemporary art.

**DC/JM:** In that case, your aesthetics are characterized by an emancipation from any preconceived idea of what a film should be. In addition, this freedom is reflected notably in the length of the films. For example, *DEAD SOULS*, presented out of competition at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, is a film of more than 8 hours and 15 minutes. What makes this film duration possible?

**WB:** We were saying earlier to what extent digital technology has brought great freedom to cinema, to what extent it is a great revolution for cinema, but now there is also the multiplication of broadcasting methods. So I have works that are presented in galleries and museums, and we can find ourselves in this kind of space with a work broadcast from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., over an eight-hour period, just like we can do a 30-minute work and play it over an 8-hour period. This urges me to use this distinctive feature of time in its length, particularly because in the space of eight hours we can have a work that will not be repeated; it allows people who enter the space and

find themselves facing the screen to decide for themselves if they will stay for a short time, see only one passage or, on the contrary, stay for very long.

If, for me, it is a different situation from cinema, it is to the extent that the animated image is presented in the exhibition space; on the other hand, when I shot *DEAD SOULS*, which was 8 hours and 15 minutes long, I wanted to make a work of cinema and not a work for galleries or museums. The reason for the 8 hours and 15 minutes lies in the subject, in a very rich content that would have made it impossible to make a short film. I know that, in relation to such a long work, there are many people who, to the extent that today we do not have to see films in cinemas, would choose to watch it at home. For me, whether it is a story or an event, from the moment we decide to tell it, it must be done in the most complete way possible, the narrative must be as complete as possible.

As regards *DEAD SOULS*, for the moment I have only directed one part of it. There are still two parts that have not yet been edited. It is a project in three parts: the first part thus consists of 8 hours and 15 minutes; the second part will be a little longer. Anyway, the project will be one in which each of the sections is about eight or nine hours long. It may seem like a very long time, but I think that a person who has decided to watch a certain subject is free to do so at his own pace, dividing the film as he wishes.

**DC/JM:** At the Sorbonne, you said: “My works in themselves, whether exhibited in a museum or gallery, are without interest, but the people [who have been filmed] have a place in a museum or gallery.” You display a precise position, which regulates both your relationship to observation (“art is observation”) and to the filmed subjects: they are the people that society neglects, that History has crushed and emptied, so that their presence in the film and their exhibition in the gallery constitute a solemn act. May we say about you what Jonas Mekas (2016) said about independent cinema: ethics dominates aesthetics?

**WB:** I am extremely respectful of the work done in museums, of the collection of the works done by them, and I wonder what I can do for them with the utmost seriousness. I absolutely do not want to rush things and I am thinking about the most serious way to respond to requests. Generally, I am keen to put the focus on those characters who are part of my contemporary works of art, because they endure a lot of suffering as individuals, both in terms of history and of their personal characteristics, in terms of what China represents, but also in terms of their talents. For example, given that the museum space is an extremely serious, demanding place, I believe that

the characters of FENGMING (in FENGMING, A CHINESE MEMOIR) or Gao Ertai, the man I filmed in BEAUTY LIVES IN FREEDOM (2018), and others to come, all have their place here, especially when you see how little respect anyone in China has for them. These are human beings who are never chosen in China to be in the forefront. When I realized that galleries and museums were interested in my work, I thought it was an opportunity for those individuals to enter these spaces, so that they too could have their place as individuals among the collections of artworks.

*Translated by Naomi Morgan*

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## About the Authors

**Wang Bing**, born in 1967 in Xi'an in the Shaanxi Province, can be considered one of the greatest representatives of contemporary Chinese cinema (along with Jia Zhangke). He studied photography at Luxun Arts University in Shenyang and film at Beijing Film Academy. He has directed both fiction and documentary films including: WEST OF THE TRACKS (2003), FENGMING, A CHINESE MEMOIR (2007), COAL MONEY (2008), MAN WITH NO NAME (2009), THE DITCH (2010), THREE SISTERS (2012), TILL MADNESS DO US PART (2013), TA'ANG (2016), MRS. FANG (2017), BEAUTY LIVES IN FREEDOM (2018) and DEAD SOULS (2018). Books on his filmic work include the Italian collection of texts,

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