

Cinema and Visual Studies in the Digital Era Blue

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'NO ONE GOES TO THE MOVIES ANYMORE:'(1) CINEMA AND VISUAL STUDIES IN THE DIGITAL ERA BLUE

WITHIN the variegated domain of media studies, convergence seems to be one of the buzzwords of the day. Forms that were previously discrete entities merge into new constellations, in the process uprooting the entire ecosystem of the media. Business conglomerates merge, on the cultural horizon new technologies continuously emerge, and the different artistic practices flow seamlessly into each other to produce works that are thoroughly hybrid and transaesthetic. The landscape of the arts and the media already looks radically different from what it did less than a decade ago. Coinciding with all these changes is another and – in Europe, at least – perhaps less heralded kind of convergence, which is first and foremost institutional and disciplinary in nature. This is the relatively recent appearance of the field of visual studies, also sometimes referred to as visual culture or visual culture studies, a budding but still very much contested amalgamation of art history, film studies, anthropology, feminism, and cultural studies whose provenance dates back to the early 1990s and the interdisciplinary experiments that were undertaken at some American universities at the time. Currently there are signs that visual studies programs are being introduced across European institutions as well, typically nested within media studies or art history departments.

The question that I would like to delve into in this paper is this: what will become of cinema in an age of not only aesthetic but also disciplinary convergence? Is the discipline we all know as cinema studies going to be integrated as part of a new mother discipline known as visual studies, or perhaps a general *Bildwissenschaft* in Horst Bredekamp's sense? Or, given the efflorescent rise of computer games and other new media among the younger generations, will cinema take its place alongside art history as an archaeological and mostly obsolescent medium, presided over by curators and archivists only? What are the challenges vis-à-vis teaching cinema studies in the context of a broader history of visibility? When film has become something that is available to us in a multitude of formats, does this spell the final parting of the ways of film and cinema? Is the particular sensibility known as cinephilia compatible with the notion of watching movies on your mobile phone? Finally, what are the prospects for film theory in this new era of digital convergence and visual studies?

The inaugural conference of The European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS) that took place in Vienna in June 2007 was an opportune moment to ponder the fate of cinema as a medium and social institution, to take stock of the condition of our field in an age of media convergence. When the NECS was established in February 2006, it was preceded by a decade's worth of proclamations of the death of cinema, resounding both from within the academic echelons and from the culture at large. Against this backdrop, the NECS initiative may seem almost a little surprising, a belated closing of the ranks in the face of unprecedented upheavals in an ever more globalized media environment. The founding of an organization like NECS at this particular point in time could also, of course, be considered not only a symptom of the field's continued and perhaps enhanced vigour, but also as simultaneous exposure and dispelling of the myth of the death of cinema.

That isn't to say that things haven't changed. When, what a decade later would become the The Society of Cinema Studies,⁽²⁾ was launched in 1959 (they were then known as "cinematologists") – on the cusp of the French New Wave – the new films of the year included titles such as Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, Bresson's *Pickpocket*, Buñuel's *Nazarín*, Chabrol's *Les Cousins*, Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*, Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, Cassavetes's *Shadows*, Hawks's *Rio Bravo*, Ray's *The World of Apu*, and Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder*, to name a few. These, as you all know very well, were the golden days of global cinephilia. Fifty years later movie theatres and ciné clubs across Europe and the United States are closing down with little fanfare, hurriedly yet almost unnoticeably. When I was on a sabbatical in Berkeley this last winter, we lived in an apartment complex situated on a lot that had previously been the address of one of the city's eminent movie houses, The Fine Arts Cinema Building, where American audiences were introduced to the likes of Bergman and Kurosawa what seems like a hundred years ago. The palaces of fantasy have become

real estate. Perhaps there are two different deaths going on here, the death of cinema and the death of film culture. Perhaps it is *cinophilia*, not film, which is dying. And perhaps it is *cinema*, not film, which is dying. At any rate, the many recent reports on the death of cinema seem to form what could be termed a mortality narrative.

A recurrent discourse that has become a favourite subject among journalists and cultural and media critics of a certain ilk it seems, this narrative constitutes what is a rather paradoxical topic, as these reminders of the medium's imminent demise in fact represent a way in which to keep film fresh in the consciousness of those who would otherwise neglect to pay it any mind. But the mortality discourse does seem to have inscribed itself into the ways in which the medium now perceives its own condition and thus, implicitly, its future or teleology. Three distinct assumptions apparently govern this perception. First, there is the privatization of the screen and the viewing venue/space of consumption consequent upon the rise and popularity of the DVD format and other digital systems. Second, there is the large-scale abandonment of movies as a recreational pastime by the generation born after 1985 (roughly), particularly in the United States, a generation raised on computer games and more explicitly interactive forms of entertainment. Third, there is the frequently voiced allegation that, at least in an American context, a spate of new television shows (particularly on HBO) now have surpassed feature films in terms of aesthetic sophistication and cultural intelligence.⁽³⁾ And, finally, the mortality discourse is certainly not foreign to the academic turf either, to which titles such as Jon Lewis's *The End of Cinema as we know it* (and especially Wheeler Winston Dixon's "Twenty-five Reasons Why it's All Over") and Paolo Cherchi Usai's *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* testify (both 2001). Even in the movies themselves the theme of that vanishing art has occasionally been brought up, as in Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003).

The latest but undoubtedly not the last sounding of this mournful refrain comes courtesy of cultural critic Camille Paglia and film scholar and regular *Sight and Sound* contributor Peter Matthews. In a column in *Salon.com* in August 2007, Paglia conveys the sense of finality and loss felt by many upon the deaths of illustrious auteurs Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni. "[I]s there a single film produced over the past 35 years," she asks rhetorically, "that is arguably of equal philosophical weight or virtuosity of execution to Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* or *Persona*?" (2007). The question is as preposterous as it is embarrassing, and it can either mean that Paglia is instinctively reiterating an anachronistic dogma or, that she has not been to the movies in 35 years. She most certainly cannot be familiar with films like Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Banishment* (2006), Roy Andersson's *You, the Living* (2006), or Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007). Maybe the ongoing mythicization of 50s and 60s cinophilia is inescapable, especially now that the last of its objects of veneration are fading, but the truth of the matter is that contemporary art cinema is at least as good as, if not superior to, that of the golden age in both quality and quantity.

In an essay given the mildly hyperbolic title "The End of an Era: A Cinephile's Lament," Peter Matthews is evidently of a different opinion. The "great, visionary enterprise of cinema is over," Matthews mourns, and from now on "there are to be no more masterpieces – uniquely luminous works describing the finest vibrations of the creator's soul" (2007, 17). Cultural pessimism, it seems, never goes out of fashion. Symbolically charged as the simultaneous deaths of those two celluloid giants may have been, the moment was not so much a closure of an era as an inevitable occurrence that has little to do with the state of contemporary cinema. Sadly, the passing of Bergman and Antonioni completely overshadowed the loss of Edward Yang, who also died this summer (2007), aged 59. His films from *That Day, on the Beach* (1983) to *Yi Yi* (2000) were a testament to the plenitude and power of the post-Bergman filmic era, a vitality of spirit and imagination that Matthews seems either unable or unwilling to acknowledge. Besides, the linear and eschatological understanding that he brings to bear on the subject is peculiarly out of step with the revamped sense of historical temporality ushered in by the digitalization of our textualized past. As filmmakers, Bergman and Antonioni belong as much to the present and the future as to the decades of febrile cinophilia in the 1950s and 1960s.

Matthews's bones of contention can be usefully summarized as the following. First: blood, sweat and tears. The aesthetic quality of a film seems to be proportional to the amount of sheer physical toil that has gone into the process of making it. If this were to be a felicitous benchmark of artistic worth, one would have to preclude most of our literary heritage from the history of aesthetics. Second: access. According to Matthews, "[i]nstant gratification is corrupting, while a too-easy facility engenders spiritual sloth" (2007, 17). While

as an avid vinyl aficionado and collector I can easily recognize and even sympathize with this notion, it nonetheless appears muddled. After all, wouldn't most of us still prefer to watch, say Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (1951) on DVD rather than not at all? "[S]ince I can dip into it anytime, I never do" (2007, 18), Matthews confesses, but people manifestly do watch films on DVD and they do it all the time. Third: what Matthews refers to as the *domestication* and *suburbanization* of cinema. On the small screen the film image becomes a televisual image, and hence the magic that was cinema dies. Matthews is not entirely mistaken here, but one must not forget that the relishing of every detail within the frame that the pausing of the image allows partially compensates for the diminutive size. Anyhow, it is not like all film theatres and multiplexes have shut down just yet, and the proliferation of film festivals nowadays is such that one hardly needs to travel very far to see the latest Béla Tarr movie. Fourth: the shortcomings of CGI. Sterile and shallow it may be, but the medium and its techniques are still in their infancy and digital filmmaking is not necessarily tantamount to CGI. Maybe I didn't pay enough attention, but I could not detect too much computer-generated imagery in *Saraband* (Bergman, 2003) or *The Return* (Zvyagintsev, 2003). Finally, Matthews's essay comes close to mistaking a perceived lapse of cinematic quality for what is in effect a critical inadequacy. At least that is the impression one gets from an allegation like this: "One might still try to affirm that Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies* and Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* are masterpieces, but the term is gutted and degraded by its promiscuous application to everything from Peter Jackson's stolid, affectless *Lord of the Rings* trilogy to Quentin Tarantino's nihilistic chic" (2007, 18). But the whole premise of the argument is logically flawed. A name is just a name. The qualitative difference between *Werckmeister Harmonies* and *Lord of the Rings* is immense, and the fact that some viewers regard the latter as a masterpiece does not detract anything from the former.

The domestication of cinema that Matthews bemoans may restrict some of the sensuous pleasures of the theatrical film – and it clearly dictates a rethinking of theories of spectatorship – but at the same time this change in the material conditions of watching films also paves the way for what may paradoxically be a deeper level of commitment to the textures of the filmic. New technologies, writes Laura Mulvey, "are able to reveal the beauty of the cinema, but through a displacement that breaks the bond of specificity so important to my generation of filmmakers and theorists" (2003, 81). The exhibition context of the theatrical film thwarts the efforts on part of the spectator to scrutinize and inhabit the moving image, and our absorption in the visual abundance before us is always interrupted by the demands of the narrative. An image is always replaced by another image, in a process of substitution over which the viewers have no control. When watching a film on DVD, on the other hand, they are permitted to "stop, look, and think" (Mulvey 2003, 81). To the extent that the visual is a more medium-specific component of film than narrativity, one could make the (probably heretic) claim that the domestication of cinema as a matter of fact accentuates film's singular visuality in ways that the theatrical film experience fails to do.

Film studies may be a melancholy science, but that is not because the medium is dying. One of the problems with the discourse about the death of cinema is that it is grounded in a misconception of what film is and on a static and segregationist view of the media. It would evidently be downright non-sensical to reduce the ontology of the moving image to a question of its exhibition context. For some time now, viewers have downloaded movies to their computers and cell phones, bought or rented films on DVD, or visited the art museum and galleries to watch moving images. Some have even gone to a theatre or multiplex. Undoubtedly, there are those who would claim that only the latter venue would have anything to do with what most of us think of as cinema – as opposed to film in general. While I tend to lean in that direction myself, I am not at all sure that the notion of the cinematic ought to hinge solely on that particular space or situation. The cinematic, I believe, is more – and really something else – than a question of materiality, of technology, of spaces, even of discrete films. Rather, it is a form of experience, a state of mind, a certain sensibility, a kind of spiritual phenomenology, perhaps. The death of this sensibility – admittedly vague in my rendering of it here – poses a much more considerable threat to the survivability of cinema than do the twin phenomena of media convergence and digitalization. The difficulty of gauging this semi-metaphysics of cinematicity does not mean that it does not exist. But am I not simply talking about that good, old concept of cinephilia here? Not quite. Cinephilia was an historically defined cultural and social practice, and its moment is irretrievably gone. Despite recent scholarly attempts to resuscitate the idea – such as Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin's edited collection *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of world Cinephilia* (2003) and Christian Keathley's *Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees* (2006) – the cinephilia of the year 1959 is not

ours and does not translate all that easily into a 21st century passion for films.

The stakes are high in the ongoing efforts to wield definitional power over the meaning of cinema in its digital future, and a hint of emotionalism no doubt accompanies this discussion. A case in point is Roman Polanski's much publicized storm-out from a press conference at this year's (2007) Cannes festival, supposedly for being provoked by what he felt were inane questions, many of which focused on the future of cinema in the digital age. And a few years ago, the ever iconoclastic Godard acerbically dismissed the digital image on account of its compactness: In the subway, he wryly pointed out, "nobody likes to be compressed. In digital technology, everybody likes it. But part of the image is lost [...] Focusing is gone, perspective is gone, everything is both blurred and sharp. There is no impression of light. It's the style of video games. Playstation, the Internet" (2002, 34).

But this isn't the time nor the place to be elegiac. As cinema scholars, we have better things to do. Like trying to consolidate the best work from the past and finding our way in a cultural climate where both the mediality, aesthetics and sociology of cinema are rapidly changing. Like determining the nature of the relationship film studies should have with the emerging area of visual studies and with the advance of digital aesthetics at large. A forthcoming conference at San Francisco State University, "Shoot, Rip & Burn: Cinema's Digital Insurgency," raises a host of questions that impinge equally and crucially upon the thinking through of these issues:

Is digital cinema an oxymoron? In an age of new media, do "cinematic" practices and theories remain useful? How have new digital media changed our conceptions of what cinema is and what it can be? What cinematic possibilities have been opened or foreclosed by digital media? To what extent will a digital cinema contravene the politics of traditional cinema?⁽⁴⁾

If the notion of cinema should not be reduced to an effect of materiality or technology – as I have just argued – then digital cinema cannot be an oxymoron. After all, the term that in the late 19th century named the medium – the "writing of movement" – was conceptual, not technological or social. The means of production, distribution and exhibition would therefore have to be secondary to the most foundational facet of the cinema, which is that it contains our shared cache of moving images. As for the problem of indexicality which has resurfaced with the expansion of the digital – and which I shall refrain from pursuing here due to the scarcity of time – suffice it for now to note that the cinema was already home to non-indexical moving images long before the advent of the digital.

In an essay a couple of years ago, Dudley Andrew wrote about what he called the "three ages" of cinema studies and asked a fundamental question: "Does cinema studies recognize itself as it enters a new century?" (2000, 345). As the first half century of studying film came to an end, Andrew observed, its object was exposed to forces of dispersal and deregulation. What was, and still is, at stake would be the stability of the field's object of study, as well as "the contemporaneity of [the discipline's] mission" and "the politics of the academy" (2000, 350). These are concerns the anxiety over which has not abated but on the contrary increased in the seven years since Andrew published his article. In this brief biography of the life of film studies, the third and "Current" age is – with respect to approaches, methods and interests – characterized by heterogeneity and pluralism (sites of plural inquiry would for instance be history, reception studies and intermedia). It is preceded by what Andrew dubs the "Stone Age" and the "Imperial Age," described in terms of amateurism /auteurism and disciplinization /theory respectively (Andrew 2000, 345). The identity of the field of cinema studies, from its auteurist childhood through its theory-driven adolescence, appears to be anything but stable, and the complexity of this ever mutable identity is reflected in the discipline's strenuous attainment of adulthood.

With its imperial age purportedly behind it, where does cinema studies go from here? Realizing that predictions of this sort are largely futile, I wish instead to turn my attention, at long last, toward the disciplinary relation between film and visual studies anticipated by this paper's title but so long withheld from the discussion (although in my defence I would like to emphasize the deep continuity that exists between the mortality discourse surrounding cinema as a medium and the subject of the digital on the one hand, and the connection between film and visual studies on the other). In his essay, Dudley Andrew contends that the cinema represents a threshold art, defined by its "in-between-ness," its intermediary positions between popular genres such as pop music, television and magazines and highbrow genres like literature, opera and

theatre, between old-fashioned technology such as celluloid and HDTV and digitality, and between corporate modes of production and the auteur mode (2000, 348).

Andrew, furthermore, interestingly suggests that "the cinema should be taken as a transitional medium that carries forward from the nineteenth century powerful traditions of narrative and visual representation." Hence, he continues, students of the medium "should understand this heritage, should sense its development in classic, modern, and postmodern cinema even as new media and new functions in art and entertainment arrive" (2000, 348). But not only is film a threshold art, it has also always embodied a *gesamtkunstmedial* propensity and produced an aesthetic gesture that is on the whole incorporative. The ontological impurity of cinema means that the principles of convergence are immanent to the form of the medium. That, in addition to the fact that the institutionalization of film studies was an outcome of collaborative efforts between scholars trained in the traditional disciplines, should bide well for the future of film studies within possible new disciplinary configurations based in visual studies. Film has never been an autonomous medium to begin with, as Lisa Cartwright has noted (2002, 8), and if the scholars of the discipline's infancy and adolescence (or its "Stone Age," and "Imperial Age," to remain with Andrew's terms) could do worthwhile work coming from interdisciplinary backgrounds, so, surely, can the scholars of the discipline's maturity.

Film studies in the era of visual culture, media convergence and the digital also coincides with another disciplinary transformation: that from – in historical terms – a relative institutional novelty to a firmly established research formation. Some scholars that I've been talking to in the United States lately have voiced a concern over the diminishing filmic literacy among the younger generation, arguing that the game culture is to cinema what the cinema was to the novel a generation or two ago. Whether that is an accurate assessment is obviously yet to be ascertained, and although I shall refrain from presenting visual studies as an all-purpose solution to educational challenge, I do think that this is a timely institutional juncture from which to reconsider the existing cartographies of our various visual media and maybe start to mold a contextualizing pedagogy sufficiently adequate to meet the demands of a digital, if not post-digital, culture. After all, the still youthful visual culture tradition is an offspring of the synthesis of art history, cinema studies, and cultural anthropology, so our field is in a very real sense a partial origin of a transdisciplinary creation which promises to provide nothing less than a new umbrella iconology. Cinema stands at the intersection of this future *Bildwissenschaft*, as it both remediates the forms and visibility of older media such as painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, dance and theatre and is in turn remediated by later interactive genres like video games and so on.

So where is the place of cinema in the age of visual studies? Does cinema studies still have an identifiable, recognizable object, or is it disintegrating and dissolving into a kind of undifferentiated electronic visibility? Is digital cinema an oxymoron? Is film evolving from a sculptural to a painterly medium, as David Rodowick recently has asserted? (Potier 2005). First of all, the alliance of cinema and visual studies may not be as drastic a measure as some may think, in part because film – as I just pointed out – already constitutes a significant part of the new field, and in part because film studies still tends to be carried out under the larger institutional auspices of media departments or cultural studies, and sometimes even comparative literature or art history. Moreover, by broadening the scope from film to its sister arts, one acknowledges the vital and persistent continuity which exists between all moving images. Thus, the idea of a mutually enriching relationship between film and other visual media need not seem like such an outlandish prospect, especially if we, for a moment, put aside the widespread supposition that the rise of visual studies programs correlates with objectives within the academy to downsize and rationalize. According to Cartwright, the history of cinema is more medium-specific than that of print culture/literature, which has absorbed both film, television and hypertext into itself (2002, 9). One could argue, then, that cinema studies would do well to emulate the accommodationist energies of the field of literary studies. At the risk of sounding colonialist, perhaps it is film studies – re-acquainted with that distinctive, unparaphraseable sensibility – that should contain visual studies, rather than the other way around?



Figure 1:

Notes

1. Line quoted in Tsai Ming-Liang's *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, 2003.
2. It was at the 1968 meeting at the University of California, Los Angeles that the organization acquired the name the Society for Cinema Studies. Twelve papers were presented at this conference. The number rose to nineteen at the New York University meeting in 1975, of which seven were devoted to André Bazin. From an increasing emphasis on theory in the 1970s (the 1979 program at an Francisco State University was dominated by theoretical approaches), the attention shifted in the direction of history throughout the 1980s. By 1998, at the University of California, San Diego meeting, film theoretical papers accounted for only 10 percent of the presentations and even fewer were devoted to traditional auteur or genre studies.
3. The last of these commonly rehearsed assertions is easily proven wrong, as the punters who embrace television shows and disparage the feature film can never seem to remember that the cinema is not limited to Hollywood. The global art cinema and the film festival market are probably in better shape than ever. But the second observation - that young people today have so fundamentally altered their media habits that film is not even on their agenda anymore is obviously thought-provoking and disquieting news for the cinema scholar.
4. See San Francisco State University's homepage at <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~cinegsa/>.

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