

The Cinema Spectator: A Rapidly-Mutating Species Viewing a Medium That Is Losing Its Bearings¹

Ever since the digital tsunami began radically to scramble the boundaries between media, cinema – or in any event cinema as we knew it – has, in some people's view, been *in the process of dying*. In a recently-published volume, entitled moreover *The End of Cinema* (duly followed by a question mark), Philippe Marion and I explore the effects of the most recent technological innovations on cinema and the crisis the medium is going through *in the digital era*.² In this volume, we attempt to demonstrate that, while cinema itself is far from dying out, there is nonetheless *something about cinema* that is dying, if only an "idea of cinema," to borrow the French title of the latest book by Dudley Andrew.³ As we are little disposed to sorrow, we even suggest, basing ourselves on our hypothesis of the "double birth of media," that it is possible to see this relative and partial death brought about by the advent of digital technology as something like the sign a *third birth of cinema* (a question I will address here).

Even though, as we know, the digital turn has produced a hitherto unseen *convergence* of media, this development is also concomitant with the production of a great number of divergences, if only that between *what cinema was* (or rather "the idea we had of cinema") before the digital shift and what cinema is in the process of becoming. Thus, among the most essential transformations it has brought about, the digital turn has thus given rise to the following phenomena:

- films are most often shown in *non*-celluloid formats;
- films are most often seen on *non*-movie-theatre screens;
- movie theatre screens often show *non*-cinema productions.

Here you will note the repetition of the same *seme par excellence* of being and non-being: "non." It is as if the emergence of digital technology gave rise to a sort of intercourse between what is and what isn't or as if the digital crisis instilled a kind of negative of itself.

Cinema itself is undergoing profound upheaval, but the wide-ranging changes being experienced by the creature known as the spectator are not far behind, especially given the fact that what viewers are confronted with

today is not the radical transformation of a single medium, cinema for example, but the radical transformation of the entire media ecosystem, all of whose elements are undergoing the same enormous effects brought on by the scrambling of boundaries between media to which the advent of digital culture has given rise. A scrambling to such an extent that cinema as a medium, and even our idea of it, is in a state of complete regression and dilution, is back in the running in places we did not expect it. There, against all expectations, it is proliferating, whether in material form such as the digital video disc or in a completely dematerialized form such as video on demand.

Nothing is simple when it comes to measuring the effects of the shocks and aftershocks of what Philippe Marion and I have called the gradual digitalizing of media. For, alongside this relative “regression” on the part of cinema, or rather, once again, of *the idea we had of cinema*, there has also and at the same time been a “progression.” It is now the case that:

- films are found on a number of *new* supports (discs, thumb drives, etc.);
- films are shown on a multiplicity of *new* screens;
- films are thus finding *new* audiences.

Here you will note the repetition of the same *seme par excellence* of “innovation,” the word “new.” It is as if the advent of the digital brought new life to an old “affair.” To such an extent that alongside those who, in the “cinema” sphere, never tired of announcing the death of the medium, many people rejoice, on the contrary, that cinema is gaining ground and is “more alive than ever.”⁴ Indeed there is a rather paradoxical situation, that of cinema’s *proliferation* alongside its *dissipation*, because while DVDs enable films to be viewed in a much more leisurely manner than before, the purely “cinematic” aspect of the film in question may now seem diluted, if only because it is no longer on... *film*. It nevertheless remains true that while the “DNA” of a film on DVD has lost some of its uniquely filmic “genes,” what we hold in our hands when we grasp one of these discs remains within the realm, just the same, of the “cinematic,” the shift from photo-chemical to digital technology notwithstanding. This shift, by the way, has caused the film “consumer” to lose many of his or her certainties concerning cinema’s identity, as it has turned all our screening habits *topsy-turvy*, in particular because of what I would call “film consultation:” I put on a DVD and can *consult* the sequence of images and sounds as I see fit, at the speed I want, in the order I want, and how I want. It’s a little like flipping through a book. The appearance of this means of “consulting films” is, in my view, a social phenomenon not sufficiently taken into account. Before, it was impossible and unthinkable to “consult” a film. We could only, quite simply, watch it (or rather “audio-view” it).⁵ This “novelty” has enormous repercussions for the spectator, who has become, by virtue of this very situation, neither more nor less than a *mutant*.

From this we might legitimately conclude that we are witnessing the advent of a *new kind of relation between film and viewer*.

But this is not all: the digital shift has also made it possible to introduce new kinds of “filmed” entertainment into movie theatres until now reserved almost exclusively for film. These new forms of entertainment do not correspond to our notion, still in force today, of cinema. They include such “non-film” presentations as operas, ballets, visits to museum exhibitions, sporting events, etc., and are a growing phenomenon in what I have suggested we call the *tele-agera*.

From this we might conclude that we are witnessing not only the advent of a new kind of relation between film and viewer but also a *new kind of relation with the movie theatre*.

This same kind of relation has, of course, taken hold amongst those specialized viewers we call scholars of “film studies” (a now quaint expression, which some people would not hesitate to call antiquated) who would be remiss if they overlooked, seated at their viewing stations, the advent of the *tele-agera* phenomenon.

Indeed the persistence of the *tele-agera* in movie theatres should attract the attention of scholars, all the more

corners of planet cinema, by passing to digital technology (we might almost say “by the passing of digital technology, the way we speak of the passing of a hurricane or tornado”). With respect to transformations, we must acknowledge that the most important of all remains the lessening, mentioned earlier, of cinema’s supremacy over all other audiovisual media. This was something Roland Barthes denounced way back in the 1960s: “cinema’s imperialism over other visual information processes can be understood historically, but cannot be justified epistemologically.”⁹

One of the most emblematic contemporary signs of the conclusion of the reign of the series “cinema” over other series employing “visual information techniques” is, to my eyes, the change to the identity of the principal film institution in France, the Centre National de Cinématographie (CNC), which in 2010 became the Centre national du cinéma et de l’image animée (while keeping the same acronym). This tiny gesture has enormous meaning, in my view. The adoption of the expression “cinema and moving images” (to replace the rather old-fashioned term French term “*cinématographie*,” little used today) clearly shows that the French institution was sensitive to the mood of the day and ready, in order to “modernize” its brand, to lessen cinema’s role in the media concert.

Indeed what is suggested by hitching cinema to other “moving images” is that cinema, in the end, is only one possible manifestation of moving pictures, that it represents only one of the moving picture arts and industries. On an epistemological level this is true, absolutely true even, however much that brings tears to the eyes of the greatest cinephiles amongst us. A small consolation: at least they didn’t go so far as to completely banish the word cinema and proclaim themselves the Centre national de l’image animée (but who can swear that this will not happen some day?).

Cinema, therefore, has not escaped unharmed from the “digitalizing” process. It has even lost a great deal of its aura. Indeed the advent of digital technology and the scrambling of boundaries that it has brought about have indisputably knocked cinema off its pedestal:

- a film is no longer a mysterious presence that I can only see by means of the beam of light arriving from behind my head and passing over my shoulder, coming from *I’m-not-sure-where-exactly* by means of an apparatus hidden from view. The end of the aura that accompanied the model of the model of the cave;
- by dematerialising, a film has become so light and nebulous that for some time now I have been able to hold one (or several!) in my hand, place it on the seat of my car and take it home; I can thus do whatever I like with it before starting it up with a device located in front of me that I control and which enables me to manipulate the images and sounds however I like as they flow past. The loss of the aura of the untouchable object, inaccessible to the average person and over which one has no hold or influence;
- the film is no longer necessarily viewed by me lurking in the shadows of a “viewing temple,” my neck twisted in a spongy seat that obliges me to watch from a low-angle perspective an imposing image, magnified to the point where it dominates me and saturates my field of vision. The loss of the aura of a sacred object that has become profane.

Cinema, moreover, no longer lording it over other audiovisual series, is seen in a sense as one element of an all-encompassing series, the *cultural series moving images*. Cinema is no longer the “whole thing” it once was; it has become a *part* of a whole. This is something the Parisian daily newspaper *Libération* remarked back in 2007:

*What the digital revolution has changed is people’s perception of cinema: in their wisdom, and without ceasing to love it, we have taken it off its pedestal. Cinema has seen its position weakened, it has been juxtaposed and compared: it has taken up position, albeit a privileged one, amongst the other objects, images, sounds and colours that the varieties of digital culture on offer dangle before people’s eyes. Cinema was an absolute; it has become relative.*¹⁰

All the screens in the world, portable to one degree or another, now place on the same level cinematic masterpieces; everyday television programs, the most dazzling YouTube clips, the most maladroit amateur films and the most boring home movies. Everything has become relative in the world of moving images. Even the “hallowed” screen of the movie theatre has joined in, as it now hosts, alongside the finest and most “authentic” *cinema films*, the most refined operas from the Met and the most vulgar professional boxing and wrestling matches. Spread the word: digital technology is the great universal media equalizer.

And yet this *cultural series moving images*, increasingly present in our hearts and minds today, has been around for a long time. But it was a well-kept secret! Film books in French show just how well-kept: they are all about cinema, with very few titles alluding to “*images animées*” or “*l’image animé*.”¹¹ (The situation is quite different in English, where we find a plethora of books with the expressions *moving image* or *moving images* in their titles.¹²) To such an extent that, to take a significant example, while there are many books in French with the title *Histoire du cinéma*, none has yet been published with the less glamorous title *Histoire des images animées*. The wind, however, is beginning to shift. This, at least, is what would appear to be indicated by a series of lectures at France’s Bibliothèque nationale in November-December 2013 entitled “*Histoire(s) des... images animées*.” The program painted an undifferentiated picture of moving image media (cinema, television, video) on the basis of the following principles:

The series of lectures “*Histoire(s) de...*” opens up to the moving image: cinema, television, video... How have technological apparatuses established the bases for new forms of entertainment? Under what conditions did the major formats and genres (a feature film, a western, etc.) impose themselves? What sorts of cinematic and audiovisual practices have presided over propagandistic aims or, on the contrary, over uses that challenge the established order? When did people begin to bring together and preserve these images, seen as one of the invaluable archives of the century gone by? The talks making up “*Histoire(s) de...*” will deal with each of these questions in turn across the 20th century. Here moving image media, often studied separately from each other, will be woven together like the threads of a single history.¹³

Weaving “the threads of a single history:” this is the by no means commonplace ambition of this project in a new genre, whose principles should give today’s historian pause. For historians, like spectators, are undergoing the aftershocks of the digital shift and the levelling of media that has flowed from it, and they too are destined to become, like the film spectator, a mutant species. Now that cinema has fallen from its pedestal, what history will we and should we write? Will we write the history of each medium “separately from each other,” or will we take into account the fact that these media have woven together “the threads of a single history?”

Historians, for whom the scrambling of boundaries will be of constant concern, are faced with a huge dilemma. Will they limit their thinking and writing to cinema? Or will they also take *video-cinema* into account? Will they take into account every kind of moving image shown on movie theatre screens? And every kind of moving image seen on every kind of screen that exists today? We might finally see Athanasius Kircher, Christiaan Huyghes, Joseph Plateau and Émile Reynaud as the precursors not only of cinema, but also of television and video...¹⁴

Notes

¹ This text is a synthesis of two different but converging conference papers: “Quelle histoire?! Le cinéma est définitivement descendu de son piédestal,” XXI International FilmForum conference, *At the Borders of (Film) History. Temporality, Archaeology, Theories*, Udine, April 2014; and “Mutatis mutandis, le spectateur est un mutant!,” *D’un écran à l’autre: les mutations du spectateur* conference,

Université Paris 8, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and the Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA), Paris, May 2014. The French version will be published by the INA in the latter half of 2015. Research for this article was carried out under the aegis of GRAFICS (Groupe de recherche sur l'avènement et la formation des institutions cinématographique et scénique). GRAFICS is a member of the international partnership TECHNÈS, which since 2012 has joined the efforts of three French-language university research groups, each of which is associated with a film archive and film school. These organizations are: in France, the cinema laboratory of the "Arts: pratiques et poétiques" group (headed by Laurent Le Forestier) at Université Rennes 2, the "Histoire et critique des arts" group at the same university, the Cinémathèque française and FÉMIS (École nationale supérieure des métiers de l'image et du son); in Switzerland, the "Dispositifs" group at the Université de Lausanne (headed by Maria Tortajada), the Swiss Film Archive and the École cantonale d'art de Lausanne; and in Canada, the GRAFICS group at the Université de Montréal (headed by André Gaudreault), the Cinémathèque québécoise and the INIS (Institut national de l'image et du son). The Quebec group also has as partners the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the Université de Montréal, the Observatoire du cinéma au Québec and Canal Savoir. GRAFICS receives funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Fonds de recherche du Québec - Société et culture.

² See André Gaudreault, Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Era*, trans. Timothy Barnard, Columbia University Press, New York 2015.

³ Dudley Andrew, *Une idée du cinéma: De Bazin à nos jours*, trans. Olivier Mignon, SIC, Bruxelles 2014. Published originally as *What Cinema Is! Bazin's Quest and its Charge*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA 2010.

⁴ Thus Philippe Dubois writes: "Cinema [...] is more alive than ever, more multi-faceted, more abundant, more omnipresent than it has ever been." Philippe Dubois, *Présentation*, in Elena Biserna, Philippe Dubois, Frédéric Monvoisin (eds.), *Extended Cinema/Le cinéma gagne du terrain*, Campanotto Editore, Pasian di Prato 2010, p. 13. My emphasis.

⁵ In reality, the "film consultation" mode of use goes back to the appearance of the videotape, but it was limited at the time by the unwieldiness of the medium and the inability to manipulate it, as it remained linear, unlike the digital disc.

⁶ The sole fact that one must now resort to a seemingly pleonastic expression such as "cinema films" to distinguish films produced, say, by the film industry, from all other films produced outside institutional cinema (by television networks or within the institution opera, to take just those two examples) is quite symptomatic of the loss of bearings brought on by the scrambling of the boundaries between media today.

⁷ Paradoxically, these same devices, given the programming freedom they offer the viewer, make possible the *uninterrupted* viewing of television series, even though they are "intrinsically" divided into episodes spread over successive seasons.

⁸ Roger Boussinot, *Le Cinéma est mort. Vive le cinéma!*, Paris, Denoël 1967, pp. 47 and 50.

⁹ Roland Barthes, "Première Conférence internationale sur l'information visuelle," in *Communications*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1961, pp. 223-225.

¹⁰ Olivier Séguret, "Le Mot de la fin," in *Libération*, 11 July 2007.

¹¹ Three exceptions to this rule were published between 1968 and 2008: *Projection des images animées et reproduction des enregistrements sonores* (Jean Vivié, 1968); *L'Univers des images animées* (Charles Ford, 1973); and *Images animées: Propositions pour la sémiologie des messages visuels* (Bernard Leconte, 2008).

¹² Among these, the following volumes could be mentioned: *The Moving Image: A Guide to Cinematic Literacy* (Robert Gessner, 1968); *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Noël Carroll, 1996); *The Transparency of Spectacle: Meditations on the Moving Image* (Wheeler Winston Dixon, 1998); *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Vivian Sobchack, 2004); *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (Laura Mulvey, 2006); *Re-Imagining Animation: The Changing Face of the Moving Image* (Paul Wells, Johnny Hardstaff, 2008); *Locating the Moving Image: New Approaches to Film and Place* (Julia Hallam, Les Roberts, eds., 2013); and *Moving Images: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Film* (Andrea Sabbadini, 2014).

¹³ See the following site: http://www.bnf.fr/fr/evenements_et_culture/auditoriums/f.histoire_image.html?seance=122391134173 8. One of the people behind this initiative was Alain Carou, curator of the video collection at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, who told me that the series of lectures was very sparsely attended. This may be the result in part of the relative vagueness of the series title, "*Histoire(s) des... images animées*," which undoubtedly was less attractive than the history of a particular medium might have been (the history of cinema, or television, or video).

¹⁴ Translated by Timothy Barnard.