

Brian Jacobson, Veronica Paredes, Christopher Hanson

Deaths of Cinema

Introduction

Little more than a decade after the centennial celebration of cinema's birth, pronouncements of its pending (if not already past) death continue unabated. Prognosticators of cinema's imminent mortality most often point to factors including developments in digital technology, increasing rates of "piracy," declining film theater attendance, and shifts in the larger media landscape to support claims that cinema, both as a distinct medium and a cultural formation, is in decline. But although these discourses of cinematic death have been the most frequently described and debated, they are only the most recent and apparent of both a deeper history and broader set of dialogues on death in and of cinema. The essays collected in this issue of *Spectator* engage cinematic death in this more polyvalent sense—as an overlapping and intersecting series of historical, methodological, and disciplinary concerns developing around issues of medium specificity, political economy, industry and consumer practices, and formal and textual analysis.

Mapping the Discursive Graveyard of Cinema

Recent claims about the death of cinema have tended to focus on the introduction of digital technologies in practices of cinematic production, distribution, and exhibition. And perhaps for good reason—widespread technological changes have challenged the very foundations by which we define "cinema." The use of digital cameras

and editing software, for instance, has led many to predict the end of cinema as a distinctly celluloid-based medium; similarly, developments in home theater systems and mobile media devices have led others to question traditional exhibition-based definitions of cinema (as the projection of moving images in a darkened space). These changes point to the necessity of reaffirming and refining our ontological and epistemological approaches to cinema at this moment of media and technological change. While these questions are most often posed as problems of the present, we may do better to look to the past—to cinema's short history—for evidence of (if not fresh approaches to) a cinematic ontology.

Perhaps ironically, from its very origins cinema has been declared a "dead" medium. As Antoine Lumière, father of the more famous *frères* Lumières, reportedly warned George Méliès in 1897—the cinema is an invention without a future. While Lumière's famous line is at best apocryphal and at worst entirely fabricated (see James Leo Cahill's essay in this issue) it has been repeated and revised throughout cinema's history (notably by Jean-Luc Godard, himself a prognosticator of the "fin de cinema," in a screening room depicted in *Le Mepris* (1963)), often as the basis for provocation (for instance, by the Lettrist International in 1950), but also as a marker of a century of cinematic evolution. Seen in this way, contemporary proclamations about cinematic death are only the most recent in a series of *petits*

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morts associated with technological change: from the introduction of sound to developments in color to the emergence of television to the proliferation of video and digital technologies, each instance of media change has been the occasion of a new (or the same old) cinematic “death.”

While the development of digital technologies has been an occasion for rethinking medium-specific definitions of cinema, it has also prompted another set of abstract responses to cinematic death, (perhaps most simply described in terms of the simultaneous mourning and celebration of cinematic change). As an instance of this complex response, witness the recent discourse around the decline in 16mm film production, distribution and exhibition. As a recent issue of *Cinema Journal* has examined in-depth, countless sources continue to warn that 16mm is “dissolving before our very eyes.”¹ The image of disintegrating celluloid run through a film projector is familiar to historians of avant-garde film—in Bill Morrison’s *Decasia* (2002), for instance, the “disappearance” (both literal and figurative) of celluloid expresses the threat of 16mm’s obsolescence with aesthetic grandeur and anxious urgency. For many, the loss of 16mm signals not only the decay of a material format, but also the decline of an entire film tradition and culture. While nostalgic mourning has been one response to these trends, many filmmakers have cast the decreasing feasibility of 16mm filmmaking in terms that exceed simple nostalgia for a lost or forgotten form. Indeed, the loss of 16mm has been imagined more rhetorically

as a metaphoric crisis of filmmakers’ own cinematic mortalities (Peter Kubelka, for instance, has commented that he will die *with* film, rather than “go digital”).

But more than mere rhetoric, these kinds of associations are consistent with cinema’s ontological status vis-à-vis life and death. Indeed, from its earliest technological forms (and in its photographic precursors) critics have recognized film’s capacity to record and re-animate, to capture and retain the life-like images and sounds of its subjects, thereby permitting them a kind of life beyond death. In this way, cinema has long been aligned with discourses of memorialization and has demonstrated a certain tendency towards depictions of—and indirect references to—mortality. Furthermore, just as it preserves and re-animates the dead, cinema serves as a tool for examining death itself (dramatized quite explicitly by another prognosticator of cinema’s death, Peter Greenaway, in the time-lapse images of corporeal decay in *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985)). If cinema has tended to re-animate, memorialize, and analyze death, it has done so, in part, by fixating on a recurring set of haunted locales—from crime scene to morgue to cemetery to heaven, hell, and beyond.

While cinema has frequently explored its relation to death through these symbolic on-screen settings, different issues of cinematic death appear in the literal spaces of production, distribution, and exhibition. The transnational flow of capital and resources has long been an important



component of international filmmaking, troubling stable notions of “national” cinemas. Despite the complexities and always shifting grounds of global cinema, Hollywood has retained its position as the dominant force in these transnational networks. Hamid Naficy explains Hollywood’s maintenance of this position in terms of life and death—Hollywood lives, Naficy suggests, by feeding on the vitalities of other international, or “accented” cinemas. The impossibility of a fixed essence for national cinemas may also contribute to the construction of resistance by the accented cinemas that Naficy describes in his essay “Viva Cinema! Or How Cinema Changes Incessantly in Order to Remain the Same.” Like a cannibal attacking its prey, in Naficy’s characterization Hollywood becomes not a dead cinema, but an undead one.

Deaths of Cinema

The essays in this issue of *Spectator* have been developed from papers presented at a conference—organized by the graduate students of the Critical Studies program at the USC School of Cinematic Arts—that took place on March 23–24, 2007. The wide array of issues that the papers address reflect both the increasingly diverse methodological approaches to film and media studies, as well as the variety of topics essential to a consideration of the many deaths in and of cinema. For the papers that comprised a panel titled “Smashing the Object: Theorizing and Materializing the End,” cinematic death is explored as the construction of the critic’s or filmmaker’s vision. Erika Balsom, for instance, explores the recent critical resurgence in cinephilia as a “desire of the critic,” a longing that she argues is a response to the increasing obsolescence of celluloid. For Balsom, these shifting conditions of production and exhibition have coalesced with the contemporary theoretical moment to nostalgically recast cinema as a lost object. James Leo Cahill examines cinematic death through the work of Martin Arnold—particularly his 2002 installation *Deanimated*—and speculates on the haunted nature of cinema itself. In his analysis of the installation’s repurposing of *The Invisible Ghost* (1941), Cahill charts the implications of Arnold’s precise cinematic surgery to remove characters and re-frame the original film, delineating the

<p>SATURDAY All events in Leamy Library Auditorium unless otherwise noted.</p> <p>breakfast 9:15–10:00 AM, Bogardus Courtyard</p> <p>Smashing the Object: Theorizing and Materializing the End 10:00–11:30 AM</p> <p>Erika Balsom “From Bad Object to Lost Object: the desires of film theory”</p> <p>James Leo Cahill “Dead Auteurs? Martin Arnold’s Phantom Cinema”</p> <p>Luis Recoder “The Death of Structural Film” Respondent: Professor David James</p> <p>Rejuvenating the Spectator: Shifts in Viewing Practices 11:45 AM–1:15 PM</p> <p>Emily Cronin “Film in the Age of Digital Duplicity: Why the War Against Movie Piracy is More than Just a Financial Fight”</p> <p>Murray Leader “Skeletons of Early Cinema: William Castle and ‘Glimcrisley’ in 1950’s Hollywood”</p> <p>Thomas Stubbsfield “Disassembling the Cinema: The Poster, the Film and In-Between” Respondent: Professor Anika Imre</p>	<p>lunch 1:30–2:30, Bogardus Courtyard</p> <p>Memorializing Death in Digital and Public Performances 2:45–4:15 PM</p> <p>Laurel Westrup “Media Martyrs? Rock ‘n’ Roll, Film and the Political Economy of Death”</p> <p>Aimée Mitchell “Public Spaces and Augmented Trauma: Jay David Bolter’s Oakland Cemetery Project”</p> <p>Amelia Guimarin “MyDeathSpace and Cinema: Reconfiguring Life Through Memorials” Respondent: Professor Anne Friedberg</p> <p>Keynote address by HAMID NAFICY “Viva Cinema! Or How Cinema Changes Incessantly in Order to Remain the Same” 4:30–6:00 PM</p> <p>Closing reception 6:00–8:00 PM, Bogardus Courtyard</p> <p>HAMID NAFICY is the John Sears Chair of Communications in the department of Radio/Television at Northwestern University. Professor Naficy also holds a joint appointment in the Department of Art History. At UCLA, he received an MFA in film and television production and a Ph.D. in critical studies in film and television. He is an authority on exotic and diasporic cinema and media, Iranian and Third World cinema.</p>
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means by which Arnold’s work indicates the existence of a ghost of cinema that haunts its very essence. Luis Recoder formulates structural/materialist film as revelatory of cinema’s essence and therefore quintessentially representative of its end. In Recoder’s account, structuralist film does not simply anticipate cinema’s death, but almost stimulates/simulates it through its violent demonstrations of the medium’s demise.

Reaching beyond the discourses of film, conference contributions also revived the cinematic in unlikely spaces of the digital and genres of spectacle. In Aimée Mitchell’s essay, cinematic codes are leveraged to characterize the experience of Jay David Bolter’s Oakland Cemetery augmented reality project. Drawing upon film theory, Mitchell asks how the conventions of cinema are used to map out geographies of trauma and loss; Mitchell’s essay suggests the applicability and transferability of more traditional models for the infusion and interpretation of affect into emergent forms of media. For Amelia Guimarin, social networking sites like MyDeathSpace are not as far from early cinema’s tradition of what Tom Gunning terms the “cinema of attractions” as historical distance would lead us to believe. Through textual analysis of the personalized memorial web pages of the deceased members of the social networking site, MySpace, Guimarin shows how the spectacle that graces these web pages reveals an uncanny revival of early cinematic spectacles and attractions. Laurel

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Westrup's essay on rock 'n' roll documentaries, and their connections to a "political economy of death," explores death as an industry marketing strategy. Here death is imagined not as the end of a medium, but as a method deployed by a genre to generate profit and sustainability. For Westrup, death effectively becomes a means of financial self-preservation.

Although cinematic death has been most often described in terms of replacement and obsolescence, these papers suggest the dynamic relationships that continue to exist between old and new media forms. These dynamics have become especially important in the areas of preservation and restoration. Despite the known instability of digital platforms, film archives around the world are increasingly turning to digital technologies to restore and preserve film stock. Faced with the mortality of its medium, the cinema has turned to its apparent rival as a means for self-preservation. In this case the digital alteration and renovation of film becomes a kind of necessary resurrection. By its very materiality, film is ultimately bound to the confines of its physical essence and is faced with its almost inevitable decomposition. For a medium that has long been lauded for its capacity to record and preserve, it is essential to recognize these inherent physical limitations of film itself. While it remains to be



seen just how effective and time-resistant digital forms and archives will be, the industrial transition to the digital for filmmakers and archivists alike is indicative of the need for a reconsideration of cinema along the lines described here. While it may be premature to eulogize film or write its obituary, it is evident that just as the cinema has transformed, so too must film studies. We hope that the essays in this issue suggest some of the approaches by which our discipline may continue to revitalize and reinvigorate itself; indeed, while the cinema may experience any number of deaths, each of these passings actually marks a new avenue of investigation—a new set of lively discourses—for our ever changing field.

Brian Jacobson, Veronica Paredes, and Christopher Hanson are PhD students in Critical Studies in USC's School of Cinematic Arts. They chaired the "Deaths of Cinema" conference committee and managed the conference's organization.

Notes

1. Heather Hendershot, "In Focus: The Death of 16mm?" *Cinema Journal* 45.3 (Spring 2006): 109.