

André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion

The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age

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Timothy Barnard)

The adjective ‘digital’ seems to attach itself to everything these days, accompanying anguished hand-wringing as often as it does excitement. This kind of descriptive promiscuity, not unlike that often vexing prefix ‘post-’ invites an obvious question: if *everything* is ‘digital’ today, what does it mean that *any* thing is? As the subtitle suggests, André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion’s *The End of Cinema?* takes a broad approach, acknowledging the range of digital technology’s transformative effects while taking seriously the definitional questions at stake. The volume offers a playful and readable survey of various debates from the field’s technophobes and technophiles alike. Situating cinema’s so-called ‘end’ within a longer genealogy of multiple ‘births’ and ‘deaths’, the titular crisis refers to cinema’s decline in pre-eminence in an increasingly crowded field of moving image cultures, as well as evolving modes of viewing and engagement. Translated from the French, the volume leans unsurprisingly towards French-language sources, contributing a refreshing array of Francophone examples — from Air France ad copy to the re-branding of the *Cinémathèque québécoise* — to a discussion often palpably American in focus.

The authors frame ‘the digital’ as yet another transformation in a medium notably prone to change, insisting: ‘cinema’s entire history has been punctuated by moments when its media identity has been radically called into question’ (2–3). They distinguish between ‘digitization’, the process of digital encoding, and ‘digitalization’, ‘the process of cinema becoming digital in general terms’ (40), including the proliferation of screens, the decline of the movie theatre and changes in the method and means of cinematic production. ‘Digitalization’, then, is just another ‘death’ alongside the introduction of sound and the emergence of television: ‘*le Cinéma est mort. Vive le cinéma!*’ as a 1967 pamphlet would have it. Tracing the recent re-emergence of such ‘attractional’ tendencies as special effects, motion capture and the re-transmission of ‘live’ opera, the volume proposes a return to medium diversity that cinema’s 20th century institutionalization has, they claim, attempted to obscure. This return (with a difference) to cinema’s ‘attractional mode’ is a central feature of the current crisis, and is a reminder of how much the medium has historically oriented itself towards narration. Following in

the work of Lev Manovich,¹ the authors assert that we ought to characterize this ‘post-cinematic’ cinema as ‘*animage*’; ‘[*animage* is] an image that moves to the beat of *animation*. Animation is thus *returning* to cinema, or rather the contrary: cinema is *returning* to animation’ (175). These many deaths belong to a medium that was both stillborn and born thrice; historic lags between cinema’s ‘births’ as technological possibility, socio-cultural practice, and now attractional mode were heralded, we are told, by Antoine Lumière’s pronouncement that ‘Cinema is an invention with no future’ (26).

There remain, however, ways in which the recent ‘death’ of cinema is distinct: for one, according to Gaudreault and Marion, digitalization is processual, less an ‘event’ than a ‘passage’ (37) or perhaps a ‘transubstantiation’ (38). Secondly, this passage is not the *replacement* of one system by another, in the way that ‘talkies’ replaced silent film, but the *fragmentation* of a media system more broadly. This fragmentation unsettles the relation between media across the entire field, moving towards what the authors call ‘intermediality’, or the ‘*fusion* of all media (accompanied by a *confusion* of genres)’ (42). The burden of determining media specificity then shifts to the frontier between medium and intermediality, for it is now determined by *how* a medium negotiated its ‘necessarily intermedial relations with other prisms of media identities’ (112).

The volume develops an impressive terminological arsenal, full of neologisms and acronyms to identify particular moments in cinema’s short history. While many may prove useful for scholars in a field where so much is in flux, the vocabulary can occasionally appear to favour inventiveness over theoretical clarity. For example, the question of whether these transformations qualify as ‘revolutionary’, to which the authors devote several pages, seems a second-order semantic tussle, and far less significant than tracking the socio-cultural effects of the transformations themselves across diverse contexts. Do we truly see the ‘post-cinematic’ landscape better when we use expressions such as ‘cinematographiation’ (98), DiMuMi syndrome (digital, multiple and migrating) or ATAWAD (Anytime, anywhere, any device)? Furthermore, the specifying impulse of ever-more neologisms betrays an ontological focus that may let cinema’s sociality fall away: broadly, the authors seem to suggest, if we could say precisely what cinema *is*, then we would understand what cinema *does*, or what it means to us. This is not accidental: as the authors make clear, they intend to make their case by ‘driving the digital’s innermost ontological entrenchments into the open’ (181). However, their second aim, to bring this approach up against the digital’s ‘social uses and cultural practices’, is a little less successful. For example, although the authors do consider the effects of the shift to digital stock on spectators, their ‘spectator’ has a generic quality, an abstraction particularly remarkable given the diversity of viewing experiences globally, and considering the question of which spectators have access to what, where, when, how, and how this makes them feel. This last

¹ Lev Manovich, “What is Digital Cinema?”, in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film*, ed. by Shane Denson and Julia Leydas (Falmer: REFRAAME Books, 2016).

question of feeling would have been a welcome addition to the work: the recent efflorescence of scholarship on the question of affect from, for example, Brian Massumi and Steven Shaviro,² demonstrates the richness of this line of inquiry for the digital age. Finally, there is very little in the volume that acknowledges that the digital age is also the era of globalisation, and as such relies on material and political networks of unevenly distributed access, resources and authority.

‘What is cinema?’, that infamous question of André Bazin’s, continues to orient discussions among film scholars in the digital era, and many readers will find the authors’ ‘births and deaths’ model compelling. Although, as the authors recognize, concerns over the model’s biologicistic inflection exist, there may be more to it than metaphorical convenience. For within the text’s account of cinema’s genealogy is a vision of media development more generally, asking how a medium comes to know itself through failure and change. As distorting as the metaphor may be, it nonetheless foregrounds how much of what we think we know about cinema comes into focus at a moment of dissolution: invention, destruction and crisis, in such a model, emerge as not only unavoidable, but indeed part of the self-constitution of the medium itself. It is a reminder, therefore, that cinema is, and always has been, a living medium.

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² Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).