

Lives of cinema: against its 'death'

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When Walter Benjamin claimed that the advent of photography and film was accompanied by a decay of aura, he could not have foreseen that about a century after cinema's birth, the aura that he saw waning would return with a vengeance in discussions surrounding this medium's 'death'. In his 1936 essay 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility' Benjamin wholeheartedly embraces the decay of the traditional artwork's cult status as a process of great emancipatory potential, and at no point shows any nostalgia for it. How different this is from many contemporary film theoretical circles – which too often resemble the ceremonial circles of a magic cult – where the supposed decay of filmic aura is generally mourned as a loss and has been said to imply the 'death of film' or, even worse, the 'death of cinema'. In this respect, Christian Metz's observation that 'the cinema fetishist is the person who is enchanted at what the machine is capable of, at the *theatre of shadows* as such' seems truer than ever.¹ Contemporary cinephile-theorists who lament the death of their medium claim to see more in a film than just a movie. They also see a certain relation between the image carrier and the profilmic, a relation that is generally defined in terms of indexicality. It is this indexical relation to reality that the digital image supposedly lacks. But what exactly do these theorists see in the analog that they do not see in the digital? What is an index, and how does one recognize one? And, most crucially, can this alleged relation between film and its profilmic be employed in order to create a distinction between digital moving images and cinema 'proper'?

My answer to this last question will be negative, as I will argue that the relation between the moving image and the profilmic is only one dimension of cinema's ontology. At least as important is the relation between viewer and image, and the way that this mediates the relation

1 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 74.

between image and profilmic. As I will emphasize in my discussion of C. S. Peirce's semiotics, this is because the index, like every other sign, is a sign *to an interpretant*. The main reason for the persistence within the field of cinema studies of the theoretical quarrel surrounding the death of film/cinema – an idea that is almost impossible to explain to people not familiar with the field – is that many contributors to it have avoided being sufficiently clear about the philosophical implications of defining cinema in terms of indexicality. I will therefore give a detailed investigation of the place the index occupies in the triangular relation between spectator, the cinematic image and the profilmic. In addition, I would like to contribute to the open-ended investigation of the question 'What is cinema now?', a question that will continue to be raised as long as the medium lives.

The expression 'death of cinema' has been used in at least two different ways. An example of the first use can be found in film preservationist Paolo Cherchi Usai's *The Death of Cinema*, where he describes cinema as 'the art of destroying moving images'.² For Usai cinema equals film, and more specifically the social practices surrounding the projection of film. Film, he argues, is continuously exposed to factors or agents that accelerate its inherent process of decay: heat, cold, fire, humidity, sunlight, negligence, forgetfulness, abundance, brute destruction and, above all, that for which film is generally created in the first place: projection. In Usai's reasoning, with every screening a film is brought a bit closer to its extinguishment: watching a film is to watch its process of dying. As a consequence, moving image preservation could be thought of as 'the science of [the moving image's] gradual loss and the art of coping with the consequences, very much like a physician who has accepted the inevitability of death even while he continues to fight for the patient's life'.³

What happens to this death, this medium-specific decay that Usai and many others have presented as inherent to cinema's physical makeup, in the 'digital dark age', as Usai tentatively calls our times? The digital image too is subject to decay, Usai acknowledges; perhaps even more so than film, in comparison with which it is in many ways easier to produce and to store, but also to destroy.⁴ In current times more images than ever before die unwatched. Yet there is also something missing in the death to which the digital image is subject, namely the process of decay that belongs to the analog image's very 'body' (nitrate, celluloid), a form of death that lies between the decay of a radioactive element and the passing away of an organism. To the extent that this death, particular to the analog image, can function as the dividing line between film and the digital moving image, the impact of the digital era on the medium of cinema could be qualified as the death of cinema's death. This is the second connotation of the phrase 'death of cinema'. In other words, the death of film, or of cinema in general, ironically results from the immunity of the digital image, if it is alive at all, to the death that the analog image suffers

2 Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. 7.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

by its very nature. This does not mean that a digital image needs no preservation in order for it to continue to exist – like all information the digital image is subject to entropy – but unlike the image recorded on a film strip, which in order to be preserved needs to be physically changed, the digital image can be infinitely transmitted to new storage locations without the nature of the image itself being altered.

Cinema's death of its death thus refers to the alleged disappearance of a certain kind of cinematic experience. It is a sense of this loss that forms the premiss for D. N. Rodowick's *The Virtual Life of Film*, in which he addresses the question of whether the essence of cinema is compatible with the digital image. Is digital cinema still cinema? Rodowick's answer is 'no', as evidenced from his sketching of the historical twilight zone in which the medium currently finds itself: 'We stand between the question "What was cinema?" and "What will digital cinema become?"'⁵ Rodowick defines cinema narrowly as 'the projection of a photographically recorded filmstrip in a theatrical setting'.⁶ Though Rodowick at one point claims that he does 'not want to sound a nostalgic note',⁷ he later admits to 'find[ing] it difficult to overcome [his] nostalgia for the analogical world'.⁸ In Rodowick's view the transition from analog to digital is accompanied by a sense of loss, but he also implicitly acknowledges that he is perhaps not fully able to put his finger on the exact nature of this loss:

as film disappears into an aesthetic universe constructed from digital intermediates and images combining computer synthesis and capture, and while I continue to feel engaged by many contemporary movies, I still have a deep sense, which is very hard to describe or qualify, of time lost.⁹

For Rodowick, this time that is now lost marks the essence of the cinematic experience. Time is the quintessential element that made cinema what it *was*, and that is lacking in digital moving images. One of the sources that Rodowick relies on in his attempt to define this cinematic essence is Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed*. Following Cavell, Rodowick argues that cinema produces 'a succession of automatic world projections' that puts its spectators in a condition of watching the world while themselves remaining unseen, in that world and to each other.¹⁰ Despite the fact that all media can be characterized by their specific automatisms, the element that distinguishes film and photography from, for example, painting or theatre is that film's and photography's world projections are mechanically produced and reproduced. This absence of the intervention of a living human agent at the moment the world is transcribed onto the image carrier makes photographs and films 'of the world', in the sense that the material that now holds the photographic or filmic image has literally been in touch with the profilmic world of which the filmic image forms a registration. Rodowick writes:

⁵ D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (enlarged edn) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 72. Cited in Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, p. 46.

the material basis of photography as well as film is a process of mechanically recording an image through the automatic registration of reflected light onto a photosensitive chemical surface. The time of exposure effects a transformation of substance in which time, light, and density are directly proportional. The resulting image is analogical, defined as a direct and continuous transformation of substance isomorphic with the originating image regardless of scale.¹¹

This idea of an analogical correspondence between image and world relates to the notion of the image's *indexicality*, insofar as the index connotes the trace. (I will return later to the index's other connotation, that of *deixis*.) In much recent film theory dealing with the analog–digital transition, the index-as-trace is often referred to as the element that separates cinema from digital media. The clearest formulation of this position is Lev Manovich's statement that 'cinema is the art of the index; it is an attempt to make art out of a footprint'.¹² Manovich's statement has been quoted favourably by scholars including Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey. Doane states that 'What is lost in the move to the digital is the imprint of time, the visible degradation of the image';¹³ while Mulvey writes: 'On one side [of cinema], that of pre-cinema, stands the photograph. The image is still, but, like film, it is indexical. On the other side, that of post-cinema, stands the digital, unlike the cinema in its material composition but able to carry the mechanical, celluloid-based moving image into a multi-media future.'¹⁴ This understanding of indexicality as the element that sets cinema apart from other media, digital cinema included, seems to correspond to Rodowick's position. Ultimately, the sense of time lost that he notices in the digital era can be traced back to a loss of indexicality, as in his opinion 'Analogical processes have a privileged relation to indexicality'.¹⁵

However, by speaking of this loss in terms of the 'weakening', 'diminishing', or 'attenuation' of indexicality, Rodowick, more than Manovich, Doane and Mulvey, also seems to leave open the possibility that digitally produced images retain some sort of indexical relation to the world.¹⁶ Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether cinematic essence can be defined in terms of indexicality or not, Rodowick's reserve about an indexical remainder in digital images is remarkable. This is because the difference between the analog and the digital is, as Braxton Soderman points out, generally theorized as a difference of kind, not of degree.¹⁷

In order to obtain a firmer grasp on this difference, it is necessary to first examine the nature of the index. The origin of this concept is often located in the semiotics of Peirce. Yet whereas in debates in cinema studies the index is often reduced to its connotation of trace – that is, a material connection between a sign and its referent that results from a moment, whether in the past or in the present, of immediate physical contact between this sign and its referent – in Peirce's writings the index has a broader meaning. This is directly related to Peirce's definition of a sign as

11 Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, p. 48.

12 Lev Manovich, 'What is digital cinema?', in Peter Lunenfeld (ed.), *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 174.

13 Mary Ann Doane, 'The indexical and the concept of medium specificity', *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2007), p. 144.

14 Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p. 22.

15 Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, p. 120.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 145, 174.

17 Braxton Soderman, 'The index and the algorithm', *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2007), p. 159.

18 Charles Sanders Peirce, 'On the nature of signs', in *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill, NC: University of Carolina Press, 1991), p. 141.

19 Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Prolegomena to an apology for pragmatism', in *Peirce on Signs*, p. 251.

20 Charles Sanders Peirce, 'On the algebra of logic: a contribution to the philosophy of notation', in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume I (1867-1893)*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 226.

21 Peirce, 'Prolegomena', p. 252.

22 Mary Ann Doane, 'Indexicality: trace and sign: introduction', *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2007), p. 2.

'an object which stands for another to some mind'.¹⁸ There are three elements here: the sign itself, the object that it stands for, and the mind or interpretant to which it stands, this interpretant also being a sign – a thought-sign. Peirce defines the index as a sign that is 'really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object'.¹⁹ The relation between the indexical sign and its object thus exists fully independently of the third element that is present in every process of signification, the interpretant. In other words, the index–object dyad excludes the interpretant, the spectator.

Peirce distinguishes the index from the icon and the symbol. Unlike the icon, which partakes in the characters of the object without this object necessarily having a real existence, or the symbol, which denotes the object as a result of habit, the index owes its character to the real existence of the object it points out. For Peirce, the index par excellence is the pointing finger: 'The index asserts nothing; it only says "There!" It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops.'²⁰ It is crucial that the index gives no insight into the nature of its object. The only information the index conveys is that the object it refers to is near or has been near (and thus exists or has existed). Simultaneously, the same sign or 'perceptible' may function both as index and icon, or both as index and symbol.²¹

In the issue of *Differences* referred to earlier, Doane analyzes this relation between the index on the one hand, and the icon and the symbol on the other. She distinguishes between the index-as-trace, examples of which are the footprint, the death mask or the photograph, and the index-as-deixis, examples of which are the pointing finger, the weathervane, or pronouns such as 'this' or 'I'. Whereas the first type of index partakes of the iconic and 'seems to harbor a fullness', the latter partakes of the symbolic and 'implies an emptiness, a hollowness that can only be filled in specific, contingent, always mutating situations'.²² To this I would add that another way to distinguish between trace and deixis is through the difference in temporality between their respective relations to their referent. The trace originates from a moment of direct physical contact with its object, a moment that now lies in the past but that is recorded in and thereby re-presented by the trace. The index-as-trace thus stands in a diachronic relation to its referent. The deictic index, on the other hand, exists synchronically with its referent. It indicates a connection that *is now*, in the present moment. The trace is the 'has-been there' or the 'no longer there', whereas deixis is the 'there' or the 'that'. In some cases, though, it remains difficult to determine whether an indexical sign is a trace or a deictic sign. For example, a weathervane pointing in one direction can either indicate that there is wind or that there has just been wind.

Two questions follow from this. Can one imagine an index that does not simultaneously also have an iconic or a symbolic relation to the object it points at? And would it be possible to perceive such a 'pure' or 'naked' index? In order to answer these questions it is important to remind oneself that first, an index, like every sign, is a sign *to some interpretant*, and

second, that the index–object dyad does *not depend* on an interpretant. From this it follows that for the interpretant it is only possible to perceive an indexical sign that is not also a symbol or an icon if this interpretant is the index’s object itself. Interpreted as such, the ‘pure index’ is in fact an emptied-out symbol. It is a symbol that has as its object the interpretant’s inclusion in the chains of signification. Whether such a moment of immediate or intuitive self-recognition would be possible, it would certainly contradict Peirce’s observation, in one of his early writings, that ‘thought cannot happen in an instant, but requires a time’.²³ So if it exists at all, the ‘pure index’ can only be conceived of in terms of a sign that interrupts processes of signification and that as such is akin to the Lacanian gaze of the real.²⁴

In the context of this discussion, however, the index is a sign that is only recognized by virtue of the fact that it also has a non-indexical relation to its object. For instance, the weathervane not only indicates that there is or has been wind, it also always resembles the wind by moving in the same direction, as well as symbolizes it by virtue of its shape and location (unlike a leaf in a tree, which does not necessarily symbolize wind, especially when there is no wind). The footprint is not only the trace of some past presence, it also contains some information about this present absence, such as the foot’s size, through which, as Peirce observes himself, the imprint in the sand calls up the idea of a human being.²⁵

So whereas an icon is not necessarily also a trace, the index-as-trace is necessarily also an icon, in such a way that its iconicity cannot be detached from its indexicality. There is no indexical remainder, in other words. There is no part of the indexical sign that, to the extent it is a trace, does not *also* resemble its object. This resemblance or likeness, other than that of the non-indexical icon, directly emanates from the object that is its referent, because of the fact that it is or has been in touch with it. As a result, the trace holds an undifferentiated, one-to-one relation to its object. It is analogue to it.

Another example of such an icon that, in Doane’s words, forms a ‘direct emanation from the real’, is the photograph.²⁶ As Peirce famously argues, the photograph’s likeness with the real is inseparably connected to its being-of-the-real:

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection [namely indices].²⁷

The photographic image, including the film image, cannot be reduced to the representation that constitutes its surface. The photographic image is always also an object, the material ‘thickness’ of which retains the indexical connection with the profilmic, this thickness itself being the

23 Charles Sanders Peirce, ‘Questions concerning certain faculties claimed for man’, in *The Essential Peirce Volume I*, p. 24.

24 Jacques Lacan describes the gaze of the real as that which cracks through the infinite repetition of the dialectic between the imaginary and the symbolic, and that thereby stirs us in our mental and bodily movement. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: the Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Norton, 1998), pp. 73, 75.

25 See Peirce, ‘Prolegomena’, p. 252.

26 Doane, ‘Indexicality’, p. 1.

27 Charles Sanders Peirce, ‘What is a sign?’, in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings Volume II*, ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 5–6.

28 Doane, 'The indexical and the concept of medium specificity', p. 134.

connection. Moreover, as Doane points out, to the extent that photography and film have recourse to language, they also 'invoke the symbolic realm'.²⁸

To recapitulate, given the place of the index in Peirce's classification of signs, one can conclude that, insofar as the photographic image is also an icon – that is to say, also forms a re-presentation of the profilmic – the nature of its indexicality is that of the trace. This is the 'that-has-been' of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, and in general the kind of indexicality that photography and film are often defined by as media. Insofar as the photographic image can also be understood as a symbol – that is, insofar as it is understood, by virtue of habit and the context in which it appears, as referring to something present – the nature of its indexicality is that of deixis. An example is a picture on the cover of a newspaper that refers to something newsworthy, or at least to something that is presented as such.

Returning to the difference between the analog and the digital: why would the digital image not be a trace of the 'has been there'? After all, one could argue that as long as such an image's digital texture has not been altered or otherwise restructured by human intervention since its moment of capture, the picture appearing in print or on the screen strictly speaking stands in a relation of material correspondence to the world of which it is an image. Evidently this connection, which is one established and maintained through data processing, is infinitesimally 'thin' in comparison to the ones that are created in photochemical processes. Unlike a film negative, a data file cannot be seen or touched because its location of storage, whether on a hard drive, a digital camera or a DVD, is not accessible to our senses, due to the small size of the memory parts that hold it and the multiplicity of storage locations. Yet in spite of this virtual intangibility and invisibility of the link between the digital image and the world of which it is an image, this link, strictly speaking, is not immaterial.

What really seems to prevent the digital photographic image from being a trace, therefore, is that it lacks, to recall Peirce's words about the analog photograph, a point-to-point correspondence to its object, if there is a profilmic object at all. Other than an analog camera, which directly inscribes the photons onto an undifferentiated surface of either chemical emulsion or electrons that, after its development (a process of mediation), becomes the image, a digital camera converts the light hitting the lens into digital data, which is then stored as a set of binary digits, as code. In this conversion process the continuity of recorded reality is interrupted. As Soderman explains:

the physical connection between image and referent in the recording of the image is broken by conventional signs: the algorithms used within the analog-to-digital conversion chop up the smooth voltages [registered in the analog recording process] according to an arbitrary system of symbolic differentiation.²⁹

29 Braxton Soderman, 'The index and the algorithm', p. 159. See this also for an extended discussion of analog video.

Soderman uses the metaphor of chopping up, thus describing this process as one of sampling, but perhaps ‘approximately imitates’ would be a more adequate description. What actually happens during the conversion from analog to digital is that in a preexistent digital grid every rectangular cell is ascribed a specific colour variable (black, white and shades of grey included). This variable is selected from a finite and discrete set of colour variables as the one that most closely approximates the ‘average’ colour of the corresponding, undifferentiated part of space in the profilmic. The converter thus does not merely cut up and rearrange the profilmic, it also ‘weighs’ it and attaches a label to it; it colour-codes it. The digital image could therefore be conceived of as a binary reconstruction of the profilmic, a reconstruction that, as the result of increasing amounts of megapixels, approximates the analog more and more closely, and perhaps even surpasses it in terms of image resolution, but that by its discrete nature will never be able fully to reproduce its continuity. A digital image may be photorealistic, and it may even exceed a photograph in terms of reality effect, but its relation to the real is fundamentally different. As Rodowick writes:

The pixel is a mathematical unit appropriate to the mapping of Cartesian coordinates, but photographic resolution is an approximation of the resolving capacity of lenses, or their ability to produce analogical isomorphism at different scales. The chemical contents of a 35mm frame (the grain of the image) are not equivalent to 12 million pixels.³⁰

³⁰ Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, p. 119.

This grain of the image that ensures the uniqueness of every photograph or film print gets lost in the digital image. On this point I agree with Rodowick. Other than the analog image which, due to the fact that it only exists in relation to a piece of celluloid, photosensitive paper or other material, is also an object, the digital image is an image only. It is a pure surface leading a virtual existence. Despite the fact that the digital image’s underlying data, its code, only exist in relation to its minuscule yet concrete storage space, it only becomes an image at the moment these data are interpreted as such by a screening device. This saves the digital image from at least one cause of death: projection. To render visible a digital image, that is to turn its image data into an image on a screen, does not *necessarily* affect these data. Of course the latter can be erased or disorganized in the split second of a mouse click or as the result of a hardware or software failure, but being lifeless by nature they do not *decay* as a film print does.

Besides the analog-to-digital conversion, the other, related rupture of indexicality results from the relative ease with which a digital image can be modified, manipulated or even created without recourse to any captured material at all. During the various stages of PhotoShpping, postproduction, image processing and computer animation, the image surface is literally retouched, or even constructed from scratch. For Manovich this is reason to consider the digital arts as a subgenre of painting, the ‘kino-eye’ in his view having been replaced by the

31 Manovich, 'What is digital cinema?', p. 192.

'kino-brush'.³¹ And, of course, analog images too can be manipulated, for example in the practice of colouring black-and-white photographs. The manipulation of photographs and films is a process far more laborious than the often automated manipulation of digital images. In addition, unless the celluloid or photopaper is fully retouched or completely covered with a layer of paint, parts of the analog's iconic surface will retain an indexical bond with the profilmic. Therefore, rather than the radical destruction of indexicality that occurs in the analog-to-digital conversion, the alteration of the analog is a process of partial transformation in which the loss of indexicality corresponds to the proportion of the image's surface that has been covered up.

32 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 212.

I would now like to shift my attention from the relation between the cinematic image and its profilmic referent in reality to the relation that until now I have only touched upon, but that is in fact intertwined with the former link: the connection between viewer and moving image. After all, cinema is more than just the material nature of a certain image carrier. As Cavell states, in what I take as one of his most important lessons: 'the nature of the audience of an art, its particular mode of participation and perception, is internal to the nature of that art'.³² An ontological examination of cinema thus needs to take into account the relation between moving image and viewer. In light of that relation, the 'death of cinema' (as the death of its death), that according to some film theorists has accompanied the advent of the digital, must have taken either one of two forms: either this death must refer to a specific 'moment' from which time on photographic images could no longer be 'trusted', after the digital turn every photographic image having become a potential *trompe-l'oeil* or, to put it less tendentially, a reality effect; or this death must be understood as an ongoing, gradual process that is directly tied to the repression of analogical moving images by digital ones. The first notion, that of an instant death, seems to make little sense, as it would imply that the mere existence of digital technologies by definition spoils one's cinematic experience, regardless of whether the production of the film one is watching involved these technologies and regardless of the format in which this film is screened. I will therefore limit myself to examining the idea of cinema's death as a gradual process, by addressing the question of to what extent the cinematic experience can be said to depend upon the specific indexical relation between the analog image and this image's profilmic reality.

What do cinema spectators actually relate to when they watch a film, and what do they see? Is it the cinematic image as an object that is both icon and index, or the cinematic image as an image that is an icon only before, by mediation of the viewer, it enters into processes of signification? If it is the indexical bond between the analog and the world that constitutes the material basis of the cinematic experience, then how is this index's absent presence perceived? How does one recognize an index,

33 Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, p. 59.

and what does an index feel like? In order to answer these questions it is informative to turn to the limit example of indexicality discussed by Rodowick, namely a photograph of a white wall. Rodowick writes:

The referent may not be recognizable, but as a result of our experiences of the camera's peculiar causal automatism, its existence will always be assumed. Many abstract films and photographs even rely on this prior knowledge for their effects.³³

Assuming that the white surface that is this photograph really is unrecognizable as the representation of a wall, how does one know that it is a representation in the first place? How does one know that it is not an overexposed photograph of nothing but light reflected by some no-longer-identifiable object? How does one know that it is a photograph? As Rodowick rightly observes, in cases like this the object is only recognized as an indexical image through prior knowledge of its indexicality and of the mechanical process that has generated this correspondence between image and the world. But is this not always the case? How can one be completely sure, certainly from a distance, that the photograph on the gallery wall really is a photograph and not a photorealist painting, such as one of Gerhard Richter's moving still-lives (figure 1)? How does one know that the black image projected on the screen is the representation of a profilmic night, as in the beginning of Carlos Reygadas's *Stellet Licht/Silent Light* (2007)? (The answer: the crickets on the soundtrack.) How, with full certainty, can one tell apart 'the grain' of a movie shot and projected in film from that of a movie that was shot in digital video before it was transferred to 35mm, in which case the film print constitutes a trace of the originally digital image, this digital image, or at least the converter's interpretation of its data, being the profilmic?



Fig. 1. Gerhard Richter, *Zwei Kerzen/Two Candles*. 1982 (CR 512-2). 140 cm × 140 cm. Oil on canvas. © Gerhard Richter 2011.

The answer in all of these cases comes down to the impossibility of seeing the index-as-trace itself. The indexical connection between the analog image and the profilmic is never perceived, or experienced in a broader sense, immediately, but is always mediated by: 1. the screened or printed representation, that is, the iconic dimension of the image (including its grain, colour, warmth, and so on); 2. the sound, whether synchronized or not; 3. the context in which this image appears, including the place and situation in which it is encountered (type of theatre, method of screening, and so on); 4. the spectator's prior knowledge or expectations about the way this particular image has come into being (director, genre, year of production, and so on); 5. the spectator's prior knowledge of photochemical processes.

In order to be perceptible or at least felt, the indexical connection thus needs to be pointed out by trustworthy markers of indexicality, by elements in or accompanying the image that operate as deictic indices in relation to the origin of the represented image, and that say 'here it is, the trace'. Therefore, and without denying that an analog image and a digital image are not made out of the same 'stuff', unless one is willing to fully reduce the essence of cinema to the experience of being in the presence of something that cannot be perceived, namely the trace itself, the declaration of cinema's death, understood as the ongoing suppression of analog images, arrives prematurely.

So what constitutes the essence of the cinematic experience if one accepts that this essence cannot be fully reduced to the experience of the trace's absent presence? In order to approach this question, I would like to follow Rodowick's example and go back to Cavell's *The World Viewed*. Even though, as will become clear, at some crucial points I deviate from Cavell's argument about cinema's 'promise of candor',³⁴ I ultimately suggest that his understanding of cinema as a particular relationship between viewer and the world can be carried over into the digital age.

As we have seen, Cavell defines film, and by extension cinema, as a condition of world viewing. According to Cavell, film presents a world by absencing its viewers from this world. Unlike painting or theatre, film offers successive projections of reality itself. 'A painting *is* a world; a photograph is *of* the world.'³⁵ Unlike the canvas, Cavell argues, the screen is not a support, but a barrier that screens the viewer from the world that it holds as a projection, 'as light as light'.³⁶ At some points in his book, Cavell's discussion of film's of-the-world-ness seems to take a medium essentialist turn. By arguing that film, through its 'succession of automatic world projections', presents its spectators with 'something that has happened', 'a world past' that is not to be mistaken for '*the* past',³⁷ Cavell seems to move towards a characterization of cinema as a medium of the trace, of the footprint. This reading of his argument seems, however, to be contradicted at other points in his book, or at least remains unconfirmed. For example, when defending his claim that 'cartoons are not movies',³⁸ Cavell does not play the trace card by saying that cartoons are not

34 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 119.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 210.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

produced in a photomechanical process (which one might expect him to do), but instead states:

The difference between [the animated world] and the world we inhabit is not that the world of animation is governed by physical laws or satisfies metaphysical limits which are just different from those which condition us; its laws are often quite similar. The difference is that we are uncertain when or to what extent our laws and limits do and do not apply (which suggests that there are no real *laws* at all).³⁹

39 Ibid., pp. 169–70.

I do not follow Cavell in his argument that ‘cartoons’, or animated images in general (a distinction he does not make), cannot be ‘of the world’. In his insistence on the ability to capture contingency as the distinguishing factor between animation and cinematography, Cavell seems to define the moving image’s relation to reality as one of deixis: ‘There it is, the world!’ In this view, the image presents the viewer with *a* world that is subject to the same laws as, and in that respect points at, *the* world. But to the extent that the viewer is really immediately present to the world cinema creates, this world is an icon (‘Here I am’), and as such does not have a necessary referent in reality. The witnessing of a deictic link between the presented world on the one hand and *the* world on the other only occurs insofar as the image is mediated by the viewer’s incorporated prior knowledge of mimesis as well as of the way the latter’s illusion is produced. But of course animated images can also be recognized as pointing at the world. Excellent examples are Ari Folman’s *Vals Im Bashir/Waltz With Bashir* (2008), a largely animated documentary that is explicitly produced in the absence of documentary footage, and a rotoscope-animated feature like Richard Linklater’s *Waking Life* (2001), a film that simultaneously hides and reveals its underlying mimetic dimension. To this one can add that CGI, arguably also a form of animation, is employed by filmmakers both to create the appearance of contingency and explicitly to disturb such an illusion, as in Jia Zhangke’s *Sanxia haoren/Still Life* (2006).

Therefore, to the degree that Cavell seems to characterize cinema’s ‘promise of candor’ in terms of verisimilitude, I disagree with his observation that the cinematic condition of viewing is ‘of the world’ because the medium takes ‘our very distance and powerlessness over the world as the condition of the world’s natural appearance’.⁴⁰ Moreover, is it not exactly the all too easily accepted illusion of immediacy that an auteur like Jean-Luc Godard questions, not in spite of but exactly in line with his famous claim that ‘film is truth at twenty-four frames per second’? The element of Cavell’s formulation of cinema’s promise that I do share, however, is his argument that the medium gives expression to a specific historical condition of world viewing. Cavell objects to the notion that cinema has changed our ways of looking at the world. On the contrary, at its birth cinema entered a world ‘whose ways of looking at itself – its *Weltanschauungen* – had already changed, as if in preparation for the screening and viewing of film’.⁴¹ Film’s displacement of the world – the fact that it presents a world by absenting its viewers from it – confirms and

40 Ibid., p. 119.

41 Ibid., p. 226.

42 Ibid., p. 226.

43 Ibid., p. 103.

explains our ‘prior estrangement’ from this world. ‘The “sense of reality” provided on film’, Cavell argues, ‘is the sense of *that* reality, one from which we already sense a distance.’⁴² He thus defines film by a specifically modern relationship between subject and world, a relationship that logically and perhaps also temporally precedes the material birth of the medium’s technology. Film, like painting or theatre, is not a medium *a priori*, in and of itself. Instead, like other media, film had to be created, within art.⁴³

Cavell’s principal thesis can be summarized as follows: the invention of the technology of film offered the material conditions for the expression of an idea of the world, namely that of watching that world unviewed, an idea that in a certain sense preceded film’s technology but that in its particular instances of expression through this technology became the medium of cinema. It remains difficult to determine precisely whether in Cavell’s understanding this intricate *ménage à trois* between film, viewer and the world that constitutes the soul of cinema – that is, that makes cinema cinema rather than something else – is fully immanent to the works that are produced in its name (a stance I would agree with); or whether, according to his argument, the idea of cinema transcends its body, that is, its technology. What one *can* determine, though, is that in its conceptualization of cinema as a way of world viewing that emerged at a particular historical moment, Cavell’s ontology of the cinematic image seems to leave space for an understanding of the medium’s essence as a category that is dynamic rather than static.

Therefore, and while acknowledging the risk of overstressing Cavell’s argument to the point that it is no longer his, I would suggest that *The World Viewed* can be taken as an invitation to understand, or at least as a meditation that leaves open the possibility of understanding, cinema as a medium that is inherently transforming, instead of one that can be defined by a fixed set of material properties. For cinema to be of the world also means to be of its time, and not just of the time in which it first saw the light, but also of the times that have followed since and that will follow. I therefore wish to believe that cinema by its very nature possesses the potential to change with the world, not just through its ability to incorporate new technologies – as there are moveable cameras, synchronized sound, colour photography, digital video, CGI, 3-D, and so on – but also and more fundamentally by giving expression to people’s changing relationships to the world, that is, to transformations in world viewing.

This line of understanding cinema as an inherently mutable medium finds support in Tom Gunning’s essay ‘Moving away from the index’. Gunning rejects the notion that cinema is dying or has already died. As opposed to ‘the essentialist approach of classical film theory’, he proposes to conceive of cinema as a medium that is inherently transforming:

Cinema has never been one thing. It has always been a point of intersection, a braiding together of diverse strands. ... Thus anyone

who sees the demise of the cinema as inevitable must be aware they are speaking only of one form of cinema (or more likely several successive forms whose differences they choose to overlook).⁴⁴

44 Tom Gunning, 'Moving away from the index: cinema and the impression of reality', *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2007), p. 33.

45 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 47.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Gunning goes on to give a tentative definition to the medium. Drawing upon Metz's early writings, he claims that the cinematic image testifies to a present or a presence rather than pointing back to the past. Citing Metz, Gunning writes that 'The movie spectator is absorbed, not by a "has been there" but by a sense of "There it is"'.⁴⁵ Cinema creates a world, one could add. Cinema achieves this sense of 'There it is' through its motion, not by presenting its audience with a picture of this 'it', but by presenting the viewer with 'an experience of seeing something truly moving'.⁴⁶

Moving is certainly something that cinema has always done. At the same time, in his attempt to steer clear of the pitfall of medium essentialism Gunning plays a little too much on the safe side, if only because, as he points out himself, his definition of cinema as an 'art of motion' also fits aesthetic practices that are not, or at least not necessarily, cinematic, such as performance art, theatre or dance. So what is cinema, or more precisely what has cinema always been, apart from an art of and in motion? Is it possible to discern at least one 'central' string in the cinematic braid, to elaborate on Gunning's metaphor, to which in the course of the medium's history other strings have attached themselves?⁴⁷ It seems defensible to state that throughout its history cinema has always revolved around the making visible on a two-dimensional framed surface, to an audience and by means of a technological apparatus, previously registered moving images. However, the exact nature of the apparatus, the type of surface, the image carrier used, and also the setting in which the images are made visible – in short the means through and the place in which motion is created – are all variable parameters. The only really stable factor seems to be the time lapse between the moment a cinematic work's production process is completed and the moment that this work is screened and consumed. This temporal interval is the reason why the cinema spectator has always watched and keeps on watching unviewed the worlds that cinema creates. I would argue that, when stretched to its limits, Cavell's characterization of cinema has survived the digital turn, despite the ongoing displacement of cinema from the film theatre into other spaces, especially the home, the web (or the internet at large) and the art gallery (as well as the museum as a multipurpose institute). The reason is that this displacement of cinematic worlds is not happening to cinema but is a part of its essence.

47 It should be noted that not only the question of whether cinema has died is contested, but also that of when exactly it was born. Though many people locate this as 1895, when the Lumière brothers screened their first film, Dudley Andrew, for example, positions it later: 'The cinema came into its own around 1910. ... I'm not the one to send out this tardy birth-announcement; Edgar Morin did that in 1956 in *Cinema: or the Imaginary Man* when he headed a chapter "Metamorphosis of the Cinematographe into Cinema".' Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. xiii–iv.

But does this mean, some readers might wonder, that films that are specifically produced for television broadcasting and that have never been screened in a theatrical setting should be considered cinematic too? Does this mean that so-called 'high production value' television series are somehow part of cinema? Does this mean that YouTube clips can potentially be cinematic? Indeed, why not? If television films are not considered cinematic then why are festival films that have never received a

theatrical release? Do television series not create a communal moving image experience that is similar to the experience particular to a film screening? And does not the fact that a cinematic institute such as *Cahiers du cinéma* has deemed the US television series *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* worthy of discussion make them at least somewhat cinematic?

I realize that such an open-ended answer to the question ‘Where does cinema begin and where does it end?’ is not entirely satisfying. One thing is certain, though: every ontology of the cinema, however narrowly or broadly defined, needs to include the relation between viewer and image. This relation does not exist independently of the braid that is cinema but is indissolubly intertwined with it.

How has this relation changed in our digital age? The digitalization of the cinematic image has made it possible to take home the worlds that cinema creates. To some extent this displacement of the cinematic image, and thereby of cinema itself, from the public space of the film theatre to the private space of the home had already been engendered by the technologies of television and video. By ‘home’ I here refer to places of private viewing at large. This definition extends to all places, including public ones, where viewers can be in control of the playing device, ranging from people’s houses to the park, and more generally to all places where people make themselves at home.

In the digital era this displacement of cinema goes further than ever before. The more the cinematic image becomes detached from its indexical carrier, the more this image becomes an object, and presents itself as an object. This object can be touched and retouched, not only by its producers but also by its consumers, its viewers. Those viewers can buy it or freely retrieve it from the internet, can collect it and delete it, can easily share it with others, can watch it pretty much wherever, whenever and however often they want to, can pause, rewind or skim it, and, perhaps most importantly, more than ever can watch *whatever* they want (a point to which I will return). In a sense the experience of watching a film has come to resemble that of reading a book.⁴⁸ Much like the reader of a novel, the viewer of digital images can go back and rewatch a scene, skip to the end to find out ‘whodunnit’, or pause the movie in order to pick it up at a later moment. The viewer has thus been given the option to interact with the linear course of a film’s narrative without being able to change this narrative itself or become an active agent or authorial voice in it (as is the case in a video game).

This increasing tangibility and manipulability of the moving image creates new kinds of viewers. Laura Mulvey, for example, introduces the possessive spectator and the pensive spectator. Both categories are movie watchers who have detached themselves from the collective (theatre) audience and who instead watch films by themselves, in their private spaces where they can counteract the ephemerality of the cinematic experience. The possessive spectator does so by delaying the movie and

⁴⁸ Illustrative in this respect is that new devices such as tablet computers are marketed as combining paper-based media and screen-based media.

49 Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, p. 161.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 165–66.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

52 Among various clues, the one that ‘solves’ *Caché* is the furtive shadow of Haneke’s camera that, at about ten minutes into the film, is cast onto the trees by the headlights of Georges’s car. This shadow is the visible evidence that proves the filmmaker (and his crew) guilty of having sent the tapes.

53 See Richard Porton, ‘Collective guilt and individual responsibility: an interview with Michael Haneke’, *Cineaste*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2005), pp. 50–51, p. 51.

54 ‘Monsieur Godard, que pensez-vous, est-ce que les nouvelles petites caméras numériques pourront sauver le cinéma?’

fragmenting it into favourite moments, in order to get a hold on and to possess the previously ‘elusive image’.⁴⁹ In this practice of watching movies in a delayed and fragmented manner, Mulvey sees a potential to weaken the ‘narrative drive’ and to reclaim the look. The possessive spectator is a fetishistic spectator who, Mulvey writes, ‘becomes more fascinated by image than plot, returning compulsively to privileged moments, investing emotion and “visual pleasure” in any slight gesture, a particular look or exchange taking place on the screen’.⁵⁰

The pensive spectator also delays cinema, but he or she does so for the experience of what Roland Barthes has called the *punctum*, that contingent detail in the photographic image or film still that has been overlooked by the photographer or cinematographer but that is visible to the viewer, and that indicates the presence of reality, the ‘this was now’. In digital viewing, something similar to this experience is available. Mulvey writes:

the pensive spectator who pauses the image with new technologies may bring to the cinema the resonance of the still photograph, the association with death usually concealed by the film’s movement, its particularly strong inscription of the index.⁵¹

In addition to these new modes of film watching that find their origin in the control options that are part of electronic or digital playing devices, one can also point at modes of interactive spectatorship that are implicated by particular movies made within the digital era, and that explicitly demand that the viewer deal with them as objects and make use of the increased amount of control that is available to them. The epitome of this implicated spectator is probably that created by Michael Haneke’s *Caché/Hidden* (2005). Shot on HD video, and distributed on 35mm print, this ‘whodunnit’ refuses to be solved in a theatrical setting and needs to be watched at home, on DVD or any other digital format, where the viewer, now alone with the film, can scrutinize its images for the many hidden clues it contains, much in the same fashion as the protagonists Anne and Georges do with the videotapes left on their doorstep.⁵² This short-circuit between the film’s diegesis and the viewer’s reality of watching is emphasized even more by the blood-stain that is printed on *Caché*’s DVD, the same image as the child’s drawing that one of the videotapes in the film is wrapped in. In his attempt to make the viewer realize his credo that ‘film is a lie at twenty-four frames per second in the service of truth’, Haneke forces the viewer to identify with his protagonists by literally placing the viewer in their position: at home, in front of the screen.⁵³

Besides Haneke’s perverse cinematic game, or examples cited earlier such as *Still Life* and *Waltz with Bashir*, there are of course many films that engage with digital technologies in an interesting way: Godard’s ongoing experiments with and reflections on digital video, for example in *Notre musique* (2004), in which, through the character of a female Bosnian student, the director asks his diegetic self whether he thinks small digital cameras can save cinema;⁵⁴ *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001),

whose story becomes clearer only after visiting the film's website; Agnès Varda's *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse/The Gleaners and I* (2000), a meditation on small digital cameras, among other things; or Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russkiy kovcheg/Russian Ark* (2002), a film of a museum consisting of a single shot. Yet these examples remain exceptions in a digital landscape that is dominated by films that hardly set themselves apart, whether narratively, stylistically or in terms of viewer interaction, from films produced in the predigital era. In this respect I fully agree with Rodowick's observation that 'If the digital is such a revolutionary process of image making, why is its technological and aesthetic goal to become perceptually indiscernible from an earlier mode of image production?'⁵⁵ In fact Rodowick's lament resonates with the one that Theodor Adorno, in a 1936 letter to Walter Benjamin, expressed regarding the revolutionary potential his friend attributed to film:

When I spent a day in the studios of Neubabelsberg a couple of years ago, what impressed me most of all was how *little* montage and all the advanced techniques you emphasize were actually used; rather, it seems as though reality is always *constructed* with an infantile attachment to the mimetic and then 'photographed'.⁵⁶

In many respects Adorno's critique still stands. In line with his argument that the technology of film did not necessarily implicate the use of aesthetic techniques made possible by this technology, the digital turn has not inaugurated a revolution in the types of images that are produced in this era. Illustrative in this respect is that 3-D spectacles such as *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) are also offered minus the extra 'D'. For now the promise of three-dimensional candour remains merely an empty shell, this shell being the apparatus itself that is venerated for its hypermimetic power.

What digital technologies have brought about, however, is a multiplication of the possible ways in which viewers can relate to moving images, not only to the ones produced in the digital era but also to those that were made before. This transformation manifests itself primarily in the increased tangibility of the moving image, a tangibility that is the direct result of the growing separation between the moving image and a particular material image carrier. Once more the contemporary masses, to paraphrase Benjamin, are fulfilled in their insatiable desire to 'bring things "closer" spatially and humanly'.⁵⁷ The aura that is shattered this time is the 'unique apparition of a distance' that the cinephile experiences during theatrical film projections. Similar to that of a painting, a film copy's cult value is directly related to its uniqueness as experienced by the viewer. Determining factors here are a copy's actual rarity, its state, the frequency with which it is screened, and the effort and money the spectator has needed to spend in order to attend its screening.

With the cinematic image becoming more and more virtual, this cult value withers. Rodowick gives a poignant illustration of this decay of cinematic aura through an anecdote of what he describes as his 'personal

⁵⁵ Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Letter from 18 March 1936, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 131.

⁵⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 223.

experience of the end of cinema'. He writes that when one night in 1989 he entered his local video store, he discovered that Pasolini's entire *oeuvre* now was available on videocassette. 'Five years earlier', he continues, 'I might have prioritized my life around a trip to New York to fill in the one or two Pasolini films I hadn't seen, or to review *en bloc* a group of his films. ... That evening, I'm sure I passed on Pasolini and moved on to other things, for opportunity and time were no longer precious commodities. There was time.'⁵⁸

Though it is hard not to share Rodowick's nostalgia, which in my case is nostalgia for a world I have never really experienced, and though I agree with most of his reasoning, I disagree with his conclusion that the partial displacement of the cinematic image marks its death. Cinema, and with it cinephilia, lives on and finds other modes of expression – in private space, which is being displaced itself, as well as in new and more traditional public spaces of exhibition, distribution and screening. More than ever before the cinephile and/or film theorist has the opportunity to watch and collect the films he or she wants, including films that do not make it to the town in which he or she happens to live, or that have never received a theatrical release in the first place. In other words, films have increasingly become not only more tangible but also more visible. The price paid for this remains hard to determine, as thus far the displacement of the cinematic image does not necessarily seem to be accompanied by the disappearance of art house cinemas or declining cinema attendance in general.⁵⁹ More obvious are the new possibilities, not only for seeing films but for sharing, analyzing, critiquing and teaching them.

On a more general level the displacement of cinema can even be said to give expression to ongoing shifts within the dialectic between private and public space itself. In our digital age public spaces are subject to an increasing process of digitalization, in the sense that use of and access to public spaces is more and more controlled on the level of identifiable groups of a population, or even on that of the individual. The beginning of this process predates the invention of digital technologies themselves and may even be inherent to modern capital's tendency to venture into its outsides, including the outsides within the spaces it already inhabits. But digital technologies have dramatically accelerated this process. One might consider, for example, the ongoing efforts made by companies such as Google or Facebook to 'personalize' access to the web or to the internet in general, in order to collect marketable data. As a consequence the public dimension of these spaces – their so-called neutrality – is under pressure.

Cinema's particular relation to the internet – understood as a communication network that is used for both private and public purposes, and in the form of the web – seems threefold. First, the internet facilitates distribution of films to private and increasingly to communal viewing spaces. One could think of streaming video services like that of Netflix, torrent trackers and file-sharing communities, but also of digital cinema distribution systems. Second, the web has become one of the main places

⁵⁸ Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, p. 26.

⁵⁹ Whereas in recent years cinema attendance in the USA has gone down but box-office revenue remained fairly stable due to higher ticket prices, in the UK, as in many other European countries, cinema attendance, after a period of decline, has increased again, partly due to the continuing growth of 3-D technology. In the UK, 2009 was the second-highest year in terms of admissions since 1971. See Mark Brown, 'Cinema takings at record high', *Guardian*, 21 July 2010, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/jul/21/cinema-takings-at-record-high>> accessed 7 June 2011.

of exchange for cinephiles, critics, theorists, and so on, whether via blogs, forums or database sites such as IMDb. Third, while leaving open the question of whether or not under certain circumstances YouTube videos are indeed forms of cinema, some can certainly be taken as reflections on the question ‘What is cinema now?’ Three examples: first, for Godard’s *Film Socialisme* (2010), his first feature entirely shot and edited in digital video, six trailers are available online, five of which consist of the entire film, fastforwarded to different speeds.⁶⁰ Second, the excerpts posted on YouTube of Bill Morrison’s *Decasia* (2002), a found-footage film that forms a meditation on the death inherent to the filmic image, forms a compelling confrontation between old and new media.⁶¹ And third, though not necessarily a cinematic event, in 2010 the Guggenheim Museum organized its first edition of *YouTube Play*, a biennial ‘exhibition’ of creative videos produced for online distribution.⁶²

The last example also brings me to the third space into which cinema increasingly moves: the museum. It does so primarily in the form of screening series – museums increasingly taking over the role of traditional art house cinemas – as well as in the form of film and video installations, whether or not in combination with other art practices. As Erika Balsom points out, in the gallery cinema regains the aura it was once said to destroy:

Salvaged from the ruins of twentieth-century mass culture ... within the white cube the cinema becomes precious. Instead of engaging the inherent capability of the medium as mechanically reproducible, 16mm gallery practice marshals an economy of purposeful rarity, restricting production of film prints to a limited edition, most often of between three and six copies, which are then sold by commercial galleries as collectible objects d’art.⁶³

Had cinema died, the museum would have been its mortuary, the institution where dead bodies are temporarily preserved and kept on view, and where people go to mourn the loss of a beloved one, or to investigate a victim’s cause of death. But since cinema has not died I would prefer to think of the museum as a cinematic sanatorium, though only in the very specific form this place assumes in Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg/The Magic Mountain* (1924). When Hans Castorp, the sympathetic antihero of Mann’s novel, first ascends from the ‘flatlands’ to the magic mountain in order to pay a visit to his cousin, he plans to stay for only three weeks. It is only in the thin air of the Swiss Alps that the severity of his condition manifests itself, three weeks quickly turning into three months, and three months into seven years. From what does Hans suffer? Probably just from the passing of time itself. More than as a place of recovery, the novel’s sanatorium appears as a place to pass time and where time passes, where time dilates, and where one could easily stay forever if only the mountain’s magic were not periodically disturbed by flatland reality.

Yet fanciful analogies must not be pressed too far, because Mann’s novel ends sadly, with Hans’s disappearance into an uncertain future in

⁶⁰ See ‘Film Socialisme J.L. Godard Trailer 2’, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vK4yLg3_Ak> accessed 7 June 2011.

⁶¹ See ‘Decasia excerpt 1’, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeEzb-0v7A>> accessed 7 June 2011.

⁶² See ‘YouTube Play: the Jury Selection’, <<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/interact/participate/youtube-play/top-videos>> accessed 7 June 2011.

⁶³ Erika Balsom, ‘A cinema in the gallery, a cinema in ruins’, *Screen*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2009), p. 423.

64 Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*
(Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer
Verlag, 1981), p. 1006 (my
translation).

the trenches of World War I. 'Farewell, honest Hans Castorp', the novel bids its protagonist, 'life's worrisome child', goodbye, 'your tale is told'.⁶⁴ The story of cinema, fortunately, for now remains open ended. And while those believing in the medium's death stand mourning at its empty grave, cinema's old and new forms continue to spread out over the flatlands.

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