

# Introduction

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## Le cinéma est mort. Vive le cinéma!

For as long as film scholars have lamented the “death of cinema” at the hands of digital technologies (e.g. Cherchi Usai 2001), there have been those who contest there was ever a digital revolution at all. John Belton, in his aptly titled “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution,” suggests despite being marketed as a revolution akin to those that shook the foundations of cinema over the last century (e.g. sound, colour, widescreen projections, etc.):

Digital projection as it exists today does not, in any way, transform the nature of the motion-picture experience. Audiences viewing digital projection will not experience the cinema differently, as those who heard sound, saw color, or experienced widescreen and stereo sound for the first time. (2002, 104)

Focusing here on the *experience* of moviegoing as it has been affected by digital projection, Belton rightfully argues against considering the new technology as having instilled the sort of radical or fundamental transformations that would warrant the term revolution. As André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion instead argue “one of the ambiguities of the passage to digital media lies precisely in the fact that this passage affects the stuff of the film medium itself while at the same time leaving the *look of the cinematic image* unchanged” (2015, 33). Building most of their book upon the opposing discourses of these two factions, Gaud-

reault and Marion offer an incisive survey of cinema’s numerous deaths (they count no less than eight), while emphasizing the many continuities and discontinuities one may find between the cinema that has been and the cinema that will be. Most notable in their approach to this debate is their understanding of cinema as a multifaceted phenomenon, which allows for death and survival to occur in harmony. Comparing this digital death of cinema to one of its most important deaths (though not its first, and certainly not its only) at the advent of sound in the 1920s, the authors propose: “Even though it is always a case of hyperbole, this obsession with the death of the medium is an interesting idea. Cinema will clearly not die, but something *about it* will die, something *within it* will die. And because nature abhors a vacuum, the ‘death’ foretold turns out also to be a birth” (*Ibid.*, 32).

What aspect of what we call “cinema” is it exactly that the so-called digital revolution has killed? Is it the privileged link with reality André Bazin (1958a, 15) attributes to cinema on the basis of its technical roots as a photographic medium? Is it the hallowed experience of cinema-going, characterized by the dark room, the communal experience, the prescribed duration, the combination of which Raymond Bellour had declared to be the only thing worth being called “cinema” (2012, 19)? Or is it perhaps the once unique conflation of moving images, sounds, narrative, screen and duration, the arrangement of which had been put into question by experiments in expanded cinema long before digital “killed” cinema? One thing

that remains clear in the face of the undeniable transformations cinema has faced over the past decades: cinema itself is not dead, as such, even if its identity as a technical process, a social event, an architectural structure, a cultural phenomenon, and a conduit of particular aesthetic expressions has undergone change.

If diverse technological developments have influenced different aspects of what we understand to be cinema, they have also exposed just how multifaceted the term “cinema” can be. Gaudreault and Marion come to the same conclusion when illustrating that two seemingly contradictory declarations about the state of cinema (Peter Greenaway’s “Cinema is dead” and Philippe Dubois’s “Cinema . . . is more alive than ever”) are in fact simply referring to different *aspects* of cinema’s identity (quoted in Gaudreault and Marion 2015, 1). Such different aspects warrant new ways of discussing cinema, as the authors show when suggesting we think beyond technological or aesthetic mutations and towards epistemological issues: “recent technological transformations, bringing upheaval not only to production practices but also to the way we watch and think about the medium, are prompting a major rethinking of the very definition and status of cinema.” (Gaudreault and Marion 2015, 11). This echoes Edward Branigan’s thinking in his seminal *Projecting a Camera: Language-Games in Film Theory*, which, by showcasing the multitudinous ways in which the term “camera” has been used in academic writing, calls for film theory itself, “to be rethought. It must seek a new relationship to its own language” (2006, xiii). Given that language governs our access to—and understanding of—the world, Branigan’s insight hints at the necessity of reconsidering the vocabulary we use to discuss cinema.

### High, Low, and Everything in Between

This need to reconsider cinema—and the language of film theory—in light of ongoing transformations at the hands of digital technologies was the point of departure for this issue of *Synoptique*. It was also the starting point for the conference from which this issue stems, namely the 2017 Graduate Student Colloquium of the Film Studies Association of Canada, held at Université de Montréal, February 15-18, 2018. In response to the perceived proliferation of bi-

nary oppositions in discourses surrounding film and media studies, the organizers of the conference elaborated the theme “High, Low and Everything in Between”. In the schism between such oppositions as cinema/media, spectator/cinephile/fan, amateur/professional, and local/global among others, the field of cinema studies has been pushed to resituate its interests. With our object of study proving more fluid than previously thought, we are redefining the boundaries of our object. These oppositions, which have appeared, among other reasons, to make sense of a media landscape in the midst of transformation, merit further investigation so that their value and epistemological reach may be reevaluated. In the articles published in this issue, which stem from the reflections undertaken during the three days of the FSAC Graduate Student Colloquium, the objective has been to focus our attention on the study of practices, modes of production, aesthetic objects, or modes of thought that are characterized by their hybridity or intersectionality. The goal was not only to exceed the above dichotomies and showcase the complexity of contemporary media, but also to understand the role of cinema within the “audiovisual ecology” that is changing it.

This special issue opens with an article by Chelsey Crawford entitled “Forging an Artifact through Artifice: Manufacturing History in the Digital Age,” which offers a point of entry into these issues by addressing the ongoing struggle between cinema’s celluloid past and its digital present; a debate which in many ways epitomizes the digital divide. Centred around an analysis of *Planet Terror* (Rodriguez 2007) and its use of special effects to remediate the traces of celluloid’s history (e.g. scratches from repeat screenings, dust, discolouration, stolen scenes, etc.), Crawford offers an original interpretation of the material conditions of analogue and digital cinema, one that avoids the commonplace accusations of the cold or sterile nature of the digital image and the clichéd or tautological praise of celluloid’s organic or auratic qualities. Instead, “Forging an Artifact” questions the history of the film-as-object, a history which the entropic nature of a physical medium like celluloid constitutes simply by virtue of its projection.<sup>1</sup> *Planet Terror*, Crawford demonstrates, showcases the intrinsic historicity of celluloid cinema by donning fabricated artifacts in an attempt at manufacturing a sense of history that is

out of reach for digital media.

Going beyond the foundational debates of the digital divide, Sasha Crawford-Holland looks at the resurgence of cinema's foundational myths in one of its most recent technological iterations: Virtual Reality (VR). His article, "Humanitarian VR Documentary and its Cinematic Myths," interrogates the role attributed to VR technologies within recent humanitarian films, namely *Clouds Over Sidra* (Milk and Arora 2015). The article pays special attention to the way in which VR's vaunted immersive potential has been taken up by journalistic and humanitarian discourses, and conflated with the idea that it can somehow promote empathy between the privileged first-world viewers and the victims of war portrayed in the images. In so doing, Crawford-Holland also exposes the theoretical underpinnings of this interpretation of VR, which go back to myths of early film viewers' credulity and to André Bazin's "myth of total cinema" (1958b).

While Crawford-Holland mentions the film *Ravished Armenia* (Apfel 1919) in passing to contextualize the types of VR films often produced these recent years, Kristi Kouchakji offers a sharply focused look at the film's promotional strategies and their often-problematic use of Orientalism, voyeurism and moral righteousness in order to promote a film centred on the Armenian genocide. Titled "There's No Such Thing as Bad Publicity: Using Stunts to Sell a Genocide Film," this paper exposes the tactics employed by the then Near East Relief (now Near East Foundation) to appeal to predominantly white, Christian American audiences. Instead of discussing the film's admittedly sensationalistic representation of torture, brutality, sexual violence and human trafficking, Kouchakji addresses the publicity material and "live prologue" used to draw audiences in and, by extension, to help increase donations to the Near East Relief. Through this study, the author also argues for a larger understanding of the term "transmedia" which can offer new ways of understanding activist practices in analogue and silent-era media.

Sylvain Lavallée's French language "Devenir Tom Cruise, de l'argentique au numérique," book-ends this issue by returning to the analogue/digital divide, this time, however, by focusing on ways in which we might revisit Stanley Cavell's influential *World Viewed* (1979), especially pertinent in French scholarship where his writings have been under-represented. Lavallée's original take on the topic

of digital cinema's challenge to the ontology of the medium comes through the use of "Tom Cruise" as a figure for interrogating these transformations. Paying particular attention to scenes from *Mission: Impossible* (de Palma 1996) and *Minority Report* (Spielberg 2002) in which Tom Cruise (the star, not the actor) is confronted with fabricated or mediated images of himself, this paper provides a refreshing interpretation of cinema's relation to reality. Simultaneously, Lavallée weaves through Cavell's musings on cinema and offers a welcome update to his thinking in light of the important transformations that have affected cinema over the last few decades.

Pursuing this discussion of cinema's transformations and of the proliferation of unique categories and labels, Jordan Adler reviews Mattias Frey's *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (2016). Frey's opus examines the wave of "scandal-baiting films" that thrive off the moral panic they generate during film festivals; a panic which often belies the "extreme" label these films don. Through Adler's review, we see how Frey looks at these "shock" films through the eyes of audiences, critics, distributors, festival programmers and ratings boards, and how labels used by these various groups come to define what constitutes "extreme" cinema. Finally, David Leblanc concludes this issue with an essay entitled "Reassembling the Ruined Archive: A Ludology of *Her Story* as Archival Practice," which bridges the gap between film theory and media outside the purview of cinema proper. Rather than applying the notion of the archive to the study of the game *Her Story* (Barlow 2015), Leblanc's essay offers a way of reconfiguring our understanding of the archive in light of the work undertaken by players within the game. Of particular interest in the context of this issue is the essay's focus on the player's own attempts at parsing through a ruined archive using labels or keywords which necessarily structure how one makes sense of the narrative held within the database.

That being said, we would be remiss not to encourage our readers to continue thinking of the issues raised in this issue as they carry on reading the second part of this double issue, which investigates many other highs, lows and in-betweens. Structured around *Les aventuriers de l'art moderne* (Harrault, Gaillard, and Loiseleux 2015) this issue edited by Karine Abadie and Rémy Besson features six French-language articles that address

questions elicited by the series' unique blend of documentary and animation, cinema and modern art, archival material and historicity, biography and narrative. We invite *Synoptique* readers to approach this unique issue as a continuation of the present one, as well as a way of opening up towards objects of study and disciplinary approaches that defy traditional labels in film studies.

In conclusion, we would like to give our most sincere thanks to the organizers of the FSAC Graduate Student Colloquium, namely the organizing committee composed of Julie Ravary-Pilon, and Marc-Antoine Lévesque, the financial committee made up of Christine Albert and Nina Barada, the scientific committee headed by Isabelle Lefebvre and Nicolas Dulac, as well as Marta Boni who acted as faculty supervisor, and Philippe Bédard, then FSAC Graduate Student Representative. Many thanks also go to the *Synoptique* editorial board, copyeditors and peer reviewers for their relentless support.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Sonia Campanini, Vinzenz Hediger and Ines Bayer have called this the "Cherchi-Usai paradox," which designates the fact that "a film is an ephemeral medium in the sense that it can only produce cultural meaning at the price of impairment and ultimate destruction of its material base" (2018, 79)