I

Models of Film Historiography: Philosophy and Time

1 The Aporias of Cinema History

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Abstract

Understanding the cinema as an archeo-topological medium of the Anthropocene, this chapter looks at some of the consequences of studying cinema from a post-human perspective. The ecology of humans interacting with technology serves as a starting point for reconsidering cinema history, where the uncanny ontology of the cinema becomes apparent in its dual role as an accelerator of post-human progress, aligning several relevant elements towards an eventual transition between humanity and technology, and an emergency brake on this road of no return, underlining the still growing importance of film heritage, of the archive, and of cinema as the cultural memory of mankind in its humanity and diversity. Therefore, one way to salvage history from cinema's (and not only cinema's) uncanny ontologies, is to open historical thinking up to the archeo-topographies of cultural memory, and especially to its traumatic remainders and apparently obsolescent values.

Keywords: cinema history, Anthropocene, post-human theory, media ecology, cultural memory, cinema ontologies

Editorial Note: This text was given to the editors briefly after the conference "Histories of Film History," which took place in December 2018 in Marburg. Thomas Elsaesser intended to rework his talk for the publication into a more extended argument, as he wrote to us, but his unexpected passing in December 2019 prohibited this. Since Thomas always wanted his texts to circulate, to be read and discussed, we decided to publish this text, even though it still bears some marks of its origin. We have only made some slight corrections of obvious mistakes and inconsistencies, otherwise the text is printed here as we have received it.

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The New York art critic Hal Foster once observed: "We still find it difficult to think about history [merely] as a narrative of survivals and repetition," yet we increasingly have to come to terms with a "continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts."[1] Or as an old joke from the Soviet Union goes: "Comrade Sergei went to Commissar Dimitri and said: Commissar Dimitri, I'm worried about the future. Replies Dimitri: don't worry about the future—it's all set forth in the five-year plan. What worries me is the past: I have to rewrite it every other week." Media archaeology sometimes feels that way, and I'll come to what seems to have replaced the five-year plan.

But back to Hal Foster and his processes of protension and retension. Foster does not name film and photography, with *their* uniquely haunting time-warp effects on our conception of history as a linear sequence, connecting effects to causes, and events to their antecedents. But Foster clearly alludes to the relays of countervailing and unsynchronized temporalities that the ubiquity of photographic media has engendered. Cinema, after all, defies time by what could be called its *uncanny ontology*: simulacra of life at its most vivid, moving images always document what is not yet dead but neither quite alive. This unresolvable tension between rewind and replay, between presence and absence, between life preserved and the kingdom of shadows has, I contend, also contributed to our altered understanding of what history is, just as the same tension between original and copy, between reconstruction and the replica, dominates our thinking today about the status of art and of historical artefacts, in our post-auratic era that nonetheless craves for authenticity, and "the return of the real," to quote another Hal Foster phrase.

As we try to assess the impact of moving pictures on history and memory, as we try to make sense of the impact that archive, digital files, and databases have made on the once ephemeral experience of cinema, due to its irreversible flow and intangible presence, I want to risk the observation that the coexistence in the twentieth century of cinema with nineteenth-century historicism has introduced two unsettled but interrelated crises: first, it has turned into a truism *the spatialization of time* which was already well under way when Bergson had his disagreements with Einstein in 1922 over relativity theory and time as duration. Second, it has begun to substitute for our notion of linear causality such terms as *contingency*, *chance*, *chaos theory*, and *stochastic series*.

Taken together, the spatial turn and the crisis in causation have challenged the hegemony of history—which the nineteenth century had discovered

1 Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-avant-garde?," *October* 74 (Fall 1994): 30.

as the relentless force of destiny (Hegel's *Weltgeist*, or world-spirit), or had celebrated as the engine driving human progress (Marx). More specifically, spatial time and contingent non-linearity have deconstructed the past into competing but also complementing centres of more negative forms of energy, identified with the *archive as a locus of power and random access as the logic of the database*.

What this does to the past is that it suspends the narratives crafted by historians and turns the facts they based themselves on into a treasure trove of data, collected and laid out for mining and crunching, in order to derive from them predictions, risk assessments, and probability calculations. And what this in turn does for our idea of the future is indeed similar to the five-year plan: it forecloses the possibility of imagining a future that is not in the image of the past, which would seem to confirm the phrase attributed to Fred Jameson, and quoted by Jane Gaines, namely that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, and the sentence that Nick Baer quoted from Sepp Gumbrecht, namely that there is neither anything from the past that we need to leave behind, nor anything from the future that could not be made present by simulated anticipation.

How, then, can we think the cinema in this configuration? Suppose we would regard the storytelling functions of cinema as only one aspect of filmic representation's part and purpose in human evolution. Especially when we add non-theatrical films—some of which featured in our discussions: home movies, useful films, state-sponsored documentaries, etc.—we come close to what film philosophers have been arguing for quite some time: namely that cinema enacts a form of thought, and indeed, may have to be considered less an art form than a form of life. Thus, if one grants that moving images have agency, they make possible "acting at a distance," to use a term introduced by Lev Manovich, who helpfully distinguishes between only two categories of images: images you can lie with, and images you can act with.[2] Under the name of "operational images"—an idea introduced by Vilem Flusser and made popular by film-makers Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen—"images to act with" assist in calculating and controlling the environment, in that they measure phenomena and can modify their behaviour:[3] this comprises what I have elsewhere called the cinema's S/M practices of the cinema, meaning all

2 Lev Manovich, "To Lie and to Act: Potemkin's Villages, Cinema and Telepresence," http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/to-lie-and-to-act-potemkin-s-villages-cinema-and-telepresence.

3 Trevor Paglen, "Operational Images," *e-flux* 59 (2014), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61130/operational-images/.

the non-entertainment uses of the cinematic apparatus in *medicine and the sciences*, in *monitoring and surveillance*, for *military operations and satellite communication*, including mimetically mirroring the *motor-sensory* coordination of the human body, and not only in industrial time-and-motion studies.[4]

As for "images to lie with," from the broader anthropological view here taken, which encompasses fiction films and extends to computer games, cinema's role is one of "mastering" life through simulation and play, which also has a scientific variant, namely experiments that require computer simulation to calculate risk and probability, or are making visible processes too fast or too slow for the human eye to perceive and to control.

This way, cinema can be inscribed in the evolutionary arc of "homo ludens," as analysed by Johan Huizinga and others: humans at play, considered as both an ontogenetic (individual) and a phylogenetic (species-related) dimension.[5] Play, as Jean Piaget taught us, is essential for the formation of a self, and organized play leads not only to sociability, but also to the spirit of adventure, competition, and experimentation. The modalities of "as-if," of "what if," and of "make-believe" are obviously cardinal properties of cinema, even as—and perhaps because—scenarios, belief systems, fictions (and their complementary obverse: frauds, deception, based on prediction and promise) have become an increasingly crucial tool for humans in real world situations, trying to anticipate possible outcomes and for tracking and tracing all manner of processes in so-called "real time," but also for gaining an advantage over adversaries. The "play-drive" (*Spieltrieb*) once occupied a key role in the aesthetic theories of German idealism[6]: now it is recognized as one of the key dynamics of both digital life and financial capitalism, with enterprise, improvisation, and creativity now the hallmarks of neoliberalism.

Images to act with and images to lie with associated cinema with capitalism in its innermost structures, but it also aligns cinema inherently to technology. Behind almost every theory of cinema is the question whether cinema's scope and development is or is not technologically determined: is cinema of the "extensions of man" in Marshall McLuhan's phrase,[7] i.e. a

4 Thomas Elsaesser, "Afterword—Digital Cinema and the Apparatus: Archaeologies, Epistemologies, Ontologies," in *Cinema and Technology: Cultures, Theories, Practices*, ed. Bruce Bennett, Marc Furstenau, and Adrian Mackenzie (London: Palgrave, 2008), 232.

5 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

6 See, for instance, Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795), 11–16, where he discusses the "*Spieltrieb*," the ludic drive.

7 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

way of appropriating the world by prosthetically extending human physical faculties and the senses. Or—especially when it concerns our mental faculties—is there an inverse relation? Do we, in the movies, rather than empathetically extend our feelings, actually instead "outsource" our bodies, our minds and affects in such a manner that other powers take over? There are numerous technophobe fantasies and sci-fi scenarios where machines turn against their creators, from *Frankenstein* to *The Terminator* franchise, but there is also the "uncanny valley"[8] effect of humanoids eliciting emotions, often in domestic settings, such as in Steven Spielberg's *A.I.*: the film whose robot child challenged us with a tagline: "His feelings are real, but he is not"? Similarly, films like *Under the Skin* or *Her* test our limits of associating a body with identity and a voice with being human.

This would suggest that the new kinds of passages that have established themselves between artificial intelligence, design and life, also place cinema in the wider field of transitions and transformations affecting human beings, in their interaction with the world. It is a context of the in-between that takes into account the impact of humans on the earth, and by extension, the impact of human technology on the very idea of "life" itself, namely of how we define life and how we reproduce it. In other words, the post-filmic moment is also an all-cinematic moment, which may well extend into the post-human moment, where the "post" is neither a temporal marker nor indicates succession, but stands for the minimal gap that both separates a concept from and links it to its changing manifestations. Here, too, change is happening, but it is moving in both directions: It means to think cinema today not from its past, but from the future—a future where cinema, but also life, will be decided between *the animated and the automated*.

It may seem a stretch to situate cinema within the epochal changes we usually associate with the Anthropocene, since cinema certainly does not turn up among any of the factors that are said to have brought about the onset of the Anthropocene. As we know, the term "Anthropocene" has been invented, in order to reflect the fact that the impact of human activity, human habitation and human proliferation on Earth has become so significant in its consequences for the atmosphere, the environment and the entire ecosystem, that it merits its own geological name.[9] And among

8 For "uncanny valley," see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncanny_valley.

9 Among the many books that try to define the Anthropocene, one can name Erle Ellis, *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (London: Polity, 2017).

the factors whose dramatic spike as recently as since the 1950s, *have* created the Anthropocene are: population growth, CO^2 emission, overfishing the oceans, motor vehicle production, water use, species extinction, deforestation, plastic waste, and even the exponential rise in paper consumption.

Yet if we broaden our definition of the Anthropocene to include a version of the post-human, and extend it in the direction of another ecology—not the species-based one that is focused on animal studies and other aspects of creaturely life, but the ecology of humans interacting with *technology*, then a space opens up where the cinema does indeed have an interstitial role to play, especially since human interfacing with machines is one of the most common definitions of the post-human. However, it is not the only one: "Post-human" also embraces the realization that we share the planet with other sentient beings and living organisms that have the right to exist, to prosper, and to survive. The Anthropocene and the post-human join these two apparent extremes—man is no different from a machine/man is no different from a plant—in a paradoxical combination. For if the post-human displaces the anthropo*centric* view of humans as the apex of creation, it still does so *from the human point of view*. Likewise, the Anthropocene contains a no less paradoxical insight: for insofar as humans now have the capacity to affect the planet in all manner of nefarious ways, and thus "own" the planet's problems and have to take responsibility for the consequences, the humans of the Anthropocene—as the name of a geological time frame—also must know full well that the earth, whose time scale are billions of years, rather than the few thousands that encompass human time, is entirely indifferent to both our existence and to our actions, making no distinctions whatsoever between beneficial and nefarious ways we humans interact with the environment, given the scale, magnitude and nature of the forces that regulate and determine planetary life.

What would be some of the consequences of seeing cinema not within a hundred-year time span, not even a five-hundred-year episteme that started with a Renaissance perspective, the camera obscura and lenses that altered the scale of projections, and not even the five thousand years that someone like Siegfried Zielinski suggests for what he calls "the deep time of media"? One consequence would be that we could no longer speak of causal connections, of influences or of material or intellectual continuities. But such a view of history might in turn suggest a post-human perspective from the start, and suspend the difference between human history, natural history, and evolutionary history: in which case, first, the post-human view would privilege informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate (such as our flesh-and-blood bodies)

could be seen as an accident of evolution rather than as a necessary or inevitable conditions of "life."

Second, the post-human view might consider *consciousness*—traditionally regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition even before Descartes' cogito—as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart, trying to claim that it is the main event, when in actuality it is only a sideshow, as the combined efforts of Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud have set out to demonstrate, long before the advents of computers and artificial intelligence.

Third, the post-human view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending the body's capacities, or replacing body parts with other prostheses becomes the continuation of a process that began before we were even born.

Fourth, the post-human view configures human beings so that they can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines, each adapting to the other, and each adapted by the other, as we experience it every day, as smartphones, GPS devices, and Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri, Google's Nest become our ever more indispensable partners in living. In this version of the post-human, there are no absolute demarcations but only porous passages between bodily existence and computer simulation, between cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, between robot running on programmes and algorithms, and humans pursuing goals and harbouring ambitions.

According to media theorist Friedrich Kittler, this process is both less dramatic and less revolutionary: such technological determinism as implied by "the machines taking over" has undeservedly been getting a bad name: tools and technologies have always been the natural condition of being human, because at every stage of evolution it was the media of communication—first language, then writing, then printing, then mechanical recording, and now mathematical modelling and algorithmic computation—that has defined what a given epoch considered "human" and "social." Media machines are an integral part of the sociability of humans as a species: there never was a pristine humanity, in unmediated harmony with nature—technology is the sole medium within which we are human.[10]

This might lead to the following hypothesis: With respect to the debate over the post-human, the cinema has been invested in the post-human, right from the start, given, for instance, the centrality of the debate over cinema's automatism among all those who have taken an interest in the cinema as a theoretical or philosophical object. However, with respect to the smooth alignment between humans and machines—something that for

10 See Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

a certain generation and mindset in the United States cannot happen soon enough, seeing how vigorously and successfully it is promoted by Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Tesla—with respect to the post-human as automation, in other words, the cinema may have played a dual role.

Assuming we are on the road of no-return to automating the functions of the brain as well as of the body, the existence of cinema may well have acted as an accelerator, aligning several relevant elements towards an eventual transition: this would include the cinematograph's early use in the non-theatrical contexts, which, of course, also comprises the time-and-motion studies that synchronized human bodies with factory machines, paving the way for robotics and automated manufacturing and assembly work. It would include what I have called "operational images" and the way moving images are used in our increasingly militarized public sphere, not only through ubiquitous surveillance, but also through the security state in all its other aspects, from airport screenings to online shopping that tracks our clicks and turns them into "likes" and "preferences."

In other respects, however, the cinema has also acted as an *emergency brake* on this road of no return, and continues to do so: think of the rise of "slow cinema," also known as "contemporary contemplative cinema," or consider the way cinema has found a home in museums and galleries—reflexive-contemplative spaces par excellence—as "installations" situated somewhere between architecture and sculpture. We can also remind ourselves of the use of found footage, and welcome the recovery of obsolescence as an aesthetic value in its own right.[11] It merely underlines the still growing importance of film heritage, of the archive and of cinema as the cultural memory of mankind in its humanity and diversity, discovered by practicing film-makers, by scholars as well as by nations using cinema to claim identity, autonomy and the right to self-determination.[12]

However, another conclusion to draw from current philosophical debates around cinema is that it has been a powerful agent not for instantiating subjectivity or embodiment, but for getting rid of them, for helping an ongoing and equally irreversible process of dismantling the sovereign subject and a relentless *exteriorization* of all forms of interiority (privacy, desires, feelings, psyche, soul). Even Stanley Cavell agrees, when in *The World Viewed*, published already in 1971, he writes:

11 Thomas Elsaesser, "Media Archaeology as Poetics of Obsolescence," in *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 331–50.
12 See, for instance, Lada Drazin Trbuljak, ed., *Muzej filma—Film u Muzeeju* (Zagreb: MDC, 2017).

> Insofar as photography satisfied a wish, it satisfied [...] the human wish [...] to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation. Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether: by automatism, by removing the human agent from the act of reproduction.[13]

The consequence of the paradox or unresolved tension seems to be that the more cinema in the twenty-first century is exteriorized, outsourced and regulated by forces that are automated, the more we film and media scholars want to "re-animate" it, that is: to make present and to make it re-present the embodied and located experience of the spectator as a fully self-possessed locus of attention, participation, and agency. But what is evident is that under these conditions, cinema's ontology cannot be realism. The paradox is a reminder that moving images are not representations of reality, but exist on a groundless ground which requires the kind of indeterminacy, whose suspended reciprocity and retroactive anticipation of the "as-if" and the "what-if" (mentioned earlier in connection with "play") resembles the cognitive and argumentative circularity which German idealist philosophy called *Das Setzen des Gesetzten* (Johann Gottlieb Fichte). It means that one has to suppose a presupposition, i.e. performatively enact as given what one first sets out to create, and thus to bridge the abyss of scepticism with a leap of faith, but one proposed by mathematics, logic, and probability calculus, rather than religion and theology.

It would therefore be no more than following in the footsteps of André Bazin's "change mummified" if one were to argue that cinema was not only the memory of twentieth-century history, but perhaps more accurately, the fossil record of twentieth-century history given how "layered" each filmic image finally is. If tar pits, bogs, and glaciers are the natural "media" of evolution, then photography and film would be the excavation sites of history, to complement the usual genealogies of celluloid that start with wax tablets, clay cylinders, scrolls, and paper—symbolic notations rather than the preserved imprint of the objects themselves.

The idea of cinema as an archeo-topological medium—one way to come to terms with its uncanny ontology—not only revives debates about stillness and movement and of movement stilled, but also helps the conflation of categories that used to be separate and even opposed to each other, such as "memory" and "history." The same goes for the opposition of "culture" and "nature," which the radical egalitarianism of the camera has

13 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 21.

also levelled—think of Jean Epstein's definition of *photogenie*: "I would describe as photogenic any aspect of things, beings or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction."[14] It is important to note the equivalence that Epstein draws between "things, beings, or souls." Even more clearly, the once considered fundamental nature/culture divide has been rendered all but obsolete due to the expanded scale and impact of human activity on the planet. The oxymoronic element in a term like historical topographies, mixing the man-made and the geological, can draw attention to these different kinds and timescales of agency, and therefore reflect the recognition that humans are henceforth in charge of—and hence responsible for—nature as well as culture: which inaugurates the macro-historical time of the Anthropocene.

But the Anthropocene might well include what Harun Farocki once identified as one of the effects of film-making, and in particular, of documentary in the age of surveillance, namely: "cameras circling the globe that make the world superfluous"—pointing to a sort of mutually determining loop of creative destruction, where what cameras capture and preserve, they also downgrade to the status of the prop or pretext. Such preservation cannot but destroy what it sets out to rescue, because when the world opens itself up to ubiquitous visibility, people and places risk existing merely in order to end up as images.

The cinema as cultural memory and historical topography could therefore be regarded as a kind of "transitional object," a comfort blanket that eases our transition from humanism to post-humanism. The uncanny ontology would be the uncanny valley of the "humanist" side of the divide, while what I just called cinema's archeo-topological definition looks at the same transition between Holocene and Anthropocene from the heights of algorithmic cinema—each indexing the different relations we now have to the world, following the end of "grand narratives" and other Enlightenment teleologies of progress, and thus also of history as we commonly understand it.

Recalling Benjamin's frame of reference, we can cite his messianic conception of *Jetztzeit* (or now-time), and argue that "the past is always formed in and by the present. It comes into discourse in relation to a present, but since it is read from the standpoint of the present, it also forms 'the time of the now.'" This analeptic-proleptic relationship I call the "loop of belatedness," which is to say, we retroactively discover the past to have been prescient

14 Jean Epstein, "On Certain Characteristic of Photogénie" (1924), in *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907–1939, Vol. 1: 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 314.

and prophetic, as seen from the point of view of some special problem or urgent concern in the here and now. Much of our work as film scholars and media historians is, for good or ill, caught in this loop of belatedness, where we retroactively assign or attribute foresight and agency to a moment or a figure from the past that suddenly speaks to us in a special way.

But here's the rub: if one of the strategic uses of obsolescence is that it can serve both as an *aesthetic value* and as an *ecological virtue*, there is still the fact that, being a term that inevitably associates both capitalism and technology, it implicitly acknowledges that today there can be *no art or nature* outside capitalism and technology. This would be the term's political dimension, since the dialectics of (technological) innovation and (capitalist) obsolescence has in some sense become the fate of the contemporary world, keeping us in a loop of our own historical belatedness, whether as members of the First World decentred by globalization or as a species, decentred by our own actions.

It suggests that obsolescence, as we touched on it yesterday evening and I have been trying to sketch it in my book on media archaeology, is also the recto to the verso of the now definitely lost ideals of progress and enlightenment: through obsolescence we negatively conjure up the ghost of progress past, making it the token or fetish of a future we no longer see other than as the recovery of a past: a past that may be trapped for us—but possibly also trapping us—in the translucent amber of our celluloid heritage. It leaves us pondering the trade-off I have been suggesting: namely that one way to salvage *history* from cinema's (and not only cinema's) uncanny *ontologies*, is to open historical thinking up to the archeo-topographies of cultural memory, and especially to its traumatic remainders and apparently obsolescent values. It gives the past—more and more recalled and present to us only through moving images—the kinds of *locatedness* and *materiality* that, far from making the world superfluous, establishes for it a *new ecology of sustainability*. Re-establishing a cycle that isn't just a loop, it would ensure for mankind's many pasts the possibility of managing our resources for the future, rather than foreclosing it in the post-human life scenarios of bio-algorithmic or bio-digital fusion.

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