

What Cinema Is (for the moment...)

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Far from the defence of historical idealism it has long been claimed to be, Bazin's *The Myth of Total Cinema* sheds a flickering light on the perpetual becoming of the technology we call the cinema, when he argues, "the cinema has not yet been invented."¹ Although offered as a defence of film's ability to mutate over time and startle us anew with its capacity to define (at every moment, with every film) what the cinema is and might be, it also offers insight into how representational technologies never become static, and are never, therefore, ever fully "invented." Indeed, this may be the most materialist account we have of the cinema's emergence.

However ironic Bazin's reading of Sadoul may be, I take his final rhetorical flourish, "each new development [...] must take us nearer and nearer to its origin. The cinema has not yet been invented!"² as sincere. Given that the central ethical tenet of Bazin's criticism is that any cinema worthy of the name should not presume to know in advance how to represent the world it encounters (or, perhaps, the world it summons into being), it is a complex affair to say that cinema's guiding obsession is "a recreation of the world in its own image."³ The reality (or the "world") cinema encounters is always unforeseen, always unique, and always particular, and the manner in which the cinema may make that world, that reality, palpable unknowable in advance. If Bazin is a realist, it is fair to say that "the real" the cinema aims at is as likely to be a text as it is the flux of the phenomenal world. Consequently, the cinema's realism will change to suit its subject. This is why Bazin is able to find value in nearly every film. The cinema's capacity to confront the absolute otherness of the world without reducing it to the already known, and in so doing to discover what it, itself, is or could be, is what Bazin cherished. It is also why "What is cinema?" is a question raised by every film and every act of viewing, and why the answer can be known only through specific works. "What is cinema?" is not a question asked in the abstract or in universal terms.

¹ André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema" in *What is Cinema*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 21.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 22.

I propose, somewhat provocatively, that what Bazin advises for the critic might also serve as a watchword for the historian of the medium. Rather than a stable construct that persists relatively unchanged for long stretches of time (say, the classical era), the cinema is always an unstable entity defined as much by its potentials and its “underground” or latent elements as it is by its manifest properties. Always an unstable mixture of technological medium (a set of devices) and aesthetic medium (its forms), the cinema is structured in contradiction through and through, and these contradictions allow not only for the emergence of the new, but serve as an engine of historical change. Much of what follows can be considered a “friendly amendment” to André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion’s “A Medium is Always Born Twice,” with the word “twice” removed and the word “repeatedly” in its place.⁴

Cinema may well have a “first” and a “second” birth, but it is a historiographical mistake to believe that any representational or communication technology ever achieves a stable or “autonomous” form. Indeed, it is these technological/aesthetic media’s perpetual need to produce and reproduce a kind of constitutive exteriority that serves as their engine for change and transformation. Indeed, it might be argued that it is Gaudreault and Marion’s signal achievement to separate the notion of medium from its technological base, and thereby understand it as radically (and in no way externally or contingently) dependent upon institutions and practices. Thoroughly cultural and social (and therefore relational), representational technologies can never be defined by simple mechanics nor even by apparently stable institutional forms. A medium is never defined by its machines or by its (currently) dominant form alone. Instead, technologies are in a constant and necessary state of self-definition, always harbouring possibilities and impulses that are not only never domesticated, but also not even essential to its most apparently stable appearances. To be sure, we are often unable to notice what is in latency until some external factor brings it into view. To understand the relationship between technology on the one hand and medium on the other requires us to acknowledge their rootedness in what Roland Barthes describes as a process of

detach[ing] a secondary language from the slime of primary languages afforded [them] by the world, history, [their] existence, in short, by an intelligibility which preexists [them], for [they come] into a world full of language, and there is no reality not already classified by men: to be born is

⁴ André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, “A Medium is Always Born Twice...”, *Early Popular Visual Culture* 3, no. 1 (May 2005): 3-15.

nothing but to find this code ready-made and to be obliged to accommodate oneself to it.⁵

Moreover, understanding technology and media requires us to recognize the gap that separates the phenomenal fullness of the work from the structures of the already known – the “code ready-made”. The distance between “the given” and the work structures cinema’s openness to the wholly unforeseen. “What is cinema?” is a radically unanswered question with each moment of cinematic newness revealing a future as it simultaneously returns us to its origins – its uniqueness.

Gaudreault and Marion describe this as the process by which it reveals “the specific contours of its opacity.”⁶ As perfect as I find this phrase (I wish I had coined it myself), it owes too much, I think, to the narratives of “medium specificity” which have become the givens of our historical and theoretical era. While I am less and less sure there really is anything at all genuinely “specific” to the cinema, for the sake of discussion, motion, editing, a photographic basis, and camera mobility all seem arguably specific to the cinema. However, whether singly or together, these do not define a medium to the exclusion of any other. Gaudreault and Marion take great pains to address these objections, so I have no wish to pick nits with them, but rather to address some implications that derive from overemphasizing one particular formation of the cinema as definitive. History shows us again and again that what we have taken as “specific” to a medium inevitably withers in importance to be replaced by more vital concerns, and aesthetic autonomy evaporates along with it.

Media constantly produce their transient “autonomies” by producing and policing the boundaries of what they are “not.” As in the case of Bazin’s staged encounter between theatre and cinema, the technological medium we call the cinema is always in tension with proximate technical and aesthetic media, and often it comes to know itself best in dialog with them. Moreover, cinema has not always tried to define itself in terms of autonomy. There is nothing in the process of media formation that needs to view the cinema as “subservient” to existing media, nor that they arrange themselves chronologically in a sequence of succession. In the 1910s, for example, cinema’s identity was as frequently defined by the media it embraced (as a kind of *gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art]), as those it excluded. One medium didn’t dominate the other, nor did one demand recognition through a Hegelian media master/slave

⁵ Roland Barthes, “Introduction” in *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), xvii. Quoted in Gaudreault and Marion, op. cit., 3.

⁶ A. Gaudreault and P. Marion, “A Medium is Always Born Twice...”, op. cit., p. 3.

dialectic. This is not to say, however, that there is no dialectic at work, just that it does not reach a point of stasis.

The dialectic between existing and newly born media never ceases. I would argue, following Bazin, that cinema is always a function of an encounter between the possibilities of a technology and an aesthetic situation that may either confirm existing ideas about the medium, or surprise us with possibilities previous unseen or even unanticipated. And since any instantiation of the cinema – even a thoroughly institutionalized one – never exhausts the possibilities of either the technological or the aesthetic medium, there always remain a series of structured contradictions that define the tension between what the cinema is at a given moment and what it might become. We can agree that the moment of institutionalization that rendered the cinema “autonomous” produced something recognizable as a medium through both a reflexive understanding of the technological medium by its practitioners, and also the sense that it had produced something like an institutionalized audience as well. However thoroughly recognized and accepted, economic, social, and cultural primacy are the result of contingent circumstances. Those filmmakers and audiences who continued to view the cinema as a species of magic lantern, as a device for structured perceptual play, as a device of wonder and scientific discovery, or as a fairground amusement neither ceased to be correct nor ceased to think that they were correct. While the dominant form of the medium might structure the terrain, it is important that we not reify it. Cinema’s structured non-identity with itself has always been one of its chief resources. Cinema *was* institutionalized during the early cinema period, but only for the moment.

Bazin offers us another way to think about this phenomenon in, of all places, his essay *Theatre and Cinema – Part 1*. In a discussion of how American slapstick films, rather than being essentially “cinematic”, are instead in constant and productive dialogue with theatrical traditions, Bazin argues forcefully for the idea of the cinema’s essentially mixed (or impure) nature. “In American comedy the theatre, albeit invisible, was always potentially there.”⁷ Rather than set theatre and cinema against one another, Bazin argues that the cinema brings theatrical situations “to maturity” from the “larval stages.” Elaborating the metaphor, he notes that

In Mexico there is a kind of salamander capable of reproduction at the larval stage and which develops no further. By injecting it with hormones, scientists have brought it to maturity. In like fashion we know that the continuity of animal evolution presented us with incomprehensible gaps until biologists

⁷ André Bazin, “Theater and Cinema – Part 1,” in *What is Cinema?*, op. cit., 78.

discovered the laws of *paedomorphosis* from which they learnt not only to place embryonic forms in the line of evolution of the species but also to recognize that certain individuals, seemingly adult, have been halted in their evolutionary development.⁸

On the one hand, this reference to the famous axolotl is a somewhat unsurprising vestige of Bazin's debt to vitalist thought, and reflects his tendency to imbue the cinema with life-like properties and an organic capacity for evolution, development, and interaction with other "organisms" and with its environment. On the other hand, it offers a profoundly non-teleological model for how we might consider the historical development of a technological medium.

The figure of *paedomorphosis* is a complex one. The theatre in this case is the axolotl in its "usual" environment, where it never develops beyond what turns out, in retrospect, to be only its "larval" form. The cinema is the external intervention that brings it to a maturity that could not have been foreseen. Thus, Bazin suggests two precepts for the development of a medium that arise from its radical dependence upon its environment. First, a medium has within it the innate capacity to transform itself no matter how fully developed it seems at any moment. Second, the direction of that development is also radically non-teleological: we cannot predict what any particular intervention – historical, cultural, aesthetic, social, etc. – will engender. Therefore, he seems to suggest, we can never assume a medium is ever static.

What concerns me about granting primacy to any one instantiation of a medium is that it tends to support unwarranted generalizations about the medium *in toto*. In recent years, it has been customary to define the cinema in terms of some of its apparently specific properties, like indexicality, that are taken to be given, yet to do so marks not only a misunderstanding of index, but more importantly, a misunderstanding of how media develop and function historically. I want briefly to address the case of the index to tease out the importance of understanding media and media practices as perpetually dynamic.

Martin Lefebvre has recently written a careful analysis of the Peircean index and how it has been misunderstood and misapplied within the humanities, especially within film studies.⁹ I cannot do justice to the complexity of his argument here, but for me the essential problem is that indexicality is typically understood as a *property* of the photographic/filmic image. Nothing

⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁹ Martin Lefebvre, "The Art of Pointing: On Peirce, Indexicality, and Photographic Images," in James Elkins (ed.) *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 220-44. See also Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Pphotographs," *Nordicom Review* 25, nos. 1-2 (2004): 39-49; and Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *Differences* 18, no. 1 (2007): 128-52.

could be more at odds with Peirce's system. Indexicality is a *function*, not a property; it is dynamic and it is irreducibly *relational*. In this, it resembles my account of media, not coincidentally. What is more, no photograph can guarantee its own indexicality. For Pierce, and for the early audiences of photography and film, the unreliability of photography was a given. In order to *produce* the relation we call indexicality, it was not enough that a photograph be taken and printed. As Philip Rosen notes, indexicality requires knowledge about how the image was produced.¹⁰ More than that, however, it requires faith in the practices of photographers, and the habitual association of photography with a certain form of photographic practice. During the nineteenth century melodramatic scenarios repeatedly staged the photographic and phonographic processes in such a way that the image or recording's credibility could not be doubted. This is true not only in *The Octoroon* but even in accounts that underlie the legal status of the image, as Jennifer Mnookin's research shows.¹¹

These dramatic accounts (however unrealistic) performed a crucial pedagogical function, accustoming audiences to the idea of photographic fidelity in the most vivid manner possible. But they also illustrate that to attribute particular sign functions as properties of a form is rash at best and misleading at worst. However habitual certain semiotic inferences became, they were always grounded far more in the ethics of photographers and a presumed set of social practices than they were in the medium "itself." By granting a special case of photography – one instantiation of a medium – the status of norm, as we have been prone to do, we are led to the point where we conflate (one possibility of a) technological medium and (one possible use of an) aesthetic medium and allow them to be understood as necessary properties. As a consequence, we are led to wholly unjustifiable claims about the relationship between analogue and digital media.

Given that indexicality depends upon a form of photographic *practice* rather than on the fact that the medium is "analogue," a digital film or photograph is no more or less indexical than any traditional photo. The practices of everyday life confirm this. That MRI you got at the hospital is digital through and through, and yet its credibility is never at issue because of that fact alone. The standards and practices of technicians serve as guarantees that the image will be as accurate as the device is capable of making it. You don't question the veracity of your

¹⁰ Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

¹¹ Jennifer L. Mnookin, "The Image of Truth: Photographic Evidence and the Power of Analogy," *Yale Journal of Law & Humanities* 10, no. 1 (1998). <http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjllh/vol10/iss1/1>; Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2004). See also Alexander Black, *Captain Kodak: A Camera Story* (Boston: Lothrop Publishing, 1899); and George William Hill, *The Phonograph Witness, A Drama in Five Acts*, 1883.

nephew's school portrait just because it has been posted on Facebook. Its digital provenance has no effect upon how you understand its purchase on the world. The same with news media. The majority of newspaper photos have been digitally produced and reproduced for well over a decade, and no crisis of credibility has emerged. When we doubt news images (as we often do), it is the reporter or editor we doubt, not the camera. Both the crisis and its resolution are profoundly social, and only in a trivial way a function of the technological medium. Still, we continue to treat media as self-defining and self-defined because certain uses have become dominant.

The stakes of such reifications are not all so dire. In the course of research for my first book I realized that one of the dilemmas at the heart of the coming of sound in Hollywood was based in differing understandings of the basic nature of sound recording as a medium. The "second birth" of phonography coincided with the emergence of the recorded music industry, and the norms both practitioners and consumers came to associate with that practice shaped sound's encounter with film. Surely sound recording was an "autonomous" medium if ever there were one. However, the telephone and other language-based communication media were also autonomous media based on a quite different representational model. It is important to understand, however, that the norms and assumptions of one of them – music recording – were taken as "given," as "essential." As the social practices surrounding music confirmed, sound recording obviously strove to duplicate the perceptual experience of an audience member at a performance. Who could question this?

Of course Hollywood was not primarily in the business of canning "real" experiences for its audiences. Indeed, the spatial logic of the image operated in stark contrast to the embodied, attentive model of the concertgoer. The conflict between a narrativized or rhetorical visual space and a perceptually defined acoustic one took several years to sort out, and involved a surprising amount of discursive to-ing and fro-ing to bring the media (cinema and sound recording) into alignment. This would not have been the case were it not that the layered contradictions of mediated sound been legible to everyone involved, but sedimented habits of practice made it impossible to see beyond one understanding of a medium. Needless to say, the perceptually replete model for sound neither disappeared nor ceased to function. Point-of-audition sound in films and the soundscapes of pop music found new and utterly redefining uses for this model, which flourished and finally reintegrated with the cinema in the form of modern sound design.

Finally, and most familiarly, I turn to the cell phone as a very contemporary example of a technology/medium in whose misapprehension we are currently participating. The name is

telling: cellular *phone*. Born “first” in 1973, its second birth occurred in the 1990s as cell phones penetrated all levels of society and the market. Nothing could be more recognizable as a medium as this adjunct to the (then familiar) telephone, now quaintly known as a “land line.” Despite its nearly universal recognition as a telephone, the cell phone was anything but a device. More a radio than anything else, its first large-scale transformation came with the addition of the camera. I remember vividly and with appropriate chagrin my first comment about the camera-phone. When my old-fashioned camera-less phone surprised a student, he extolled the virtues of his new camera. Perplexed by the portmanteau combination of unrelated devices I snarked, “Yeah, I’ll put it next to my bicycle pump/juice squeezer”. Thus I entered fogey-dom. Blinded by its identity as a phone, I was unable to see (as were most consumers) its transformation into a data-transmission device, furthered by the addition of text and e-mail functions and finally Internet access. Blackberry, Treo, and the iPhone finally crossed the last threshold and did away with designs that resembled traditional phones in any way. Last to die is the name; these are still usually called “smart phones”.

The media legends that sprung up around the first iPhones, especially the one that had new owners exclaiming “I didn’t know it could make calls!” testify to the fact that we never fully grasp the meaning and impact of media except in relation to media and practices that impinge upon them. One might say, looking back, that the iPhone rubes who were surprised by its ability to make calls were, in fact, the ones who saw the future of the device most clearly. My children’s generation use smart phones to make calls only as a last resort. For them it is a portable electronic data device first, a telephone only secondarily, because of the social and cultural worlds they inhabit. In the end, they seem to prove the idea that there are no autonomous media, only media embedded in changeable social and cultural frameworks. It seems clear that the cinema is no exception to this rule, and we are as likely to be blinded to emergent cinemas lurking within the cinema we know as we are to the next iteration of the smart phone.

The contradiction between technological media – devices – and aesthetic media, and even the contradictions within particular media are essential and defining features of our media worlds, and the cause of their capacity to change. Whether we celebrate or mourn this year’s “death of cinema” (or painting, or radio, or the book), we can be fairly certain that a new cinema will emerge, one that is new, unexpected, and only hinted at in our present media configuration. Cinema is dead? Long live the cinema.