What Was Cinema?

It has become abundantly clear that cinema no longer means film. The last several years have seen the closing of film laboratories around the world, the discontinuation of all but a few stocks by film manufacturers, and the outfitting of nearly every theater with digital projection systems. It is undeniable that the material basis of film, whether nitrate, celluloid, or acetate, has been superseded by digital processes. Though a small portion of work continues to employ the material of film, and though the word “film” survives as the name for feature-length works, film is no longer the primary mode by which moving images are made, distributed, and exhibited.

The so-called “death of cinema” of course, long predates the digital turn of the past fifteen years. The emergence of television and video challenged the centrality of film many decades prior. In art, these rival media gave rise to what Rosalind Krauss has called the «post-medium condition» of the sixties and seventies, in which modernism’s former emphasis on medium specificity gave way to a more diffuse notion of artistic practice not bound, in form or in destiny, by one’s materials.1 Krauss’s idea of a post-medium condition was an attempt to account for a diffuse range of artistic practices of the time, both the emergence of a new technological and artistic medium, video, as well as the dematerialized objects of conceptual art. In its expansiveness, the post-medium condition (which Krauss formulated some time after this period) also revealed an unstable notion of what a medium is apart from its idea or material substrate2.

In cinema, the decoupling of medium from material has had an even longer history. André Bazin, in his 1946 essay “The Myth of Total Cinema”, calls cinema an «idealist phenomenon,» more an idea than a particular physical manifestation3. In the

pursuit of a total cinema, or that which will «provide that complete illusion of life», he observes that the telos of technological innovation isn't as smooth or straightforward as we assume it to be. Whether extended delays between idea and invention, historical dead-ends, or the nagging question of paths not taken, cinema’s technological progress has been messy and uneven. The reality of invention only partially aligns with the medium’s guiding myth of increasingly accurate, detailed, and complete mimicry of reality. To ask the Bazinian question «what is cinema?» means understanding what cinema has perhaps only appeared to be.

For Jonathan Walley, Bazin regards cinema «as much a conceptual phenome-non—a dream, a fantasy—as it is a tangible medium. In short, it is an idea that has temporarily taken the form of certain materials.»4 This fantasy, which forms a shadow history to the dominant view of film history, reaches to the earliest expressions of the medium. In an inversion of Louis Lumière’s famous claim that «cinema is an invention without a future,» Bazin declares that «cinema has not yet been invented!»5 Cinema’s history, riddled with fits and starts, has not advanced the invention beyond a rudimentary condition. The notion of its future, meanwhile, lies elsewhere, more a matter of myth and desire than a natural outcome of our technological tinkering. It is cinema we want more than we have actually achieved.

The idea of cinema, as much as or perhaps more than its concrete manifestations, has always pervaded the meaning we ascribe to the notion of medium. As an idea, cinema is a slippery, phantasmatic term, untethered to the forms it temporarily inhabits. In the contemporary terrain of the «post»—post-medium, post-cinema—the idea of the cinematic medium becomes all the more ghostly, a spectral vision of the past in the present. Cinema no longer means film, its former material substrate, nor does it convincingly mean something else. This is not because film has been replaced by the digital, but because the medium never was completely film in the first place. To look at cinema now, as a medium distinct from its material substrate, requires a double view: both what the idea of cinema is, and, equally important, what it was.

Among contemporary theorists, the view of cinema is decidedly nostalgic. “In Defense of the Poor Image” one of the most influential essays of new media theory
to appear in recent years, resurrects an idea of cinema from the era of film to mobilize and politicize the digital image. Hito Steyerl invokes «rare prints of militant, experimental, and classical works of cinema as well as video art,» with the primary example being Chris Marker’s film and video essays, as the heroic forms of the past, though these have been limited by problems of access: «Video essays and experimental films remained for the most part unseen save for some rare screenings in metropolitan film museums or film clubs, projected in their original resolution before disappearing again into the darkness of the archive»7.

New media, on the other hand, have no problem circulating widely, but must contend with the issue of clutter, including «[h]ate speech, spam, and other rubbish»8. These are what she calls «poor images,» degraded in both pixelated form and meaningless, apolitical content. This poverty, she suggests, is a condition of neoliberal capitalist structures that have, in the realm of the image, separated high-resolution images, which are available only to the wealthy, from compressed, low-resolution poor images, which are available to everyone else. The latter, however, can be turned to different aims, namely to contest the very political and economic structure that has produced it. With the poor image, Steyerl finds an opportunity to recover and re-distribute the cinema of the past: «The circulation of poor images creates a circuit, which fulfills the original ambitions of militant and (some) essayistic and experimental cinema—to create an alternate economy of images...»9. She uses Juan García Espinosa’s notion of an imperfect cinema, a political, populist cinema that deliberately rejects the polish of commercial films, as her hook. The avant-garde and militant films of the past, in their new form as poor images, can now find the audiences that need them more than ever.

Steyerl’s analysis is an account of a technological transition, and to bridge the intermedial gap she maintains a notion of cinema as a medium distinguished from its material in film or digital technologies. Her idea of cinema is also its political and aesthetic ideal, as if the explicit aims of resistant cinema were wholly consistent with accounts of the relationship between the two media, see André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, “The Cinema as a Model for the Genealogy of Media” (2002); Thomas Elsaesser, “The New Film Histories as Media Archaeology” (2004); and Jonathan Walley, “Materiality and Meaning in Recent Projection Performance,” The Velvet Light Trap 70, Fall 2012, pp. 18–34.

8 Ibid., pp. 40.
9 Ibid., pp. 42.
its reception. In essence, Steyerl evokes a continuous idea of experimental cinema, unchanged save for its material construction. It is as if technological and infrastructural issues of access were the only problems facing the avant-garde, all of which are solved by digital media. Belatedly, and in a different material form, experimental cinema can finally achieve some of its radical aims.

But this may never have been the case. Espinosa’s imperfect cinema, after all, was more successful as a manifesto, an idea, than the revolutionary catalyst it was designed to be. The films of Chris Marker may not have been any more political efficacious had they been more widely seen in their own time or enabled by torrents in our own. Imbuing the poor image with such revolutionary potential speaks more of Steyerl’s desire for these new media forms to do meaningful political work than any intrinsic destiny that radical cinema might possess. The poor image is less the inheritor of a particular legacy of film, one that by many accounts has actually failed, than a projection of an illusory past for its imagined political and economic utility. For those of us sympathetic to the aspirations of the heroic avant-garde and dispirited by the unequal distribution of new media forms and access under neoliberal capitalism, the idea of cinema she offers is an appealing one. It is a past our distracted, overwhelmed present needs. Tinted with the patina of faded celluloid, but no less for the wear, this ennobled idea of cinema will anchor and serve us for the struggles that lie ahead.

Steyerl’s essay makes no mention of contemporary avant-garde film, though the implicit assumption is that whatever exists today is in some way continuous with the aspirations of the past. This is to some extent true in the case of Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder, whose work, which resolutely treats film as material, bears resemblance to the structural films of the late sixties and seventies. Yet however much concerned with the idea of a cinematic medium, their installations, performances, and texts—never «films»—depart significantly from the materially-determined medium essentialism of structural film. If, for many structural filmmakers, the purity of film form was the aim of cinema, Gibson and Recoder revisit an older rift, dispensing with film in order to arrive at the «metaphysical idea» of cinema—in effect its medium unburdened by its material substrate.

Their body of work is large and complex, and I will limit myself to two examples. *Light Spill* (2006) contains the elements of a typical film screening, with a running

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16mm projector, a screen or wall for projection, and a reel of film threaded through the machine. The take-up reel, however, is removed so that the film that passes through the machine falls onto the floor. Over the course of the installation’s duration, which has ranged from a period of weeks to several months, the tangled, unruly heap grows. The work characterizes the projector as an organ of digestion, ingesting new footage and transforming it to waste. The machine is a ravenous, indiscriminate eater. Gibson and Recoder accept any donations of footage they receive, and the projector’s lens is purposefully unfocused so that all the images that appear on the wall are further indistinguishable. Unlike most film screenings, the central «event» is not the projection of the image, but the mounting excretion of the filmstrip.

With Light Spill, there is no suggestion that computer technologies will later imbibe and digitally reconstitute the image in the manner of the poor image, no technological deus ex machina to revive the film machine. At the end of the installation, the projector simply stops, leaving behind a pedestal surrounded by a mass of film. An alternate end to Light Spill is presented by Threadbare (2013), in which the projector is fully wrapped in ribbons of film. If the projector in Light Spill seemed to run of its own accord, here it has ceased to function, effectively bound and gagged by the filmstrip that once sustained it. Film has become the enemy of cinema. Gibson and Recoder write in “Cinema/Film”: «The organic nature of film is the long intestine (umbilical/spinal chord) unwinding and slithering silently behind our backs (our spines), wrapping its infinite coil (or noose?) ever so swiftly around our necks!»\(^{11}\).

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\(^{11}\) \textit{Ibid.}
Gibson and Recoder’s works neither reference digital technologies nor make use of them. From a technological standpoint, their altered projection systems could have been made using equipment available sixty years ago. There is no new media to make cinema old, as it were, yet their work is nevertheless marked by the present moment. One cannot help but be reminded of the economic structures that condition Steyerl’s analysis, and her formulation of the revolutionary poor image as a response to them. If Gibson and Recoder are responding to the same contemporary situation, they look not toward the digital future of cinema as does Steyerl, but reach backward in time to recover cinema from the ruins of its filmic past. Somewhat paradoxically, their work is contemporary because the materials they use are worn and deteriorated. The outmoded equipment that make up their installations barely function, if at all. In the account of film history inferred from Light Spill and Threadbare, the death of film came not as a result of digital media, but by its own doing, choked in its own material.

The sacrifice of film is enacted with the purpose of liberating the idea of cinema. For Gibson and Recoder, the nature of cinema might be grasped by shedding the «thingness» of film. Without this material apparatus, the concept of cinema, or Bazin’s «idealistic phenomenon,» is shifty, elusive, and unstable. It is «what remains as its thingness fades into darkness,» an invention whose future is not yet discernable, and may in fact be unattainable. But if this is hazy, the idea of cinema as it has been embedded in various pasts is becoming increasingly clear. Gibson and Recoder’s work shows us the end of film in order to discern the idea of cinema, not only for a previous time, but for ours as well. We have yet to decide which idea, which past, will deliver us into the yet uncertain future. Though Bazin’s essay was written nearly seventy years ago, cinema, it turns out, still has yet to be invented.