

The Myth of Postal Cinema

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In what follows, I'd like to emphasize a history of cinema as technology that is itself not scientific, but imaginative, mythical, and encrusted in language. This may seem unorthodox, but the gambit has a precedent. In his now classic essay, "The Myth of Total Cinema," André Bazin adopts a similar approach. Identifying "total cinema" as an utterly unadulterated realism that existed prior to the cinematograph's appearance, Bazin rejects the claim that the invention of cinema resembles an economic or technological evolution – instead, he posits that the invention of cinema reveals the fusion of disparate technical aspects under an idea. "The cinema," he declares, "is an idealistic phenomenon. The concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven."ⁱ He suggests, oddly enough, that each technological development remains destined to efface itself as it pushes cinema closer to this platonic ideal. And in making that point, the essay reaches a rhetorical crescendo: "Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!"ⁱⁱ If the rhetoric here seems stretched to its limits, then it stretches only because Bazin must play with language to suitably describe the temporal paradox of cinema's invention. With similar lexical exuberance, we might refer to this remarkable temporal modality as cinema's late(nt) arrival at its own very origins.ⁱⁱⁱ

Bazin's merry declaration – i.e., "cinema has not yet been invented!" – is radical not only because it seems to fly in the face of established history, but also because its grammar prefigures a particular form of response. For if cinema has "not yet been invented," then we must ask: "When will it have been invented?" Bazin's present perfect declaration compels us to engage the future perfect tense, which, at a grammatical level, resembles the remarkable temporal modality of cinematic invention described in "The Myth of Total Cinema."^{iv} As Bazin understood and as we realize after reading his essay, the specter of what *will have been* must always haunt cinematic discourse. Such a realization may even temper cries about the death of film in our emerging post-cinematic era. After all, Bazin outlines such a unique cinematic hauntology himself. The passing of the classical filmic experience isn't necessarily a conclusive moment in a linear progression, because the *anticipated return* of total cinema threatens, at all moments, any rigid chronology of cinematic history.^v In fact, a brief foray into apparatus theory shows that even the scholars who formulated a description of the classical filmic experience were haunted by total cinema's *anticipated return* – by a sense of what cinema *will have been*. Ultimately, it may be that the "invention" of cinema studies in the 1970s and 1980s follows a quite similar temporal logic as the "invention" of cinema.



Visual Depiction of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"

Though apparatus theory resists monolithic summary,^{vi} a reasonable synopsis might begin with Jean-Louis Baudry's evocation of Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave" in his essay, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema." Baudry focuses less on film texts than the conditions under which cinematic effects are produced. For Baudry, these conditions influence the spectator far more than film texts, and he argues that these conditions are analogous to those in Plato's cave. In the allegory itself, framed as a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, Plato proffers an idealist argument about images. Its suggestion is that although we think we see the world's reality, we, in fact, rarely look at it directly. What we see is a facsimile of reality, i.e. a representation of the world. We are like prisoners incapable of moving their heads, viewing projections and shadows on a cave wall in front of us:

"Imagine human beings living in an underground, cave-like dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets."^{vii}

While Plato describes this predicament in order to champion philosophy,^{viii} Baudry sees in it the physical and psychological conditions of film-viewing. According to him, the distinctive technological ensemble and spatial organization of different elements in the theater establish and restrict the effects cinema has on a spectator.^{ix} But here arises a difficulty in "The Apparatus." The key term in the text – i.e. apparatus – renders in one English word what Baudry divides into two French phrases. Depending on the English translation, conceptual slippage may occur between, on one hand, the technological ensemble and the spatial organization of the theater [*l'appareil de base*], and, on the other, a powerful scene of representation that compels the spectator to regress into a premature state in which s/he is susceptible to becoming an ideological subject [*le dispositif*]. Baudry marks this distinction in a footnote:

"In a general way, we distinguish the *basic cinematographic apparatus* [*l'appareil de base*], which concerns the ensemble of the equipment and operations necessary to the production of a film and its projection, from the apparatus [*le dispositif*] discussed in this article, which solely concerns projection and which includes the subject to whom the projection is addressed. Thus the *basic cinematographic apparatus* involves the film stock, the camera, developing, montage considered in its technical aspects, etc., as well as the apparatus [*dispositif*] of projection. The basic cinematographic apparatus is a long way from being the camera by itself."^x

Confusingly, Baudry collapses the "apparatus [*dispositif*] of projection" into the basic cinematographic apparatus, thereby muddying the waters he hoped to clear. Still, to some extent the conflation helps make his point. As Thomas Elsaesser and Marte Hagener put it, Baudry's apparatus theory "is based first of all on an analysis of the fixed and unchangeable arrangement of (disembodied, captive, and impressionable) spectators, (fixed) screen and (hidden) projector, all of which entertain a specific spatial relationship to one another. This

arrangement creates an architecture of looks, linking camera, audience and protagonist(s) that turns the silver screen into an imaginary mirror of spectatorial desire." The actual arrangement of the theater is part of the virtual work of the apparatus.

But, even at this inaugural moment – during the initial formulation of a model of the classical filmic experience – the specter of what *will have been* already haunts cinematic discourse. On this point, Elsaesser and Hagener are worth quoting at length:

"If one follows apparatus theory to the letter, then any engagement with individual films becomes mere illustration or decoration, since the immutability of the system would seem to crush any variation at the level of the individual work. However, it is quite striking that Baudry developed his influential theory at a time when the spatial arrangement, audience set-up and projection technology, with which his cinematic apparatus and its 'metaphysics' are so intrinsically bound up, had already lost much of its supremacy and certainly its claim to 'normativity.' In the 1970s and 1980s it even appeared likely that the cinema in which this apparatus had first been used would not only hand over to television and its 'channels,' but that cinema as a public place was inevitably condemned to extinction. One can therefore assume that the insistence on the insurmountability and omnipotence of the apparatus in his theory was embedded in an ideologically symptomatic, contradictory relation to the dwindling influence that same apparatus began to have in practice. In other words: apparatus theory reacted to the crisis of cinema – which had been caused historically by the development of different audio-visual technologies and by changes in audience behavior – with a certain kind of mourning work vis-à-vis the cinema in which the loving, nostalgic look of the cinephiles gave way to a special kind of love-hate relationship in the face of cinema's looming demise."^{xi}

Technological progression in the '70s and '80s seemed to suggest the passing of classical filmic experience. Faced with this extinction, writers like Baudry theorize the cinema situation as something so insurmountable and omnipotent that the technological congealing of the basic cinematographic apparatus [*l'appareil de base*] appears to be merely a stage in the evolution toward some prior metaphysical power: the apparatus [*le dispositif*]^{xii}. Thus theorized, the passing of classical filmic experience wouldn't necessarily be a conclusive moment in a linear progression because the anticipated return of the prior metaphysical power renders null and void any rigid chronology of cinematic history. The so-called "mourning work" of apparatus theory instantiates the very same temporal modality outlined by Bazin in his "Myth" essay. But, whereas Bazin noticed this temporal modality in the invention of cinema, apparatus theorists used it for the invention of cinema studies. In this sense, the invention of cinema studies itself was an "idealistic phenomenon," agitated by the specter of what cinema *will have been*.

In the 21st century, digital technologies have disturbed the darkened dream space of apparatus theory, and the extinction of cinema seems to loom again. When it comes to the production, exhibition, and reception of moving images, the conditions have changed – on both a material and technological level. Film (i.e., celluloid) and cinema as such (i.e., an institution of shared reception) seem to be nearing obsolescence, and a single term – *post-cinema* – has emerged to describe aesthetic responses to this state of affairs. The term's prefix signals that post-cinematic practices either succeed or develop upon cinematic ones, and the term accounts for, according to Shane Benson and Julia Leyda, the varying ways that 21st century media shape and reflect new forms of filmic sensibility.^{xiii} But, it must be said: the filmic experience, so central in apparatus theory and so apparently nearing extinction, still remains. The term post-cinema, if taken at face value, threatens to elide the fact that digital technics have merely sublated, not eradicated, classical film experience. In other words, even though the filmic experience may be culturally residual in the 21st century, it's still possible to experience Baudry's description of a cave-like apparatus. To their credit, Benson and Leyda recognize this concurrency and write that post-cinema "alternately abjures, emulates, prolongs, mourns, or pays homage to cinema."^{xiv} But even if theorists of post-cinema account for the problematic prefix ("post-") by mining debates over postmodernism and postmodernity—debates that positioned the prefix as something that accounts for an ambiguous temporality—the term nonetheless conjures a media environment in which cinema no longer shapes and reflects the cultural sensibilities of our era. And if it imagines the completion of cinema's role in that regard, then post-cinema refers to cinema using the future perfect tense. Even though cinema has not yet been "invented," in the Bazinian sense – since this filmic experience is passing but not yet passed – post-cinema imagines a world in which cinema *will have been*.

No doubt, cinema's founding myth dooms it to disappear within the totality of absolute realism. Eventually, according to Bazin's myth, cinema will return to the ideational realm of platonic oblivion, but until that time, it must linger chimerically in the physical realm seeking to embody an ideal. Thus, the hauntology of cinema is inherent in the logic of its founding myth: cinema prepares to make a "return" to its origins, but that return also promises to be an ideational debut. Recent post-cinematic scholarship, thanks to its tendency to imagine the future perfect of cinema, tends to reveal, though not always wittingly, this cinematic hauntology anew.



Interpretation of Robertson's *Fantasmagorie*

Curious, I returned to Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, whose text is accompanied by a Foreword written by Rodowick as though it were a direct letter to Wollen. One strange passage stands out in the Foreword: "In writing these words, it pains me deeply to think that we still exist on the same planet though not in the same world. The time has passed for us to continue the conversations that have been so meaningful for me throughout my own intellectual engagement with moving images and the critical thought they inspire. I suppose this letter is my way, perhaps my last lost opportunity, to continue that conversation."^{xv} Rodowick talks about being on the same planet yet a different world and refers to a "last lost" opportunity... but why?

One example of such scholarship, D.N. Rodowick's *The Virtual Life of Film*, seems especially preoccupied with the specter of what cinema will have been. In the book, Rodowick mourns what he sees as the death of cinema at the hands of electronic and digital technologies, which undermine the ontological photographic power of the image and force film into a virtual afterlife as philosophy. However, Rodowick begins the book with a dedication to Peter Wollen: "in friendship and admiration." This moment is the only place where Wollen's name is referenced explicitly. The rest of the text is empty of the Marxist tenor of Wollen's semiotics, nor can one find any traces of the theorist's name.

When writing to Wollen, why does Rodowick slip into a kind of preemptive nostalgia – why does he adopt an affectual concern with what *will have been*?

As some in the cinema and media studies community know, Peter Wollen has been severely disabled with Alzheimer's disease for over a decade. The disease leaves him fettered to the moment, now unburdened by recall. Nostalgia, preemptive or otherwise, is an affect no longer afforded to him. And yet, confronted with his friend's illness, Rodowick *does* feel this preemptive nostalgia – a strange, future-perfect modality that differs greatly from Wollen's perpetual, present-tense modality. My conjecture is that in the encounter between these two figures, and in the friction of their temporal modalities, something crystallized for Rodowick about the filmic experience. In *The Virtual Life of Film*, we witness him reckoning with the passing of this experience and, in a more subtle way, the passing of his friend. In this sense, Rodowick's negative attitude toward digitally composed worlds – he says that in these worlds "nothing endures," and "the sense of time" gives way to "a time of a continuous present"^{xvi} – carries sorrowful undertones informed by the shifting state of his relationship not just with cinema but with Wollen himself.

Much of Rodowick's argument in the book turns on his claim that film is unique due to its "twofold virtuality." The film-viewer chases an image both lost to time past and passing in time present. First, there's the projection of events virtually lost to the past in the current perceptual image, and then there's the succession of passing present moments where space and movement appear and disappear into the virtual time of memory. In both photography and film, "the virtual is always overrunning the actual."^{xvii} Once in that psychological state conditioned by the apparatus, a viewer feels personally involved in the duration of the image. Raymond Bellour, another film nostalgist, puts it another way. During the film-viewing experience, "virtualities never cease propagating themselves," and these "interruptions, these permanent memory-in-action recalls [...] extend the film into the individual life of every spectator."^{xviii} For those hailed by these ceaselessly propagating virtualities, the digital remains less proficient than film at conveying the inexorable image of the past and the passing world. Whereas the digital permits one to select, recombine, replay, and rerun, the filmic seems to replicate the irreversible direction and stream of objective time.^{xix} This is to say that film projects time lost, and the act of watching it simulates and thickens our experience of nostalgia – a yearning for that which is irrecoverable.

The Virtual Life of Film vibrates with such nostalgia, most obviously for the waning of classical filmic experience. But, grappling with the passing of film-viewing as well as the passing of his friend, Rodowick finds himself preemptively nostalgic, caught in a future-perfect mode and compelled to write a proleptic elegy. If *The Virtual Life of Film* mourns in advance the death of cinema, then it must also be said that the Foreword/letter in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* mourns in advance the death of Wollen. This tone, which turns the Foreword/letter into a proleptic elegy as well, is weird. It's odd to address someone as if they are dead even though they have not yet passed. To some extent, it is even a failure to mourn because nothing has actually passed; those who mourn in advance simply adopt the *posture* of mourning. At any rate, this anticipatory mourning is important to note. For along with preemptive nostalgia, it engages the remarkable temporal modality of the future-perfect tense – a temporal modality that Bazin describes as inherent to the history of cinema as a technology. The specter of what *will have been* continues to haunt cinematic discourse, even – or perhaps especially – now that cinema appears to be on its deathbed under this new post-cinematic regime. After all, according to the unique temporality outlined by Bazin, the closer that cinema gets to its original platonic ideal, the closer it gets to self-erasure. As a form of technology, cinema's history represents a progressive march toward its founding fantasy – "The Myth of Total Cinema," or, as Bazin tells us, the moment at which cinema would cease to be cinema at all.^{xx} If each of cinema's technological advancements can be seen as part of a progression toward total cinema – toward the erasure of cinema as such – then we might say that cinema inscribes, within itself, every sentence of its own elegy. Cinema writes and internalizes, in advance of its death, a letter of mourning to itself.

Post-cinematic scholarship, like *The Virtual Life of Film*, helps relay that self-inscribed proleptic elegy. But, understood as "behind," "after," or "subsequent to," the problematic prefix (*post*-cinema) implies that the history of cinema as technology should be studied as more teleology than morphology. This, of course, runs counter to Bazin's emphasis on imagination, myth, and language, not to mention the paradoxical temporality of a proleptic elegy. What I'm proposing – i.e., a morphologically-inclined history of cinema as technology – would instead treat the term "post-cinema" as merely another *form* of cinema.

Consequently, the linguistic or mythic origins of this new cinematic form are worth highlighting because the origins of a form reveal something of its nature. According to David Wilson, a postal historian, the word "post" originally referred to a place where the horses could be changed on their journey from one town to another – a so-called "changing post."^{xxi} And one key moment for the invention of "cinema" occurred between 1877-1880, when Eadweard Muybridge, "thanks to the imaginative generosity of a horse lover," as Bazin puts it, "managed to construct a large complex device which enabled him to make from the image of a galloping horse the first series of cinematographic pictures."^{xxii}



The Horse in Motion, Eadweard Muybridge

Animal locomotion, crucial to both "post" and "cinema," sutures these two words together: post-cinema... A horse gallops back and forth across the lacuna, its path traced by a hyphen. And, of course, the hyphen creates an extended word. "Post-cinema" appears as the newest form of expanded cinema, the next stage in cinema's continued invention.

When the history of cinema is updated decades from now, we might soon learn that this "post-cinema" is no more than just another node in cinema's technological progression. Here, we understand that such progress is as much lexical, born out of language, as it is scientific – an idea no doubt proven from even a cursory glance at the series of patent suits that marked Edison's attempted control of early film industry. With the lexical stamp of its prefix, post-cinema may *seem* authorized to send cinema's self-inscribed proleptic elegy. It may *seem* that this letter has been scribed, enveloped, and mailed – therefore announcing the end of cinema and the reign of a new *postal*-cinema. But if this "post-cinema" is just another node in cinema's technological progression, then total cinema has yet to make its irruptive re-arrival. Indeed, its mythical power derives from just such an anticipated return. So, once again, the cessation of cinema remains a future perfect. Once again, cinema's letter of mourning – even in the age of post-cinema – will have been returned to its sender.

About the Author

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Works Cited

1. André Bazin "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 1, trans./ed. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 17.
2. *Ibid*, 21.
3. In her book, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City*, Dianne Chisholm coins in passing the tantalizing phrase "late(nt) arrival" to describe the women's revolution in Paris. Chisholm does not expand on the phrase from a theoretical perspective, and, because it is not accompanied by explanation in *Queer Constellations*, my use of it here only aligns with Chisholm's intended meaning. See: Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 33.
4. The present perfect tense indicates either that an action was completed (hence finished or "perfected") at some point in the past, or that the action extends to the present. It is formed with a present tense form of "to have" and the past participle of a verb. Bazin's declaration – cinema has not yet been invented – uses the present perfect tense ("has" + "invented"), along with a negative "yet" (which is used in the present perfect to mean *up to and including the present*). Meanwhile, the future perfect tense indicates that an action will have been completed (finished or "perfected") at some point in the future.
5. A word coined by Jacques Derrida as a portmanteau of "haunting" and "ontology," *hauntology* seeks to characterize the nature of being spectral. Ghosts appear in the present but don't really belong to it, and the event of their manifestation can be described as an irruptive re-arrival. What Peter Buse and Andrew Stott call a "dual movement of return and inauguration" [*Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999), 11.]. A temporal paradox endemic to being spectral is at the heart of Derrida's conception of hauntology: "In the experience of the end, in its insistent instant, always imminently eschatological coming, at the extremity of the extreme today, there would thus be announced the future of what comes. More than ever, for the future-to-come can announce itself as such and in its purity only on the basis of a *past end*: beyond, *if that's possible*, the last extremity. If that's possible, *if there is* any future, but how can one suspend such a question or deprive oneself of such a reserve without *concluding in advance* both the future and its chance? Without totalizing in advance? We must discern here between eschatology and teleology, even if the stakes of such a difference risk constantly being effaced in the most fragile and slight insubstantiality – and will be in a certain way always and necessarily deprived of any insurance against this risk. Is there not a messianic extremity, an *eskhaton* [sic] whose ultimate event (immediate rupture, unheard-of-interruption, untimeliness of the infinite surprise, heterogeneity without accomplishment) can exceed, *at each moment*, the final term of a *phusis*, such as work, the production, and the *telos* of any history? The question is indeed 'whither?' Not only whence comes the ghost but first of all is it going to come back? Is it not already beginning to arrive and where is it going? What of the future? The future can only be for ghosts. And the past" (37). The logic of haunting, as described here by Derrida, shares certain similarities with the temporal paradox of cinema's invention, as outlined by Bazin. The idea of total cinema, like a "messianic extremity," exceeds at each moment the telos of cinematic history. See: Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and The New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
6. The most thorough treatment of apparatus theory is Philip Rosen's edited collection. See: *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). On heterogeneity within apparatus theory, Rosen writes: "To theorize the apparatus is not necessarily to depict the continuous territory of an ontology of cinema in all its totalizing effectivity. Instead, it can be to map an element of the often rocky and disjunctive terrain on which we find and construct both the history of signification in general and the history of filmic signification in particular" (283).
7. Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave," *The Republic in Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, eds. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 5-9.
8. Like the prisoner freed from the cave, the philosopher might begin to perceive the true form of reality rather than the facsimile seen by the prisoner.
9. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 67.
10. Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, 317.
11. *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, 101.
12. There are, of course, others besides Baudry contributing to this conceptualization of the apparatus. For example, Stephen Heath: "Cinema is not simply and specifically ideological 'in itself'; but it is developed in the context of concrete and specific ideological determinations which inform as well the 'technical' as the 'commercial' or 'artistic' sides of that development" [See: Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 389].
13. Shane Denson & Julia Leyda (eds), *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016), 1-6.
14. *Ibid*, 2.
15. Peter Wollen. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: 5th ed. Palgrave Macmillan for the British Film Institute, 2013), xiv.
16. D.N. Rodowick. *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 171.
17. *Ibid*, 78-79.
18. Raymond Bellour, "The Cinema Spectator: A Special Memory," in *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, edited by Gertrude Koch, Volker Pantenburg, and Simon Rothöhler (Österreichisches Filmmuseum SYNEMA - Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2012), 19.
19. Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence'," in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016), 112.
20. André Bazin. "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 26-27.
21. *Love in the Post*. Dir. Johanna Callaghan. Heraclitus Pictures, 2014.
22. "The Myth of Total Cinema," 18.

