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Authors	Fitzpatrick, Daniel
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The Impact of Technological Innovations on the Historiography and Theory of Cinema Montreal, Canada, 1–6 November 2011

A Conference Report by Daniel Fitzpatrick, DAH, National University of Ireland, Galway

Introduction

The international conference "The Impact of Technological Innovations on the Historiography and Theory of Cinema" was a large six-day event that took place in Montreal's Cinémathèque québécoise. The conference featured over a hundred speakers, including distinguished academics and theorists such as Bernard Stiegler, Tom Gunning and W.J.T. Mitchell, among others. It was organised by André Gaudreault of the University of Montreal and Martin Lefebvre of Concordia, both known primarily, although by no means exclusively, for their contributions to the study of early film. Taking as its focus a more general theoretical and historical perspective, the chosen papers and invited speakers (Gunning, Thomas Elsaesser, Charlie Keil) did, to some degree, support a predilection towards early cinema studies.

The work produced by Gunning, Gaudreault, Charles Musser and others is frequently bracketed under the "New Film History" descriptor. The research undertaken by these writers in relation to early cinema has to date had a significant impact on the ways in which we theorise and historicise the cinema. These writers helped place the arrival of filmic technologies at the end of the 19th century within a wider historical narrative and expanded genealogy to include not only the more commonly cited pre-cinema inventions, such as the magic lantern, the zoetrope and Muybridge and Marey's chronophotographic experiments, but also more general shifts that were occurring in relation to newly industrialised environments and urban centres. In our current, ever-changing technological environment the focus of this conference invited us to draw our attention towards the ways in which these transformations impact upon how we historically and theoretically think of, and situate ourselves in relation to, the cinema.

The conference took place in three auditoriums with papers delivered by both French and English speakers, with, in some instances, simultaneous translation. While the conference primarily consisted of short twenty-minute papers, there were also longer keynote speakers and a number of round-table/panel discussions. Many of the keynote and round-table discussions were translated into French or English via live-linked individual headsets, an impressive though by no means foolproof system.

Conference Summary

I began with Diane Wei Lewis's (Harvard) enlightening paper about the non-medium specificity and intermediality of experimental stagecraft in Japan (1920s–), in particular its innovative incorporation of the cinema screen, including in some instances multi-screen displays. Vsevolod Meyerhold remains a touchstone for this line of inquiry and examples of this kind of mediality.

Tom Gunning delivered a paper titled "The Language of Motion: Moving Images Within the Evolution of Human Technology", in which he considered previous attempts to classify and codify the cinema in terms of language. Influenced here by the work of André Leroi-Gourhan, Gunning treated cinema as a form of exteriorised memory that has more in common with cave painting than the written word. For Gunning technology extends the human process of evolution: we become human through *techné*, a position that was echoed in part within Bernard Stiegler's keynote later that day.

James Lastra's paper, titled "What Cinema is (for the Moment)" suggested that, within our post-media digital age, there is now assuredly nothing specific to the cinema, nothing definitive by which we can categorise it. For Bazin, famously, "the cinema has not yet been invented" (21). Cinema then is never static, never fully invented—"a medium is always born twice", or repeatedly reborn. A cell phone is now both a technology and a medium. There are now no autonomous media, only media embedded in cultural frameworks. We cannot differentiate the analogue and the digital through indexicality either, given that indexicality exists wherever there are signs.

Bernard Stiegler delivered the keynote address on the first evening; an event that, in my case, was marred slightly by my poor ear for French and the challenges of simultaneous translation. Stiegler locates film as "a temporal object" and, like Bazin, describes cinema as extending processes already existent within the human condition—"the consciousness was always making movies". He described the "destruction of attention" enabled by the cinema and quoted Frank Capra: the "cinema is a disease"—it substitutes something your own body is supposed to produce. The question Stiegler asked then—where is resistance located?—took him to affirm that we adhere, out of stupidity and naivety, and treat the cinema as a "pharmacon".

Francesco Casetti played an important role in opening up the historicisation of film theory; his 1999 *Theories of Cinema 1945-1995* is a key text in this regard. Here Casetti turned his formidable attention to a number of rarely translated, rarely read Italian writers approaching the cinema theoretically in the early 20th century. Casetti presented examples of this work and announced his intention to make much of it freely available and in translation through the *Permanent Seminar on the History of Film Theory* project. In the examples shown, both technophobic and techno-utopian tendencies could be identified. There was also a particular interest placed—as is in the following quote from Luigi Pirandello's *Shoot!: The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*—on the merging of man and machine: "I was a thing: perhaps the thing that was resting on my knees, wrapped in a black cloth" (89).

The third day was dominated by round-table discussions (one French-speaking, one English-speaking), both of which addressed the usefulness and continued applicability of apparatus theory within our current environment of "multiple screens and exhibition

platforms". There was also a large degree of crossover here with issues raised at a similar round table on the second day, which revisited Jean-Louis Comolli's "Technique and Ideology" essay forty years after its publication.

Part of the work undertaken here was to clarify definitions. There has been renewed interest in the apparatus-dispositif debate recently, especially with contemporary usage of the terms by philosophers like Deleuze and Agamben. These debates, however, remain problematic. In English-language film theory, the distinct terms "apparatus" and "dispositif" have historically been mistranslated and amalgamated within the term "apparatus". There were several suggestions made here as to more suitable, and full, translations.

Jane Gaines raised further questions, such as "why do we look historically at all?" Her suggested answer was: "to destabilise the present". Furthermore, why is historical knowledge typically privileged over philosophical knowledge? What might an archaeology of cinema look like, and how do we avoid the power of "retroactive causality" as we trace technological development from its end-point back? We need in fact to think it in reverse—from sausage into pig, so to speak: "Then is always now".

Thomas Elsaesser suggested that a true ontology of the cinema must realise that apparatus theory is heterogeneous, adaptable to new cinemas and new ways of looking. This invites an expanded focus that incorporates non-entertainment uses for the cinematic apparatus—military (Kittler, Virilio) and medical—often overlooked within conventional histories. In contemplating the "death of cinema", he suggested that death ought not always be negative; in fact, it gives cinema an end-point, a body of work. It can open the study of film to new perspectives, particularly traditional art-historical perspectives that favour a finite corpus. Elsaesser also discussed the migration of the cinematic/filmic apparatus into the art gallery and other exhibition spaces—a "poetics of obsolescence". In work by Tacita Dean and many others, we witness a fetishising/revitalising of the filmic object. Elsaesser suggested that this is made possible in part when the filmic is divested of its use value by capitalism—"when capitalism lets go art can come in". When the apparatus becomes king, however, content is in danger of becoming trivialised.

Highlights of the fourth day included Vinzenz Hediger's paper "Technology as Fate in Film & Media Theory since 1945". In it Hediger noted three broad tendencies within Media Theory—media euphoria, media phobia and media amnesia/amnesis. He quoted André Bazin's thesis that the artistic drive is rooted in a "mummy complex"—a desire to preserve life through its representation, a tendency extended through recent technological transformation. Hediger laid out a biblical narrative of death and resurrection of the image for the cinema, informed in part by his reading of Bazin. He noted "the degradation of painting" that occurred before the arrival of the photograph. With the mechanical reproduction of the photographic and the cinematic image comes then a "redemption of the image". The question he raised, however, is who gets redeemed and from what? For Hediger a hunger for illusion is sated by the arrival of the moving image (we are returned here to the idea of technology fulfilling a gap, the "technologising" of processes already begun internally). Hediger understands the photograph's place within 1950s media theory in terms similar to those of the Eucharist. There follows then a Protestant/Catholic split—does the Eucharist symbolise the body of Christ (Protestant) or does it actually contain the Body of Christ (Catholic)? In terms of the photograph, this equates to the photographic image and its relationship to reality. Does the photographic image have a direct connection with reality, a connection that did not exist within the painted image, and is

that connection with reality the "indexical" that is lost within its digital counterpart? There exists here the idea of a direct, indexical relationship with the world and by extension the sacred. The redemption of the natural world through its image (the photograph) is extended through information (the iPad).

Hediger highlighted the work of Günther Anders in the 1950s (a student with Heidegger, who married Hannah Arendt). Hediger described Anders as a sort of second coming of Benjamin. Anders wrote an as-yet-untranslated book, *The Antiquatedness of Mankind*. Although primarily about the atomic bomb, it also decried the negative effects of television, in which images are substituted for experience. For Anders the "dispositive" of television renders the world as phantom and blueprint. The question is, can we situate ourselves outside of the binary oppositions of technological euphoria and technological anxiety or phobia? If there is a middle ground between the pessimism of, for example, Günther Anders and Bernard Stiegler and the optimism and redemptive arc of Bazin, we might find it, it is suggested, in Friedrich Kittler, who "took Hegel, turned him on his head and replaced his feet with Heidegger". Kittler's relationship with technology is ambiguous; his "technology as fate" explicitly contains Heidegger's *techné—techné* as *physis*—"the self-generating bringing forth of living things". Technology then, in Kittler's "Techno-Hegelianism", becomes "a hand we have been dealt which we can play and which has dangers but also opportunity".

Highlights of the fifth day included a paper by Erich Frisvold Hansen titled "Tracing Colour: Cinema and Technologies of Origins". Colour in cinema remains an under-interrogated field and, using several excellent examples, Erich related colour to the idea of index. He began by briefly tracing the prehistory of colour cinema, highlighting experimental techniques within the pre-sound era; he then analysed the "mobility" across time and space of colour in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Mohsen Makmhalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1996).

Lea Jacobs's paper on "Film Rhythm and Film Sound" was similarly insightful in its examination of rhythmic patterns within narrative cinema. Highlighting creative experimentations by Vsevolod Pudovkin, Alberto Cavlacanti and John Grierson, Jacobs demonstrated that studies of rhythmic patterns in film should not be limited to analyses of editing.

Equally close film readings could be found in Marshall Deutelbaum's study of "Graphic Continuities of Line and Shape Across Shot Changes" within CinemaScope Editing. In his work on CinemaScope, Deutelbaum has discovered virtually invisible, although seemingly premeditated, continuities across and within edits in a startling number of CinemaScope films. How it was decided that these continuities should be placed within these narratives is difficult to fathom; although they went largely unnoticed at the time they were constructed, in many cases at the level of set design. It is remarkable to discover that this level of detail was incorporated within a mainstream studio cinema, evidence of which may never have been recovered were it not for the diligent research of Deutelbaum and his team.

The final sessions, on the sixth day, took the form of two panel discussions, both treating the question—"What is the Function/Value of a Technological History of Film?" This was a summation of the last six days, an attempt to resituate us in relation to issues raised. There was much crossover across the panels, a focus on non-entertainment uses of the cinema (courtesy of Lee Grieveson), terminology, ontology, pre-history, contingency, histories taking precedence over history, and the pluralised cinemas over the singular cinema.

Final Reflections

Looking back over the conference in its entirety we see that, despite an irrevocably altered technological environment, the primary concerns within theoretical/historical approaches to cinema in relation to the technological retain an affinity with the cinema's earliest writings and its foundational texts. In this regard it is not surprising that the two most quoted theorists over the six days, by some distance, were André Bazin and Walter Benjamin. The questions being asked remain largely ontological; we still ask, "What is cinema?"; only, now the question has become: "What is cinema in the post-media age?"

While there is a notable tendency to look back and feel that "then is always now", there remains much to be gained with this kind of approach. Applying what we have learned within existing filmic disciplines to the study of new media and new technology can grant us new avenues for understanding the trajectories and possible effects of more recent technological change. The work that has been undertaken to date is by no means irrelevant to our current media environment. In fact, bearing this work in mind may allow us to bypass many of the circuitous and repetitive conversations that take place during moments of profound technological transformation. These perspectives can also resensitise us to the contingencies that exist in relation to technological history, introducing the possibility that they may even be activated in relation to our current situation.

There was also, over the course of the conference, an urge to "put to bed" some of the less fruitful aspects of theoretical approaches to film. In his contribution, for instance, Tom Gunning criticised what he sees as the excessive importance placed on montage within theoretical approaches to film (Deleuze came under particular scrutiny here), as well as attempts to classify and codify film as a language. For Gunning, film can never be usefully treated as a language because it can never be made up of discreet entities in the way that is possible for the written word. From his example, the "gun" as word can be conceived just by the abstract term "gun"; within cinema however there can never be any such thing as merely a "gun". Cinema can never be reduced to its constituent parts in the way that is possible to do with language. The problem for Gunning, then, lies in the domination of the written word within certain existing theoretical formations. He argues instead that we should look back to a pre-linguistic pictorial representation to understand more fully what the cinema does, and to create a more applicable set of tools for reading films.

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Daniel Fitzpatrick (National University of Ireland, Galway) is a PhD student with the newly established DAH (Digital Arts & Humanities) programme. Previous to this he served as Festival Director with Killruddery Film Festival, an annual repertory event dedicated to "lost, overlooked and forgotten cinema". He collaborated there with the celebrated film historian Kevin Brownlow, from whom he couldn't help but learn a lot. He also regularly curates film programmes, lectures and most recently he established Hollywood Babylon, a midnight movie film club and pop-up cinema. For a long time he wrote and thought about the relationship between the train and the cinema but now he mostly concerns himself with other things.