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The Death of Cinema and the Contemporary Novel

The Death of Cinema

Films which dramatize, or reflect on, their own making, or depict practices of cinema-going and film-spectatorship, have been central to the history of cinema. Amongst their number are those, such as *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), *The Last Picture Show* (1971) and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), which depict the romance of cinemas past or their decay, often as broader indicators of a cultural decline. The reflection of the cinema on the conditions of its own medium is also greatly heightened during points of transition, or in retrospective constructions of such transitions. The coming of sound has, historically, been the most prominent instance of this process. Recent years, however, have seen much discussion of the impact of the "transition" from analogue to digital film technologies.

At the close of 2011, two films appeared which explore the early years of cinema. *The Artist*, which has been enthusiastically received by critics and audiences, recreates the conditions of silent cinema, in its story of the fate of a silent film actor who is unable to make the transition to sound. This multi-layered film plays out the conditions of early cinema—the appearance of black and white photography (although it was in fact filmed in colour), the use of subtitles, the importance of gesture, the close-up on the face, and the workings of narrative suspense, in particular the race against time produced through cross-cutting and parallel editing. These representations are at once mimetic (the making of silent film as it would have been) and self-consciously reconstructive (some eighty years have passed since films began to talk).

Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* is an adaption of Brian Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007): at the centre of both illustrated book and film is the rediscovery in the early 1930s of the pioneer filmmaker Georges Méliès, now an old man running a toy-shop in the Gare du Nord. Selznick weaves a fantasy around this historical narrative, in which the boy Hugo reassembles a long-

abandoned automaton, a figure holding a pen which, when finally mended, slowly transcribes one of the most familiar images from Méliès's *Voyage a la lune*: the moon with a rocket in its face. The automaton, which Hugo had believed would write out a message in words, thus produces instead a graphic image; appropriately enough, in a novel where the drawings bear narrative weight equal to the words. The graphic image, in turn, leads back to early cinema and to Méliès, the automaton's creator, in a nexus of mechanical life, cinema and magic. Scorsese then adds to the verbal-visual relationship of Selznick's book the workings of film technology, recreating the world of early film in 3D and digital form.

The fascination with the early decades of film has steadily increased since the end of the twentieth century, "the century of cinema." In addition to the intense academic focus on early and silent cinema, there is significant general interest in the early history of film, manifested in, to take only two instances, the popularity of screenings of silent films with live piano or orchestral accompaniment, and, in Britain, the excitement generated by the discovery in Blackburn, Lancashire, during demolition work on a shop, of reels of Mitchell and Kenyon films, local actuality and fiction films from cinema's early years. The poignancy of this recovery and the fascination of the films, now restored, are at one with their representation as "the lost world of Mitchell and Kenyon." The world lost is at once that of Edwardian Britain (the archive includes extensive footage of troops departing for the Boer War and for the trenches of World War One, of workers leaving factories, football matches, street scenes, and town parades) and that of a technology at its birth.

The association of film as a medium with a lost world and, indeed, with death has been present from the very inception of cinema. The very first commentators on film defined film as a ghost-world or noted its power to, in Noel Burch's words, "extend the "conquest of nature" by triumphing over death through an ersatz of Life itself."[1] For the French filmmaker René Clair, writing in the 1920s, it was film's transience which had proven a challenge to time and which had

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[1] Noël Burch, *Life to those Shadows*, trans. and ed. Ben Brewster (London: British Film Institute. 1990), 7.

been met by time's revenge in "speeding up its effects on everything pertaining to the cinema."[2] The screening, in the 1920s, of films from cinema's very first years, had been met, Clair asserts, by laughter from the audience: a response soured by their realization that the present of their own films would soon become the past, attacked by time which would "gnaw off all their present verisimilitude, to leave only a funny skeleton."[3] Nearly a hundred years later, the historical distance is sufficiently great for a re-enchantment of the vanished world of the early films. This disappearance is made yet more poignant by the knowledge that some eighty per-cent of films from the silent era are lost to us, primarily through destruction either accidental or, more frequently, deliberate, at a point at which it was believed that the coming of sound, and remakes of early versions of film narratives, had rendered the films irrelevant.

In recent years, the association between cinema and loss or death has been redefined in relation to a focus on the materiality of the film medium, in particular the relationship between stasis and motion, and the transition to digital technology, with the attendant "death" of analogue film. This chapter explores recent discussions of "the death of cinema" in film theory, and some of the ways in which this death is figured in films themselves. It then turns to recent and contemporary fiction to explore the figuring of "the death of cinema" in literary texts. My interest in the contemporary novel, in its relation to cinema, is also in the ways in which new and different relationships between the verbal and the visual seem to be emerging.

The concept of "the death of cinema" is multi-faceted. Its association with the move from analogue to digital technologies stems from the understanding that this will bring about an end to the photographic basis of film and hence, it is argued, of cinema itself. There is a comparison to be drawn here with other points of "transition" in film history. With the coming of the new technology (in this case the digital) the earlier, "superseded" technology (in this case the analogical) becomes represented as a lost *art*, in the face of a process that

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[2] René Clair, *Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Vera Traill (London: William Kimber, 1953), 59. There is surely an invocation here of Henri Bergson's account, in his *Creative Evolution* (1907; English translation 1911), of duration as the continuous progress of the past which "gnaws into the future," swelling as it grows.

[3] Ibid., 59.

becomes represented as purely technological and hence, as David Rodowick has noted, as "the antithesis of art."[4] In the instance of an earlier "transition," the coming of sound to film, it was sound which was perceived as a mechanization too far. Silent film was constructed (retrospectively) as a "humanistic" art and, indeed, as "the art that died" (Bryher), though at its origin it, too, was represented as machine and technology and *not* as art. Describing the analogue-digital "transition" in the terms of a lost world and of lost material realities Rodowick writes, in his recent book *The Virtual Life of Film*:

> The celluloid strip with its reassuring physical passage of visible images, the noisy and cumbersome cranking of the mechanical film projector or the Steembeck editing table, the imposing bulk of the film canister, are all disappearing one by one into a virtual space, along with the images they so beautifully recorded and presented.[5]

The contemporary preoccupation with "the death of cinema" is also an aspect of the intense focus in recent film theory on the materiality of the film medium and the temporalities of cinematic movement. Garrett Stewart's *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* focuses on the existence of "a photographic relation to cinema even when the photographic imprint (known in film analysis as the photogram) goes unperceived as such onscreen."[6] "The isolated photo or photogram," Stewart argues, "is the still work of death; cinema is death always still at work."[7] Stewart's concern is with those films, or moments in films, in which the *photogrammic* nature of the medium is made manifest, through the representation of inset photographs or "stalled imaging," as in the freeze-frame, an *arrest* normally occluded in film: "For doesn't the held image occasionally remind us that the stillness of photography, its halt and hush, is never entirely shaken loose by sequential movement in and as film but is merely

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[4] David Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5.

[5] Ibid., 8.

[6] Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1.

[7] Ibid., x.

lost to notice."[8] This is an argument about the materiality of film and the nature of film movement, but Stewart also wishes to align concepts of "vanishing" and image-death to a *thematic* of death in the films which he discusses: "we come to find how often filmed death contracts […] into film death—narrative catastrophe into impacted cinematographic arrest."

A number of similar arguments to Stewart's emerge in Laura Mulvey's recent study *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. Like Victor Burgin, in his book *The Remembered Film*, Mulvey makes the argument that "video and digital media have opened up new ways of seeing old movies," creating "the possibility of returning to and repeating a specific film fragment. Return and repetition necessarily involve interrupting the flow of film, delaying its progress, and, in the process, discovering the cinema's complex relationship to time."[9] Mulvey's interest in "stillness" in the cinema leads her to the cinema of the past as well as to "new mechanisms of delay." Dziga-Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1928) forms a central paradigm for her discussion, and in particular the sequence in which the frenzied movement of the film halts to show its editor, Elizaveta Svilova, in the editing suite, cutting the still frames which we have seen, or will see, in their animated form. Death emerges for Mulvey "out of the presence of preserved time"; in the porous boundaries between life and death and in cinema's mechanical animation of the inanimate. "The death of cinema" comes to the fore in different, though related ways, in the writings of the film historian and curator Paulo Cherchi Usai, whose particular concern is with the vexed issues around the preservation and restoration of films. Cinema, Usai argues in his book *The Death of Cinema,* is inherently an autodestructive medium: the very condition of its existence is structural impermanence. The projector animates the still image, but at the same time its mechanism advances the destruction of the celluloid which passes through it.[10]

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[8] Ibid., 39.

[9] Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 8.

[10] Paulo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 13.

Central to American film-director's Bill Morrison's *Decasia: The State of Decay* (2002) is the representation of "image decay." Morrison used decaying nitrate archive footage from numerous collections to compose his film, which, on its first screening, accompanied a live symphonic score by the composer Michael Gordon. Morrison's project points up the complex, often contradictory, relationship to "the death of cinema" in the work of film theorists and filmmakers. His declared intention was to show images pushing back against their own physical disintegration. As Morrison has stated: "I was clearly drawn to those images where there was a dialogue between the image and the film stock it was printed on […] examples of man defying his own mortality […] The deterioration of the film seemed to belie the images betrayed on it."[11] We might note, in particular, the recurrent images of birth and rebirth in the footage Morrison selected, the choice of footage in which there is intense movement within the frame, images of weaving and the motion of machinery, and, more generally, the interplay in *Decasia* between life and death, decay and immortality. The film would also seem to be in dialogue with *A Man with a Movie Camera*: Morrison includes representations of film editing and shots of a woman giving birth, seen in relation to the celluloid strip in its bath of fluid.

In interview, Morrison has noted of the images that *were* used to tell stories in the original films from which he has taken fragments: "these stories are now obscured by new narratives told by the film-stock itself."[12]The film, Morrison also claimed, was not a plea for film preservation, but an encounter with the processes of decay and the transformations they produce. This can co-exist, however, as his interviewer suggests, with a desire for that which is fugitive and lost (Rick Prelinger). Here, too, we find a contrast between analogue and digital material: it is only in analogue film that such processes will be sustained. Once digital material is corrupted, Morrison argues, it is entirely unseeable. Emerging here is the development, strongly expressed in Morrison's aesthetics, of a "Romanticist" film theory: an absorption in and by fragments, ruins, and the productivity of decay and of time's passage, understood as metamorphosis rather than entropy.

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[11] Bill Morrison, quoted *Decasia: The State of Decay*, BFI Video Publishing, 2002.

[12] Bill Morrison and Rick Prelinger in interview, Stanford University, uploaded 25 March 2010.

Film and the Novel

While conceptions of film technology and of the materiality of film would seem to be specific to the medium, it is striking that they have also become central to literary texts. A number of recent and contemporary fictions intersect in important ways with the debates I have outlined. In his exploration of the relationship of poets to the cinema, Lawrence Goldstein has noted the insistent nostalgia for film, brought about in large part by the rise of television's popularity in the middle decades of the twentieth century and the attendant decline in the practice of cinema-going. "The crisis of the film industry," Goldstein writes, "engendered a large number of film elegies and film homilies." In the 1950s and 1960s, poets "became fascinated with the pastness of Hollywood, as a metaphor for their own aging and for the transformations of American culture."[13]

It is in part in this context that Angela Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) can be placed. The text is at once an elegy for Hollywood; a reworking of the text which has the claim to be the first film-novel, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's "L'Eve future" ("The Future Eve," or *Tomorrow's Eve*, as it is translated) of 1886, which revolves around a fictionalized Thomas Edison's creation of a female "*Android*," Hadaly; and a prescient fable which anticipates current debates about "the death of cinema," in its representations and intertwinings of film-death and a post-apocalyptic world, figured in its American desert landscape. At the novel's opening, the narrator Evelyn, who is about to leave London for New York and who will be transmuted, in the course of the novel, into the "new Eve," goes to the movies and watches a film with the actress, Tristessa de St Ange, who has always shaped his dreams:

> The film stock was old and scratched, as if the desolating passage of time were made visible in the rain on the screen, audible in the worn stuttering of the sound track, yet these erosions of temporality only enhanced your luminous presence since they made it all the more forlorn, the more precarious your specious triumph over time. For you were just as beautiful as you had been twenty years before, would always be so

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[13] Lawrence Goldstein, *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 237.

> beautiful as long as celluloid remained in complicity with the
> phenomenon of persistence of vision: but that triumph would die of
> duration in the end, and the surfaces that preserved your appearance were
> already wearing away.[14]

The celluloid surface preserves the past as present, but, as in the theoretical
accounts I've been discussing, the death of cinema is inscribed in the film-stock
as image-corrosion and sound-stuttering. The novel also makes the question of
time and the cinema one of time and America—"Historicity in America goes
more quickly, jigs to a more ragged rhythm than the elegiac measures of the old
world."[15] Above all, however, it ties film-time and film-death to the image of the
"star" on the screen: the female star, who, it will transpire, is man-woman,
transvestite. Eve's first encounter with Tristessa in the flesh, as opposed to on the
screen, is represented in the novel's most heightened Gothic mode; Tristessa, in
her house made of glass, is lying on a funeral bier:

> It was as if all Tristessa's movies were being projected all at once on that
> pale, reclining figure so I saw her walking, speaking, dying, over and over
> again in all the attitudes that remained in this world, frozen in the amber
> of innumerable spools of celluloid from which her being could be
> extracted and endlessly recycled in a technological eternity, a perpetual
> resurrection of the spirit.[16]

Later, Eve—"the technological Eve," a created woman—sees Tristessa as
composed of "flesh so insubstantial only the phenomenon of persistence of
vision could account for his presence here."[17] Celluloid and body become one.
Tristessa, the "ambiguous woman," "was like nothing so much as her own
shadow, worn away to its present state of tangible insubstantiality because,
perhaps, so many layers of appearances had been stripped from it by the
camera—as if the camera had stolen, not the soul, but her body and left behind a

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[14] Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago Press, 1982), 5.

[15] Ibid., 93.

[16] Ibid., 119

[17] Ibid., 147.

presence like an absence that lived, now, only in a quiet, ghostly, hypersensitised world of its own."[18] Film's capturings, of world and of body, are in fact a derealisation. Twice in the novel—and I have pointed to both instances—Carter refers to the "phenomenon of persistence of vision," thus invoking an understanding of film as illusory at its very core, in its use (misuse) of the workings of human perception to construct motion out of stillness.

In her short story, "The Merchant of Shadows," first published in 1989, Carter returned to the representation of Hollywood cinema. A young British man, living in California and working on a thesis on a German émigré film director, Hank Mann, born Heinrich Mannheim, goes to interview Mann's widow and third wife, a former silent-film star, in her cliff-top house. This legendary figure is described as having "possessed only the extraordinary durability of her presence, as if continually incarnated afresh with the passage of time due to some occult operation of the Great Art of Light and Shade."[19] The narrator in Carter's story has already met the director's former second wife, and she has shown him a posed "spanking pic," with Hank Mann dressed as a school-girl. On arrival at the third wife's house, the young man encounters first a geriatric, toothless lion— "Leo, formerly of MGM"—and then an old "*personnage*," a woman who "looked like a superannuated lumberjack." She introduces herself as the sister of Hank Mann's widow, the former film-star, who subsequently appears in her chrome and ivory leather wheel-chair, lingerie-clad circa 1935, bewigged and heavily made-up. The three of them drink quantities of gin by the scummy swimming-pool, in which Hank Mann was said to have drowned himself, back in 1940. As the drunken evening progresses, the film-star, now called the Spirit, starts to speak of the priesthood of her art, of the cinemas as "darkened cathedrals," in a voice which, the narrator thinks "might have been Mannheim talking." Towards the story's close, the realization comes to him that the swimming-pool drowning in 1940 had been faked: that the lumberjack sister was once the film-star, Hank Mann's wife, and that the Spirit, the female Star, is Mann himself who, having faked his death in 1940, transformed himself into the image of the Star, in the place once occupied by his wife.

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[18] Ibid, 123.

[19] Angela Carter, "The Merchant of Shadows," in *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996), 364.

"The Merchant of Shadows" is explicitly in dialogue with Billy Wilder's 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard*, and the short story retrospectively reveals the extent to which Wilder's film inhabits *The Passion of New Eve*. The narrative components of "The Merchant of Shadows" are closely matched to the film narrative: the male narrator (a writer) who arrives at the reclusive actress's house, though the decadent furnishings of *Sunset Boulevard* are turned by Carter into the transparencies of a glass cube; the Hollywood swimming-pool which is now an arena of decay and death; the aged female actress transfixed in the time of her silent film stardom; the Gothic modalities of both film and novel. At the opening of *Sunset Boulevard*, the voice-over (that of the young script-writer who comes to the house and never leaves it) makes a reference to Miss Havisham, suggesting something of what *Great Expectations* might have looked like if Miss Havisham had lusted after Pip herself. The silent-film actress in *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma Desmond, plays bridge with a group of fellow old actors, among them one of the most celebrated of silent-film actors, Buster Keaton, whom the narrator calls "the waxworks." Max, the German general factotum in *Sunset Boulevard,* turns out to have been Norma Desmond's first husband and the director of her silent films. He has dedicated the rest of his life to preserving her image, and keeping her from the knowledge of her own faded stardom and the depredations and desolations of time and of age: "I made her a star. And I cannot let her be destroyed." It is Max who projects the silent films of the past so that Norma Desmond can watch herself as she was.

Sunset Boulevard is a film which enacts the death of cinema, inscribing and performing the ways in which film stages its own death(s), in particular in relation to its technological transitions. One of its fascinations for Carter was, it would seem, the ways in which it used the image of the female star to represent the medium's own ageing. The other was clearly the question of disguise and performance, which extended from the film-world to the world outside it: husbands and wives, male directors and their female stars, end up living their lives together as servant and mistress, in *Sunset Boulevard*, or as sisters in "The Merchant of Shadows." Carter thus turns the seeming absolutes of male and female, masculinity and femininity, in the Hollywood film into a series of drag-acts.

The element of *Sunset Boulevard* which she does not take up in "The Merchant of Shadows" is the posthumous narration. At the film's opening (and with echoes of Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*), we see a body floating face-down in a swimming-pool, shot in the back: cameras are photographing him. The voice-over narrative begins here; it is the voice of a dead man, and he will narrate his story from the circumstances of his arrival at the house through to his shooting by Norma Desmond, as he tries to leave her, and closing with her final mad scene as she imagines herself performing for Cecil B. De Mille's cameras and for "those wonderful people out there in the dark."

In its first cut, the film opened with the body in the morgue telling its story to all the other corpses gathered there, but this sequence was abandoned after, allegedly, being greeted with some hilarity by the audience in Evanston, Illinois, where the film was screened on trial run. It is interesting, therefore, that the director and producer chose to keep the post-mortem narration, though in a more free-floating mode, as if this particular story could only be told by a dead man. The voice-over is familiar from film-noir, and thus names a genre, but it also brings death into the frame as technology and film history. The dead man is a screenwriter, a hack, part of the world of words that, as Norma Desmond asserts in striking terms, killed off the silent film: "We didn't need dialogue. We had faces [...] You've made a rope of words and strangled this business. But there's a microphone right there to catch the last gurgles, and Technicolor to photograph the red swollen tongue." There is a good degree of irony, of course, in the fact that this impassioned exponent of cinematic silence gets the best lines.

In tandem with *Sunset Boulevard*, and by contrast with Carter's story, Paul Auster's novel of 2002, *The Book of Illusions*, does take up the question of posthumous narration, and of autobiography as a writing from the grave, as one of its central tropes. It also appears to borrow elements of "The Merchant of Shadows," in its story of a man who becomes fascinated by a male silent film star and discovers a narrative of disappearances and disguises. There is no play with gender ambiguity, but it is possible that Auster took the name of his film star from Carter: her Hank Mann/Heinrich Mannheim becomes his Hector Mann/Herman Loesser (lesser/loser). The novel is interesting both in the connections it suggests between the film medium and vanishing or disappearance, and in the ways in which it describes the films which Auster has

invented for his text. In the early part of the novel, Auster's narrator, David Zimmer (having lost his wife and sons in a plane crash), becomes fascinated, in his grief, by Mann's silent films and finds that he is sustained by his research and writing on them. The silent film comedians had, Zimmer asserts, "understood the language they were speaking. They had invented a syntax of the eye, a grammar of pure kinesis […] We watched them across a great chasm of forgetfulness, and the very things that separated them from us were in fact what made them so arresting: their muteness, their absence of color, their fitful, speeded-up rhythms."[20] Most interesting here, perhaps, is the alliance or allegiance that is being forged between the contemporary novel and the silent film. The suggestion is that cinema, having given up on these early manifestations of its medium, having allowed this silent art to die, has in some sense released it for re-animation by the writer, even though it is, as Auster insists, a purely visual language. Describing the processes of putting his film-book together, Zimmer tells a friend: "I was writing about things I couldn't see anymore and I had to present them in purely visual terms. The whole experience was like a hallucination."[21]

Auster has his narrative move through the films he has invented for Mann in precise sequential detail, so that we are asked, as readers, to visualize his words as linear film-images. The film which is recounted in the fullest detail was Mann's last silent film, and its story is that of a man who is rendered invisible by a jealous employer. (A possible intertext of the novel is Samuel Beckett's *Film* [1966], in which Buster Keaton [one of the "waxworks" in *Sunset Boulevard*] performs the part of "O," who perpetually seeks escape from E, the camera-eye, and pores over photographs from his past before destroying them. The film quotes Berkeley's "esse est percipi," "to be is to be perceived.") For Auster, the thematic and the process of "becoming invisible" are at one with the novel's preoccupations with cinema as a presence of absence; with annihilation and "the anguish of selfhood'[22]; with the destruction of films in the desert landscape. To this extent, his text shares with Carter's text, and with the film theory I discussed

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[20] Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions* (London: Faber, 2002), 15.

[21] Ibid, 64.

[22] Ibid., 53.

earlier, an explicit representation of film as death. But, as always in Auster's work, the question of authorship, of the role of the writer and of writing, are the most fundamental preoccupations.

The silent film in *The Book of Illusions* is represented as a co-creation of the actor's face and the camera lens: the close-up of the face is pure interiority, "a reflection of what we all are when we're alone inside ourselves." When these close-up sequences occur, "everything else stops. We can read the content of Hector's mind as though it were spelled out in letters across the screen, and before those letters vanish, they are no less visible than a building, a piano, or a pie in the face."[23] This image of the writing on the screen takes us back to Garrett Stewart's discussions of the photogram of the film and the phonogram of literary language. Stewart's account of a "modernist inscriptive practice" as "intervallic inscription," applied in a reading of Joseph Conrad, is also suggestive in the context of more recent fiction.

Stewart refers only in passing to Auster's texts but he does discuss the film *Smoke*, directed by Wayne Wing, and written by Auster, and almost certainly Auster's most interesting engagement with film. The sequence in *Smoke* in which Auggie Wren, the cigar-shop proprietor, shows the writer Paul Benjamin his albums of photographs, taken each day on the same spot at the same time, points up significant questions of repetition and difference, and of the arrest by the photographic image of time and movement. We also need to know that (as in virtually all Auster's fictions) his central writer-protagonist is in mourning, in this case for his wife, who was caught up in a shooting on the corner outside the cigar-shop. As Paul turns the pages of the albums, he sees the image of his living wife, caught by the camera lens: "Oh Jesus—look, it's Ellen—It's Ellen. Look at her." It's an arrest which takes us back to one of the earliest stories about cinema, Kipling's "Mrs Bathurst," and its resonant line, as the narrator watches the film of the train coming into the station and the passengers moving along the platform: "Christ, there's Mrs B."[24]

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[23] Ibid., 30.

[24] Rudyard Kipling, "Mrs Bathurst" (1904), *Collected Stories* (London: Everyman, 1994), 591.

For Stewart, *Smoke* is "a kind of summa: namely, of photography's relation to diurnal reality, to temporality, to narrativity, to death, and ultimately to filmic visuality—and hence to the revealed imaginary of film's mechanized textuality."[25] At the close of the film sequence discussed above, we see Auggie outside his shop taking his daily picture, and then cut to Paul Benjamin at his typewriter: an explicit correspondence is being drawn between the act of taking a photograph and typing a line of text. This correspondence is returned to at the film's close, with a radical splitting between words (the recounting of a story whose factuality is in doubt) and images (the visual representation of the same story in silence and in black and white). This final sequence represents pure vision (one of its ironies being that the story is that of Auggie's masquerading, on Christmas Day, as the grandson of an old blind woman, who of course cannot see him and chooses to pretend to believe his fictions), but it comes after a shot of Paul Benjamin's typewriter and the words of his title page: "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story by Paul Benjamin." The sequence poses questions about the relative authority of word and image: the visual seems to have primacy, but it is also represented as emerging from the writer's act of textual inscription, though this is in turn a transcription of Auggie's words. Such images of text and writing or, more usually, typing, have become highly prevalent in recent cinema, frequently in films in which the writer, and often the screenwriter, becomes a central figure, creating or created by his or her verbal/textual imaginings. Relationships and encounters between literature and film, word and image, are being played out in new ways, including a radical reformulation of the concept of "adaptation."

Don DeLillo's recent novel *Point Omega* is a striking example of the contemporary novelist's engagement with the film medium. It opens and closes with an unnamed protagonist in the Museum of Modern Art in New York watching a video installation. This is the Scottish artist Douglas Gordon's *Psycho 24*, in which Gordon projects Hitchcock's *Psycho* at two frames a second, so that the entire film takes twenty four hours to run. Gordon uses video technology (a commercially available video cassette of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, a VCR with an infinitely adjustable speed setting, a video-projector and a semi-

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[25] Stewart, *Between Film and Screen*, 98.

transparent screen suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the installation space, a darkened room). This is and is not film/cinema. The conditions of spectatorship are changed: the spectators stand, and the semi-transparent screen means that the images can be observed from both sides, while the use of video film means that the speed of play can be slowed down without the black areas on the celluloid between each individual frame becoming visible.[26] The film is screened without a soundtrack.

"Cinema is dead," Gordon has said. "Cinema is dead, going nowhere. Nobody can break out of the narrative structures demanded by mainstream audiences, except avant-garde filmmakers, whose films nobody wants to watch anyway. It could be fun to raise the dead. I'm looking for something to replace cinema, not film. Some way of getting back that enjoyment."[27] Gordon has commented thus of time and sequence in the work: "What interests me about the *24 Hour Psycho* is that it runs so slowly that you can never know what's going to happen next. The past is a confusion of memory. The images follow each other too slowly for you to remember. The past goes on and the future never happens, so everything stays in the present. And the present is a constant convergence of future and past. As Heidegger says, it doesn't really exist."[28] In his account, the film works with his interest "in those areas where perception breaks up or, breaks down": things that have lost their allocated place can be observed and judged freely.

In DeLillo's narration of the film's projection, the spectator's relationship to the images becomes central, as his words create a second level of narration and projection: "The gallery was cold and lighted only by the faint gray shimmer on the screen. Back by the north wall the darkness was nearly complete and the man standing alone moved a hand toward his face, repeating, ever so slowly, the action of a figure on the screen."[29] A little later—"he stood motionless now, watching Antony Perkins turn his head":

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[26] See Holger Broeker, "Cinema is Dead! Long Live Film! The Language of Images in the Video Works of Douglas Gordon," in *Douglas Gordon Superhumanatural* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2006), 66.

[27] Quoted Hoeker, ibid., 79.

[28] Quoted Hoeker, ibid., 70.

[29] Don DeLillo, *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2010), 3.

> The slightest camera movement was a profound shift in space and time but the camera was not moving now. Anthony Perkins is turning his head. It was like whole numbers. The man could count the gradations in the movement of Anthony Perkins' head. Anthony Perkins turns his head in five incremental movements rather than one continuous motion. It was like bricks in a wall, clearly countable, not like the flight of an arrow or a bird. Then again it was not like or unlike anything. Anthony Perkins' head swiveling over time on his long thin neck.[30]

The repetitions in the prose suggest cinematic movement. The "bricks in the wall" are the photograms of the film medium, the image replacing the arrow of Zeno's paradox, repeatedly invoked in early film theory to represent the paradox of film motion. De Lillo's fiction has consistently shown a fascination with "slow motion"—as in *Libra*, in which he invokes Abraham Zapruder's amateur film footage of John F. Kennedy's assassination and uses it to explore the ways in which the trajectory transcribed by Lee Harvey Oswald's bullet is also the arc of Oswald's life and death. In *Point Omega*, "slow motion" has ceded to the preoccupation, which I've been discussing in contemporary film theory, with film's photogrammic basis, the materiality of film stock, and the interplay between stasis and motion.

The description of the man by the gallery wall watching *Psycho 24* is the narrative framing device of *Point Omega*, opening and ending the novel. At the centre of the text is an enigmatic, open-ended narrative—a young filmmaker comes to discuss the making of a film interview with an elderly academic, who had acted as an advisor to the government during the First Gulf War. The film, never made, is planned as "one continuous take […] A single extended shot" against a wall—"Just a man and a wall […] Any pauses, they're your pauses, I keep shooting."[31] The wall is connected to the "walled enclosures" that represent the interrogation/torture arena deployed by the US, as well as the wall in the

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[30] Ibid., 5.

[31] Ibid, 21. Don DeLillo's referent in this section of the novel is the former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and Errol Morris's filmed interview with him, released as *Fog of War* (2003).

gallery in which *Psycho 24* was screened (not a projection wall, but the space of watching).

The two men—filmmaker and academic (Elster)—are staying in a house in the US desert, "out beyond cities and scattered towns," where time seems to slow down. The title of DeLillo's novel is a reference to Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point as "a maximum level of complexity and consciousness towards which the universe appears to be evolving": the novel stages both contraction and expansion.[32] Elster's daughter Jessica also comes to stay, an elusive figure: "her look had an abridged quality, it wasn't reaching the wall or window. I found it disturbing to watch her, knowing that she didn't feel watched." Then she disappears. A knife is found in a desert ravine (a former bombing range) but no body. The two men drive back to New York. The narrative then returns to the MOMA gallery and the unnamed man watching *Psycho 24*. This, as we reconstruct it, is a flashback. The novel becomes a detective story of a kind—the anonymous spectator may well become Jessica's killer, thought we will never see a corpse.

DeLillo's novel and its relationship to the film medium is multi-layered and enigmatic. Some preliminary points emerge. The complex time-scheme of the novel is in dialogue with cinema's necessary conflations of past and present—past time can only be represented as present appearance. The unnamed watcher of *Psycho 24* would seem to be wholly absorbed by questions of time and motion in the film, but his mimetic tracings of Anthony Perkins's actions suggest that reflections on the ontology of cinema are not separable from more dangerous forms of affect, voyeurism and identification. DeLillo's text suggests a connection between the death-drive of Hitchcock's narrative—as it is reconstructed in and by Gordon's film—with war and with the desolation of the American desert landscape. Such landscapes appear in a number of recent novels which are particularly intertwined with cinema, *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Book of Illusions* among them. This is the Hollywood novel rewritten, and often displaced to the adjacent desert states of Arizona and New Mexico. There are further connections here with contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions. In these contemporary constructions, the death of cinema is becoming conflated with the

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[32] See Hermione Hoby, review of *Point Omega*, *The Observer*, 21 March 2010.

death of the world (as in Cormac MacCarthy's *The Road*). The desert states are also those in which the US rehearses its weapons and its projects of mass-destruction.

The death of cinema—film death and filmed death, to borrow Stewart's terms—would appear to be dominating film theory and history and making its mark on contemporary fiction. Yet the projects of "remediation," including, as in Douglas Gordon's work, film into video, suggest not so much "death" as a continual process of remaking: images, to borrow Bill Morrison's terms, pushing back against their own disintegration. In relation to fiction, we are seeing (as in the Auster and DeLillo texts I've discussed) an incorporation of film into literature which departs from earlier manifestions of "the cinematic novel," newly engaging with the materiality of film and with the attempt to reproduce, along the track of the sentence, both the image and sequence. Contemporary films, in turn, are revealing a fascination with that track of the sentence, as it appears, for example, on the screen in the form of a line of type. This is a time of continual transformations, not only of media forms but of the ways in which literature and film encounter, and inhabit, each other.