Luis Recoder

The Death of Structural Film
Notes Toward a Filmless Cinema

1. The destruction of the celluloid material of film signals the ‘death of cinema’. If such is the case, it is from the perspective – the optic if you wish – of the celluloid material itself that the question of death in cinema gets developed. The ‘death of cinema’ is the death of film - not the absolute and final death of cinema but the death of cinema as a cinema based on the material make-up of cellulose acetate film. For cinema is alive and well. Film, on the other hand is on its way out.

2. The destruction of celluloid occurs at the very beginning, during the birth of cinema to be precise: the precarious passage of flammable cellulose nitrate and the burning carbon arc lamp of early projection. Death is the filmic burning down of the rudimentary movie houses of the early 20th century. Does cellulose nitrate signal death or is it the carbon arc lamp? Film or projection? Which is it? Or do they work in tandem, the slower the frame rate the better chance this mechanico-chemical ensemble have in burning down the house?

3. The destruction of celluloid as the spectacle *par excellence* of the death of cinema. But what exactly do we mean by celluloid film? What bit of the film material are we referring to? What is this “in itself” we are attempting to get a hold of in order to better “materialize” our object and perhaps aid in the current procession of casting it out of its existence as a dominant cinematic art form of our time? The perforated ribbon, celluloid acetate base, or the granular structure of exposed silver halides suspended in the upper regions of a gelatinous emulsion? For surely it is the entire length, breadth, density and overall objecthood of the object that is meant by the use of the word “film.” And yet it is the photo-graphic granularity of the medium that still seems to dominate our definition of film.

4. The destruction of celluloid – like the destruction of most art forms – is an act of avant-garde vandalism. It is a Dadaist impulse, as in the destruction of the screen in Rene Claire’s *Entr’acte* (1924) – a tearing through the illusionist plane of the cinematic canvas, the illuminated screen. The destructive impulse of the avant-garde is immanent: the death of an emerging art form is played out, performed, executed, as in time-lapse cinematography so as to speed up the process of growth and to further partake in the decay and ruin. So what comes after death?
5. In Owen Land’s *Bardo Follies* (1967), a 16mm film loop is burnt in the projector. The loop is of a beauty pageant waving repeatedly toward the spectator. The footage is burnt over and over to show various stages of thermal decomposition. The image of the woman blisters into bubbly shapes and warm liquid colors so that she is no longer in the picture. The melting of the footage in the gate consumes the photographic image in real-time (the real-time of the burning at the gate). The resolution of the photographic image is utterly dissolved and becomes soluble by the intense heat of the projector lamp which melts the film. The granular structure of the original footage is cooked out of existence, boiled-over to give rise to the plasticity of the acetate plastic, the cellulose base itself.

6. The destruction of celluloid in *Bardo Follies* is a return to the material base, the material support of the medium. It begins with the introduction, or “establishing shot” if you will, of photo-based cinema and “re-photographs” it not with a camera proper but with the burning exposure of a 16mm projector. Film and projection work in tandem thus retreading the precarious passage of silver nitrate through the burning rays of carbon arc lamp light. Not retreading but rethreading through an earlier passage in cinema’s technical history. What is initially perceived as dangerously destructive in the interface between cellulose nitrate and carbon arc is in Land’s film provocatively and even seductively destructive. Beauty pageant melts in the thermal agitation of chemical compounds suspending the mass of exposed silver halides. Is she waving hello or good-bye to cinema as we know it?

7. Destruction of the celluloid in *Bardo Follies* is the destruction not of the total film object itself but of that layer of the material where the micro-density of the granular structure is embedded. In the reductivist logic of formalist strategies we could venture to say that by means of obliterating or effacing the exposed layer of emulsion, the work of burning-through works at removing or withdrawing from the medium the non- or extra-filmic fragment, in this case the photo-graphic substance. Preserved is the purity of the celluloid, the essence of film – in this case the smoldering acetate churning in a real-time boil. But Land’s film goes even further and burns a hole right through the acetate itself to reveal the white of the screen. This burning-through to the other side of the film plane will be repeated nearly a decade later by Paul Sharits in his *Analytical Studies II: Unframed Lines* (1971-76). As if taking his earlier signature color flicker films and effacing the structural integrity of their meticulously framed frame-by-frame registration, Sharits scratches and tears the film strip vertically, thereby cutting through the latticework of frames and framelines, and ending – as in Land’s film – in the burning-through the film plane toward the white of the screen.

8. So ‘What is film?’ if the film celluloid has been effaced, negated, and violently cancelled out in these early materialist works? Not film and yet film? Unless these burnt-frame films are performed live before an audience, one cannot truly overcome film’s photo-graphic hegemony. For Land and Sharits’ destructive efforts are in the end recuperated in the form of photo-graphic reproductions, i.e., film prints. More precisely, they capture live projector-performances: the strip of film is held at the gate, without intermittency; persistence-of-vision is curtailed, the illusion of movement deferred, and in its place is the real movement of a film still – a film frame – melting in real-time before the burning rays of lamp light. But all this is re-photographed by the camera, re-staged for its reproduction on light-sensitive film. And for this to be really real one would have to take it a step further, that is to take these burnt-frame films and put them through a kind of ‘second-degree burn’ wherein the final product would in turn be destroyed during their projection before an audience. That way we can truly see the empirically unmediated effects of a burning-through to the
other side of the film plane. “Unmediated,” that is by the un-filmic photo-graphic.

9.
Hollis Frampton’s conceptual ‘non-film’, though not ‘anti-film’ A Lecture (1968) is such a burning-through. Not a burning of frames so as to peel-back the layers and methodically expose the question ‘What is film?’ but a letting-through of projected light in the absence of celluloid. In this lecture, a pre-recorded voice-over directs the projectionist to turn the projector on and insert a number of objects, including a red filter and pipe cleaner. Frampton’s lecturer points out that inserting nothing in the projector but the white light of the projection lamp is, in essence, a film. In fact this light, which fits, as he says “conveniently” in the projector, is in truth “more” than if actual celluloid were to be used. If one wants to see “more,” which is in fact “less,” one must subtract from the light. This is achieved by inserting a red filter, thus subtracting green and blue from the white light. In the burning-through of celluloid that is manifested in Land and Sharits’ films, not less but more is revealed, since the blank vacancy which remains in the melting away of the celluloid points beyond the filtration of light rays via a semi-opaque film plane and toward the pure transparent illumination of a screen plane. The evacuation of celluloid unveils the truth of cinema.

10.
The question of the ‘death of cinema’ can be retrieved from the so-called structural film. The destruction of celluloid is a way to expedite getting at or near the essentialist question: ‘What is film?’ The “essentialist project” – developed by the theoretical efforts of the original Anthology Film Archives group (Sitney, Mekas, Kubelka, et al.) – is primarily a matter of locating and securing a formalist approach to cinema. Land’s early films are characterized as “structural” in that strategies such as loop printing, repetition, duration, and granularity, are addressed for the sole purpose of making us aware of the material conditions of cinema. Hence the loop structure of the opening sequence of Bardo Follies – or for that matter the entirety of Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc. (1965-66) – is considered “structural” in its foregrounding of the material-as-material, film-as-film, and so on and so forth. Structural film’s answer to the question ‘What is film?’ is to show the film itself in its purest form, not as an end in itself but as an

Light Spill (2006), by Sandra Gibson and Luis Recorder. Photos by Roel Meelkop (TENT, Rotterdam)
attempt to arrive at a new beginning unhindered by unquestioned notions of “What film is.” In this light, Land’s ritualistic melting of the celluloid material in the projector strips away the photographic layer, thereby positing a film in which there no longer appears the preponderance of photography.

11.
Structural film’s answer to the question of the ‘death of cinema’ is to address it with death, that is to murder it long before it decays into oblivion. A materialist obliteration of the film object can only, though significantly, push to frame the latter into the foreground of perception. The potential loss or disappearance of the object is key to the understanding of Frampton’s Nostalgia (1971), in which individual photographs are burnt on the spiral grill of an electric hotplate. The set of destroyed photographs must be quickly scrutinized by the viewer before they burn on the stove in real-time, compounding readability by the narrator’s description not of the burning image before us but of one that will be destroyed in the following shot. The thermal agitation of the burning photographs accelerates the granular structure of the prints and rather than moving toward obliteration brings them closer to motion-picture phenomena. For the photographic prints are stills just like the individual frames of the film which represents them, but unlike the latter the former is flared, fired-up, in-flamed into movement. Whereas Frampton’s film is illusion of movement at 24 frames-per-second the burning of his photographic prints depicts real movement toward death.

12.
The death of photography in Nostalgia, is destructive insofar as it is instructive in posing the essentialist question “What is film?” The death of one medium — in this case photography — is essential in putting forward the essential or essentialist components of film as an aspiring art form. One can even go so far as to say that structural film moves in and through death. In other words, the question of death as the modus operandi of structural film; death not as a goal but as a result, consequence, aftermath. The death of film is necessary in Land’s Bardo Follies in order to make us aware of the materiality of the medium. The materialist obliteration of the material brings us back to the material bedrock of the medium. So does the film which proceeds in the wake of this obliteration. If A Lecture is a film without a film then what and where is film? We are told that film is anything that can be put in the projector. So “film” is not the material filmstrip itself. And yet there is film. Projected light, which is the ultimate base and support of the filmstrip transparency, is the penultimate film of all films. It might even be the last film...

13.
Imagining the “last” film, one could think of Anthony McCall’s Long Film for Ambient Light (1975) or Tony Conrad’s Yellow Movie (1972-1976). In Long Film there is no “film” per se. Film, screen, and even projector have been replaced by a regular light bulb suspended in an empty room. For a 24 hour cycle, the viewer experiences the crossover or fade between natural and artificial light. It is not clear if the “film” is to be located in the field of projected shadows (ours?) cast on the walls of the room or the interference of daylight and lamplight, their rays interlacing and extending in opposite directions as far as light can “see.” An artist statement and diagram is the only source

Light Spill (2006), by Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder. Photograph by Roel Meelkop.
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of information the viewer has in the attempt to find a point-of-entry into this “film.” We are told that the artist has put a temporary hold to his career as a filmmaker in order to embark upon a meditation on the “presuppositions” of film as an art form without the use of film. The series of paintings comprising Yellow Movie are also to be understood within this filmless context. Conrad painted a series of “cinematic” rectangles on paper using various cheap off-white paints framed by a black border, also painted. The idea being that by using cheap paint the “cine-paintings” or “screen-paintings” would fade and turn yellow. Nearly 30 years later, the artist claims, there hasn’t been much fading after all.

14. Conrad’s Yellow Movie was a way to put into the discussion of structural film discourse what he refers to as a structural “endgame.” If Sitney, in his ground-breaking text, located the origins of the structural film in Warhol’s long durational films, Conrad’s response was to go even further than Warhol and make the longest film ever. But because the technology of film was not up to par with this demand, Conrad turned to painting and its “structural” potential of outlasting the viewer. Ironically, the return to painting via film reverses decades of thinking about film as an outgrowth and even realization of painting. Hans Richter was one of the first theorist-filmmakers who abandoned painting and embraced film as an art form on the basis that it was the ultimate realization of movement, to which painting had merely struggled to express for centuries. Not expressing “movement” per se but alluding to the reality of paint’s surface and its extremely slow fading away, Yellow Movie shifts or superimposes the field of painting within the light-sensitive field of photography’s long washed-out over-exposure. If Conrad’s gesture is in fact the ultimate structural endgame, it unremittingly opens new territory for rethinking the death of painting via the birth of cinema (via the avant-garde cinema of the 20s), and the place of photography in painting, and vice-versa.

15. Structural film can be understood as a kind of endgame to film itself. In its formalist rigor to locate the presuppositions of film as an art form, it goes so far as to efface its objects altogether. The death of film is a given. It has reached the limits of film. It has gone beyond film and in its overcoming of film is recast as film’s filmless epoch.

Luis Recoder is an internationally acclaimed experimental filmmaker and installation artist with works in the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Cinema Foundation in Paris. His recent collaborations with artist Sandra Gibson have exhibited at the Institute for Contemporary Art (London), Palais des Beaux-Arts (Brussels), TENT (Rotterdam), RIXC (Latvia), and Image Forum (Tokyo). His writing has appeared in Millenium Film Journal and Intermittent.