In the twenty-first century, the word “film” speaks to a specific materiality of the medium that is part and parcel of its lore among cinephiles and film scholars. It summons images of flatbed editing, bulky film canisters, the whirl of spinning reels, the flicker of projection and the serial images of the filmstrip, images whose power comes in part from their sense of a more direct connection to reality, or at least a more pure form of image making, in comparison to their digital counterparts. In light of these associations, the continued use of the word “film” in describing contemporary moving images is perhaps not simply an innocent misnomer, but further evidence of our collective fetish as we seem intent upon sustaining this illusion of purity through the logic of disavowal (“I know very well, but all the same…”). In actuality, the analog image, if present at all in contemporary commercial cinema, is often relegated to nothing more than “input” that is quickly recast into binary code at the point of postproduction, distribution, and/or exhibition. Not surprisingly, this now-hybrid medium occupies a virtual no-man’s-land in academia, representing uncharted waters for those trained in classical film theory while at the same time carrying with it a history of which few theorists of new media can claim mastery. It is precisely for this reason that D.N. Rodowick’s *The Virtual Life of Film* represents such an important moment in moving image theory. While it is certainly not the first to consider how we might understand film and film studies in the context of this pervasive digitization, it is one of the few to frame the question in terms other than the death of cinema, and to that extent the work represents an important point of entry for the future of film studies.

Rodowick’s primary task is to assuage the anxiety of both cinephiles who equate the passage of celluloid with the disappearance of cinema, and film scholars who fear that their training may now be obsolete. To this end, Rodowick points to the numerous ways in which the “perceptual realism” of classical cinema persists in digital images through the latter’s attempts to incorporate both the language of classical cinema (*Rodowick’s reading of the Matrix is exemplary in this regard*) and the defining elements of the analog image itself (even at the expense of those new possibilities opened up by the realm of the digital). Considering that the photographic image and the visual language of film have functioned as yardsticks by which to gauge the success or failure of the digital image, it seems clear that the arrival of the digital is by
no means synonymous with the disappearance of cinema. However, Rodowick is not so naïve as to deny that a significant shift has taken place. Indeed, in breaking with theorists such as Tom Gunning who see continued relevance of the concept of indexicality in digital media, Rodowick claims that despite the persistence of a cinematic mode of image making, the digital image is, at base, differentiated from the analog image by a “discontinuity between input and output” that displaces the indexical value of the image onto the symbolic. In other words, while light passes through the lens of a digital camera and strikes a receptive surface which registers its fluctuations much the same way as an analog camera, the resulting output of that event might just as easily represent a tree or a skyscraper as there is no inherent continuity between the profilmic event and the resulting data that is stored. The translation of this data and the image’s subsequent legibility are wholly reliant upon code.

While this would seem to be no small differentiation, Rodowick couches the bump in the road that it causes for film studies within a persistent anxiety over the essence of the cinematic that has followed the medium since its beginning. From the arrival of sound, the “infringement” of television, and even the enigma of cinematic temporality itself, Rodowick reminds us that throughout its brief history the cinema has been defined by its crisis with other media. Furthermore, it is precisely this constitutive crisis that should be celebrated by the field of film studies as it grants the discipline a self-critical function that is absent from other fields, most notably, art history. However, while this inclusive view of cinema may serve to open disciplinary boundaries, it also begs the Bazinian question, “what is cinema?”—or, as Rodowick puts it, “what was cinema?” In order to flesh out this “ontological groundlessness” of the cinema, Rodowick turns to the work of Stanley Cavell, who attributes the power of the cinema to its ability to automatically produce a world independent of our perception. According to this view, the filmmaker creates automatons (and here we begin to see why Cavell would be attractive to a Deleuzian like Rodowick) that are set in motion by the creative act but function of their own accord, as machinic assemblages. In this way, the creative act works upon the medium itself by employing various combinations of sound, lighting, camera angles, and so on, and as a result the medium of cinema is immanent to the work rather than defined a priori by its materiality. Thus the perplexity over this new mongrel cinema is not only nothing new, but is in a certain sense demanded by the cinema itself, which, as Rodowick claims, “has no persistent identity.”

Obviously, this position does much for legitimizing visual studies and more interdisciplinary approaches to 21st century cinema. However, it also grants Rodowick a license to play fast and loose with visual media and other cultural forms that the cinema might engage. Consequently, in its less than 190 pages, the discussion flows from scratch films to consumer photography to digital art to installation work to painting to music and so on. In this sometimes dizzying mesh, the reader can’t help but feel that abandoning media specificity might come with a price of its own. Along these same lines, though perhaps not integral to the argument being made here, the component that appears missing from Rodowick’s otherwise impressive work, is an analysis of the process by which digital media, in their more mainstream manifestations, take the cinema as their model (Rodowick slithers out of this thorny issue by stating that “History has not yet made [this relationship] clear”). In the end, the book is written from the perspective of film and, as the title indicates, this is obviously the intent, but with the exception of a few sections on digital art, there is little discussion of new media on its own terms. This leaves the reader wondering whether the effect of cinema on digital culture may be more significant than the opposite trajectory and, to that extent, the more pressing question might revolve around the cinematic life of digital media rather than the reverse.

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