J. HOBERMAN

FILM AFTER FILM

Or, What Became of 21st Century Cinema?

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PREFACE

It may seem absurd, barely a decade into the millennium, to speak of a distinctly "twenty-first century cinema." Despite the universal predilection for organizing trends by decades, it's obvious that cultural development is neither determined by a timetable nor bound to an arbitrary calendar. And yet, in the case of the cinema there are two—or even two and a half—reasons to consider the possibility that, since 2001, the nature and development of the motion picture medium has become irrevocably altered.

This new situation, which was accompanied by the oft-articulated perception that motion pictures, as they had existed in the century following the Lumière brothers' first demonstration of their *cinématographe,* had entered a period of irreversible decline, arises from a technological shift in the basic motion picture apparatus—namely, the shift from the photographic to the digital that began tentatively in the 1980s, and gathered momentum from the mid '90s onward. The digital turn occurred in the midst of and was amplified by pre-millennial jitters, not unlike the fantasy that the world's computers would crash when the date shifted from December 31, 1999 to January 1, 2000. The second, more unexpected and less rational, reason for the new situation occurred barely nine months into the twenty-first century. This was a world-historical happening, namely the events of September 11, 2001. As watched by millions "live" and in heavy rotation on TV—which is to say, as a form of cinema—these events could not help but challenge, mystify, and provoke filmmakers as individuals while, at the same time, dramatizing their medium directly in an impersonal way. No less than *Titanic* or *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy or the saga of *Harry Potter* (and actually, a good deal more so), the events of 9/11 were a show of cinematic might.

This is not to say that twentieth-century cinema no longer exists—even nineteenth-century cinema is with us still. But the digital turn, accompanied by a free-floating anxiety regarding the change in cinema's essential nature and a cataclysmic jolt out of the clear blue sky that, for the vast majority of the world's population, was apprehended as a manmade cinematic event, have all combined—perhaps conspired—to create something new. That new thing is the subject of this book.

Film After Film is a direct outgrowth of my work as both a lecturer on cinema history and a professional journalist who reviewed (or reported on) current movies on a weekly basis. Like many twenty-first-century films which fuse the digital and the photographic, *Film After Film* is also something of a cyborg entity, combining analysis and reportage. The book is divided into three parts. The first, titled "A Post-Photographic Cinema" (Film After Film) and greatly expanded from an essay first published in *Artforum,* proposes the notion of twenty-first-century cinema and attempts to characterize, theorize and historicize it. Part II, "A Chronicle of the Bush Years" (Film After Film After Film …), culls the 400 or so weekly reports and occasional cover stories I published in the *Village Voice* between September 2001 and November 2008 to revisit the early twenty-first century as it unfolded—or, put another way, to write the first draft of its film history.

The 750-word weekly film review is a specific journalistic form: over a period of months and years,

these topical short pieces document a writer's attempt to make sense of the ongoing flux of movi
amid the ongoing flux of events. Thus, part II is a chronicle of the George W. Bush presidency, a reig
defined not only by the events of 9/11 but by continuous foreign wars, the much-publicized threat
additional terror attacks, and further disasters—both natural and manmade—as viewed from
screening room. The movies discussed are nearly all American and, while not necessarily the stronge
of the period (some of those may be found in other sections) are nevertheless the ones that seeme
most directly responsive to or reflective of the post-9/11 climate. Chronologically arranged, thes
journalistic reports have been somewhat edited but never updated. Rather than rewrite them in light
subsequent events (which include the movies' receptions), thus contaminating the spontaneity of a
original impression, I have chosen to annotate and historically contextualize my original response
bold type.

As already noted, one impetus for *Film After Film* came from a series of university courses I taug
on the nature of twenty-first-century cinema. This book is very much intended as a resource, if not
text, for similar courses. By way of an addendum (or an extended footnote to part I), part III, "Not
Toward a Syllabus" (Some Films After Film), offers twenty-one short essays on programs of wor
that I showed (or would have liked to have shown) in class. For a number of reasons—sometim
technical, at others thematic or aesthetic—these seem to me to be quintessentially twenty-firs
century motion pictures. Reworked from class lectures and/or reviews—most of which were original
published in the *Village Voice*, though several versions of pieces first appeared elsewhere, includir
Artforum (*Battle in Heaven*, *The World*, and *The Strange Case of Angelica*), *Film Comment* (*Russi*
Ark and *Carlos*, as well as the essay on Arnold Schwarzenegger), and *Sight and Sound* (*Dogville*)-
these film notes focus on international production in a variety of cinematic modes (albeit wo
characterized by a certain historical self-consciousness).

Many, though not all, of the cinema-objects discussed here are available on DVD. In addition
providing practical suggestions for a survey of twenty-first-century cinema, this selection shou
serve to demonstrate that, hardly the arid desert some have imagined, the century's first deca
abounded with significant and radically innovative cinema.

J. Hoberm
New York, March 20

PART I:
A POST-PHOTOGRAPHIC CINEMA

I predict that all movies will be animated or computer-generated within fifteen years.
—Bruce Goldstein, "Flashback: The Year in Movies," *Village Voice* (December 28, 1999)

It is in the nature of analogical worlds to provoke a yearning for the past … The digital will wants to change the world.
—D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007)

THE MYTH OF "THE MYTH OF TOTAL CINEMA"

Can we speak of a twenty-first-century cinema? And if so, on what basis?[1]

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the French film critic André Bazin offered a narrative in opposition to a then current notion that cinema developed in the spirit of scientific inquiry. Bazin characterized cinema as an idealistic phenomenon and cinema-making as an intrinsically irrational enterprise—namely, the obsessive quest for that complete representation of reality that he termed Total Cinema.

"There was not a single inventor who did not try to combine sound and relief with animation of the image," Bazin maintained in "The Myth of Total Cinema." Each and every new technological development—synchronous sound, full-color, stereoscopic or 3-D movies, Smell-O-Vision—served to take the cinema nearer to its imagined essence, which is to say that "cinema has not yet been invented!" Moreover, once true cinema was achieved, the medium itself would disappear—just like the state under true communism. Writing in 1946, Bazin believed that this could happen by 2000. In fact, something else occurred: the development of digital computer-generated imagery (CGI) broke the special relationship that existed between photography and the world.

The Myth of Total Cinema, the "recreation of the world in its own image," was for Bazin a factor of cinema's essence: the medium's integral realism was predicated on the camera's impartial gaze (the French word for lens is *objectif*), as well as the chemical reaction by which light left an authentic trace on photographic emulsion. In "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," an essay published in 1945, Bazin had noted that "photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature … The photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being." Because of this impartial, indexical connection between the photograph and that which was photographed (the profilmic subject or event), motion pictures produced an all-but-automatic image "unburdened" by artistic interpretation. Like a shadow or a bullet hole, a photograph was a form of evidence—a "hallucination that is also a fact." Moreover, each photograph was derived from its own material evidence in the form of the negative image produced by the initial photo-chemical reaction. Such negatives might be altered, cropped in the course of printing, or even destroyed but, at least initially, the image existed as a recognizable physical entity—unlike the infinitely malleable binary code produced, however indexically, by a digital camera.[2]

The divorce between photography and the world was initially experienced as a crisis in photography. Thanks to Photoshop, the image editing program first introduced in 1990, as well as other forms of digital manipulation, the photographic became an element or subset of the graphic. Previously, as art historian Julian Stallabrass observed in the mid 1990s, "forging ordinary photographs involved great skill and, if all variants and the original negatives were not destroyed, could always be unmasked.

Digitalization, which made image manipulation easily accessible, was "a technique which lends itse[lf] to the production of useful lies." Photography might retain "its powers of resemblance," but it wou[ld] lose "its veracity."[3]

 As the digitally manipulable photograph superseded the world as raw material for image-making, th[e] existential crisis for motion pictures was even more intense: Bazin had imagined cinema as th[e] objective "recreation of the world." Yet digital image-making precludes the necessity of having th[e] world, or even a really existing subject, before the camera—let alone the need for a camer[a.] Photography had been superseded, if not the desire to produce images that moved. Chaplin w[as] perhaps but a footnote to Mickey Mouse; what were *The Birth of a Nation* and *Battleship Potemk[in]* compared to *Toy Story 3*? With the advent of CGI, the history of motion pictures was now, in effe[ct] the history of animation.[4]

THE MATRIX: "A PRISON FOR YOUR MIND"

The process began in the early 1980s with two expensive and much-publicized Hollywood features—both of which, like certain animated cartoons of the 1920s, inserted "live actors" into virtu[al] environments. *One From the Heart* (1982), Francis Ford Coppola's experiment in electronic imag[e]-making, returned but $1 million on a $26-million investment and effectively destroyed his studi[o], while Disney's *Tron* (1982) the first sustained exercise in computer-generated imagery, was a mov[ie] whose costly special effects and mediocre box-office returns would be credited with (or blamed fo[r]) delaying CGI-based cinema for a decade.[1]

Tron's literalist representation of cyberspace predated William Gibson's *Neuromancer* by sever[al] years, although the movie was actually closer to *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Wizard of Oz* [—] supposedly taking place inside a computer where all the characters, except the hacker Flynn (Je[ff] Bridges), were—in a longstanding Disney tradition—anthropomorphized computer code. As suc[h], *Tron* might be considered a founding example of cyborg cinema, combining digital and photograph[ic] imagery. The movie's most dramatic effect was the virtual tracking shot, in which a non-existe[nt] camera seemed to move through an imaginary landscape. More advanced and popular cyborgs, Steve[n] Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) and George Lucas's *The Phantom Menace* (1999), seamlessly fuse[d] photography and CGI imagery to have real people interact convincingly onscreen with non-existe[nt] creatures, offering early clues to the new direction. So did the numerous popular discussion[s] surrounding the production of digital personalities like Lara Croft, who made her first appearance [in] the 1996 video game *Tomb Raider*, or the resurrection of dead film stars, as in the 1995 episode [of] HBO's aptly titled *Tales from the Crypt*, featuring "Humphrey Bogart," or the Super Bowl XX[X] commercial in which "Fred Astaire" danced with a Broom Vac.[2]

Both *Jurassic Park* and *The Phantom Menace* also engaged in a particular form of naturalization b[y] inscribing CGI into prehistory, whether that of planet Earth or of the *Star Wars* saga. In his 2001 boo[k] *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich made the provocative observation that the aesthet[ic] underlying *Jurassic Park* is akin to Socialist Realism, which strove to project the radiant futu[re] socialist society into the familiar world of the present. *Jurassic Park* strives "to show the future [in] sight itself."

> Just as Socialist Realist paintings blended the perfect future with imperfect reality, *Jurassic Park* blends the future supervision of computer graphics with the familiar vision of the film image … The dinosaurs are present to tell us that computer images belong safely to a past long gone—even though we have every reason to believe that they are messengers from a future still to come.

The Phantom Menace, which was also projected digitally in some theaters, not only evoked b[ut] embodied the future of cinema. So, in another way, did Douglas Gordon's 1993 video installation, 2[4]

Hour Psycho—in which, wrenched from its natural context and re-presented as a re-animated (or perhaps, de-animated), glacially slow-motion digital image of itself, requiring a full day to watch, Hitchcock's old-fashioned analog motion picture became an extreme object of contemplation.[3]

A cyborg production like *24 Hour Psycho* further induces what some experience as a loss of temporal indexicality. Cinematographer and filmmaker Babette Mangolte has argued that digital image-making may be distinguished from photographic cinema in its intrinsic inability to embody temporal duration or a sense of "real time," and that this is true even when photographic motion pictures are projected in digital form: "Why," she wonders,

> is the brightness of the LCD screen, the relentless glare of the digital image with no shutter reprieve, no back and forth between one forty-eighth of a second of dark followed by one forty-eighth of projected images, with no repetitive pattern as regular as your own heartbeat, unable to establish and construct an experiential sense of time passing and why could the projected image do it so effortlessly in the past and still can?

Mangolte's question, posed in the 2003 anthology *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida*, suggests that, for some, the essence of film—if not cinema—is not so much a matter of the photographic indexical as the presence of a material flicker; film may be defined by the rhythm of the motion picture projector, which is to say the sense of motion pictures as an apparatus or machine. In this sense, the Austrian avant-garde filmmaker Peter Kubelka's 1958 *Arnulf Rainer* which, made without a camera, alternates clear and opaque 16mm footage, may be considered cinema's Ground Zero and the series of frame-by-frame painted films with which Stan Brakhage ended his career an assertion of film's material, anti-photographic essence.[4]

Rather than indexicality of the photographic image, the new essence of cinema might be found in Andrei Tarkovsky's notion of "imprinted time" or duration. Writing on the significance of the first Lumière *actualités*, Tarkovsky observed that

> for the first time in the history of the arts, in the history of culture, man found the means to *take an impression of time*. And simultaneously the possibility of reproducing that time on screen as often as he wanted, to repeat it and go back to it. He acquired a matrix for *actual time*. Once seen and recorded, time could now be preserved in metal boxes over a long period (theoretically for ever) … *Time, printed in its factual forms and manifestations*: such is the supreme idea of cinema as an art.

It has often been observed that, with its absence of flicker and greater sense of continuity, the video image seems eternally "present." What then is one to make of Christian Marclay's 2010 installation *The Clock*, a digitally-projected assemblage of photographic motion pictures that, in its perfectly chronological, minute-to-minute temporal references, functions as a twenty-four-hour timekeeper? (*The Clock*'s thousands of clips include everything from *High Noon* and *Easy Rider* to *Back to the Future* and *Pulp Fiction*. No list can possibly do it justice.) In London, New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere, *The Clock* demonstrated Tarkovsky's assertion—albeit in a vulgar sense—as it held audience spellbound and hyper-aware of time passing.[5]

Although the suspense inherent in many of the original clips undoubtedly contributed to *The Clock*'s power to fascinate the spectator, one might also observe that the heightened awareness of time, as well as *The Clock*'s utilitarian capacity to tell time in real time, provided a new sort of indexicality: The experience of watching a movie is forcibly literalized as the experience of watching a movie and that is further emphasized by the presence of so much familiar material. For many, much of *The Clock* is pre-saturated in personal memory or nostalgia.[6]

It may be argued that, as fashioned from pre-existing, often well-known movie and television clips,

and thus employing many beloved stars, *The Clock* was in fact a traditional motion picture or, at the very least, a celebration of motion pictures and their undying appeal. (It was praised by several New York art critics specifically for its presumed love for movies.) Nevertheless this epic projection was, of course, digital, and—like *24 Hour Psycho* or other Gordon installations—only possible as a form of digital image-making. *The Clock*'s occasional cropping and stretching of the original material is a factor of the high-definition video format which demands a 16:9 aspect ratio. (Marclay employed further digital manipulation in making *The Clock*, sweetening some footage by removing voiceover that implied a past tense, eliminating overly emphatic music, and creating new sound effects when necessary.)

   In short, whether as a source of visual data or as a delivery system, computer-generated imagery had introduced a radical impurity into the motion picture apparatus that was developed at the turn of the twentieth century and which, save for the introduction of synchronous sound, remained markedly consistent for 100 years. Thus, *The Matrix* (1999), written and directed by the brothers Larry and Andy Wachowski, represents a landmark hybrid in its combination of live action with frame-by-frame digital manipulation. No previous animated film had so naturalistically represented the physical world. "Once you have seen a movie like *The Matrix*, you can't unsee it," a Los Angeles exhibitor told the *New York Times* in 2002, referring to the ways in which CGI had altered the action film, in part by allowing serious actors to perform impossible stunts. *The Matrix*, as film critic David Edelstein would note the following year, "changed not only the way we look at movies but movies themselves." *The Matrix* "cut us loose from the laws of physics in ways that no live-action film had ever done, exploding our ideas of time and space on screen."[7]

   In addition to vaulting the gap between photographed humans and computer-generated humanoids known as the "uncanny valley," *The Matrix* provided an irresistible ruling metaphor that was heightened in its force by the approaching millennium—humanity lives in simulation, in a computer-generated illusion created to conceal the terrifying Desert of the Real. "There's something wrong with the world, but you don't know what it is," the most informed character told the movie's computer-nerd protagonist, articulating the loss of photographic certainty in a digital world even while offering the red pill that will allow the protagonist to see things as they actually are.

   As with *Tron*, the hacker was the hero but, to a far more sophisticated degree, cyberspace was the place. Despite its fantastic premise, *The Matrix* evoked and identified a recognizable world—a new social reality in which freedom and social control had merged, while information, entertainment, fantasy, advertising, and communication seemed indistinguishable. This was reinforced by the movie's incidental social realism—the narrative was not just dependent on computers but cell phones and instant messages. At the same time, *The Matrix*'s own matrix of self-referential film sequels and websites, as well as participatory fan sites and video games, suggest an entire virtual environment.[8]

   Media theorist Henry Jenkins considers *The Matrix* to be the quintessential "entertainment for the age of media convergence … a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium." *The Matrix* further benefited from and made use of DVD technology which, introduced in 1996, came into its own as a consumer product in the late 1990s (and soon began to provide the movie industry's margin of profit), not least because of the extras the new format permitted, including commentary and self-promoting production documentaries. In August 2000, Time Warner announced that a record-setting 3 million *Matrix* DVDs had been sold. What's more, in addition to promoting itself, *The Matrix* also popularized certain ideas associated with French philosopher Jean Baudrillard—namely the notion of the Hyperreal, "a real without origin or reality," which might be one way to characterize

CGI, as well as *The Matrix* itself.[9]

In short, *The Matrix* (now hopelessly dated) was understood in its moment as an historical even Shortly before millennial New Year, *Entertainment Weekly* made Jeff Gordinier's "1999: The Yea That Changed the Movies" its cover story. "Films of the new guard dart and weave," Gordinier wrot "they reflect the cut-and-paste sensibility of videogames, the Internet, and hip-hop," as well as th MTV-conditioned sensibility of the audience. "You don't 'watch' a film like *Fight Club*," Gordini explained, "you mainline a deluge of visual and sonic information (including a hefty chunk of th IKEA catalog) straight into your cranium." Speaking for his audience, David Fincher had reassure the movie's producers: "Don't worry, the audience will be able to follow this. This is not unspoolir your tale. This is downloading."

Released at the height of the dot.com bubble, during a period in which computers saturated the hon entertainment market in the manner that television did in the 1950s, *The Matrix* was an idea who time had clearly come. In January 2000, less than a year after the movie's release, Time Warner—th world's largest media conglomerate as well as the studio that produced *The Matrix*—merged with t world's largest internet-service provider, America Online (AOL), in a deal which involved the transfe of $182 billion in stocks and debts and was the largest in history.

Evoking "a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch … a prison for your mind," *The Matr* premise invited allegory. For architecture critic Herbert Muschamp, the Matrix suggested "th monoculture of shopping malls, theme parks, edge cities, suburban subdivisions, convention cente and hotels." It might also be AOL Time Warner or Hollywood or the National Entertainment State The main thing is this: one cannot stand outside it. Thus, in the universe of *The Matrix*, Bazin's drea arrived as a nightmare, in the form of a virtual cyber existence: Total Cinema as a total dissociatio from reality.[10]

THE NEW REALNESS

"If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis," Bazin begins his "Ontology of the Photographic Image," then "the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation." If the motion pictures of the twenty-first century were placed under psychoanalysis, their symptoms might reveal two types of anxiety—one objective, the other hysterical.

Objective anxiety is manifested both in a recognition that the motion picture *medium*, as it has more or less existed since 1896, is in an apparently irreversible decline—the mass audience is eroded, national film industries have been defunded, film labs are shuttered, film stocks terminated and formats rendered obsolete, parts for broken 16mm-projectors are irreplaceable, laptop computers have been introduced as a delivery system—and then in a feeling among cinema-oriented intellectuals that film *culture* is disappearing. The latter may be seen in the increased marginalization of movie criticism as a journalistic practice and the experience of a more general lost love of movies (or cinephilia), as most eloquently and pessimistically articulated by Susan Sontag in her widely read centennial essay, "The Decay of Cinema."

"Each art breeds its fanatics," Sontag declared. "The love that cinema inspired, however, was special.

> It was born of the conviction that cinema was an art unlike any other: quintessentially modern; distinctively accessible; poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral—all at the same time. Cinema had apostles. (It was like religion.) Cinema was a crusade.

> For cinephiles, the movies encapsulated everything. Cinema was both the book of art and the book of life.[1]

This objective anxiety is also a factor of what film theorist David Rodowick has termed the "digital will"—namely the sense that CGI technology inherently strives to remake the world while motion pictures (as we knew them), having surrendered their privileged relationship with the real, are in some sense obsolete. It is this anxiety that underscores the *neo*-neo-realist position of the Danish Dogma '95 group despite, or perhaps because of, its use of digital video. The most important motion pictures produced according to Dogma's ten commandments were Lars von Trier's *Idiots* (1997) and Jesper Jargil's *The Humiliated*, a 1998 documentary on the making of *Idiots*, precisely because of their emphasis on "life-acting," namely the staging and documenting of authentic transgressive behavior.[2]

The key expression of objective anxiety, however, is Jean-Luc Godard's magisterial *In Praise of Love* (2001) which, no less than Godard's first feature *Breathless*—albeit with somewhat less jouissance—responds to a new situation in cinema history.

Two-thirds shot on black-and-white 35mm and the rest on luridly synthesized digital video, *In Praise of Love* mourns the loss of photographic cinema, as well as the memory and history that, more than an indexical trace, photography makes material. Studied as they are, Godard's unprepossessing, sometimes harsh images of the city and its inhabitants—many of them dispossessed—feel as newly minted as the earliest Lumière brothers views; they evoke the thrill of light becoming emulsion. Much

of the movie is a voluptuous urban nocturne with particular emphasis on the transitory sensations th
were the essence of the first motion pictures. (*Pace* Bazin, there are passages where *In Praise of Lo*
appears like a fact of nature while Hollywood movies, exemplified by *Schindler's List* and *T*
Matrix—which are, at least by association, digital—are rather, Godard insists, a substitute f
history.)

Such cinematic eulogies were not uncommon in the early twenty-first century. These twilight movi
include Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), a lament for vanished popular cinema, i
audience, and its means of presentation, in a specifically Taiwanese context, as well as several notab
avant-garde films such as Pat O'Neill's *Decay of Fiction,* Bill Morrison's *Decasia,* and Ernie Gehr
Cotton Candy (all released in 2002). As Tsai presented the ghost-ridden movie theater, so *Decay*
Fiction evokes a haunted movie set. O'Neill spectrally populated the abandoned Ambassador Hotel,
old-time movie-star hangout and frequent movie location, with transparent actors dressed according
period styles.[3]

In a 2011 roundtable on experimental digital cinema, filmmaker Lynne Sachs identified a nostalg
"fetishism of decay," noting digital effects designed to simulate film scratches and dust: "We don
want things to age. Nevertheless, we miss the chemical reactions, the fact that physical things chang
so we simulate decay." Each in its way, *Decasia* and *Cotton Candy* savor photographic disintegratio
even as they are overtly preservationist in intent. Rather than a moldering hotel, Morrison documen
decomposing 35mm nitrate footage culled from a number of film archives, while Gehr records th
ancient pre-cinematic toys in San Francisco's Musée Mécanique, notably the sort of hand-cranke
photographic flip-book known as mutoscopes and most particularly (so it seems) those wi
photographs that are torn, faded or damaged.[4]

We may not, per Babette Mangolte, experience time according to the rhythm of twenty-four frame
per second, but we are watching change. That *Decasia* and *The Decay of Fiction* have been large
exhibited in digital form while *Cotton Candy* was digitally produced infuses their pragmatism with
measure of rueful, guilty digital ambivalence. (The abandonment of the old medium is similar
acknowledged in Linkletter's *Waking Life* which, shot and edited as an ordinary motion picture, y
proposes a new sort of indexicality.) At the same time, however, several distinguished film artis
created digital works which in their use of real time and duration, could be said to make the motio
picture medium *more itself*. However dissimilar, Abbas Kiarostami's "undirected" Warholian trackin
film and acting vehicle *Ten* and Aleksandr Sokurov's ninety-five-minute single take *Russian A*
amplified each other for both premiering in competition at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. (Neith
won any awards.)

Russian Ark, in which Sokurov's camera tours Petersburg's Hermitage Museum in on
choreographed movement, was distinguished by a number of historical achievements—as the fir
unedited single-screen, single-take full-length feature film; as the longest single SteadiCam sequenc
and as the first uncompressed High Definition movie recorded onto a portable hard disc. And yet,
pointed out by Rodowick, who insists that "digitally acquired information has no ontologic
distinctiveness from digitally synthesized outputs that construct virtual worlds," the certainty
watching absolute, unmediated continuity is gone. Rodowick does not address the possibility of
automatically printed time code, assuming perhaps that it could be easily forged. *Russian Ark* h
significant post-production manipulation. In some instances, the frame has been resized to elimina
unwanted objects, the camera speed adjusted, the lighting modified, and the color temperatur
conformed. In one scene the perspective of a wide-angle lens is simulated, while the movie ends wi

a swirl of digitally-created snow and fog. No less than *The Matrix,* then, *Russian Ark* is an animate

movie created from photographic material.[5]

And yet, *Russian Ark*'s single take is what Tarkovsky would have called the "impression of time and the movie is essentially Bazinian, most radically in its performative aspect—that is, in th orchestration of the camera and profilmic event. The same is true for *Ten,* for which the filmmak placed his mini-camera on an automobile dashboard to document the conversations of the car's driv and passengers as they drove through Tehran. Each in its own way, these digitally created "fil objects" confound the distinction between staged fiction and documented "truth." In both cases, directors have made something happen in life. While these motion pictures may be considered as form of canned theater, both employ digital technology in order make quintessential motion pictures

Elsewhere, the loss of indexicality has promoted a new, compensatory "real-ness," emphasizing fil as an object (if only an object in decay). *In Praise of Love,* which begins *in media res* and ends with prolonged flashback, can be understood as a continuous loop—and hence, as a film installatio *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*—a sort of superimposed double-feature with the older movie "inserted" insi or framed by the newer one—also suggests an installation, perhaps one designed to be projected in th since-demolished Taipei theater where the movie is set. Both *Decay of Fiction* and Michael Snow 2002 perceptual vaudeville show **Corpus Callosum* (which, like *Decay of Fiction* or Eric Rohmer *The Lady and the Duke,* is a twenty-first-century Méliès trick-film to Kiarostami and Sokurov digital *actualités*) were exhibited as gallery installations.

History doubles back on itself. **Corpus Callosum* ends in a screening room with the presentation Snow's crude cartoon of a weirdly elastic, waving human with a twisty foot kick. Rigorous predicated on irreducible cinematic facts, Snow's structuralist epics—*Wavelength* (1967) and *l Région Centrale* (1971)—announced the imminent passing of the film era. Rich with ne possibilities, **Corpus Callosum*'s self-described "tableau of transformation," largely set in a gener fun-house office and featuring wackily distorted "information workers," heralds the advent of th next. Snow and Gehr were at one point in the late 1960s and early 70s considered to be part of th "structural" tendency in avant-garde filmmaking, heavily invested in the specific properties of th film medium. In switching to digital technology, they had demonstrated a comparable concern wi the nature of this new medium.

So too, Guy Maddin's confessional narrative *Cowards Bend the Knee* (2003), which was initial shown as a ten-part peep show installed on a battery of mutoscopes. *Cowards Bend the Knee* employe the conventions of silent cinema with transitions marked by irises and intertitles standing in f dialogue; when projected, the action was accompanied by a combination of classical and progra music, as well as sound effects. Such gratuitous anachronism is something other (and nuttier) tha mere nostalgia. Artisanal puppet animations like Trey Parker's *Team America: World Police* (200 and particularly Henry Selick's 3-D *Coraline* (2009), with its perverse, although not absolute, refus of CGI, are further instances of what might be called the New Realness; related, albeit disparat examples of willful, neo-retro primitivism would include Maddin's deliberately silent feature *Brai Upon the Brain!* (2006), Neil Young's post-dubbed super-8 protest opera *Greendale* (2003), and Ke Jacob's reworked 1903 *actualité Razzle Dazzle* (2006) which, like Gehr's *Cotton Cand* programmatically fuses ancient photographic and modern digital technology.

The cinema of international film festivals has showcased many successors to the short-lived Dogn movement in the form of modestly produced motion pictures, digital or analog, which, lik Kiarostami's *Ten,* purposefully blur the distinction between staged fiction and recorded realit Neither pseudo nor mock documentaries, these movies might be characterized as "situatio

documentaries," asserting their media specific realness through the use of long takes, minimal editing, behavioral performances, and leisurely contemplation of their subjects or setting. Drama is subsumed in observation. Landscape trumps performance.

Pedro Costa's *Ossos* (1997), *In Vanda's Room* (2000), and *Colossal Youth* (2006) allow Lisbon slum dwellers to dramatize their lives or, at least, play themselves talking before the camera. With their deliberate compositions and purposeful lighting, Costa's features have the feel of staged documentaries—as do certain works by China's Jia Zhangke or the Austrian filmmaker Ulrich Seidl. More radical and less stylized are those unprepossessing, minimalist narratives which are shot like documentaries, notably Kiarostami's *Ten* and those of Argentine director Lisandro Alonso—*La Libertad* (2000), *Los Muertos* (2004), and *Liverpool* (2008). Related artists include Spanish filmmaker Albert Serra and the Portuguese director Miguel Gomes; a quintessential example of this rudimentary rock-hard ultra-literalism is Paz Encina's *Paraguayan Hammock* (2006) in which, rather than coaxing a narrative from a documentary situation, simply uses voiceover and editing to impose one.

The first 35mm all-Paraguayan feature produced since the 1970s, Encina's willfully primitive movie could have been made a century ago—albeit in black and white, with a pair of actors behind the screen presenting the movie's asynchronous dialogue. It opens with a lengthy, static long shot in which an elderly couple emerges from the woods to hang their hammock in a clearing. "What is wrong with you?" one asks the other. Their words—like all of the movie's dialogue—are obviously post-dubbed and delivered in the indigenous Guaraní language. From their conversation, it gradually becomes apparent that their son is a soldier fighting in a war. The day goes on. The couple performs their separate chores as each remembers or imagines a conversation with the absent boy. With their repetitive discourse, the protagonists suggest a pair of Beckett characters. Inevitably, the movie comes full circle. As day ends, the old couple returns to their hammock—once more seen in long shot. In the fading light, they expand their three topics of conversation (the dog, the weather, their son) to acknowledge death and even each other. Then the old man lights a lamp, and the two shuffle off back into the woods. Encino holds the blank screen for a minute or two, ending with the sound of rain.

Such "situation documentaries" operate in the gap between non-fiction and fiction recognized by Italian neo-realist films like Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1948), with its cast of non-actors dramatizing their lives *in situ*, and further refined (or perhaps de-refined) in the Warhol Factory features of the mid 1960s, most notably those starring Edie Sedgwick as herself. Movies like *La Libertad* and *Paraguayan Hammock* are predicated on and assert film's indexical relation to the real even when, as with *Ten*, they are produced with digital technology.[6]

The great performance artist of the mode is Sasha Baron Cohen who first introduced his alter-egos Borat and Brüno as television personalities. Indeed, in some ways, the partially-staged situation documentary is analogous to the international phenomenon known as "reality television," anticipated in the US by MTV's long-running *The Real World* (1992–), precipitated by the network-produced *Survivor* series (2000–), and continuing through various editions and iterations of *American Idol* (2002–), *The Bachelor* (2002–), *The Apprentice* (2004–), *The Biggest Loser* (2004–), *Dancing With the Stars* (2005–), *Jersey Shore* (2009–), etc., as well as Jennifer Ringley's twenty-four-hour dorm room website JenniCAM (1996–2003). Indeed, as demonstrated by the aftermath of the 2008 presidential campaign and the run-up to the 2012 election, reality television has become the template for American politics.

From a philosophical point of view, the most paradoxical exercise in New Realness is Lars von Trier's post-Dogma *Dogville* (2003). At once abstract and concrete, *Dogville* plays out on an obvious if schematically organized, soundstage and thus, in addition to providing a narrative, documents the

scaffolding on which a narrative is conventionally constructed. This soundstage world, in which all t[he] actors on the set are at all times potentially visible, meets the Dogma requirement that "filming mu[st] be done on location"—call it Dogmaville. Filled with close-ups and jump-cuts, *Dogville* was shot o[n] digital video—a format that not only allows for a greater sense of spontaneity than 35mm but in i[ts] immediacy effectively precludes any nostalgia inherent in the movie's period setting.

On the eve of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, scarcely two months before *Dogville*'s Cann[es] premiere, Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia rose on the floor of the US Senate to announce that he we[pt] for his country:

> I have watched the events of recent months with a heavy, heavy heart. No more is the image of America one of a strong, yet benevolent peacekeeper. The image of America has changed. Around the globe, our friends mistrust us, our word is disputed, our intentions are questioned … We flaunt our superpower status with arrogance.

Von Trier's Rocky Mountain town may be a superpower writ small, but it is explicitly a realm of sel[f-] righteous fantasy and proud delusion. In one sense a two-hour-plus build-up to the end credit montag[e,] *Dogville* saves catharsis for its final moments. The town's hitherto unseen dog turns "real"—that i[s] photographic—and so does von Trier's abstract "America." What we have previously witnessed wa[s] simply a play, as well as a representation. Von Trier's documentary realness, recording actors on a se[t] in a way that they can never be imagined to be anything else, is ruptured by a greater realness— namely a montage of photographic evidence, wrenching images of human misery in America, set to [a] disco beat.

It's a nasty prank, but who could possibly laugh at these indexical images of naked distress? [Or] readily turn their back, as encouraged to do, by leaving the theater? Is the audience ignoring reali[ty] and returning to their Dogville? Or is it vice versa?[7]

QUID EST VERITAS:
THE REALITY OF UNSPEAKABLE SUFFERING

Objective anxiety became manifest at the height of the dot.com bubble in the late 1990s and the panicky anticipation of the Y2K "virus," the period Rodowick calls "the summer of digital paranoia," when (as he paraphrased Marx) *The Matrix*, et al. suggested that "all that was chemical and photographic [was] disappearing into the electronic and digital."

Hysterical anxiety can be even more precisely dated. For many, and not just those in Hollywood, the events of September 11, 2001 provided the ultimate movie experience—spectacular destruction predicated on fantastic conspiracy, broadcast live, as well as repeatedly (and even recorded by some participants on their cell phones), and watched by an audience, more or less simultaneously, of billions. This surely is what the composer Karl Stockhausen, among others, meant when, in the course of a press conference at the Hamburg Music Festival on September 16, 2001, he undiplomatically referring to the events of 9/11 as "the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos."[1]

These events—or rather, this Event—established a new cinematic paradigm and Hollywood's response was fascinating, particularly in that magical thinking is what movies are all about. Only days after the Event, the studios eagerly reported that the FBI had informed them they could be the terrorists' next target. On September 21, rumors of an impending attack swept Los Angeles. The industry felt somehow guilty and even responsible, although not everyone was as blunt (or innocent in his megalomania) as Robert Altman, who told the Associated Press that, "These people have copied the movies. Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they'd seen it in a movie … We created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it."[2]

Did the history-changing shock of this cinematic event plunge the nascent twenty-first century into an alternative universe, one in which motion picture fairy tales actually did come true? Or was it rather a red pill that parted the veil on a new reality that already existed? The 9/11 Event was understood by some filmmakers as a horrible unintended consequence of their medium and taken by others as a challenge to the notion of the movies as a medium with a privileged relationship to the real.[3]

This was not necessarily conscious as when, during the course of an on-set press conference, Steven Spielberg would describe his fantastic *War of the Worlds* (2005), the first Hollywood movie to allegorize 9/11, as an exercise in realism, even insisting upon a key concept of the New Realness: "The whole thing is very experiential [*sic*]." *War of the Worlds*, Spielberg maintained, was not simply entertainment, like such earlier fantasies of interplanetary warfare as *Independence Day* (1996) or *Starship Troopers* (1997): "We take it much more seriously than that." The movie, he promised reporters, would be "as ultra-realistic as I've ever attempted to make a movie, in terms of its documentary style …" Spielberg, like Altman, was speaking on behalf of his medium. Cinema itself

would insure that the post 9/11 disaster film would be experiential, communal and above a[ll] naturalistic.[4]

Although the mayhem in *War of the Worlds* references 9/11 in every instance, the most brutal Ne[w] Realness is manifest in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), a movie that seemingly stan[ds] opposed to all entertainment values and which, in fact, aspired to be far more than a movie b[y] representing and, in a sense, identifying with a unique instance of divine intervention—and henc[e] proposing itself as a cinematic event to trump even 9/11. For a true believer, *The Passion of the Chri[st]* is not a narrative but an icon—an object through which to meditate upon the spectacle of a defensele[ss] man beaten, stomped, and tortured to death so that he might redeem the sins of all humanity since th[e] beginning of time!

As a subject, Gibson's Jesus Christ has less in common with any previous movie protagonist tha[n] with the greenish-purplish, pustulent, putrifying subject of Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece. As [a] movie, *The Passion* passes the point of no return with the eleven-minute chastisement sequence [in] which Jesus is lacerated, first with rods and then studded whips, until his back resembles a side of r[aw] beef. The crux of *The Passion* is the experience of a crucifixion; the near continuous violence and go[re] is meant to excruciate the viewer. Using numerous overhead shots, Gibson assumes a fallen world a[nd] projects an essentially medieval worldview. (The crucifixion only emerged as a subject for artists wi[th] the first millennium; passion plays didn't exist before the twelfth century.)

As detailed by art historian Mitchell B. Merback in *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and th[e] Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago, 1999), medieval Christi[an] devotion required immersion in the Passion's "grisly details," while other devotional practic[es] centered on the experience of a tortured, pain-racked body. (Merback finds analogies in mediev[al] Europe's contemporaneous fascination with martyrdom, flagellation, extravagant forms [of] punishment, and public executions.) The antithesis of a film like Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Count[ry] Priest* (1951), Gibson's atavistic Christian art goes for shock rather than sublimity. The filmmak[er] employs extreme, even gross, horror movie tropes, as well as blatant digital effects—the Roman wh[ip] and Christ's wounds in the chastisement sequence, as well as the final shot of 3-D stigmata.[5]

From the silent era on, movies drew power from their affinity to religious ritual; *The Passion* inver[ts] this equation, and redeems movie-going. The cinema is transformed from a questionable, possib[ly] sinful activity into a source of collective identity as well as a communal rite. Entire congregatio[ns] rented theaters in order to the share the experience, often bringing young children. For these religio[us] audiences, *The Passion* functioned as a sermon but, unlike a sermon, the end of the screening w[as] greeted with applause—or so I've been told. However gruesome its presentation, *The Passion* w[as] taken as a gift from God. Evangelical leader and child psychologist James C. Dobson was not alone [in] welcoming this redemption of a debased popular culture: "In any other context, I could not in go[od] conscience recommend a movie containing this degree of violent content. However, in this case, t[he] violence is intended not to titillate or entertain, but to emphasize the reality of the unspeakab[le] suffering that our Savior endured on our behalf."[6]

As *The Passion*'s sanctified violence and horror impressed a devout audience with the reality [of] "unspeakable suffering", so the real-ness of Gibson's extreme filmmaking intrigued more secul[ar] artists. Not everyone was as honest as Quentin Tarantino who, when asked by interviewer John Powe[rs] if he'd seen Gibson's *Passion*, replied that he "loved it … I think it actually is one of the mo[st] brilliant visual storytelling movies I've seen since the talkies."

It has the power of a silent movie … It is pretty violent, I must say. At a certain point, it was like a Takashi Miike film. It got so [

Tarantino would subsequently lend his imprimatur to exploitation director Eli Roth, author of th quasi-pornographic torture-based horror films *Cabin Fever* (2002) and *Hostel* (2005), low-budget D productions with stylistic affinities to the New Realness, by employing Roth to contribute a trailer his compilation film *Grindhouse* and by producing *Hostel II* (both 2007).[7]

Gibson's blockbuster stimulated other filmmakers—but not simply because of its mayhem. Movi as varied as Gus Van Sant's crypto-Kurt Cobain ode *Last Days* (2005), Cristi Puiu's black comedy *Th Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005), Julia Loktev's structural suspense film *Day Night Day Night* (200 Paul Greengrass's 9/11 docudrama *United 93* (2006), Julian Schnabel's medical case history *Th Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2006), Steve McQueen's prison story *Hunger* (2008), Filipino direct Brilliante Mendoza's true-crime *Kinatay* (2009), Jerzy Skolomowski's existential chase film *Essenti Killing* (2010), and Danny Boyle's self-amputation ordeal *127 Hours* (2010)—many based on inspired by true stories, and all built around a discreet experience—are examples of post-*Passion* ant entertainment, aspiring to a visceral realness and being additionally "experiential" in their emphas on real-time duration.[8]

Noting their over-determined endings, film critic Nathan Lee bracketed several such movies wi *The Passion of the Christ*, as "death trips." No less crucial is their interest in constructing an ordeal- both on the screen and for the audience. *Last Days* was immediately recognized as analogous Gibson's project. *Washington Post* reviewer Anna Hornaday called it "the grunge generation *Passio of the Christ*," predicting (erroneously) that it might prove "as powerful a communal and spiritu experience." Van Sant's suicidal rock star is only the most obvious martyr. Others include a alcoholic non-entity who dies on a hospital gurney, a would-be suicide bomber, the passengers an crew of a hijacked plane, a French fashion writer sentenced to a living death, an Irish revolutiona who embarks on a fatal hunger strike, and a Filipino hooker. In every case, their passion is presente as an object of contemplation.

United 93, which more or less demands that its audience live through a doomed flight from take-o to crash, is the most therapeutic of these movies. The quintessential new disaster film, *United 93* explicit in its use of real time and designed for audience participation. New disaster is experiential an communal. Just as the now notorious trailer distilled the movie's narrative arc (albeit without offerin the final catharsis), audiences mimicked the action: having paid to see *Inside Man*, unsuspectin viewers had their attention "hijacked." According to some descriptions in the press, the angry patron at AMC Loews Lincoln Square banded together to yank the trailer.

Kinatay (the title means "slaughter" in Tagalog) is the most radical of these films. The movie crudely shot from the perspective of a twenty-year-old police trainee who, moonlighting for ext money, finds himself trapped on behalf of the spectator, in a hellish world. Over the course of a fort five-minute, more or less real-time sequence, and before his eyes, a young prostitute is abducte beaten, tortured, raped, sodomized, murdered, and matter-of-factly dismembered. That these atrociti are murkily rendered on HD, more often heard than seen, serves to add insult to injury, even Mendoza's anti-technique amplifies the horrifying spectacle of relentless degradation. *Kinatay* is not movie to be lightly recommended but it is something that must be endured to be understood.[9]

SOCIAL NETWORK

Like *The Passion, Kinatay* draws on the lowest horror movie tropes in its grimly experienti[al] representation of human suffering and depraved indifference. At a higher level of aspiration one fin[ds] a variety of self-reflexive attempts that use genre conventions to represent a new "social-real" [—] existential terror, cyber-globalism, viral images, digital will, and social networking.[1]

Further examples of this new social-real would include George Romero's horror films *Land of t[he] Dead* (2005) and *Diary of the Dead* (2007), and Matt Reeves's *Cloverfield* (2008)—the last of whic[h,] purporting to be a subjective camcorder documentation of a cataclysmic disaster, is notable f[or] integrating the two poles of digital image-making: expensive CGI and amateur DV. More specificall[y,] although each in its own way, Antonio Campo's Haneke-influenced youth film, *Afterschool* (200[8),] Brian De Palma's anti-war *Redacted* (2007) and Errol Morris's investigative documentary *Standa[rd] Operating Procedure* (2008) explore the implications of YouTube—of self-produced movies bein[g] uploaded to the web for a potential audience of tens of thousands.[2]

Jia Zhangke's theme-park set *The World* (2004) and Joe Swanberg's humorously scaled-dow[n] exercise in social networking, *LOL* (2006), are both revisionist versions of the globalistic melodram[a,] as is the more widely seen and highly praised David Fincher–Aaron Sorkin "Facebook" movie, *T[he] Social Network* (2010). At once a form of neo-neo-realism and an attempt to make a contempora[ry] new wave film, Swanberg's low-budget production is characterized by primitive jump cuts and a[ll] manner of sound/image disjunction, as when a panicky voicemail message is heard over a montage [of] faces or when email messages function as silent movie intertitles.

Utterly classical in its film language, *The Social Network* addresses the origin and appeal of t[he] motion picture's latest rival. Like any form of entertainment, social networking succeeds to the degr[ee] that it successfully compensates people for something missing in their lives—a lost sense [of] neighborhood or extended family or workplace fraternity or class solidarity or even self-importanc[e.] As dramatized in *The Social Network*, the story of Facebook's creation is not unlike that of any larg[e] corporation—megalomania rewarded, sweethearts trampled, partners buggered. Shoring up its ov[rn] historical bona fides, the movie explicitly compares Facebook's youthful founder Mark Zuckerberg [to] the media-mogul protagonist of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. Zuckerberg's real achieveme[nt,] however, was something more mysterious than founding a newspaper or a twenty-first-century MG[M] or Standard Oil; his genius was to manufacture intimacy through the creation of a parall[el] personalized internet: offering an ongoing second life in a virtual gated community.[3]

For its users, Facebook offers a sort of post-cinematic Total Cinema—it is the cyberspace equivale[nt] of super-8 or video home movies, giving anyone the opportunity to be the star of their own ongoi[ng] online situation documentary. Objectively, however, Facebook creates a new sort of reification—[a] sphere in which everyone is a potential database self-defined by consumption. (In early 2011, certa[in] movie studios—or rather media conglomerates—were studying the possibility of using Facebook as [a]

platform by which users could rent movie downloads, a suggestive way of reconstituting the lo[st]
motion picture audience.) True to its moment however, *The Social Network* is less interested [in]
mapping this new system of human interaction than in psychoanalyzing it as the projection of i[ts]
quintessential user: Mark Zuckerberg. The key insight in *The Social Network* is that its imagine[d]
Zuckerberg—who is not particularly friendly and not at all prone to sharing—created his virtu[al]
community to address his specific situation.[4]

   As Kafka's self-starved Hunger Artist found his métier in his idiosyncratic nature (there just wasn[t]
any food he liked to eat) so *The Social Network*'s anti-hero invented Facebook in response to t[he]
psychic pressure of an individual quirk or character flaw, globalizing his own inability to connect wi[th]
actual people. Ostensibly critical of Zuckerberg, *The Social Network* nonetheless proved to be [a]
priceless advertisement for Facebook. As 2010 ended, the investment bank Goldman Sachs valued t[he]
worth of Zuckerman's business at $50 billion; the firm invested $500 million in Facebook and w[as]
preparing to raise another $1.5 billion from their clients.[5]

   The protagonists of Swanberg's all but homemade *LOL* (its title is the online abbreviation for "laug[h]
out loud") are dutiful citizens of Zuckerberg's world (even though, as the movie was made in 200[6]
and was thus all but instantly anachronistic, Facebook is not their social network of choice). Close [to]
psychodrama, *LOL* stars its three main creators and was largely improvised by them. According to a[n]
explanatory extra included in the DVD release, the movie was "born out of ideas batted back and for[th]
via computer, cell phone, etc., and then filmed in the same manner that people use webcams or the[ir]
cell phones"—which is another way of describing its narrative. The opening shot is a computer scre[en]
with a moving mouse clicking on a file. Someone has posted his girlfriend's private striptease on lin[e.]
Her dance is cross-cut with close-ups of a dozen or more transfixed spectators, each occupying h[is]
own personal space and staring dumbfounded (and pants down?) at his own personal screen.[6]

   LOL, in which every dysfunctional or imaginary romantic relationship is mediated by soci[al]
networks, might have been titled, after Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*. So too, Pixar[s]
even more alienated, mega-million dollar, state of the art CGI spectacular *WALL-E* (2008), directed [by]
Andrew Stanton. An unaccountably optimistic vision of human extinction, and thus a dialectic[al]
response to the new disaster film, *WALL-E* successfully vaults the uncanny valley that preclud[es]
audience identification with humanoid simulations to enlist as its protagonist a solitary robot tras[h]
compactor who (or which) is single-mindedly organizing the endless detritus of an abandone[d,]
implicitly analog world. (Whereas the ruined heart of a great city would once have invoked the spect[er]
of World War II, it now carries an unmistakable sense of New York City's Ground Zero.) Th[e]
spectacle of this devoted dingbot working alone to fashion a Grand Canyon out of neatly compacte[d]
garbage provides a breathtaking sense of eternity.

   For much of *WALL-E*, its endearing, Chaplinesque hero—part Sisyphus, part Third World scavenge[r]
—is the earth's last vestige of humanity. (A single plant and the trash-compactor's cockroach sidekic[k]
are Earth's only signs of life.) Utterly superfluous, the descendants of the planet's former inhabitan[ts]
drift through space in a giant, robot-controlled shopping mall known as the Axiom, too bloated to [do]
more than slurp down Happy Meals and watch TV.

   Pixar's computer animation represents the epitome, thus far, of digital will. Even the indexic[al]
presence of a drawing or painted cel has vanished. Is this universally acclaimed motion picture th[en]
part of the problem or part of the solution? *WALL-E* satirizes the technology it deploys; it bemoans y[et]
celebrates the death of analog image-making, consigns old-fashioned movies to the trash heap, ev[en]
while worshipping their fragments. Although Kubrick's 1968 *2001* is ruthlessly parodied throughout,

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