

# *The elusive form of film*

Article

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## The Elusive Form of Film

Lúcia Nagib

Film scholars in the new millennium have to live with an existential dilemma. Their very *raison d'être*, i.e. 'film', has become a chaotic constellation of audiovisual artefacts, mostly in digital form, bearing little or no relation to the endearing perforated film strip that continues to illustrate so many of our activities. Whether as synonymous to 'film' or as the name of film theatres, 'cinema' is equally undergoing an identity crisis in an environment dominated by giant Video-on-Demand (VoD) streamers, cashing in on the easy pleasure of home-viewing, which in pandemic times has become impossible to resist. For decades now we have been juggling with alternative appellations to account for the elusive object we study and teach, two of our favourites being 'screen' and 'lens-based' media. However, modes of audiovisual production and exhibition have evolved beyond these descriptors, some of them dispensing with lenses for their creation (as in CGI, or Computer-Generated Imagery) or the traditional screen for their fruition (as in VR or Virtual Reality productions). Even the adjective 'audiovisual' reveals its limits, when it comes to works addressing our haptic and olfactory senses, as well as our vision and hearing, examples including AR (Augmented Reality) and expanded-cinema experiments.

It is therefore understandable that many of us have taken refuge under the unspecific, catch-all term of 'post-cinema', as proposed in the excellent collection *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Film*. In their Introduction to the volume, editors Denson and Leyda (2016: 1) highlight some of the recurrent features of new media forms, including 'digital, interactive, networked, ludic, miniaturized, mobile, social, processual, algorithmic, aggregative, environmental, or convergent, among other things'. They however stress that none of these features, alone or in combination, constitute a replacement to traditional 'film', on the contrary, post-cinema should be understood as a 'collection of media [...] that "follows" the broadly cinematic regime of the twentieth century – where "following" can mean either to succeed something as an alternative or to "follow suit" as a

development or a response in kind'. Invoking post-cinema again in its title, Chateau and Moure, in the more recent collection *Post-cinema: Cinema in the Post-art Era* (2020), subscribe to the idea of continuity described by Denson and Leyda, despite cinema's many announced deaths over the past decades. But they go on to introduce a new element into the mix, namely 'art' or 'post-art', as they put it, the prefix 'post' resulting from contemporary art's self-questioning status as art, as well as from cinema's own dubious artistic character as an industrial medium (Chateau and Moure 2020: 14). Thus, for these scholars, film and cinema still exist, even if just as 'cinematicity', or 'traces of cinema', as Geiger and Littau (2013) have ingeniously called it.

Others, such as William Brown (2016; 2018) and myself (Nagib 2016; 2020), have adopted a downright negative stance, via the concept of 'non-cinema'. Brown uses this term to make sense of the 'multitude', that is, the images and sounds of those who populate the outside of the narrow frame of capitalism. By making a virtue of technical shortcomings and low budgets, 'non-cinema' provides, in his view, a kind of 'digital-era continuation of what Julio García Espinosa termed imperfect cinema' (2018: 3). In this, he echoes Steyerl (2009), who had linked Espinosa's 'imperfect cinema' to the promises of new media. Going in a different direction, my own concept of 'non-cinema' refers to a kind of realist filmmaking that rejects its own nature as cinema, aspiring to be life itself, rather than a mere simulation of it. A representative case I have studied is Jafar Panahi's forbidden tetralogy, composed of *This Is Not a Film* (co-directed by Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, 2011), *Closed Curtain (Pardeh)* (co-directed by Kambuzia Partovi, 2013), *Taxi Tehran (Taxi)* (2015) and *Three Faces (Se rokh)* (2018), all of which came into being despite (or rather as a result of) the 20-year ban from making films imposed on the director by the Iranian authorities. Filming in the confined spaces of his home, his seaside retreat and his car, Panahi has attempted, in these films, to change filmmaking into the reality of his own life. Having been prohibited from 'directing' films but not from 'appearing' in them, as he states in *This Is Not a Film*, he delegates the directorial role to collaborators, such as Mirtahmasb or Partovi, or, in their absence, to an autonomous camera turning on its own. Even if these acts are rather symbolic and self-defeating, as Panahi continues to be the

dynamo behind as much as within his films, they have allowed him to survive as both an artist and a human being up until now.

Manovich (2016: 29) states that, 'In digital filmmaking, shot footage is no longer the final point but just raw material to be manipulated in a computer where the real construction of a scene will take place. In short, the production becomes just the first stage of post-production'. Perfectly valid in principle, this argument however obscures the fact that many filmmakers continue to value production over post-production, even when using digital technology. In fact, new technologies such as mobile phones have played a crucial role in facilitating the self-denying mode of filmmaking adopted by the likes of Panahi. One of the most remarkable consequences of the digital revolution has been to enable filmmakers from the most disparate areas of the globe to embark on otherwise unthinkable realist ventures. A fitting example is the first Inuit feature-length film ever made, *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk, 2001), which could only come into being thanks to the light-weight, versatile digital equipment that allowed for shooting in sub-zero temperatures and in remote areas of the Arctic circle inaccessible to motor vehicles. Here, an entirely Inuit cast re-lived their mythology in their own territory, language and costumes, turning the fictional plot into physical and historical reality.

In his visionary essay, 'The Myth of Total Cinema', written in 1946, André Bazin describes how new technologies could ultimately lead to the reconstruction of 'a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief' (1967: 20). In its ethico-political battle against illusionism, non-cinema could be seen as an attempt to meet Bazin's total illusion through the back door, which he left conveniently open for 'total realism', or cinema's return to the moment it 'had not yet been invented' (Bazin 1967: 21). But as Bazin also points out, 'total cinema' is a myth, as much as non-cinema is ultimately a self-defeating endeavour, always thwarted by the manipulative act of editing and other postproduction interferences, which inevitably tamper with the direct presentation of the real. This is why non-cinema makers often feel obliged to unveil the reality of the medium by

focusing on the shooting apparatus, the tricks of acting and the traps of representation, as Panahi has repeatedly done in his non-films.

Another theoretical approach gaining traction in recent years, not least thanks to the development of digital technology, is intermediality, which has offered cinema a new lease of life by locating it 'in-between' other mediums and arts, as Ágnes Pethő (2020) has compellingly argued. Pethő's 'passion for the in-between' resonates with Raymond Bellour's (2011) concept of *entrimages* ('between the images'), launched back in the 1980s à propos of videoart, in which he identified the creative 'passages' between film, video and photography. Bellour's 'passages' could be understood as an early insight into what later became known as 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin 1999), or the multiplication of supports that over the last decades has allowed cinema to break free from the film theatre and pervade museums, galleries, schools, offices, domestic and personal screens.

What these theories have hitherto failed to properly address is the fact that new media have ceased to be a specialised craft to become a generalised mode of being. 'The language of new media', as Manovich (2001) has called it, is now an inseparable complement to, even replacement for, oral and written communication. This is because, today, anyone with basic skills can author and distribute their own moving images and sounds, from the child to the elderly, from the teacher to the criminal, from the environmental activist to the terrorist. Digital viewers can also creatively reauthor and redistribute works by others. On the other hand, hegemonic streamers such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, used as default providers in homes all over the world, rely on self-serving algorithms – already dubbed 'algorithms of oppression' (Umoja Noble 2018) – with the aim of stifling difference, protecting the status quo and generating profit. Thus, besides studying the almighty director-*auteur* of artistic films, we now have to understand the creativity deployed by the anonymous remixer, whose 'love for cinema has mutated into true *cinephagia*', as Belén Vidal (2018: 404) has put it. As well as resisting Hollywood's domination of physical cinemas, we have to rescue cultural diversity from beyond the barrage of algorithms at work on VoD platforms.

This also means accepting and enjoying the advantages of digital technology and the virtual sphere, where the wonders of the old and new film-related forms can still be found and appreciated. In fact, thanks to these new affordances, the traditional film scholar is no longer restricted to the written word, on the contrary, filmmaking is today available to the researcher as much as to any other users, allowing us to communicate beyond the academic walls. As Piotrowska (2020: 5) states, 'in the humanities generally, but especially in the arts and creative industries, such [a] synthesis of theory and practice recognizes creative work as a legitimate form of research'. Videographic criticism, which conducts film analysis through film, is now common currency in academia and dedicated online peer-reviewed journals. For Cox-Stanton and Gibbs (2021), 'videographic forms provide an opportunity for inventive ways of making arguments, presenting evidence, and conveying analysis'. An increasing number of academics are also venturing into the feature-length format, a notable example being *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn and anonymous 2012), a landmark in documentary filmmaking resulting from an AHRC-funded academic project. Thomas Elsaesser's widely acclaimed *The Sun Island* (2017) is another example of scholarly thought translated into the essay-film genre. My own feature-length film-on-films *Passages*, co-directed by Samuel Paiva (2019), is yet another such venture. Currently, the good-old perforated film strip is making a surprising comeback, with more than 20 pieces in this format having been presented at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival, eight of them in competition (see Lodge 2021 in this respect). However, it is the language of new media that allows us to continue to talk creatively about all those films we love as 'films', and to keep our discipline alive and well.

So it seems that the wheel has turned and returned to the same place, i.e. to film. But in the process it has exposed some important challenges that future theorising would do well to address. The most important of them is that, in our audiovisual planet, where film is not a mere act of cinema going but a collective and continuous exercise in making, distributing and viewing moving images and sounds, the relationship between film scholars, practitioners and the public will have to change dramatically. Borders will inevitably dissolve, hierarchies will crumble, and theorists like us will have

to be prepared not just to proselytise, but also to learn from others, in particular from those expert filmmakers whose jobs we are now striving to make our own, via video essays and the growing metagenre of 'films on films'. This will probably be our best chance to consolidate our presence in this new democratic community.

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## Bio Notes

**Lúcia Nagib** is Professor of Film at the University of Reading. Her research has focused, among other subjects, on polycentric approaches to world cinema, new waves and new cinemas, cinematic realism and intermediality. She is the author of many books, including *Realist Cinema as World Cinema: Non-cinema, Intermedial Passages, Total Cinema* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (Bloomsbury, 2011) and *Brazil on Screen: Cinema Novo, New Cinema, Utopia* (I.B. Tauris, 2007). Her edited books include *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film* (with Anne Jerslev, I.B. Tauris, 2013), *Theorizing World Cinema* (with Chris Perriam and Rajinder Dudrah, I.B. Tauris, 2011), *Realism and the Audiovisual Media* (with Cecília Mello, Palgrave, 2009) and *The New Brazilian Cinema* (I.B. Tauris, 2003). She is the writer and director, with Samuel Paiva, of the award-winning feature-length documentary, *Passages* (UK, 2019).



