

a review of

The Death of Cinema:

History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age

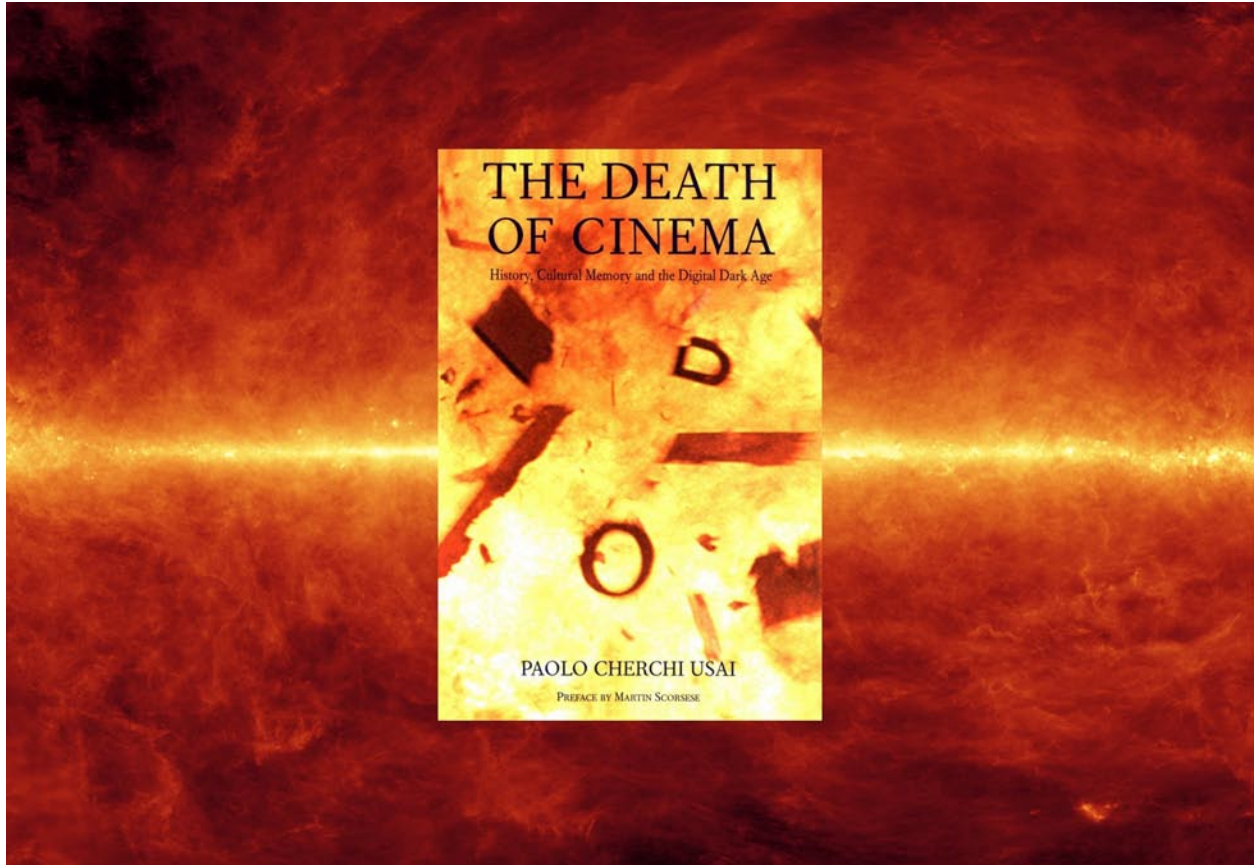
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On the future of aesthetics

a review of



***The Death of Cinema:
History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age***
Paolo Cherchi Usai
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A Last Judgment is Necessary because Fools flourish
A Vision of The Last Judgment (William Blake)

Usai's book of aphorisms exemplifies a rhetoric of apocalypse. *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* is a *cri du coeur* from an archivist prophesying the inevitable exhaustion of the surfaces we use to record, preserve, and enjoy cinematic representations. Usai refers to the digital present as a "dark age" not out of any nostalgia for a Classical or Golden Age of the Cinema, but to warn his readers against their immersion in a dominant illusion: the belief that we have invented a recording surface that will never grow old. One need, of course, only think of the matrices the cinema has exhausted in its short history to recall the fundamentally transitory quality of image preservation, an art of conservation commonly identified as the precinct of the archivist. For Usai, to be an archivist of the "Cinema is," on the contrary, to be versed in "the art of moving image destruction": "For cinema is the art of destroying moving images" (6-7). Just as one frame of film succeeds another, destroying what came before for the spectator at an unseeable rate of 24 frames (or 30 or more in the case of digital "frames") per second, so too, most moving images are not preserved; i.e., surveillance footage. Images succeed images with no end in sight except an endless loss of objects and the continuously replenished depletion of the viewing subject's visual pleasure: "In India alone," the world's largest film industry, "several hundred films are made a year, and only a tiny portion of them end in the archives. Television in developing countries is produced on videotapes that are erased every few months" (111).

Usai's book is apocalyptic, then, in that it is a hyperbolic admonition vis-à-vis the false comforts our technoscape provides as well as a prediction that we are heading into a dark age of digital indifference. (Usai is especially bothered by the over-saturated re-release of old prints restricted to a tiny canon at the expense of the unpopular, obscure, and unknown films allegedly neglected by orthodox archivists and their sponsors.) The form of his book contributes to this apocalyptic tone, for it is written in aphorisms accompanied (almost always without commentary) by fascinating images from the history of cinema, say an employee of the Douglas Fairbanks Studio "chopping up 'useless' film," or Alexander De Large (Malcolm McDowell in *A Clockwork Orange* [1971]) staring at a screen, his eyes tortuously pried wide shut by metallic clips. The reader has to connect the aphorisms, which are numerically hyperlinked to

each other, to every other aphorism and their respective images according to a paratactic strategy without a master plan. Aphoristic and apocalyptic. What could be more Nietzschean?

The ultimate question Usai poses is a vexed and relevant one: what is the social role of film history?—a question that can only be approached if we figure out what he means by the model image. What I mean to say is that *The Death of the Cinema* requires active interpretation, and for that, as Zarathustra says in “On Reading and Writing,” “one must have long legs”: “In the mountains the shortest way is from peak to peak: but for that one must have long legs. Aphorisms should be peaks” (Trans. Kaufmann). And so I will read what Usai means by the model image without in the least pretending to know if that is indeed what he intends to say.

Canonical archivists are, according to Usai’s polemical intervention in a longstanding debate, motivated by the fantasy of a model image that they believe they can re-create by reconstructing either the original intent of the director or an originary viewing experience. These archivists insist on defying the tagline to Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible* (2002)—“*Le temps détruit tout*”/“Time destroys everything”—each time they clean up a long lost print, or splice together rediscovered footage. Is it possible, Usai asks, for the “cinema” to be “a potential object of history,” if it is an art dedicated to indiscriminately destroying images? His answer is “Yes. The Model Image is its ideal type” (10-11). This ideal was once, Usai playfully suggests, actual in the Golden Age of the Cinema, when it was “usually perceived as a totality even when some of its parts” were “forever unknown to the viewer’s experience of it. Film history proceeds by an effort to explain the loss of cultural ambiance that has evaporated from the moving image in the context of a given time and place” (31).

Since the accompanying image is of a Douglas Fairbanks Studio employee hacking film to bits, we can assume that this mythic era is that of the Hollywood studio system, or a fantasmic time when viewers were “conscious of nothing but the Model Image” (45). Usai gently parodies this idealized model of lived experience as “an original and unrepeatable entity. ‘No such thing as two identical viewings. Films sometimes as brief as the twinkling of the eye. Programs of shorts continuously shown. Spectators indifferent to when the cycle begins or ends. Audiences who happily cheer, stomp, eat and make love in front of the screen! . . .’” (47). The image placed alongside this aphorism is of an entranced crowd at a Friulian *Cineteca* circa 01935, the zero evidently there to remind us of the archivist’s unvanquishable enemy—empty vistas of empty time (see Fellini or Tornatore’s *Cinema Paradiso* [1988] for a nostalgic sentimentalizing of this self-same idealization of a cinema teeming with affective life).

Yet this Model Image is the reconstruction of a phantasm that was never enjoyed in any time or place, a lack of actuality that results not only from the “empirical impossibility” of “recaptur[ing] the experience of its first viewers,” but a lack that is produced by Usai’s Romantic understanding of “perfect vision” as an aesthetic experience of the cinema that “has no duration and is not durable. This axiom is at the heart of the notion of film history” (29). The accompanying film still for this gnome is the famed image of a blade cutting an eye in Buñuel and Dali’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), a scene that always forces me to blink no matter how many times I see it. I can describe the scene, its effects, and multiple significations to you, but I cannot watch it, an unseeing that is differently experienced each and every time. In spite of an all-too-human insistence on “the pleasure of repeating an experience of pleasure” indefinitely, the intoxication of a Model Image that can only be enjoyed once seems irrecoverable (99).

Another aphorism, entitled “The urge to create visions,” complicates Usai’s recourse to the visionary demiurgy of the Romantic imagination. I cite the text in full to convey a sense of the difficulty of reading *The Death of Cinema* as a social event:



Visionary cinema has no other subject matter than the transformation of the image itself, for otherwise it would have nothing to exercise itself upon. Whether the outcome is cheerful or tragic (but also in the lack of a narrative pattern), the event that results is a self-obliterating illusion that is doomed sooner or later to fade into the realm of memory (33).

The ultimate matrix in question is the oldest one in the world (if the cosmos itself isn’t a multitrack recording surface for some inscrutable reason or other): human memory, a storage bank constitutively in need of supplementation by mnemotechnical surfaces, such as writing, registration apparatuses, celluloid, etc. (Viz. Derrida’s *Archive Fever* [sic]). The perfect vision cinematic experience produces has, then, no duration, and is akin to the editing cut that can never be seen *per se*, as *Un Chien Andalou* forces us to see without, of course, being able to make this reminder remain or remainder remind. We must fail to see it again and again (Cf. the [in]visible sword of Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill* as an allegory of the creative act of editorial cutting).

An example: I have seen David Lynch’s visionary sister/brother films, *Lost Highway* (1997)/*Mulholland Drive* (2001), two times each on a big screen where the destruction of the image cannot be stopped by pausing, rewinding, or retardation of any kind. Each film is half-constituted by a narrative that

the male or female protagonist hallucinates or invents in order to deny or overcome either the loss of a loved one or a murderous violence inflicted upon the same. The first time we watch *Lost Highway*, we are blind, thinking that everything we are seeing is diegetically real, whereas the second “half” of the film is fantasized by the lead protagonist (played by two different actors). The first time I watched *Mulholland Drive*, on the other hand, I walked away convinced I had half-perceived the “aura,” allegoresis, or point of the film, yet the second time I realized I had missed the moment when Naomi Watts’s character, an actress, shoots herself. How could that be? My eyes were riveted to the screen. Was I so caught up in her desire to unsee her loss that I unsaw or half-created the loss her refusal to accept this loss begot? Was this unseeing, then, the Model Image of the film, not in the sense of an image an archivist could reconstruct, but in the sense of a “self-obliterating illusion”: a total identification with feminine desire, or a sympathetic loss of myself in the other’s loss “that is doomed sooner or later to fade into the realm of memory” as the melancholy “I”/eye returns to the prison of the male gaze (33).

Yet isn’t this analysis too characterological and subjective, too subjectified by the sovereignty of “tragic” posturing and ideological “narrative[s],” if, as Usai’s aphorism maintains, “Visionary cinema has no other subject matter than the transformation of the image itself, for otherwise it would have nothing to exercise itself upon”? The facing image is a spiral whirling in (or is it out?) of a close-up on the eye of a Kim Novak (Madeleine/Judy) double at the beginning (or is it the end?) of the credit sequence to *Vertigo* (1958). The “transformation of the image itself” alludes, then, to the purely plastic play of images set into motion by Saul Bass’s famous *générique* to Hitchcock’s film, a “lack of narrative pattern” based on the ostentatiously non-diegetic spirals produced by experimental film-maker John Whitney Sr.

This plasticity of the image denotes, in the meantime, nothing more than the ideological cliché of Romantic love actualized by the diegesis of *Vertigo*: one begins to lose it when one looks deeply into the eye of another. Any cinematic experience of this memorialized loss can only be a seeing of what is already or almost lost, “doomed sooner or later to fade into the realm of memory.” A sense of time destroying all things is also at the heart of Noé’s meditation on temporal irreversibility. *Irréversible* runs in reverse, painfully dwelling on the brutal rape of Monica Bellucci, only to end up with her happy as can be in a park, an image of bliss (Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony reverberates as the camera spirals) that we know to be already destroyed by time, if not by the cinema as an Romantic act of “creative destruction,” or the art of destroying moving images. So too, no matter how many times *Vertigo* is seen, the sheer irreality of Madeline fascinates even though we are aware it is an illusion, a futile stopgap either to temporal inevitability (of the narrative or of Time itself) or to the *jouissance* the idiotic male gaze takes in vicariously enjoying Jimmy Stewart’s loss (twice!).

The enjoyment of loss as loss might be a preliminary definition of the Model Image, yet Usai also puts forth a definition custom made for a contemporaneity distended by non-discrete images—images, that is, deprived by the state of distraction in which we live from even the promise of an inaccessible totality (a scenario in which the fantasy of knowing the whole—a.k.a. “globalization”—stands in for this impossibility):



Whenever the quantity of moving images available to a given community exceeds the actual or presumed need (aesthetic or otherwise) for their consumption, and the community endorses the display of non-discrete images—that is, images that form and vanish without being seen in their entirety—there would then be another kind of Model Image, one displayed through electronic or other non-photographic means (53).

What, then, is the relation between a self-obliterating, and hence self-encrypting, Model Image and the socio-historical conditions for this evanishing sense of self? As an archivist, Usai wants to preserve “an ethics of vision” grounded on the “Moral Image” (105): “Moving image preservation will then be redefined as the science of its gradual loss and the art of coping with the consequences, very much like the physician who has accepted the inevitability of death even while he continues to fight for the patient’s life.”

How to define the conservator’s task in this landscape of death? “As their preservation and decay arise from the conditions under which such images are produced and exhibited, an effort to evaluate the way in which those conditions affect the aesthetic and pragmatic nature of the viewing experience ought to be made” without any intentional “disfigure[ment] by value judgments and self-projected intentions” (15). Instead of dismissing the non-director’s cut, explore how it transforms the experience. Instead of fetishizing the director’s cut, explicate how this residual reconstruction of the “Model Image” continues to reinscribe idealism into the history of cinema. This idealism is suspect in that it withdraws attention from a model image that is hopelessly subjective, phenomenologically speaking, or buried deep within what Abraham and Torok call the interminably (un)decipherable temporality of the ego as crypt. Lastly, archival idealism distracts us from the sheer heteroglossia of moving images on the verge of being ingested by Chronos. “Make him vomit” summarizes, in other words, the radical archivist’s relation to Time.

To end on a high note, consider an apocalyptic statement: the internet is slowing down, due, for example, to torrents of downloading (i.e., entire seasons of TV shows from transitional transnational sites that die every

day), a never ending increase of human/programmed users and the constant stream of video flowing out of yahoo.com, youtube.com, youporn.com, etc. The archive isn't disappearing or being destroyed, it is accumulating at an incomprehensibly blinding rate, an accumulation that is also a target of Usai's apocalyptic screed. We have lost the aura of film consolidated by that brief late 50s-to-early 80s period when leaving the house to go see a movie from beginning to end was the order of the day—that is to say, we no longer (un)see films at 24 frames a second. Is a film a film on an iPhone, a computer panel, or a TV? Usai insists that we cannot dismiss this question as an unutterable nostalgia, which is not to say that we can stop the accumulation of data without end. We would have to change all our habits of attention, data processing, and image filtering, stop channel-flipping, remix-hunting, and web-surfing, listen to an album from beginning to end even if it is on a CD or Windows Media Player. Or as I overheard an undergraduate habituated to our non-present present say the other day: "I had 85 windows open when it crashed."

This crash will not, however, occur. The lonely instance of apocalypse never comes. Yet if we imagine time as a circle—say, an eternal return—then we are already dead, and will live and recur in this postapocalyptic circle eternally. And if we are dead—now, me, 'speaking' to you—then there can be no death of the cinema. There is, instead, what Derrida calls a "hauntology," a being haunted by images, simulacra, ghosts, and memory screens. Usai's pragmatic response to this historical situation of spectral archivality is for us to be haunted otherwise: to archive what is ignored and to establish the "Model Image" of what remains—an image that the "Moral Image" shows to be a necessary illusion wrinkled deep in time, yet an image that survives, in the meanwhile, on the inside.