TRANSMISSIBLE EVIDENCE

Is This the End of Film?

Daryl Chin

On the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Montréal World Film Festival, Serge Losique, the director of the festival, decided to hold a conference on “new media,” with demonstrations of new digital equipment, seminars, and discussions. On Friday, August 31, 2001, one of the sessions had the title “Is This the End of Film?” The fact is, if the companies that manufacture film decide to stop manufacturing and processing film stocks, then film as a medium for the moving picture will definitely end. And the representatives from Kodak were not too sanguine about the prospects for longevity. The end is already at hand for many current moving-picture film types, joining such glorious, no-longer-produced emulsion processes as Technicolor, the last plants for which are in China, but no longer used. (For still photography, the abandonment of Kodachrome 25 and the rumored elimination of a number of slower daylight and tungsten films by both Kodak and Fuji will require a reconsideration of the way certain types of images are made and perceived, both for art and commerce, from National Geographic to Ralph Lauren et al.) The new digital technology is fast becoming the new performative and “documenting” medium.

The rapidity of the acceptance of the digital medium has been daunting. A decade ago, I began to be confused when young “artists” began to talk about their “films,” because what I saw was some videotape which they hoped to project on a video projection system. Growing up at a time when film and video, movies and television, celluloid and videotape were mutually exclusive, I couldn’t understand why these young people were confusing the terms (not to mention the media). But it was as if these artists had become the lunatic hunters from Preston Sturges’s The Palm Beach Story: if it moves, shoot it, and if you’ve shot it, you’ve got a “film.” Who cares if film has a grain and video has pixels, if (as Nam June Paik once explained) one medium is essentially chemical and the other essentially electronic? And so many young artists began talking about their dinky videotapes as “films.” Some young person would ask, do you want to see my film, and if you answered yes, she or he would whip out a videocassette, and what you’d see wouldn’t even be a film-to-tape transfer, but the scuzziest, most pixel-ridden, undefined mess imaginable. Toiling through the field of independent media, you’d run across someone who wanted you to look at their “film,” only to be confronted with some awful amateur videotape.
Such is the daunting power of art (or nonart), that, damn, if some of those messy videotapes didn’t have something. But, by and large, the lack of definition that the cheap video equipment would enforce on the images was only matched by the lack of definition in terms of talent, ideas, and skill.

And now that video (analog or digital) is becoming the medium of the future of the moving image, are there any (immediate) lessons to be learned? For one thing, there is the lesson of cultural standards. During the 1950s, when television technology was in its infancy, the image resolution was impossibly fuzzy, and the problem of reception seemed insurmountable. Video ghosts, vertical rolling, scrambling were part and parcel of television viewing in the 1960s. Pauline Kael, in her 1968 essay “Movies on Television,” noted:

Not all old movies look bad now, of course; the good ones are still good—surprisingly good, often, if you consider how much of the detail is lost on television. Not only the size but the shape of the image is changed, and, indeed, almost all the specifically visual elements are so distorted as to be all but completely destroyed. On television, a cattle drive or a cavalry charge or a chase—the climax of so many a big movie—loses the dimensions of space and distance that made it exciting, that sometimes made it great. And since the structural elements—the rhythm, the buildup, the suspense—are also partly destroyed by deletions and commercial breaks and the interruptions incidental to home viewing, it’s amazing that the bare bones of performance, dialogue, story, good directing, and (especially important for close-range viewing) good editing can still make an old movie more entertaining than almost anything new on television.

Watching movies now, you get the sense that the traditional arts that had nurtured and fed the movies, not just the theatre, but painting, literature, and music, have been ignored, in favor of television as a primary source of education and inspiration. This became particularly apparent during the 1990s, with the eruption of American independent cinema onto the world’s screens. Struggling through hours of badly shot movies, you were inundated with references to the cheesiest television sitcoms of the 1960s. The Brady Bunch or The Beverly Hillbillies, anyone? The psychobabble of the 1970s and 1980s, in which self-determination and self-regard became determinants (remember terms such as “role models,” “I’m OK, you’re OK,” and “The Me Generation”?), had a deleterious effect on the arts: art had become whatever the artist said it was, and often the artist was stuck in arrested development, imagining that whatever had proven delightful when under the age of ten had tons of meaning for an audience. The idea that, as we grow in experience and knowledge, our aesthetic senses grow with us, seems to be incomprehensible to so many artists—and not just in film, but also in performance and the other visual arts.

So we get to the current state of infantilism in American commercial movies, where recycled pop culture is being regurgitated and expelled. And we get to the crisis of film at this time: film as an endangered species. Though the Montréal World Film
Juliana Carneiro da Cunha in *To the Left of the Father (Lavoura Arcaica)*, directed by Luis Fernando Carvalho. Photo: Courtesy Montréal World Film Festival.

Tom Wilkinson and Sissy Spacek in Todd Field’s film *In the Bedroom*. Photo: John Clifford, courtesy of Miramax.
Festival had many examples of artists using the medium of film in astoundingly creative and personally inventive ways (two examples: Luis Fernando Carvalho’s *To the Left of the Father* (*Lavoura Arcaica*) from Brazil, and Jan Troell’s *As White as in Snow* from Sweden), there was also the sense that the days of film were nearing the end. Just taking a sampling of the American independent films on display, one noted that there was a predominance of digital technology. Of the eight American films I saw, five had been shot with digital equipment. And this also pointed to another problem: right now, there is no single standard for digital filmmaking. There are different cameras, different formats, different technologies. Currently, digital “film” is an encoded electronic format which must be transferred to actual projectible celluloid: the image must be moved from a digital disc or videotape to film in order for the image to be projected in a standard 35-millimeter format onto a movie screen. (When digital projection becomes the norm—a process that may take longer than previously expected, because of the current bankruptcy of most of the major cinema chains and world-wide recession and fears of war—then this transfer will no longer be necessary; with vast implications for viewing and perception, though there were demonstrations of digital projectors during the conference.)

Taking the eight American films as a sample (strangely enough, digital technology has not been available in “developing” countries, so one saw films from such places as Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka which were definitely, almost defiantly, “film”), the range of problems brought about by this period of digital-to-film was prominently on display. Trying to enumerate the problems might give some indication of what is happening with the moving image.

At this point, most audiences are familiar with tape-to-film transfers: with the least sophisticated examples, the audience is witness to the striations, the pixels, and the uneven light pulsations that are exaggerated in the videotape during the transfer process. The improvements in videotape, specifically in the difference between analog (the previous format) and digital (the new format), have reduced the striations by increasing the light pulses. But the standards for digital video remain in flux, as companies issue different formats under the rubric of “digital.” One afternoon at the Festival there was a special presentation of *Tableaux d’un voyage imaginaire* by Chedly Belkhodja and Jean Chabot, with Michel La Veaux as director of photography; the work was photographed on the Sony HDW700 Camera at 1080i (30 images per second) and edited with high definition equipment. The “special” aspect of this screening was that it was shown as a digital projection. Panasonic was demonstrating a new digital projector, and this National Film Board of Canada short was used as the sample: the projector was equipped with the capability of showing various video formats, and *Tableaux* was presented in a High Definition format. It was a videotape, projected as a videotape, and the specifics of the projection point to the changes which will be common in terms of the future of the projected moving image.

For one thing, color is different in video and in film. In film, the color is a chemical dye-transfer that saturates the celluloid strip; in video, the color comes from electronic pulsations on videotape or videodisc. Color in video is, in a sense, not better or worse than color in film, but it is different: more acidic, with a harsher
edge. (And, of course, it is perceived differently.) Projected, video color (without the softening which results from the transfer to film) is often too bright, with a distinctively glaring quality. The reason for this glaring quality is the fact that the image was meant to be seen within a broadcast format, that is, the image itself was meant to be a source of light. (When we look at a television monitor, we are looking at the source of light, as much as looking into a candle or a lightbulb.) Tableaux was often exceedingly harsh, and the piece pointed to another problem with digital technology: the problem of controlling the lighting. During the carefully staged “historical” tableaux, the lighting was modulated, so that the density of the color saturation approximated film, but in the candid shots, such as the ones of a convention hall, the image reverted to the striations and the prominent pixels that underscored the fact that this work was shot in video.

These difficulties could also be found among the American independent films. This problem of lighting, of the image reverting to the breaking up of the signal when there is a stress because of low lighting conditions, could be seen throughout Chelsea Walls, the digital feature directed by Ethan Hawke (cinematographer: Tom Richmond, with Richard Rutkowski) for the Independent Film Channel’s InDigEnt project. There were scenes shot in a room bathed in a red light, and the image would become so fuzzy, so broken up, so indistinct, that it was impossible to make out any details. Bobby Roth’s Jack the Dog (cinematographer: Georg Fick) was simply shot on video, and then transferred to 35-mm film. The camerawork was not sloppy, so much as accepting of the fact that there would be all the accoutrements of video imagery.

Both In the Bedroom (director: Todd Fields; cinematographer: Antonio Calvache) and Daddy and Them (director: Billy Bob Thornton; cinematographer: Barry Markowitz) were shot on film, but each pointed to the problems that cinematographers will have in relation to the new lenses and the new film stocks which have been manufactured in light of digital developments. In In the Bedroom, there are many scenes shot at night, and the film registers shapes and outlines, but that registration is sometimes not enough: it is still hard to make out a clear image, so these night scenes are indistinct. In Daddy and Them, the lighting is too bright, and everything is shoved into the foreground. In one bizarrely organized scene, a family picnic is shot so that all the members of the family are crowded on one side of the table, with everyone facing front. Daddy and Them is a film which seems to see its afterlife as a staple of television broadcasting. This problem of lighting, even when the work is shot on film, occurred in George Zaloom’s The Whole Shebang (cinematographer: Jacek Laskus), which seemed to include the major flaws of both In the Bedroom (indistinct night scenes) and Daddy and Them (unusually bright foregrounding of interior scenes).

The history of cinematography has often been conditioned by developments in film stocks and lenses, which have allowed for experimentation with lighting techniques. Often, these developments have been conditioned from necessity: the raw reportage style of the Italian Neo-Realists came from conditions of shooting on location, without extraneous studio lighting. In the 1970s, new lenses and film stocks allowed
Kelly Preston, Diane Ladd, Laura Dern, and Billy Bob Thornton in the latter's *Daddy and Them*. Photo: Van Reden, courtesy of Miramax.

Benjamin Bratt in Leon Ichaso's *Piñero*. Photo: Abbot Genser, courtesy of Miramax.
for the use of less light, resulting in such memorable images as the candlelit tableaux of *Barry Lyndon* (director: Stanley Kubrick; cinematographer: John Alcott) and the layers of shadowed darkness in *The Godfather, Part II* (director: Francis Ford Coppola; cinematographer: Gordon Willis). But the lighting and the compositions of those films were meticulously achieved; nowadays, cinematographers have neither the time nor the craft to create such effects, let alone such legendary lighting effects as the ones created by Lee Garmes for Josef von Sternberg in such films as *Morocco* (1930) and *Shanghai Express* (1932).

At Montréal there were three films shot on digital video (and transferred to 35-mm film) which proved to be instructive as to the pros and cons of these developments. They were: *Seven and a Match* (director: Derek Simonds; cinematographer: Uta Briesewitz); *Jackpot* (director: Michael Polish; cinematographer: M. David Mullen); and *Piñero* (director: Leon Ichaso; cinematographers: Claudio Chea and Abe Schrager). Beginning with *Piñero*, the print that was shown had the too-bright look of video. Though the image never broke up, the contrast was keyed in tonalities that were far too extreme. The colors looked as bright and acidic as the colors in the digital projection demonstration, that is, the colors remained video colors, even in the film transfer. *Seven and a Match* was one of the most technically accomplished of the digital transfers; in fact, though it was one of the most modestly budgeted of the American features, it proved to be technically impeccable. At no point did the image ever break up: even when the setting was a dimly lit bar, the resolution was consistent, and the lighting was careful enough so that the image was distinct and clear. If *Seven and a Match* was technically impeccable, *Jackpot* proved to be the most technically imaginative, within the limits of budget and subject. Taking a tour of a karaoke singer and his manager as the subject, there were many scenes of small nightclubs, dingy bar rooms, and drab hotel rooms, all with varying degrees of dim lighting, yet at no point did the image break up, and it never became so recessive that it was hard to see. *Jackpot* was shot in the digital format of 24P, which is a format in which the image can be scanned at the rate comparable to the 24 frames-per-second of 35-mm film, making transfer to film seamless.

The technical questions raised by these American independent productions must be seen in the context of the dominant mode for theatrical media presentation, that is, the theatrical 35-mm film. The standards that are being brought to bear derive from that dominant mode, such as the cohesion of the image, image clarity, and illusionistic qualities such as depth of field, perspective, and range of motion. But, as the demonstration of digital projection proved, perhaps these standards are, in and of themselves, antiquated, and new standards must be adapted in addressing the forms which theatrical media are taking. Be that as it may, *Seven and a Match* and *Jackpot*, irrespective of the qualities that they might have had as “art,” proved that the technical equivalence of digital video to film might not be as wrenching as had been anticipated. Mark Polish, the producer of *Jackpot*, prefaced the screening by mentioning that the 24P digital format was the one currently being used by George Lucas for the next installment of *Star Wars*, making the digital revolution commensurate with *The Attack of the Clones*. Nevertheless, it is sad to think that
the visual range established by the century of cinema might now be circumscribed by the limitations of video.

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