

All that has melted into bits and bytes becomes solid

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Abstract

Utopian and dystopian narratives often abound in analyses of current processes of convergence and digitization of cinema. We argue that such analyses run the danger of amplifying the ruptures and discontinuities while ignoring continuities. In particular, the material, tangible and sociable dimension of film production and consumption ought to be included in (Chinese) cinema studies.

Keywords

materiality
 tangibility
 sociability
 convergence
 digitization

We would like to begin with a curious case in the Netherlands where we are based – curious because it demonstrates how some *thing* – a film – that used to be solid has melted into digital bits and bytes and then, under certain conditions, became solid again. We are talking about Dutch politician Geert Wilders' anti-Islam film *Fitna* (2008).

In terms of production, distribution and consumption, the sixteen-minute film was emblematic of the possibilities offered by new digital technologies. Stills and footages readily available on the Internet (including those of the World Trade Centre attack and the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist) were cut and pasted, not unlike the amateur films posted on YouTube. As Dutch public television stations refused to air his film, Wilders decided to upload it on a website on 28 March 2008. Three hours after *Fitna* went online, some three million people in various localities had seen the film. It was a perfect example of how an alternative film, by logging into the digitized world, succeeded in circumventing regular systems of distribution and gained global screening.

Almost a year later, Lord Pearson planned to screen *Fitna* in the British House of Lords and invited Wilders to London. Quoting public security regulations, the British Government made it clear that Wilders would be denied entry. Yet, he insisted on flying to the UK, along with fifty journalists, only to return to Amsterdam two hours later as the British authorities lived up to their promises. This act could obviously be seen as a political stunt, but it was a stunt, we argue, made possible only by a cunning denial of the digitized, immaterial, and fluid nature of a film that owes its very existence to the digitized world. To actualize the film, its maker had to board a plane. It was as if the bits and bytes of *Fitna* were becoming solid again and Wilders, like an obsolete courier of film reels, had to carry it to the UK and by doing so turned himself into a spectacle. These are the moments we want to foreground in an era of ubiquitous digitization:

moments when films and the people surrounding them are actualized, moments which are significant for films and film studies, not because of what is being digitized, but precisely because of what is not and can not be digitized. In other words, we should go beyond the audio-visuality of films, which is after all what digitization primarily captures, in order to also understand the materiality, tangibility and sociability films may entail.

We are making our appeal especially at a time when narratives of digitization are persuasive and persistent. On the one hand, dystopian narratives proclaim the end of cinema as we know it, claiming that audiences now simply download films, use peer-to-peer (hereafter P2P) networks, and buy DVDs rather than go to the cinema. Indicative of this development is that in the US, 'less than 15 per cent of feature revenues now comes from theatrical box office income. [...] The electronically mediated home now functions as the most economically strategic site for both television reception *and* film consumption' (Caldwell 2008: 9; original emphasis). On the other hand, digitization is also closely related to convergence, which refers not only to the cooperation between media industries but also to the flow of content as well as audiences (Jenkins 2006: 2). For Jenkins, this implies both a threat to the industry and an empowering moment for the audiences. Due to the long tail effect, niche cultures like experimental cinema are believed to be overtaking the mainstream and causing a rupture in the way culture is being produced and consumed in our societies.

Similar utopian and dystopian narratives have accompanied the introduction of any new technology, such as telephone, television and video. The obsession with ruptures and discontinuities (perhaps spurred by a penchant for drama and moral panic) may blind us to processes and continuities. It is of course not our intention to deny that changes are taking place as a result of the development of digitization and convergence, but we do wish to draw attention to the continuous importance of materiality, tangibility and sociability that are sometimes overlooked in film studies. To put it more specifically, we would argue that studying the changing nature of moving image in MySpace or YouTube is as necessary as investigating the workings of film festivals. Because of film festivals, we become present; we become actual spectators whose bodies are linked through the consumption of films. As de Valck convincingly argues, festival space 'supports the visibility and prestige of festival films in ways that digital distribution cannot' (de Valck 2008: 22). Even online festivals need to create offline, real-time events to draw attention to their festival (de Valck 2008: 21).

In other words, it is the limitations of time and space that facilitate rather than contain the filmic experience, drawing people to special places and cities, at specific moments. Instead of downloading, buying DVDs and watching on home computers, audience choose to deny their digital existence and follow films not only by going to cinemas but also by attending festivals, even those in other cities, as if films were solid things that are accessible only if they are physically there. Films do become things, and '[w]hen media become things, we enter a world of operationality, a world not of interpretation but of navigation. We do not "read" them so much as "do" them... or do with them' (Lash and Lury 2007: 8). Through the

process of festivals, audience or participants help to constitute the films, as well as materialize themselves into experiencing bodies and social beings. The immediacy of consumption during festivals remains of pivotal importance for the filmic experience. This experience is indeed slowly morphing into a multimedia happening, in which websites, blogs, extended DVD versions, as well as our mobile phones, are used to multiply and amplify the experience.

The popularity of film festivals (as well as, for instance, gigantic IMAX theatres) also underscores the continual importance of actual places where films are screened during actual time slots. The ritualized materiality of festivals – epitomized by its yearly return – feeds its participants with a sense of anticipation, control, and perhaps even ontological security. The noise, the crowd, the hustle and bustle from film to film, the planning in advance – with or without friends – the occasional recognition of fellow festival goers of last years, in short, the tangibility, materiality and sociability of things all point to the danger of thinking about film in a digitized age purely in the terms of change and rupture.

To conclude, we want to link our general appeal more explicitly to Chinese cinema, less because it entails local variants of utopian and dystopian narratives of digitalization, but more due to its local media ecology, where film import regulations (only twenty foreign films are officially allowed) work in tandem with censorship policies, rendering possibilities offered by digital technologies such as P2P networks all the more relevant. Understandably, legal and ethical issues concerning copyright are becoming increasingly important when downloading makes it so much easier for Chinese audiences to gain access to global cinema. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of copyright, implicated in the global culture industry, is being challenged by the Creative Commons movement. Possible alternative regimes of cultural licensing and distribution in connection to cinema production and consumption in China and East Asia obviously deserve further study. Also, the impact of digital technologies on film production, style, genre and consumption is informing a new set of questions: Is there further bifurcation in terms of genre caused by new technologies? How do special effects – often inspired by computer games – negotiate with aesthetics form? How do the possibilities of mobile viewing practices through devices like phones and iPods alter the cinematic experience? Does digitization result in more regional or global patterns of cooperation? Turning to convergence practices, research in Hollywood has shown how television and cinema production increasingly conflate, along with Internet services, rendering traditional distinctions between media increasingly obsolete (Caldwell 2008). It would be interesting, for instance, to scrutinize if and how other centres of production, such as Hong Kong, undergo similar changes. Given the political context of China, any research agenda of Chinese cinema studies in the digitized era can hardly refrain from engaging with online circulation of films that would never (have to) gain official sanction, and their impact on newer generations of Chinese film-makers and watchers.

But even in this context of change and possibility – and our list of research questions is anything but exhaustive – we would argue that it is nonetheless crucial to study how films materialize, become things, and how they enable spectators to become present, to actualize themselves,

and become sociable at the same time. Our inquiries should also cover, for instance, visits of Chinese directors to other localities, the material packaging of DVDs, as well as Chinese film festivals. In an era of digital technologies, it may only take a few clicks to make, distribute and view a film but, interestingly, we may still opt to go somewhere, to be present, to make something happen. Thus, as critics, we must also savour the moment when all that has melted into bits and bytes becomes solid.

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