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Cinematic Revolution

New Contracts,
New Media, and New Television:
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No Country for Old Men and There Will Be Blood

Clinging to the Physical:
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Dear Readers,

The number 18 means a great deal in American culture. It represents the achievement of adulthood and the moment when most begin their education in self-dependency. Eighteen is when one begins to redefine who they are as an adult, taking a stance as a new individual—with this in mind we began to reshape Eyecandy toward a new design.

However, soon after committing ourselves as editors, a most intimidating question arose: what exactly should Volume 18 discuss? Several nights of pacing and cups of coffee later, we finally found our answer. Eyecandy has long been a site where the students of UCSC can meet on common ground in a discussion of film and digital media.

Many cultural and media critics have already staked their claim as to what our generation most desires, most anticipates, and most understands. But how many examples exist of Gen Y authors having the chance to speak for themselves? Our primary goal is relevance. As the journal’s editors, we have sought to design an issue that allows us to deeply analyze our changing media culture. We seek to take our readers further afield — to explore new practices in spectatorship, filmmaking, and visual media study that most pertain to our generation.

Volume 18 shall serve as a time capsule — each author speaking of his or her most pressing interests and anxieties of the moment, together creating what we believe is the most important volume in Eyecandy’s young history. In addition, this year’s staff has worked diligently with us in creating a web publication that does not exist separately from print, as was the case in previous volumes, but rather in tandem. Many of the print pieces in Volume 18 have supplemental content, including streaming video, on the redesigned website. For the third consecutive year, Eyecandy includes a complimentary DVD showcasing some of the finest student films from the UCSC community.

As editors, we hope that Volume 18 creates a mediaphile out of every reader. Our love for visual media is why we have worked so hard. Hopefully, that same passion will take root within yourself and compel you to ask questions similar to those addressed in the following pages. For many of the pieces you are about to read, the dust has yet to settle; we are still in the infancy of the new millennium and our development as scholars has just begun. Volume 18 is a first, honest attempt to look forward and to predict what visual culture will look like in the years and decades to come.

Roberto Alexander Santos & William Hoschele
Editors-in-Chief

The Film and Digital Media Department at UC Santa Cruz has long prided itself — and rightfully so — on bringing together critical studies and production, theory and praxis. Here student filmmakers benefit from analyzing the history, aesthetics, and theory of film/media, while critical studies majors get hands-on experience in the craft they are taught to study.

Volume 18 of Eyecandy perfectly illustrates the Department’s marriage of critical studies and production. The editors and staff have richly combined scholarship with journalism, text with graphic design, virtual and digital media with print, and film/industry analysis with filmmaking. The result is an edition that informs and entertains us, even as it illustrates and negotiates the changing media landscape that surrounds us.

Enjoy,

Drew Todd
This is an unusual event in the history of the arts. Rarely, if ever, has a medium changed so significantly as to require a new description in order to identify it. When sculpting shifted from carving figures out of granite to shaping them from soft clay, was this not still sculpting? Does the stage no longer host theatrical performances? When painting alternated from paints to oils to watercolors, was the final product not still a painting? Putting a pen to paper or typing on a keyboard does not change the term we use to describe the process. While these changes may have influenced the artists, altering the means by which they were able to express themselves, the final product was not a change for us, the spectator/reader.

Film is no longer simply film. Today, there is an increase in the use of digital video used in live-action movies such as Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith (George Lucas, 2005, USA) and Dancer in the Dark (Lars Von Trier, 2000, Denmark), as well as the release of completely CGI blockbuster movies such as Ratatouille (Brad Bird, 2007, USA) and Shrek (Andrew Adamson, 2001, USA). However, this begs the question, are these movies any less important to the medium simply because they lack the physicality of celluloid?

This essay is not a condemnation of older methods; I do not wish to banish the use of film stock as a means of cinematic expression. Instead, I seek to change the term used to define it in keeping with the new wealth of technological advancements. Star Wars director George Lucas, who advocates for Hollywood and filmmakers to fully embrace the digital revolution, stated, "In the 20th century, cinema was celluloid; the cinema of the 21st century will be digital...Film is going to be photographed and projected digitally...We made it through the silent era to the sound era and from the black-and-white era to the color era, and I'm sure we'll make it through to the digital era...the creator's palette has been continually widened." Lucas's view of film as an old medium and digital as the next stage in evolution underscores the reality that digital technology is here and is becoming an increasingly viable solution to the costly expense of celluloid.

One of the reasons that Hollywood cornered the movie market was usually a function of economics. It has been able to afford the ever-rising cost of celluloid film, the chemical processing, the editing tables, and the distribution — and you cannot. That is, before the time of the video camera, which put the ability to make movies, even low-quality ones, in the hands of everyone. Home videotape movies, however, never went anywhere outside of the living room. Today digital cameras rival once standard film cameras, while the personal computer has evolved into a home-editing suite.

Despite Lucas's belief that digital cinema is the wave of the future, there are filmmakers who still grasp onto celluloid as their means of artistic expression. Steven Spielberg, Lucas's collaborator on the Indiana Jones series, is one such person. In an interview with Time magazine, Spielberg stressed his preference for film and his reluctance to join the digital revolution: "I'm too nostalgic to make my movies digitally. I'm the last person in Hollywood who cuts his film on film. I still love cutting on film. The greatest films ever made in our history were cut on film and I'm tenaciously hanging on to the process." The process of making film is an arduous task in and of itself; making celluloid from raw stock, shooting, developing the film, and distributing the product play heavily in the decisions of many studios to pursue alternative, more affordable means of filmmaking. Despite his objections, even Spielberg admits that "Sadly, it's the inevitable medium. I think that certainly it is right around the corner. Dreamworks certainly recognizes the tens of millions of dollars that will be saved in distribution.
costs in not having to make five, six, seven thousand 35mm prints, just in the domestic market, for a big-event movie.”

Director Steven Soderbergh finds a middle ground between the two juggernaut film moguls, alternating between filming high-end blockbusters such as Ocean’s II (2001, USA) on film and smaller independent projects such as Bubble (2005, USA) on digital. Soderbergh also experimented in Full Frontal (2002, USA) by combining the mediums. The result is a film that uses the mediums in an experimental way to analyze the spectator’s interpretation between what they perceive as documentary footage and fictional narrative when it is all actually fiction.

Even the industry is calling the newest addition to the cinematic family ‘digital film,’ but the term is clearly an oxymoron. Film is a physical element; one can touch it, feel its grain. But something that is digital lacks substance, it appears only as material perceived through the manipulation of pixels and computer code. That which is digital is not physical. It can become so by transferring to another medium, but by itself it is not tangible. In his essay, “What is Digital Cinema?,” Lev Manovich describes digital filmmaking as similar to animation: “A particular case of animation which uses live-action footage as one of its many elements.” We now come back to the initial problem, what term best defines the art of motion pictures in the present day?

The answer is already in use. It is strange, but one does not need to invent a new term to create a new definition. What we require in this age is a name to encompass everything that involves, and revolves around, the moving image — and that name ought to be cinema. The term ‘cinema’ is as old as the increasingly anachronistic ‘film,’ and yet it still works. Cinema does not exclude the currently evolving digital revolution, nor does it disqualify movies whose source springs from the matrix of a computer. The cinema is a location, but what do we see at the cinema? Cinema. The cinema describes motion pictures and the industry that creates them. This term encompasses that which we strain to grasp verbally and conceptually. While cinema does not specifically describe the individual contours of the medium, this is of little concern. In such an instance, we still have the previous means of description to fall back on.

Cinema is the most important art form of contemporary times because it is a medium that vividly reflects, engages, and negotiates changing society. Lacking current and appropriate terminology to discuss, describe, and otherwise define such a medium takes something away from its message.

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3 Time, ibid.
HALO 3: Cinematic Revolution

AT SOME POINT in 2007, hearing about *Halo 3* (Bungie Studios, Xbox 360, 2007) was unavoidable. Perhaps it was the financial news pundits predicting massive consumer sales, based solely on the pre-launch hype; or the local news affiliates' coverage of sleepless herds of line-waiters, anxiously perched outside of a nearby video game store; or you had to have noticed your nephews or cousins playing incessantly at the last family get-together. *Halo 3* was ubiquitous in 2007, whether you knew anything about video games or not. What's the big deal? After all, it's just a video game, right? Yet a game as successful, high-budget, and influential as *Halo 3* sets the bar for other game developers both in terms of quality and features. Among those features are a few aimed at the hardcore gamers, but this game has something for anybody with a couple buddies and a little imagination. With an in-game editor to create and alter backgrounds, a free-moving camera that records all the action in a match, a few friends to perform as digital puppets, and the internet just waiting to freely distribute and provide virtually instant feedback, the digital torch and pitchfork are all in hand for *Halo 3* to stage a cinematic revolution.

*Halo 3* currently holds the record for the highest-grossing entertainment product in a 24-hour period.1 Granted, a $60 game (for the non-special edition) already has a price-per-unit advantage over a $10 movie ticket, though $170 million in a day2 is an impressive feat. To date, the game has also pushed over eight million units globally,3 making it difficult to deny the reach and influence of *Halo 3*. To see the impact of the title on gamers, you need not actually play or watch someone else play the game; nor do you need to look at the sheer volume of matches being played nightly on Xbox Live, Microsoft's online gaming service. You simply need run a search for "Halo 3" on YouTube.com.

*Halo 3* is groundbreaking in that it provides two features that ensure a unique experience each time the online multiplayer mode is played: the saved video and Forge functions.4 The saved video function allows every match to be replayed afterwards by the player, who has control over the playback speed, perspective, camera angle and movement, and more. The footage can then be uploaded to Bungie's server for other players to download and watch. This is made possible by special programming that records the code of what happened where in the match instead of the actual High Definition (HD) video, creating smaller file sizes and simple instructions for video recreation that can be easily transferred to other Xbox 360s. This method also makes possible for the camera to move around freely post-match. The Forge mode lets the player customize multiplayer maps with items, boxes, weapons, and vehicles to give levels a more personal touch.5

These two functions further set the stage for reflection on the human psyche for consumers of this digital multimedia. "Halo 3"s" gamer-spectator practice brings to mind a rather comedic, yet relevant sequence from a past episode of *The Simpsons*, in which Bart Simpson manages to get a video of sister Lisa breaking Ralph Wiggum's heart on national television. He seeks to "pinpoint the second when [Ralph's] heart rips in half" and he succeeds": rewind, frame-by-frame slow motion, and pause.

Not too distant are videos that hoodlums make when causing mischief to ward off the monotony of the suburbs. They are able to watch and relive the moment the tenth mailbox was knocked down or when the joggers fell victim to a drive-by super-soaking. The difference, perhaps, is that the *Halo* videos can more closely reflect the imagination of the creator and are in high definition.

These videos contain all the elements of Sam Peckinpah's (*The Wild Bunch*, 1969, USA) ballistic balterics, complete with bullet trajectories made visible vis-à-vis lines of dust, light, and blood. The difference is that these videos can do that 360° pan around a subject in the perfect frame, reminiscent of *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999, USA). Comparisons can definitely be made to television and action films of the past, and inspiration is likely to have been taken from them. Furthermore, the stylized violence in *Halo 3* could not be possible without the contributions to visual media by the world's television and filmmakers. However, neither of those mediums, nor any other, allows for this type of customizable experience under the name of a specific product. No other medium has the power to create an active participant who not only plays but also watches, edits, and shares this content. These are the virtual action figures for the 21st century.

Before looking too far into the implications of this new variety of digital media, however, a close analysis of how it came about is necessary. Roughly a year and a half after the original *Halo* (Bungie Studios, Xbox, 2001) was released, the Rooster Teeth production group6 began making *Red vs. Blue* (Rooster Teeth, 2003–2007), a situational comedy using the game's multiplayer mode. A group of digital puppets would simply manipulate each of their respective characters based upon a loose script, and then the dialogue track would be added during postproduction. The players would alternate camera duty, which was simply a particular player's in-game screen, based off of whoever was not in the shot. Then, through a clever use of heavy letterboxing, most of the typical game displays were hidden in the final videos, which subsequently gave *Red Vs. Blue* its signature look. As a result of the series's popularity, Bungie Studios not only embraced the series, but also made it possible in "Halo 3" for players to not hold a weapon, leaving their arms down at their sides, giving the characters the option of a more natural standing.
position. Furthermore, even though the saved video function allows for a team of Halo 3 players to work on its strategy and tactics, realistically it blows the door for machinima (machine cinema) wide open.

It is important to remember, nonetheless, that even though Red vs. Blue and other Halo videos out on the Internet certainly have a do-it-yourself aesthetic, there are still some barriers to entry. Besides the cost of the game and game console, a few different hardware options to capture the video into an editable data format can run another couple hundred dollars, which also assumes that the Spielberg-in-the-making knows how to use the proper editing and compression software. However, it is still relatively affordable on a consumer level.

Then again, by default there is still the option to upload saved videos to Bungie.net, straight from the user's Xbox, to be shared with other Halo 3 players — but this limits user accessibility. Despite this limitation of distribution and creative control (since without using a computer there are few options to edit the footage before uploading), the videos would be reaching their most niche audience. From there, thanks to the nature of the video being more data than video, the user who downloads it can manipulate it as she/he so desires. Imagine watching a film in which the events happen in one point in space, but you can re-play them frame by frame, pause the action, and move the camera virtually anywhere in the movie world while the event is happening — it would be comparable to a high-definition, feature-length diorama that played itself out.

In actuality, interaction like this is a demand of the revolution. A practice in which the participant — and I say participant over viewer or gamer because she/he is much more than that — has control over the content playing, whether it is self-produced or not, is where the future of digital multimedia lies.

Though consumers have been producing machinima since 1996, giving such powerful tools to the everyday user who is perhaps not as technically savvy, especially on a console video game (compared to a computer game where user-made modifications are more commonplace), is what is worth noting. Likewise, to create a computer-generated image (CGI) film from the ground up would be a much more expensive, time-consuming, and intimidating task, but again, the artist would have more control. To compare and contrast further, consider how creating machinima with digital puppeteers frees the director from having to deal with actors, costumes, and, other production variables (such as weather and time of day). One of the major downsides, however, at least for Halo 3, is that all of the characters look like colorful Imperial Stormtrooper soldiers.

From here, a majority of filmmakers might look at Halo 3 and think that the drawbacks — namely all of the characters soldiers and that the props are primarily weapons — do not work out too well for a romantic comedy, which is fine. It was never stated that Halo 3 is a filmmaker's dream video game, but rather it stands as an agent that can influence many other games to follow suit in providing the tools for user-generated content and videos. Additionally, it has the potential to act as a catalyst that can inspire and challenge both gamers and potential filmmakers to take a couple of feet when an inch or two is given.

Keep in mind the lines that are being drawn with some of this language. I feel it is important when thinking about cinema, and where it is headed, to note distinctions between traditional cinema (digital or film) and this new digital multimedia. The level of immersion, not just in the media but time spent within the game world, already says something about comparisons between games and cinema. Whereas a cinematic experience typically lasts around two hours, a game with an online multiplayer mode can be played virtually infinitely. From there, when the gamer desires a break from the game element, she/he can remain in the game realm, create a video, and then go online to watch other machinima that gamers are creating. Finally, the lot of them can comment, rate, and ultimately dictate what the market prefers, which is unique, even in this age, when compared to that of the blockbuster movie focus group.

Despite the growing potential for cinematic revolution, neither Halo 3 nor machinima will replace traditional cinema, at least not any time soon. It is also difficult to classify this new media. It stems from traditional video games and is marketed as such, but it is capable of transcending its own medium and format. Even though all of the new features common in contemporary games typically have some connection to their respective game realms and modes of game-play, in actuality they are pushing the envelope of what a video game can be, integrating all different forms of new media. The level of creativity this new media inspires and provides truly speaks volumes, the likes of which have only begun to be tapped.

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2 Thorsen, Ibid.
5 “Frankie,” Ibid.
7 Rooster Teeth Production's history can be found via their company’s website: http://www.roostertooths.com.
8 Some of the earliest machinima examples can be found at the following website: http://www.machinima.com.
New Contracts, New Media, and New Television: A Retrospective on the 2007/08 WGA Strike

LITTLE CAN POLARIZE the American public faster than a strike. When that strike affects a national pastime as vital to the American lifestyle as television, people take notice. While public opinion is surprisingly favorable toward the Writers’ Guild of America (WGA), most viewers are more concerned with the return of their favorite shows to broadcast than the issues behind the strike. In spite of this, the 2007/08 WGA strike will have a lasting impact on both the production and reception of television.

In essence, the strike boils down to a fight over residuals. Like novelists and songwriters, screenwriters are paid a flat fee for the rights to produce and distribute their work. Added to this standard fee is an agreement that they will receive a percentage of the distributor’s gross each time their work is broadcast, screened or sold after its initial airing. Different from the original flat fee, a residual is the payment a writer receives every time their work is shown on TV, whether in prime-time or syndication, or sold to home video.

As freelancers, 48% of WGA members are unemployed at any given time. During these times, writers depend on residuals to maintain a living. This industry practice, however, has not always been in effect. Film and television residuals were established in the early 1950s, but it was not until the WGA’s first major strike in 1960 that writers were paid residuals for airings beyond the initial screenings. This system worked fairly well until the mid-1980s, when the WGA agreed to an 80% cut in the residuals they would receive, designed to help a burgeoning new market expand its profits — home video. The writers understood at the time that this cut would be only temporary, and that once the home video market was stable residuals would return to an appropriate amount. In 1988, residuals still had not been increased from their reduced rate. Meanwhile, the industry landscape was drastically changing due to the increasing role of the home video market.

On March 7, 1988, the longest WGA strike in history began. Lasting for 22 weeks, the strike is estimated to have cost the entertainment industry upwards of $500 million collectively. The negative impact, however, was not simply limited to a loss of profits. Delayed by six weeks, the 1988 television season resulted in a significant loss of network audiences to cable due to the work stoppage. This loss was never to be recouped, with over 9% of audience members leaving broadcast television for good.

In addition to this stretch of unemployment, a burgeoning home video market allowed for the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPP) to convince the WGA to a lower residual rate of 0.3% for the first million grossed and 0.36% thereafter. This agreement has continued until today, with DVDs eventually replacing videocassettes. In practical terms, this means that for every $19.99 DVD sold, the writer receives only four cents, a number considerably less than the 50 cents it costs to make and distribute those same DVDs.

Nearly 20 years later, new technologies have rekindled old arguments, and on Nov. 5, 2007, the WGA went on strike once again. With this most recent strike, the WGA challenged the AMPP in an attempt to stake a claim in what many see as the future of television. With the emergence and spread of time-shifting technologies, such as TiVo and DirecTV, the viewer is able to watch television at their convenience, skipping commercials altogether, leaving studios and advertisers searching for alternative methods of distribution and profit. Like TiVo, the Internet also allows for the convenience of time shifting. However, on streaming sites such as ABC.com or Hulu.com this new model allows ads to be embedded or displayed alongside the video. Viewers can also pay to download episodes from providers such as iTunes, with video entertainment spreading to personal devices such as iPods and cell phones. This burgeoning market is known collectively as “New Media,” and is a revenue source expected to reap $4.6 billion in profits over the next three years. Although this new market shows the potential to be highly lucrative, it was not until weeks into the strike that the AMPP agreed to talk about changing the current model of residuals.

It is important when looking at the WGA strike to understand just what the AMPP is and how it functions. On its website, the AMPP claims to represent “over 350 motion picture and television producers.” However, many independent producers have written to publications such as Variety in an attempt to remind journalists not to associate them with the AMPP by referring to it as “the producers;” and commenting further “The Alliance represents the studios, the networks, and the international conglomerates that own them, not working producers.”
most prominent members of the AMPTP are General Electric (owners of NBC and Universal), the Walt Disney Company, Time Warner (owners of Warner Brothers and partial owners of the CW network), Viacom (owners of Paramount and partial owners of the CW network), the CBS Corporation and New Corporation (owners of FOX).  

By contrast, the WGA is comprised of two cooperative labor unions, the WGA West and East, which represent television and film writers in Southern California and around New York City, respectively. These unions were established to protect the interests of screenwriters and currently oversee healthcare and pension plans. Under the most recent contract with the AMPTP, however, the WGA does not have jurisdiction over the writers of reality television or animation. This exclusion was one of the many issues the WGA hoped to rectify when their current Minimum Basic Agreement (MBA) contract with the AMPTopaque expired on midnight of Oct. 31, 2007. After three months of negotiations with the AMPTP, a resolution had yet to be achieved. On the final day, the contract negotiations between the WGA and the AMPTP collapsed. The following Monday the WGA strike began.

In addition to the inclusion of animation and reality television writers, the WGA had initially hoped to negotiate a new contract with the AMPTP that would finally increase DVD residuals from 0.3% to 0.6% (effectively increasing that four cents per DVD to eight cents). In spite of statements by the AMPTP and the common misconception that the strike is all about DVDs, the WGA's most important goal is tied to establishing the residual model for New Media. Currently, writers receive the DVD residual rate on all Internet downloads. That means for every $1.99 television download from iTunes, the writer receives a whopping half of a cent. Ideally, the WGA had hoped to change the current download residuals from the DVD rate of 0.3% to the 2.5% writers would have received for a television airing of the same episode.  

However, the practice of legal downloading is but one of the many ways to watch television online. Many major networks, including NBC, ABC, and FOX, provide full episodes of their current shows on their websites at absolutely no cost to the viewer, and no benefit to the writer. Although the AMPTP claims these streaming episodes are online as "promotional" material only and that they "don't know if it's going to replace other markets or enhance other markets," networks and studios are collecting profits due to ad sales. In fact, Leslie Moonves, CEO of CBS, went so far as to call New Media a "profit machine." Under the old MBA contract, none of this profit was to be passed along to the writers. One of the WGA's aims was to change that 0% residual rate to the 2.5% they have established for New Media sales and distribution.

After months of unemployment and dozens of picket lines, the WGA strike finally ended on Feb. 12, 2008, its 100th day. Although the three-year contract is still tentative, reactions to the strike's resolution are mixed. WGA negotiating committee member Howard Michael Gould reflected, "In the end, though, I think we did it damned well. And the happy result was the deal that we needed." However, many guild members seem to disagree with this sentiment. Some, such as sciencefiction writer Harlan Ellison, go so far as to say, "after months on the line... we rushed headlong into a shabby, scabrous, underfed showoff [sic] shit clutched to the affections of toss-in-the-towel summer soldiers trembling before the Awe of the Alliance."  

The residual model for streaming television is somewhat different, with writers receiving around $1,300 per episode per year after an initial promotional window of up to 24 days of free streaming. A year after the expiration of the initial window, the residual would increase to 2% of the distributor's gross. In the third year of the new contract, this 2% would go into effect immediately after the end of the promotional period. However, this model only applies to network prime-time television shows. Writers of shows produced for cable will receive a fixed sum, an agreement comparable to that established for the first year of streaming broadcast shows. One of the most important provisions of the new contract establishes separate rights for the creators of content for New Media. As has been the case for writers of television and film, writers for the Internet will retain rights over any characters they create, as well as the rights to adapt the work for another medium.

The strike may have ended, but its effects are far from over. With the strike lasting over three months, most
studies have run out of stockpile scripts, allowing for reruns and reality television to dominate programming schedules. Like the strike of 1988, the most recent WGA strike has forced a delay in the current television season. For those of us with our career sights set on Hollywood, it could spell the end of an era.

As the strike of 1988 was buffered by the summer, it caused only a small delay in television’s upcoming pilot season,18 the most current strike instead could bring about the end of seasonal television altogether. As a result of the delay, studios are beginning to question the current pilot model. According to David Carr of the New York Times, many studios have “severed existing contracts with writers” and have “succeeded over more of their prime-time schedules to reality programming.”19 Just as today’s reality show predecessors, such as Cops (1989-Present, FOX), emerged as television filler in the wake of the 1988 strike,20 so will reality shows dominate television’s lineup in the months to come. Already, prime-time slots are littered with familiar reality titles such as Fox’s American Idol (2002-Present) and Wife Swap (2004-Present) on ABC, as well as new arrivals, including ABC’s Dancing with the Stars (2004-Present) spin-off, Dance War: Bruno vs. Carrie Ann (2008-Present).

The importance of the WGA strike spans far beyond the increase in unscripted television. Just as was the case in the strike of 1988, audiences disappointed by current television have turned to other forms of media.13 Among some of the common alternatives are DVDs and the Internet.14 In addition to the millions of dollars lost over the course of the strike, the television industry is looking at a likely decrease in viewer ratings. As audiences move away from broadcast television towards the Internet and as television-recording devices steadily march towards a merger with Internet downloads, the new media residual formula takes on a far greater importance.

It will not be long before television is not broadcast, but streamed.

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The Last Frontier: No Country for Old Men and There Will Be Blood

"Oil Derrick" by Louise Chen.

SOLITARY MEN WANDER the expanses of a Western frontier. Under skies of pale blue and mountains scorched-red, each deliberately adheres to his private agenda. One stumbles upon a suitcase full of money, a relic of a drug deal gone terribly wrong. He pries it out of the hands of a dead other, unaware of the maelstrom of violence that clings to him quietly. Another staves up at a patch of sky framed picturesquely within a gaping hole 50 feet below the ground. Half-submerged in oil, he smiles as the pulleys lift up bucket after bucket of the Earth's sustenance. And another lies estranged in a desolate motel room, eyes glazed as he stoically nurtures the wounds from an earlier assault. Filling their own self-interests, each figure plays a central role in perpetuating this godless game where harrowing opportunism and human fallibility can crystallize without interruption—all of this fittingly located in the unadorned West, where "the graces of civilization" are far-removed, and "men are men."

No Country for Old Men (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2007, USA) and There Will Be Blood (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007, USA), both Oscar-nominated for Best Picture, offer unsettling meditations on humankind's potential. With the absence of law and security a flimsy innovation, we see the motives of men as they are carried out in an environment practically devoid of limitations. Avarice and self-glorification consume the lands, cynicism and competition flourish, while mortality and existence are so transient they seem interchangeable. Few have refrained from calling the films nihilistic and from analyzing the motivations behind such temperament. Jonathan Rosenbaum of the Chicago Reader considered the objective behind No Country for Old Men to be simple "genre exercise." Armord White of the New York Press supposed the intent behind There Will Be Blood to be more politically rooted, a "post-Iraq War Tergiment." This duality among viewer reactions has typically been viewed as diametrically opposed. However, in truly understanding the workings behind either of these two films, one should notice the degrees of solidarity and interdependence that exist between them.

Set during different times in American history—No Country for Old Men in the 1980s and There Will Be Blood covering a 30-year span at the turn of the 20th century—both films invariably deal with the fragility of human morality during times of transition. While the Coen brothers' work tends to focus more on the macro levels of critique—embryding the "battle field" concept that has proven so effective (and so abundant) during times of war—Anderson's picture concerns itself with the varying capacities of the individual (i.e., the stark portrayal of a man in a state of perpetual decline). Working alongside each other, these two films' collective attitudes towards mortality, faith, humanity, and societal progression all create fatalistic expositions. And in the historical context in which they were both produced and exhibited, that of a post-9/11 society forever seeking means of closure and restitution, their senses of ambiguity and meaninglessness have posed a wide-ranging list of curiosities, causing some to look to the filmmakers for resolution.

If one hopes to find such resolution from the filmmakers, they might be disappointed. When interviewed separately (within a week of one another) on the Charlie Rose Show, both the Coen brothers and Anderson displayed a hazy sense of reticence toward acknowledging the political and existential implications of their films. When asked why the Coen brothers chose to take on the project of adapting a Cormac McCarthy novel, co-writer/director Ethan Coen cryptically remarked, "It seemed like promising material for a movie. It is a chase, action, story, and something more than that. But...that." Perhaps it is because viewer expectations are too high that some have found the brothers to be anticlimactic.
or unsatisfying in their self-commentary. It is reasonable to think that the creators of such consummate films would display a remotely comparable sense of enthusiasm for their works. However, one cannot deny that the Coen brothers make up for this in their latest film, which fortunately speaks loud enough for both of them.

As for Anderson, when asked of his true intentions for making *There Will Be Blood* (other than merely telling a story), he safely replied by fawning over Daniel Day-Lewis: "The idea of collaboration with people that you really love and people you like being around. [...] It's really pleasurable work to do when it's going well." As the three (Anderson, Rose, Day-Lewis) talk about the film's workings, they continuously shy away from any inklings of potential unrest, and look to their sterling hero across the table. Although the element of performance is a key (if not the key) facet of *There Will Be Blood*, the responses of the filmmaker strangely deny the film's political content.

As Christian Metz reminds us, however, "The fact that must be understood is that films are understood." A layered duality exists between filmmaker and viewer in all movies, where the underlying meaning is amorphous and forever shifting according to the spectator's personal experience. And in the cultural context of these films, where it is safe to suggest that the audience pointed to is distinctly American, the assumption of political weariness is forever in mind. The simple foundations of the movies themselves certainly work to enact such a notion. Given the fact that they are both adaptations of novels written by authors who share heavily culture-conscious perspectives — *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood* — the films bear a significant degree of their social critiques.

In his book *Visions of the Apocalypse*, Wheeler Winston Dixon writes, "Not since the height of the 1950s Cold War hysteria has the United States lived in such an atmosphere of fear and repression." With innumerable cultures and religious sects pitted against each other, our social condition has been viewed as one that is unreceptive and blandly opportunistic. In a review from the *Chicago Reader*, Jonathan Rosenbaum aptly put it: "We can allow dog collars to be used [on people] even while we hypocritically shake our heads at the sadness of it all." The ineptitude that he speaks of has made itself abundantly clear through the film industry's proliferation of movies that seek to provide a sort of idyllic world that desperately clings to the sincerities and authenticities of an earlier generation. Similar notions of idealism are suggested in the films *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood* through the iconic conventions of the American West — however, only in degrees of standardized reference. Overwhelming the traditional panoramic landscapes, the ceaseless horizons and the crimson-red sunsets, are the fires of man's transgressions: flaming oil derricks screaming at the heavens, billowing clouds of smoke emitting from premeditated explosions, and cabins set alight by a soundless boy's caution.

Most resonant of our current conflict in the Middle East are these films' added sense of elusiveness, stemming from an unidentifiable enemy who is able to take the form of non-combatants. He is forever looming, quietly parasitic. In the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men*, the elusive enemy is manifest in the character of Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), a merciless killer who has been repeatedly perceived in the wake of Hannibal Lecter. He bears a stoic expression, a starkly coherent voice, and a unique physicality that is a rarity these days. However, what makes Chigurh ultimately more terrifying than Lecter is neither his omniscience nor his twisted mentality, but his brooding presence and his frustrating unattainability. He is very much among us throughout the entire course of the film. As he recklessly pursues a relic two million dollars from an abortive drug deal, he uses any and all means necessary.

What is so troubling about Anton's character is the fact that his actions do not necessarily coincide with his agenda, namely the killing of numerous Good Samaritans who are completely ignorant of his program. The utter transience with which violence is portrayed — alternating between showing too much and showing virtually nothing at all — is formulaic of the Coen brothers' attitudes toward mortality in their work. Wherever Anton Chigurh goes, death is manifest; wherever he is destined to be, death is imminent. Some have referred to him as the 'agent of fate,' others prefer 'death incarnate.' However, 'looming manifestation of domestic terrorism' is a la-
bel that few have chosen to expound upon. The name ‘Anton Chigurh,' enigmatically pronounced and seemingly self-ordained, is entirely untraceable to any culture or background. He comes from nowhere, born from nothing. He bears not a single shred of remorse for humanity, and he resolutely adheres to his unrelenting principles of mortality checks. In essence, his detachment is expressive of an outside contempt, one that is loudly resonant of a terrorist’s agenda. The simple notion of a perpetrator among us, wreaking havoc across the crumbling expanses of the American West, is unsettling to say the least. Peter Travers of Rolling Stone remarked that No Country for Old Men “carries in its bones the virus of what we’ve become.” Aside from the perpetrators of violence in the film — the sought-after Llewellyn Moss (Josh Brolin), the hired gun Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson), and of course the killer Anton Chigurh — the faults of the people we truly relate with, those passers-by who serve as accessories to the landscape, are only suggestive of an over-complacency. If this is the virus we have become, then the film works to counteract this notion with the utmost degree of deliberation.

Meanwhile, Anderson’s film There Will Be Blood has been read as an allegory for the current ‘blood-for-oil' conflict in the Middle East. We follow the protagonist Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) through the Western frontier as he works to control turn-of-the-century California oil fields. As he becomes increasingly obsessed with power and competition, we watch his gradual descent into delusion and violence. Loosely paying homage to the Western through the generalized dynamics of wilderness versus civilization, pragmatism versus idealism, and savagery versus humanity, the key component of the film tends to stray further away into a struggle between capitalism and religion. As Daniel prospects the fertile lands of the fictional town Little Boston, a system of one-upsmanship arises when he runs into the likes of a crooked evangelist named Eli Sunday (Paul Dano). From here on, we watch the effects of religion wear on a man who is fundamentally devoid of principles. If No Country for Old Men's Anton Chigurh is representative of a looming terrorist hysteria, then There Will Be Blood's Daniel Plainview is expressive of the polar opposite side of the equation — the pitfalls of the American Dream. He is self-glorifying, egomaniacal, imperious, and utterly perilous. Yet, even still, Daniel partially fits the traditional Western hero trope.

According to film critic Robert Warshow’s criteria, “[the Western hero] is without culture, without manners, without leisure, or at any rate his leisure is likely to be spent in debauchery so compulsively aggressive as to seem only another aspect of his ‘work.’” Warshow continues, “The Westerner at his best exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image and saves him from absurdity.” One can partially agree with the first portion of Warshow’s description, but in the context of There Will Be Blood, to say that the Western hero is saved from absurdity is fairly irrational. If one is to map Daniel’s eventual rise to power to the point of the much talked-about climax between him and Eli in the bowling alley, one sees an insurmountable degree of absurdity not only in the performance of the Western hero, but also in the situation itself. This one-upmanship alluded to earlier, between religion and capitalism, is essentially reduced to an individualistic level of understanding. In the context of a capitalist society, even God is reduced to “another piece of competition.” And when Daniel gives Eli the final screw, so to speak, the end result is one that not only confirms his disavowal of God, but one that also solidifies his absolute triumph in the face of harrowing opportunism.

Nearing the end of No Country for Old Men, the retiring Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) says, “I always figured when I got older, God would sort of come into my life somehow. And he didn’t.” This sense of godlessness, and the vengeful abandon with which the characters go about their daily routines, is expressive of a state of complete resignation. We watch these characters try to contain the mess they have inherited, the mess they have unconsciously perpetuated, and because they are so caught up in the whirlwind of their own madness, the prospect of a feasible solution is naturally evasive. In this dying American West, where the landscape is no longer evocative of the “freedom and expansiveness of frontier life,” but of its “limitations” and its “material barrenness,” men no longer ride into glorious sunsets with feelings of triumph and victory; they now charge fully-fledged into electrical storms, fleeing the bullets of ruthless drug runners. They seek refuge in desolate motels, stoically nurturing wounds in bathtubs full of...
murky water. They stand with their faces lit up by a night sky hellishly illuminated by flaming oil derricks.

In the apocalyptic West of both of these movies, man acts the way he does, selfish and incognizant, because he irrationally blames an omnipotent figure whose presence has proven mythical. The conventional qualities of honor, integrity, and justice have invariably been set in place, yet they are jumbled beyond recognition. And because the law, his last stronghold of order and control, has proven to be ineffective, the concept of looming apocalypse seems all the more probable. Of course there is the notion of supposed solidarity that exists in the aftermath of destruction — where slavery, demarcation, injustice, and humanity’s other transgressions are finally abolished — and “we are, thus, all equal in death.” However, judging by these ruthless portrayals of individuals completely incapable of seeing beyond their own actions, the idea of a thorough grasp on such terminal camaraderie seems improbable. Whether or not we are any better than the characters presented on screen is debatable. The filmmakers have already proven their abilities to recognize the extent of our social regression. The Oscar nominations of their films would demonstrate a significant degree of our cultural awareness. However, beyond the mere feat of waving a cautionary flag, the notion of a lasting solution still remains as elusive as the endings of both films.

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10 Warshow 703.
11 Ibid 708.
11 Ibid 709.
11 Ibid 3.
Stumble into Mumblecore

IT MAY HAVE the most peculiar of names, but Mumblecore is a filmmaking movement that has been garnering media attention throughout the past two years. Outside of film festivals, it has been rather difficult to view most of these films in theaters, but with recent releases on DVD and on specially cable TV stations such as IFC, the opportunity for one to view Mumblecore films has expanded with increased availability. In turn, a small but growing young audience is forming. Mumblecore films are typically made outside of a studio by un-established filmmakers and on extremely low budgets. They tend to focus on dialogue instead of action to drive the narrative. Oddly enough, an independent film movement that is relatively unknown enjoys the benefit of being tagged as the future of cinema — the onscreen voice of our generation. However, do low production values and young characters alone make the movement worthy of such promotion, or is Mumblecore all talk?

The film commonly heralded as the beginning of the Mumblecore movement is Andrew Bujalski's Funny Ha Ha (2002, USA). The plot unfolds much like a standard romantic comedy, yet with its own unique wrinkles, including a fairly open ending. The film follows a 23-year-old recent college graduate trying to find love. Relationships and human connections are common Mumblecore themes, but it is too easy to group them together simply because they are films made by twentysomethings, about twentysomethings, and for twentysomethings. Alicia Van Couvering writes, “Generally these films are severely naturalistic portraits of the life and loves of artistic twentysomethings.” In the larger view of a filmmaking movement, it would be a disservice to enact such a simplistic view of these films. There is something else to Mumblecore that one cannot recognize just by reading about them. The only way to completely experience Mumblecore is to view the films themselves.

The key filmmakers of the movement are Bujalski, Aaron Katz, Joe Swanberg, and the Duplass brothers. Among these four, eight of their films are available on DVD. At this year's Sundance Film Festival, Sony Pictures Classics purchased the Duplass brothers' most recent effort, Baghead (2008, USA).  

Categorizing these films into a single movement, however, is made difficult upon close readings. Each filmmaker has his own distinctive style, so there is not a definitive aesthetic that connects them or their films. The primary reason they have been grouped together is because of their approach to filmmaking. It is hard to find a three-act structure when viewing these films because they are slices of the filmmakers' lives themselves. Mumblecore films are not addressing groundbreaking themes — finding love in New York City, for example, is hardly new. Rather, it is Mumblecore's approach to story that explains why it is receiving attention. The lack of resources has forced the filmmakers to rely on dialogue rather than action. The results are films that feel authentic and natural.

Despite it being a purely 21st century practice, there are two historical filmmaking movements from which these young filmmakers have drawn inspiration. The first is the rise of American independent film with John Cassavetes's first feature Shadows (1959, USA), which, like Bujalski's Mutual Appreciation (2005, USA), also focuses on young characters, their problematic relationships, and incomplete reconciliations in New York City. If Shadows, which was filmed over two years with a cast of friends and used improvised dialogue, had been made in the early 21st century, it may be considered Mumblecore due to its structure and similar modes of production. Matt Dentler, program director for the South by Southwest Film and Music Festival, a venue that has launched many Mumblecore films to a larger audience, describes them as "slices of life in a way, almost inspired by cinema verite in a sense."  

Mumblecore also owes a debt to Dogme 95 — created in 1995 by Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. This movement rebelled against growing budgets and limited narrative risks of Hollywood productions. Dogme filmmakers established a goal to create films made on low budgets, relying more on dialogue and character relationships to progress its narratives, rather than movie stars and special effects.  

Cassavetes and Dogme 95 are clear inspirations for Mumblecore filmmakers, partially due
to the fact that each rejects Hollywood’s favoring of spectacle and style over substance. With the exception of Bujalski’s two offerings, all are shot on Digital Video with micro-budgest, so they genuinely feel raw and sharp around the edges. The term ‘Mumblecore’ refers to the muddy audio quality of the films — credited to sound mixer Eric Masunaga, who coined the term while working on one of Bujalski’s films.³

Mumblecore is a young and exciting film movement that is taking place across the country, with Bujalski and Katz based in Brooklyn, Swanberg in Chicago, the Duplass brothers in Austin, as well as a rapidly growing community that is spreading west. The filmmakers are active, with films being released every year, and there is new talent to be discovered. Mumblecore was born out of inexpensive Digital Video technologies, because for the first time young filmmakers had the opportunity to make feature films on a miniscule budget. With the advent of social networking websites such as Myspace and Facebook, word of mouth is playing a significant role in helping to popularize this up-and-coming film movement. As Mumblecore becomes increasingly accessible, perhaps our generation will finally be able to determine for itself whether or not Mumblecore truly speaks for it.

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Jay Duplass filming a scene for The Puffy Chair (2005, USA).

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Clinging to the Physical: Laserdisc versus Digital Technology

Touch is essential to the collector. Having the physical presence of a collectible adds to the dimension that makes the item worth having. It can be displayed, picked up, examined, etc. With the growing dominance of digital technologies, in which movies, music, and photographs are stored, that tactile love of something is increasingly lost. I will examine the smallest demographic of this culture of collection in order to explore the psychology and mythos behind it, that is, the laserdisc collecting community. I will provide a brief history of the laserdisc format as well as the difference between the quality provided by this form of technology compared to its newer modes of technology and modes concurrent with the laserdisc’s time. I will also draw a few analogies between audio recording equipment that will further expand the examination of the culture of nostalgia. New media, namely non-physical digital media, alters the way in which the spectator relates to his or her temporality. The near infinite access the user has to digital forms of media subverts their own sense of finitude and thus incurs a sense of profound existential angst. Finally, I hope to make a case for physical forms of media, namely the laserdisc.

From vinyl to retro-digital products, audiophiles and cinephiles seek out “dated” forms of technology in order to add to their ever-growing collections. Typically, the reasoning behind acquiring allegedly obsolete forms of technology is a preference of the supposed aesthetic quality of the object. Audiophiles tend to claim that a vinyl record provides a warmer, more intimate sound than the sleeker digital format. According to the Laserdisc Database (lddb.com), the old mode of technology is immune to macroblocking (a term that details the tendency for digital formats to have blocky pixellated images during high motion scenes). These collectors claim that new forms of technology may leave behind some qualities that older forms had previously perfected.

These justifications, however, are highly suspect and in the end are merely an opinion held by an individual in regard to a particular media technology. The “warm, intimate” sound of a vinyl record can also seem scratchy or fuzzy to some. Similarly, like many forms of analog technology, the laserdisc is dependent on the quality of its decoder (or player), a necessity that does not pertain to the DVD. Objective quality, then, is something of a myth when it comes to media technology — both sides have a point. New technology may function more efficiently, but as it is a different product, it does not necessarily outperform everything the older product did. Rather, it contains new aspects that the listener/viewer subjectively compares to older products. Such comparisons may lead the spectator/listener to judging the new product as more streamlined due, in part, to its strangeness rather than to an objectively higher degree of quality. The mere familiarity the spectator has with contemporary forms of technology renders older media formats as lacking. These older forms of media can, however, be rediscovered to possess certain qualities that newer forms of media fail to replicate. For our generation, the vinyl record has made an unprecedented return in the market. Similarly, cassette mix-tapes are gaining in popularity, and I speculate that the laserdisc could become revived through cultural trend (rather than technical capability) to some degree. At the same time, one cannot deny that newer forms of technology do provide improvements to certain aspects of picture and audio quality — improvements not possible decades or even years before.

Consumer preference for older forms of media technology partially stems from other cultural phenomena, not as easily explained as those previously addressed. Use of so-called obsolete technology is a consumer reaction to a growing media culture bombarded by newer modes of technology. Clinging to a particular form of media allows the user to feel at place in a cultural tradition that will continue beyond the user’s own limited life span. In the midst of a world increasingly filled with non-physical media, consumers seek out physical artifacts that give the user a sense of historical context through the tactile. That society is being bombarded by new
technology is not the only factor, however, in converting large groups of people to favor dated over modern formats. This culture is also deeply materialistic, not in a Marxian *false consciousness* sense, but in the sense that it starves for physical artifacts in an age of virtuality. The individuals within this kind of culture have a sense of relation between themselves and the physical objects they possess. Consumers are what they own, and if their objects become more and more obsolete, then so does their sense of self.

**Clashing Media: Competition Among Film Formats and the History of Laserdisc**

According to the Laserdisc FAQ, David Paul Gregg invented laserdisc technology in 1958 by utilizing a transparent disc to record analog data. In 1969, the Phillips Corporation improved upon the technology by using a reflective disc, the same material used for CDs and DVDs. In 1972, the Music Corporation of America, which at the time owned the most film rights of any media recording company, decided to cooperate with Phillips to begin manufacturing laserdiscs for public consumption. Five years later, the laserdisc entered the American home-video market.

The main competitor at the time for the laserdisc was the VHS tape. Laserdisc had a number of advantages over the VHS format: laserdiscs have nearly twice the resolution capacity and thus the picture was considered much sharper; laserdiscs were cheaper to manufacture — VHS tapes contained moving parts and required significant amounts of plastic material; and laserdiscs are also read optically, so playback does not wear the disc down. VHS, meanwhile, is not as durable. The tape in the VHS has a magnetic coating that contains all the information and touches the spools during every use. With repeated use, VHS tapes tend to have a shorter lifespan than the more durable laserdisc. Furthermore, laserdiscs are able to store multiple audio tracks, with special-edition discs sold with popular features such as director’s commentary.

There are, however, some obvious disadvantages to the laserdisc. The first is its size. The discs are thirty centimeters in diameter, or one foot in length, roughly the same as a vinyl record. Needless to say, laserdiscs are more bulky and awkward for viewers to handle than the more compact VHS. Once again the physicality of a media object determines its consumption by the public. Despite the obvious higher picture quality of the laserdisc, its cumbersome shape was enough to turn individuals away from the product. Furthermore, perhaps even more disastrously, the laserdisc was marketed at a higher price than VHS, despite its lower manufacturing costs. The VHS quickly dominated the laserdisc from nearly the outset of the latter’s existence.

Despite its problematic nature, laserdisc media technology persevered back into fashion as a collector’s item. I personally know a handful of cinephiles who collect the discs and claim the same technical justifications as outlined above, for their purchase. Maybe it is the same reason all retro media come back into fashion, their cult, retro appeal. I believe it is also their physicality and, oddly enough, even their cumbersome; the large covers provide more artwork and are considered aesthetically pleasing in this time of small discs and non corporeal digital media. To put it more colloquially, laserdiscs just look (and feel) cool.

To justify this claim about a subculture that is reacting to dominant modes of media technology, I will draw upon an example of mainstream commercialism. In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes examines the physical nature of detergent products and how they are advertised toward consumer culture. Barthes posits that powdered detergent, which is conceived as more coarse and abrasive than its liquid variation, is more often marketed toward cleaning clothing and fabrics. He believes that this is because consumers believe that stains on clothes and fabrics generally need a vigorous washing. The coarseness perceived in the grainy powdered detergent will somehow be more forceful in cleaning the laundry. On the contrary, liquid soap is marketed toward personal hygiene because it is perceived as gentler on the skin. Yet when both come into contact with water, both surfactants produce the same reaction. Thus the consumer relates differently to products that have nearly the same result. The physical appearance of the products is the only source of their difference, yet the user experiences the two products differently.

I seek to invert this analogy in regard to my claim about laserdiscs. The continuous barrage of nascent forms of technology, combined with the feelings of alienation attendant to nonphysical media formats, such as the MP3, makes some consumers feel disconnected from mainstream media technologies. As such, media users seek out physical objects, forms of media that are larger and are thus perceived as more indestructible, in order to connect with the media they consume. Much like the consumer who related...
differently to the two forms in which soap
took, so does the collector of physical visual
media relate to their environment through a
product. This collector seeks to form a
corporeal collection of artifacts that can be
counted on to exist for long periods of time
and which can be both controlled and
archived physically. This type of individual
does not trust invisible, digital media
placed on a hard drive to last indefinitely.
Viruses, crashes, or any other number of
uncontrollable, nonphysical problems can
hazard digital media. The physicality of
the laserdisc or the vinyl record gives the
owner a sense of tactile authenticity and
security through touch.

My Generation: Anxiety and
Intangibility
OUR GENERATION, popularly referred
to as “Generation Y,” is perhaps the most
susceptible to this symptom of cultural
nostalgia. We, more than any other
generation before, see multiple updates of
media within the span of a year. Before,
technology lasted for a decade if not
longer. Currently a flood of new products
jeopardizes our ability to connect with
and to relate to a single media technology
collectively. Despite my increased use
of digital media, I still struggle to decide
between shifting files to my external hard
drive or acquiring new memory so that
I can download more music and film.
Meanwhile, I much prefer to use and to
add to my record collection. I feel more
connected to the products I am inclined to
purchase, rather than the rapid rate at which
I can download new media for free.

As a result, our generation tends
to have higher demand for physical forms
of media. After nearly dying out, the vinyl
record made somewhat of a comeback in the
late 20th century. This correlation between
increased vinyl sales and the advent of free
digital downloading cannot be meaningless.
As access to infinite amounts of media rose,
the consumer became existentially anxious
about their place in a limitless market. The
user’s finitude was in direct opposition to
their capacity for media consumption. To
alleviate this anxiety, the consumer sought
out more physical, aesthetic, and seemingly
authentic forms of media in order to gain
some sort of grounding in a world of
limitless media. Marketers responded
by including vinyl-only bonus materials
such as extra tracks, B-sides, and concert
posters. The laserdisc could also use its size
to include physical bonus materials, such
as a movie poster, a booklet that provides
further insight to the film, or some other
kind of merchandise that appeals to the
spectator. These resources have yet to be
tapped. If laserdisc manufacturers were to
include some of these added materials, I
feel that there could still be a market for
laserdiscs in the 21st century. The physical
size of the laserdisc, which was once its
greatest flaw, can now be exploited to
appeal to new markets.

A Conclusion Without an End — The
Continuing Evolution of Technology
THIS PHENOMENON, however, is not
exactly new. In her essay “The End of
Cinema: Multimedia and Technological
Change,” Anne Friedberg argues that the
VHS tape introduced the concept of
“time-shifting” to the viewer. She argues
that features such as fast-forward and
rewind radically altered the way in which
the spectator related to film and media.
Indeed, even the laserdisc, for which I
am advocating, needed to be flipped, thus
altering the sense of continuity of the
film narrative. These two forms of media,
however, do not possess the capacity for
ubiquity that digital media does. Because
digital media is nonphysical, it does not need
to be shipped, distributed, or advertised,
or to take up storage space (beyond the
physical hard drive enclosure). Even more
crucial to the prevalence of digital media
is that it is potentially and easily attainable
free of cost.

As such, digital media will present
itself as the more accessible, more
reliable media format than either VHS or
the laserdisc — or even the DVD could
ever be. Because of its accessibility and
broad appeal, most individuals will seek
out this form of media as more individuals
become technologically adept. These
individuals who only know media as an
infinite resource will experience existential
anxiety as they seek to connect to films in
a nonphysical way. Consciously or
unconsciously, spectators will experience
their own finitude in contrast to the infinite
nature of the binary media they use, thus
straining the notion of the self within an
historical context. This sense of anxiety
is clearly symptomatic of our generation,
one that imbues physical media with an
sense of cultural ‘trendiness.’ This cultural
fascination and revisiting of older forms
of media allow the spectator to feel some
connection with his or her place in history.
Rather than giving the spectator a sense of
the infinite, physical forms of media allow
for the viewer to make sense of the world.
In the age of digital evolution, it seems that
physical forms of media are one of the few
ways to keep us connected with our own
humanity.

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Eye candy Film Journal.

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Braudy and Marshall Cohen. (Oxford:
Oxford University Press, 2004) 914-924.
RIDING ROUTE 15 into town, I sat next to a fellow student of cinema — the co-editor of this journal, no less — skillfully pretending to listen to what he had to say. My lack of investment in the conversation had actually little to do with the particular topics at hand. Indeed, my friend’s reasons for conversion to Judaism usually would have been given my undivided attention. I felt bad. I felt like a jerk. The poor guy ran as fast as he could across crowded intersections, just so that we could see the movie together at the Del Mar. He understands, as I do, that spectatorship is best suited to be shared with others, in public exhibition.

As this one-sided bus ride conversation continued, I found myself concerned with other developments taking place around me. Across the aisle to my left, a trio of young Santa Cruzans were recording their own minute-length documentary and then reviewing their project in playback — all made possible by a single cell phone and its digital video abilities. As of last year, half the world’s population is connected to a cellular network, myself included, progressively altering the common means by which visual media are watched and produced.¹ My friend, having realized my attention was now devoted to a twoscreen more than 10 feet away, ceased speaking. Making our way to the theater, the two of us sat in silence. Thanks to the latest developments in consumer teleconvideo convergence, pre- and post-movie conversation would never be the same.

Outside the Del Mar Theater, I began thinking less about cellular phones and more about the greater 21st-century threat to cinephilia. Gazing at the 3:10 to Yuma (James Mangold, 2007, USA) poster, I remember having passed up the chance to see the film before it ever arrived in theaters. Today, one need not physically travel to their local theater just to watch a Western remake, let alone wait for its premier date. Modern filmgoers, or film-no-goers, can simply download a few billion lines of binary code and within hours will have the pleasure of watching Hollywood’s latest offerings in the solitary comfort of their own desk chair, free of charge.

Putting aside the ethical dilemmas of digital piracy, this spectator practice still leaves much to be desired. A computer monitor does not complement my peripheral vision as the Del Mar’s projection screen does. More importantly, I am never detached from the world when spectatorship occurs via a 20-inch screen, often populated with a plethora of information/conversation windows. Stationed in front of a computer, we are vulnerable to media multitasking. In fact, it is the very nature of this device.² Assuming that most computer spectatorship occurs within the domestic sphere, itself laden with distractions, this practice achieves an apex of uncertainty. How many interruptions would inflict the diegesis of 3:10 to Yuma, given that my response is obligated for the automatic pop-ups of instant messages (IM), breaking Iraq War updates or new email alerts? In the midst of rapid spectator evolution, I question whether or not one is still the “all-perceiving subject,”³ as Metz so describes, when the screen becomes too small and divided to perceive anything at all?

The reason for my anxiety is simple: I am aware of an alternative. For future generations of spectators, however, the same cannot be guaranteed. Recent studies point to GenY’s (the very coinage itself influenced by IM speak) dependence upon simultaneous media usage.⁴ With each division of a spectator’s attention span, the quality of their perception decreases. The apparatus-spectator cooperation, which
has been painstakingly developed over the past four centuries, is falling victim to progress and modernization. The ability to comprehend on-screen signs, symbols, and meanings has been facilitated by centuries of spectator education. By our refusal to disconnect from the rest of the ongoing world, we are essentially losing the connection to our very history with cinema.

During these midday escapism, I try to forget said concerns. Halfway through the movie, I felt like shaking hands with the Del Mar for yet another job well done. We make a good team — each of us providing meaning for the other’s existence. If not for that text-messaging punk rocker two rows in front of me, with his brightly illuminated cell phone like a beacon of obstructing light seeping into a peaceful abyss, this would have been a flawless afternoon at the movies. I look around the room briefly, wondering why the Del Mar has yet to follow suit with other theaters’ cellular blocking systems. Again, I grow wary. Converging technologies and their effects on human behavior, in the form of “continuous partial attention,” has indeed made its mark on cinema. Uninterrupted and undivided spectatorship is increasingly unsuitable for my generation. The throwback punk in front of me does not use his phone during 3:10 to Yuma’s slower moments. Rather, he watches the film in pastime, between the text-message correspondences. Inside of the theater, watching a movie is no longer the primary — but instead has become the secondary — activity.

Walking out of the theater and into the Del Mar’s lobby, I once again had to ignore my dear friend, effectively missing his well-thought-out responses to the movie. A teenager walking in front of me has one of those handless, Bluetooth cell phone receivers properly attached behind his ear. Switching the device on from its deactivated state, he was immediately reconected to the world at large. His electronic conversation featured him convincing a friend to see 3:10 to Yuma in person at their local theater. For once, it seemed there was a glimmer of hope, both for myself and for all the Del Mars of the world. This spectator, who needs not use a single primitive limb to talk on a phone, had ventured to the Del Mar and was even encouraging others to go, too — but will they?

Long after the 3:10 train bound for Yuma left the station, I still regard my experience with awe. Both the film and the Del Mar lived up to expectations, providing the service that I had proudly paid for and satisfying my cinephile appetite better than the divided media snacking that my computer or cell phone screens have to offer. For two non-multitasking hours, I allowed a series of successive still images to hold my attention. As desired, the screen was dominant. This is how it should be for a spectator. This is how I want it to be. To quote Dorothy Richardson, “That is the prime necessity.” Hopefully, I may still experience this movie-going euphoria for as long as I live — for as long as the Del Mar stands. Just as importantly, I hope there will be other cinephiles with whom to share the experience.

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4 Fochr, Ibid.
5 David Robinson. From Peep Show to Palace: The Birth of American Film (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 3.4. Robinson posits, “the most apparent antecedent of the cinema projector is the magic lantern.” Dutch physicist Christian Huygens is credited with the device’s first documented exhibition in 1659.
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