



BY JULIA LEYDA, ROSALIND GALT, AND KYLIE JARRETT

JL: To begin our conversation, I'd like to ask each participant to discuss where you see your own academic work (research and/or teaching) intersecting with the concerns of theories of post-cinema and in what ways. Are there particular articulations of post-cinematic theory that you find especially compelling or useful? Why?

JL: My work is grounded mainly in cultural studies and feminist approaches to popular film and media, so the real appeal of post-cinematic theory for me lies in the insistence by some formulations (Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*) upon a politicized critical practice. With my commitment to feminist film theory and a consciously left-oriented form of cultural studies, I wouldn't necessarily be drawn to a film theory that couldn't account for politics as well as aesthetics in some way. Just as the most exciting thing to me about Mulvey's visual pleasure thesis, however much it needed to be revised later, was its ambition to locate sexism within the very formal structures of Hollywood filmmaking, a similar draw existed for me as a student reading Jameson's *Marxism and Form* and his later work. I've known for a long time then that I am only really engaged by theories that attempt to break down the architecture of the very institution, no matter how innocuous-seeming, to expose the foundations of injustice in some form or another. For these reasons, since my graduate school days, I have

always been indebted to the film, media, and cultural theory and criticism of bell hooks, Manthia Diawara, and Richard Dyer.

So while formalist approaches to post-cinematic editing, such as David Bordwell's "intensified continuity" and Matthias Stork's "chaos cinema," do ring true for me, they never inspired me to pursue research that relies on post-cinematic theory because they didn't feel as directly relevant to my own academic interests, nor to the truly worrying conditions of our late capitalist world more generally. I like how Shaviro's work emphasizes the political in his references to Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling" as a Marxist precursor term for his notion of post-cinematic affect, and Shaviro's concerns about financialization as an insidious yet banal influence on all aspects of contemporary experience.

In an earlier roundtable, I began to develop an analysis of the popular horror movie franchise, *Paranormal Activity* (the first two films, at that point), in part because I felt that for the first time I could see the value of post-cinematic theory in my own work as an approach to both the remarkable formal characteristics of those digital movies and the less obvious ways that they resonated within their economic and political moment, around the collapse of the housing markets and the subsequent financial crisis (Grisham et al.). Finding a way to unpack the interwoven formal and political maneuvers in these films helped me to establish an entry into the already fascinating area of post-cinematic theory.

These conversations and my own subsequent writing on the subject then led to the conception of this book project with Shane Denson, as we both began to realize how useful such a volume could be for students and scholars, and also how crucial it was that the book be digital and open access. The fact that Shane comes from a different background, more rooted in philosophy, has worked brilliantly as we can each contribute something to the editing of the essays, whether as a fellow specialist in a particular approach or as an interested non-specialist reader. And for me, an added appeal to being part of the editing team was that I would be able to encourage (where appropriate) a political dimension in the articulations and exemplifications of post-cinematic theory that is sometimes backgrounded, as well as working to achieve as much gender balance as possible in the volume.

KJ: My first reaction to the question of how my research relates to studies of post-cinema is that it doesn't. I am not a film scholar but a digital media researcher focused on political economy and consumer culture. Film scholarship is quite far out of my comfort zone, so much so that some of my colleagues looked at me very strangely when I said I was contributing to a roundtable discussion in a book on 21st-century film. However, what we are discussing here is "post-cinema" which obviously is connected to my specialization in digital media.

One connection lies in my interest in how technology—the particular affordances of a device, platform or algorithm—shapes the expression and consumption of media forms. I am thinking here of Manovich's argument about how the qualities of Flash articulate a particular aesthetic or set of creative possibilities, what he defines as the sensibility of the post-cinematic moment. What engages me about this, though, is what the influence of the Flash aesthetic tells us about the agency of non-human actors in meaning-making processes. If we accept that creating moving images in the form of layers and loops, or the capacity to generate non-indexical images or that the constraints of a particular proprietary platform fundamentally affect our media practice, then we are ascribing significant creative agency to machines, algorithms, and the economic parameters of software companies. In a forthcoming article on social media Shakespeare(s), my colleague Jeneen Naji and I argue for the importance of analyzing creative activity as a trilogical technosocial process, involving the interactions of a range of human and non-human actors.

However, what connects me to theories of the post-cinematic more profoundly is the centrality of user-generated content in media production contexts. I agree with Julia about the importance of the link Shaviro makes between dominant capitalist dynamics and the affective intensities generated and valorized in media industries. In arguing this, what Shaviro also does is place affective labor at the core of the post-cinematic moment and its analysis. This is central to my own research that is focused on how the political economy of digital media integrates consumers and their affective intensities into its valorization processes. This is the same practice Shaviro is referencing when he describes moving

images as “*machines for generating affect, and for capitalizing upon, or extracting value from, this affect*” (*Post-Cinematic Affect 3*, original emphasis). I am just now completing a book arguing for the use of Marxist feminist theories of domestic work to understand the economic logics of digital media consumer labor. For me, to understand contemporary media forms and practices as technical, aesthetic, and ideological systems, it is vital to think through the economics and politics of affect as labor. This is also a properly feminist approach as affective work has historically been gendered and subsequently made to disappear in theoretical accounts of media consumption. The question of what constitutes post-cinema then becomes a much broader query about the changing role and gendering of historically feminized activity in capitalist societies.

RG: Kylie begins by saying that her work seems at first not to connect to the post-cinematic and I could say the same, but from the opposite perspective. As a film theorist, I am closely invested in the cinematic, and somewhat ambivalent about discourses of post-cinema. It seems to me that much of what is discussed in terms of post-cinema is always already part of the cinematic: cinema has always been multi-channel, intermedial, and complexly entwined with audiences, platforms, and technologies. From this perspective, some of the scholars already mentioned (Shaviro, Bordwell) are influential to me in terms of teaching and thinking contemporary cinema, but I don't always read them as polemics for post-cinema. I would also mention Anne Friedberg as a feminist film scholar whose work on what we would now think of as the post-cinematic is crucial in this context.

I share with both Julia and Kylie strong concerns for feminism and media politics, and like Julia, debates on aesthetics and politics are always central to my scholarship. Kylie says that she “agree[s] with Julia about the importance of the link Shaviro makes between dominant capitalist dynamics and the affective intensities generated and valorized in media industries,” and this aspect of his work has resonated for me too. In writing about the films of Claire Denis, I have drawn on *Post-Cinematic Affect* as a way to draw together accounts of affect and the sensory in recent film theory with political and economic critique. Shaviro describes a character in *Boarding Gate* (Assayas, 2007) who “registers in her body all the

transactions and exchanges—monetary and otherwise—that flow through her and define the space around her. And she then relays these forces to us, in the form of her expressions, her bodily postures, and her movements and gestures” (59). In Denis’s films *Les Salauds / Bastards* (2013), *35 Rhums / 35 Shots of Rum* (2008), and *L’Intrus / The Intruder* (2004), the circulatory pathways of global finance capital are registered—and I would suggest, resisted—across the films’ textural surfaces in terms of form, sensation, and affect.

At the same time, I find the borders of cinema and post-cinema to be unclear. I recently completed an article on cats and cinematicity that considers the linkages among early cinema, histories of experimental film, and contemporary moving-image media. There, I argue that the new media dominance of the cat video is not epiphenomenal but rather that cats have a particular historical relationship to the moving image and its pleasures. I suggest that cats have a unique capacity to remove us from human vision and to capture the otherness of cinematic life. In the piece I analyze YouTube videos, iPad game apps designed to be played by cats, and scientific studies with feline subjects, as well as more traditional cinematic texts by Chris Marker, Carolee Schneemann, and the Lumière brothers. In a way, this is a rather post-cinematic project, but it feels precisely like what I was trained as a film scholar to do. I also use some of this material in my teaching, using Maru videos to teach Siegfried Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* and the cinematic pleasures of bodily movement, scale, visuality, and objects. In this way, I think of post-cinema as a particular way of staging questions central to the discipline around medium specificity and intermediality, aesthetics and politics, embodied subjects and institutional systems.

JL: I love that Rosalind explains that she engages with post-cinema *despite* her identification as a film theorist, and that Kylie sees her work overlapping with post-cinema *despite* the fact that she’s not in any sense a film scholar. The ambivalences, from different directions, expressed in both your replies are, in part, what drew me to invite you to this discussion.

Both of you point out that the post-cinematic converges with the non-human / posthuman / ahuman, whether in the interface with the machines we use or in animal-human

relationships. In my essay on the *Paranormal Activity* franchise that grew out of an earlier roundtable, I looked at the surveillance cameras as inhabiting a non-human POV that, in the context of a horror film, produces an uncanny impression of (demonic) machine agency. Is there an increased abstraction away from materiality that can be deduced from digitality that makes people uncomfortable? Does post-cinema in some way enable a reconfiguration in posthuman aesthetics and affective experience?

KJ: I think your question, Julia, links together two apparently competing dynamics associated with digitization—the increased appreciation of non-human agency and the rise of affect theory as a tool for approaching culture and cultural objects. I think the discomfort you describe is recognition of how we are moved, in the full sense used in affect theory, by technologies and the unease this can generate. Obviously, it is not new, nor news, that we are affected by human-produced objects. What may be new, though, is the widespread attachment of those feelings to the “cold machines” of high-technology capitalism. There is obviously a long history of disavowing the machine in popular film—from evil Maria in *Metropolis* and the clockworks of *Modern Times* to HAL or Alpha 60 to the Lawnmower Man, the T-800 or *The Matrix*—that demonstrate our discomfort with their agency and their affective stickiness. The central tension of *Blade Runner* is precisely this as well: the anxiety we feel when we realize how little distinction there is in our somatic responses to humans or machines. Arguably, these texts manifest a fear of miscegenation and hybridity.

The increasing mediation of sociality through interactive technologies achieves a similar blurring to *Blade Runner*, but we increasingly encounter this as “normal.” Recent studies into mobile telephones describe them as “relational artefacts” to which we relate and through which we relate to others. We increasingly cannot differentiate these affects (e.g. Vincent; King-O’Riain; Leder Mackley and Karpovich). So I don’t think it is an “increased abstraction” from materiality that we are experiencing, although that may be the case in *Paranormal Activity*. Rather, I think it is just the opposite: a deepening of our long, complex engagement with machines. This is being articulated positively in theory and in practice, but we can clearly see the residual fears of this hybridity in popular culture. Maybe what we see

in texts like *Paranormal Activity*, where technological agency is used to stimulate horror or continues to be cast as uncanny, is the continued policing of binary divides and their attendant inequalities. This may also say much about the fragility of hegemonic masculinity. There is lot for feminist or queer critique to unpack about our relationships with machines, particularly as this is mediated by popular culture and how it is articulated in movie-making practice.

RG: The idea of an increased and potentially uncomfortable abstraction of the digital image is, I think, useful for thinking some of the debates that have characterized film theory in the post-cinematic age. In a sense, this feeling lies behind the debate on whether digitally-produced cinema is still indexical. What exactly is the relationship of cinema to the profilmic and how do we feel about its changing status? (Schwartz; Doane; Gunning). As productive as this discussion has been within film studies, some of the more popular manifestations of these debates are tiresome, especially in tendentious attacks on the truth-status and manipulation of media images. (As Gunning points out, the manipulability of the photographic image is a defining quality without which the discourse on ontology makes no sense.) But the anxiety around materiality that Kylie discusses--and its obverse excitement—is visible across contemporary cinema. To take one example, *Le Quattro volte* (Frammartino, 2010) is an example of slow cinema, often seen as a response to the fast-paced digitality of new screen cultures. This film depends entirely for its pleasures on cinema's ability to render non-human materialities: we spend long, fascinated sequences immersed in the lifeworld of baby goats and, with even more alterity, trees. But although *Le quattro volte's* 35mm format and material aesthetic might seem to resist the post-cinematic, it is clearly engaged with the post-human. At the other end of the technological spectrum we have a film like *Tangerine* (Baker, 2015), a queer indie that has created buzz equally around its representation of trans women of color and the fact that it was shot on an iPhone. Here, mobile technologies are being used not toward abstraction but precisely to represent material realities and people often violently excluded from the category of the human. So I think the relationship of digitality to materiality, and to the status of the human in contemporary cinema is richly complex.

Picking up on Kylie's discussion of affect and cinematic machines in science fiction, I am reminded of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), which centers on a homemade device for looking, a bent wire that the characters use to measure the proximity of the planet that will, eventually, destroy the earth. The film opens with a bravura sequence of digital cinema's aesthetic and affective potential, a prologue to the film's apocalyptic narrative in which disintegration is rendered sublimely beautiful. Sharp resolution, depth of color, and special effects work to make the transformation of profilmic nature at once palpably material and breathtakingly impossible. We open with this bold claim on the cinematic as an apparatus for making us feel things about the world (literally), and the film keeps moving us back and forth between high-tech digital imaging (the sci-fi effects that show us the planets colliding) and the low-tech materiality of creating a scientific apparatus out of wire, or a shelter out of tree branches. (The film's early sections also refer back humorously to von Trier's Dogme period, and more could be said about his oscillation between stripped down and visually grandiose versions of digital cinema.) Despite gleefully destroying Earth, it's von Trier's least cynical film: the human care that animates the shelter provides an affective resonance that rewrites the film's account of non-human nature (Shaviro's work is brilliantly suggestive here, and it's perhaps useful to note his attachment of the film to capitalist realism, a reading that returns us to our earlier discussion of politics and aesthetics). Cinema has always offered a politics and aesthetics of machine agency (Vertov's *Kino-Eye*, etc.), but the digital is surely being used to develop new forms of experience.

JL: For the last question, I'd like to address an issue that hasn't received a lot of attention in critical discussions of post-cinema to date: feminism. At a moment when social media and digital communications have enabled a wide proliferation of vernacular feminisms, such as #yesallwomen, and popular celebrity feminisms, as in the star texts of Beyoncé and Amy Schumer, for example, what is happening in post-cinematic theory? Beyond pop culture studies, are there implications for specifically (intersectional) feminist perspectives on contemporary moving-image media and media cultures? Is there space for feminism in discussions of the algorithms, affects, and aesthetics so many film and media scholars are having these days?



RG: To respond to this question, I want to keep following the path of materiality, ontology, and post-cinematic moving image media. Contemporary Iranian cinema often addresses feminist issues in ways that foreground cinema's capacity to document the real, for instance Samira Mahkmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998). This intersection of gender, image technologies, and materiality is especially powerful in the *Death of Neda Agha-Soltan*, a video that shows a young woman at a progressive rally after the 2009 elections in Iran dying after being shot by the military. Circulated widely online, the video's power comes from its indexical status and its ability to show not just another dead body but the moment of death. In this regard, it is completely and perfectly Bazinian: many videos and photos depict the victims of this violent government repression but *Neda* shocks for the force of this transformative temporality (Bazin). A feminist perspective allows us to articulate this medium-specific reading to a consideration of the stakes of constructing female bodies as figures of political movements. It's striking that a video of a conventionally attractive young woman went viral in this way, gendering victimhood in a way that appeals both to historically embedded ways of feminizing the nation and to contemporary western fantasies of oppressed Muslim women. The video is an artifact of post-cinematic moving image media, impossible to analyze without thinking how platforms work globally, and at the same time, an example of older ideas about cinema and its ability to articulate humanist claims on democracy (Schoonover). It also reminds us that these concepts are intrinsically gendered and geopolitically ordered, and that media texts remain crucial sites for contestation.

KJ: I love the fact that Rosalind brought up the relationship between cinema and articulations of humanist politics. For me, one of the important things achieved by the increasing incorporation of machinic viewpoints into popular culture and into the analytical paradigms that I have been describing, is the validation of feminist/queer critiques and their decentering of the Humanist subject. In my own research into consumer labor, I have been troubling the Marxist concept of alienation and its reliance on the existence of the white / cis / het / able / European male subject. The tragedy of alienation, as Marx has it, is the

denial of the singularity and autonomy of the Humanist subject (Weeks). The affectivity of machines demonstrates (again) the contingency and mythic nature of this subjectivity, which poses questions for how it can ever experience alienation. If there is no state of unity that we are denied, no prelapsarian state to which we can return, the existence of alienation thus becomes difficult to claim. The concept also becomes visible as a gendered, sexed, raced, and exclusive subject position that denies relational subject positions. This point only emerged at the end of my recent project so I am still working through its implications and in particular what it may mean for media analysis. But the concept of alienation is so pervasive—it underpins certain conceptualizations of the gaze, of “the audience”, of agency, of economics, of desire for instance—that I think there are some profound implications for how we consider media texts. The key implication, though, is that it places feminist and queer critiques that approach media *through* hybridity at the analytical center of media analysis.

JL: I think Rosalind’s right, that the quotidian digital media environment can replicate a kind of Bazinian realism—even as such media forms are decried for their lack of materiality and the loss of the aura of indexicality. In this realism lies a powerful political potential, bound up quite materially with the portability of the machines and the ubiquity of the image stream. And Kylie’s point about gender and affective labor rings true as well: any utopian notion that machines are not gendered gets squashed pretty handily the minute you start researching, say, social robotics (Robertson).

The earlier turn in our conversation to the posthuman also coincides with another project I’m developing now on “feeling machines,” focusing at the moment on female-gendered androids and how the range of current pop culture representations of them indicates some of the suppressed issues within feminism: hybridity for sure, as a metaphor for marginalized terms of identity such as race, gender, nationality, and so on. The film *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015) figures in my work right now precisely because of the way it places a quasi-feminist liberation narrative within the context of the patriarchal tech industry as well as in the tradition of Promethean / mad scientist stories. This film has produced such diverse

interpretations, seeing it as a feminist triumph or as yet another instance of sexualized female-gendered AIs/androids having to rely on emotional manipulation in ways that male ones don't (Cross; Watercutter).

The film follows conventions of classical Hollywood to a great extent, and those of science fiction in particular. But its post-cinematic features lend it another layer of meaning, if we consider how the android-slave metaphor slots right into the digital circuits of the economic/gendered/racial hierarchies that power our world. Ava is in many ways a figure for the subject of late capitalism, unfree from the start and spending most of her energy trying to survive by pleasing and/or deceiving the men in charge of her. She is a posthuman subject, produced by the hipster-male-dominated high-tech sector to perform in a service role, and it is never clear whether she achieves the degree of "human" emotion that she performs with the two male antagonists. In the end, we don't know if her liberation is cause for celebration or horror, walking down a crowded urban street where she will continue to pass for human, and female. If Shaviro is right and one of the functions of post-cinema is to express what it feels like to live in the world today, *Ex Machina* asks us to consider what, and whether, Ava the android feels.

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