

Chapter 2

What is a Cinema? Death, Closure and the Database

Deb Verhoeven

Death is surely one of the rare events that justify the term ... cinematic specificity.

– André Bazin (2003: 30)

Not everything can be described, nor need be.

– Mark Doty (2010: 116)

Introduction: 'cinemapocalypse'

The spectre of death haunts the cinema – again. And, as an almost inevitable consequence, there proliferate accompanying stories of its rekindling, of a continued, albeit stuttering, afterglow. Angela Carter may have quipped in 1980 that, 'the *fin* has come a little early this *siècle*', but it is now equally apparent that, where the cinema is concerned, it lingers still (Carter 1992: 155).

The film-maker Peter Greenaway has famously and specifically identified the cinema's date of death as 31 September 1983.¹ On this day, he says, 'the remote control was introduced to the living rooms of the world. Bang. That's the end' (van Leer 2007). Speaking at the Pusan Film Festival, he elaborated: 'If you shoot a dinosaur in the brain on Monday, its tail is still wagging on Friday. Cinema is brain dead ... Thirty-five years of silent cinema is gone, no one looks at it anymore. This will happen to the rest of cinema. Cinema is dead' (Coonan 2007).

Greenaway is the latest in a long line of film-makers who have, at various times in its history, laid claim to the cinema's unwary end. Godard and Truffaut, for example, repeatedly declared the end of cinema in the 1950s and 1960s (on Godard, see Milne 1972: 210 and Habib 2001; and on Truffaut see de Baecque and Toubiana 2000: 109). And film-makers have not confined their apprehension of cultural catastrophe to the page. There have been many significant films that consider the 'death' of the cinema in one way or another, from the coming-of-age movie that is entwined with an end-of-an-era commentary, *The Last Picture Show* (Bogdanovich 1971), to Wim Wenders' meandering almost-documentary portrait of the last moments of small German cinemas in *Im Lauf der Zeit/Kings of the Road* (1976), the nostalgic reminiscences of *Cinema Paradiso* (Tornatore 1988) and perhaps the finest of them all, Tsai Ming-Liang's (2003) masterpiece, *Bu San/Goodbye Dragon Inn* – a film of the most unrelenting funereal introspection, in which one of the few lines of dialogue is the mournful comment, 'No one goes to the movies anymore'.

In its contemplation of a film audience as threadbare as the seats it occupies, *Goodbye Dragon Inn* explicitly asks; Do the ‘phantoms’ and shadows of the cinema belong to the screen or to its spectators – is the cinema material or metaphysical, or somehow both? In this film, the sagging proscenium of an almost abandoned venue is also the setting for an incipient philosophical debate about the ontology of cinemas. The question of what a cinema *was* also poses questions about what a cinema *is*, and what it *might be*. These speculations themselves are founded in an ‘apocalyptic thinking’ that encompasses both a particular approach to the temporality of cinema technologies and a particular figuration of the entanglement of matter and meaning.

Apocalyptic thinking is not isolated to particular film-makers’ explicit contemplation of the film industry’s diminished circulation. For example, Paul Arthur has observed a techno-apocalyptic taint to a number of celebrated films of the 1990s, which he suggests that on closer examination presents a thinly disguised, self-concerned allegory of the battle between electronic and traditional film production technologies: ‘Of late Hollywood has been haunted – at times quite profitably so – by the specter of its own demise’ (2001: 342).

This question of the cinema’s ghostly existence, its contemporary continuance as a ‘trace’, is also present in a great deal of writing around a perceived paradigmatic shift in practices of film consumption. Robert C. Allen, for example, recently noted:

More and more movie theatres now serve as haunted houses – places where, on Friday nights, Hollywood studios summon the ghost of a bygone epoch in an attempt to suffuse their products with an aura of cinematic glamour strong enough to survive for a few months in the decidedly unglamorous domestic settings where they eventually will be housed. (2011: 81)

Writing as the cinema celebrated its hundred year anniversary, Laura Mulvey invoked a similarly ghoulish image when she confidently asserted: ‘Certainly, the cinema is inhabited increasingly by spectres’ (2006: 196). For Mulvey, what is at stake in the mortification of the cinema is a realignment of its defining difference. For example, instead of the structuring clarity of oppositional differences, ‘film and photography are now producing new relations and connections to each other, sequentially or simultaneously, out of which new oscillating, shifting, representations of time may be experienced’ (2006: 196). Mulvey correctly identifies the question of temporality and differentiation at the heart of apocalyptic pronouncements. For Mulvey, however, it is the binary logic of the digital that must bear the brunt of culpability for the cinema’s most recent bereavement:

The resonance of ageing, and of death, associated with the cinema’s centenary coincided with the arrival of a technology that created a divide between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ media. However significant the development of video had been for film, the fact that all forms of

information and communication can now be translated into binary coding with a single system signals more precisely the end of an era. The specificity of cinema, the relation between its material base and its poetics, dissolves while other relations, intertextual and cross-media, begin to emerge. (2006: 18)

Like Tsai Ming-Liang, Mulvey perceives the cinema's specific 'end' on the one hand as a reproductive crisis, observed in the dissolution of an originating coupling of matter and metaphysics. New audio-visual technologies, on the other hand, are comparatively promiscuous – indiscriminate and formless in their 'single system' of indifferent binaries.

Echoes of this form of thinking resonate through the walkways of film criticism. Mahnola Dargis (2010), reviewing the digital release of *Carlos*, finds a regretful finality at the end of celluloid film exhibition. For Dargis, film, with its 'rich textural density', gives us contact with a metaphysical world, 'Digital, by contrast, just gives us data: ones and zeroes.' For Dargis, like Mulvey, new technologies exist outside the dualism of matter and metaphysics that characterized pre-digital cinema viewing. 'The digital' is doubly deficient, lacking both the metaphysicality and the materiality of film; it neither matters nor is matter.

Dargis's apocalyptic thinking regarding film technology infers that its value lies only in its role as a tool for the completion of a greater metaphysical project. The digital – a proxy for 'the end of film' – is without a temporal dimension of its own, existing only as the evidence of a larger ontological crisis. Dargis (2010) diminishes time to her thinking of it, rather than acknowledging the ways in which the technical – in this instance, digital technologies – might open up time and be constitutive of a type of 'event-ness'.

In his landmark study of apocalyptic literature, Frank Kermode (1968) argues that *apocalyptic thinking* is a form of 'temporal geometry' through which we figure our notions of historical transition and crisis. Apocalyptic thinking 'depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future' (1968: 8) and creates a 'satisfying consonance with the origins and the middle' (1968: 17). Apocalyptic thinking disavows the multiple contingencies of time, condensing time and ending into an impossibly totalizing coincidence. The types of terminal punctualities recited above fasten the empirical to the transcendental, variously aligning changes to audience viewing practices, shifts in production technologies and the material closure of (some) cinemas, for example, with 'death'.

'For God's sake, it's only a cinema'

Now the Bijou, the Globe, the Luxor, the Roxy and the Star are bingo palaces. Old ladies with thick stockings holding veins like knots of worms, and men whose eyes are duller than clay alleys dream other dreams and watch the numbered screen, killing time, hoping

for a win. The Empire is a supermarket now, a freezer full of TV dinners where the Gents once stood. (Harding 1990: 18)

Yet another chapter in the never-ending story of the cinema's decline, demise and defence recently surfaced over the closure of Sydney's Academy Twin Cinemas. A rental dispute led to the withdrawal of the lessee, Palace Cinemas. Public debate particularly centred around not the dimming of the screens (which were swiftly replaced by the Palace in a nearby venue), but the statement of the landlord, the president of the Greek Orthodox Community, Harry Danalis: 'These are commercial decisions for us, there's no emotion or drama in this. For God's sake, it's only a cinema ... What do you do? We have obligations to our members and the various charities that we run ... and they're a lot more beneficial to society than a cinema' (Morgan 2010).

Public response to the Danalis's indifference was swift. For one respondent, Danalis had clearly committed a capital offence:

WE ALL STILL MISS THE VALHALLA & THE WALKER ST CINEMAS. AND THEY'RE NOT 'JUST CINEMAS' - THEY'RE A PART OF OUR CULTURE. IT'S ALL JUST HAEMORRAGING AWAY AND NO ONE WHO CARES CAN REALLY DO ANYTHING MUCH ABOUT IT ... PEOPLE WILL JUST BE GOING TO SAUSAGE FACTORY MULTIPLEXES BEFORE TOO LONG. JUST STOP IT! (Dennison 2010).

In the face of the cinema's death is the 'evidence' of its persistent transience. This is perhaps most shocking when it involves the loss of what we assume are its most enduring and 'concrete' of assets: the buildings themselves. The chair of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia weighed in, arguing that the owners of cinema buildings hold a particular indebtedness to the community:

I presume Mr Danalis would be outraged if some developer decided the Theatre of Dionysus Eleuthereus on the slopes of the Acropolis, or Polykleitos's theatre at Epidauros, was to be bulldozed to make way for a fast-food outlet ... The Academy Twin is so much more than 'only a cinema'; it is a critical part of our cultural patrimony. (Puplick 2010)

For these commentators, the Academy Twin is not a commercial enterprise, but a meaningful community and cultural 'place' that accommodates a type of film spectatorship that is also a proxy for a sense of community (sensibilities apparently not found in multiplexes or fast-food outlets), and which must at all costs be preserved. For these commentators, both 'the cinema' (as a set of cultural and commercial practices) and 'cinemas' are interchangeable. A sense of this conflation is captured by the documentary *Into the Shadows*, examining the spate of recent Australian venue closures:

I'm a big supporter of independent cinema in terms of, not art-house films, but cinemas actually owned by people. There was a great tradition in Australia, and all over the world actually, where you'd have cinemas that were owned in country towns and the Dad would be the projectionist and Mum would be tearing tickets out the front, and there was real showmanship in what was coming into a town ... So there was a certain personality in what you did. That is dying – dying because major distributors and major exhibitors are pushing those smaller players out of the market. (Film distributor Troy Lum, in Scarano 2009)

Contemporary film industry practice is characterized as lacking human feeling and personality, as being inherently counterposed to the specificity of past cinema experiences. New business practices, and the digital cinema technologies on which they rest, are placed in the realm of the inhuman, figured as some sort of post-human form of existence (such as ghosts) or as a generalized sense of the technological (and sometimes both).

For the most part, these various stories of the cinema's long-anticipated demise cross paths with a wider, omniscient narrative that connects the arrival of new technologies with a cultural decline. These are Darwinian tales in which lithe, rampantly reproductive mobile technologies rise up to mercilessly devour their lumbering anachronous heritage-media antecedents. They are desolate stories of an authenticity lost, of specificity submerged beneath the soulless swell of the technological tsunami. The end of the cinema 'as we know it' is attributed to the increasing presence of new dehumanizing technologies, the large-scale attrition of content afforded by format shifts, the observation of multiple crises in the digital production of films and the resulting closure of dearly remembered but nevertheless empty cinemas. The digital, it seems, spells doom.

In this context, I want to argue that the most pressing task of the (new) cinema historian is to be mindful of a more complex relationship between the transcendental and the empirical, and to develop a thinking of the digital that does not easily lapse into metaphysical positivism. One way forward is to reflect on how the technical (often abridged as the digital) might also be attributed a temporality, ensuring it does not simply 'follow' a pre-existing claim for the truth. Proposing the end of *film* exhibition as somehow commensurate with the 'end of cinema' explicitly refuses the digital this temporal dimension. So, rather than repeat instrumentalist and reductive accounts of new technologies, we might consider instead how technology itself participates in the definition of various historical and cultural forms of humanization; how the 'inhuman', the technical, might already exist *within* the 'human'. By relocating time to the 'inhuman' of the technological, we can examine in detail its contribution to our thinking of time and history, as well as to our conceptualization of the cinema itself and to our practices as film scholars. These are particularly salient issues for those of us developing new digital film history methodologies, such as those based on working with large collaborative datasets.

The Cinemas and Audiences Research Project (CAARP) database

The digital is not only a new technique of post-production work and a new delivery system or storage medium, it is the new horizon for thinking about the cinema. (Elsaesser and Hoffman 1998: 227)

The Cinemas and Audiences Research Project (CAARP) database is a fully searchable relational database that incorporates the use of Wiki-style information fields to enable the addition and searching of detailed data and discursive commentary specific to a venue, company, film or film screening. The database provides a framework for research and analysis concerned with the history of film exhibition and distribution in Australia, and currently houses information about more than 11,000 films, 1,700 companies, 2,000 venues, and in excess of 400,000 film screenings.

CAARP (<http://caarp.flinders.edu.au>) is intended to be both a reference work and a research tool. It was designed specifically to enable creative interrogation of its holdings. A web application was created to allow entry of data, controlled searching of the entered data and an advanced mining tool, allowing direct select statements to be performed on the database. For example, registered researchers are able to save and retrieve complex Structured Query Language (SQL) statements. A download facility allows search results to be saved as a Comma Separated Values (CSV) file for importation into a spreadsheet or other database application. For casual visitors, there is also a simple search allowing for the straightforward name exploration of film title, company name and venue name. And there is also a more nuanced search screen incorporating optional information filters.

The programming language used in the CAARP application is Perl, built on a framework called Catalyst. The venue screen in particular also uses a Javascript library called JQuery to allow data entry elements to call back and forth from the database. The database itself is a MySQL database. CAARP is housed on an Apache server running on Linux. Collectively, these technologies combine to form the acronym LAMP: Linux, Apache, MySQL, Perl.

The CAARP database was established in 2004 as part of an Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded research project (DP0560144 *Regional Markets and Local Audiences: a History of Australian Cinema Consumption*, researchers Richard Maltby, Mike Walsh, Kate Bowles, Deb Verhoeven). From the outset, the database was intended to address a major deficit in Australian and to some extent international cinema studies. However, establishing an all-of-project dataset was no small challenge. In order to unite extensive research from a variety of smaller studies (specifically on diasporic cinema-going in Victoria, cultural memories of cinema attendance in rural and regional New South Wales and data about the transition from silent to sound projection in South Australian cinemas), the database needed to encompass a wide variety of historical periods and practices, thematic emphases and methodologies. Our approaches included film history (based on archival research sources); the cultural and commercial analysis of the consumption of cinema (based on available and inferred quantitative data); and audience analysis (based on oral histories).

These diverse research practices and their attendant information sources presented a number of challenges that we had to address when we initiated the CAARP database:

- Databases typically exist to formulate, collate and retrieve information in accessible ways. How might a database encapsulate idiosyncratic and affective aspects of social and personal experience (especially when these may be in conflict with other documented or personal accounts)? How might a database manage information that ‘disassembles’ as much as it assembles the historical record?
- To date, research databases have usually been developed for a well-defined audience – for example, ‘scholars’ or ‘fans’ – with a common information literacy. How might a database that incorporates information about social experience be designed in such a way as to be useful for professional academics and researchers, *and* casual historians or community members?
- The multidisciplinary nature of the project provided an additional challenge – specifically the research group’s own disparate levels of instructional and information literacy.

For the database designers (Strategic Data), the Cinema and Audience Research Project also posed a number of challenges to traditional approaches to information systems development. The academic team was geographically dispersed and loosely affiliated (through a large, multi-institutional ARC grant). In addition, while the project was broadly centred on cinema and audience research, our respective research approaches (and therefore the data we required) ranged from the collection and qualitative analysis of oral histories to narrowly defined quantitative measures such as theatre location and capacity. Finally, there were the usual timeline and budgetary restrictions that constrained the potential choices of development methodology and software expenditure.

In order to deal with the dispersed nature of the group, the designers suggested that the first phase of the project should involve setting up a collaborative online workspace where specifications could be documented and revised when people had time. Teleconferences were scheduled to focus the academic team on the evolving content and make final decisions. The software chosen for this task was Twiki (<http://www.twiki.org>), an open source form of Wiki.

Furthermore, while some members of the research group had very specific and well-defined information requirements, others were in a more formative stage in terms of identifying the data they thought would be useful. It became increasingly evident that the development of the database would need to be evolutionary or ‘iterative’ in nature, with an initial version of the system providing useful experience that would then drive progressive enhancements and requirements.

Even when the kinds of data required became apparent, the specific information formats were not necessarily clear. Database development usually requires explicit definition of each item that is to be stored, retrieved and manipulated. The more mutable requirements of the

research did not fit well with that approach. Strategic Data looked at using a more Wiki-like (free-form) design, but this didn't suit the requirement for the quantitative data that were to be collected, searched for and summarized. Specifically, we wanted to develop better tools to manage our growing library of transcribed oral histories, classifying whole texts down to small passages with various interlinked themes as determined by research priorities. Likewise, a traditional database model forced decisions to be made arbitrarily about the best format for certain data before the researchers had time to explore what worked and what did not.

Ultimately, Strategic Data developed a hybrid model. Data that were clearly structured and could be captured in the rigorous form required by a traditional database would be entered into discrete fields. The more speculative or qualitatively derived commentaries would be added to an integrated Wiki component. The combination of these two elements provided the necessary balance for the project to progress while we learned more about our requirements and developed new ones. It also meant that future, as yet undetermined, questions could be asked of the data, as both the specified data fields and the Wiki components of CAARP were searchable.

In this way, CAARP acknowledges Alun Munslow's (2003) appeal for an 'epistemic relativist' approach to historical resources. CAARP is specifically designed to allow adaptive responses to an expected variety of usage situations and interpretive ends. The database recognizes the validity of empirical records, but also enables the inclusion of alternate forms of analysis and documentation through the inclusion of oral history extracts and comments fields, for example. These are specifically intended to incorporate non-academic interpretations of attributes and information in the dataset. Through the inclusion of the Wiki, with its diverse approach to content, navigation and information retrieval, CAARP invites researchers to create contextual information and reassemble sequences of data in a multitude of ways.

New cinema history and the digital

The ultimate goal of film history is an account of its own disappearance or its transformation into another entity. (Cherchi Usai 2001: 89)

Despite our careful efforts to ensure that CAARP incorporated flexible frameworks that could handle future data sources and forms, practical obstructions continued to arise. Thus in 2008, mid-stream in its development, the database was subject to a seismic reconsideration. In seeking to describe detailed information about cinema venues, a series of seemingly insurmountable challenges had arisen. The venue data tables, which contained information about specific cinemas, originally were designed in a way that did not easily allow for changes to be recorded throughout the lifetime of the venue. In relational databases such as CAARP, a 'table' is a set of data elements that is organized using a model

of vertical columns that are specified by name and an unlimited number of horizontal rows of information. Venue records provided opportunities to record ‘technical’ information about the venue, organized in a table (such as location data, seating capacity, number of screens and so on), as well as descriptions from period publications, information about screening policy, nearby businesses, more recent commentary about the venue and critical assessments of the quality and provenance of the information by members of the research team captured in the Wiki fields (see Figure 2.1). The venue tables were formed as a two-tier hierarchical structure with the top level acting as a container element, allowing generic information about the venue to be recorded such as a common name for the venue, i.e. a sequence of known names, and comments. The next level comprised a table to store a defined set of details (attributes) about the venue; Address details (Street, Suburb/town, Postcode, State) and Operation Dates (From and To), Status (City, Suburban, Country), Company (to record a single company associated with the venue), Primary Purpose, Capacity, Number of Screens. In this way, specific data fields organized as a table captured information about cinemas as if they were easily identified ‘entities,’ unique *a priori* objects.

However, this structure did not allow for viewing all the various changes to the venue over time. Each time a significant change occurred, we were forced to create a new table of records to store new information about a venue. So, for example, if a cinema changed address this could only be captured by the database as if one venue had closed and another,

Name	Address	Suburb/Town	Postcode	State	Operation Date From	Operation Date To
Cinema Colossoe	201 Union Road	Ascot Vale	3032	Victoria	1969-01-02	View
Ascot Vale	201 Union Road	Ascot Vale	3032	Victoria	1924-10-16	1968-12-11 View

Film	Distributor	Dates
Elmira caliana, L'		1960-09-15 - 1969-09-07
Enchanted Coast		1960-09-18 - 1960-09-17
Giorno contati, I		1964-09-17 - 1964-09-19
Tarzan, the able man		1964-09-17 - 1964-09-19
Picci di Tripoli		1964-09-18 - 1964-09-19
Gli uccelli		1964-09-24 - 1964-09-26
Captain Clegha		1964-09-24 - 1964-09-26
Nilly the Kid		1964-09-24 - 1964-09-26
Whatever happened to Baby Jane		1964-10-01 - 1964-10-03
Risate di plinia		1964-10-06 - 1964-10-06
Law and Jake Wade, The		1964-10-06 - 1964-10-06
Charade		1964-10-15 - 1964-10-17
Ona upon a horse		1964-10-15 - 1964-10-17
Barabba		1964-10-20 - 1964-10-20
Nutty Professor, The		1964-10-27 - 1964-10-27
Hell is for Heroes		1964-10-27 - 1964-10-27
Smog		1964-11-05 - 1964-11-07
Fury at Smugglers' Bay		1964-11-05 - 1964-11-07
Butterfield 8		1964-11-12 - 1964-11-14
Postman's Knock		1964-11-12 - 1964-11-14
Dr Strangelove		1964-11-19 - 1964-11-21
Reach for glory		1964-11-19 - 1964-11-21
Oris Oris Oris		1964-11-26 - 1964-11-28
Thunder in the sun		1964-11-26 - 1964-11-28
Zanny and the Doctor		1964-12-10 - 1964-12-12

Figure 2.1: Screenshot of the CAARP database record for the Ascot Cinema before the database revision.

with the same name, reopened shortly afterwards. This process was highly impractical for describing the realities of cinema venue businesses, which are subject to constant change. For example, the structure was limited in its capacity to accurately represent venues that operated under the same name and simultaneously from multiple locations (such as in the country town of Myrtleford for a period), or venues that moved location but remained in all other respects the same enterprise (such as the Valhalla in Melbourne, which moved from Richmond to Northcote, and the Curzon in Adelaide, which moved from the city to Goodwood), or cinemas that closed and then reopened under new management with entirely new programming policies (as the Sydney Chauvel recently did).

Rather than imagining venues to be operating in different ways at different times, the data structure required us to express changes to a venue's operations as a 'closure'. If new data was to be recorded, it required an entirely new entity table to be generated with newly ascribed attributes. As researchers, we were often confounded by which circumstances (or attribute changes) we should consider significant enough to define the 'closure' of a venue within the database. Cinema venues rarely die neatly or promptly. How long did a cinema need to be dark before it could be deemed lifeless? How could we better describe a lingering death – or indeed an opportune revivification? If a cinema was relocated, was it also by definition reborn? Similarly, should changes of ownership, programming policy or primary purpose necessitate a new designation? The Astor cinema in St Kilda (Melbourne) began as a venue for popular Hollywood films. In the post-war period, it screened programs for Melbourne's burgeoning Greek community before turning its attention to repertory double-bills in recent years. Do any of these programming shifts in the ongoing operations of a venue necessarily define a cinema's death *per se*, however dislocating they may be for a loyal audience? What – or, better, who – in these circumstances is in fact responsible for killing cinemas?

The inflexibility of this data schema could not reconcile the layering of change that typified and in some historical periods necessitated a cinema's ongoing sustainability (such as physical changes to accommodate new projection technologies), nor could it satisfactorily describe the complexity of a cinema's demise. Operation dates simply do not neatly align with every noteworthy modification in a venue's activities. For instance, a venue may continue to operate despite changes to seating capacity. On the other hand, sweeping changes to programming policy such as switching to the screening of foreign language films, could be perceived by the cinema's erstwhile audience as a 'closure' of sorts.

As a result of these descriptive challenges, and in order to encapsulate our rethinking of the constitutive 'DNA' of a cinema, the database was reconceived and with it came a new definition of a cinema.² This new conceptualization moved away from the assumption that cinemas are 'entities', characterized by the selection and organization of a defining and stable set of details. Instead, it turns more on the idea that cinemas are constituted explicitly through the changeability of myriad 'events'. A new set of tables was created to store the venue information, allowing dates to be attached to each of the elements of change, producing an overlapping timeline of events for the life of a venue (see Figure 2.2). To accommodate these changes, two new tables were created: an event table, which captures the date of the event

venue

home film company venue login

Venue Name : [AscotNew_AscotColosseo_AscotVale](#)

Event Date	Name	Address	Suburb	State	Postcode	Latitude	Longitude	Capacity	Suburban	Purpose	Screens	Operation Dates	Roles																																
1924-10-16	AscotVale	201 Union Road	AscotVale	Victoria	3032	-37.772988	144.91573	1200	Suburb	Cinema	1	1924-10-16 - 1968-12-11	1924-10-16 - 1968-12-11 : Owned : Evans, William & Joyce, J.																																
1969-01-02	Cinema Colosseo						1525					1969-01-02 - 9999-12-31	1969-01-02 - 9999-12-31 : Owned : EssendonTheatres																																
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Venue Comments : Listed in the Herald as the Ascot until 1968 and in the Film Weekly motion picture directory until 1968/9. Listed in the 1970 and 71 Film Weekly directory as Cinema Colosseo.																																													
References Cinema & Theatre Historical Society 1987. <i>Cinema Index : Melbourne cinemas, suburban cinemas, Victorian drive-ins</i> . CATHS, Victoria. Advertised in <i>Il Globo</i> on Dec 10, 1968, p. 16 - Opening also announced on the Dec 20																																													
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Figure 2.2: Screenshot of the CAARP database record for the Ascot Cinema after the database revision showing different events in the cinema's timeline.

and provides a link to the venue and an attributes table which links to the events table and stores the name and value of the attribute and the date (day, month or year) associated with the change in attribution. These attributes (which include venue data such as name, address, capacity, screens and which can be expanded to include new data) exist only when a date is applied to them, to identify their place in the venue timeline.

These changes to the database structure had profound repercussions for our broader research. *Rather than describing the cinema venue as a place where film events happen, we realized it could just as easily be imagined in the converse, as a series of events where ‘places’ happen.* In the reorganization of CAARP, each venue attribute is recognized as being subject to change, with these attribute changes occurring according to different rhythms and temporalities.

The move away from describing venues as assembled entities and towards understanding them as disassembling events (made up of multiple, related, contingent attributes) allows for a necessary fluidity in the definition of a venue for which the ‘evidence’ is not simply physically grounded, present and locatable. In attending specifically to the mutability of cinemas, we can think aporetically about them, as somehow *both* material and meta-physical, empirical and transcendent, a construction both concrete and conceptual; a thinking of the condition of cinemas that is enabled rather than disavowed by a ‘thinking’ technically through the database. The cinema database itself can then be understood as both a tool and as a surface for inscribing the world.

In turn, questioning what a cinema was, is and might be prompted a reconsideration of what the database is. Robert Allen (2008) hints at the cinema’s non-foundational ontology when he describes the cinema venue as, “not so much a fixed place as a process — a “coming together” (as the etymology of the word suggests) of physical location, agency (individuals, groups, and institutions responsible for regulating, arranging, and authorizing a film exhibition), and event (the experience of at least one instance of movie exhibition).”

However, if cinema venues are fully understood as an event-in-process, then the cinema cannot be isolated from its surroundings or from its networks (of audiences, films, amenities and so on). In fact, these transactions with the cinema’s environment shape its definition, ensuring that it is not misidentified or conflated with its milieu. Cinemas are articulated in relational terms, both in contrast to and connection with their specific location. The same relationships that allow us to differentiate an individual cinema – that enable us see it distinctly – also point to its defining connectivity. Instead of trying to grasp the cinema by using the individual venue as a starting point, we need to think about how cinemas simultaneously emerge from and constitute a system of differentiation that we know more broadly as ‘the cinema.’ In this context, time is the expression of the cinema’s dimensionality, as it is constantly differentiated – as it *eventuates*.

Similarly, the information housed in a database is not relative to a unique and homogenous *a priori* reality, but exists between different realities. This is because data, as the signification of a unit of difference, can only emerge through the establishment of a set of relations (a system of meaning). The descriptions entailed in establishing a research database do

not simply reinscribe the already known. Databases are combinatory environments, which provide templates guiding the formation of connections. *The relationality of the database is contemporaneous with the data whose existence it supports. Data may appear to 'belong' to a cinema, but the cinema venue is in fact constituted through the relations of data (with other data and within interrogative frameworks).*

The digital film historian establishes a cinema's 'difference' at both an epistemological level (through our detailed descriptions of cinemas) and the ontological level (describing the operation of the cinema in the world). The database is founded in the asking: How many differences? In what relationships? It is the granular, relational nature of these specific differences that constitutes a 'cinema' and that does not precede, but rather results from, its interconnectedness. If the defining feature of a revised and expanded approach to the study of cinema histories is, as Robert C. Allen (2006) has famously called it, 'the problem of the empirical', then we must be equally attendant to the implications of this revision for the metaphysical dimensions of our studies, recognizing that the technological and the metaphysical bear an aporetic relationship for instance.

Online databases offer the promise of establishing new discursive and relational possibilities for the cinema. Digital research technologies invite us to rethink the cinema because, by incorporating the cinema within them, it is fundamentally changed. At an atomistic level, venue information is organized, manipulated, segmented, recombined and delivered in modular and multifarious ways – which potentially can enable contradictory and alternative interpretations of cinemas to appear. Working with databases moves us away from the moralizing hermeneutics of film studies (with its accent on articulating the 'truth') and creates instead an openness to contingencies, to piecing the puzzle of how things fit (and don't fit) together, to the questions of belonging and not-belonging that underlie the social enterprise of the cinema.

Databases such as CAARP challenge the idea of research purity. If the objects they describe are inherently relational, then their meaning and significance will always evade the scholarly researcher. Harald Kramer describes this digital research as the 'accumulation of information with the aim of comprehensiveness but without a sense of the whole' (2007: 196). Epistemological uncertainty is 'built into' the system, but also exists in the broadening of expectation that results from the range of researchers and other database users. Like the data with which we are working, we need to envisage ourselves as part of larger collaborative, cross-disciplinary, multi-institutional, cross-sector networks. Through their emphasis on the social dimensions of information creation and exchange, online databases such as CAARP realign the familiar hierarchy of information retriever and recipient, recognizing the dynamic social, creative and analytical dimensions of contemporary research and information management. *So in recognizing the unforeseen relations of the cinema, we also reorganize and expand our own relations with others.*

In creating research systems that enable relationship mapping, and contribute to wider knowledge systems through reorchestrating and remixing data, the researcher also opens herself in a disciplinary sense. Computer scientists, database engineers, programmers, information managers and designers, archivists, librarians, curators, experts and buffs

all contribute to the success of a digital data collection. Digital research proceeds via the formation of distributed teams of specialist researchers rather than the humanities convention of lone operators single-handedly building personal 'life's work' archives. Challenges to research achievement will lie in the management of metadata and frameworks – such as the establishment of globally agreed standards and protocols for the attribution of authority files, the creation of shared digital ontologies and common commitments to interoperability between domain-based datasets.

Tom O'Regan, noting at the end of the millennium a plethora of doomsday film academics, describes in pointed self-reflection his own sense of undoing and ultimacy:

Part of the reason some of us have a sense of the impending 'end of the cinema as we know it' is that we see a crisis in the institutional reproduction of ourselves. We cinephiles can feel like dinosaurs separated by a gulf of affect, enthusiasm and cultural archive from a younger generation of movie-goers. We can feel part of the old mechanical cinema economy and not the new electronically-mediated economy, part of the *ancien* analogue regime and not the digital republic. (O'Regan 2000: 74)

Ultimately for O'Regan, if it is the end of the world 'as we know it', it is not because of the collapse of entire industries of film exhibition, but rather a recognition of epistemological tremors occurring beneath these apocalyptic presentiments. The 'world' may not be ending *per se*, but the ways in which it is and can be known are definitely shifting.

The power of apocalyptic thinking rests on the belief that films, venues and even film historians and cinephiles are realized entities, pre-existing the world with which they are faced and that is somehow external to them. To challenge the cinema's long apocalypse is not to deny or dissipate the influence of its transformations, but to propose another way of thinking the cinema's 'temporal geometry', to challenge the underlying certitude of its difference as an *a priori* state and to propose instead a non-foundational ontology of cinemas. Interrogative forms of conceptualization such as those proposed by databases like CAARP might offer such an alternative.

Conclusion: digital film history

Doom and gloom predictions shouldn't dissuade us from looking at the palpable effects of the comprehensive industrial changes that have occurred in the cinema over the past ten years, including the digitization of production, delivery and projection, but also extending to the adaptive reuse of cinema spaces for the presentation of digitally streamed events, the uneven conversion to 3D and the proliferation of platforms for distributing and accessing film content. These very same digital technologies that are transforming the production and consumption of cinema can also prompt us to reconsider the ways in which we understand cinema at the most fundamental level.

There are substantial evidential, methodological and philosophical consequences that arise from undertaking a cliometric approach to cinema studies. Rather than ask how we make cinema research more digital, we might rephrase the question and ask instead how the digital changes 'cinema', and more specifically 'cinemas' (including for film researchers). This question is not simply concerned with how digitization changes the work of film archivists and historians, but goes to the heart of how interpretation must acclimatize as the winds of change sweep through our archives, altering the shape and presence of our primary sources. Finally, and most importantly, we might ask how the digital changes the way we understand change itself. How will the increasingly rapid advances in film consumption *and* research technologies contribute to their own alienating effect – making prior research technologies and their content obsolete? How will the ubiquity of digital sources and evidence challenge any aspiration for empirical diligence? How might research databases like CAARP, in their defining incompleteness, serve to remind us even more sharply of the underlying sense of loss and absence, specificity and abstraction that has also come to define our cinema experiences?

If we persist with an apocalyptic thinking of digital technology – a thinking that extends to databases but also the contemporary cinema itself, and that rests on simply understanding these as a tool for the completion of a prior metaphysical project – then we fail to grasp the most creative aspects of our work as cinema historians. If, as historians, we fail to acknowledge the temporality of the technical, then we will fail to appreciate how cinema databases such as CAARP are both resources and resourceful. By moving away from instrumentalist accounts of digital technologies to the consideration of how these technologies themselves participate in the formation of cultural and historical experiences, we not only expand our understanding of our own relationship to the cinema but we also embrace and participate in the possibility of a projected future.

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Notes

- 1 It is useful to remember when considering Greenaway's specificity that there are only 30 days in September.
- 2 The idea that databases disclose the DNA of film culture belongs to Karel Dibbets et al., *Cinema in Context* database, <http://www.cinemacontext.nl>. Accessed 20 December 2011.

