

James Leo Cahill

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Martin Arnold's Phantom Cinema

Let me begin by citing two earlier scenes in the long death—or multiple deaths—of cinema. Each points to the same imagined beginning of the end, dated December 28, 1895. The first is a minor but significant detail from Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 *Contempt* [*Le Mépris*], a film that addresses the death (and death sentence) of cinema. The second is Hollis Frampton's characteristically brilliant November 17, 1979 lecture at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, given as part of the series "Researches and Investigations into Film: Its Origins and the Avant-Garde."¹ Both examples make explicit reference to Louis Lumière's aphorism "the cinema is an invention without a future." Godard emblazons the phrase in Italian on the wall of a studio screening room. Frampton—speaking in the context of the emergence of the unnamable "v." (video) and "c." (computers)—uses it as the title and conclusion of his consideration of the relationship between film's origins and its precarious future. As with many episodes from the arrival of cinema, Lumière's koan is more mythic than factual. Indeed, the origin may lie in a slightly different utterance attributable to Louis' and Auguste's father Antoine Lumière. In the absence of his sons, Antoine organized the public premiere of the cinématographe in the basement of the Grand Café in Paris on December 28, 1895. Antoine may have said: "My invention is not for sale—for you it would be ruinous. It may be exploited for some time as a scientific curiosity,

but apart from that, it has no commercial future."² But I suspect the phrase is at least in part an act of ventriloquism on the part of its implied addressee—the magician Georges Méliès—performing yet another cine-trick by giving voice to Lumière, voice to light, "*voix à Lumière*," in the form of a cunning disavowal.

Regardless of its author or precise wording—as an invention without a future or an invention without a commercial future (the points are *practically* synonymous today)—I begin with this idea, this riddle, because it encapsulates some of the primary concerns of this paper. First, it emphasizes the manner in which cinema's arrival and departure, its birth and death, have at numerous historical junctures been positioned as coinciding with or haunting each other. An invention without a future is, essentially, dead on arrival. It exists, in a sense, as a phantom. Second, the Lumière riddle points to the manner in which obituaries for the cinema often read as treatises on medium specificity—suggesting the continued vitality of these often dismissed discourses. The coming of sound in the 1920s, the economic and affective competition from television beginning in the 1950s, the popularization of video in the 1970s and 1980s and digital video in the 1990s, and the recent material and institutional disinvestments in celluloid have inspired numerous eulogies for cinema that implicitly ask: What is cinema? What was cinema? What remains after it disappears?³

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The recent work of the Austrian experimental filmmaker Martin Arnold (b. 1959) helps to bring speculations about cinema in the present moment into focus, suggesting what an *afterwards* of cinema may look like. In considering Arnold's interventions, I will make a slight adjustment in the terminology posed by the conference, shifting from the so-called "deaths" of cinema to the "ends of cinema." I mean "ends" in at least two ways. "Ends" refer to finite limits, to boundaries, to a termination—in this case, the end of celluloid based cinema, the end of analogue indexicality, the end of cinema as it was experienced (if not always known) for the better part of the past 112 years.⁴ I also mean "ends" as an aim or goal, an agenda, a teleology, an anticipated outcome or arrival.

Arnold's digital video installations contribute to a growing body of film, video, and digital pieces that work through the question of "the ends of cinema" by focusing on its remnants, particularly the fragile materiality of celluloid. I am primarily thinking here of found footage works by Peggy Ahwesh, Mary Billyou, Eve Heller, Ken Jacobs, Bill Morrison, Phil Solomon, and Peter Tscherkassky, to name but a few.⁵ Although these films, when considered together, suggest a larger structure of feeling, I will limit my comments to Arnold's *Deanimated: The Invisible Ghost*, part of a triptych of digital video installations mounted in autumn 2002 at the Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna) alongside

the companion pieces *Forsaken and Dissociated*.⁶ *Deanimated* marks a shift from the frenetic cuts and compulsive repetitions of Arnold's earlier found footage trilogy—*pièce touchée* (1989), *passage à l'acte* (1993), and *Alone. Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (1998)—to a more expansive and ambitious study of a cinema of disappearance, displacement, dissociation, and silence.⁷ No longer working with an optical printer to produce frame-by-frame manipulations on celluloid (as with *pièce touchée*), Arnold now works with non-linear editing software and a team of animators to produce pixel-by-pixel alterations of found footage in digital video. Like his earlier film-works, Arnold attends to registers of the invisible in the visible. The novelty of his digital video-works lies in his more concentrated exploration of the structures of invisibility and inaudibility upon which filmic audio-visual apprehension relies—a sort of image-repertoire of the optically repressed.

Arnold designed the installation space for *Deanimated* to resemble a derelict movie theater. An excess of seats were installed so that visitors would experience the gallery space with an exaggerated sense of emptiness, isolation, absence, and abandonment—suggesting the disappearance of the public rituals and social institutions associated with classical cinema-going. The digital video loop is built from re-touched footage from Joseph H. Lewis's 1941 *Invisible Ghost*, a poverty



Figure 1: Still from *Invisible Ghost*



Figure 2: Corresponding stills from *Invisible Ghost* (left top and bottom) and *Deanimated* (right top and bottom)

row picture starring Bela Lugosi as a melancholic widower driven to murdering his household staff by the “ghost” of his missing wife, whose absence he refuses to acknowledge, and rightly so, as it turns out in the original narrative. Almost the same running-length as its source material, *Deanimated* stands in uncanny proximity to *Invisible Ghost*, like its doppelgänger or ghostly twin sibling. The trope of the “invisible ghost,” introduced in the source footage through an empty chair [figure 1], spreads throughout the piece like a contagion. Arnold digitally erases characters from the original footage and morphs actors’ mouths shut during stretches of dialogue, slowly dissolving the visual and narrative coherence of the film. Actors with de-animated lips grimace and mutely gesture at each other, as if struck by aphasia, their sealed mouths swallowing their words with pained expressions. Instead of engaging in a cinematic talking cure, they unwillingly enact the silent treatment. Arnold evacuates the *mise-en-crimescene* of culprits and victims, human agents and identifiable motives [figures 2-3]. The final fifteen minutes of *Deanimated* are almost completely devoid of human figures (with the single exception of a corpse), transforming the cheap background sets into the foreground, and eventually erasing the image itself, until only black remains. The haunted

house itself becomes the “star” of the film as Arnold transforms the remnants of the Hollywood picture into an *unheimlich* [un-homely, uncanny] home movie, literally de-familiarized and spirited away from the constraints of the Oedipal family drama with which it was formerly occupied.⁸ The camera becomes increasingly aimless and without object—it becomes, in the Freudian sense, “perverse.”⁹ It tracks, pans, zooms, and focuses onto nothing, onto no-thing within the evacuated, domestic spaces of the images [figure 4].¹⁰ Arnold puts the phonos and logos of classical Hollywood cinema under erasure, rendering it a *language of cinema*.

Arnold inscribes, or as Akira Mizuta Lippit notes, de- or ex-scribes absence, transforming *Invisible Ghost*’s cinematography into a kind of “ghost script.”¹¹ I would like to extend this notion of the ghost script by developing the resonances between Arnold’s cinematic language of erasure and Nicholas Abraham’s “Notes on the Phantom,” an essay published by the French-Hungarian psychoanalyst in 1975.¹² Abraham develops his concept of the phantom to name a language disorder occasioned by the presence of “unspeakable” unconscious secrets inherited from previous generations. He refers to the phantom as an “invention”—a technology of sorts—that objectifies a gap in language created by inexpressible

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and unspeakable unconscious materials. The phantom mobilizes an asemiotics of non-signification.¹³ *Deanimated* uses such unspeakable secrets, the repressed and “optically unconscious” material latent in—inherited from—the celluloid of Lewis’s *Invisible Ghost* as its basic audio-visual vocabulary.¹⁴ Symptoms of a previous repression—the phantasmic gaps, *pointless* stochastic gestures, and aspects of camera movements unnoticed in *Invisible Ghost*—compromise the surface and structure of Arnold’s invention from out of the past. *Deanimated* is based in and built from phantoms in the sense described by Abraham: it is a phantom cinema.¹⁵

At the level of the image, Arnold’s phantom cinema is also a phantom of cinema. It is a digital dematerialization of film’s fragile celluloid body, the inauguration of a cinematic after-life through the “incorporation” of one medium by another.¹⁶ What is intimated in the manipulation of the figures from *Invisible Ghost* (the sealing of oral orifices, whereby the swallowed dialogue suggests the process of incorporation) is intensified by the transformations of the material and technology. The arrival of digital video has supposedly safeguarded the future of filmic content and circulation through preservation, but it has also accelerated the disinvestment in celluloid at the expense of its ontological kernels—the promise of indexicality

and the presence of the interval, the flicker—and its proven archival durability.¹⁷ The cleanliness with which digital processing may alter or un-do the indexicality of the filmic image—scrubbing at the trace of the real—demonstrates, quite forcefully, the medium’s erasure: a fact Arnold puts to remarkably creative use, showing us something of film (or at least something of *the* film) that celluloid would never allow us to see. As the title *Deanimated* suggests, Arnold’s phantom cinema counters film’s powers of animation. Arnold ignites a cinematic death drive, a pulsion towards the disintegration and total erasure of the cinematic image itself. This is figured by the negative energy of the invisible ghost, which begins in the source footage as a localized event (the empty chair at the dinner table) but slowly becomes a generalized condition of invisibility, eventually overtaking the entire image, leaving nothing in the frame but darkness. The film itself becomes a phantasmic absence.¹⁸

Sigmund Freud speculated that the death drive was an expression of the fundamentally conservative nature of organisms, their tendency towards the release of all tension, a total expenditure that tries to return to a previous, inorganic state.¹⁹ Significantly for Freud, the death drive does not announce itself: it is invisible and silent. Abraham emphasizes its silence in “Notes on the Phantom.”

Figure 3: Corresponding stills from *Invisible Ghost* (left top and bottom) and *Deanimated* (right top and bottom). Note that in Arnold’s retouched footage, the candles in the background are lit.





Figure 4: Still from *Deanimated*

He asserts that his notion of the phantom—as an invention that stages uncanny returns—“coincides in every respect with Freud’s description of the death instinct... it pursues its work of disarray in silence... [It] gives rise to endless repetition and, more often than not, eludes rationalization.”²⁰ Similarly, in *Archive Fever* (1995), Jacques Derrida’s reflection on technologies of remembering, forgetting, and secrets, he writes that the death drive is “mute (stumm)” [dumb, silent].²¹ Arnold’s phantom cinema, the agent and indication of cinematic death drive, recalls Derrida’s archive fever, his *mal d’archive*, in that it works against the medium’s capacity to remember.²² In *Deanimated* the mnemotechnics of cinema (the technologies of memory) suffer from *mal de cinéma*, a *ciné-mal*. The film’s capacity to record and retain impressions is fundamentally undermined. *Deanimated* presents a digital cinema of amnemotechnics, an amnemonic technology, a cinema that forgets itself.

An invention that forgets exists in a tenuous relationship to both the past it cannot retain and the future it is supposedly without. It lurks, as a phantom, in a gap, an in-between state: gone but refusing to be put to rest. It is not my intention here to nostalgically fetishize celluloid or simplistically accuse digital video of killing our beloved celluloid,

though I do believe in its passing something unique is being lost.²³ Allow me to clarify and conclude by returning to the riddle and the question of the ends of cinema with which I began: to Lumière’s aphorism that “cinema is an invention without a future” or “an invention without a commercial future.” I believe Arnold’s *Deanimated* answers Lumière’s riddle by staging cinema’s death in order to engage its re-invention. A melancholic act of perverse cinephilia (and I mean that in the best possible sense), Arnold’s *encryption* of the film *Invisible Ghost* into the digital video loop and installation *Deanimated: The Invisible Ghost* invents a phantom cinema, a cinematic afterlife, a something that exists beyond the ends/aims of cinema as an invention or a commercial enterprise. It loops, without *telos*. It is interminable, endless, without end.

I suggested above that an invention without a future and an invention without a commercial future were “practically synonymous,” but I will close by emphasizing a difference between the two. Arnold’s phantom cinema haunts museums, galleries, and universities—spaces slightly insulated though certainly not outside of the circuits of economic viability determining the futures of cinema on celluloid and in “the cinematic arts.”

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Like Abraham's phantom it objectifies a semiotic gap. It is up to us scholars, critics, artists, archivists, and cinephiles to attend to this phantom, so

that the differences between being without a commercial future, and without a future as such, do not disappear.

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Notes

1. Hollis Frampton, "The Invention without a Future," *October 109* (Summer 2004): 64-75.
2. This passage, misattributed to Louis Lumière, is cited in C.W. Ceram's *Archaeology of the Cinema*, trans. Richard Wilson (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), 11. The full citation is: "Jeune homme, remerciez-moi. Mon invention n'est pas à vendre, mais pour vous, elle serait la ruine. Elle peut être exploitée quelque temps comme un curiosité scientifique: en dehors de cela elle n'a aucun avenir commercial." The young man in question is Georges Méliès, so it makes little sense that Louis, born in 1864, would refer to Méliès, born in 1861, as "young man." Additionally, Louis was not at the screening that Méliès purportedly attended, making it unlikely that he would address Méliès as "young man" in a letter, if the transaction occurred through the postal system. For more on this scene, the Lumières' first screening, and Méliès, see: Maurice Bessy and Lo Duca, *Georges Méliès: Mage* (Paris: Prisma, 1945), 43 (Bessy and Duca suggest Antoine's paternal beneficence motivated his refusal of Méliès); Laurent Mannoni's remarkable *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema*, trans. Richard Crangle (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 462; and Deac Rossell's *Living Pictures: The Origins of the Movies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 135.
3. Imagine here a shift in tenses from André Bazin's *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma* to *Quel était le cinéma* and *Qu'est-ce que après le cinéma?*
4. C.f. Anne Friedberg, "The End of Cinema: Multimedia and Technological Change," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 438-452.
5. Key titles include: Peggy Ahwesh's *The Color of Love* (1994), Mary Billyou's *Perhaps the Singer is Dead* (2004) and *1-9* (2007), Eve Heller's *Ruby Skin* (2005), Ken Jacobs "Nervous System" performances (1980-present), Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002) and *Light is Calling* (2004), Phil Solomon's *Remains to be Seen* (1989) and *Twilight Psalms* (1999), and Peter Tscherkassky's cinemascopie trilogy (1998-2002). My thoughts here draw inspiration from Laura U. Marks' essay "Loving a Disappearing Image," published in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 91-110. Marks eloquently writes of filmmakers whose work expresses a melancholic love for "dying" images, figured through films featuring decaying or disappearing images and restricted visual access. She reads these pieces as operating through the registers of the ailing human and cinematic bodies, giving special attention to the impact of AIDS on experimental films and videos of the 1990s. Moving away from the Freudian notion of melancholy as a pathological condition that necessitates the restoration of coherent ego, Marks elaborates a conception of interminable melancholy as the maintenance of love in the face of its inevitable loss.
6. My information on *Deanimated* draws from the excellent catalog for the show, featuring writings by Gerald Matt, Thomas Miessgang, Akira Mizuta Lippit, and Wolfgang Pircher. My thinking here is particularly indebted to Lippit's work. See Lippit, "---MA," in *Martin Arnold: Deanimated*, ed. Matt Gerald and Thomas Miessgang (New York: Springer, 2002), 30-34.
7. For extended discussions of Arnold's earlier films, see Lippit, "Cinemnesis: Martin Arnold's Memory Machine," *Afterimage* 24, no. 6 (1997): 8-10; Scott MacDonald, "Martin Arnold," in *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 347-362; and my "The Cineseizure," *Martin Arnold: The Cineseizure* (Vienna: Index, 2006), 2-10. Arnold's work has begun to take on a more expansive, Warholian character. At the 2002 Viennale Arnold premiered his 12-hour loop *Jeanne Marie Renée* (2002), comprised from the close-ups of Maria Falconetti's face in Carl Theodore Dreyer's *La Passion de Jean d'Arc* (1928).
8. Playing upon the critical practice of reading the mise-en-scène in cinema as an exteriorized projection or expression of inexpressible interior states of characters, Arnold's erasures may be understood as symptoms of Jacques Lacan's uncanny notion of "homme-sickness"—a form of "d'hommestique" strife. See Lacan, *Televisión*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michaelson, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 5.
9. Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 125-243.

10. A series of zooms and rack focuses set at a window suggest a witty remake of Ken Jacobs' structural film *Airshaft* (1967).
11. Lippit, "----MA," 32.
12. "Notes on the Phantom," in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 171-176.
13. *Ibid.*, 171, 174.
14. For a discussion of the optical unconscious see Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 2 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2001), 510-512.
15. A crucial distinction must be made here in connecting Abraham's "invention of the phantom" and Arnold's phantom cinema. Whereas Abraham's discussion of the phantom aims to find ways of exorcising or at least containing it, so as to "cure" the patient, Arnold's phantom cinema seeks no such ends.
16. Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*. The term "incorporation" holds special valence within the work of Abraham and Torok. They theorize the "fantasy of incorporation" as the unspeakable consequence of failed, "inexpressible" mourning. An essentially melancholic disposition, incorporation directly counteracts introjection. Incorporation is a defensive action against topographical transformations necessitated by the loss of a love object. Incorporation takes the lost love object into the body, swallowing it through the de-figuration and withholding of specific words, which take on the status of things (127). The ingested love object, recreated within and prevented from being abreacted by the prohibition of certain language, gets entombed in a "crypt" that becomes a hermetically sealed world unto itself, with its own topography. Incorporation effects an "annulment of figurative language": "If we are determined to see a form of language in the processes governing this type of fantasy, we will need a new figure of speech in our traditional inventory, namely the figure of an active destruction of representation. We propose to call this figure *antimetaphor*. Let us make clear that it is not simply a matter of reverting to the literal meaning of words, but of using them in such a way—whether in speech or deed—that *their very capacity for figurative representation is destroyed*" (132, my emphasis). While the reverberations between Abraham and Torok's notion of incorporation and Arnold's work are useful for its emphasis on disfiguration, and may suggest a certain melancholic disposition with regards to the death or end of cinema, I do wish to ascribe these as Arnold's primary intentions, nor suggest that the work is reducible to melancholy or nostalgia.
17. For a striking examination of the importance of the cinematic interval, see: René Bruckner, "The Instant and the Dark: Cinema's Momentum," *Octopus 2* (2006): 21-36.
18. In contradistinction to the aestheticized filmic deaths realized through the prominent musical scores of Bill Morrison's work (recall Eisler and Adorno's thesis that music was added to film to disavow the ghostly effect of silent motion pictures), Arnold's *Deanimated* shows us the death of film itself (the erasure of indexicality and the interval) in all its uncanniness. As with most of Arnold's work, the piece is often funny, indeed hysterical, but this does little to alleviate the considerable demands the piece asks of us as viewers. C.f. Hanns Eisler and Theodor W. Adorno, *Composing for the Films* (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), 75.
19. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 1-64.
20. Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom," 175.
21. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 10.
22. *Ibid.*, 10-11.
23. To be sure, this has happened before—the arrival of the cinema in 1895 initiated the displacement, absorption, and extinction of the magic lantern, the Théâtre Optique, and other screen based visual entertainments that preceded it.

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