Screen Replays

David Wills

In memoriam Peter Brunette (1943–2010)

In the summer of 1984 I attended a conference at the University of Toronto entitled “Semiotics of Cinema: The State of the Art.” I gave a paper in a panel on deconstruction and cinema, which seemed to be the first such panel at a film conference in North America; one of the other participants was Peter Brunette. I remember relatively little of the conference—Umberto Eco was a keynote speaker, the feminism-Lacanianism approach was dominant—but can clearly recall two things: sitting on the lawn with Peter sketching out the broad framework of a book called Screen/Play that we would write together,¹ and running into Jacques Derrida, whom I had met only briefly once or twice before, at the coffee machine. He was giving a summer seminar on the same campus.

Our book had its own shelf life and has now long been out of print. On more than one occasion we entertained the idea of revising it, but that never happened, and Peter died too suddenly in 2010. At the time we wrote our book there was only a rather limited amount of work published by Derrida on the visual arts, most notably in The Truth in Painting (University of Chicago Press, 1987), and nothing on cinema. We therefore set about “applying” his ideas to questions of cinema, concentrating on film as writing, and questions of mimesis and the frame and attempting to nudge
film theory toward other types of writing as well as toward a different configuration of the field within the emerging new media.

In April 1990, Peter and I interviewed Derrida at Laguna Beach for an anthology of articles by seventeen scholars that was published as *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts* and in which we and our collaborators were able to refer to a broader range of texts (the topic was in any case broader than just cinema). During that interview our invitation to Derrida to speak further about cinema met with only limited success, being required to circumvent his protestations of “incompetence.” So now in the spring of 2014, with almost thirty years having passed since the conjuncture that was Toronto and almost ten years having elapsed since Derrida died, I pause to wonder how different a book on Derrida and film theory might be written today, given the full range of material now published as *Penser à ne pas voir,* which opens with the retranslation of our 1990 interview, and especially given the *Cahiers du cinéma* interview “Cinema and Its Ghosts” that gives rise to this special issue of *Discourse.*

Over the last thirty years my work in film studies has, to say the least, become increasingly spotty. I do not pretend to know where that field now is, what its major currents are, and so on. It is a very long time since I attended a meeting of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, and although a glance at the 2014 conference program shows its interests to be extremely diverse, the sort of film theoretical work that fascinated me as a young scholar in the 1980s is barely represented (hidden in the middle of the program is a panel entitled “The Return to Classical Film Theory”). Similarly, I have for a long time stopped reading *Cahiers du cinéma* on anything like a regular basis, whereas it was previously my preferred journal for keeping abreast both of European cinema and of a certain informed, scholarly, and often theoretical film journalism (articles published there in the 1970s by such writers as Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni, Jean-Pierre Oudart, and Pascal Bonitzer represent the touchstones of a very different thinking of cinema). That Antoine de Baecque and Thierry Jousse, both of whom had stints as editors of *Cahiers* in the 1990s, should seek out Derrida for an interview (published in the fiftieth anniversary edition) is a not insignificant indication of the journal’s continuing commitment to thinking cinema. But of course, the beginnings of that interview itself (July 1998) are already nearly sixteen years old, situated in some vague midpoint terrain between my very own 1984 Toronto and wherever I can be said to be now.

Thinking this . . .
1. Derrida is by now far more biographically determined than he was in 1984, and the cinematic aspects of that biography emerge, although not for the first time, in the Cahiers interview. So one could imagine prefacing a new or revised book on Derrida and film theory with reference to a twelve-year-old voyou d’Alger expelled from the Lycée Ben Aknoun and playing truant from Émile-Maupas, hiding out at the cinema, beginning his sexual apprenticeship, taking in whatever Hollywood had to offer. But such reference might well begin before that, with his very first name, Jackie, borrowed somehow from America and from American film, as recounted in “A ‘Madness’ Must Watch Over Thinking” and again in Tourner les mots, or with what he says to Cahiers and what one knows privately about his “pathological” relation to cinema indulged in regularly during his visits to Los Angeles and New York. But such reference might also extend into the phantasmic projections of his own life, as a “Resistance fighter in the last war blowing up bridges or trains” or screening “the film of my whole life” with some of its most dramatic moments: being thrown into jail in Prague, being white-glove chauffeured and jet-setted from Fukuoka to Tokyo to Paris to London in 1992, having the out-of-writing and out-of-body experience of being booted off the stage he shared with Ornette Coleman in 1997, or any number of other filmworthy occasions before he comes to be thrown well and truly in front of the cameras of Safaa Fathy (Derrida’s Elsewhere, 2000) and Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering.
Kofman (Derrida, 2002), after first ghost dancing for Ken McMul-

2. I thought I would have cringed to reread the general introduc-
tion to Derrida’s work that Peter Brunette and I felt compelled
to include at the beginning of our book, where the published
scholars of reference were Jonathan Culler, Christopher Norris,
Vincent Leitch, Barbara Johnson, and Gayatri Spivak. In orient-
ing the discussion toward film studies, we first discussed the use of
the term “deconstruction” in the cinematic context by what might
today be called “ideology critique” writers, precisely the Cahiers
contributors already mentioned: Comolli, Narboni, Oudart, and
Baudry. We then discussed Derrida’s relation to Lacan, feminism,
and Marxism, followed by a discussion of his relation to politics
in general (referring to Positions, “The Principle of Reason,” “No
Apocalypse” and the apartheid debate of “Racism’s Last Word” and
“But, beyond . . .” as well as Michael Ryan’s Marxism and Deconstruc-
tion).7 We noted that the de Man affair was breaking as we went to
press. In a second chapter, which also functioned within the con-
text of prolegomena, we turned to more local questions within film
studies, attempting in a broad sweep—but one that also focused
on specific contemporary examples—to point to such gestures as
the totalizing tendencies of film histories and the nonproblematic
acceptation of genre and figuration.

But those opening chapters are not so embarrassing. The
dominance of Lacan and feminism was at that time patent in
Anglo-American scholarship and not limited to cinematic theory,
and the perceived apoliticism of Derrida’s work continued until
he published books with the words “Marx” and “politics” in their
titles.8 Then he was finally understood to have a politics, even a
“left-leaning” politics, but it was not of course, for many, a politics
sufficiently anchored in the “real world.” (That shifting target of
bad faith will persist: now that we are seeing his seminars on the
death penalty appear, his politics will of course be seen as an activ-
ism in the real world, but not of course for some the real activism
of, say, a Foucault.)9

The grand question for a new introduction to a new Screen/
Play, and for a new Screen/Play itself, would be to what extent the
book should be inflected or even structured by the now consider-
ably larger and diverse body of work by Derrida on or with artists
themselves (painters, other plastic artists, photographers, video
and film artists)—Valerio Adami, Gérard Titus-Carmel, François
Loubrieu, Micaëla Henich, Colette Deblé, Salvatore Puglia, Jean-
Michel Atlan, Marie-Françoise Plissart, Kishin Shinoyama, Frédéric
Brenner, François Bonhomme, Gary Hill, Safaa Fathy—to which would also have to be added the major essays on drawing (*Memoirs of the Blind*), on Artaud (“To Unsense the Subjectile” and *Artaud le Moma*), and the work with Bernard Stiegler in *Echographies*.  

3. The essays on Titus-Carmel and Adami in *The Truth in Painting* aligned themselves neatly with what Peter and I chose as our major themes for the central discussions of *Screen/Play*: mimesis and framing. Titus-Carmel’s *Pocket Size Tlingit Coffin* could easily be read as a staging of the questions of original and copy, of paradigm and example, questions that were already well developed, albeit fragmentarily in “Parergon.” Similarly, Adami’s play with citation and signature, not to mention with frames themselves, lent itself readily to analysis of a certain undecidability of the frame. I continue to find the operation of the signature on a work of art—visible or not, written or painted, pictorialized or not (Gauguin’s “P Go” being a most graphic example)—as the most accessible means of introducing students to the whole problematics of the inside (and the outside) on which Derrida has written extensively and repeatedly, and I would be hard-pressed to isolate a more salient element linking his ideas to the visual arts.

Indeed, it is not for nothing that Derrida included those two pieces as part of the contrived four-sided set of writings (two theoretico-philosophical exposés, two analytico-artistic instantiations) that constitute *The Truth in Painting*. One could easily argue that both themes (of mimesis and the frame) remain paramount to any discussion of Derrida in relation to the visual arts. As he reminds us regarding one of those themes in the discussion published as “Trace et archive, image et art”: “it happens that I have spent years and years meditating on this question of mimesis, this immense question of mimesis, precisely on the paradoxes and aporias of mimesis.” However, if one were now to take into account Derrida’s expanded body of work on the plastic arts, it would be much less a matter of simply maintaining the thematic duality of reproduction and framing, in the first place because each essay he writes obeys its own logic and the logic of its “object.” Two examples: the piece accompanying Marie-Françoise Plissart’s photographs, *Right of Inspection*, which we did discuss briefly, raises questions of both plural writing and “oblique” readings that relate to other texts by Derrida not necessarily pertaining to the visual, but it also refers to the Benjaminian connection with psychoanalysis by means of the detail that will be a theme in later discussions, including the *Cahiers* interview, as well as the law of the pose that returns in *Echographies of Television; Athens, Still Remains*; and *Tourner les mots. “Sauver les*
phénomènes,” on Salvatore Puglia, plays with that artist’s name in the context of his idiosyncratic approach to the photo-pictorial archive as well as by means of a plurilinguality and pluriculturality—a “hyperbabelization of Europe in perfusion” as Derrida calls it—\(^\text{13}\)—that can be related to Puglia’s creation of a heterogeneous (and spectral) visible surface.

4. A different approach would be to ignore, more or less studiously, all of Derrida’s essays on the visual that do not relate either to photography or to cinema. But in the first place, that separation would be exceedingly difficult to delineate: doesn’t the detail necessarily imply a photographic visuality related to psychoanalysis—which might also mean that psychoanalysis necessarily and conversely implies a type of photographic visuality—and doesn’t every single reading by Derrida constitute an explicit mobilization of forms of detailing? Might not the same be said of the frame and of every more or less formalist reference to framing such as permeates Derrida’s writing; can the frame be rigorously circumscribed as a pictorial question without bleeding into a photographic or cinematic question?

In the second place, such a quarantining of the nonphotocinematic, presuming it were possible, would mean putting aside the fundamental contributions made by Memoirs of the Blind and the essays on Artaud concerning such themes as blindness and the status of the visible surface or support. The idea of a nonvisible as condition of possibility of the visible, of a blindness within sight, was something we developed as a fundamental heterogeneity, or “anagrammatical” “incoherence” of the image,\(^\text{14}\) but it could or should have also been related to the operation of the hors champ (offscreen space) as “internally” determining and disrupting what is seen within the frame, such as in a classic case (e.g., Hitchcock) where the character onscreen reacts to something that the spectator is not shown; or—same thing from a different perspective—it could or should have better informed our references to montage, or to the discontinuity of the medium in general, especially as represented by the black frame that is the space between each separate photogram and by the ruptured juxtapositions of each shot and each sequence.

Similarly, Derrida’s work relating to Artaud, on what is called the “subjectile,” points to a different heterogeneity of the image, the one whereby the screen becomes a medium for the play of depth and density: where narrative impulsion and progression gives way to versions of the painterly or else to what Deleuze will privilege as the “time-image.”\(^\text{15}\) The image as a site for transmitting
the real thus comes to be superseded by complex mediations that suspend not only the mimetic function per se but also transmission or communication itself, involving ruptures and interruptions that by no means begin with what is seen onscreen. Film studies had for some time been showing that the film image, produced by a complex apparatus, never was a site of immediacy, but with Derrida technology comes to be understood as originary, emerging with and as any and every signifying mechanism: “the body of the image qua image is shot through [travaillée] with invisibility. . . . What can be seen in the film has less importance no doubt than the unsaid, the invisible that is cast like a throw of the dice.”

As we were already able to suggest in Screen/Play, the condition of possibility of everything that now goes by the name of new technology and new media—much of which was merely nascent in the second half of the 1980s (I remember having my first PC in 1985 and first accessing the World Wide Web in the early 1990s)—can be found in Derrida’s idea of postal adestination. The postcard in his book The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond is hypertextual through and through, and indeed Derrida’s readings hypertextualize in general, being able to do so because the signifying “surface” of any text is troubled, punctured as it were, by an invisibilizing or avisibilizing technological effect.

5. In Tourner les mots, written in the wake of Safaa Fathy’s Derrida’s Elsewhere, Derrida adopts the position of the “Actor.” In order to describe what that involves, he of course becomes a writer again but a writer writing under the influence of being filmed, in a sense even of filming. For it seems to me now, as in the 1980s, that discussion of cinema in the context of Derrida, or of Derrida in the context of cinema, cannot avoid treating of the cinematicism of his writing. In Screen/Play we dedicated the fifth chapter to two facing page commentaries of Truffaut’s Black and Blue and Lynch’s Blue Velvet, somewhat in mimicry of or at least inspired by the example of Glas and other texts. Derrida doesn’t hesitate to agree in “Cinema and Its Ghosts” that “[b]etween writing of the deconstructive type that interests me and cinema, there is an essential link”—a link determined by the exploitation of “all the possibilities of montage, that is, of plays with the rhythms, of grafts of quotations, insertions, changes in tone, changes in language, crossings between ‘disciplines’ and the rules of art, the arts. . . . . Deconstruction or not, a writer has always been an editor [monteur, ‘film editor,’ ‘filmmaker’].” That also implies an attention to the possibilities for rapidity and acceleration offered by new technologies. Right of Inspection already evoked the experience of being photographed
as the discomfort of “hurry up and keep still” (my formulation), which returns as a concern of *Tourner les mots* and can be related to Derrida’s reluctance to be photographed in earlier years and his continued mistrust of media exposure. Speed is thus something that he will both exploit and criticize, being attuned to the fact that speed is in fact a question of rhythm, of different speeds, and that fast is not always best: “I am writing in my room, in the end, to avoid the camera, cinema, television and photography. Not in order to escape or accuse the machine, but these machines, in the current state of their functioning. I prefer, provisionally, the tempo of another writing machine, another scene of writing, even another ‘cinematography’; at the same time slower, more patient, but also more supple and thus better adjusted to the infinitely greater speed of virtual micro-movements . . . another way to cut, select, sacrifice, ‘repress.’”

6. Work by Derrida from his acting in *Ghost Dance* and his collaboration on *Right of Inspection* to the interview “Cinema and Its Ghosts,” and from *Athens, Still Remains* to *Copy, Archive, Signature* militates in favor of organizing discussion of the photographic and cinematic around the question of spectrality. Echoing in many ways Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*—as is made clear in the 1980 essay “The Deaths of Roland Barthes”—Derrida analyzes the temporal disjunction between the now of perception and the *ça a été* of photographic exposure and finally perhaps the whole photo-cinematic apparatus from that point of view: “Cinema thus allows one to cultivate what could be called ‘grafts’ of spectrality; it inscribes traces of ghosts on a general framework [trame], the projected film, which is itself a ghost.” Spectrality becomes for Derrida the structuring force of cinema. It is the very form of its tracing, what in *Screen/Play* we were at some pains to call “writing”: “The cinematic experience belongs thoroughly to spectrality, which I link . . . to the very nature of the trace.” Spectrality operates across the referential analogization that is presumed to function between object in the world and image on the screen, the process that makes the image a photographic reproduction of that object while nevertheless remaining haunted by its absence. The photograph is in that very obvious sense a ghost of the object, not the object itself. But spectrality also governs the spectator’s relation to the screen, involving the projection of one’s own phantasmatic and phantomatic images, allowing one, for the time of “a little longer than an analytic [session],” to give oneself over to the unconscious (and here the second phase of Metz’s semiotics, published as *The Imaginary Signifier*, gains new relevance).
It does not stop there, however. Spectrality could also be related, on a whole other “level,” to the resituating of photography, and by extension cinema, that is necessitated by challenges to the priority accorded it on the basis of its being considered a superior mimetic art. Derrida introduces, rather unassumingly, a series of ideas along those lines in a dozen or so dense and provocative pages in *Copy, Archive, Signature*. His reference there is not explicitly to spectrality, but everything he develops can be interpreted within the context of an image whose mimetic assurance is undercut by various forms of uncanniness, doubled by effects of copying, interrupted by effects of delay, contrived by effects of technology. Is the photography moment so singular, he wonders, and is its referentiality unique if “every original imprint is divided as an archive” while preserving its reference? To what extent is the manipulation of the image, its performativity, a function of the digital revolution rather than of a classic photography that already exceeds “a mode of registering or recording that would be ‘constative?’” Indeed, starting with perception itself and all the way into so-called new media, are we not dealing with *remarkings of retracings* that are “at once active and passive . . . [in] a movement that is a priori photographic?”

Or, pursuing the inquiry from a different perspective, what if, instead of holding pride of place among technologies of mechanical reproducibility, photography were to seek a position within the field of technologies of spectralization, of traces in general? What if its “presumed phenomenological naturalism” were to be deconstructed by “a divisibility of the first time,” by a differential duration “that is correlative to a technics”? How should we understand or determine its status among technologies of time? Or indeed, within the relation between a manufactured time and “difference in light . . . [what is] perhaps the first possibility of the trace, of the archive and of everything that follows from it: memory, the techniques of memory, mnemotechnics, etc.?” What would film theory look like if it were to attempt to come to grips with the cinematicality of those concepts?

Finally, the version of spectrality that is called in “Cinema and Its Ghosts” the “intrinsic virtualization that marks any technical reproducibility” introduces the structure that Derrida has developed at length under the rubric of survival or survivance. The division of time between the actual moment of an event and the moment of its mediated visibility (as photograph, film, or televised broadcast, even where the latter claims to be “direct”) produces a spectral virtuality: “From now on, [the living present] bears death within itself and retranscribes in its own immediacy what ought as it were to survive it. It divides itself, in its life, between its life and its afterlife
survive], without which there would be no image, no recording. There would be no archive without this dehiscence, without this divisibility of the living present, which bears its specter within itself.”

What we might have more or less naively considered as the relation between Derrida’s thinking and new media now opens out onto other work by him, but in a way this means folding back over the emphases that seemed so important to film theory thirty years ago. Then, one used a series of “materialist” and “mediatist” insistences upon the technological apparatus in order to resist the realist and naturalist presumptions of cinema, arguing that at every level—from the ideological institution of monocular perspective through filming, montage, and the chemical processes of development all the way to the co-optation of the spectator—any real world that may have originally existed in front of the lens had been irremediably technologized: cinema was that technologization of the natural world. Now, the spectrality of survival means that some form of the life that cinema denaturalizes nevertheless remains, albeit phantastically, which has the converse effect of “enlivening” the image but in the sense of bringing it to bear upon a broad question concerning how what lives lives.

The image is inhabited by the ontological quandary of being both death and survival; it produces archival or technological life.

7. The archive also implies an ethical relation that Derrida calls a fiduciary relation; in fact, he considers the paradigm of responsibility, in the sense of respect, to function in relation to what survives or is to come: “There is no respect, and, therefore, no justice possible without this relation of fidelity or of promise, as it were, to what is no longer living or not living yet, to what is not simply present.” But there is a more specific—and at the same time more general—form of the fiduciary at work in cinema, referred to in “Cinema and Its Ghosts,” namely the faith or credence that has been precisely called in English the willing suspension of disbelief. That phrase describes the rather bizarre promise that the spectator makes—to him/herself? to the image? to the actors? to the director? to the apparatus?—to pretend to believe, to hold disbelief in check, to almost believe, at least to the extent of holding off disbelieving: “If I were to write about film, what would interest me above all is its mode and system of belief [croyance]. There is an altogether singular mode of believing [croire] in cinema: a century ago, an unprecedented experience of belief was invented.” Analysis of that unprecedented cinematic mode or regime, which comes across in that quote as the most explicit task that Derrida sets for film theory, would involve displacing attention from spectator
metapsychology (although, as I suggested above, the psychoanalytic-type investment of the spectator is not to be overlooked) toward the cinematic version of belief in a specter, an experience within which “belief is neither assured nor disputed.”

A Derridean film theory would thus be required to come to grips with the complicated and seemingly strange relation between technics and faith that Derrida has developed most extensively in the text “Faith and Knowledge.” As he reinforces in the Cahiers interview, “I believe one must connect the question of technicity with that of faith, in the religious and fiduciary sense, namely, the credit granted to an image.”34 One cannot, rationally speaking, consent to watch a film; one cannot watch it “successfully” without believing in it, which means believing as much in its machinic and technological contrivances as in its fiction (something already required for, say, a novel). In watching a film, we mobilize the same structure of trust that we mobilize when we believe what an interlocutor is telling us and when we believe what is happening in fiction in general. We trust the machine just as we trust a person—in each case we trust, believe, have faith—even though we may well claim to distinguish among forms of trust: that conferred on the machines used by a surgeon who is operating on us as distinguished from that we place in a car or a plane not to malfunction, and so on. In the case of cinema, one trusts, more precisely, the image produced by the machine, and one trusts that the characters performing in the image will behave like real people, but one does that on the basis of a peculiarly fascinating, frightening, or arousing play of light projected in the dark. We swear to or on this artifact as Hamlet swore to the ghost, even if we know that it will leave us on its own timetable and not ours, sending us, often dazed and confused, out into the light.

Belief (and religion), it turns out, both needs and fears the technology that it presumes it is immune from; technology, conversely, produces specters to which we can relate only by suspending the very reason without whose rigorous application it would not be possible. Film, Derrida argues, is uniquely positioned to enable analysis of that, analysis such as would give rise to a very different film theory.

Notes


13 Ibid., 187.
14 Ibid., 62, 86–90.
17 Brunette and Wills, Screen/Play, 185–86.
19 See the explanation repeated in Jacques Derrida, “La danse des fantômes: Entrevue avec Mark Lewis et Andrew Payne,” in Michaud, Masó, and Bassas, Penser à ne pas voir, 311–12.
24 Ibid., 27.
26 Derrida, Copy, Archive, Signature, 4, 6, 17.
27 Ibid., 8, 9, 15–17.
30 I investigate this question, with frequent reference to Derrida and survival, in my Inanimation: Theories of Inorganic Life (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 2016).
33 Ibid., 37.

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