**New Film History and the Moral Image Paradigm**

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*The Death of Cinema – History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* by Paolo Cherchi Usai. London: BFI Publishing, 2001. 134 pages. $42.06, paperback.

Cherchi Usai organizes the text into a collection of pithy observations and reflections on how contemporary film history problematically constructs its spatiotemporal framework through a historiographical model that emphasizes cultural/technological amnesia and fetish for the digital. It is a model that sees the ontology of the film artifact determined teleologically through aesthetic concepts emerging from spectatorship and visual culture. Each observation/reflection is delineated by a separate chapter with individual title headings, and there are fifty-two of these chapters altogether. As such, *The Death of Cinema*, can be understood as a treatise on the urgency to remedy postmodern cultural values with modernist material technology. The structure of the text is free-flowing and Cherchi Usai makes liberal use of citations in order to direct the reader to previous related “chapters”. There are two primary throughlines for the text with respect to Cherchi Usai’s intervention on contemporary film history: a need for structuralist schema to properly construct the film artifact’s ontology and build a new film history, and psychodynamic explanations for justifying the deconstruction of contemporary film history. Working in conjunction, these two disparate intellectual endeavors provide the foundation for Cherchi Usai’s the Moral Image paradigm – a structure where a new film history can form.

The marrying of structuralist sensibilities and critical psychoanalytics is a tenuous thing indeed, but Cherchi Usai cannot be faulted for attempting to renew our faith in the former while remediating and narrowing the scope of the latter. I would suggest that this approach falls somewhat short of its intention because he argues that a teleological fallacy emerging from visual culture determines contemporary film history through the wrongful denial of the film artifact’s inherent qualities, yet Cherchi Usai relies on psychoanalysis to explain how visual culture might find a new approach to understanding the film artifact. He validates visual culture’s qualitative practices and searches for a way to have this culture then value the qualitative aspects of the artifact’s nature. How can a culture undergirded by a selfish ideology also forego that selfishness and defer to something else? There is a dilemma at play. Cherchi Usai seems to recognize this dilemma as legitimate and the Model Image paradigm is flawed for its perpetuation of this dilemma. Cherchi Usai offers his Moral Image paradigm but, in the end, fails to provide a compelling argument for how the Moral Image paradigm and human visual culture can co-exist.

The introduction to the text is provided by acclaimed filmmaker and auteur, Martin Scorsese. Scorsese notes that there is a lack of global conservation strategy for film while corporate greed often produces a détournement for the rhetoric of restoration in service of extending older film’s commercial revenue windows. Cherchi Usai launches his own polemics from this introduction noting that culture is in the process of ignoring the loss of its own image. Digital technology does not provide a substitute for motion picture stock in the preservation process. For Cherchi Usai, the fetish for the digital is a form of cultural fundamentalism whose ideological character misconstrues and stigmatizes all opponents as being simply, neo-luddite. Through this ideology, the digital format guarantees a spurious historical framework for film preservation – namely, if a film has been preserved digitally, then the job of the preservationist is at an end.

Both, the Scorsese and Cherchi Usai introductions establish that the Moral Image paradigm and endeavor to construct a new film history have a distinct political character. Cherchi Usai seems unable to offer the reader this new paradigm in such a way that it relieves us of burdensome ideology. The Moral Image paradigm is clearly underpinned by a powerful ideology, but Cherchi Usai relies on his career experience as a film archivist and media preservationist to justify the “right” in his paradigm and the “wrong” in the current model. The structuralist rationale for the film artifact’s ontology can be questioned - if the Moral Image paradigm is pervaded by ideology then how can there be an assurance that what we believe to be the film artifact’s inherent qualities is not simply a projection of our own psychological urges or desires?

Cherchi Usai relies on Kantian notions of the good and Metzian psychoanalytic semiotics to explain the “death” of film history in the contemporary moment and then critique the alternative paradigm of the Model Image through comparing it with his concept of the Moral Image. He writes, “cinema is the art of destroying moving images” (Cherchi Usai, 7). For Cherchi Usai, the historiography of cinema has been poised to express the quantitative aspects of the medium (ie. material, technological) such that moving image destruction implies perpetual renewal of fresh images. Thus, history is understood in a narrow sense – film history has been constituted through synchronic meaning for the film artifact as opposed to diachronic meaning, therefore, the history of an artifact reflects a particular moment as opposed to a full temporal framework of past, present and future. This is the “death” of film history for Cherchi Usai. I would like to suggest that Cherchi Usai is interested in a poetic Hegelian dialectic process for structuring film history around the film artifact. This process understands the film artifact represented in film history where the thesis of the present image and the antithesis of its inevitable destruction synthesize a new meaning in the emergence of the image. This emergence denotes equal value in the film artifact’s assured past and its vital present. Thus, a full temporal framework is constructed leading to the formation of a new film history.

Arguably, Cherchi Usai’s deconstruction of contemporary film history works and he is correct in seeing that history as having been formed “backward”. The ideology that pervades visual culture determined the meaning of the film artifact and its value to film history through aesthetic explanatory arguments. The aesthetic principles (the film image in a perpetual state of renewal or repeatability) established the terms for epistemology in film history which subsequently led to the ontology of the film artifact (hence, teleological fallacy). Cherchi Usai offers a structuralist approach whereby the film artifact’s inherent qualities (temporally diachronic and spatially dynamic) determine its ontology. This ontology provides a proper historical framework for epistemology. The epistemology sets up a historiographical model bereft of epochal periodization and thus aesthetic principles emerge explained by the film artifact. I believe that Cherchi Usai constructs a spatiotemporal register that is deductively sensible for the quantitative aspects of film history and reasonably sound for its qualitative aspects. The remediation of visual culture through psychoanalytic terms is where the project takes a wrong turn, in this reviewer’s humble opinion.

As much as Cherchi Usai is sincerely interested in remediating structuralism in the postmodern context in order to enable the construction of a new film history, he also slips into murky territory logically when employing psychoanalytic concepts to qualify those structures. Cherchi Usai refers to the film spectator as an “unconscious” and “impotent” witness to the extinction of moving images because the decay process is beyond the viewer’s immediate scope as a consumer of film. Preservation is deemed an oblique quality of the artifact thus justifying neglect in the preservation process. Cherchi Usai argues in a manner that recalls the French Impressionist filmmakers’ concept of photogénie (Jean Epstein, Germain Dulac). If film were to be understood as having inherent qualities beyond what humans assign in meaning through their consumption of film, then each artifact would construct its own historical framework precluding current periodization in contemporary film history. The artifact wouldn’t be a repeated past event in the present for the spectator but instead would be a temporally diachronic and spatially dynamic object emerging in the present distinct in that moment from what it is in any other moment. This would constitute a full deconstruction of film history proper.

For Cherchi Usai, periodization defines the political character of film in its historical discourse. Thus, ideology (through political valence) can introduce concepts into that historical discourse that justify notions of “utopia” – the film serves humans, as opposed to there being a synergistic relationship (again the assumed dominant synchronic meaning for film artifacts constitutes and reflects this utopic paradigm). Just as film history requires deconstruction, according to Cherchi Usai, so too does film theory which understands film artifacts as ephemera thus setting up a framework of analysis through periodization. Film artifacts in contemporary film history do not constitute their own history in the discourse, thus the moving images of the film artifact are conceived by Cherchi Usai as being “dead” – they are virtual in the present, and only actual in the past. Their meaning in the moment of consumption is atrophied – zombielike – leading Cherchi Usai to refer to the state as “deteriora sequitur” (Cherchi Usai, 45).

The aforementioned issues of cultural/technological amnesia guide visual culture and mediate the ideology of that culture. Cherchi Usai understands the ideology of visual culture to be an ideology of negation or decay because of how both human perceptual equipment and the cinematic apparatus operate (intermittency and after-image of impressions). Amnesia is also about negation – the negation of memory impressions. Cherchi Usai suggests that human beings reason through forgetting the image because of an acceptance for the loss of memory. Humans come to accept that a film artifact or film image is either lost or in a uniform state (presence-absence false dichotomy). Cherchi Usai writes, “no history of cinema can be established without confronting the issues of the physiology and the psychology of perception” (Cherchi Usai, 51). Film decay and lost films are what determine periodization in film history, precluding the film artifact from articulating its own spatiotemporal coordinates in the discursive formation.

Cherchi Usai’s conception of psychoanalysis is entrenched in Metzian semiotics and Baudrian apparatus theory. However, the corollary on volatility in human visual impression to human memory impression is a fallacious one. Psychoanalytically speaking, the human psyche is composed of a conscious and unconscious where memories lost to the conscious are likely not lost to the unconscious. On the other hand, visual impressions are indeed lost once replaced with a fresh image and after the fading of the after-image. Through Cherchi Usai’s metaphor, it would imply that visual culture would not have a total cultural amnesia for film artifacts, just as the human psyche doesn’t completely lose memories even once they are forgotten by the conscious mind. Cherchi Usai uses psychoanalysis with some degree of confirmation bias thus compromising the deconstruction component of his project.

Cherchi Usai is the foremost figure in the world of film archiving and media preservation. He is the co-founder and former senior curator at the Motion Picture Department at George Eastman House, as well as being the former Director of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation. *The Death of Cinema* has gone through several iterations throughout Cherchi Usai’s career as he has been navigating a personal psychological trauma site regarding the film industry’s callousness toward responsible film preservation. As such, there are potentially more iterations of the text that might follow the 2001 edition. Cherchi Usai’s project as gleaned from the text has a distinct political character where he clearly advocates for a new film history based on the radical alteration of contemporary visual culture. The prose is punchy through its segmentation into highly concentrated “chapters”, but because the scope is so large the pithiness of observations and reflections can sometimes come off as pat. Cherchi Usai makes liberal use of photo plates (almost one per chapter) and there is something ironic about the critique of visual culture being serviced by photographs that are assumed to naturally fit with that chapter topic.

Cherchi Usai has produced a tour de force as critique for contemporary film history, however, the alternative paradigm of the Moral Image that is offered by him lacks a measure of soundness for its proper implementation into visual culture. The construction of a new film history through primacy of the film artifact and acknowledgement of the artifact’s inherent qualities follows reasonably from the critique of contemporary film history’s formation in teleological processes. Cherchi Usai soundly reasons through how contemporary film history’s periodization is pervaded by visual culture’s ideology and that the film artifact’s ontology is fallaciously manufactured from aesthetic principles within that ideology. However, the structuralism employed by Cherchi Usai is reduced in effectiveness when he uses psychoanalysis to qualify structures. The deconstruction process through structuralist logic works while the moral justifications of deconstruction through psychoanalysis do not. This problem renders the text somewhat incoherent in its logic, reveals that a spurious ideology underpins Cherchi Usai’s project and compromises the validity of the Moral Image paradigm offered by Cherchi Usai. *The Death of the Cinema* becomes a compelling text, more for what it can’t do than what it does do, in understanding contemporary film history. Marrying structuralist quantitative methods of analysis with qualitative psychoanalytic methods is a synthesis worthy of all our efforts. Cherchi Usai’s text successfully launches this form of inquiry, leaving ample opportunity for other theorists and historians to emerge with their own unique blend. Perhaps, there can be no total history for film history through this synthetic method, and thus the “death” of cinema can fortunately be understood as an ironic misnomer for the more holistic project implied through Cherchi Usai’s work.