From Silver Screens to Liquid Platforms: Debating the Ontology of Cinema in the Digital Era.

من الشاشات الفضية إلى المنصات السائلة: مساءلة أنطولوجيا السينما في العصر الرقمي

OUAHABI Naziha ✷ [1]

[1]University of Blida2,Algeria, n.ouahabi@univ-blida2.dz

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Abstract:

This study examines the profound ontological transformation of cinema as it migrates from the traditional "Silver Screen" to the digital ecosystem of "Liquid Platforms." The research analyzes how the transition from celluloid materiality to algorithmic code has dismantled the classical cinematic dispositif, relocating the filmic experience from a collective theatrical ritual to fragmented, individualized, and data-driven environments. By employing a media-archaeological and philosophical approach, the paper investigates the rise of "algorithmic authorship," where predictive analytics and Video-on-Demand (VOD) interfaces reshape narrative structures and spectator subjectivity. The study further explores the aesthetic shift from "Cinema" to "Content," highlighting the tensions between global platform hegemony and national cultural sovereignty. The findings suggest that while digital liquidity offers unprecedented accessibility, it simultaneously imposes a commodified logic that challenges the artistic autonomy of the moving image. The study concludes with strategic recommendations for developing a post-cinematic theoretical framework and fostering digital resistance through independent cultural cooperatives.

Keywords: Cinema Ontology; Liquid Platforms; Algorithmic Authorship; Digital Hegemony; VOD Platforms.

ملخص:

تستقصي هذه الدراسة التحول الأنطولوجي العميق للسينما مع ارتحالها من "الشاشات الفضية" التقليدية إلى المنظومة الرقمية لـ "المنصات السائلة"، حيث تحلل كيف أدى الانتقال من مادية الفيلم الخام إلى الشفرة الخوارزمية إلى تفكيك "الديسبوزيتيف" السينمائي الكلاسيكي، ونقل تجربة المشاهدة من طقس جماعي غامر إلى بيئات مجزأة وفردانية موجهة بالبيانات. وباعتماد نهج الأركيولوجيا الإعلامية والتحليل الفلسفي، يبحث البحث في صعود "المؤلف الخوارزمي" وإعادة تشكيل البنى السردية وذاتية المتفرج، كما تتقصى الدراسة التحول الجمالي من "السينما" كفن إلى "المحتوى" كسلعة، مسلطة الضوء على التوترات القائمة بين الهيمنة الرقمية للمنصات العالمية والسيادة الثقافية الوطنية. وتشير النتائج إلى أن السيولة الرقمية، رغم توفيرها وصولاً غير مسبوق، تفرض منطقاً تسليعياً يتحدى الاستقلالية الفنية للصورة، مما يستدعي تطوير إطار نظري لـ "ما بعد السينما" وتعزيز المقاومة الرقمية عبر التعاونيات الثقافية المستقلة.

كلمات مفتاحية: أنطولوجيا السينما؛ المنصات السائلة؛ المؤلف الخوارزمي؛ الهيمنة الرقمية؛ منصات الفيديو حسب الطلب (VOD).

Introduction:

The cinematic medium is currently navigating a period of radical ontological destabilization, a "tectonic shift" that challenges the very definitions established over a century of film theory. Since the inception of the Cinématographe by the Lumière brothers, cinema has been inextricably linked to a specific physical and social *dispositif*: the collective immersion within a darkened architectural space, focused on a monumental "Silver Screen." This traditional mode of exhibition created what Francesco Casetti (2015, p. 22) describes as a "filmic experience" characterized by its fixed materiality and a dedicated, singular gaze. However, the dawn of the digital era and the subsequent hegemony of Video-on-Demand (VOD) platforms like Netflix, Shahid, and Mubi have initiated a migration of the moving image from these "sacred" theaters to what can be termed "Liquid Platforms." In this new paradigm, the cinematic object is no longer a stable, celluloid entity but a fluid, algorithmic data-stream that is consumed in fragmented, individualized, and non-linear environments.

This transition from "Silver Screens" to "Liquid Platforms" is not merely a technical upgrade in distribution; it represents a fundamental re-engineering of the cinematic "aura." As Lev Manovich (2016, p. 48) argues, the digital image lacks the indexical anchor of physical film, existing instead as an infinitely malleable code that can be reformatted for any interface, from a high-definition home theater to a handheld smartphone. This "liquidity" fundamentally alters the spectator's relationship with time and space. The ritualistic, scheduled attendance of a film screening has been replaced by the "on-demand" logic of the digital age, where the authority of the director is challenged by the autonomy of the user—who can pause, skip, or binge-watch at will. Furthermore, the introduction of algorithmic curation has shifted the role of the "gatekeeper" from human critics and curators to mathematical engines that "recommend" content based on predictive analytics, thereby reshaping the aesthetic horizons of the modern audience (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 118).

Moreover, the semiotic shift from "Film" to "Content" signifies a profound commodification of the moving image within the attention economy. In the "liquid" ecosystem, cinema is often stripped of its historical and artistic autonomy, becoming just one of many competing data-points in a multitasking digital landscape. This leads to a critical paradox: while digital technology has democratized access to global cinema, it has simultaneously eroded the specific spatial and social conditions that once defined the "cinematic event." As the boundaries between cinema, television, and social media continue to blur, the medium faces an existential crisis regarding its unique ontological status. We are witnessing the birth of a "post-cinema" era where the image is no longer a window to a shared world, but a mirror of individualized data-patterns (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 95).

In light of this discourse, the following central research question emerges: **How does the digital liquidity of platforms and algorithms reshape the ontological identity of cinema and redefine the subjective experience of the modern spectator?**

1. *The Ontological Shift: From Fixed Matter to Digital Liquidity*

This section explores the transition of cinema from a stable, physical entity into a fluid, data-driven "liquid" state. By examining the shift from celluloid to digital code, the relocation of the

viewing ritual, and the emergence of algorithmic authorship, we delineate how the fundamental essence of the cinematic object is being reconstructed within digital ecosystems.

1-1. The Materiality of the Image: From Celluloid to Code

The transition from analog film to digital data signifies a radical departure from the "indexical" nature of the cinematic image. Unlike the physical grain of celluloid, which bears a direct chemical trace of reality, the digital image is a mathematical construct composed of discrete pixels and metadata. As Lev Manovich (2016, p. 44) argues, the digital cinematic image is essentially a "rendered" output of underlying algorithms, making it an infinitely malleable data-packet rather than a fixed physical object.

This shift introduces a new "liquidity" where the film is no longer a finalized, static entity but a fluid file that can be instantly reformatted, compressed, or edited. This lack of material permanence challenges the traditional ontological status of the "master print," as the digital file exists only as a potentiality until it is decoded by specific software and displayed on a screen (Manovich, 2016, p. 52).

Consequently, the "purity" of the cinematic frame is replaced by a hybrid digital surface that merges cinema with computer graphics and telecommunications. In this digital ontology, the distinction between "live-action" and "animation" blurs, as every frame is subject to algorithmic manipulation, leading to what can be termed a "post-indexical" cinema (Casetti, 2015, p. 18).

1-2. The Disappearance of the Theatrical Ritual

Cinema has long been a powerful medium for political and social expression, playing a pivotal role in mass mobilization and inspiring revolutions throughout history. (Ferrah, 2025, p318). It was historically defined by its unique *dispositif*—the architectural space of the theater and the collective, focused gaze of the audience. The rise of liquid platforms has dismantled this necessity, relocating the cinematic experience into the fragmented spheres of domestic and mobile life. Francesco Casetti (2015, p. 24) suggests that this "relocation" causes cinema to lose its monumental status, transforming it from a public event into a private, casual activity.

This shift fundamentally alters the power dynamic between the screen and the spectator; the viewer is no longer "captured" by the immersive darkness of the cinema but is a "user" who manages the flow of images. The authority of the projectionist is replaced by the play-pause-skip functions of the interface, leading to a fragmented temporal experience that breaks the traditional linear flow of the film (Casetti, 2015, p. 31).

As the cinematic canvas shrinks to fit handheld devices, the "aura" of the event dissolves into the interruptions of daily digital life. Cinema becomes just one among many competing notifications in a multitasking environment, leading to a "dilution" of the aesthetic intensity that once characterized the silver screen experience (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 102).

1-3. Algorithmic Authorship vs. The Auteur

In the ecosystem of liquid platforms, the ontology of the film is increasingly shaped by recommendation engines and predictive analytics. Platforms like Netflix utilize data to determine narrative structures and casting choices, effectively making the "algorithm" a silent co-author of the

cinematic work. Gomez-Uribe and Hunt (2016, p. 7) note that these systems prioritize "engagement metrics," which can dictate the very rhythm and pacing of the digital content.

This data-driven development undermines the classical "Auteur theory," where the director's singular vision was the primary source of the film's meaning. In the digital era, the "content" is often optimized to satisfy the taste profiles generated by big data, leading to a standardization of visual storytelling that ensures commercial predictability (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2016, p. 11).

The resulting "algorithmic aesthetics" create a feedback loop where the spectator is only exposed to narratives that mirror their previous choices. This narrows the ontological horizon of cinema from a medium of discovery and surprise to a personalized commodity designed to maintain user retention at all costs (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 125).

2. The Spectator's Experience: Fragmentation and Immersion

This section analyzes the shift in the spectator's subjective engagement as cinema migrates to digital platforms. By examining the rise of the hyper-personalized gaze, the temporal shifts in binge-watching, and the decline of collective memory, we explore how the "liquid" environment reconfigures the psychological and social dimensions of cinematic reception.

2-1. The Hyper-Personalized Gaze

The move toward liquid platforms allows for a hyper-personalized experience where the algorithm "curates" the cinematic world for the individual. This narrows the spectator's horizon to a reflection of their own past choices, creating what is often termed a "filter bubble" in filmic taste. As Hallinan and Striphas (2016, p. 119) observe, the algorithmic gaze replaces the accidental discovery of art with a predictive model of consumption.

This personalization redefines the viewer's subjectivity; the spectator is no longer an explorer of a diverse cultural landscape but a consumer within a closed-loop system. The platform's interface actively shapes the "gaze" by prioritizing visual thumbnails and trailers that align with the user's data profile, thereby pre-determining the emotional tone of the cinematic encounter (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 122).

Furthermore, this individualized consumption leads to a "subjective isolation," where the aesthetic experience is no longer shared in real-time with a broader public. The spectator's engagement becomes a data-point in a feedback loop, reinforcing existing biases rather than challenging the viewer with the "otherness" of diverse cinematic languages (Casetti, 2015, p. 58).

2-2. Binge-Watching and Narrative Flow

The "liquidity" of platforms encourages "binge-watching," a practice that fundamentally alters the temporal ontology of cinema. Films and serial narratives are no longer isolated events but parts of a continuous, never-ending stream of content. Thomas Elsaesser (2016, p. 115) notes that this "flow" dissolves the traditional boundaries between beginning, middle, and end, creating a "modular" narrative experience.

This temporal shift affects how the spectator processes narrative complexity; the intensity of the "marathon" viewing session can lead to a deeper immersion but also to a more ephemeral retention of the work. The "cinema of the stream" prioritizes immediate gratification and cliffhangers, ensuring that the spectator remains tethered to the platform's ecosystem for extended periods (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 119).

Consequently, the "work" of cinema loses its status as a distinct aesthetic object and becomes a "utility" within a lifestyle habit. The act of viewing is transformed from a dedicated artistic contemplation into a background activity or a compulsive consumption pattern, where the "quantity" of content often supersedes its "quality" (Casetti, 2015, p. 62).

2-3. The Loss of Collective Memory

As cinema consumption becomes increasingly individualized and private, the "collective memory" once fostered by the theatrical experience begins to fade. Historically, cinema acted as a "public sphere" where social groups shared a common visual history. In the digital era, as Casetti (2015, p. 55) argues, cinema moves from being a collective event to a "private data point," weakening its role as a communal cultural anchor.

The lack of a shared viewing time and space means that the "national" or "social" conversation around cinema is fragmented into thousands of micro-discourses. This fragmentation makes it difficult for cinema to provoke widespread social change or to serve as a mirror for collective identity, as the audience is no longer a "public" but a set of "users" (Jin, 2015, p. 102).

In the absence of the physical theater, the social ritual of "going to the movies" is replaced by the "scroll." This shift erodes the historical consciousness of the medium, as platforms prioritize "newness" and "trending" content over the preservation and communal celebration of cinematic heritage (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 132).

3. The Aesthetics of "Content" vs. "Cinema"

This section investigates the aesthetic implications of re-branding cinematic works as "content" within digital ecosystems. By analyzing the commodification of the image, the adaptation of visual language to small screens, and the persistent nostalgic longing for "analog" aesthetics, we examine how the artistic value of cinema is being renegotiated in the age of liquid platforms.

3-1. The Commodification of the Image

In the era of liquid platforms, films are increasingly re-categorized as "content," a term that strips the image of its unique artistic autonomy. This semantic shift reflects a fundamental change in value, where the moving image is appraised primarily for its "traffic" and "engagement" potential rather than its aesthetic or philosophical depth. As Lev Manovich (2016, p. 60) argues, the "content" logic treats the cinematic work as a filler for a data-pipe, designed to be consumed rapidly.

This commodification leads to a "flatness" in the digital catalog, where a masterpiece of world cinema is presented with the same visual weight as a low-budget viral video. The platform’s interface homogenizes the aesthetic experience, reducing complex artistic visions to "tiles" in a grid, which encourages a "superficial" scanning behavior among spectators (Manovich, 2016, p. 64).

Consequently, the "work of art" is replaced by the "asset." The financial success of a film on a liquid platform is often measured by its ability to prevent "churn" (subscriber cancellation), leading to a production logic that favors "safe" and "formulaic" aesthetics over experimental or challenging cinema (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2016, p. 15).

3-2. Visual Language of the Small Screen

Cinematic language is undergoing a structural adaptation to meet the demands of "liquid" viewing on mobile and domestic devices. Filmmakers are increasingly adopting tighter framing, frequent close-ups, and faster editing rhythms to ensure "readability" on small, low-resolution screens. (Hadouche, Louise, 2025, p351).

Thomas notes that the "epic" scale and deep-focus compositions of classical cinema are being sacrificed for a "functional" clarity suited for the mobile user. (Thomas Elsaesser,2016, p. 128)

This "small-screen aesthetic" diminishes the importance of background detail and subtle visual metaphors that require a large theatrical canvas to be fully appreciated. The "spectacle" is no longer about the grandeur of the landscape or the complexity of the mise-en-scène, but about the immediate emotional impact of the human face and rapid narrative progression (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 131).

Furthermore, the lighting and color grading of modern digital productions are often optimized for backlit LED screens rather than projection. This technical shift results in a "digital sheen" that lacks the textural depth of traditional cinematography, creating a standardized "look" that characterizes the majority of streaming-era "content" (Manovich, 2016, p. 72).

3-3. The Persistence of Cinematic Longing

Despite the totalizing shift toward digital liquidity, there remains a profound nostalgic longing for the "silver screen" and its analog textures. Many digital directors and cinematographers utilize sophisticated filters and software to "mimic" the grain, scratches, and color breathing of physical film. This practice proves that the "ontology of cinema" continues to haunt the digital file as an idealized aesthetic ghost (Manovich, 2016, p. 68).

This nostalgia is not merely stylistic but reflects a desire for the "authenticity" and "permanence" that digital code lacks. The popularity of "retro" aesthetics in digital cinema serves as a defensive mechanism against the perceived "coldness" and "fluidity" of the digital medium, attempting to anchor the liquid image in a simulated historical past (Casetti, 2015, p. 74).

Ironically, the same platforms that promote digital liquidity often use the "prestige" of traditional cinema to market their high-end productions. By mimicking the visual codes of the silver screen, these platforms attempt to borrow the "aura" of an art form they are simultaneously dismantling, revealing a deep ontological tension at the heart of the digital era (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 140).

4. Cultural Sovereignty and Global Streaming

This section explores the geopolitical implications of digital liquidity and the dominance of global VOD platforms. By analyzing the hegemony of streaming giants, the digital divide in cinematic access, and the emergence of digital resistance, we examine how "liquid cinema" affects the cultural sovereignty of national film industries and the diversity of global narratives.

4-1. The Hegemony of Global Platforms

Global VOD platforms act as "cultural gatekeepers," wielding the power to determine which national stories are produced and distributed on a global scale. This centralized control often results in a "globalized aesthetic," where local cultural nuances are flattened to fit a universal narrative formula that appeals to a broad, international subscriber base. As Dal Yong Jin (2015, p. 88) argues,

this "platform imperialism" threatens the diversity of independent and national cinemas by imposing a neo-liberal market logic on artistic expression.

The algorithmic prioritization of high-budget, Western-centric content often pushes regional and non-Western cinemas to the margins of the digital catalog. This "digital displacement" makes it increasingly difficult for local filmmakers to reach their own domestic audiences without conforming to the stylistic and thematic requirements of global distributors (Jin, 2015, p. 92).

Consequently, cultural sovereignty is compromised as the "data-driven" decisions of global corporations supersede national cultural policies. The "liquid" nature of these platforms allows them to bypass traditional regulatory frameworks, leading to a landscape where global tech giants hold more influence over a nation's visual culture than its own local institutions (Jin, 2015, p. 98).

4-2. The Digital Divide in Film Access

The "liquidity" of cinema is not a universal phenomenon; it is strictly dependent on high-speed internet infrastructure and digital literacy. This dependency creates a new "ontology of access," where significant portions of the global population are excluded from the digital cinematic dialogue. As Jin (2015, p. 95) observes, the transition to streaming often reinforces existing socio-economic inequalities, leaving "disconnected" regions in a state of cultural invisibility.

In many parts of the Global South, the disappearance of physical cinemas has not been met with a corresponding rise in affordable digital access. This creates a "cinematic vacuum," where the historical and communal experience of film is lost, and the new digital alternatives remain a luxury for the urban elite (Jin, 2015, p. 101).

Furthermore, the "subscription model" of liquid platforms creates a financial barrier that restricts the "right to culture." Unlike the public nature of the traditional theater or broadcast television, the digital stream is a "walled garden" that requires continuous payment, transforming the spectator from a citizen into a permanent "subscriber" (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 132).

4-3. Resistance and Independent Digital Spaces

While major platforms dominate the market, the same digital "liquidity" provides tools for radical resistance and the emergence of niche cinematic spaces. Independent platforms and digital archives allow for the preservation and distribution of experimental, political, and marginalized films that would otherwise be lost. Hallinan and Striphas (2016, p. 132) suggest that these "counter-algorithms" can foster a diverse digital public sphere that challenges the mainstream narrative.

Filmmakers are also utilizing digital liquidity to bypass traditional censorship and state-controlled distribution networks. The ability to share "liquid" files across borders enables a global solidarity among independent creators, allowing for a "transnational" cinema that exists outside the control of both global corporations and national governments (Jin, 2015, p. 108).

Ultimately, the digital era offers a dual potential: it is both a tool for unprecedented cultural hegemony and a platform for profound liberation. The future of cinematic sovereignty depends on the ability of creators and audiences to navigate these "liquid" waters, reclaiming the digital space as a site for authentic cultural expression rather than mere data-consumption (Casetti, 2015, p. 82).

Drawing upon the preceding analytical framework, which traced the migration of the moving image from materiality to code and from theater to platform, the study yields the following key findings:

- The ontological shift of cinema from a fixed, "indexical" material entity (celluloid) to a state of "digital liquidity" characterized by infinite malleability.
- The dismantling of the traditional cinematic *dispositif*, transitioning the viewer's experience from a collective, immersive ritual to fragmented, individualized consumption.
- The emergence of "algorithmic authorship," where big data and predictive analytics act as aesthetic co-authors that dictate narrative structures and spectator tastes.
- The re-branding of cinema as "content," leading to its commodification within the global attention economy and the erosion of its artistic autonomy.
- The structural adaptation of visual language to fit "liquid" screens through tighter framing, faster editing, and optimized digital aesthetics for mobile devices.
- A growing tension between the "digital hegemony" of global VOD platforms and the "cultural sovereignty" of national and independent film industries.
- The transformation of the spectator from a "passive viewer" within a controlled environment to an "active user" who manages the temporal and spatial flow of the image.
- The persistence of "analog nostalgia" in digital filmmaking as a symbolic attempt to reclaim the "aura" and authenticity lost in the transition to binary code.

CONCLUSION

The transition of cinema from "Silver Screens" to "Liquid Platforms" represents more than a mere evolution in distribution technology; it is a fundamental reconfiguration of the medium's ontology. While the digital era has democratized access and offered unprecedented flexibility, it has simultaneously eroded the historical "aura" of the cinematic ritual and subordinated artistic vision to the logic of the algorithm. Cinema today exists in a state of flux, caught between its legacy as a monumental public art and its future as a hyper-personalized, commodified data-stream.

Ultimately, the survival of cinema as a distinct aesthetic form depends on our ability to navigate this liquidity without losing the essence of the "cinematic event." As the boundaries between the spectator and the interface continue to blur, the challenge lies in reclaiming the digital space as a site of cultural sovereignty and creative resistance. We must ensure that technology serves as a bridge to new visual horizons rather than a closed loop of predictive consumption, preserving the transformative power of the moving image for future generations.

Based on the comprehensive analysis provided, we arrive at the following strategic recommendations:

- Developing a new "Post-Cinematic" theoretical framework to redefine film aesthetics and the spectator's rights in the age of algorithmic liquidity.
- Encouraging national film industries to establish independent digital streaming cooperatives to safeguard cultural sovereignty against global platform hegemony.
- Integrating "Algorithmic Literacy" into film studies curricula to empower future filmmakers to navigate and resist data-driven narrative pressures.

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