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The Posthuman Future(s) of Film

Max Bergmann
International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

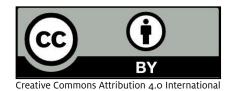Contact: max.bergmann@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

In *Fast Forward. The Future(s) of the Cinematic Arts*, Holly Willis charts an extensive overview of contemporary cinematic art in all its diversity. Analyzing artworks ranging from websites and apps to conventional fiction films, she is able to connect the current 'post-cinematic' moment to a decided shift towards posthumanism. To do so, she explores the different aspects – techno-logical, aesthetic, and practical – of an increasingly decentered cinematic universe, identifying the posthuman perspectives and techniques prevalent in the artworks she considers.

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New media is rapidly developing all around us, changing the way in which we navigate, communicate, and not least, watch films: In the age of post-cinema, „moving images are now found on cell phones and computers, inside cardboard viewers and high-tech goggles, on giant screens throughout major cities and ensconced in museums, galleries and art spaces" (p. 1). Amidst these changes, Holly Willis's *Fast Forward* tries to chart the way in which cinema and adjacent art forms not only represent and reflect, but also incorporate new technologies. In her expansive analysis of artworks that loosely fit under the umbrella term of the „post-cinematic", she shows that the shift towards post-cinema coincides with a simultaneous shift to posthumanism, highlighting the myriad ways this is negotiated in current cinematic arts. To do so, she draws on a wide-ranging array of theoretical backgrounds – from film theory to media history, cultural studies and network theory – as well as previous studies, positioning her work firmly in the growing list of publications concerned with post-cinema. But the basis of the book's argument is a glut of source material, including virtual reality projects, websites, apps, and architectural media installations. The result is a highly engaging account of cinematic arts as a way of understanding how contemporary subjectivity is reconfigured by new technologies, and

how it finds new expressions in the analyzed artworks.

To accommodate the broad definition of post-cinema as a new way of cinematic storytelling, sometimes still anchored in the old apparatus, sometimes completely diverging in trans-medial forays, Willis centers her chapters around themes and practices rather than specific art forms. In the first chapter she provides an overview with different artists standing in as key examples for the main issues like „the role of the [physical] ‚medium'" or „what it means to be human in the posthuman context" (p. 27). Subsequently in chapter two, these categories begin with (technological) shifts in the practice of filmmaking and disruptions of the classic workflow, e.g. „Transmedia Story Design" (p. 47ff.). Others include „Live Cinema" as a technique of conducting cinema as live performance (ch. 3), the city as both venue and content of cinematic art (ch. 4) or the evolution and narrative challenges of virtual reality (ch. 6). After brief theoretical and historical introductions, Willis goes on to dissect different artworks, at times following the entire œuvre of an artist, but mostly ends up switching seamlessly between artists and media. The strength of this approach is that it is able to capture an enormous span of different artworks, showcasing developments, potentials, and shortcomings of post-cinema in all its diversity. As a point of reference and starting point, this is incredibly useful, but one obvious drawback can be the depth of analysis, which sometimes fails to go beyond mere description or an initial idea.

Nevertheless, more often than not, the analyses prove to be illuminating, as is the case when Willis turns her attention to the interface as a crucial new tool of post-cinema (ch. 5), stating that it „acts as the marker of the shift from linear cinematic story to interaction, and as such, plays a very significant role in ordering the experience of participants […]" (p. 125). She outlines different experiments of interactive storytelling like *The Wilderness Downtown* (2010) by Chris Milk, where the user puts in her home address and the website creates a personalized narrative with help from Google Earth and Street View. This creates a sense of intimacy and privacy you usually do not encounter online, eliciting in Willis „a newfound respect for [her] laptop and a hopeful sense that it might indeed be possible to generate moments of intimacy and aesthetic pleasure that were entirely new" (p. 122). Later in the chapter, this sense is heightened in her description of *Strange Rain* (2011) by Erik Loyer, a nonlinear story experiment that users can interact with through „tapping, dragging, and caressing" (p. 134) the screen. Here they reflect on the tactility of their interactions with mobile devices that is usually reserved for intimate relationships. The surprising omission of interactive fiction films like *Possibilia* (2014) by Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert in this chapter can easily be forgiven among the rest of the examples she uses. Mostly because for readers, these analyses are indeed eye-opening not only on a scholarly level, but personally, and discovering digital artworks that tackle our hyper-technologized and networked cultures is arguably one of the biggest joys of *Fast Forward*.

Willis's approach is captured best in the chapter on virtual reality and the networked self, where she convincingly traces an increasing use of virtual cameras in Hollywood fiction films and CGI-created perspectives independent of a physical point of view to virtual reality (VR) in its diverse forms. In all of these different media platforms and technological developments she discovers a posthuman perspective, be it a „storytelling experience that does not presume the human as the central axis for both agency and perspective" (p. 142) in conventional fiction films or the radical experience of controlling another body in VR storytelling. In this way, Willis is able to highlight concrete manifestations of the posthuman in different media and artworks, making for a rich analysis of contemporary cultural production.

In its entirety, *Fast Forward* presents an extensive overview of both current research on post-cinematic art and the artworks themselves, which will be welcomed by researchers for its trans-disciplinary bibliography and wealth of source material alone. The analyses, while often succinct and illuminating, sometimes fall short of deep insights, but always provide invaluable starting points to further research. Especially by frequently basing her study in practice and practical technologies, Holly Willis's contribution to the scholarship on post-cinema proves to be highly relevant and a delight for everyone interested in the future(s) of film.

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German Abstract:

Die posthumanen Zukünfte des Films

In *Fast Forward. The Future(s) of the Cinematic Arts* entwirft Holly Willis einen extensiven Überblick der gegenwärtigen kinematographischen Künste in all ihrer Diversität. In ihren Analysen der Kunstwerke, die von Websites über Apps bis zu konventionellen Spielfilmen reichen, verbindet sie den momentanen ‚post-kinematographischen' Moment insbesondere mit einer Wende zum Posthumanismus. Dabei untersucht sie die verschiedenen (technologischen, ästhetischen, praktischen) Aspekte einer immer dezentralisierteren Kinematographie und identifiziert die posthumanen Perspektiven und Techniken, die in den analysierten Kunstwerken dominieren.

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