Call for Papers: Ends of Cinema
Center for 21st Century Studies
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
May 3-5, 2018

Are we now, as many scholars have proclaimed, in an age of “post-cinema?” Has the massive global wave of digital production, distribution, and exhibition finally eradicated cinema as we’ve known it? Martin Scorsese seems to think so, declaring in an interview with the Associated Press in the last days of 2016 that “Cinema is gone. . . . The cinema that I grew up with and that I’m making, it’s gone.” Scorsese’s mournful tone echoed Ridley Scott and Peter Greenaway, as well as articles in popular publications like GQ, The New Yorker, and Vanity Fair that blamed prestige television, high ticket prices, and, mostly, streaming platforms and digital technologies. Similar elegies for cinema have saturated academic discourse over the past fifteen years, from Paolo Cherchi Usai to Alexander Zahlten.

Whatever the object “cinema” was, it seems to have been summarily executed in the digital era. Yet as John Belton has recently noted, “Predictions of the death of cinema have been with us as long as the cinema itself,” while declarations of cinema’s ends are in part a function of its beginnings. But whose cinema is ending? If “cinema” implies a universal canon built on default ideologies, has its “death” been a response, in part, to deeper investigations into diversities made possible by increased access to the means of production? Might #OscarsSoWhite signify an end of white, male, and western-centric cinema? Are cinema’s many deaths, then, bound to another kind of end: what we understand to be the goal of cinema, whether political, aesthetic, representational, theoretical, or technological?

Over visual media’s long century, the emergence of new technologies, both filmic and otherwise, have repeatedly elegized cinema’s ruin and celebrated its rejuvenation. In 1930, Benjamin Fondane wrote on silent cinema at the dawn of synchronized sound, noting its “sudden death, certainly, but also sudden birth and feverish life, tormented, restless. . . . The mystery of its death can only be investigated in the light of the mystery of its life.” From the 1940s through the 1970s, as Peter Lev and Paul Young have shown, cinema found itself threatened by the emergence of television and then by the development of the VCR. For Thomas Elsaesser, Jean-Louis Baudry’s theory of the apparatus in the 1970s mourned the disappearance of a particular cinematic practice—interest in which has been reinvigorated recently with returns to the dispositif. And Girish Shambu has refuted Susan Sontag’s “end of cinephilia” in the 1990s by examining the new cinephilia of global networks. The end of cinema, it seems, is fissiparous and cyclical; it has happened, it hasn’t happened, it has happened in fits and starts, and it will happen again. If no one death can be attributed to cinema, perhaps the answer is to consider its multiple endings—and subsequent new beginnings.

In this spirit, the Center for 21st Century Studies (C21) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee seeks proposals for presentations at a conference on the Ends of Cinema. Is the current “post-cinematic” moment one where cinema has died and been reborn? How have globalized and localized diversities resisted or transformed cinema’s deaths? Has the rhetoric of the end of cinema closed off or reopened disciplinary boundaries? How have queer and trans
theories inflected cinema’s dying breaths and/or its reincarnation? If “the mystery of its death can only be investigated in the light of the mystery of its life,” what new models might arise in looking both backwards and forwards to the ends of cinema?

As part of the Center’s 50th anniversary year, this conference is also meant to look back to the Center’s beginnings and forward towards its future. From the mid-1970s to the end of the 1980s, the (then) Center for 20th Century Studies staged more than a half-dozen international conferences on the emerging disciplines of film, television, and performance studies. These conferences not only helped define these nascent fields but also established the Center’s reputation as a crucial site for research and teaching in film, media, and feminist theory. In looking backwards and forwards to the Ends of Cinema, C21 hopes both to celebrate the Center’s first half-century and to look ahead to the decades to come.

Possible topics may include but are not limited to:

- Post-cinema
- Moments of technological transformation
- Cinema after digitality
- Global and racial diversity and cinema’s new beginnings
- Changing approaches to the apparatus, the dispositif, and medium specificity
- Historiographies of cinema’s death(s)
- Queerness, the archive, and shifting modes of distribution
- Performance, faces, and motion capture
- New approaches to festival culture
- Remediation, transmedia, and the ends of cinema
- New phenomenologies of the digital
- Digital ontologies
- Exhibition, domestic space, and the rise and fall of cinephilia
- Formalism at cinema’s end

Confirmed plenary speakers for the conference are: Caetlin Benson-Allott (Georgetown), James Leo Cahill (Toronto), Francesco Casetti (Yale), Mary Ann Doane (Berkeley), André Gaudreault (Montreal), Michael Gillespie (City College), Jean Ma (Stanford), Amy Villarrejo (Cornell).

Please send your abstract (up to 250 words) and a brief CV by Monday, January 9, 2018, to Richard Grusin, Director, Center for 21st Century Studies, c21@uwm.edu