

## **Graphophilia, Film, Typewriter**

### **Abstract**

*Flimmer*'s narrator 'never wrote back', but the film engraves her words on the affair's detritus: cigarettes, spilt milk, a doll, typewriter keys, and the film's surface. *Flimmer* thus uses nostalgia for technologies of indexical inscription such as the typewriter to respond to emerging digital practices such as the RED camera.

### **Keywords**

indexical inscription, obsolete media, technological nostalgia, digital cinema, RED camera, typewriter

### **Introduction**

'We met...in a bar' whispers the curlicue script on two still-glowing cigarettes nestling in a glass ashtray. 'N-E-V-E-R' is spelt out unequivocally on the keys of a vintage typewriter. Alphabet beads from a friendship bracelet are scattered in a puddle of spilt milk, confiding in tiny capitals that 'AFTER THAT WEEK I LEFT HIM'. Repeatedly in *Flimmer*, selected words from the narrator's account of her affair are instantiated on surfaces or objects which relate tangentially to the details of the story: on the foot of a plastic doll lying abandoned in the undergrowth (shot 1); in barely discernible script on half-smoked cigarettes

in an ashtray (shot 6), on beads in the spillage from an overturned glass (shot 9); on the keys of a vintage typewriter (shot 10); in a blowsy font floating over a pond (shot 11); and in minimalist letters stamped on textured paper (shot 16). Even if the cool English tones of the voiceover betray no emotion, her words are made flesh by inscribing themselves onto the material detritus of the short relationship.

### **Graphophilia**

This article's title plays on Friedrich A. Kittler's work of media history, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, which explores how writers responded to the emergence of these three technologies between 1880 and 1920. Gramophone, film and typewriter were the first media technologies 'capable of storing and therefore separating sounds, sights, and writing' (Kittler 1999: xl), and therefore posed a particular challenge to the written word. Kittler therefore pursues written responses in a range of genres to trace how, when '[p]ushed to their margins even obsolete media become sensitive enough to register the signs and clues of a situation' (Kittler 1999: xl).

This remark in Kittler's Preface, I want to argue, resonates with *Flimmer* in two mutually amplifying ways, which both chime with the term 'graphophilia'. Within *Flimmer's* narrative logic, a variety of obsolete and unlikely media function as inscriptional surfaces - typewriter, cigarettes, alphabet beads, doll - and thus 'register the signs and clues of a situation'. That is, they undercut the voiceover's robotic coolness and re-invest the love affair with materiality and sensuality. For the narrator, romantic nostalgia is subsumed into technological nostalgia (see Boym n.d.). On the other hand, these old and makeshift media provide crucial context for *Flimmer's* *trompe-l'oeil* effect, whereby this digital film

shows itself disintegrating like celluloid (shots 13-14). Mimicking an obsolete (or at least outmoded) analogue format is *Flimmer's* acknowledgement of its own place in media history.

## Film

In shots 13 and 14, as a black stick insect crawls across rumpled bed sheets, the surface of the film appears to bubble and break up before the viewer's eyes. This move is reminiscent of the opening montage of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), an allusion intensified by the insect, reminiscent of *Persona's* tarantula. Too, the respective disintegration shots in both films arrive towards the end of sequences of apparently arbitrary images. But while Bergman's ostensibly melting film stock jolted the 1960s cinemagoer into an encounter with film *qua* film, the viewer of *Flimmer* might be moved to google what kind of shooting format was used, and perhaps experience a twinge of nostalgia for analogue film.

On the face of it, it is hardly ground-breaking for a film of the 2010s to draw attention to its digital instantiation by expressing nostalgia for pre-digital stock. Kittler's book, first published in German in the mid-1980s, appeared in English in 1999, the same year that has been dubbed 'the summer of digital paranoia' (Rodowick 2007: 3). The advent of the digital, then, had already overtaken Kittler's dissection of the relations between the material form and aesthetics of early cinema. By 1999, a flurry of feature films were undertaking the kind of seismographic work that Kittler traces in the culture of a century earlier: *The Matrix*, for example, replaces the world with a digital simulation, functioning 'as an allegorical conflict wherein cinema struggles to reassert or define its identity in the face of a new representational technology that threatens to overwhelm it' (Rodowick 2007: 3). We

need hardly rehearse how scholars around the same time called for urgent revisions to film preservation policy and technologies to stave off the 'death' of film and cinema (Cherchi Usai 2001). The philosophical implications of digital technologies and their impact on the distribution and consumption of cinema were being widely discussed in film studies by the mid-2000s (Mulvey 2006; Rodowick 2007).

Why, then, would a short film made in 2011 still make the analogue-digital divide central to its exploration of love and loss? One answer might be found in the voiceover for shots 13 and 14, in which the image of the stick insect is stilled and melts into bubbles and holes. Over these two shots, the narrator declares enigmatically: 'cacti and the colour red are not compatible'. The cactus makes immediate sense in light of the narrator's early self-characterization as a lonely *Agave Americana*, but the reference to the colour red floats free of any context within the film. However, the film was shot using a RED camera (Filmpolitiet 2011). This series of cameras, launched in 2007, has been lauded as a 'game-changer' in facilitating filmmaking at 4K resolution (Kantilaftis 2015). *Flimmer* makes ostentatious use of this extremely high resolution on the micro and macro scales, juxtaposing, for example, a deep-focus image of a richly textured bedroom (shot 7) with illuminated dust motes dancing in the dark (shot 8).

My intention here is not to posit a hard-and-fast 'explanation' for the enigmatic inclusion of 'red' in the voiceover, draining it of its fertile suggestiveness. Nonetheless, the association of red, or RED, with a shot that disintegrates a virtual rendering of 'real' filmstock reminds us that the digital revolution continues to unfold. From the perspective of the filmmaker, RED and other digital camera models constituted a technological sea change around 2010. *Flimmer's* nostalgia for celluloid and other analogue technologies can

be read as, in Kittler's terms, registering 'the signs and clues of a situation' - the transformations wrought on the image by digital high definition.

### Typewriter

The vintage typewriter that appears in shot 10 of *Flimmer* at an oblique angle at first gestures to the director's origins with its Norwegian SHIFT key ('skifter'). As the camera pans over the typewriter keys, the traditional QWERTY sequence is revealed to have been retrofitted with the letters 'N-E-V-E-R'. The panning close-up on the keys of the typewriter emphasizes the interaction of fingers and machine and (literally) hammers home a recurring feature of the film's words: that they are traces left by some kind of indexical impression such as lasering, embossing or stamping.

*Flimmer's* inclusion of the typewriter is arguably the most obvious example of what Kittler refers to as 'obsolete media' (1999: xl). He studies the typewriter alongside gramophone and film precisely because of the subtlety of its socio-technological impact: 'the typewriter cannot conjure up anything imaginary, as can cinema; it cannot simulate the real, as can sound recording; it only inverts the gender of writing. In so doing, however, it inverts the material basis of literature' (Kittler 1999: 183). Kittler is primarily interested in the typewriter's creation of the gendered role of secretary and the progressive mechanization of writing amongst late-nineteenth-century men of letters, but integral to these processes is what he calls 'the relay unit of human and machine' (Kittler 1999: 222). Without a typist - embodied, conscious, literate - and his or her fingers, there is no love letter.

Over the shot of the typewriter, the voiceover declares that although her lover wrote her 'many letters', she 'never wrote back'. Here, the typewriter is a writing machine

that is not used for writing but instead has had its interface 'hacked', to envision letters never written. However, the narrator's claim is undermined by the final shot of *Flimmer*.

## Conclusion

The words with which *Flimmer* closes - 'it was ours' - are spoken aloud by the narrator and instantiated as print in weighty paper or vellum. The edges of the screen are in sepia-tinted shadow, with a curve that gestures to the iris of the silent era. This scenario, then, contains within itself both print and cinema. While the font is modern and *sans serif*, the embossed effect recalls the presence of the typewriter a few shots previously. This is the first time in the film that the words on screen have been printed on a conventional surface, and so the precise correspondence of narration to text in this moment seems to have an extra weightiness and rightness - or write-ness. In this final shot, *Flimmer* reveals itself to have been an act of inscription - the love letter that she 'never wrote back'.

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