

The Infinite Cinema

A Discussion with Mr. Xu Chi on »The Limit of Cinema« *and*
The Limit of Art: A Second Discussion on the Infinite Cinema

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The Infinite Cinema:
A Discussion with Mr. Xu Chi on »The Limit of Cinema«¹

Cinema has no limit, cinema is infinite!

(If Mr. Xu Chi thinks cinema has its own limit, which is bound by time and space, cinema can actually lengthen, bend forward, spread out, and transcend its limit to become infinite.)

Any art must have its own limit of existence. Once the limit is exceeded, art will perish. Such death does not mean the extermination of art, but rather the life of art expands and creates such tension that it cannot but transcend this limit and develop into another newly emergent art so as to continue its existence. An art's realm of activity is surrounded by the crosses of death; if an art wants to roll out of these crosses, art must mutate to maintain its life. This is what Mr. Xu meant by the limit of art.

Those who examine the boundary of art in order to investigate the developmental history of artistic form are but looking for the crosses of death for art. From another perspective, they are also looking for the point of indirect growth for this art. Art germinates its life at such a point of transition and matures into another configuration. To see art as »discontinuous growth« is to understand that art's metamorphosis must reach a certain apex so that the embryo for a new art can emerge and inherit its excellent bloodline while overcoming its defect. Such a spiral development, however, changes when it comes to the epoch of cinema. Like the point where the moth breaks its cocoon and flies freely in the sky, cinema's discontinuous points of life, be they vertical (time) or horizontal (space), are like two parallel, symmetrical lines that can extend to the infinite such that we can no

¹ Li Lishui: Dianying wuxianda. du Xu Chi xiansheng »dianying de jixian« yiwenhou de shangque (The cinema has no limit. A discussion with Mr. Xu Chi's on »the limit of cinema«), in: Dianying jishibao (Movie chronicle) 1 (June 25, 1941), pp. 4-5.

longer define cinema's boundary by a »fixed form« (*dingxing*) or a particular »constant« (*dingshu*).

Since its invention, an art form wants to break its limit, i.e., the limits of its prior territory of activity, it naturally wants to spread more broadly and last longer. Such a conflict is entirely resolved with the birth of cinema, which also forbids any ensuing art to invade its territory. Indeed, only cinema can occupy a boundless territory.

The reason cinema differs from other arts and contains no limit is entirely due to the special »energy« (*neng*) it possesses. Let's call it cinema's »radiating energy« (*fangshe neng*). Such radiating energy is like the variable (*kebianshu*) in mathematics, it is broadcasted through the vertical (time) and horizontal (space) line growth and hence gives cinema infinite life. Since this variable forms a mathematical relationship with time and space, there is no doubt that cinema is an unbridled, leaping art that transcends and exceeds any boundary.

In chemistry, there are functions of »osmosis« (*shentou zuoyong*) and »diffusion« (*misan zuoyong*). Obviously, cinema also carries both functions. By way of osmosis, cinema breaks its stiff body at its point of indirect growth (its limit) where it cannot develop or formulate any further; by way of diffusion, cinema lengthens, bends forward, spreads out, and leaps into the infinite. Consequently, cinema possesses an immense body (in terms of its realm of activity) and thrives in the boundless universe (*wuji*). Such an enormous body merges with ether (*yitai*) as the boundless universe, moving either in the manner of a Brownian Movement [English original] or following a certain trajectory. But we can be sure that cinema is an art that starts from the earth and travels in the realm of the infinite.

Moreover, cinema assimilates the limits of all departments of art and dissolves them in the infinite realm of cinema. This is the artistic sublimation of cinema. No matter at what time and space, wherever ether exists, cinema's life is attached to it. Cinema does not allow any obstruction and will appear in front of everyone at any moment and place. Now we need to ask how cinema is able to break the limit of every department of art and dissolve them in an infinite realm. Mr. Xu made this point quite clearly:

Because cinema stays on the surface, it can only observe the human body from various angles, which makes it inferior to sculpture. But cinema can deploy multiple ways to make the audience grasp the concept of sculpture.

Any specific feature of painting, such as color, line, composition, is immediately retained by cinema. Whereas painting is static, cinema overcomes its stillness and become continuous movement.

The continuous movement of literature only captures the virtual (*biaoxiang*), not actual image (*xingxiang*). In the past, drama broke such a limit of literature to

compensate readers with actual imagery and thus evoked their emotional response; now cinema has achieved similar effects.

Cinema retains all of music's specific features and further advances them. Music in this case enhances cinema. So does dance.

But cinema does not only traverse the limits of all sorts of art but also annihilates the crosses of death surrounding its territory, thus achieving eternal and widespread life. Here we can take radiophotography (*wuxiandian chuanzhen*) as evidence that cinema is already a vibrating art in the air. No fortress can demarcate cinema's limit. The notion of limit can thus be explicated via mathematics. A constant (*dingzhi*) or value (*dingshi*) can be infinitely approximated but never reached by its variable. Yet the cinema's limit is already the infinite!²

The Limit of Art: A Second Discussion on the Infinite Cinema³

Art has its limit of existence. As the old saying has it, »fish jumps in the pool, and an eagle flies in the sky.« Everything exists within its own limit. Art can only thrive and develop within its limit of existence just as the deep pool and the sky are the limits for the fish and the eagle. They cannot develop and survive beyond their realms of existence.

We all know the kinds of arts contingent upon our sense of space, that is, these arts' limit of existence resides in space. We call them spatial arts, such as architecture and painting. Those arts based on our sense of time are called temporal arts. Music and poetry, which are also called rhythmic arts, constitute good examples. But what kind of art is cinema?

Cinema's existence is not only space but also time, it is an amphibian creature that lives in the »deep pool« and the »sky.« It can develop and thrive simultaneously in time and space. This might be why cinema has been called a synthetic art! Yet perhaps we cannot quite call space and time cinema's limits.

If one takes art's limit of existence as the point from which art can no longer stretch or develop further, art is seen as static. As a measurement of its limit, it will

² Li is applying the notion of limit and infinity from calculus. The limit is a precise value (constant) until the distance between the variable and the limit reaches close to zero, hence lifting the limit and reaching infinity, which Li applies to cinema. Mathematical study boomed in wartime Chongqing and hinterland China. See Li Zhongyan: *Sanshinian lai zhongguo de suanxue* (Mathematical study in China for the past three decades), Kexue 29/3 (1947), pp. 67-72.

³ Li Lishui: *Yishu de shengcun xiandai: zailun dianying wuxianda* (The limit of art's existence: A second discussion on the infinite cinema), *Dianying jishibao* 2 (August 10, 1941), p. 8.

freeze once it reaches a certain degree of temperature. Nevertheless, is cinema static? Will it end its life once it reaches the freezing point? No, cinema can thrive and develop simultaneously in the same time and space, but it can also exist and develop beyond this time and space. In other words, cinema can be projected at different places at the same time; further, it can perpetually and continuously move in the limitless realm. This is cinema's simultaneity and infinity. In this sense, cinema is a mobile, leaping art. Cinema has no »limit,« nor will there be any »limit« for language in cinema. Naturally our language has its spatial character—dialects vary in different places. But this should not decrease cinema's infinity. Although language is a means of expression, it is absolutely not the only means of expression. Human kind shares the same soul and similar emotions such as love and hatred, anger and sorrow. This is one of the main bases for cinema's infinity. Even though language has its »limit,« it can certainly lengthen, stretch forward, spread out, and break its boundary and turn into an infinite cinema.

As Mr. Xu Chi rightly points out in his essay *The Question of Language in Cinema*: »The task of cinema is not simply to unify written and spoken language, but further, to unify distinct dialects from various regions so as to create a national vernacular language after being repeatedly tempered.« Wouldn't it be possible for us to create an international vernacular language after repeated tempering?

Language cannot shrink the living realm of cinema; what's more, »language will accompany film to traverse time and space without obstruction and thus reaches infinity.«

Translated by Weihong Bao