



## MATTER

In recent years, the concept of matter has returned to the center of international debate, thanks to a number of studies and publications that — although emerging from highly heterogeneous disciplinary perspectives often grouped under the umbrella term “new materialism” (Bennett 2009; Iovino and Oppermann 2015; Miodownik 2015; Bruno 2016; Conway 2023) — converge in emphasizing the material irreducibility of a reality that is, paradoxically, increasingly described as marked by processes of “dematerialization.” Yet this concept is far from easy to define. Historically opposed to “form,” which alone could render it intelligible by translating it into substance, or alternatively contrasted with “spirit,” matter can be understood both as a domain of pure virtuality or potentiality (Aristotele) and as the concrete and tangible foundation of our being in the world, our primary anchoring to the real. According to contemporary physics, matter is equivalent to “energy,” and even our everyday experience — greatly simplifying this equivalence — now tends to conceive matter above all as an element embedded within a chain of value production.

Matter thus stands today at the center of a dense network of discourses, emerging as one of the key terms of our present — from geopolitics to quantum physics, from critical theory to engineering. In this context, it becomes crucial to examine how the arts might “reinvent materiality” (Giuliana Bruno), understood as an open field constituted less by substances in themselves than by relations. How, then, do cinema and audiovisual media engage with and articulate this specific interest in their own terms?

The relationship between technically reproduced images and the concept of matter is both articulated and complex. On the one hand, it makes it possible to rethink the history of film and film theory from a perspective that remains surprisingly underexplored, despite having long occupied a central place in reflections on media — not only audiovisual ones

(from McLuhan to Kittler). On the other hand, it allows us to investigate how contemporary images — as well as those of the past — critically engage with the question of the materiality of the world, a question so crucial to our present that it informs nearly all of its political articulations (environmental, technological, identity-based, ethnic, and gender-related).

Despite the many forms of resistance it has encountered, the idea of cinema as a privileged site for a “materialist” reflection on reality runs throughout much of the history of film theory. Siegfried Kracauer, for instance, conceived his theory of cinema as an explicitly materialist project, while André Bazin traces in the mummy complex — at the origin of the plastic and figurative arts — a form of survival “depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body.” It is this very complex that photography first, and cinema later, bring to completion, suggesting that their contiguity with the materiality of the world precedes that with the ideology of its representation. This equivalence can already be found in Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*: “I call matter the aggregate of images, and perception of matter these same images referred to the possible action of a certain determinate image, my body.” By grafting Bergsonian thought onto the history of film, Gilles Deleuze identifies a number of decisive moments, as in the case of Dziga Vertov. In *The Movement-Image*, the Soviet filmmaker’s cine-eye becomes “the eye of matter, the eye within matter” which thus realises “the materialist program of the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* through cinema”.

Matter, in a perspective that brings Bergson’s thought into dialogue with structuralist epistemology, thus becomes the ensemble of the virtualities of meaning, and can achieve actualization only through a process of formation that configures it as substance. Reflecting on the relationship between matter and (audio)visual images — on how the former bears upon the latter and how the latter, in turn, elaborate the former — therefore means attempting to interrogate the conditions of possibility through which the sense of reality (in Hjelmslev’s writings, the Italian term “materia” translates the English purport) can be perceived, communicated, and shared.

Matter can thus be considered a key concept from which a number of theoretical, analytical, and critical trajectories may unfold, capable of linking images and media to the world that surrounds them in original ways. From this perspective, three main areas can be identified that gather the principal articulations of this particular relationship.

**The narration of matter, its representation.** Matter as an object of narration has always been present in film images: one need only think of Charlot in *The Gold Rush* eating his own shoe, “stripping” every nail from it, or of the dramatically thanatopolitical version proposed by Pasolini with the “spiked” meatball in *Salò*. One might also recall the entire body

of cinema—both industrial and otherwise—devoted to fuels and material modernity, from Ivens's *L'Italia non è un paese povero* (Italy Is Not a Poor Country) to Bertolucci's *La via del petrolio* (The Oil Route) and Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness*. More generally, one may think of the atmospheric interaction of objects within narrative and perceptual trajectories, or of the close exploration of material surfaces that open up synesthetic processes (Merleau-Ponty 1960; Sobchack 1992; Marks 2000). This material dimension also survives in the contemporary digital era, indeed becoming an even more decisive element within the narratives of cinema in the New Millennium: from *Matrix* and *Fight Club* to the dystopian universe of *Black Mirror*, reality — seemingly dematerialized — encounters an inescapable material obstacle, increasingly embodied by the human body itself. What, then, is the role of the material dimension — the sensible concreteness of reality — within cinematic narration? In what ways does it shape a critical reflection on the present? And which aesthetic strategies have characterized the representation of matter both diachronically and synchronically (from Dovzhenko to D'Anolfi and Parenti)?

**The image as material presence.** The image does not merely represent matter; it may itself become material — for instance, as an object included within the image or within filmic syntax, transforming surfaces of representation into a visual palimpsest that is intrinsically material (Aumont 2005; Peucker 2007; Montani 2010). One may think of the cinema of Peter Greenaway, where the dialogue between film and the figurative culture of the past unfolds primarily on the level of the materiality of the medium (*The Draughtsman's Contract*; *A Zed and Two Noughts*), restoring it through the ostension of bodies as a concrete presence in the world (*Prospero's Books*; *The Pillow Book*) and through the scenic dimension as an interplay between corporeality and representation (*The Baby of Mâcon*; *Nightwatching*). What, then, are the processes that constitute the materiality of the image? And what specific dialogical strategies emerge among these different regimes of material images?

The material presence of images within virtual environments is also an essential component for the successful relationship that a user establishes with VR, itself the result of complex processes of simulation. In cinema as well, the increasingly frequent use of CGI redefines the material status of digital images, with which different levels of interaction and belief are established, as evidenced by works such as *Jurassic Park* by Spielberg or *L'Anglaise e le Duc* by Rohmer, which theoretically elaborate the interplay between wonder and verisimilitude. How is the material presence of an image simulated within a virtual environment? And how is a virtual image transformed into a material element within a broader regime of representation?

Finally, the image becomes matter when it occupies a defined space and extends beyond its traditional support, as in media façades, for instance, or in media environments more generally. Under the expanded conditions that increasingly define the concept of the screen in the contemporary — both in terms of extension and protection (Casetti 2015; 2023) — the image becomes a concrete presence in the world. What forms of experience arise from these “material expansions” of the image? And what feedback effects do they produce on the very conception of the image and on the theoretical concepts that surround it, from screen to frame?

**The material dimension of cinema and media.** In recent years, cinema and media have increasingly been approached also in their material dimension, which concerns both their conditions of existence and their modes of reception. The material nature of cinema, understood as a set of technical or specialized objects, is framed within an archaeological or geological approach (Parikka 2015; 2020) that seeks to preserve, rediscover, or rework the concrete traces of the past. From “ephemera” as a source for film history (Comand and Mariani 2021) to the reuse of equipment long considered obsolete (such as the carbon arc projector employed, for instance, at Il Cinema Ritrovato), the objects of cinema now occupy the center of a dense network of attention — among which is that of cinema itself. Perhaps the most emblematic project in this regard is *Decasia* by Morrison, yet many are the examples that mobilize the materiality of the medium in order to develop an aesthetic discourse (also in continuity with precursors such as Vertov). In what ways does this material dimension redefine the aesthetics and theory of cinema? What kinds of relationships does it establish with media theory in broader terms? And what theoretical and critical contribution do research perspectives associated with the Environmental Humanities offer to a renewed materialist reflection on cinema and audiovisual media?

**Deadline for the submission of the abstract (150 words): April 21, 2026**

**Deadline for the submission of the essay: August 30, 2026**

**Essays should be expressly written for the journal and should strictly respect the following word limit:**

***Focus:* Min 5000 Max 6000 words (including spaces and footnotes)**

***Rifrazioni:* Min 2000 Max 3000 words (including spaces and footnotes)**

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