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In 2013, film disappeared from movie theaters in the United States. Hollywood studios stopped creating and distributing 35mm prints of their productions—the format that had been the international industry standard in place for just over a century—and most people didn't even notice the change. After all, it's been a long goodbye. Digital technology had been creeping into cinema's analog systems for decades, first transforming sound editing, then picture editing, then cinematography, and exhibition. When we go to the movies now, some quote-unquote films we watch have no film involved in their making at all; they're fully digital objects, the results of years of clever programming and electronic engineering. They are more directly the descendants of video and computers than film proper. In a technological sense, we go now to the cinema to watch television.

Seeing a film from 80 years ago, seeing *Gold Diggers* of 1933—one of the hits of that year—we now inspect the product of an increasingly alien system, the labors of a lost world. In 2013, we look at realistic images on a screen that imitate objects through convoluted strings of immaterial code. In 1933, there were only real bodies made of flesh and blood, *corpus delicti*, slathered in Max Factor makeup, dancing around sets of wood and nails and plaster and paint, all constructed to cast monochrome shadows onto the light sensitive chemicals, silver halide crystals suspended in an emulsion covering strips of nitrocellulose, thirty-five millimeters wide and many thousands of feet long. The action of light, flying off of the face of Ginger Rogers and onto that film, bouncing an image from negative to positive through flesh-pressing-metal mechanical reproduction, allowing us, our eyes, to follow those vectors back in time and look upon the face of Rogers herself, as if through some zany telescope.

At least, this is how it feels now, in the twilight of analog cinema. In the final heyday of real-film cinephilia, from the 1970s to the 1990s, scholars loved to talk about the 'constructedness' of cinema, its ideological-fictional-illusory quality, claiming, with a counterfactual thrill, that even documentaries weren't really real. And yet, watching *Gold Diggers* today, reality now seems everywhere, bleeding into the fiction, quivering behind the escapist dream. Newly strange to us, film has dropped down from its empyrean heights to become an artifact, an object. We now are more aware of the heaviness of film, its giant metal cameras, its sewing-machine-machine-gun projectors. Rolled up on wheels and placed in canisters, the 35mm print of *Gold Diggers* weighs easily over 50 pounds. Compare this to the mere ounces on a DVD. Compare this to the information on that DVD, which, in its essence, weighs nothing.

What Charles Peirce coined the indexical nature of the image, its ability to serve as a direct imprint of reality, strikes us as of paramount importance today. We think of it as the crucial difference between an analog and a digital image. If once they wanted to argue that all films are fictions, even documentaries, now the real mystery is how film ever became anything but documentary, anything but a recording of the real world. Hollywood movies in 1933 retain this accidentally documentary quality -- or, perhaps, have re-achieved it, despite themselves. Jonas Mekas once wrote, of home movies, that "time is laying a veil of poetry over them," making them aesthetic objects as they recede into history. The opposite is also true: over time, the fantasy worlds of Hollywood become documentaries of their own making. You're always aware that there are cameras wheeling around on a soundstage, in the dizzy height of Hollywood production of its time, now reduced, in our 21st century eyes, to the transparency of a cheap 1980s sitcom. The heroic age of Hollywood sought to transcend workaday reality, to escape; now these images fall back to earth with a thud.

And yet, the three major musicals choreographed by Busby Berkeley and released in 1933 -- *Gold Diggers*, *Footlight Parade*, and *42nd Street* -- were always about the failure of transcendence. We're in the money, until it's revealed we very much are not, and the cameras pull back to show the artifice, as its elements are being repossessed by the bank. It's the Depression, dearie. Keep dancing and no one will notice it's just a cheap set.

The finale of *42nd Street* begins with Ruby Keeler hoofing solo, her shoes slapping hard against the planks of the stage floor, sounds made with the weight of her body against wood. I can't help but think of Samuel Johnson's comment after hearing George Berkeley lecture on the essential nonexistence of matter. The good doctor Johnson kicked a stone with his foot, and said, "I refute it thus."

These are the paradoxes of the musicals of 1933. Fantasy and reality, depression and elation, money and art, the material and the dream. Bodies coming together, into ecstatic moments of collective action and harmony,

into moments of transcendence, attempting to escape the material, but never truly able to lose their physical nature.

These are musicals that display the hardness of life. Gold digging is back-breaking labor, after all, trying to do anything to survive the economic winter. On 42nd Street, pedestrians bob and sway and smile, as a mother spans a baby, a man drinks a bootlegged cocktail, and a lover's quarrel ends with a woman stabbed in the back on a crowded street.

In his essay "The Mass Ornament," of the Tiller Girls, a travelling Rockettes-style troupe of the 1920s, Siegfried Kracauer writes, "These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters, whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics."

Maybe Berkeley's girls parading behind Ginger Rogers and Ruby Keeler were dancing out a message to us, like bees do. That the cinema was just the beginning of a process that would overtake us all. That we'd crack reality wide open and get at the stuff deep inside it, the waves and particles and even down past those, and then everything would be broken up into blips of energy, recombined, re-understood, re-envisioned.

Like the dancing masses on 42nd street, we too live inside a soundstage at all times, monitored and recorded as once only the greatest stars were, our pictures splashed across the internet, scads of text written around us, our phones tapped so the dialog about the dialog gets recorded. New buildings look as flimsy as stage constructions, our Uniqlo threads are so thin they might as well be disposable costumes, not really designed for too many performances.

On one hand, to quote Karl Marx—All that is solid melts into air.

On the other hand, to quote Aleister Crowley (by way of Kenneth Anger)—Every man and every woman is a star.

