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Time, Touch, and Tactile Resistance: Film in the Age of Digital and AI Image eneration

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Abstract: This essay explores whether photochemical film is truly making a comeback in an era dominated by digital workflows and rapidly advancing AI image generation. Instead of solely focusing on market share, the essay compares film, digital, and AI across three key dimensions: their treatment of time, their connection to the body, and their modes of control. Drawing on Gilles Deleuzes distinction between the movement-image and the time-image, the essay argues that films grain, scratches, and mechanical imperfections disrupt smooth sensory-motor flow, creating spaces where time becomes directly perceivable. Jennifer Barkers concept of the "tactile eye" and Shane Densons theory of discorrelated images further illustr ate how photochemical images engage viewers on multiple levels, including the skin, muscles, and viscera. In contrast, digital optimization and AI prediction increasingly bypass embodied perception in favor of computational abstraction. A comparative analysis of three Manhattan skyline images—a Kodak Gold 200 negative, an iPhone RAW file, and a DALL•E-generated skyline—highlights these differences in terms of texture, depth, and the uncanny cleanliness of AIs prediction-image. While film may not regain its industrial dominance, it is emerging as a privileged medium of tactile resistance. It offers a space where time leaves its mark, where images remain partially uncontrollable, and where viewers can still sense their own existence transcending the realm of data within a feedback loop.

Keywords: Analog film; Digital cinema; AI image generation; Time-image; Tactile eye; Discorrelated images; Prediction-image; Uncanny valley Time; Touch and Tactile Resistance; Film in the Age of Digital and AI Image Generation.

1. Introduction

In my senior high school, I joined the photography club. Around 2018, we experimented with various photography mediums, including digital single-lens reflex cameras, drones, and film photography. Among these, films quickly became my favorite. The wide range of film stocks available allowed me to express myself visually in unique ways. I often said that shooting film is the best way to "speak" visually because you can swap out different "light sensors" to create entirely different looks. For instance, basic film stocks like Fuji C200, Kodak ColorPlus 200, and Ultramax 400 each have their distinct characteristics in terms of color cast, grain structure, and the way highlights transition into shadows. Greenish Fuji, yellowish Kodak, reddish Agfa, and bluish Ektar each create diverse moods in my photographs. Despite the traits films have, the development process is also full of variables, such as the temperature, reagents, and development methods. Altogether, the output of film becomes almost unpredictable.

Back then, each roll of film cost only two dollars, so I referred to them as my "practice films." The affordability of film allowed me to shoot numerous rolls, enabling me to thoroughly explore the distinct characteristics of each stock. Another reason I cherish film is the unique experience it offers during the shooting process. Unlike digital photography, where I can instantly review my images, film photography demands a strong command of the camera, metering, and composition. This practice forces me to remain fully present with the act of photographing, rather than constantly critiquing the pictures Ive already captured. It is the difference between being process-oriented and results-oriented.

During COVID, due to the shutdown of the factories and customs, it became more and more difficult to get film stocks. The price of the very basic Fuji C200 rose from 2 dollars each roll to 20 dollars, 10 times more than before. But as a fan of films, I still tried my best to find cheap and abundant films. Not for selling, but for the unique experience films offer in photography.

One of the hottest topics in 2025 is whether the film is coming back. The resurgence of film is evident in Kodaks recent move to introduce new 35mm stocks, Kodakcolor 100 and 200, as "sub-brands of existing Kodak films." This launch was presented as an "ongoing commitment to supporting the long-term health of the film industry" (PetaPixel, 2025). Shops reported quick sell-outs, framing the move as Eastman Kodaks return to direct film distribution (KosmoFoto, 2025). However, the rise in demand has also led to increased prices, with average U.S. prices up about 9% from February to July 2025, as reported by Analog.Cafe (2025).

On the big-screen front, film is not stagnant. IMAXs next-generation 65mm film camera made its debut on set this November at the Y.M.Cinema 2025 event. Multiple outlets have reported that Christopher Nolans The Odyssey (2026) will be the first feature film shot entirely on IMAX film and will be released in 2026. This film utilizes quieter, lighter cameras and upgraded editing and playback technology. The UK coverage adds to the material scale, with Nolan reportedly using over 2 million feet of film and wrapping in August 2025. These developments indicate a revival of film, but they also highlight the challenges it faces. While visibility and prestige are increasing, supply, pricing, and logistics still pose significant constraints to its growth. Film is present, but it may not be able to fully replace digital in everyday production (PetaPixel, 2025; KosmoFoto, 2025; Analog.Cafe, 2025; Y.M.Cinema, 2025; The Verge, 2025; People, 2025; The Guardian, 2025). Many filmmakers still yearn for the tactile workflow, texture, and disciplined, intentional shooting that

film offers. While film remains captivating, it cannot fully replace digital in everyday production due to its inherent costs, slow pace, and inherent risks. The expenses associated with stock, processing, and storage strain budgets in an era characterized by dwindling revenues and the relentless pressure of streaming.

So, will film regain its primacy as the primary capture mode? The evidence suggests otherwise. Digital pipelines offer speed, scalability, and deep integration with todays postproduction, VFX, and streaming delivery. The 2025 sources mentioned above emphasize selective expansion, limited new film stocks, modest camera refreshes, and a few high-profile projects, rather than a return to abundant low-cost stock and labs. Film is gaining cultural value and flagship uses, but ever more powerful digital sensors and faster, cheaper digital cameras keep the economic and logistical center of the industry firmly digital (Analog.Cafe, 2025; The Verge, 2025; The Guardian, 2025).

Meanwhile, AI is rapidly gaining traction in sectors where short format, low cost, and speed are paramount. Chinas micro-dramas exemplify this trend. Vertical shooting, rapid platform distribution, and "small overhead costs" enable these productions, with budgets ranging from approximately $28,000 to $280,000 and cycle times measured in months (Reuters, 2024). A 2025 industry feature highlights the market scale of the micro-series market, which reached 50.4 billion yuan in 2024, surpassing cinema revenue. This market boasts 662 million domestic viewers, with a significant portion watching daily (Le Monde, 2025). Investor writing also suggests a shift from one-model dreams to specialized tools and workflows in AI video. The notion of a "God Model" capable of handling all tasks is diminishing, and we are entering an era of "the product era of video models" that excel at focused tasks (Moore, 2025). These points explain why AI can plausibly become a mainstream production path in short video, advertisements, and micro-series. The lower costs, faster iteration, and practical pipelines now available make AI an attractive option (Reuters, 2024; Le Monde, 2025; Moore, 2025).

Why doesnt this principle automatically apply to live-action, human-centric cinema? The reception still imposes a significant limitation. The common definition is straightforward: an entity that appears almost human is likely to evoke unsettling feelings—the uncanny valley (Wikipedia, 2025). Consequently, major brands are now designing around this barrier. For instance, Googles first fully AI-generated ad avoids the valley by using a non-human character, a plush turkey (Wall Street Journal, 2025). In essence, AI excels in formats that are short and stylized, or when humans are not the primary focus. However, it still struggles when audiences demand convincing faces, micro-expressions, and embodied performance. Until tools address this reception gap—or productions consistently bypass it—the most probable outcome is clear: film will retain its prestige and tactile appeal, digital will remain the workhorse, and AI will become the go-to option for low-cost, high-volume formats while it learns to overcome the uncanny valley (Wikipedia, 2025; Wall Street Journal, 2025).

In this article, I pose the question, "Is film coming back?" and then present a clear comparison between film, digital, and AI. I delve into how each medium affects time, texture, viewing, production, and cost. I explore whether AI can truly become the new mainstream, not just in demos, and outline the potential benefits (speed, accessibility, low budgets, scalable assets) and drawbacks (loss of authorial touch, embodied performance, and trust in human faces). I draw on fresh 2025 reports and case studies, including theoretical analysis such as the Deleuze Time Image and Barkers Tactile Eyes, to illustrate why film is gaining much attention in this digital era. I also examine Chinas AI micro-dramas and short-video pipelines to demonstrate the rapid growth of AI. Additionally, I present evidence from the "uncanny valley" to highlight AI s ongoing struggle with realistic live-action humans. The objective is not to advocate for one side but to present, with evidence, the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of each medium for the future of filmmaking and film consumption.

Since the late nineteenth century, photochemical film has been the defining technology behind moving images. Celluloid film not only standardized the material support for cinema but also revolutionized how we perceive light: it was inscribed on emulsion and projected as a flickering sequence of frames. Throughout most of the twentieth century, this analog system shaped industrial production, distribution, and exhibition, as well as spectators expectations of grain, contrast, and color. Even as formats and stocks evolved, from black-and-white to color, from nitrate to safety film, from 16mm to 70mm, the fundamental principle of film remained rooted in light passing through a lens and leaving a physical imprint on a strip.

From the late 1980s onward, digital imaging began to disrupt this established regime. Charge-coupled devices and later CMOS sensors replaced emulsion as the primary "light sensor," converting photons into data units. Image creation transformed into a process of sampling and compression rather than chemical transformation. This shift paved the way for new forms of manipulation (nonlinear editing, digital color grading) and new distribution infrastructures (DVD, streaming, social media), while also normalizing a visual aesthetic characterized by smoothness, clarity, and instant review. The camera evolved into a screen-based interface, and capture and playback seamlessly merged into a single moment.

Most recently, AI-based image generation has further abstracted the relationship between image and reality. Instead of capturing light from a scene, machine-learning systems generate images by statistically modeling vast archives of preexisting pictures and texts. In this paradigm, the "camera" no longer requires a physical body, a lens, or even a scene in front of it; images can be synthesized from prompts, recombining fragments of past data into moving images. Where film relies on photochemical process and digital on electrical pulse, AI images depend on training and inference. Together, these three regimes, film, digital, and AI, outline an uneven landscape of coexisting technologies and competing ideas about the nature of images and their intended purpose.

2. Film Acts as a Time Rupture that Breaks Digital Control

Gilles Deleuze, a French philosopher and film scholar, is the author of the Movement-Image and Time-Image. In Gilles Deleuzes theory, movies before WWII are movement-images, and those produced in the post-war period are time-images. Before World War II, classical cinema structured shots around clear actions and objectives, as described by Deleuze as sensory-motor situations. Movement dictated the portrayal of time, resulting in images that were essentially "movement-

images." However, after World War II, the aftermath of war, trauma, and social upheaval led to the creation of characters who were unable to act or whose actions no longer held meaning. In response to this, postwar cinemas, such as Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, employed techniques like long takes, location shooting, wandering cameras, and "empty" or dead time. In these films, time itself became a direct presence, manifesting through hesitation, waiting, and duration. Consequently, images transformed into "time-images."

Movement-image theory suggests movies are connected by movement, actions, and cause and effect: "In short, cinema does not give us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image... Movement is a mobile section of duration" (Deleuze, 1986, pp. 2, 4). While in his second category, time image, he articulates that post-war movies no longer rely on the movement to present time, they directly present the flow of time and the break of time... Movies are no longer subordinate to movement (Deleuze, 1989, p. 22). For instance, the long takes and natural motion-blur in the movies make time visible directly without the narrative of actions.

But this trend has been broken by the streaming platform, algorithms, and AI. In the digital age, images undergo optimization to appear "smoother." Grain and texture are eliminated, edges are sharpened, and motion is stabilized or even algorithmically interpolated. For instance, motion-smoothing modes on TVs generate additional frames between the original 24 frames per second, reducing strobing and creating a synthetic motion blur that gives pans and action sequences a fluidity reminiscent of video games or soap operas. This characteristic follows the sensory-motor schema, connecting the perception with actions rather than time, presented in the movement-image. He writes: "All perception is primarily sensory-motor: perception is no more in the sensory centers than in the motor centers; it measures the complexity of their relations" (Deleuze, 1986, p. 65). Only when this chain is broken will the audience feel the time-image. However, the "smoothness" of digital media naturally turns the audience back to the sensory-motor schema, which jumped out of the time-image field. The "smoothness" of digital flow links the perception but resists the ruptures and gaps essential to a true time-image, which falls into the trap of digital control that Deleuze states: "Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other..." (Deleuze, 1995, p. 4). 30 to 40 years ago, the technology of digital cameras was not as excellent as today; they had a lot of drawbacks, like terrible noise control, poor color depth. As a result, people tried so hard to erase these "non-smoothness" without noticing that images were running farther away from the human body, which can be demonstrated by the high sales of noise-reducing plug-ins at that time. But now, this approach is not considered a sign of good production: the Netflix version of Roma (Cuarón, 2018) has been criticized for being "overly cleaned," erasing the films noise that Cuarón had deliberately preserved. This cleanliness fixed the ruptures, making it look far away from humans and causing an uncanny valley effect. Due to the natural traits of digital media, they showed a trend to leave the field of time-image. These techniques in streaming platforms, including automatic playback, de-graining, and noise reduction algorithms, are all an extreme optimization of "sensory-motor schema", which recreates a fake sense of time -- it is not a visibility of time, but a smoothness of rhythm.

However, it does not mean that every digital movie is excluded from the time-image. For example, Wes Andersons The French Dispatch (2021) uses digital technology to simulate film frame skips and grains to create artificial breaks of time. Although it is still a simulation of the natural breaks, the gaps make people think of the image not as an illusion of seamless continuity, but as a construction that can be interrupted, manipulated, and physically felt. Also, the glitch art, using code errors to create visual ruptures, is another strong example.

In this way, both of them restore a sense of temporal rupture that digital smoothness often erases. Besides, the time rupture caused by digital simulation is acquired and reversible, like the filter effects, while the drawback of film is natural and uncontrollable, like the randomness of scratches.

But why do people need time ruptures? Why cant we live in the smooth digital era? From my perspective, this can be attributed to humans search for their existence. Humans need to find the value of ourselves in our lives; otherwise, we will feel uncertain and unsafe. The quickest way to find the existence of ourselves is through the rupture of time. When time breaks or slows down, we notice things more, rather than focusing on the time-consuming project itself. Just like the statement of "time flies", it is not because time really flies, but because time is occupied by our life affairs seamlessly, which makes us feel so smooth and have no break to breathe and enjoy the time. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, peoples lives around the world were abruptly interrupted, creating unexpected time to reflect and think. Currently, a booming "mental wellness" industry, with mindfulness and meditation apps, to get away from the screens. That break of time made people reassess what is more important and realize what they truly care about. This break made people feel longer, heavier, or even more real, which helps more people feel about themselves again. Thats the reason why film, with its physical texture and slowness, becomes a medium in which people can rediscover their being.

La Jetée (Marker, 1962) exhibits the time rupture in still photos. The whole movie is a combination of still photos, except for one shot (the girl blinks). This movie is the practitioner of Deleuzes time -image, using the two ruptures in both form and content, which makes "time" the protagonist of the narrative. This form makes the movie look like a storyboard, breaking the essence of movement in motion pictures, which perfectly matches Deleuzes "Opsigns". These still photos peel off the sensory-motor schema, where the characters cannot move anymore, making time stand out as the object to be observed.

If the example of La Jetée is a use of time rupture within the narrative, then Oppenheimer is another example that introduces time ruptures on a material and experiential level. It happens outside of the films diegesis but embedded in the projection process. The IMAX Oppenheimer (Nolan, 2023) is shot in 65mm film. The director Nolan, who is the advocate of film, says in the interview, "Ive always had tremendous faith in the film medium, particularly photochemical film -- the real thing. " His pursuit of the film is not only exhibited in the image quality, but also in the unique watching experience. He mentioned in the interview that: "I think a lot of engineers and filmmakers that I talk to -- they make the mistake of trying to gauge the effectiveness of a technique on how the audience can consciously parse something...Its really about how you feel watching something. ". These imperfections are

exactly where the films attractions are, which forces people to realize the image is not 0 and 1, it is the trace carried by physical material.

In a word, films physical flaws—scratches, grain, reel changes—are not mistakes. They are weapons. In a digital world occupied with smoothness, such as endless streaming and cleanliness, these imperfections rupture the illusion of digital control. They force us to feel time, not as a zombie living numbly, but as something raw, lively, and human. Although digital movies can fake these traits, like filters or glitches, they lack the films uncon trollable characteristics. When Oppenheimers film reel pauses, or La Jetées still photos freeze time, they scream: "You are here. This is real." Film wins because it refuses to disappear into the screen, which leaves room for humans to reflect. Its noise, skips, and shakes, altogether, are acts of fighting for existence, just like what humans do. They remind us: to be human is to leave marks, to break rhythms, to exist in time, not just consume it.

For AI, the logic of control becomes even more radical. If digital cinema still needs to capture light in real time, AI-generated images no longer require a camera, a body, or even a specific duration. Instead, they are synthesized from datasets and prompts, based on probabilities rather than exposure. In this sense, AI images are not movement-images or time-images, but prediction-images—visual outputs that anticipate both action and time by presenting the "most likely" frame before anything has actually occurred. Frame-interpolation, auto-colorization, AI de-noising, and text-to-video models all function by smoothing over gaps, erasing noise, and filling in what "should" be there. They do not merely follow the sensory-motor schema; they anticipate it, producing images that seamlessly fit into a behavioral loop of swiping, consuming, and forgetting. If digital streaming has already minimized the ruptures of time with autoplay and compression, AI risks closing the loop entirely, transforming images into continuous feedback for training the next model. In this environment, ruptures become almost impossible from within the system, as any deviation is immediately corrected, averaged, or re-generated according to the norm encoded in the dataset. Therefore, films scratches, flickers, and mechanical pauses acquire a new political and existential significance. They are not merely nostalgic remnants of analog technology but rare instances where time resists being predicted and optimized. In contrast to AIs tendency to create perfectly "plausible" worlds devoid of history or contingency, film steadfastly asserts the stubborn fact that something actually transpired in front of the lens—and that this occurrence left a tangible mark.

3. Film Touches the Body

In the previous paragraph, I discussed how the trace of film and its non-smoothness make people feel real. Whats more important is that it raises peoples awareness of their sense of existence. Now Im going to further explain why these textures will draw us closer and build a connection with the material.

Shane Denson, a media theorist, uses his book Discorrelated Images (2020) to examine how digital, post-cinematic images are processed in ways that unsettle the relation between moving images and human perception. According to Densons idea that "In contrast to the integral photograms of cinema, the images of a post-cinematic media regime are dividual, their forms discorrelated from molar subjectivity..." (Denson, 2020, p. 51). This kind of non-correlation (departing from physical carrier) cuts off the relationship between the human body and digital movies. Besides, "these processes" (what I mentioned in part 2, like noise-reduction that relies on advanced hardware and software) ... "take place outside the spatial and temporal dimensions of subjective perception" (Denson, 2020, p. 54). In other words, digital media lose their equal status with the audience as film does, as the whole production process not only occurs at the macro level but also occurs at "the micro level of computation" (Denson, 2020, p. 54), which distances the audience from the movie.

Film, in contrast, has the ability to connect the body through its "physical touch". From the macro to the micro, film production is all finished within the framework of "indexical trace," which digital media does not have (Rodowick, 2007). Film theorist Jennifer M. Barker, in The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience (2009), argues that cinema engages us as whole bodies rather than just as eyes and ears. From Barkers view, there are three layers of how film connects the body: skin, musculature, and viscera.

In the first layer, Barker believes that movies dont just use eyes. They touch the Skin. The first reaction between the film and the body occurs on the skin. She writes, "Touch is the guarantor of truth, the only way to discover the secrets of history and desire that are concealed by the skin" (Barker, 2009, p. 64). Film uses its unique visual elements, such as light and shadow, texture, and color trigger the tactile association of the skin -- hot, cold, rough, smooth, etc. The celluloid provides the silver halide crystals, and when the photochemical process occurs, these grains react and form a random-sized grainy group, creating a visible but intangible "roughness" during the projection. The light from the projector goes through the actual reacted material, which captures that particular periods light, leading to the true experience of "looking back". Just like Nolan compares film grain to "sculpting light into materiality," where light refracts inside silver, not just hitting a glass sensor without any chemical reaction. That is the reason why people would feel "real" when watching celluloid movies. The photochemical grains on the celluloid function as the microscopic tactile witnesses to the event itself. Each grain reacts with the photons emitted by the explosion and becomes a confirmation of the blast. The flickering grain structure mirrors the uneven texture of ash and radiation scars, evoking a tactile memory of destruction. When it is brought in front of the audience, the heat, vibration, and detailed texture from that moment serve as a tool to wake up the skin, causing the tactile association of the skin. Besides, the high resolution and high dynamic range provided by film also give the viewers access to the exploration of the detailed texture. Editors like Anne V. Coates, who kept strips of celluloid on her desk while digitally cutting, make this logic a reality. Her practice exemplifies Barkers assertion that cinemas authenticity lies in its ability to "touch" before it conveys.

Second, Barker articulates, film connects the body by musculature: "The films and viewers relationship to each other is experienced and expressed not only on the surface of their skins but also through movement, comportment, and gesture ..." (Barker, 2009, p. 69). She mentions: "Viewers empathize with the body of the film to such a degree that we can experience and grasp, in our muscles and tendons as much as in our minds, the exhilaration of a close call ..." (Barker, 2009, p. 73). The film camera/projector pulls the mechanical gears 24 times per second, with flickering and

vibration. Also, the lens panning operated by the cameraman, such as pushing, pulling, swinging, and tilting, imitates human-like movements. These movements are easily resonated by the "muscle memory" unconsciously. This muscular engagement also explains the mixed reception of recent experiments with higher frame rates. Peter Jacksons 48-fps Hobbit films (2012, 2013, 2014) and Ang Lees 120-fps features (Billy Lynns Long Halftime Walk, 2016; Gemini Man, 2019) promised smoother motion, but many viewers found them too sharp, plasticky, or "video-like." It was as if the images no longer required the viewers muscles and perceptual gaps to complete them. By suppressing flicker and the tiny discontinuities that trigger the phi phenomenon and muscular adjustments, these formats inadvertently flattened the very micro-movements that make motion pictures feel alive. Thus, what Barker writes about the muscle layer is not only about the single large movements, but also about any muscular reaction that is synchronized with the rhythm of the film. This also explains why later attempts to enhance cinema with higher frame rates, such as Peter Jacksons 48 fps or Ang Lees 120 fps, often felt overly smooth or "video-like" to audiences. By minimizing flicker and our natural tendency to fill in gaps, these higher frame rates dampen the engaging experience that movies are meant to provide. After all, movies are motion pictures.

The third layer is the Viscera. Barker writes: "This chapter shifts the focus ... to the internal body, where the pulse and the rhythmic filling and emptying of the lungs can enact and express attitudes and emotions such as desire, fear, anticipation, and relief... Both viewers and films bodies exhibit a structure of intermittence that is scarcely perceptible until it is evoked at the deepest recesses of the human and cinematic form" (Barker, 2009, pp. 120, 128). Like the camera/projector example I gave previously, flickering and vibration further connect the organs through the muscle. The light-shadow-light pattern matches the breath of the body, breath-in, breath-out, and breath-in. Also, the pattern of the pulse reflects this kind of intermittence. The digital medias high frame rates, no-flickering smoothness, lose this visceral palpitation, leading the audience to a flat somewhere. Besides, due to the mechanical process, the dark period of the shutter in the screening room (about 1/48 second) leaves a window for the brain to "compensate for the movement." In the light period of the shutter, the human brain captures the image, while during the dark period, the brain will use this gap to complete "motion compensation" and "visual filling" (the so-called phi phenomenon/beta movement). At this time, the brain-eye would finish the smooth pursuit and micro-saccade, tiny, involuntary corrective eye movements, to match the rhythm of the film. This is not only shown in the microscopic way but also can be observed in the audiences behavior: the shoulder/neck tilts slightly, and the breathing rhythm is pulled. Except for these stable patterns of intermittence, irregular shocks resembling arrhythmic "startle reflex" will also "tighten" their body. The sudden high luminance of a scene presented in the film will make the audiences stomach tighten, thus connecting their body to the film. Besides, mechanical flaws like the shutter jam, film burn and roll change signs can be considered as the premature heartbeats, hiccups, and pauses, where we can notice our body s existence. This "dys-appearance" can only be seen in the body and the film when they are abnormal. Philosopher Martin Heidegger once mentioned that renewal has less celebratory thrust, and it is the breakdown of equipment that allows us to experience it afresh (Heidegger, 1962). Similarly, when the film breaks its rhythm, whether visually or mechanically, it reminds us of our own bodily intermittence. These ideas incorporate my statement that humans uses film as a tool to reflect their own existence.

Through Barkers three layers of bodily connection, skin, musculature, and viscera, film offers a deeply connected cinematic experience to the body that digital media struggles to replicate. Unlike the dividual nature of digital media, photochemical film preserves an indexical trace of the real, allowing light, texture, and rhythm to touch the viewer on multiple levels. Through its imperfections and materiality, film not only provides a deeply bonded watching experience but reminds us that to see is also to feel, and to feel is to reflect the existence.

For AI-generated images, this bodily circuit is not merely weakened but fundamentally rerouted. Instead of initiating from an indexical encounter between light and photosensitive material, AI systems commence with pre-existing datasets and culminate in the abstraction of behavioral patterns. Consequently, the viewer is perceived less as a feeling body and more as a node in a feedback loop to be measured, predicted, and optimized. While AI can simulate tactility—adding synthetic grain, "cinematic" motion blur, or even haptic feedback on a phone screen—these touches do not originate from a shared material event. Instead, they are calculated effects tuned to maintain attention and generate further data. If Barkers sk in, musculature, and viscera describe layers where film and viewer mutually imprint upon one another, AI images tend to bypass these layers, directly addressing the algorithmic "double" of the viewer: a profile, a probability distribution, a set of preferences. The body is not invited to resonate but to be monitored—its pauses, clicks, and linger times are folded back into the model as training material. In this sense, AI images risk perfecting what Denson refers to as the "discorrelation" of post-cinematic media: the flicker that once aligned projector and heartbeat is replaced by an invisible calculus of relevance. Each image becomes less an invitation to feel and more a cue to scroll. Whereas films haptic touch opens a space for rediscovering our existence, AIs synthetic touch tends to smooth that space away, enclosing the body in a choreography it did not choose but continually, silently, supplies.

4. Comparing Examples

To ground these arguments, I turn to three images of the same Manhattan skyline. The first was shot on an iPhone 14 Pro Max in RAW, then only lightly restored without aggressive color grading. The second was taken on a Leica M6 with a Summicron 35mm lens on Kodak Gold 200. The third is generated by an AI image model from a text prompt based on the same view.

In the Gold 200 film version (Figure 1), the shadows cast by the brick buildings are dense, and the sky takes on a bluish hue. As the emulsion nears its limit, the highlights on the towers "bloom" slightly. Grain is visible throughout the frame, particularly in the midtones. These irregular crystals serve as the "microscopic witnesses" I mentioned earlier, each one having physically responded to the light of that particular morning. The warm cast, slight underexposure in the foreground, and even the frame line at the edge all act as small disruptions that hinder the illusion of seamless vision. They serve as reminders that a strip of film was intermittently moved behind a shutter and then subjected to chemical

processing. In Deleuzes terms , this is where time begins to detach from pure movement. The grain, halation, and tiny instabilities thicken the moment, transforming the skyline from a transparent view into a remembered duration. Barkers "skin" is also activated in this moment; the grain and color shifts invite the viewer to experience warmth, roughness, and atmospheric thickness, rather than merely recognizing the buildings.

Figure 1. Manhattan skyline shot on Kodak Gold 200 film.

The digital RAW image captured by the iPhone (Figure 2) treats the same scene as a field of data that needs optimization. The wider dynamic range ensures that details are preserved in both the illuminated clouds and the deep shadows of the rooftops. The edges are sharp, the verticals are clean, and the sky transitions into a very even gradient. Even before any heavy grading, the phones internal processing has already stabilized the exposure, aligned micro-vibrations, and suppressed noise. As a result, the image emerges as highly legible and "smooth," seamlessly fitting into the sensory-motor schema described by Deleuze. Perception is guided towards distinct objects that can be navigated and utilized, rather than towards disruptions in time. The eye glides effortlessly over the frame without being hindered by scratches or heavy grain, reducing the temptation to feel the image on the skin. Densons concept of discorrelation is evident here as well. Much of what contributes to the images "good" appearance—demosaicing, sharpening, and local tone mapping—occurs at the micro-computational level, beyond our perceptual time. While we still possess an indexical record, the interaction between light and body is partially mediated and partially concealed by software.

Figure 2. Manhattan skyline captured with iPhone 14 Pro Max in RAW format.

The AI-generated skyline exacerbates this tendency. DALL•E doesnt wait for sunset or load film into a camera; it constructs a statistically plausible Manhattan from its training images. Initially, the image appears "high quality": the sky features an ultra-smooth gradient without banding, the glass façades are razor-sharp, and the contrast is perfectly balanced, eliminating shadows and highlights. However, the micro-textures are oddly uniform. Window patterns repeat, rooftop clutter is simplified, and atmospheric haze is absent, making distant towers feel as crisp and plasticky as the foreground. The light seems globally applied rather than locally negotiated, resembling a render of "sunset" dropped onto a 3D model. Even when the model emulates film traits like soft color and a hint of grain, these are cosmetic overlays, not the result of emulsion being physically altered by light. In Deleuzean terms, this is a prediction-image: a frame that depicts what such a skyline is most likely to look like before anything has occurred. It also touches upon the uncanny valley. Although no humans are present, the citys almost -real surfaces and overly-perfect cleanliness and flatness create a subtle sense of eeriness, a feeling that the world has been approximated rather than lived. Barkers skin, musculature, and viscera find nothing to resonate with here, and Densons "dividual" image fully emerges: the skyline is not a singular photogram tied to a specific moment, but a composite output tailored for a hypothetical viewer, convincing to the eye yet curiously lacking in bodily truth. (Figure 3)

Figure 3. Manhattan skyline generated by DALL•E AI.

When seen together, these three skylines stage the core argument of this essay. Film stores time as a fragile, tactile trace, full of ruptures that touch the body and mark existence. Digital reconfigures time as adjustable data, smoothing away many of those ruptures in the name of clarity and control while still retaining an indexical base. AI goes one step further, generating convincing surfaces without any prior encounter with the world, perfecting the smoothness and predictability that Deleuze warns can close off genuine experiences of time.

5. Conclusion

This essay began with a seemingly simple yet elusive question: Is film making a comeback? After delving into industry reports, theoretical frameworks, and concrete examples, the answer emerges as a nuanced blend of yes and no. While film may not be returning as the primary infrastructure for moving-image production, digital pipelines have become too fast, cost-effective, and deeply integrated into postproduction, VFX, and streaming to be easily replaced. Simultaneously, film is experiencing a resurgence as a distinct form of tactile resistance within a culture dominated by digital

and AI-generated imagery. It serves as a reminder that time, bodies, and materials still hold significance.

Drawing inspiration from Deleuze, I explored how classical cinema structured images around movement and action. In contrast, postwar film introduced the concept of the "time-image," where hesitation, delay, and rupture become tangible aspects of time itself. However, digital media, optimized for smoothness and control, tends to draw us back toward the sensory-motor schema. Noise reduction, motion smoothing, and platform logics effectively close the gaps where time might be perceived, transforming images into a continuous flow that facilitates swiping and forgetting. AI further amplifies this logic by generating prediction-images—frames created not from exposure but from probabilities, already pre-tailored to anticipated behaviors. In such a system, rupture is no longer a technical limitation but an anomaly that needs correction. Consequently, films scratches, reel changes, and mechanical pauses acquire newfound political and existential significance. They represent rare instances where time resists being meticulously modeled in advance.

Barkers "tactile eye" and Densons discordant images shed light on why this concept holds significance at the level of the body. Photochemical film, meticulously crafted within the realm of indexical trace, physically interacts with the viewer through skin, muscles, and internal organs. Grain, flicker, and intermittent light transcend mere illustration; they engage the viewers breathing, pulse, and muscle memory, transforming perception into a collaborative performance between the projector and the body. While digital cinema undoubtedly captivates and impresses us, much of its functionality operates at the micro-computational level, where optimization distances images from our corporeal experience. Artificial Intelligence takes this a step further, focusing not on the embodied viewer but on their algorithmic "double"—a profile that can be predicted and monetized. Even when AI simulates tactility through artificial grain or "cinematic" color, this touch is strategic rather than reciprocal, prioritizing attention-grabbing over fostering self-recognition.

The three Manhattan skylines serve as a visual representation of this trajectory. The Gold 200 negative distorts a specific evening into grain and color shifts, transforming the view into a recollection of a particular duration. In contrast, the iPhone RAW file presents the same scene as pristine, adjustable data—smooth, legible, and primed for further manipulation. Finally, the DALL•E skyline offers an almost-realistic, eerily spotless city that straddles the uncanny valley: visually convincing yet curiously disembodied, a place that appears to have been approximated rather than experienced firsthand. Collectively, these images illustrate how film, digital, and AI not only "capture" the world in distinct ways but also propose varying relationships between light, time, and human existence.

If film is experiencing a resurgence, its because many viewers and creators recognize the need for precisely what digital and AI tend to suppress: slowness, friction, and the undeniable fact that something tangible occurs in front of a lens. While film may not be suitable as the primary industrial workhorse or a competitor to AI in terms of speed or volume, it can continue to serve as a medium of rupture—a space where time leaves an indelible mark, where images remain slightly unpredictable, and where the body is compelled to experience rather than merely optimize. In this regard, the future of moving images is unlikely to be a seamless transition from film to digital to AI. Instead, it will be a negotiated coexistence where films value lies less in nostalgia and more in its ability to remind us that viewing is also an act of touch, hesitation, and existence in time, rather than simply passing through images without leaving a lasting impression.

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