In tackling the question, What is Film?, Cherchi-Usai first makes reference to an anonymous article in an 1897 (or rather 01897, the year format that Cherchi-Usai insists on using throughout the book) issue of _Le Natur_, wherein the author arithmetically works out how long an individual frame in any film is physically made apparent in the putative three hundred screenings of a cinematographic film before its disintegration. He (or she) concludes that an individual image's 'effective life is in its totality one-and-one-third seconds' (5), far shorter than the ephemeral existence of a firework. Thus Cherchi-Usai seems to ask what it is that we consider to be a film. Is it the original negative (or positive) onto which the image is initially recorded in the camera? Is it the total number of copies originally struck from that negative and edited into a
Cherchi-Usai here seems to be making a logical leap from the physical to the metaphysical. If every viewing of a celluloid print inevitably leads to its eventual destruction, this is not merely a physical problem that can be solved by copying the images of that film onto another medium. He argues that this destruction is in some way constitutive of what he calls 'cinema'. This reasoning seems to echo Barthes when he famously writes that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author'. [2] For Cherchi-Usai, the birth of cinema must be at the cost of the death of film. This also implies the inevitable death of cinema, since its existence is dependent on film, the material that it necessarily consumes in the perpetuation of its existence. Put this way, Cherchi-Usai is making an ecological argument in which he implies that cinema will eventually destroy all film and therefore itself. The problem here is Cherchi-Usai's insistence that the physical method of turning film into a cinema (or perhaps this should more properly be called an alchemical method) is a metaphor for the way in which we comprehend the moving image itself (this moving image is, of course, merely an illusion created in the mind of the viewer). Does our understanding of the meaning of a film necessarily depend on that film's destruction? Or rather, on the possibility that our understanding of what that film might mean is mistaken?

Let us try to think this through in what may be termed a 'science fiction' approach. Imagine that you are the only person alive and that you have in your possession a projector and a can of film, the contents of which you know nothing. Imagine that you can screen the film only 300 times before it is no longer viewable. Since you have nothing else to do except wait for your own death, you decide to screen the film once every two months (this will take 50 years). Is the film's inevitable disintegration on its 300th screening in any way linked to your understanding of what that film might be about? If so, the only subject that that film (or, indeed, any film) could have would be the death of cinema. The problem of whether or not 'cinema is the art of destroying moving images' would be the subject of that film regardless of its overt subject material.

Cherchi-Usai's second question, How is film to preserved?, is predicated on this answer. He quickly points out that any chemical process of copying film is inevitably doomed, and he also claims this to be true for any digital copy of a film. This latter point is not rigorously argued from a physical point of view. Cherchi-Usai does not really go into the details of digital as opposed to chemical preservation. He merely assumes that digital reproduction is also hopeless. This attitude is summed up in a reader's report on the manuscript of _The Death of Cinema_, that Cherchi-Usai includes as an appendix to the book, in which the reader (who might possibly be a fictional construct of Cherchi-Usai himself) heaps scorn on those who 'invoke the digital goddess to spare us the guilty knowledge of impending and irredeemable doom' (113). The logic of this conclusion is based on the understanding that the thing we call 'cinema' only exists because it will inevitably be destroyed. Film preservation, therefore, becomes a doomed, romantic endeavour that is carried out by enthusiasts who realise that their efforts will inevitably come to nothing. What then is the preservationist enthusiastic about? Why bother preserving anything if, by definition, that thing cannot be preserved? Here Cherchi-Usai offers two possible explanations, one explicitly in his discussion of the role of Film History, and the other more covertly in the publication of this book itself.
In aphorism 10, 'Primary Goal of Film History', Cherchi-Usai writes: 'The subject of film history being the destruction of the moving image, its primary goal is to recapture the experience of its first viewers, an empirical impossibility' (25). Let us return to our science fiction example in order to think more clearly about this. If we assume that no one has seen the film in our can before (the editor having dropped dead after the final edit), we can therefore say that the first screening of the film will be the object of film history. Every bimonthly screening after that will be an attempt to recreate the experience of our first viewing, which, since the passage of time inevitably implies change of some sort, must be 'an empirical impossibility'. The time between each screening could be spent producing tomes about what it had been like to watch the film the first time and each subsequent screening would be a fleeting reminder of what that experience may have been like. The capture of what Cherchi-Usai terms the 'Model Image' (one of the earlier proposed titles of the book) becomes the impossible goal of Film History. In this sense, the word 'recapture' is equivalent to the semiotic impossibility of the term 'perception'. Cherchi-Usai goes on to say that neither film history nor political utopia 'would have any interest whatsoever if their goals were realised' (25), that is, if Film History ever managed to recreate the Model Image it would be obsolete. It is therefore the gap between image and Model Image that allows the existence of history as such.

The second answer to the point of film preservation is contained in the book, _The Death of Cinema_, itself and particularly in its reproduction of stills. Some of these are obvious to the point of being visual cliches about the difficulty of the visual: Bunuel slicing the donkey's eye in _Un Chien andalou_ (1929); the spiral/eye from Saul Bass's _Vertigo_ credits (1958); Malcolm McDowell's forced viewing in _A Clockwork Orange_ (1971); an eye gouging from Pasolini's _Salo_ (1975). Others explicitly revel in images of the destruction of film: a strip of decomposed film from 1925; a burned out nitrate film storage room; a Douglas Fairbanks Studio employee using an axe to destroy unwanted film; Taliban students torching films in Afghanistan. There is however a third category of images: those that depict human death and suffering (a burned Chinese baby; John F. Kennedy's assassination; the emaciated corpse of a Bergen-Belsen inmate) that seem to make an analogy between the destruction of film and the destruction of human life. This is a metaphor that also appears in the text itself: when describing images from distant and (to us) obscure cultures, Cherchi-Usai writes that their 'relative distance leaves us with the same lack of involvement we feel at the news of the passing away of a person we have never heard of before' (97), while in the reader's report an equivalence is drawn between choosing which film to preserve in the face of economic necessity and the choice a doctor might have when faced with 'ten thousand patients, and there's enough medicine to cure perhaps a hundred' (114). There seems, then, to be an argument here that in the quest to preserve film, we are in some way also preserving human life. Or perhaps, that the desire to preserve film is the same as the desire to preserve life. For Cherchi-Usai, then, the doomed attempt to preserve film would appear to be the same as the doomed attempt to preserve humanity (and civilisation).

While _The Death of Cinema_ is in part theoretically provocative, it seems to work itself into a nihilistic dead-end from which escape is only possible through that which has been proved to be impossible: cinema itself. Martin Scorsese's Preface seems to completely miss Cherchi-Usai's point while at the same time entirely understanding the aim of the project:

'Paolo has drawn with clinical precision . . . the picture of a worldwide crisis that commands our unconditional concern. His portrait of a culture ignoring the loss of its own image is a devastating moral tale: there is something very wrong with the way we are taught to dismiss the art of seeing as something ephemeral and negligible.'

It is unclear however why we should be concerned (unconditionally) with the preservation of this
image (especially considering the impossibility of this task). Perhaps it is merely a restatement of the cliche that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it, but this book never moves beyond that cliche.

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Footnotes


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David Sorfa, 'Why Bother with Cinema?', _Film-Philosophy_, vol. 7 no. 9, April 2003 <http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol7-2003/n9sorfa>.

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