23 Fragments on the Future of Cinema


Asked to address the question of the moment, James Schamus responds with this provocative, exhilarating meditation on cinema, its death, and the possibilities of its non-future. A speech given November 18, 2014 at the German Film Academy.

1. Let us begin with a quotation, from the late, great Theodor Adorno: “Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration, whether this is his intention or not.”

2. You have invited me here tonight to speak on the topic of “The Future of Cinema.” This is not an easy task, given all the challenges buffeting our Industry and our art form, challenges such as declining theater attendance in markets like the United States; piracy; increased competition for attention from games, sports, online social media and Web and television series; changing structures of finance and revenue flows that come with the reconfiguration of ancillary markets following the fall of DVD sales and the rise of video-on-demand and subscription streaming services such as Netflix; the impact of increased consolidation among the large corporations that own the various integrated media empires; political and economic constraints on sales and pre-sales of independent and studio films across borders and regions; and the presumed rise of the blockbuster mentality among the major studios.
My task is made easier, however, by the fact that I don’t really care about the future of cinema.

I do care, however, about why the topic of the future of cinema has become a matter of care and concern for my friends and colleagues.

3. The cinema, said Louis Lumière, in 1895, “Is an invention without a future.”

4. Of course everyone thinks Lumière was obviously and ironically sorely mistaken; even if we are worried that cinema today may not have a future, we believe that cinema at one point did have a future. It’s just that cinema’s future may now most likely be in its past.

But I think we should take Lumière seriously. What if, from its very inception, the cinema was — and still is — precisely a way of organizing masses of human beings into processes of imagining, producing and exchanging stories and images, that at one and the same time solicits our sense of futurity while foreclosing our hopes that we might be agents ourselves of that future? The cinema makes us modern, and it does so by announcing to us that the future is already here, so, naturally, what usually follows this future-that-is-already-here is nothing short of apocalypse — an apocalypse we can only imagine resolving itself in our favor through some kind of heroic return to a recognizable, if reconfigured, Edenic, long-gone past.

Cinema implants the technologies of our ultimate destruction into the very means by which we create our dreams and fantasies: how else can we account for the fact that no one seems to notice that Méliès’ A Trip to the Moon stages a massive and apocalyptic race war as its dénouement, or that Interstellar and its thousands of antecedents locate the future as the simultaneous destruction and reproduction of the social relations that defined our [fantasies of our] quaint, rural past? Cinema congeals around its individual heroes and heroines precisely this obvious refusal of the idea of a collective, co-created future.

Sergei Eisenstein had this figured out in the 1920s when he brilliantly linked D.W. Griffith and the rise of Hollywood global cinema with its contradictory embrace of both a frenetic modernity and an old-school, Dickensian parochialism. He was amazed by the paradox of his experience of visiting New York City — sky-high buildings, exuberant capitalism, modern automobiles, but all stuck in traffic, moving at a snail’s pace. And the apartments in those high-rises? Filled with faux-Victorian furniture, stained-wood cabinets covered with doilies and people with small-town values.

So, when we worry about the future of the cinema, we worry about the future of that which produces, at the very core of its being, a no-future future. We worry about the future of this thing with no future, which constantly solicits us to imagine, finance, create and exhibit to each other this no-future, this walking death of our imagined past.

Is this what you are worried about losing when you worry about the future of cinema?

5. Another way to think about this: The best way to ensure there is no future for cinema is to structure your thinking about cinema around the problem of its future, as if this were even a problem.

One reason the future of the cinema is not a problem is because the cinema is already dead anyway, and you all know it. Think of it this way: 40 years ago, if we were to gather together under similar circumstances, you would more than likely have asked me to come and talk about “The Cinema Today,” or some such title. Today, no one among us thinks about the cinema today, because we are too busy thinking about the cinema’s future, about trends and threats, and the reason we are worried about the future of cinema is because we know the cinema is already dead and we would rather not think about that fact. Of
course by this I do not mean that there are still not a lot of movies (and great ones) and a lot of great moviemakers: I mean only that, simply, the cinema is dead. But being dead is not the same thing as not existing — many things exist that are dead. Indeed, I would argue that many of the greatest things that exist are dead and this is not necessarily a bad thing.

And the fact that something is dead does not mean that it does not have a kind of future. The cinema, from its Inception, repeatedly gives us this lesson: the dead are also, always, in the movies, the undead, not exactly alive, but always coming back, returning, popping up from the grave, etc. And the living, caught on film, are always soon-to-be-dead, even as their shadows continue to animate the screens in front of us. To be captured on film is, in an Important way, to participate, however passively, in your protest against this fact.

Siegfried Kracauer, following Proust, understood well the camera as death-machine that inscribes, through its very alienation and objectification of our vision, the possibility of experiencing the overlooked and left-for-dead world around us, the world we couldn’t pay attention to without this mechanical abjection that captures and then re-presents our world.

For Kracauer, the photographic essence of the cinema was the means by which cinema could escape the death-grip of traditional art, which closed off the world through its formal structures, of which tragedy was the supreme example. True cinema, Kracauer argued, even if it tried for tragic closure, always had within it this escape valve — it captured the trivial, the unnoticed, the unimportant, the seemingly meaningless: it scooped them all up along with its heroes and heroines and their storybook fates and three-act structures.

Today, under the sign of the digital, we are told that this photographic, indexical function of the cinema is disappearing, and with it the balance between recording and formal functions that Kracauer celebrated as the value of the cinematic.

Is this perhaps what you are worried about losing when you worry about the future of the cinema? All this trivia and abject refuse?

6. On November 5, 2014, Christopher Nolan’s Interstellar opened its North American release on 279 screens, on which his movie was projected via 35mm and IMAX-sized film. Two days later, it expanded to thousands and thousands of digital screens. That is, this bold cinematic vision of the future was, at its, so to speak, Inception, a gesture of tremendous nostalgia, nostalgia for film. But this is, as I argued just now, always the future of the cinema; it always has been. We are always, in the cinema, traveling into an imagined future in order to inhabit our ideal past.

7. Thus, to imagine a future for cinema, we have to imagine the possibility of a cinema that might actually be able to think the future without figuring it as an undead version of our past.

Thinking about this future, though, would be the opposite of worrying about the future of the cinema.

8. Another (cinematic) way of thinking about our worry for the future of cinema: perhaps it is an issue of mutants and clones.

In one version of its history, cinema crawled out of its primordial swamp — the decaying flesh of live theater — by installing its dead ghost-images inside those very theatrical spaces where live humans used to strut and exclaim. Within two decades of its arrival it had, like a mutant virus, killed off most of those live actors and taken over the body of the theatrical stage, turning it into a screen.

And more: it did so by replicating itself, not so much by copying as by cloning. We say "such-and-such" film — say, E.T. — but the film E.T. is an ideal conceptual construct that exists because each print of E.T. claims its status not as the copy of some original E.T. but as the clone of the ideal E.T. (an ideal we only extract from the existence of an inter-negative — that is, like Sartre’s Being, film only emerges as a phenomenologically available datum through our actions of nihilization, of negating an [inter-]negative idealization).

Over the course of the past 120 years the cinema has adapted to and co-mutated with a number of other technologies: some of these have entered “Inside” the body of the cinema, such as sound, and then digital recording. Some of these have formed infrastructures and pathways for audience and market construction into which cinema has had to acclimate itself, such as television and the Internet. The worry is that, of course, these new "viral" forms are eating the cinema alive from its “Inside” and forcing its migration to hostile environments where it cannot “adapt” and “compete” with other forms that are more suited to these new conditions and whose mutations are more competitive.
Is it this we are worried about when we worry about the future of the cinema? That is, have we taken our own mutating virus and turned it, over time, into an idea of a unified singular artistic ideal form, now under assault from these new, even deadlier half-life forms?

9. The cinema has something to do with the experience of narratives unfolding in or around a couple of hours, more or less, play-acted in front of cameras, assembled into edited products that, at least initially, are projected onto screens in front of audiences who pay to enter and sit in dark spaces together facing those screens.

Of course, from an economic point of view, such an idea of cinema has not existed for many, many decades — indeed, for coming up on probably half its actual lifespan, the cinema has not been the cinema, as the entire economic edifice which supports the idea of the cinema has rested on the sources of its actual profits: the sum total of the ancillary values derived from the windowing of video and DVD, cable and television licensing, pay TV, TV syndication and now digital streaming. For most of my lifetime a theatrical release has been simply, even in its most successful iterations, a loss-leader, a form of advertising that gave legitimacy to the product’s "identity" as "cinema" in its actual economic life downstream on smaller screens.

The entire economy that this idea of cinema supports rests primarily on a business that involves selling sugar water and fat-laden carbohydrates at 90% profit margins to sedentary and lethargic groups of consumers who agree to sit still long enough for their blood sugar levels to go down sufficiently so that they can be sold these sugar and fat products in large enough quantities to justify the expense of operating cinema theaters and making and marketing so-called films. As I am wont to say, the most important six words in the film business are "No Outside Food or Drink Allowed."

The future of "cinema" can thus be thought of first and foremost as the future of regularly congregating large numbers of people to ingest fat and sugar in front of screens.

Is this the future of cinema that you are worried about?

10. Here is another way to think about the future of cinema: Cinema insists on the singularity — even if it is a rewatchable singularity — of its audiovisual narrative experience. In this sense we associate cinema with something you pay for by the specific unit of consumption: one ticket to Der Schuh des Manitu gets you one unit of Der Schuh des Manitu consumption. But already there’s something off about this assumption — even the way we say things like “Let’s go to the movies.” That is, we have always thought the cinema as somehow already plural. This is perhaps a leftover of the days in which the cinema functioned as a kind of community television, consumed in double- and triple-features, accompanied by short newsreels and trailers. That is, we have only in retrospect made the cinema out to be the site of a singular experience, and we hold on to this idea by believing that cinema begins its path in one-off theatrical experiences, from whence the unit of cinematic consumption begins its journey over time — into its own future, that is — from a single unit of consumable leisure time into its merging into an eventual, steadily growing and near-infinite pile of digital entertainment available, as they say, any time, any how and anywhere, on any and all platforms.

So the future of cinema always has within it this future of each unit of cinema — it begins as a proposal for a singular transaction in a theater, then a singular transaction available from a much more vast menu as a DVD or a pay-per-view sale or rental, and then, over time, it joins an amorphous mass of programming and digital stuff floating in various clouds.

11. The current thinking has it, at least in the States and somewhat in the U.K., Scandinavia and perhaps France, that television, broadly conceived as also including digital streaming, is, creatively and financially, where the action is. Is television’s recent surge the cause for your anxiety about the future of cinema? But, as we noted above, cinema has been, essentially, a televisual endeavor for most of the past half-century anyway. What specifically cinematic thing do you feel is being threatened now?

One way to answer this question is to think about how one sense of time, the journey from the now to the future, is thought to enact itself in movies and in television series. Is there a difference between how movies and TV series partake of this journey? Certainly, when the producers of a TV series begin their work, they sketch out in advance many of the story arcs and destinies of their characters. But the entire point of launching a TV series is that you don’t actually ever want it to end — the real money comes in extending the series for many, many seasons, during the course of which various contingencies can be adapted to — audiences might fall in love with a secondary character who is then promoted in the next season to center stage, or an actor begins to behave badly and to ask for too much money when it comes time to renegotiate his contract, so his character must be killed off or otherwise removed.
The point is that the "final episode" is always an embarrassment for a TV series, either an abrupt pulling of the plug by the network, or an admission of creative or audience exhaustion, aging, etc. TV series — even if not especially beloved ones — always seem to end either too soon or too late.

By contrast, a film, to be successful, must seek out and fulfill its end from its very start. Even if it is to be sequitized, or prequelized, or is envisioned as a multi-part work such as the Harry Potter movies — that is, even if it engineers some kind of narrative or temporal gap or porthole into its endings through which we can imagine or desire further adventures — a film proposes at its very inception one thing for sure: it has thought through its end. In this sense the cinema indeed has no future, precisely because it must know its end before it begins, unlike television.

Clearly, however, this kind of televisial temporality has always been part of the cinema, from even before there was television — Les Mystères de Paris, B movie and Western serials, etc. — and is ingrained in some of cinema's most, well, cinematic successes (the Star Wars films, for example). And yet this sense of narrative destination, so linked to the self-identity of each individual film, is still cherished as an ideal essential to cinema's defenders, regardless of how fragile it is.

So you are worried about the future of something that must incorporate already, by its very nature, its ending before it begins.

12. I begin these fragments with a quotation from Theodor Adorno, to which I now return. Tonight we gather in Berlin as filmmakers, as producers of cinema, and perhaps we should confess that our worries about the future of cinema are worries about the future of us.

13. It is not so much that producers produce cinema as it is that cinema, as an ideology and institution, produces cinema producers.

Of course the cinema produces images and sounds that combine to tell stories. It produces emotions and ideas, too. But just as importantly the cinema produces a cadre, a cohort, of administrators whose function it is to transform money, intellectual property and labor into a network of relations and activities and protocols embedded in audiovisual data organized as stories meant for circulation across a broad array of media. Co-production treaties, letters of credit, interparty agreements, licensing arrangements, escrow accounts, talent deals and the technologies of marketing and publicity that create and help constitute audiences and target demographics — cinema produces a specific set of various areas of expertise (on top of or underneath all the kinds of expert craftsmanship involved in acting, lighting, scoring, writing, directing, etc.).

14. This professional and administrative expertise is always described as having to locate itself on a spectrum. On the one end of the spectrum is something we call "art" or "culture." On the other end of the spectrum is something we call "money" or, sometimes, "capital." It is assumed in the film world that too great a preoccupation with "art" equals probably too little return on capital, and that too much obsession with return on capital equals too little regard for art, and that the job of the producer is somehow to balance these competing and opposite ends of this presumed spectrum.

The cinema, of course, makes a mockery of this assumption; and the idea that it is the producer's task to calibrate this so-called "balance" is one of the great institutional jokes of our profession. For "art" — this concept that emerged here in Germany most forcefully during the 18th-century Enlightenment — and "capital," another idea that emerged concomitantly with the modern concept of the "aesthetic" — are not opposites, but rather functions of each other.

The presence of art in a world in which all objects and relations are reducible to abstract exchangeable units of value allows us to imagine human productive force as, at its most human, "priceless," beyond exchange value. But, funny enough, the priceless always, too, manages to command its price, and that which has its price always has it because it can serve as a depository for the production and exchange of our human dreams, desires and fantasies. We believe that these fantasies exceed or are additions to our basic needs and the assignment of use values to the objects we manufacture and exchange to meet those needs, but, of course, it is the fantasies themselves that are the ground for this entire economic system.

And so perhaps your worries about the future of cinema are worries about whether or not the fantasy structures produced and administered by us, the professional cadres enlisted to sustain this system of fantasy/value exchange, are strong and resilient enough any more for a system that is increasingly hyper-financialized and abstract. Are the desires we produce capable of keeping our audiences tethered to this system? Or are the current shifts in the flow of money in and out of narrative sound-image chains dispersing our desires and fantasies away from identifiably cinematic narrative structures and into more scattered and ephemeral units?
15. Money is itself a technology of the future. Its only value is its embodiment as a token of our fantasy or belief that at some future date it will still be redeemable. The cinema — and in this sense cinema stands in for a certain version of "art" — disrupts this idea of a future promise (even as it shares essentially its same form), for cinema, as I have argued above, posits its end at its beginning, imagines the future as a kind of past, insists on an identity that claims that each film is particular and unique (dollar bills cannot, by their very nature, be thought of as unique), at least before its inevitable disappearance into the pile of digital content that it joins on the far horizon of its value chain, at the end of all the windows it passes through.

16. To the extent cinema is "art," it serves as a vanishing pool into which money flows and disappears into culture. Culture is thus the creation of a present that refuses the logic of money as the way to think about the future. But, as Adorno has shown us, this is an ideological fantasy — a trap. The more culture pretends to be un-administrable as art, the more it legitimizes the idea that the world of monetary equivalence, use value and instrumental reason is the "real" world — when, as we learn again and again, that so-called "real" world is often a nightmare fantasy of exploitation, destruction and unreality.

17. Here is what we are told, day in and day out, by all the current prognosticators of the "future" of cinema: the consumer wants his entertainment when he wants it, where he wants it and how he wants it. He wants it now. Those who are too old-fashioned to get with this program will soon be killed off by the innovators and disrupters who will service without hesitation this gigantic infant consumer.

18. But there is another way to phrase this injunction: the providers of entertainment, the corporation-states and state-corporations, need to know what this gigantic baby consumer is doing, when he is doing it and how he is doing it. And they need to know it now.

19. Value is created not in the exchange of time and attention for entertainment, but in the production, manipulation and control of the consumer-data generated when the subject lives within this world of immediate data points. In this world, all money and power flows through those with the algorithms: our job as producers is simply to feed enough operationally visible fantasy points into the infrastructure so it can sustain itself as the source of fantasy and identity for its subjects.

The reason for this shift has again to do with the incorporation of the future into the value chain. The algorithms produce mainly probabilities and predictions: the goal is to capture the consumer-baby's attention and purchase decision-making as much and as efficiently as possible, and this means refining the menu of options in front of the consumer-baby based on the accumulating evidence of all of his or her prior fantasy/money interactions within the system, as well as those of all similar consumer-babies from whom actual and data and predictions can be generated by analogy and social mapping.

20. The same logic that goes into the super-government's surveillance of all our data — so that it can predict and thus preemptively quash the possibility of attack or subversion — also goes into our Netflix queues. In order to turn this to account, however, prediction must become, as simultaneously as possible, production: it is much more efficient to predict what someone will choose when, on the one hand, your target believes she is an agent with free choice, and on the other hand she has as few choices as possible to choose from. You can see how this works in our corporate-controlled elections in the United States, now essentially financed by competing factions of billionaires who pay for the mass production of fantasies of choice into which voters are invited and encouraged to participate.

21. With regards to the future of the cinema, my point is that everything now converges on the refinement of these technologies of the future and of consumer-baby behavior prediction, while the definition of the "future" becomes increasingly shrunken down to a micro-order of milliseconds of decisions about what to click, view, sign, vote for or purchase.

Perhaps your worry about the future of the cinema has to do with your nostalgia for a kind of cinematic citizen, someone not tethered to this system but rather someone who, private and anonymous in the great cinema-going crowd, sits and watches your work without becoming fodder for the production of this near-simultaneous and predictable set of delimited futures. Whether or not this "cinematic citizen" has ever really existed, or can exist today, is probably besides the point — the idea of her locates at the very least a point of resistance for you to reflect on the current and unfolding reality.

22. We can think of this in terms of information theory: the second law of thermodynamics postulates that all matter is inexorably trending toward indifferentiation and eventual heat death. This is probable to the point of certainty.

Information is the presence of improbable configurations of matter — art, for example, or narrative, is thus meaningful to the extent that it reorganizes matter in such a way that it pushes back against this inevitable, certain, nondifferentiated unfolding state and creates improbable objects for us to encounter. It intervenes in this version of temporal progression toward eventual certain heat death, and thus introduces to us the experience of a different kind of temporality, or at least a protest to
the idea of time as the unfolding of indifferendation and eventual heat death. In a sense art points elsewhere, if not backwards, to a future that is not in front of us. And cinema, to the extent it has been something of our past century's premier "art" form, is an idea that allows us to think differently from, away from and against that future.

Perhaps it is the value you place in this nonfuture that has you worried about the future of the cinema.

22. So you asking me to come here to Berlin to talk about the future of cinema was a simple but understandable mistake — given that you have asked me for a kind of thinking that the cinema itself (to the extent there is such a thing as the cinema) objects to. So now you know why I don't care about the future of the cinema, and why I think you should not care either. Lumière, at the beginning of the cinema, was absolutely right: it was an invention without a future. He was right then, and he is even more right today. Good night.