

Greg Macon

Oklahoma Film and Video Studies Society Conference

University of Central Oklahoma

April 3, 2010

See Through Film: Back to the Future of an Illusion

-- From a Restricted to a General Economy -- Yesterday's Tomorrows -- Things to Come -- Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Film Study -- The Ends of the Film Loop -- Theses on a History of the Future of Cinema -- Tomorrow I'll Wake up and Scald Myself with Tea

Forgive my infatuation with titles, but this is also a by-product of the archive, the age of accumulation and electronic art and data. Not to mention of all the titles that interest in movies entails, whether skimming a movie guide, making favorite lists, shopping on Netflix, or researching exhibition or censor logs for all the lost films. IMDb. Perhaps more peculiarly, I have a fascination with the idea of a written work being just a series of titles, a kind of catalogue like a Rolodex, a flip book or Mutoscope, as a striptease, a dance of veils where each one refers to what's to come in a relay that never gets to a pure, denuded subject, substance. Or think of it as different takes. You'll see that this is all a sleight of hand, not really there, like the subject of cinema, the action or event in "cyberspace."

One of the things I'm going to do -- going to perform here -- is illustrate the absence of illustration. You will note what it means not to have these examples, from film or film history or film theory. Instead of showing you film clips, I'm going to illustrate by not having illustrations what it is to be unable to see film, as happens in writing anyway. "In" this paper. I thus emphasize the loss of this record, this art, this subject. I will even refer to something I haven't seen.

Remember “theory” is also to see, to look. I’ll remind you of seeing, again, so you’ll be reminded of what you’re not -- seeing.

So, theses toward a history of the future of film. I’m doing a remake, here, of a famous Walter Benjamin piece, whose title I also trope. (A parenthesis: I set down as example, as a kind of effigy, this matter of the contemporary remake as clamorous reclamation of the past that is an obscuration of so much more past, a reductive investment or capitalization, perhaps a fetishization if we can trust ourselves not to get carried away with that term, a kind of Baudrillardian hyper-ization of a commodity sense of the past.) I’m restaging from this Walter Benjamin piece this character, figure: the angel of history blown backwards into the future, seeing only the conflagrations of the past. This figure also passes by that other famous Benjamin essay for film study, which nonetheless gives us another uncanny figure: that of the film negative or print now having the aura of the original.

Looking at the ends of film, like the ends of the reels, we have to know our heads from our tails. Can we tell them apart? The movies began in the arcades, the movies as proto-video games, and took over the theater. Now this personalization of the arcade threatens the theatrical aspect of the movies. And this new archive arcade, this digital, computer graphic metamorphosis is killing the cinema while keeping the movies, moving pictures, alive. The living dead.

Can we tell the ends of film? Can we see the future of an illusion?

When one has lived for long within a particular culture and has often striven to discover its origins and the path of its development, one feels for once the temptation to turn one’s attention in the other direction and to ask what further fate awaits this culture and what transformations it is destined to undergo. . . .

[B]ut the less a man knows of the past and the present the more unreliable must

his judgment of the future prove. . . . And finally one must take into account the remarkable fact that in general men experience the present naïvely, so to speak, without being able to estimate its content; they must first place it at a distance, i.e. the present must have become the past before one can win from it points of vantage from which to gauge the future. And so he who yields to the temptation to deliver an opinion on the probable future of our culture will do well to remind himself of the difficulties just indicated, and likewise of the uncertainty that attaches quite universally to every prophecy (Freud 7-8).

This work I quote, *The Future of an Illusion* by Sigmund Freud, could be cited in its entirety. The problems of the sort Freud gets into, not just what he takes up, but his manner of doing so, are ones we should be just as keen to. The naiveté of the viewer, of holding any view, is just as much here in this objectification of culture, of others in or as culture, thus demonstrated as much by Freud's essay, position, as by what it says, speaks of. We should always be aware of this trick of the absolute gaze, especially as film theorists, that is, as specialists in the field of visual representation, lights and shadows, phantoms, in dark rooms.

For the theme of *The Future of an Illusion*, it's subject or object, it's major movement, religion v. science, we might make analogous the matter of the camera, the apparatus, as well as the film art in general: *physis* v. *techne*, document v. fantasy, realism v. formalism. Of course, the movies, as art, and in turn as culture, fall into Freud's argument, but I would find here a suggestion of in between, where art, fiction, poesis, and even more broadly representation subtend this entire opposition of mythos and logos, of truth. Even more particularly, of course, movies are this matter between something like a bare fact and fantasy, between the purely mechanical passive trait as fact and the projection. This opposition we know as film historians

and theorists has gone on from the beginning, the two orientations of the movies: Lumière and Méliès.

From Freud we might also get -- borrow or pick up inadvertently -- the succession principle of the law of the father, both from another work at hand, *Totem and Taboo*, referred to in *The Future of an Illusion*, and from more general knowledge of his work. The symbolic murder of the father, if not the actual one it may pay tribute to, this communal killing of the primal father at the origin of society, culture, religion, is necessary symbolically, psychologically, for coming to be in one's own right. Movies had to do this with respect to the older arts, and as an industry, modes of production and commercialization, the movies must also face some of their own consequences, the succession by the same principle, if not their own offspring.

Let me also remind us about the double genitive, among all these other double, ambiguous, confused ends: the future *of* an illusion. In other words, also yesterday's tomorrows, things to come, sci-fi films, the various futures our movies have imagined. The history of *that* fiction and *of* that fiction. Before I go on to some other quotes, more or less famous.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." That's a comment of George Santayana's that is misremembered in several famous ways. We forget that we forget. Heidegger, I think, said something to this effect, but I can't remember how exactly, or where. So I'll just be responsible for saying it my own way: Look out, the past is behind you.

And as for film, as for this *techne*, mechanical writing of light and event, recorded image of life itself, we must remember: even the record is forgotten. Even the record is mortal. The lesson of the precariousness of the record itself, of the archive, has been learned hard with film,

all the material, chemical, mechanical and financial problems of storage and transfer, from nitrate to the matter of transfer to digital video.

The lesson, here, is one about what we are not seeing, what we are not conscious of, not merely as some submerged referent or value in a reservoir, but what we don't have in mind at any level. Freud suggests that this matter of the naiveté of the present is an ineluctable factor of seeing. To have any view of the future, we must be aware of this way we are (not) seeing the present, and realize we must look at the present *as* the past. The operative here is distance. (I hasten ahead to broaden this to difference, of all kinds, and even one kind, genre, could stand for all the others: gender, country, language, sound, culture, seriousness, art, running time.)

“Film” -- movies -- if we can be presumptuous enough about what this is we refer to, about any of these terms we use to gloss and gather and mark off, for in the same way, the movies had to proclaim and at the same time defend, fight against and fight for, the same distinction, in their day, when they began, of the other arts -- but aren't the movies so much a matter of these other arts, visual composition, writing, music, drama, and even if film subsumed them all, like some apparatus of Hegelian perfection, it would thus maintain them all, bear these distinctions within it. Movies had to fight this battle, and here within a century, they are now in the place of the older arts, falling prey to their own law of succession. We can be just as sure of the effects of this decline even if we cannot find a “real” border -- for what is a *real* border? -- between one “art” and another, one representation and another, one cyberspace and another.

Note how this term “cyberspace” is the arrogance of a new medium's distinction, subsuming the past with its own naiveté. As if there weren't before, in writing, painting, movies, the theater, the matter of this a-topic place where the story, the scene, fiction, imagination, ideas occur. Where does the story of the text occur? Where is the space of what the painting depicts? Is

this more uncanny as figure or abstract? Where do these events written in light take place? And just as uncanny, where realism runs up against its greatest paradox of formalism, how does the event portrayed occur *in* the theater even when it's in the theater, if it is to be realistic?

We know as film historians, theorists, critics, fans and buffs, the more as aficionados, the more as we've cultivated ourselves to appreciate this matter, how the movies, film, celluloid, had to fight against the apocalyptic claims of the other arts. So now, with video and digitalization and increased privatization and convenience and dissemination of exhibition, it is easy to see -- but remember, as Freud reminded us, and remember that we forget, what this easiness can mean -- how the existence of moving pictures is both threatened and never more assured. We know this as it is happening to literature, too. Just as film/script expresses the conundrum of the way movies would never extinguish writing in principle, at the same time that they have affected the material, social, commercial means of writing, the industry of print and books, so the term "movies," even where the term "image" stands for this, expresses this conundrum of the transformation of film into this more mobile, transferable, pervasive form or medium, all this electronic, digital proliferation, at the same time it radically transforms not only the means of production, but the physical and social form of the experience of viewing, of seeing, of watching movies. We must be aware of our prophecies here, of being neither too apocalyptic, alarmist, nor too complacent, intransigent, in denial about change.

It's the word "cinema" that captures what is at stake. The word, shortened from "cinematograph," first coined by the Lumière brothers to refer to their invention, was used by 1899 to refer to movie halls for exhibition of the works of this process. The Lumière's word meant something like the writing of movement, from Greek terms for those. I call attention to the association in "graph" of tracing, drawing, writing, even scratching or etching. At the same time,

via the other part, from the Greek term *kinein*, movement, note the relation to “cite”: to summon, to cause to move, arouse, urge, call; stir, rouse, invite. And let me also recall here the etymology of theater, and its common relation with theory, in Greek terms for seeing, viewing.¹

Movies may have, for example, de-socialized the theater in some way, the collective form, by substituting for these live people who perform for us. But this substitution, as many have noted, brought us things, places, people from distances that we had not seen in such a place as the theater. It brought us, as Béla Balázs was one to tell us, the human face as we had not seen it before. It brought to this theater many things we had not been able to see in such a way, acting as a prosthetic eye, as Dziga Vertov gave us to see it. It may have put us in a dark room and then isolated each of us with these phantasms, but it also brought us together for this nocturnal waking dream.

Film recorded reality, and now, the reality of that record is in peril, endangered, on the verge of extinction. The mad extrapolation of the archive, its own principle. The reel of film is the snake swallowing its tail. (In parentheses. Should I even make a comment about George Lucas? He’s sort of the elephant in the room. But as an example, on the one hand, of being a victim of trying to succeed oneself: a sort of auto-consumptive parthenogenesis. More literally, of course, the digital overtaking of his own films, which had earlier contributed so much to optical printing, and the digital Hollywood, which was to be at one point in the Presidio of San Francisco, is now just another example of shipping to cheaper labor markets out of the U.S., and destroying an entire industry, unions of set painters, for example. I speak of this from proximity. But, no, I better not say anything about George Lucas. Better not to accede once more to this black hole of stardom, of spectacle and mythical futures.)

To present a survey of the lost moments in film, the points in film, that film makes, like “That’s Entertainment” or one of those Oscar movie clip retrospectives, those swells of nostalgia, brief moment stand-ins, emotional metonymy. The still, or frame of film. The sentiment, regardless of its banality or more dubious uses, has its reasons nonetheless.

The critic in me has this impulse: an impatient, jealous interest in what is good. Yes, there is the history of film, the details, that we must preserve, but to a certain extent, the critic in me gets impatient with all that sort of thing that even now overwhelms us as trivial pursuit on IMDb, even though this archive also frees us from that, for the sake of the art. Because that is what all this is about, what movies iterate: whether the barest technical effect of mechanical photography, the image; whether documentary, which has actually grown in status because of this inflationary fiction; or whether the most precarious of all complexities, art, this movie resumption of narrative, image, composition, music, orchestration, tragedy, comedy.

Here is where we desire. Is it only the critic in us that rushes to tout, proclaim, hold up, to share the great accomplishments? Or is it not also what drives the analysis, the deconstruction, the archiving, the restoration? The revival -- this very movie and movie house version of survival, living on in the art of mechanical reproduction, reprinting, rewinding, replaying, undead. Could we not say that all of this is the same passion that we are to mean by “fan” or “buff,” if it weren’t for the fact those terms are so much a matter of that law of succession, that market fad principle, of the restricted economy of the fetish, that they so often now mean the obscuration of so much else with the favor of one -- genre, if not one movie.

How will you know what is not there? How will you know “Nosferatu,” this undead of the movies? How will you see the face of Joan of Arc that Béla Balázs referred to? How will you see what the kino-eye can show you in “Man with a Movie Camera”? How will I show you the

passage of sublime artifice that is a tribute to artifice in “Le Million,” the poignant peak of which is a shot of a paper moon? Or how will I show you the way the beauty of Carroll Ballard’s “The Black Stallion” is also a testament to its own demise, its own ephemera, the cusp of the golden age of cinematography?

I have here no film clips of these, and thus illustrate the matter of these very moving pictures. But even if I had a film clip for you here, I would not be able to illustrate, to convey or deliver to you, the effect of a shot in the 1981 “Pennies from Heaven” of Herbert Ross in which Steve Martin and Bernadette Peters dance in front of a movie screen showing “Follow the Fleet” with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Only if you see this movie in a movie theater, a cinema, with a large enough screen do you see how it is framed so they appear, life-size, to be standing in front of your movie screen. Gordon Willis, this movie's cinematographer, is one of our great treasures that calls for seeing on the big screen.

How will you know what of any of these could mean as cinema?

And for my feature representation, I present to you in absentia a film I have not seen myself. I learned of it only in the liner notes of another obscure Czech film. The English translation of the title is something like “Tomorrow I Will Wake up and Scald Myself with Tea.” The description of this 1977 movie I found on the Kinoblog of filmjournal.net, written by Michael Brooke, the Screenonline Curator at the British Film Institute National Archive. He explains that the reputation of this movie in the U.K. is almost entirely because of a TV broadcast of it in 1982. Brooke gives info on some Czech distributors, where it is no less difficult to find a PAL/SECAM copy, and in fact one of the web sites no longer existed when I checked.

A group of elderly Nazis has survived into the 1990s . . . and is therefore in a position to take advantage of the miraculous invention of the Universum company

-- which offers time travel to school parties and rich American tourists, on condition that they are passive observers throughout. . . . The Nazis . . . plan to disobey this cardinal rule by landing in Germany on December 8, 1944, with the aim of offering Hitler and his associates a hydrogen bomb. . . . Jan [identical twin of the Nazi's pilot] tries to put things right . . . by going backwards and forwards in time, on each occasion landing fractionally in advance of events depicted earlier in the film (Brooke).

Not just a great title, but a parody of time travel movies, presenting the paradoxes they avoid, this film aims its spoof backwards at Hitler and hits "Back to the Future" in advance. Here is a film that takes to task a simplistic sense of time utilized by so many time travel movies, not necessarily less dear to us as our historical future illusions, in a way I have always wanted to see done. Rather than imagine merely the past or the future, it imagines the complexity of this imagining, a figure for the very matter I'm trying to show here. And the lack of access to this film shows the matter of not being able to show. Is forgetting a matter of memory, or vice versa? What do we see with all these records -- pasts and presents and futures -- misplaced?

Who addresses this decline? To whom? What is the address of this decline? We who sit in the dark theater, of (solitary) dreams, we the obsolete, do we preach to the choir? How do we tell what is missed to those who will not miss it? How do we make this show? How do we preserve this possibility so that it will once again see the light of projection in the dark theater?

Note

1 Etymology:

cinema 1899, “a movie hall,” from Fr. *cinéma*, shortened from *cinématographe*, coined 1890s by Lumière brothers, who invented it, from Gk. *kinema* “movement,” from *kinein* “to move” (see *cite*). Meaning “movies collectively, especially as an art form” first recorded 1918. *Cinéma vérité* is 1963, from Fr.; *Cinerama*, proprietary name, is from 1951.

cite late 15c., from O.Fr. *citer* “to summon,” from L. *citare* “to cause to move, arouse, summon, urge, call,” freq. of *ciere* “to move, set in motion, stir, rouse, call, invite” from PIE base **kei-* “to move to and fro” (cf. Skt. *cyavate* “stirs himself, goes;” Gk. *kinein* “to move;” *kinymai* “move myself;” Goth. *haitan* “call, be called;” O.E. *hatan* “command, call”). Sense of “calling forth a passage of writing” is first attested 1530s.

theater late 14c., “open air place in ancient times for viewing spectacles,” from O.Fr. *theatre* (12c.), from L. *theatrum*, from Gk. *theatron* “theater,” lit. “place for viewing,” from *theasthai* “to behold” (cf. *thea* “a view,” *theates* “spectator”) + *-tron*, suffix denoting place. Meaning “building where plays are shown” (1570s) was transferred to that of “plays, writing, production, the stage” (1660s). Spelling with *-re* prevailed in Britain after c.1700, but Amer.Eng. retained or revived the older spelling in *-er*. Generic sense of “place of action” is from 1580s; especially “region where war is being fought” (1914).

theory 1590s, “conception, mental scheme,” from L.L. *theoria* (Jerome), from Gk. *theoria* “contemplation, speculation, a looking at, things looked at,” from *theorein*

“to consider, speculate, look at,” from *theoros* “spectator,” from *thea* “a view” + *horan* “to see.” Sense of “principles or methods of a science or art (rather than its practice)” is first recorded 1610s. That of “an explanation based on observation and reasoning” is from 1630s. (Dictionary.com)

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