The Future of the Cinema: Evolution or Revolution?

By John Bailey

Aside from its immediate Darwinian context, the word "evolution" reminds me of the comment of Bill Hurt as the constantly stoned, cynical, but articulate sage Nick, in Lawrence Kasdan's 1983 film *The Big Chill.* In answer to a question about what he's going to do once their weekend reunion ends he says, "I'm evolving; we're all evolving." I don't know whether cinema today is evolving or revolving. Many pundits and critics think it is merely revolting, for once again we are in the midst of a national debate about the influence of violence in film and television on the minds and hearts of our youth.

Violence in the Media

Film and Television

Nearly five years ago I wrote a piece that was published in the *DGA Magazine* and *American Cinematographer* about the contrasting presentation of violence in *Natural Born Killers* and *The Shawshank Redemption* and of filmmakers' responsibilities in the portrayal of violence. The national dialogue on film and television violence has once again sadly leaped to the forefront of our consciousness. Industry and AMPTP spokesman Jack Valenti, appearing on "Larry King Live," all but exonerates mainstream movies not only from any complicity in the glamorizing of violence, but from a coarsening of our basic level of civility.

Writing from a broader perspective, the contemporary historian Francis Fukuyama presents a compelling article in the May issue of *Atlantic Monthly.* He argues that, just as in the 19th century transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, the unrest and breakdown of values we witness today is a consequence of the confusing and turbulent evolution from an industrial to an information age—what the futurist Alvin Toffler has called "The Third Wave."

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There are plenty of sources to point our indignant fingers at to try to explain the tragedy at Columbine High School and beyond. Yet, it is abundantly clear, looking into our own mirror as filmmakers, that as special effects and digital technology in the movies become more and more accomplished and inventive, the bar for indulging in graphic mayhem and gore can and most likely will be raised to new highs—or lows.

Video Games

Nor can we look only to film and television. Video games have evolved a long way since Pong and Pac-Man. Most parents can tell you how pervasively and casually violent many popular video games are. What should we make of a recent *L.A. Times* front page article which reports that video games have nearly overtaken movies in gross revenues? And in a disturbing profile of John Romero and John Carmack, co-developers of the "first person shooter" games Doom and Quake, the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* writer Paul Keegan asks Romero if he were concerned about criticism of video game violence. His answer was, "Why would I care about it...I make games I want to play. If I want to see more gibs, I make it." "Gibs" is short for giblets, the chunks of flesh blown off game characters when fragged. In a classic pattern of cross-fertilization, many films seem to be embracing the style and rhythms of best-selling video games. Surely, there's plenty of blame for all of us to share.

The Power to Influence

I could never argue a case for censorship or for any form of legislated oversight of the arts, but I cannot in good conscience address you here, today, about my views on the future of cinema without acknowledging the enormous power to influence values and behavior that our medium has, and that we as creators of the content as well as the technology, have an undeniable moral responsibility for what we create. If it ever were, it is no longer possible for us to plead what I call the "technical pass."

Technicians and engineers have historically argued that the implementation of technology is not their responsibility. That argument has had decreasing currency in the five decades since Hiroshima. Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer spent most of his tormented later years crying out *mea culpa* over his leadership of the Manhattan Project and of the release of atomic bombs over the skies of Japan. It is becoming clearer, as this national dialogue continues, that the media, TV, and the movies have detonated a bomb on a generation of young people who are standing at ground zero.

Movies are, for better or worse, here to stay. They are the chameleon-like touchstones of our culture and they vacuum up everything in their path. Product placement, fast-food tie-ins, toys, video games, novelizations, inundate us. Movie soundtracks, once a niche market, now regularly ride high on the *Billboard* charts. Instant "collectibles," churned out by the millions surround us with the release of each new "event" film. We are all drowning in movie "crap." But our appetites seem insatiable and the clever marketers are even now dreaming up new ways to get to us.

Another thing that is clear is that 15 years after the depressing and dystopian vision of George Orwell's *1984* has receded into history, Big Brother is not in control. The gray totalitarian state survives in only a few isolated backwaters on planet Earth, paddling futilely against the raging waters of capitalism and American pop culture. Jean-Luc Godard's famous statement that "we are all the children of Marx and Coca-Cola" must be upgraded like an obsolete computer program. Marxism is a defunct footnote; we are now the children of the Internet and Coca-Cola. Capitalism-slash-Democracy is the ruling program. The Internet rules. Movies rule. If any of us could have predicated the explosive growth of the Internet, we would have bought Amazon.Com at $10 a share. But because cinema has left a hundred-year-old footprint on our culture, we may find it easier to track into the future.

The Cinema Experience

In a recent *New York Times* article about the future of cinema, my classmate here at USC in the mid-60s, Walter Murch, cast a hopeful light into the darkened recesses of the movie theater. He says that the cinema experience is inherently a "cave" experience. We willingly enter a windowless room where we have paid an admission and when the lights dim, we surrender ourselves to the screen in front of us.

Allow me to carry this metaphor back into history with you. There we are, in the theater, surrounded by darkness, bathed in flickering light, sitting with a group of strangers (shall we call them fellow communicants). We are participating in an ancient ritual of storytelling. It is the experience of the hunters who painted the caves of Lascaux and Altamira more than 30 centuries ago, recounting their adventures in front of a warming fire; it is the experience of 5th-century B.C. Athenians seated on a terraced hillside under a canopy of stars; it is the experience of the faithful celebrating a solemn high Mass in a 13th-century French cathedral bathed in candles and incense. It is us watching *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* at Mann's Chinese Theater today. It is "theater" and it is a primal experience for it addresses the mysteries, hopes, and fears that lie deep in our psyche. It addresses our need to understand: to understand ourselves, our community, the world outside. Cinema, whether it is the accessible mythology of George Lucas or the more arcane ethos of Robert Bresson, helps us to understand the overarching problem of our place on planet Earth.

I'm sure some of you may find all of this rather "highfalutin." Movies are meant to entertain, to divert, to while away a couple of hours, have something to start a conversation with at work on Monday morning. Sure, why not. Hollywood is great at that, always has been, always will be. Hollywood rules. Doesn't every filmmaker want to make movies in Hollywood, have the toys, have the money? Maybe, maybe not.

Filmmakers—Past and Present

Last Saturday evening I went to see the first two feature films made by the great French director who helped inspire the New Wave, Robert Bresson. The films are *Les anges du peche* and *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne*. The first is set in a cloistered convent and was made in 1943 in Vichy France. The second, a story of love and revenge among the upper class was begun six weeks before the Normandy invasion in June 1944. Bresson never had an easy time making films, and in the course of a near-50-year career made only 14 of them, the last one *L'Argent*, in 1983. His career preceded and outlasted the heady years of the French New Wave. His films are demanding, uncompromising, and hugely important. Truffaut, Antonioni, Tarkovsky, Scorsese, Schrader all cited him as a major influence. Paul Schrader devoted a significant part of his book, *Transcendental Style in the Cinema* to his work.

I am talking to you about Bresson because even before Bergman, Tarkovsky, or Antonioni, he was attacking the larger issues of life. If any filmmaker can be said to have dramatized the ideas of the European Existentialists, it is Bresson. His technical style was never flashy, but the power of his vision for my generation of filmmakers is enormous. While Spielberg and Lucas have emerged as the defining commercial artists of this generation and have spawned many younger filmmakers, it is Bresson who is our spiritual father.

If you find you need an antidote to the amazing flow of information and cutting edge technobabble you will get here today (and I certainly intend to stay all day), I implore you to go tonight to the L.A. County Museum on Wilshire Blvd. to see Bresson's *Pickpocket* voted the greatest postwar French film by *Cahiers du Cinema*. It is lean filmmaking, stripped to the essentials, and in it you will discover more about the future of cinema than you will in any cybermovie like *Matrix*.

The Film Market

To answer the question I asked a few minutes ago about Hollywood as a cinematic Mecca, let me just say that Bresson never made a film in Hollywood, nor did Godard, Truffaut, Resnais, Fellini, or Bergman. Antonioni made *Zabriskie Point* for MGM and some say he never recovered from it. I'm not at all sure the so-called American Independents want to make films in Hollywood or have an affair with its reigning digital seductress. John Sayles, Jim Jarmusch, Todd Haynes, Hal Hartley, Neil La Butte haven't. Kevin Smith has forsworn the studio machine and Steve Soderberg must be incredibly confused by it.

It seems to me that what we are experiencing now is a bifurcation of the medium, a splitting apart in a way more polarizing than ever before. There has developed the phenomenon known as "winning the weekend." This is dutifully reported as a sports-like box score in the Monday editions, not only of the trade publications *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter*, but of nonindustry newspapers such as the *L.A. Times*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and God knows how many others. Any critical standard that once might have been applied to these event movies has become buried under the avalanche of box-office hype.

It's the old joke of one producer asking a fellow producer if he enjoyed the new megahit on opening weekend. The second producer says. "I don't know yet. Let me check the grosses." This isn't a joke anymore. It is a sad reality. Films are supported or abandoned based on the first week-end box office.

It gets even worse. Many films are never finished in the way they were intended by the filmmakers. Preview screenings become the pretext for studio imposed surgery. This is done at the behest of a recruited audience of would-be diagnosticians. A "focus group" of 20 is elected to autopsy the expired patient.

Theaters

However, despite the nay saying of eminent film critic Andrew Sarris in a recent *New York Times* article titled, "Why the Foreign Film Has Lost Its Cachet," (I wonder whose cachet he means) an alternative cinema outside the loop of Hollywood hype continues to thrive. I have just returned from filming in Toronto with Paul Schrader, who, God bless him, remains the quintessential American maverick filmmaker. We have just completed our fifth film together after an unintended hiatus of more than ten years. A fourplex movie theater across from our hotel was showing foreign films to sold-out houses. Toronto is also a thriving film town with its glut of Hollywood product. But it embraces a wide spectrum of international films. A Canadian exhibitor told me that it appears that in

Europe the era of the American action film is passing.

Many of the new theaters being built on the continent will be luxurious but smaller, to accommodate a maturing population that is returning to the cinema seeking out films exploring dramatic relationships. In Toronto, the Manulife Center already has theaters with intimate rooms, advertised as screening rooms, where for a few extra dollars you can see films such as *The Red Violin* or *The Dreamlife of Angels* and have a glass of wine or a latte and croissant served to you at your seat.

What is clear from any perspective, except possibly the myopic one of a 30-year-old Hollywood studio executive screaming into his cell phone as he heads over the Sepulveda Pass, is that there are many cinemas in front of us and they will co-exist. And one of them will be old fashioned analog cinema: a strip of emulsified celluloid coursing through a clattery movement at 24 frames a second. Hallelujah!

Technology and Filmmaking

Digital technology, using computer generated imagery at the production end and satellite electronic delivery to the theaters at the exhibition end, is not necessarily the promised land. It is not and will not be appropriate for every filmmaker. In our close-focus analysis and presentations today, let's not lose sight of the fact that we are talking about "tools and techniques." They will be taken up and embraced by the business end of the film industry in a manner that is directly proportional to their marketability and cost effectiveness.

But films are made by men and women with ideas and visions, and they will also determine the tools and techniques they need in ways that cannot be mandated. Some filmmakers are blithely indifferent to all the babble and hype. When my friend, the director Sam Raimi, was recently queried about the future of cinema, he may have articulated the cool skepticism of his generation. He said "I see a reemergence of the black Jujube—and a new form of popcorn that takes apart cholesterol."

Film Music

We mustn't make the error of assuming that because we are mesmerized by a new and flexible technology it will necessarily prevail. The rapid obsolescence of many consumer electronics should sound a cautionary klaxon. Twenty years ago, I made a film with Paul Schrader called *American Gigolo.* Paul wanted Los Angeles to look like a foreign city, to have a European gloss. To that end he hired the great Nando Scarfiotti as production designer and persuaded Georgio Armani (then little known in the States) to provide the wardrobe. He asked Georgio Moroder to score the film. This was deep at the back end of the disco era and synthesizer music was ubiquitous. Groups like Tangerine Dream were creating cutting edge sounds. The dream of the musique concrete composers of the 1950s was coming to fruition. Orchestral music was dead. Studio musicians were despairing of ever working again. How many of you remember this crisis?

Well, synthesizer music reached its limited apogee pretty quickly and eventually assumed a niche within the classic semicircle of a rehabilitated full orchestra. Even with subsequent refinements and the introduction of sampling techniques, with close miking and amplification a la Phillip Glass and Michael Nyman, the traditional sound of the orchestra today permeates the soundtracks of Hollywood films.

The Future of Film

George Lucas may boast of how he is able to change the facial expression of the human actors in the new *Star Wars.* He may predict that the next *Star Wars* films will be all digital, all computer manipulated. He and others may predict that actors will disappear in less than a decade, that films will not even be photographed, digitally or otherwise, that the computer will rule. They may be right. But maybe they aren't.

Some existing technologies wither and disappear quickly in the face of new technologies. Some make subtle changes and adapt, becoming better. Some reach a stage of development that achieves a kind of stasis. The piano has not altered much since the days of Chopin, 150 years ago.

The symphony orchestra has also remained substantially unchanged in the last hundred years. Is it perhaps because it evolved to a state of perfect equilibrium and aesthetic satisfaction? I think so. The orchestra is not frozen in a time capsule; it is enormously alive and responsive to many kinds of music. Artists of differing temperaments embrace it as the preferred vehicle of musical expression because of its power and nuance. It is the creators who ultimately decide what tools of expression to embrace in any artistic medium.

Image Generation

We are seeing, today, profound changes in image generation both in cinema and still photography. We have feature length films (albeit animation) that are being made solely on computers. We have an association of "filmmakers," the Danish Dogma 90 Group, that shoots on small format digital video cameras, without lights or any traditional equipment. The only stage at which they use film is for the theatrical release print. Last year's Academy-nominated *Celebration* directed by Thomas Vinterberg, a leader of Dogma 90, is a true cinematic event. While this film is a startling human and dramatic document, I fear that we will soon see movies using only its technology not its artistry.

While in Toronto doing the Schrader film, I had the opportunity to see the completed Phillip Glass-Robert Wilson work *Monsters of Grace.* It is advertised as a digital 3-D opera. Glass and Wilson have been leading exponents of the avant-garde since their 1976 collaboration *Einstein on the Beach. Monsters* is a multimedia event using CGI images projected on a screen, as a closely miked ensemble plays the Glass score. A small group of singers intones the words of the 13th-century Sufi poet Rumi.

In an interview after the performance, Glass spoke with the Canadian film director Atom Egoyan. He said that early in his composing career the words of his operas were not of primary interest to him. Many sections of *Einstein* were incantatory number counting and wordless syllables. In fact, it was only after the film sections of *Monsters* were completed and the interim dancers eliminated that he was able to move the singers to the front of the stage. Suddenly, the beauty and the emotion of the sung poems became apparent, and he shifted the balance of the soundscape so that the words became the leading edge. The technical demands and the complexity of the work had previously kept the heart of the poetry at bay, and the power of the work was only fully realized with a lucid understanding of the words.

Similarly, I think we are in danger of becoming intoxicated with the digital tools and techniques we are creating for the cinema. That a kind of euphoria at the incredible speed and ease the new technology is expanding our horizons, is to be expected. One of the abiding hallmarks of the American character is an almost obsessive love of new technology. I don't think any society in the world races headlong to embrace change the way we do. It is a driving animus in the whole culture and is partly responsible for the position of leadership we have in business. In the realm of the arts it can be a very mixed blessing.

The Creative Experience

Without a clear understanding as filmmakers and as technical innovators that this technology, including all aspects of the digital capture and delivery systems that we discuss and see demonstrated here today, is only the means to achieve greater levels of creative expression and not an end in itself, without that explicit understanding we will have unwittingly betrayed the next generation of film artists, many of whom sit among us today.

Several years ago it was fashionable to insist that the future of movies, especially movies for the international market, had to rely on action and be essentially wordless. A generation of clone-like action stars began to drive box office revenues. But something has changed. Most of these action stars have fallen on hard times. The reason is simple: they aren't actors. How much less likely do you think are cyberactors created on a keyboard to touch our hearts and transport us?

There may now be a growing return to traditional cinematic values. Fascinating as it was, most of us know that the unparalleled success of *Titanic* was not because of the digital special effects but because of the deeply involving love story and heart-on-the-sleeve emotion that the audience found in it. This year's *Star Wars* is already a certified megahit even before its recent opening, but a muffled disappointment also seems to accompany its less than fully engaging characters and story.

I think that the real future of cinema will be what it has been for the past and present hundred years: dramatically and credibly presenting the stories of our lives. The technology that accomplishes that is secondary.

Several years ago my wife, the editor Carol Littleton, and I made a film with Jonathan Demme of Spaulding Gray's monologue *Swimming to Cambodia*. We opened it up a bit with a few camera, lighting, and editing techniques, including an excerpt from *The Killing Fields* inserted at a climactic moment; but it was essentially a faithful rendering of a dramatic monologue. And it was very powerful cinema, a compelling and important historical event revealed in one man's personal narrative.

I am going to New York this Monday to photograph and direct a film version of the playwright David Hare's monologue "Via Dolorosa," which is currently playing to packed houses on Broadway. In the play, Hare simply talks to the audience for 90 minutes about several trips he made two years ago to Israel and the Palestinian territories. He explores with great understanding and compassion the tragedy that is the festering wound of two great cultures. Hare reveals the stories of people caught and wrung in the wheel of history and thwarted destiny, people across the political spectrum, across the ugly borders that alienate them one from another. It is powerful stuff and who dares say that a simple capturing of it on film is not cinema. No special effects, no computer imagery, no music video crane sweeps, no jump cuts. Just one person in a darkened room telling a compelling story.

The Human Experience

What movies can give us that the theater can't is not what we may at first think. Not the exotic locations or spectacular thrills, not the imaginary worlds or even sexual fantasy. It gives us the infinite fascination and mystery of the human face, the face in close-up, vulnerable, revealing, exposed, a multilayered portrait of our most secret emotions shared for a brief time with our fellow humans, linked for a moment in an epiphany of the mystery and brevity of our own lives.

In our self-absorption and hubris, each generation pictures itself as the most aware, most evolved. Our love affair with technology undoubtedly helps to fuel this. We cannot be criticized too broadly for feeling that we are alive at a special time, when our lives are so full of the pleasures and privileges technology affords us.

But I am reminded of a recent cover cartoon in *The New Yorker*. Several groups of people are standing in an art gallery. Some are wearing Acoustiguide headsets; others are sipping wine, sampling canapés. The paintings they are viewing are primitive renderings of animals—it could be Susan Rothenberg's work. However, all of the assembled art lovers are barefoot and clad only in primitive animal skins. One woman, hands behind her back, holds a guide that reads "The Art of the Cave." The paintings are from the caves of Lascaux, as are the gallery-goers. This whimsical collapsing of time expounds a simple message that leads us back to my earlier remarks about cinema and the cave.

We humans are not such a complex lot, are we? Our basic nature remains pretty unchanged from the Paleolithic era to today. Our observation perch changes, but we look out on the same dilemmas we always have. The meaning of life will always be a mystery to us but one we are doomed to pursue. We pursue it ever anew with new metaphors, new technologies; but it is always the same search. Its record is drawn on the cave walls of Lascaux; it is buried beneath the pyramids of the Nile Valley; it is the wail of Sophocles' chorus; it is the pageant of the medieval Mass, and in this century it is The Movies. Each generation retells and re-interprets the same stories, cloaking them in the particulars of our historic moment, our music, our fashion, our politics.

Each film becomes a time capsule of itself revealing who we are at a given moment. Our very hipness at that moment becomes frozen, a prisoner of time, for a succeeding generation indulgently to smile at. Our technology will date us.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to make a modest proposal concerning today's program. Explore widely and soak up all the information you can from the demonstrations and seminars, but remember, we are all just cavemen looking for somebody to tell us a simple and moving story about ourselves.