Don't Cry For Me When I'm Gone: Motion Pictures in the 1990s

By Paul Schrader

Lectures like these — about the "state of motion pictures" — are the occasion for self-promoting pieties about "art," often given by businessmen for whom art is a slogan, not a way of life. If movies were better, people would be better and what a wonderful world this would be. You know the routine.

It's time to take the longer view. Movies are almost 100 years old. Movies were born of this century and the century is coming to an end. Just because film has been the popular art form of this century doesn't mean it will be of the next century. It doesn't even mean it will *exist* in the next century. Discussions about the problems of contemporary film tend to slip on the slope of the unstated assumption that film's "problems" began yesterday and can be solved tomorrow. The opposite is true. The problems that film faces today were present from the very beginning of the art form.

History repeats and loops around itself and at times it appears there's nothing new under the sun. Everything new is old. There are, however, two tendencies that stand apart: two linear, chronological lines running from the beginning of recorded history to the present. One is technology, the other democracy. They are progressive, not cyclical, and are the yardsticks by which art, religion and social conduct can be measured.

Technological progress — man's knowledge of the physical world and his control over it — is not only continuous but exponential; the more we learn the faster we learn it. One discovery begets ten. At one time an educated person could master both arts and sciences; today a scientist, to be on the forefront of knowledge, must choose a specific science, a field within that science and a subfield within that field. Our tools are equally exponential, progressively more sophisticated: mechanical, combustive, electronic. Man's mastery over his environment has grown to the point where he is able to destroy it, both in evil and benign ways.

Democracy, or, more accurately, the empowerment of the common man, is the other historical thread. The events we associate with democracy — the Magna Carta, French Revolution, emancipation of slaves, universal suffrage; Democracy's Greatest Hits — are political symbols of a broader social evolution. History can be defined as an accretion of individual rights, civilization by civilization, century by century. Democracy has had it's setbacks, as has had technology, but the overall trend is irrefutable. The individual has successively gained knowledge of events around him, a greater voice in government, more say in his religious life, increased participation in the arts. Rulers by definition resist empowerment; over time they invariably fail. To stand against the individual is to stand against history.

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Individual empowerment and technological progress are not exactly isolated trends. They are handmaidens. They assist and feed each other. Individual curiosity spurs technological progress, technology empowers the individual.

This is where cinema enters the room. At the end of the nineteenth century, during the so-called "Second Industrial Revolution," the tools of technology turned from heavy industry to consumer needs. The invention of the linotype machine and cheap newsprint created a pervasive popular press, the combustible engine provided economical travel, the telegraph made it possible to communicate across great distances, the electric light freed millions from dawn to dusk schedules, leisure time democratized sport, cinema brought news events to every neighborhood. Commoners flocked to cities to enjoy new freedoms. The cities birthed an urban proletariat, doubling, tripling in size. "Invention runs free," H.G. Wells declared, "and our state is under it's dominion."

The upstart film medium dovetailed democracy and art. Scorned by Culture, movies became the voice of the people. The Art Establishment, pigeonholers all, circumscribed moving images. They were clever but curious — good to record historical events, preserve theatre, aid scientific research. Cinema was not art. Repudiated, film entrepreneurs, creators of the motion picture, turned to the public. They owed nothing to the cultural establishment. "Art" was validated by working people putting coins in the nickelodeons. Art for and by the marketplace. Stories glorifying the common man. US film entrepreneurs, in the penultimate insult, fled the East Coast with its stultifying patent laws and cultural prejudices and started anew, lock, stock and lens, in Southern California.

The inventors and early critics of cinematography, as motion pictures were then called, were more aware of its democratic potential than its future as an art form. The debate raged. On one side

were cinematic utopians and democrats. Michel Corday, a Parisian journalist, described a "Cineorama" exhibit at the 1900 Exposition as part of a "great current of democratization that offers the masses the precious joys until now reserved for a few." Thomas Edison, co-inventor of the kinescope, declared: "I intend to do away with books in the school...When we get the moving pictures in the school, the child will be so interested that he will hurry to get there before the bell rings, because it's the natural way to teach, through the eye." An 1894 columnist in *Harper's Weekly* wrote, "Already it has been made quite clear that in this scientific millennium the public will not have to betake itself to exhibition halls to see and hear a novelette, but will sit at home and take the novelette over the wires, seeing and hearing with the aid of electricity." By 1916, motion pictures had their first theorist, Hugo Munsterberg, who saw the new art form was a means to democratize the theatre; "The greatest mission which the photoplay may have in our community is that of esthetic cultivation."

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On the other side were the defenders of Cultural Values. German sociologist Georg Simmel went right to the point: "Individuals, in all their divergences, contribute only the lowest parts of their personalities to form a common denominator." In 1895, Gustave Le Bon was even more dystopian: "Today the claims of the masses amount to nothing less than a determination to destroy utterly society as it now exists." Louis Haugmard, a Catholic essayist, countered Munsterberg's optimism. "Alas! In the future," he wrote in 1913, "Notorious personalities will instinctively `pose' for cinematographic popularity, and historical events will tend to be concocted for its sake...The charmed masses will learn not to think anymore, to resist all desire to reason and to construct: they will know only how to open their large and empty eyes, only to look, look, look...Will cinematography comprise, perhaps, the elegant solution to the social question, if the modern cry is formulated: `Bread and cinemas?'"

Sound familiar?

This brings us to 1993. The modernist debate rages on. One hundred years on, similar laments fill the popular press; critics are outraged that movies have "gotten worse," corrupted by popular taste. They don't make movies like they used to. Every year is worse than the previous. Filmmakers, ironically, and film executives, even more ironically, counting their gains, have joined the list of complainants.

Anyone who looks beyond last week's grosses realizes that film is not in a unique crisis of quality. Movies are as good as they have ever been, probably better. Today's debate has been going on for 100 years and it is the debate which defines mass produced art: cultural standards vs. popular taste. The extent to which popular art can promote social intelligence is the unanswered question of modern history — one that probably cannot be answered and, perhaps, need not be answered.

Film is in a crisis of another sort, however; a crisis dictated by the trends which created it: technology and democracy. This is the real crisis, the crisis of whether or not movies will continue to exist. Which direction are those mighty horses, technology and democracy, pulling?

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The future of film is coming into focus. Digital technology not only redefines movies but also the very idea of the image. We were born in an analog era, we will die in a digital one. Film is an analog, that is, a physical copy of something else; it is "analogous" to what it photographs. A digital image is not a copy, it is an electronic and mathematical translation. Laserdiscs transform images and sounds into binary choices, millions of on-off decisions.

Digital technology is not only transforming exhibition, it's transforming our notion of the image. The dream that the anonymous *Harper's Weekly* columnist wrote about 98 years ago, the dream of "novelettes" brought into the home "with the aid of electricity," has come true. "In the meantime," that writer continued, "we must be content at the halfway house. Certainly the halfway house has proved to be a very interesting place." Public cinemas have been a halfway house for almost a century. Analog exhibition has been a good tool. it's done its job. It's time for a new tool. (Digital transmission of images may itself be a halfway house. In the future audio-visual images may be transmitted bio-chemically.)

If you think technology is threaten-

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ing, take a look at democracy. for a century artists have been fomenting artistic freedom for the commoners — Ortega's "revolt of the masses" — while retaining papal prerogatives themselves, creating art by fiat. In *Hearts of Darkness*, a documentary about the making of *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Coppola comments that being a film director is the closest thing there is, in this democratic age, to being a dictator. And so he is. Twentieth century artists live in the best of both worlds, advocating power to the people, never imagining they will have to give up any themselves. Democracy is a wonderful thing, just don't try it on my film set.

These prerogatives will also be called into question. Digital technology challenges the traditional relationship between the artist and the viewer/listener. A digital image is, in essence, as potentially different from an analog image as a portrait is from a photograph: portraits interpret, photographs replicate. Analog images are essentially what they are, immutable; digital images are manipulatable, not only by the artist but also by the viewer. Digital images and sounds can be altered: sounds and instruments can be added to a recording, digital images can be broken up, colorized, morphized.

In recent years, a new form of literature, Hypertext, has evolved. These are novels written exclusively on computer software. A Hypertext novel can have an infinite number of windows: each sentence, each word, each letter can lead to a separate narrative pattern. The reader chooses his own path, interacting as he chooses with other paths. The novelist programs the paths but cannot program the interactions — they are the reader's creations. Novelist Robert Coover wrote recently about a "novel" he and his students were programming. Each successive reader chose a narrative path and added to it, expanding the text. The creative life span of this Hypertext novel, Coover speculated, could be 100 years. The reader was empowered.

Something similar may be in store for cinema. In the digital future, a viewer will not only be able to recast an existing movie, replacing Gable with Bogart or Cagney in *Gone With the Wind*, for example, but will also be able to participate in the creation of new films, mixtures of pre-existing and imagined images. The appeal of "virtual reality" is that it is interactive. The autocratic artist will finally face the consequences of democracy, he will be a creative partner. A filmmaker won't direct a movie, he'll instigate it.

Am I saying what you think I am saying? Yes. In the future, movies will not only not look like they do now, the filmmaker won't even have autonomy.

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An immediate retort is: but audiences *want* the artist to have autonomy. Viewers want structure, they want to be told what to see, what to hear, what to feel. This is the argument that has been made by political autocrats, ecclesiastical czars and cultural mandarins over the centuries; the masses want us to decide for them. The Roman Church assumed parishioners *wanted* it to control the Scriptures; they were wrong, individuals wanted to participate — to share and decide — and the Reformation democratized Christianity. The autocrats weren't right in the past, it's not likely they'll be right in the future. Viewers will decide. The child playing narrative video games, the colleague at his computer paint box — they will decide. Most films will be made, as they are now, but authorial fiat; but there will also be *new* films, films made in concert with viewers.

There will always be stories. Humankind has needed to tell and retell itself certain tales from the beginning of civilization. As long as there are parents and children, men and women, landlords and tenants, the ancient myths will be repeated and updated. Whatever the medium. The storyteller has only a sentimental attachment to the medium. His commitment is to the audience, not the medium. The media will change, the relationship between the storyteller and the listener will be realigned, but there will always be stories.

There is no cause for despair. It *is* disconcerting. The future by definition is disconcerting. That's the fun of it. Without challenge, without change, art atrophies. The only thing more frightening than going forward is standing still.

I'd like to close with a quote from Nietzsche, who, as you can imagine, took a dim view of the democratization of the arts. In 1888, Nietzsche wrote a statement reflecting his despair at recent developments, a statement which can be repeated, not in despair, but with hope. "Nothing avails," he wrote, "one *must* go forward — step by step further into decadence (that is *my* definition of modern `progress')."

The above was the Cinema Militans lecture that director-writer-producer Paul Schrader delivered in the Netherlands last fall.

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