

FUTURISTIC CINEMA VS. CINEMA OF THE FUTURE:

An Analysis of the Relationships among Cinema, the Spectacle, and Futurism

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ARTH 3650: The History and Theory of Digital Art

14 May 2017

“By posing a ‘future’ cinema merely as a kind of end-game in the history of representation suggests that it must obliterate the history it inherits or that it must perpetuate the crumbling passivity of its audience as ‘spectators of the spectacle’ rather than to reconceptualize itself in the face of radical possibilities. Instead, the task is to reconsider cinema itself an unfinished product, one which refigures the notion of cinema as an interface into realities only possible as cinema, cinemas that just do not coincide with an expectation that they verify a preexisting model.”

- Timothy Druckery

Timothy Druckery states that art pieces examining the future of cinema are limiting, as they present the future of cinema as some end state that has either diverted from the directions of its history, or has inherited many of the same traits that exist in its current form (thereby reinforcing the passivity of audiences in the face of the spectacle). He states that art pieces should consider cinema not in terms of futurism, but instead by focusing on its dynamic capability as an interface between a culture and its currently unrealized realities.

Before delving into the relationships among technology, art, and cinematic experiences, it is necessary to first address and deconstruct the concept which Druckery refers to as the spectacle. The concept of the spectacle was developed by Guy Debord in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, published in 1967, and was highly influential with contemporary art movements (for example, the term was employed by the Situationists and was a central concept in much of their work). The spectacle exists in societies which are more closely intimate with signs than the things they signify—it therefore has become increasingly applicable over time with the discretization of values through the development of technology. In such societies, “spectacle” refers not to images or distortions of the physical world, but rather to the social relationships among people which are a product of (and are mediated by) these images. In these societies, the modern conditions of production are perceived by the public to be “an immense accumulation of

spectacles”¹. Examples of modern physical manifestations of the spectacle include (but are not limited to): advertising, propaganda, news, and all forms of the consumption of entertainment. The conjunction of mass media with new forms of technology have created a digital culture which greatly empowers the spectacle, and Druckery refers specifically to the role of cinema in this culture.

In 1950s, Morton Heilig was the first person to conceptualize what is referred to today as virtual reality. In 1955, he published an essay entitled “The Cinema of the Future”, in which he detailed the full sensory experience that would define the future of cinema. He described how all senses of the audience would be engaged. Heilig responds to those who state that cinema has become too realistic, stating that cinema can never be too realistic, and that it in fact should be as realistic as possible, so that a more full experience can be transmitted from artist to audience.² In this way, he envisions the future of cinema as open-ended, guided by developing technology, the development of which will be directed by the needs of the artists. Although the future that Heilig envisions is open-ended, shaped to empower the creative control of the artist, it does in some ways parallel the futuristic “end state” which Druckery warns to avoid. By defining specific attributes of a future cinematic state, although larger in scope than the contemporary abilities of the cinema were, Heilig was presenting a still-limited vision that does not encompass all possibilities of cinema, and very definitely presents an end-state of full sensory engagement. In addition, his vision aligns with Druckery’s category of perpetuating the passivity of

¹ Debord, Guy, Guy Debord, and Ken Knabb. *The society of the spectacle*. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014.

² Heilig, Morton. "The Cinema of the Future." 1955.

audiences--he places all of the power in the hands of the cinema, and imagines an (albeit awe-inspiring) totally submissive experience for audiences.

A piece by Jill Scott, *Frontiers of Utopia* (1995) attempts to embody certain aspects of her vision of the future of cinema. *Frontiers* was in a octagonal room, with each wall-panel featuring a different historically-based character who was at the forefront of a movement. The audience could either stand in the middle of the room and observe multiple screens, or control and switch one video or audio feed. In an essay published as a chapter in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative* in 2002 by the British Film Institute entitled "Crossing and Collapsing Time: Re-constructing (Her)Historical and Ideological Film Narratives on a Transformed Stage", Jill Scott discusses *Frontiers of Utopia* along with several other pieces, weaving together the themes of her work. She states that "in the future, I imagine more optimistic and unpredictable transformed stages where the viewer can unfold dynamic new fictions". The future she poses is one of interactive cinema, a concept that *Frontiers of Utopia* embodies. She describes the "new idea" as enabling individuals in an audience to become "transient nomads" and "fully-integrated mediated activators". This kind of theorizing about a future state of cinema, and works based upon this theory, fall into the same category that Heilig's theorizing does--a futuristic, ultimately limiting "end-state". However, this work is an example of one that falls into Druckery's other category of futuristic cinema--one that "obliterates the history it inherits"--or rather, one that presents a divergence from present methods (present methods being the pervasive cinematic design of passive audiences).³

³ Scott, Jill. "Crossing and Collapsing Time: Re-constructing (Her)Historical and Ideological Film Narratives on a Transformed Stage." In *New screen media: cinema - art - narrative*. London: British Film Institute, 2002.

The relationship between technology and cinema is necessarily an intimate one, as the existence of cinema is totally dependent on the technology which created it. While it can easily be concluded from this statement that technology is the main driving force behind cinema—validating Druckery’s notion that some believe cinema simply verifies a “preexisting model” of technology—it should also be considered how the drive to create realistic experiences directs the development of these supporting technologies. Currently, a whole field of technology supporting virtual or enhanced reality experiences are being developed solely for the purpose of enabling individuals or entities to share more sensorily comprehensive experiences with others. Considering the relationship from this perspective is empowering to artists and creators, as it gives more weight to their creative needs.

The Legible City is an excellent example of an enhanced cinematic experience that was not predicated on the idea of what futuristic cinema should be, but is instead functionalist and uses the tools of cinema to relay a specific experience. The Legible City is an installation by Jeffrey Shaw, with three different versions released in 1989, 1990, and 1991. It consists of a stationary bicycle situated in front of a screen—visitors can ride the bicycle “through” the cities of Manhattan, Amsterdam, and Karlsruhe. Shaw intended for the piece to allow users to experience the three cities in a new light, with an emphasis on its architecture and urban layout. While this may seem more of an interactive art piece than a development of cinema, it is actually more in line with Heilig’s idea that cinema should be expanded to include more senses. The tactile aspect of the piece does not discount it from being considered cinema—since the

participant cannot actually change their surroundings, but simply their location in them, they are still partaking in the specific sensory experience that was designed by the artist.⁴

This work falls into Druckery's category of works that refigure the notion of cinema, as it is a further development in cinematic experiences that is specific to the conceptual needs of the piece, and therefore does not make general assumptions about the direction cinema "should" move in. This piece can be contrasted with *Frontiers of Utopia* in this aspect based on its subject matter--the stories shared in *Frontiers of Utopia* were of individuals at the forefront of certain movements, paralleling the goal of the artist--for the form of the piece to be influential in cinema's development toward what she believed its end state should be.

Osmose (1995), a virtual reality piece by Char Davies, was atypical of virtual reality games and environments of the time--participants' movement was based on their breath, and it avoided attempts to recreate realism through its graphics. It is a world composed of layers, and participants sunk or rose among these layers--a forest, the earth's core, and underneath this moving green lines of text replicating the code the reality is based on. It was exemplary of many previously-defined attributes of futuristic cinema without defining itself as such, or presenting itself as an ultimate or end-state.⁵

The main factor that distinguishes whether the pieces and theories previously discussed fall into Druckery's category of futuristic cinema or cinema of the future are whether the technical methods of the piece serve the purpose of influencing cinema, or of serving the piece and furthering concepts that are expressed through it. While cinema is historically significant as

⁴ Shaw, Jeffrey. "Meaningful Interfaces in Immersive Environments." Lecture, Invited Talk, IUI'06, Sydney, Australia, February 1, 2006.

⁵ Hansen, Mark B. N. *Bodies in code: interfaces with digital media*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

a medium that enables artists to represent reality in a revolutionarily new way, it is still very much linked to the development of the technology upon which its existence is founded; this technology is dynamic and ever-evolving, and Druckery's critique of the intentionally futuristic tendencies of cinematic art is valid.