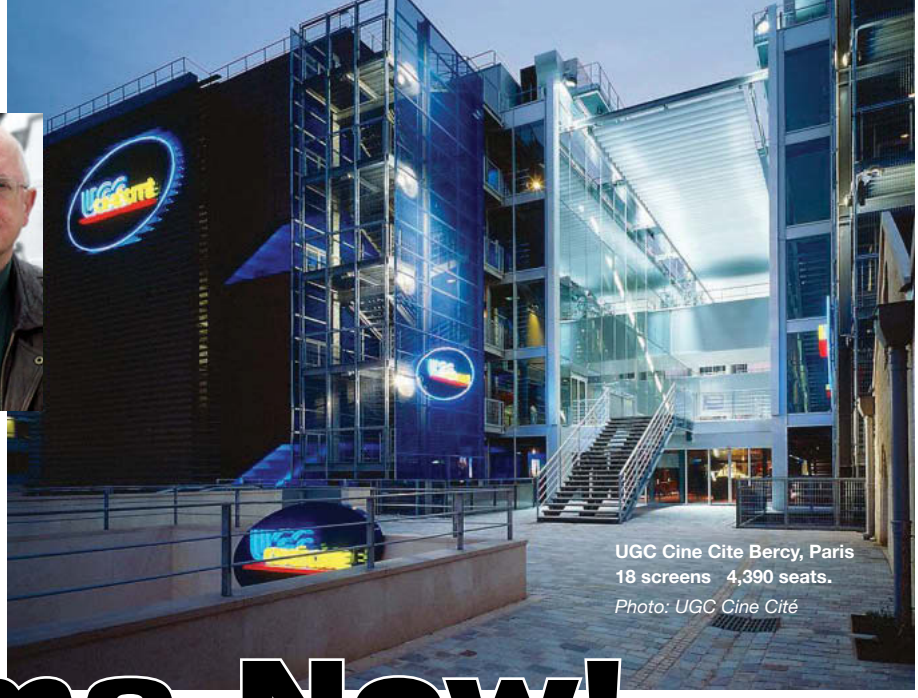


UGC Cine Cite Bercy, Paris
18 screens 4,390 seats.
Photo: UGC Cine Cité

In a series of three articles, our regular contributor Mark Trompeteler looks at the debates taking place around the idea that movies today are not as important to popular culture and society as they once were. He also discusses how the digital domain has grown rapidly, both within the type of movies that have become popular and in the content of those movies, and also how they are consumed in all kinds of other ways outside of cinemas.

Cinema Now! - Cinema Future?

Part 1:
Television Strikes Back
In this first part Mark highlights some of the main issues. These go right back to the very beginning of cinema and some of the most fundamental debates about the nature of cinema, distribution and exhibition.

Beginnings

Even at the very beginning of cinema, a few distinct, discernable approaches to thinking about and creating a film, and attracting an audience, were immediately established. Initially film was used to depict reality. The realistic / documentary depiction of the world was the subject of the first moving pictures exhibited widely by the Lumière brothers. Then at the other end of the scale were the magical fantasy films of Georges Méliès with his early use of "trick" effects ("A Trip to the Moon" – 1902). In between these two extremes different graduations of a mix between reality and fantasy emerged. These different mixes or different genres of film became established and told stories within these genres.

It is also significant to remember that early film was exploited as spectacle and action too. One such very popular early film was "The Life of an American Fireman" (1902), by Edwin S. Porter whose film making base was at the Edison Studio in New York. His film had very close similarities to a popular attraction at New York's Coney Island at the beginning of the twentieth century. At this attraction huge crowds paid money to watch a "set" where three or four times daily they could watch a building catch fire, actors as firemen arrive and watch as the people in peril were rescued dramatically from the upper floors. Cinema in its popularisation in its early days was often as a "pop-up" cinema which competed at fairgrounds alongside such rival established attractions as stunt shows and thrill rides.

The Digitisation of Film Content and Stories

Parallel to the huge impact of the digital domain in cinema exhibition has been a growth in the impact of computers on both the post production and production of films. Furthermore, the greater availability of ever more sophisticated computer generated imagery and special effects has created a situation whereby it has given a real ascendency to the types of film that are the inheritors of the Georges Méliès tradition. The past ten to fifteen years has seen a real myriad of films that fully exploit the fantasy, magic, action and spectacle that can be created with CGI and special effects. The full gamut of fantasy, science fiction, comic books and graphic novels has been opened up, where previously more traditional naturalistic and conventional literature had been explored and adapted for the screen. Original screenplays also give life to the most fantastic ideas on screen that were never as fully realised

Early example of digital manipulation to produce huge crowds from a limited number of actors using Quantel's Domino. The Dance of Shiva 1998.

before the advent of CGI. I personally have lost count of the number of superheroes, monsters, kingdoms, wizards, magicians, fairytales, CGI historical and fantasy armies, robots, bionic men and runaway fast and furious planes, trains, buses, cars and epidemics and cataclysms that have flown across cinema screens in the past decade.

Not so long ago the mainstream staple diet of what was being screened at the cinema were films that relied on a more realistic depiction of the world and films which to the audience member and critic appeared to explore such things as theme, narrative, the development of character, their moral dilemmas, plot development and action in often what appeared to some as clearer and more subtle ways. One of the problems of what we see at the cinema now is that such classic elements of movies are now increasingly being subjugated to overwhelming spectacle, action and visual trickery.

The French "New Wave" film makers of the 1950s and 1960s were extremely influential in the development of modern cinema. In his famous essay "Little Themes" published in "Cahiers du Cinema" magazine, Claude Chabrol essentially argued that really big treatments, like an apocalyptic end of the world war, of a theme like man's intolerance of his fellow man, could in fact be a distraction and decoy from the successful communication of that theme. He argued that exactly the same theme could equally be given a small treatment - for instance, an argument about land or boundaries between two neighbouring farmers in the French countryside. He argued that the problem is that the audience member might never have seen either the French countryside or an apocalyptic deserted and ruined city. Therefore the audience member can very easily be impressed by the latter, however beautifully they both may be photographed. His general argument is that the bigger and more fantastic the treatment of the theme, the bigger the danger is of having some of the audience lose the point of the story and its theme.

Jean Baudrillard is a French cultural academic and writer on cinema and cites films like "The Matrix" and its sequels as having become almost a parody of cinema.

The Television Empire Strikes Back

As cinema has recently been going further down one path than before, aided and abetted by the power of the computer – its major entertainment rival has been developing something new on the storytelling front. The phenomenon of the extended television programme and series is something that cinema can only rival via trilogies, quadrilogies and franchises. Irrespective of whether your 42 or 55 inch flat screen TV at home is showing 2K or 4K images and whether or not it has a sound bar or is connected to a home cinema surround sound system, the extended television programme or series has taken the classic elements of cinema content – narrative, character, motivation, moral dilemma, action and social contexts and honed them to new levels of audio visual story telling. TV series like the original Danish version of "The Killing" have proved to be critically and culturally significant. The telling of the story of a single police investigation over an extended twenty hour running time has taken those classic ingredients of narrative, character and motivation to whole new levels. This new type of approach to the series idea is different from the old kind of TV series like "The Sweeney" which traded as much on popularity, familiarly, entertainment and repetition as anything else. Constructing a narrative, characters and dilemmas of such quality that you are confident you are going to hold the interest of an audience for the telling of a single story for twenty hours of running time is a long way from one hour or even two hour separate stories each week, repeatedly shown in a formulaic way, as in a conventional TV series.

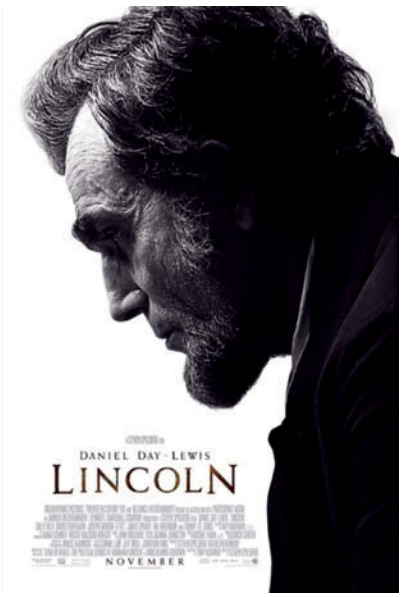
I personally found the critically acclaimed "The Wire" breathtaking in both its scope and ambition. What starts as seemingly another TV crime drama series around the urban drugs trade develops into something quite amazing over its five series. It effectively is an exploration of modern contemporary American urban society using sophisticated overlapping narratives. Over its five series, using the safe initial acceptable base element of a TV cop crime drama, it goes on to explore urban society very effectively through the related layers of employment and trade unions, the education system, local government and politics and the media in a seamless layered approach to telling a story on a screen. At a time when DVD sales of a film will often significantly overtake the amount of money a film takes at the box office, the development of the extended television programme and series, and the boxed DVD set, is a very worthy rival to films at the cinema. Dolby Atmos, a curved screen or LightVibes would add little to the power of the psychological immersion that a really great story well told in a beautifully crafted extended television programme offers the viewer.

The End of Intelligent Cinema?

The choice of Kevin Spacey in 2013 for the MacTaggart keynote lecture at The Edinburgh International Television Festival was significant. He was the first actor in its 37 year history ever to give that lecture. Also significant was the release earlier that year of Netflix's first ever own drama TV series which they released with all 13 episodes being available simultaneously from the beginning. So the viewer could now choose not only how and when they wanted to view the 13 hour story, but also choose for how long or short they wanted their viewing sessions to be. In his lecture Spacey advised the television industry to take advantage of the massive audience interest in extended dramas and boxed sets and the new technologies that allow streaming and viewing on mobile devices. Whilst relating to a time a while back when he never thought the best output of television was comparable to the best of cinema he also said "I do not think anyone today, 15 years later, can, in terms of character driven drama, argue that television has not indeed taken over."

The film and television actor Ray

Winstone at the press launch of the Sky TV produced series "Moonfleet" in his own inimitable way said "The best scripts come from TV now, there is a lot of crap in the films isn't there? What started the ball rolling was HBO bringing great actors and making dramas like cinema."



The past few years has seen many actors, screenwriters, critics and columnists decrying the creative, aesthetic and cultural value of films in cinemas. (Sarah Sands a columnist on London's Evening Standard newspaper: "Everyone now agrees that television is smarter than the movies.")

Back to "Thrill Rides" and The Fairground?

Established directors have shown concern at the situation too. Oscar-winning director, Steven Soderbergh, has famously been going through a three year goodbye to Hollywood and has stated he is no longer interested in making movies.

In a recent definitive interview Soderbergh lamented the disappearance of an era – presumably the early-to-mid 1970s – in which film-makers were allowed more freedom, and said intelligent viewers had spotted the trend and shifted to watching TV. "It's true that when I was growing up, there was a sort of division: respect was accorded to people who made great movies and to people who made movies that made a lot of money," he said. "And that division just doesn't exist any more: now it's just the people who make a lot of money."

"I think there are many reasons for that," he added. "Some of them are cultural. I've said before, I think that the audience for the kinds of movies I grew up liking has migrated to television. The format really allows for the narrow and deep approach that I like. Three and a half million people watching a show on cable is a success. That many people seeing a movie is not a success. I just don't think movies matter as much any more, culturally. Soderbergh's film "Behind the Candelabra", starring Michael Douglas and Matt Damon as Liberace and his young lover Scott Thorson, was financed by US pay-TV Channel HBO as Hollywood studios refused to fund the film.

In an address to students at the University of Southern California in 2013 and standing alongside no less a cinema figure as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg revealed that if he hadn't part owned the film studio he would have had to have gone to television to finance his critically acclaimed and academy award winning "Lincoln." In their address to students Lucas and Spielberg were pessimistic about the current and future cultural heath of the movies and both criticised studios for investing too heavily in movies based on comic book and fantasy characters and a lack of commitment to original and fresh ideas. By one count 2013 saw 31 sequels and 17 remakes of previously filmed concepts that were financed by Hollywood. Steven Spielberg was predicting a meltdown in the film industry if more Hollywood blockbusters flopped at the box office. George Lucas said that television productions were now "much more adventurous" than those released by the film industry.

Spielberg predicted the arrival of a so called "tent pole" strategy with studios pouring more of their resources into a smaller number of blockbuster films which they expect to make up a larger proportion of their profits. This "tent pole" strategy has implications of premium experience cinemas, with advanced immersive and thrill technologies, which will drive ticket prices upwards. However, quieter, smaller more character and narrative driven films would be available in other screens at much cheaper prices. This to all extent and purposes has already arrived and is happening and such programming flexibility was always the basis of the multiplex. What Spielberg and Lucas warned about was the meltdown that could occur if too much is committed to the premium blockbusters and they begin to fail. You cannot help sympathise a little with the view that implies with "tent poles", films as thrill rides and all the accompanying hot dogs, cola, and popcorn, significant aspects of cinema are reverting back to its origins – of being a modern high tech fairground attraction.

The Growth of the "Connected" Audience

Driving around London in the past two years I have had some three or four pedestrians step out in front of my car, totally oblivious to their surroundings, the colour of the traffic and pedestrian lights, and their eyes and concentration firmly fixed on the screens of their mobile devices. Travelling on trains I cannot help notice the increase in the number of passengers watching a TV programme or film on a large mobile phone or tablet. One such passenger I remember was standing in a crowded carriage, his not insignificantly sized shopping gripped between his legs, and his tablet held in his hand. As he was watching his film or tv programme with earpiece firmly fixed in his ear, his mobile phone rang - he put the tablet on pause and carefully balancing everything, he took the call.

In the UK I couldn't help fail to notice the arrival of press and TV advertising for "Sky Go". In one advertising scenario one is told how lucky a business man is, sitting in the back of a London taxi, being able to watch a portion of a Harry Potter film, on a tablet balanced on his lap, before he arrives at a business meeting. In another scenario a young mother addresses the screen telling me she wished there was a way in which she could entertain herself easily when she was waiting for an appointment during her busy day. She gives the impression she would love to see a portion of a favorite film in those annoying boring little slots in her day. Then she reveals that she had discovered "Sky Go" and now she can do what she wished. This may be cinema Jim ? But not as we know it !

Mark Trompeteler

In the next two articles I meet up with Professor Sir Christopher Frayling and we discuss the above issues. I was interested to get his perspective on them as he is probably the leading commentator on popular culture within the UK, as well as being an expert on the place of cinema within popular culture.