





**Satantango,
Béla Tarr (1994)**

Bachmann





**Don't Believe the Hype:
Cinema as a Political Space**

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“Cinema is dead” is a prophecy of doom we’ve been hearing for quite a while now. Yet no one holding cinema dear to his or her heart or making a living of its many money-making tentacles, can hear it without feeling some sort of pain or anguish. Perhaps because something we love is declared to be dying. Or because a cultural field that supplies us with what we (and maybe our family too) need for a living, is said to not be profitable any more. What I want to say is that the statement “cinema is dead” is an existential one – it is talking about an institution, it is referring to emotional ties and it is addressing a factual, financial base. In other words: It is a serious statement.

CINEMA IS OUT OF TIME, OR: THE ACCUSATION OF NOSTALGIA

Having been invited to the symposium “Archival Film Today” at the National Film Archive in Prague in February 2015, I had the notion that the choice of topic would inspire many presentations and lectures on the seemingly endless possibilities of presenting, distributing and interacting with moving images in the digital ether. Since my work and fascination with film (of which archival film is only one aspect) is strongly connected to a different understanding – that which cherishes moving images on the big screen, in a cinema, together with others – I decided to approach the idea of digital possibilities *ex negativo*. As a result stressing what we might lose if we think of today and tomorrow only in digital terms. So while the Austrian Film Museum does of course delve into the possibilities of the digital, I nevertheless felt it necessary to underline what we should *not* be forgetting when modeling possible scenarios for archival film in the future.

I cannot predict the future and would not dare to make any prophecy as to whether colleagues in other archives, cinemas, museums will continue to be able to make a living of what they are doing now. But nevertheless, I want to speak of a *necessity* for the cinema not *only* because it is a tradition that we must uphold, but a necessity for the present situation. The cinema as a space is something meaningful *here and now*, and it can make us see things that the world on the outside tends to suppress. This potential of the cinema as a space can serve as an element of emancipation, both political and personal.

Having worked at the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna as curator and head of education for approximately five years, I have been invited time and time again to talk about the institution's philosophy, its history and the centrality of the cinema as an exhibition space at its core. And while I always (or, most of the time, at least) sensed that people appreciate the ideas and the concept, I have at the same time often felt easily assailable, since I have articulated a certain vision for the present (or even the future) as the continuation of a tradition. Tradition nowadays is suspicious, as it seems to stand in opposition to the central paradigm of our times: progress, constant renewal and an all-encompassing creativity. If we formulate something as being the continuation of a tradition, we are by definition conservative and prone to nostalgia. Nostalgia, I would agree, is the worst kind of relationship one can have with the past, because it imagines something in the past that has never quite existed as such, and because it negates the urgency of the present in favor of a longing for that past.

To give you an idea of how my usual line of argumentation is structured, I will sum it up in just a few sentences. When Peter Kubelka (at that time already making avant-garde film) and

Peter Konlechner (student at the Technical University of Vienna) founded the Austrian Film Museum in 1964, their main intention was to establish an institution that was to preserve, restore, research and exhibit film just as the other arts were preserved, restored, researched and exhibited in their respective museums. From the very start, Kubelka and Konlechner decided that a screening space had to be at the heart of the institution, since it was (to them) the only adequate form of exhibiting film: a space that respected the temporality of the medium, a space that invited people to focus on the complexities of the moving images unfolding themselves within the duration of each screening, and a space that allowed film to be shown in the right format (8 mm, 16 mm, 35 mm and so on) and speed (16 fps, 18 fps, 20 to 24 fps). Thus, cinema is more than images on the screen or sounds coming from speakers. Cinema is a system consisting of a material base, a technical apparatus and a spatio-temporal dispositif. From these basic premises derives the present curatorial concept, or, to be more precise: The present curatorial concept *can* be understood as a continuation of this tradition. The Film Museum still screens films in their original formats in its screening room, and this curatorial presentation attempts to foster an understanding of the complexity of what we mean when we talk about cinema. The aesthetics and history of cinema can only be understood by films from all corners of the medium's history – feature, documentary, experimental/avant-garde, industrial films, amateur films, advertising, trailers, early cinema – being shown in the context of a screening space that allows the apparatus, the spatio-temporal dispositif, and their material base to be present as well.

Two observations on present discourses can help us understand why the ideas and concepts I am presenting above are sometimes regarded as a) out of time and b) nostalgic.

- a) Insisting on the importance of film being presented in a cinema space is *out of time* because it articulates values that seem to stand in opposition to what is nowadays asked of an emancipated citizen – in his daily life, as part of his education, and in his working life. Firstly, the cinema space facilitates a sort of bodily passivity that seems to stand in opposition to the constant imperative of activity. Cinema theory of the 1970s summarized under the label “apparatus theory” has stressed this point: We are put into a dark space, strapped to our chair and have absolutely no power over the images that are basically pressed into our head. This theoretic critique – basing its convictions on a mixture of Marxist theory and psychoanalysis – found its artistic equivalent in the Expanded Cinema movement. Expanded Cinema asked for the liberation of the images from its authoritarian dispositiv, which was aimed (or so it was said) at suppressing the spectator. If one looks at the rhetoric of contemporary curators in art museums, which show moving images in a gallery space without black boxes (which come closer to a cinema space), one will find the same line of thought: To show films in a gallery space mobilizes the viewer, it allows him to actively position himself in relation to the images, and by moving through the museum he can create his own narrative. Interestingly, if we compare these ideas to the strikingly similar marketing rhetoric of video-on-demand services such as Netflix or Amazon, which offer a pay-per-view system that allows the user to choose what he watches, and also when and where, one must become suspicious. This line of argumentation was established in the 1970s – a time when authoritarian structures truly dominated the western world; in its institutions, its working relationships, in the family unit – and is transferred to the present by commercial enterprises (who in the long-run always think about expanding their capital). What once was counter-culture now is marketing-rhetoric.

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- b) The understanding of cinema I have outlined above can be criticized for being *nostalgic* if one actually believes that those who defend the need for the cinema space, base their convictions on the grounds that it has always been like this. And that they are the same people who would argue that back in the 50s the world was better, less complex, and easier to manage. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course. While one can certainly say that the cinema space was the dominant mode of watching films for most of the medium's history, one cannot negate the fact that a large part of that history also took place elsewhere: in tents, bars, on video, on walls and so on. To insist on film having its ideal space of presentation in the movie theater seems to be considered nostalgic because critics like to imply that supporters of the cinema space are totally unaware of revolutionary movements (like the ones in the 70s outlined above). Or critics seem to insist on thinning out the realities of the present (the dissemination of images into all areas of life). Can we not be trusted to continue a tradition without being considered conservative or blind to the necessities of the present?

THE CINEMA IN RELATION TO THE PRESENT

Why articulate cinema as a political space from the perspective of the now, the present? Or better: *How* to formulate it? The starting point from which to think about cinema as such is not grounded in something axiomatic, but in a firm belief: Namely, that the only *truly* valuable function of any cultural institution has to be defined in its relationship with everything outside of it. A museum for film, a theatre, a festival – all of these places are part of the world and can at the same time articulate a position towards it. When you enter such an institution you do not leave the world, but you enter a space within that world that can enable us to articulate something about the world. It is a

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space that allows you to distance yourself as much as you need to get a clearer view of the world, but without ever leaving it. A cultural institution allows you to be – at the same time – both inside and outside of the rest of the world.

Here is one example of how we can imagine the relationship between the art institution and the world that surrounds it. In a recent discussion on the function of museums in regards to the moving image at the Austrian Film Museum in November 2014, Chris Dercon, at that time director of Tate Modern in London, articulated his understanding of a cultural institution as something like the following: He suggested that the museum should not build any barriers against the outside world, quite the opposite. It should understand the world outside, everything beyond its institutional doors and establish the museum as a seamless continuation of it. This would then, according to Dercon, lead to more people coming into the galleries and looking at work and thus establish a stronger presence of art in their daily lives. If people are used to actively decide how to act, where to move, when to leave and how much attention to spend on whatever they encounter, the museum has to be thought of along those lines. To make his point he even argued (surely being polemic) that Béla Tarr's 8-hour epic *Satantango* (1994) was best shown on intercontinental flights where the length of the flight matched the length of the film. Here again, the point of departure is not what the work needs, but how the work fits into external realities.

Exaggerating a little, one could say that to follow this line of thought is to subscribe to the belief that *any* contact with art, history and cultural artifacts is a form of valuable contact. It also means to not take into consideration that the way something is presented says something about that object and in turn

Fig.
Santalago,
Bida Tarr (1994)



influences how we perceive it. What is implied here, is a certain approach: We do not ask ourselves what the artwork would need to fully unfold its impact in relation to the world, but we ask ourselves how we can squeeze the work into the ways of the world.

This is the point where I would like to return to the idea of the cinema space as both an institution that articulates a position towards the object it exhibits (film), and a space that articulates this position in relation to the outside world. What I would like to suggest then, is how the cinema space can be thought of in the present. And exactly what about this space can be considered educational in an emancipatory sense: how it can liberate us from the imperatives of daily life, how it can seduce us to look at the world differently. Here, I do not want to talk about specific films, but rather focus on certain aspects connected to

2. Kathrin Busch: *Passivität*, Textem Verlag und Halle für Kunst, Hamburg/Lüneburg, 2012, p. 11.

1. Kathrin Busch: *Passivität*, Textem Verlag und Halle für Kunst, Hamburg/Lüneburg, 2012, p. 8.

the cinema space and their relationship to the present that can be a cause for friction. So while I will argue that the cinema is and always should be part of the world, I will further articulate its potential in creating a space that asks people to be different, asks them to reflect on the world from a different perspective, that creates a form of *emancipation through friction*. There are three points I would like to briefly consider here: a) the idea of bodily passivity, b) the idea of materiality, and c) the idea of programming. These three aspects form what could be called the experience of film in the cinema space.

- a) Bodily passivity: In the cinema we can learn that bodily passivity is something to be cherished. We understand that going somewhere not to act, be active or interact, but to sit down, let darkness surround us and have no real influence on the situation for the duration of a screening, can be a rewarding, even necessary experience. The philosopher Kathrin Busch has articulated a need for the appreciation and understanding of passivity in a broader sense. She does not see passivity as the opposite of activity, or a break from it. “It is not enough to answer society’s call for hyperflexibility and creativity simply with a plea for a break, some spare time and deacceleration or even by singing the song of tiredness”¹ Busch writes, and reminds us of the philosophical concepts of passivity as they have been articulated by Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida or Giorgio Agamben. These philosophers have all turned their attention to the fact that any form of activity is always necessarily connected to passivity. As Busch later states: “Taking into consideration and reflecting on passivity is based on the idea that acting and producing cannot be disconnected from the impulses, affects and invocations, which they answer to.”²
- “ We need to be touched by things before we can create things. Cinema as a space can remind us of this – by sensibly forcing us

**“We need to be touched by things
Cinema as a space can**

Fig.
Salamango,
Bida Tarr (1994)



to stop using our mobile phones, stop posting on social media, stop checking emails, stop moving our bodies and ask us to be touched, affected, invoked by the images on the screen.

- b) **Materiality:** With analogue projection, we can learn that the world has not lost its materiality, that every image to be found on YouTube only carries a certain part of its truth, namely the images themselves but not their material base. I do not mean to be fetishistic about the materiality of film. I am actually convinced that everyone should and has to decide for himself whether he prefers the clean, slick look of a DCP, or rather a 35 mm print that speaks about its history, about the places it has been screened, the hands it has been touched by, the injuries it has been exposed to. But what the latter holds in store is an understanding of history that the slick DCP can never contain. Namely that our history is based on materials and means of

**before we can create things.
remind us of this”**

Sigmund Freud: "Fetishism", in: *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*. Trans. James Strachey et al. Ed. Angela Richards, Harmondsworth, 1991, p. 351-357.

production (which are, as Marx would have put it, the result of a certain political system), and that history didn't just happen, but was produced. What becomes visible in an analogue cinema screening, which the digital world of well-dressed bohemians with precarious jobs exploiting themselves on shiny MacBooks tend to suppress, is labor. The labor of the projectionist who makes possible the images on the screen, the labor that has gone into preserving a print from the past for the present, and the labor that time itself has left as a mark on this material. As a final remark, one should actually reconsider if the digital image – from its manifestation on a laptop screen, a mobile device, at the train station or in the cinema – does not carry more traits of what Freud meant with the fetish: It is the fetish that tends to draw our attention away from dangers (for example that film can decay) and realities (that labor has gone into the film screening), while the analogue image, as I have outlined above, speaks of the realities of a world.³

- c) Programming: The last aspect of the cinema that I consider to be educational is "programming". With this I mean the idea that a moving-image work (or a short film program, a film series or a retrospective) is screened in a cinema because someone has programmed it, and made the screening happen. While moving images tend to be available anytime and anywhere now, the act of programming entails the idea that a certain work is shown in a certain place at a certain time. While mainstream culture cherishes the idea of the individual having total control over what he sees when and for how long, the idea of a program introduces another concept of engagement with a work of art: It asks the viewer to lean back and let others decide what he or she could watch. It means to accept that in order to be an emancipated citizen in this world, you have to commit yourself to the ideas, thoughts and propositions of others. When I say

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commit I surely do not mean subordinate, quite the opposite: I mean to give someone the time to articulate something and after that time to position myself towards it. A film program then, is – ideally – the articulation of an idea that asks to be met with reflection. When I watch a film chosen by someone else together with strangers, I become aware that we share an experience and that each of us is different in this process. I find this idea to be in opposition to the mentality that tells us: If you don't like it after three minutes, just turn it off, switch to another channel or open another browser window.

This, I will conclude, is how we can perceive cinema as a political space in the present. It is a space that enhances our capacity for critique by confronting us with ways of being, seeing and thinking that are not in line with (but partly in opposition to) the *human condition* outside of that institution. If people tend to feel a bigger resistance to go to the cinema nowadays, it is overcoming that resistance that might prove to be emancipating. Returning to the statement “cinema is dead” I would like to answer: Cinema is not dead, it has only changed. It has not changed as such, but its function in the world is different, because the world has changed. If we do not want cinema to be dead, we have to think of it differently. We have to rethink its function and emphasize not how it can become more like the world around us, but how it can create more friction with that world, thus enabling us to think about it differently, critically, and anew.

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