# Say Goodbye to Hollywood

*On the comfort of watching the future, and the difficulty of letting go*

In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a scientist flies to a space station with Pan Am and, once there, calls home from a video phone booth of Bell, to a small daughter whose birthday party the scientist is going to miss. The flight is calm, the call is a bit sad, and the logos are there, clearly visible for the audience. The Bell System was broken up already in 1984, and Pan Am stopped flying in 1991, both before the year in the title. It is easy to laugh at these. Everybody does it, and I do it too. Lately, though, I laugh less, and I am not completely sure why.

What exactly we laugh at? The film makers were not stupid, and they were not trying to predict anything, at least not in the sense that the weather forecaster predicts tomorrow's rain. They took the biggest names of their own present – the airline, the telephone company – and put them to the future, as it were. And this is, more or less, all one can do. Popper argued already in *The Poverty of Historicism* that we cannot know today what we will know only tomorrow; if we could, we would know it already, today. So the future in a film is always made of the present, dressed up a little bit. The logos in *2001* show the *limits of conceivability* of 1968: it was hard to conceive that such companies could simply disappear. Limits are nothing to laugh about, or not much. Then again, maybe this is the reason why I laugh less: the limits are ours too. Our futures are made of our present as well (what else they could be made of?), and somebody will laugh at them, perhaps quite soon. Sorry to say, this includes also the futures studies reports, mine among them. I do not find this funny anymore. We are doing our best now, and they were doing their best too.

Still, there is something in Hollywood that is worth to say goodbye to, and the logos are the smallest part of it. What I mean is the picture of what future is and how we stand in relation to it – the picture that comes with the cinema in the same package, that many of us, I think, grew up with, and which is for that reason not easy to leave. Consider what happens when we watch a film about the future. There are three things, at least. (i) There is *one ending*: the film shows one future, even if there will be sequel. (ii) The future is already there, made and finished, and the *camera* only shows it to us; we watch what is, so to say. (iii) We sit in the dark, each in our *seat*, and whatever we do, the film goes like it goes. Now, nobody in futures studies says that they can see the future – that would be plain silly. However, the field quite often speaks, and sometimes even works, as if these three things holds. Funding calls ask for "the future of" this or that, in singular. Scenario sets are presented like four trailers, and the audience is asked to guess which one of the films will be released in the end. And so on.

Let us take the three in turn. First, the *one ending*. The object of futures studies is, as I have argued elsewhere, the *space of possibilities*: what could happen, how the possibilities hang together, and why some of them are possible only after others have been realised. Plurality of futures is therefore no weakness of the field, or a sign that researchers cannot make up their minds. Then again, plurality does not mean freedom to imagine whatever one happens to like. Not everything goes. Some futures are not possible at all, some are possible only if many other things happen first, and some were possible once and are not possible anymore (things have happened, decisions have been made or not made, which is also a decision, in a sense). This is also the part of the space we speak about the least; nobody writes scenarios about futures that are already lost. The structure of all this – which possibility depends on which, and which ones are already gone – is exactly the thing the researcher tries to make visible, also when nobody is very happy to see it. A scenario set, then, is a sort of map of the space, or of some part of it. Reading it like four films competing on the release date misses the map completely.

Second, the *camera*. A film can show the future only because somebody has built it, set by set, and in a sense it exists, already finished, before we ever see it. The future of the world is not like this. There is nothing out there yet to collect data about; there is no data about future as such. What there is, are the present structures, trends, plans and dependencies, the people with their reasons, and the past which has made all of them – and the past goes often deeper than we think. Consider *The Exorcist* (1973). What people remember is the girl in Georgetown and the long nights in the bedroom. Almost nobody remembers how the film begins: in northern Iraq, at an archaeological dig, where an old priest finds a small figure of an old demon from the ground. Something old has been dug out, and then things start to happen, far away from the dig. When the priest finally arrives in Georgetown, the priest knows what is waiting upstairs. The priest knew it already before the film, as we remember it, even began. And goes anyway, and does not survive the night. The priest knew more than anybody else in the film, and it did not help the priest much.

Historians know this structure well. Only afterwards one can say that the dig was "the beginning" of something; at the dig itself it was a dig, one among many (in philosophy of history such descriptions are called *narrative sentences*, after Danto). Futures studies is in a strange position here. If it resembles anything in these films, it resembles the opening that nobody remembers: the dig, the old finds, and the old priest who understands something before the story begins (demons aside, of course). The priest has no *camera*. What the priest has is understanding of what the dug-out thing may set going, and of how such things have gone before. This is, I think, the main epistemic goal of futures studies too: understanding – *justified understanding*, to be precise – while prediction, when it is possible at all, is rather special case. Why does this matter? Because the value of a scenario never was in its endpoint in the first place. The value is in what we understand about the dependencies on the way there, and that understanding can be justified even when the scenario itself is not true, and will never be. And most of our scenarios will never be, as they are written. We know this already when we write them. It is bit strange work, if one stops to think about it. Most of what we write is about things that will not happen, and the people who read it will forget it, like the opening of the film.

Third, and perhaps most important to me, the *seat*. In the cinema the audience cannot change the film. People who read foresight can, and they do; that is often the very reason why the foresight is made at all. A scenario that is taken seriously may make itself more possible, or less possible, simply because somebody acts on it – the researcher included, as the researcher is never standing outside of the thing being studied. Bit ironically, *Planet of the Apes* (1968) knew something about this. The astronauts think they have landed far away, in a strange world that has nothing to do with them. In the end the strange world turns out to be their own, and its future was made by humans, by acting (or by acting very badly, to put it bluntly). And again somebody knew it before: Dr. Zaius, Minister of Science and Chief Defender of the Faith, a priest of a sort, who knew what the old finds in the Forbidden Zone meant, and kept quiet. Knowing and keeping quiet is also acting, in its own way, and not a good one. But the audience still sits in the dark with popcorn, and nothing they do in the cinema changes what is found on the beach at the end. I admit that I miss the *seat* sometimes. In the cinema nothing was our fault; the film went like it went, and afterwards we went home. Then again, there was never really such a *seat* for us outside the cinema; it only felt like there was. In futures studies there is no such going home, as the not-acting is also one way of acting, in a sense.

To be sure, I am not saying that films are useless for futures studies, or that stories are. Rather the opposite. Stories move people in a way a table of drivers of change hardly ever does, and narrative foresight is a method that I, together with colleagues, have tried to revitalise quite recently. Hollywood is good in what it does: it makes a possible future felt, for two hours or so. The stories can stay. What can go is the *one ending*, the *camera* and the *seat*, i.e. the assumption that the future is already made and our job is to watch it, or to watch it a bit earlier than the others.

Saying goodbye is easier said than done, however. The picture is handy. Clients understand it immediately, and it is far easier to sell "the future of mobility" than a structured *space of possibilities* with contested initial conditions and reflexive loops in it. And I catch myself, too, speaking about what "will" happen when what I mean is something about what can. So there will hardly be a train leaving the station, with music, when the credits roll. Dropping a habit takes time, day after day, and the field has been at it, more or less, for long time already. What the field can say without the *camera* is still quite a lot: what is possible, how the possibilities hang together, what is being dug out right now, and what we ourselves add to all this by acting. Whether this is enough for those who came to see a film, I am not sure. Perhaps it is not, and I understand them; I would like to see the film too, and some days quite badly. It is, however, what futures studies can honestly offer, at least for now, and I still think it is worth to do.