Epilogue: Futures of Shakespeare

[The poet] not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers the laws according to which the present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

For what we have in the discovery of psycho-analysis is an encounter, an essential encounter – an appointment to which we are always called with a real that eludes us.

—Jacques Lacan

A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.

—Franz Kafka

As Walter Benjamin remarks, a degree of fervour often seized the early theorists of the cinema. By way of example he cites Abel Gance, who in 1927 proclaimed that ‘Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make movies […] All legends, all mythologies, and all myths […] await their celluloid resurrection’ (Benjamin 2008, 22). It is the case that Shakespeare’s futures intertwine in multiple ways with the cinema, and that the cinema has often positioned its luminous projections of the beautiful dead as paralleling Shakespeare’s exhumations. However, Gance’s use of the future tense (‘will make movies’) – at least with regard to Shakespeare – is surprising. As we have seen, at least 41 cinematic Hamlets, and in total perhaps 500 Shakespeare films, were produced in the period 1899–1927, prior to Gance’s prediction. Despite the large body of extant Shakespeare films, for Gance Shakespeare’s relation with the cinema was one of futurity. Benjamin explains that Gance was
‘inviting the reader, no doubt unawares, to witness a complete liquidation’ (2008, 22). With ‘liquidation’ Benjamin names the total erosion of all traditional and sacred structures that he perceived as the *modus operandi* of modernity. Technological reproduction strips artworks of the cultic value of their singular presence, which Benjamin terms their *aura*. In the way its technological reproducibility intervenes in cultural values and the potentiality for thought, film is the medium that will bring about complete social and aesthetic reorganization.

This book has explored ways in which the cinema reorganizes the desires of Shakespeare’s language. However, alongside the technological liquidation that Benjamin perceives, I have placed an emphasis on the two-way relation of Shakespeare and cinematic modernity. Shakespeare’s language foregrounds how aesthetic forms provide spaces of negotiation. In modernity, aesthetic forms are able both to reflect and to resist the liquidations of technology. I have located this resistance in the recurring fissure between natural presence and supplementary reinscription that Shakespeare’s language explores. In this sense, Shakespeare’s language prefigures the absence of *aura* that Benjamin perceives in technologically reproduced artworks. Take the deconsecration of the monarchy effected by the early modern theatre, which leads directly to the execution of Charles I. For Franco Moretti, the theatre exposes the theatricality of the monarchy. The cultic sanctity on which the Tudor and Jacobean legal doctrine of the King’s Two Bodies depends is called into question by mimesis. Shakespeare herein anticipates the erosive, liquidating thrust of modernity that Benjamin ascribes to cinema technology. This is perhaps one reason why the cinema has so frequently turned to Shakespeare in attempting to understand itself.

If Shakespeare’s language reflects a liquidation-to-come, how does it offer a space for negotiation with the erosive thrust of modernity? In a slightly later phase of modernity, Heidegger also considers the changes wrought by media technology. In an uncommon foray into the concrete practicalities of daily life, he comes increasingly to worry that ‘our dwelling is harassed by work, made insecure by the hunt for gain and success, bewitched by the entertainments and recreations industry’ (2001, 211). Heidegger contrasts the technologized danger of what he terms ‘inauthentic living’ with his notion of ‘dwelling’, which names an authentic manner of living whereby ‘man takes his measure from the unknown’ (2001, 220). For Heidegger, poetry is that which enables mankind to touch upon this unknown; this is why *poetically man dwells*. Following Heidegger part of the way, this book examines some of the ways in which Shakespeare’s language touches on its own symbolic limits.