
The illusion of genre

... there can be no dead-center genre film for genre is always characterized by a journey from the center to the edge, by tension with convention. The thrill of such journeys carries with it immense ideological weight because the system is shown to function not just within the known confines of its home terrain, but in the darkness outside its boundaries. In this way cultural forms declare themselves to be at one with the natural order. Doubtlessly it consoles us to realize that a single human being is directing this voyage, even if he is acting under orders and moves in a "direction" set out in advance (Andrew, 1984:117).

Andrew (1984a:114) argues that genres are "...specific equilibria balancing the desires of subjects and the machinery of the motion picture apparatus". Genre categories and the various associated generic conventions are thought to play a central role in organising and simplifying audience expectations with regards to the cinema. More than this, according to Andrew (1984a:110-111), genres may be seen as mechanisms which "construct" the correct viewer "...for their own consumption", thereby both building "desire" and representing "...the satisfaction of what they have triggered". The concept of genre may well be considered a "mental" mechanism "...which permits the transformation of sights and sounds into pictures and stories matching the desires those subjects have come to depend on" (Andrew, 1984:114). These conventions and categories signal which "forms of pleasure" a particular film is likely to stimulate and satisfy, thereby codifying our viewing and effectively installing in us "particular regimes of pleasure" (Bennet *et al.*, 1981:3). Genre may be understood as a type of shorthand denoting particular conventions which refer to "...the industrial prototype every director is given by the producer" (Andrew, 1984:116). In this sense, genre functions as a framework around which a filmmaker and a vast team of cast and crew members collaborate to create a product which will provide viewers (who have particular tastes) with particular sets of spectatorial pleasure. Christian Metz (in Neale, 1981:6) writes that the institution of cinema acts on the mental faculties of spectators allowing those who have grown "accustomed" to it to "internalise" its features historically and therefore become "...adapted...to the consumption of films".

Stephen Neale (1981:6) argues that, as a social institution, cinema is more than "...a set of economic practices or meaningful products...", but is also an ongoing and radically changing ("fluctuating") "...series of signifying practices". Andrew (1984:110) also notes that genres "...ensure the production of meaning by regulating the viewer's relation to the images and narratives constructed for him or her". Neale compares the

cinema to a machine which regulates "the orders of subjectivity", and thereby orders or "positions" meaning. Genres – as organising mechanisms of narrative - are seen as components of this "machine":

Approached in this way, genres are not to be seen as forms of textual codifications, but as systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject (Neale, 1981:6).

Genres may be viewed as modes within the more general narrative system of cinema, and these modes simultaneously "...exploit and contain the diversity of mainstream narrative" (Neale, 1981:7). Andrew refers to genre as "...a specific guise of ideology, the visible edge of a vast subterranean implacement [*sic*] determining the various institutions and practices of culture, clandestinely working on the unconscious of spectators" (Andrew, 1984:112). Generic conventions not only play an important role in generating and stabilising a particular narrative, but may also serve such ancillary functions as motivating action (Neale, 1981:9). Particular genre conventions are seldom inclusive or exclusive, but each genre has tended to incorporate its own "...system of narrative address..." (Neale, 1981:13) which typically determines the extent to which certain conventions occur within that genre. Neale (1981:13) also points out that genre, while signalling expectations regarding "...the pleasure of [the] process..." of predictable narrative development, also introduces the desire for "closure" which brings another form of pleasure (satisfaction, presumably). Genre is thus partially responsible for what Neale (1981:15) refers to as "...the economy of pleasure in the mainstream text...".

Generic conventions are also closely linked to the mainstream narrative cinema's ability to sustain credibility, while the viewer may never be able to overcome his or her problems with the obvious lack of verisimilitude. As Neale (1981:19) points out, some genres are simply "more fictional" than others. While certain genres (gangster, war) traditionally tend towards "realism", others (musicals, horror films, action-adventure films) tend towards the imaginative and fantastical. Verisimilitude functions *within* genre to sustain particular expectations and pleasures within a particular audience group. This is not to suggest that "...total belief in the accuracy or the reality..." (Neale, 1981:20) in even the most "realistic" genres is probable or possible. Genre conventions (and how they determine a viewer's demand for authenticity) carry a "regime of credibility" which minimises "...the 'danger' of the spectator being caught in the contradictions..." (Neale, 1981:20) that are inherent in all fiction: the division between the spectator's willingness to believe fully (suspension of disbelief) and the

obvious lack of "the real" (whatever that may mean). This "...clash between the demands of authenticity and those of narrative fiction..." (Neale, 1981:20) always suggests the immersion of the viewer within an alternative "reality" wherein certain "realistic" details may be compromised. In other words, certain details such as speech rhythms, popularity of performers, and dialogue, may significantly interfere with the attempt at "realism" which a particular film attempts to achieve. In this respect, classical notions of genre function have served to strike a balance between reasonable belief in a "reality" and the expectations of desire in narrative fiction.

In this sense, genre is an artificial construct used to order and maintain the interests and desires of the spectator "component" of the cinema system. The mainstream cinema industry (notably Hollywood) employs genre in order to enable it to transform "...sights and sounds into pictures and stories..." which match the desires of the consumer-spectator. Genre categories achieve definition only by virtue of an array of works which come to be identified as definitionally-interchangeable. Each film, however, contributes somehow to the prevailing spirit of the genre to which it belongs, while those genre clichés which effectively sustain the category serve merely to satisfy audience expectations. Certainly, each "genre" film is influenced to some extent by the level of inventiveness and ingenuity brought to the project by its creators. Much recent (materialist) theory views each new film within a particular genre "...as a formal permutation in the system of the genre itself" (Andrew, 1984:117). High-concept films generally attempt to combine a wide variety of genre elements appealing to diverse audience tastes, in order to lure the broadest spectrum of potential viewers. This reworking of older film categories may be understood as a reaction to the fragmentation of audiences within equally fragmented postmodern societies.

According to Andrew (1984:117), films differ from "most consumer items" in that they draw much of their "value" from their "perceived distinctiveness". He therefore argues that "[i]nvention [and] creativity...locate their apparent dynamism without which the genre would be nothing more than a corpus, or, what is the same thing, a corpse" (Andrew, 1984:117). Jim Collins (1993:242) identifies "eclectic irony" as "...an ironic hybridization of pure classical genres..." which is "...founded on dissonance, on eclectic juxtapositions of elements that very obviously don't belong together...". He sees this "new" genre as a reaction to "...the media-saturated landscape of contemporary American culture" (Collins, 1993:243). According to Collins, genre has traditionally

served to order and stabilise audience expectations and consequently, stabilise audiences. The development of the entertainment industry in recent years, however, has altered the previously held notion of a "mass audience" giving rise to a "cluster of 'target' audiences" (Collins, 1993:243). This social and cultural fragmentation has inevitably resulted in the eclectic reworking and integration of genre categories in an attempt to satisfy various audience groups simultaneously. Furthermore, Andrew (1984:116-117) argues that it is now possible "...to suggest that the values internal to any film result from the particular ratio it exhibits between convention and invention, between the requirements of genre and the ingenuity and world view of an auteur working with that genre". It is in this sense that genres are effectively flexible "psychic categories" which are used to appeal to existing audience desires while stimulating new audiences and new curiosities.

Collins (1993:253) notes that those who criticise contemporary popular films typically base their attacks on the departure from "traditional narrative" and "authentic representation", which is generally based on an assumption "...that the increasing sophistication of the media produces a sensory overload in which individual viewers are overstimulated into numbness, reachable only through blunt appeals to animal appetites". In this respect, Collins tackles some of the criticism against Tim Burton's postmodern fantasy film, *Batman*, which has variously been described as an "example of deficient narrative" and imbued with a glorification of visual spectacle over plot. Its detractors, Collins (1993:253) notes, describe the film as being concerned with "urban design" and the "cartooning" of Hollywood. Collins argues that the film presents an "old-fashioned" plot, but situates this action within the mediated cultural landscape of contemporary (postmodern) society. K.J. Donnelly (1998:154) supports this position, noting that the film (as well as its first sequel *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992)) "...assumes that the unprecedented access to images and narratives has supplied a knowledge of the Batman figure, Gothic imagery, and so forth, largely made available through contemporary audio-visual culture's principle of recycling".

According to Collins, the manipulation of the images within that landscape becomes the central focus of the conflict which arises between the two image-conscious characters, Batman (Michael Keaton) and the Joker (Jack Nicholson). Throughout the film, for example, the Joker is seen cutting up photographs for various purposes. In one scene, he defaces numerous paintings in a museum, and later, he literally "hijacks" the local television signal in order to transmit his insane advertising

parodies. Batman finds himself preoccupied with a vast bank of television monitors which not only bring him news from Gotham city, but also images from hidden cameras throughout his home. These surveillance camera images can also be "manipulated" (in the way that the Joker manipulates images) so that pre-recorded scenes can be recalled "...in order to summon a reality that escaped his purview the first time around" (Collins, 1993:254). Both Batman and the Joker are actively engaged in processes of image manipulation which describes our function as viewers who are actively engaged in reshuffling the flow of images from the cinema screen. The film is a self-referential text which describes its own interplay of narrative action through the actions of its characters.

The "...foregrounding of disparate intertexts and the all-pervasive hyperconsciousness concerning the history of both 'high art' and popular representation" (Collins, 1993:254) is significantly embodied in the contemporary storytelling technique of *Batman* (and, indeed, all three of its sequels). This type of cinema is concerned with the actions of characters as well as the "action" of the text itself within a broader framework of cultural production. Dargis (1995:41) argues, for example, that the second *Batman* sequel, *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995), is evidence of the extent to which camp has become embedded in mainstream representation, noting "...the outrageous attention to male genitalia both in costume and visual cues":

When Robin first emerges in his vermilion costume, Batman not only gives him a studied looking-over, he stops to fix his gaze on his comrade's bright red package (Dargis, 1995:41).

Dargis (1995:41) further argues that it is this commitment to subtext which ultimately prevents any "real story" from emerging. According to Mark Poster (in Collins, 1993:254), as the meaning of texts – or films – becomes increasingly dependent on the self-reflexive nature of its imagery and narrative so the referent becomes increasingly obscure until it is no longer involved in "...the delicate process of sustaining cultural memory". However, Collins (1993:255) argues that such referentiality can actually offer what he calls a "double referentiality" which is "...the basis of strategies of *rearticulation*..." in certain films that "...recognize the inseparability of these two levels of referentiality in regard to notions of gender and racial difference, the nature of sexual preference, and the determination of cultural value":

All such distinctions are patterns of signs, conventionalized in such a way that they are now taken to be "real" and therefore must be exposed as such through strategies of rearticulation that change that real by foregrounding mechanisms

of referentiality (Collins, 1993:255)

Thus, Dargis (1995:41) notes that the "one intriguing narrative glimmer" in the second *Batman* sequel, *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995), is the film's concern with the "divided lives" or "split personality" of "certain male power brokers". Just as Batman leads a double life - "...squiring beautiful women in public...while in private [swinging] with the boys..." - so Hollywood personalities must lead a "double life", one which is the product of the media's world of hyperreal creation (a fantasy) and one which is, potentially, private (a different sort of fantasy).

Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991) embodies this notion of "double referentiality" through the continual reworking and referencing of the Western genre, the action-getaway film, and the buddy movie. These "rearticulations" become a way of addressing the imposed "reality" of female subjugation, while simultaneously addressing and subverting traditionally held beliefs concerning gender-specific genres. Similarly, Jim Jarmusch subverts notions of the traditional Western in his black-and-white comedy-drama, *Dead Man* (1995):

Dead Man is a Western John Ford wouldn't recognise, yet one which thoroughly honours and reinvents some of the great poetry Ford forged in his own depictions of the American past. It's a damning revision of the great theme of manifest destiny – the presumptive fate of the white race to conquer and settle the North American continent (Levy, 2000:24).

Images which immediately conjure up the rugged, hostile landscape of most (black-and-white) Westerns are combined with bizarre characters and strange off-beat scenarios that undermine the viewer's familiarity with the "cowboy-and-Indian"-type myths established in numerous classical Hollywood westerns. The central protagonist is a Cleveland accountant named William Blake (Johnny Depp) who, as "...the whitest of white men...", undertakes a journey to the West while possessing "...none of the skills by which the wilderness or its feral inhabitants (native or immigrant) might be tamed" (Levy, 2000:24). In an early scene, as Blake walks down the dusty main road of Machine ("...a ghastly final outpost of colonial industry..." (Levy, 2000:24)) he and the viewer are shown both "classic" and unexpected visual elements which disrupt the viewer's image of a typical "classical" Western movie. Within this quasi-iconic "Hollywood" town, Blake and the viewer also witness ironic scenes such as a urinating horse, an old woman rocking a baby-pram, and through one window, a man receiving fellatio while holding a shotgun. Indeed, within this contemporary "Western" not all the men are cowboys with perfect aim (Blake misses twice when trying to shoot Gabriel Byrne's Charlie Dickinson), nor do all the men possess characteristically

masculine personalities (Iggy Pop, for example, plays a transvestite named Sally). *Dead Man* continuously draws attention to Hollywood systems of representation by foregrounding differences between itself and the mode of address typically associated with the genre to which it defers. Compelling the viewer to acknowledge these differences, the film engages a meaningful discourse around the significance of film as a tool of representation.¹²⁸

Generic verisimilitude is disrupted – not in order to do away with narrative – but to evoke multiple “meanings” and various narratives. As genres are altered (or complicated through condensation) into a system of meta-genres which comment on, parody, and confuse traditional forms, so the artificial “...conventions of verisimilitude...” (Neale, 1981:19) which apply to “classically established” genres take on a playful, ironic and self-reflexive character which is indicative of postmodern cinema. Like the cultural cutups in *Batman*, “genre categories” cease to work in the establishment of singular underlying “realities” within particular films. Instead, they clash and commingle in a way which reflects our own fragmented world. Thus, in a film like *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino corrupts/distorts the expectations of “realism” suggested by the gangster “genre” by including moments in which fantasy or supernatural events intrude (Jules’ “miraculous” survival after being shot at several times, for example). These generic disruptions disrupt narrative “logic” (and verisimilitude), recalling Tzvetan Todorov’s notion of “anti-verisimilitude” (in Neale, 1981:22) which describes the reliance of a genre on the verisimilitude of *its own genre*. Such anti-verisimilitude “...only functions in relation to the establishment of a truth, and that truth can only be established if the consistency of the fiction is maintained” (Neale, 1981:23, my emphasis). Films like *Pulp Fiction*, however, disrupt the totalising function of narrative through the conscious deconstruction of genre categories which work to establish the consistency of a filmic “reality” within particular narratives.

Illusions of (in)visibility

In so far as Dracula is almost another word for an ambiguous nostalgia, it remains the archetypal movie motif, for the very theme of the undead lies at the cinema’s power and cultural presence
(Elsaesser, 1998:198).

Jameson argues that postmodernity produces cultural artefacts which demonstrate

the simultaneous "imprisonment" of the past within the present, and the present within the past. This notion is articulated in Francis Ford Coppola's version of a classical "horror" story, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992). Elsaesser suggests that Coppola's film exemplifies the notion of "post-classical" cinema which delights in the joining of economic and textual excess as demonstrated in both the narrative and stylistic treatment of the film. In this sense, the film reflects an epistemological understanding of postmodernism as the coupling of cultural production with economic causality. For Elsaesser, the film fluidly conflates details from a range of periods, and he identifies the Dracula character (Gary Oldman) as a decadent *fin-de-siècle* figure who is located simultaneously in various historical periods. Firstly, his "historical" origins are depicted during the film's opening scenes set in 1497, during which the Christian warrior curses God (after his beloved Elzbieta commits suicide) and thereby condemns himself to an unnatural existence between life and death. Secondly, he is positioned as a horrifying figure of the late Nineteenth Century, situated within the time period dealt with during the bulk of the movie and during which the "vampire narrative" (which is a fairly familiar, frequently re-articulated story) unfolds. Thirdly, he occurs as a character within a movie created towards the end of the Twentieth century (i.e. Coppola's movie). Furthermore, this film represents an undead character within a medium that renders its subjects and characters "undead" in terms of their "eternal existence" on film.

Elsaesser (1998:199) refers to Coppola's elaborately intertextual *mise-en-scène* which cinematically recalls certain "...meandering motifs à la Aubrey Beardsley, or the monsters of Gustav Moreau"¹²⁹, in order to highlight the "...self-conscious citations of period detail..." which occur throughout the film, which is distinctively a product of the 1990s. Elsaesser (1998:199) also identifies a pre-Raphaelite pictorialism in the film which at once gives "...yet another layer of 'authentic' movie patina to Bram Stoker's literary *décadence*" and suggests something of Coppola's

...historically secured vantage point for something altogether more tentative: to put into play several distinct systems of representation, whose coexistence and frictions in the film help to define what might – in retrospect, so to speak – have been at stake aesthetically, as well as for media technology and audiences in the shift from classical to post-classical (Elsaesser, 1998:200).

Coppola is afforded a certain luxury in that his (postmodern) frame of reference allows not only critical and aesthetic commentary on the socio-historical period which he "brings to life" in the film, but also a century of developments (both historical and cinematic) which have contributed to his understanding of Bram Stoker's original

narrative. Such developments have allowed for various degrees of playfulness with regards to the narrative and aesthetic strategies which have impacted on Coppola's version of the tale.

It is from this perspective that Coppola also uses the existing narrative framework (of a familiar story) to find new points of contact with an audience which has different sets of familiarity to those suggested by a novel written one hundred years ago. Coppola simulates a Victorian world, a bygone era with imagined sensibilities, which is understood from a late-twentieth century perspective which comes with all the nostalgic yearnings and cultural cynicism of its own time. Yet, while Victorian London differs immeasurably from our own world, it is also shown in severe contrast to the mysterious world (Transylvania) in which Dracula lives. From the moment Harker (Keanu Reeves) enters Dracula's world, having travelled from that Victorian London, his experience of the erosion of "reality" is depicted *visually* in order to exaggerate for contemporary viewers the "un-reality" of Dracula's unholy/unnatural world. Similarly, and perhaps more indicative of Coppola's postmodern perspective, when Dracula arrives in London he is first seen walking about the streets as though being filmed by an early film camera. This allusion to early cinematography works to establish the seeming "reality" of this simulated London.¹³⁰ References to the viewer's experience of "reality" through the sense of sight occur throughout the film. As in Buñuel's eye-slitting scene in *Un Chien Andalou*, the viewer's sense of sight is constantly referenced, with regular close-ups of eyes and scenes in which characters appear or disappear, or change into alternate shapes and forms quite magically. Sometimes these visual transformations are achieved using precinematic techniques (such as a scene in which Dracula's shadow takes on a life of its own), while some scenes involve elaborate visual effects achieved by authentically cinematic means. The film (itself a reference to a refined form of "seeing") includes numerous images and motifs which refer to the human preoccupation with vision, representation, recording and distorting. Spectacles, sunglasses, binoculars, the cinematograph and microscopes, are all examples of vision-enhancing devices which are shown or referred to in the film. These devices, supposedly used to improve one's view of the world, are, however, shown to be equally capable of distorting and obscuring "reality" (just as Coppola does with his own film).

Visual illusions are compelling features of both the style and content of Coppola's approach in this film. Not only does he use cinematic "tricks" to enhance the

effectiveness of illusions which form part of the narrative, but many of the shots seem to “melt” into one another to create what Elsaesser (1998:202) refers to as an “aesthetic fluidity” which effectively blurs the distinction between different shots. The development of the film ceases to occur within comprehensible time and space, and instead “engulfs” the viewer in an audio-visual experience which transcends classical narrative evolution. While Coppola’s use of montage certainly creates an array of technically formidable illusions, both *Von Helsing* (Anthony Hopkins) and *Dracula* also resort to “trickery” in order to cast doubt on their own particular “realities”. *Von Helsing* resorts to a simple voice-throwing spectacle in order to demonstrate that there are certain phenomena which may potentially elude scientific explanation. *Dracula*, who is not bound by science and rationalism, introduces us to the subject of illusion in a far more profound and exotic manner. During his early attempts to woo Mina (Winona Ryder), he treats her to the pleasure of the once-accepted drug, absinthe, which he pronounces “absence”. While the name of the (now illicit) drink immediately alludes to the *sinfulness* of indulging in its mind-altering properties, *Dracula*’s pronunciation refers to both the absence of mind during intoxication, and to the absence of his long-lost Elzbieta whose memory (simulation, even) is suggested by her remarkable likeness to Mina who is both present and “absent” in this scene. The scene visually attempts to echo Mina’s drug-induced experience by simulating the confusion, shifting and interpolation of imagery within time and space. The viewer’s eyes are literally tricked and sight is blurred by various ocular distortions enabled by the filmmaking process. As the drug induces Mina’s “absence”, the visuals suggest her attempts to piece together the hazy, visually-disrupted sequence of events as *Dracula* attempts to restore Elzbieta’s absence through his seduction of Mina. Coppola imposes various possible layers of “meaning” through this visual distortion. The scene becomes an eclectic blend of references to the role and function of visual signification. Disrupting the viewer’s ability to establish a single, wholly coherent perspective, the film reiterates the illusory nature of the construction of “reality” through the act of *seeing*. Just as *Dracula* deceives himself into believing that Mina *is* his long-lost Elzbieta, so the film works to remind us that it is deceiving us. Ironically, the film achieves this *by* deceiving us, for the “meaning” of what we are *seeing* is simply a spectacular illusion.

The self-conscious mirror

Conventional cinema is expanding and mutating. Arcades are going virtual, turning into Vrcades.

Films, games, rollercoaster rides, simulation technology and theme park architecture are being spliced together to create some new hybrid entertainment. It seems we, the consumers, want more.

We don't want films to move us any more; we want to be shaken up. We want to feel as if we're racing ahead on a fast-forward trip into the future, even though we're actually stuck in the same old seats (McClellan, 1994:50).

I'm not talking just about rides, you know. Everybody has rides. No, we have made living biological attractions, so astounding that they'll capture the imagination of the entire planet (Hammond in Jurassic Park, 1993).

As Peter Krämer (1998:302-304) points out in his socio-cultural study of the "family-adventure film", *Jurassic Park* serves as a mirror which (ironically) reflects the condition of its own spectatorship. While the genre he identifies is largely concerned with familial concerns echoing those of society at large, *Jurassic Park* is particularly self-reflexive in that it presents a narrative in which the theme park thrill-ride experience is addressed (just as *Gladiator* addresses violent spectacle as mass entertainment). Hammond (Richard Attenborough) describes the dinosaur-populated theme-park which he has developed in terms which significantly reflect the ways in which the film itself was sold to the world. It is certainly no coincidence that the film bears the same title as the theme-park within the movie, and there can be no doubt that Spielberg's film has been designed to have the same effect on viewers that the "real" park had been intended have. As Hammond notes of his expectations for *his* park: "Our attractions will drive kids out of their minds. And not just kids – everyone!" Indeed, just as Hammond's grandchildren are accompanied by adults on their ill-fated journey through *Jurassic Park*, so the film itself has been targeted at a range of age groups, simultaneously appealing to children and adults:

...the film clearly spells out what kind of entertainment it is meant to be...an exciting, almost life-like adventure, which is affordable for everyone and appeals first and foremost to children but is also attractive for teenagers and adults (Krämer, 1998:304).

In an information- and image-centred world "...the movie provides a primary narrative baseline which endows isolated movie icons with meaning and emotional resonance, and provides a backdrop against which to toy with these associations in other media contexts" (Smith, 1998:14). Bukatman (1998:266) notes that "[f]ilm has become something to inhabit rather than watch..." in the sense that screen spectacles now frequently extend beyond the film itself. While this has been the case since film-goers

first began to flock to the first examples of the "miracle of moving pictures", today's extra-cinematic experience takes place within the context of a "global multimedia culture". The "Batman character", for example, has entered and re-entered Western cultural consciousness in a variety of contexts; as a comic book super-hero, as the central figure in a number of early B-movies, as a "fully-realised" protagonist in four contemporary blockbusters, and as an enigmatic hero in a highly stylised graphically animated Nineties' television cartoon series.

Fantasies of the spectacular kind now penetrate the viewer's world in ways which significantly contribute to the meaning of our actual lives. In effect, "reality" is linked to the screen spectacle and we are experiencing what Bukatman (1998:267) calls "the end of offscreen space". Just as Roman citizens enjoyed a different routine when festivals of spectacular entertainment were declared, so "[t]he rise of effects-centered films, the decline of narrative, the return of the cinema of attractions, the sequels and simulations and spectaculars..." have enabled "[p]hysical and spectacular spaces [to] commingle" (Bukatman, 1998:267). The "film as theme-park ride" marks not the disappearance of "meaning" in contemporary cinema, but rather serves to highlight viewing as an experiential act. As screen spectacle strives to envelop and overwhelm the viewer through attempts at greater and more sophisticated attempts at "realism", so its "mutations" into various forms of simulation and "virtual reality" are not only inevitable, but also meaningful. Spectacle strives to give us an enhanced sense of being immersed in the action and excitement of effects-generated fantasies, and through this overwhelming concern with providing the excitement that we seek through the act of *showing*, these compelling visuals serve to articulate the "meaning" of cinema.

Elsaesser, however, argues that many contemporary Hollywood films (such as *Bram Stoker's Dracula*) actually send out "mixed signals" which are indicative of the way in which many post-classical films conduct "...a kind of deconstruction of the linear narrative/monocular perspective system of representation which film studies has identified with the classical" (Elsaesser, 1998:200). This "classical" film structure is typically "[d]ominated by a 'character-centred causality'..." and is "...faithful to broadly Aristotelian principles (unity of space, time and action)..." as well as being "...organized according to a clear cause and effect chain which relentlessly motivates the action..." (Elsaesser, 1998:200). Characters within classical film narratives are said to display a high degree of consistency in the sense that the protagonists rarely

act "out of character" unless permitted by a particular genre, while their physical appearance remains in tact and they do not change shape other than in magical, supernatural or fantastical tales. Elsaesser (1998:195) observes that it is typical of the postmodern New Hollywood to turn to the genres which were regarded as B-movies during the 1950s. Science-fiction films, the "creature-feature" or monster movie, as well as other variant strains of the horror movie, have been revived and popularised during the 1980s and 1990s. Accordingly, the B-picture conventions which have entered mainstream filmmaking have introduced the sort of "ruptures in realism" which have disrupted the notion of classical narrative described above:

...the sources and techniques that split open the New Hollywood narratives came mostly from the American cinema itself, its minor genres and debased modes. The horror film especially permitted deviations and transgressions of the representational norm. In contrast to maintaining a coherent diegetic world and the rule of narrative causality, horror films almost by definition disrupt the cause and effect patterns of such classical devices as shot/countershot, continuity and reverse field editing in order to create a sense of mystery, of the unexpected, of surprise, incongruity and horror, misleading the viewer by withholding information or keeping the causal agent, the monster offscreen as long as possible (Elsaesser, 1998:195).

It may be noted, therefore, that post-classical (New Hollywood) cinema does not so much oppose classical Hollywood as re-centre it, "...precisely by making the marginal genres the dominant ones, pulling an unusual time structure, a novel sound practice or an expressive visual style into focus and dead centre, without thereby neutralizing their unsettling aberrance" (Elsaesser, 198:201). Post-classical Hollywood frequently relies on narrative forms which are driven by style, by visual inventiveness, by inconsistencies, by surprise, shock and transgression, and these features are clearly identifiable in the B-movies and exploitation genres which once existed at the fringes of Hollywood cinema.

According to Elsaesser (1998:200), one of the important developments heralded by post-classical cinema in contrast with classical cinema is related to the "involved" narrative progressions evidenced in films with complex or complicated temporal schemes and plot construction. These films may include those which deal with actual time-travel, such as the *Back to the Future* trilogy (Robert Zemeckis, 1985, 1989, 1990), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1986) and *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995), as well as films which restructure temporal "reality" (*Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Go*, for example) or weave together multiple strands of narrative in order to emphasise the fragmentation of plot (*Pulp Fiction*, *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, 1993), for example). In Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), the

plot unfolds backwards, forcing the viewer not only to investigate narrative "clues", but also to interrogate the construction of memory. Such films disrupt the experience of narrative chronology in ways which draw attention to the arbitrary nature of temporal fixity. While time recedes as the causal factor in the viewer's experience of narrative, so the fragmented nature of the film's underlying "reality" is also questioned. Just as *Batman* finds both Batman and The Joker engaged in acts of image fragmentation, so filmmakers are able to fragment time by rearranging images. Such fragmentation does not necessarily erode "narrative", however, but rather engages the viewer in the process of "narrative construction".

Elsaesser (1998:200) argues that "[t]he combined impact of...changes in chronological time schemes and character identity can be observed in the fate of another feature of the classical cinema, the double plot structure, where an adventure plot and a romance plot are at once distinct from and intertwined with each other". While the adventure plot is typically concerned with the attainment of some sort of goal through a "quest" or "investigation", the romantic plot is focussed on the "...formation of the heterosexual couple..." which usually also provides "...the terms of closure" (Elsaesser, 1998:201). In post-classical terms, however, the "...plot is able to take greater liberties and 'get away with it'" (Elsaesser, 1998:201), frequently rendering endings "open", "ambiguous" or "positively menacing". Such open-ended narratives may leave room for a sequel or may serve to deconstruct the concept of closure. More than this, however, the "open" ending heightens the distanced involvement of the viewer. Rather than being drawn into and engulfed by a narrative which offers closure, the ambiguity or menace destabilises the viewer's position and encourages continued contemplation of the seemingly ongoing narrative.

In many ways, the concept of classical narrative has receded and has been replaced by sophisticated visual spectacles, intricately constructed spatio-temporal contexts, oblique narrative trajectories and what might be considered the "foregrounding of the device" through "gratuitous 'showing off'" and the excesses and "'bad taste' of B-movies" (Elsaesser, 1998:203). The result, according to Elsaesser (1998:204), is "...an altogether different viewing experience and viewing habit..." which is

...the viewing experience of the screen as a monitor, as a flat surface, upon which, in a visual-video overlay, any number of elements can be called up simultaneously: graphics, images, script, text, sound, voice, in other words, a whole array of media signals (Elsaesser, 1998:204).

The post-classical film is frequently concerned with articulating precisely those

strategies which are used to construct narrative and stimulate the viewing experience. Narrative is therefore rendered invisible giving rise to an effect which constitutes what Elsaesser (1998:204) refers to as a moment of "pseudo-primitivism" which has in fact been "...crafted in order to engage narrative on its own terrain by deconstructing its logic of agency, motivation, temporality and the causal chain". Elsaesser uses the term "engulfment" to refer to "...an attenuated kind of causality..." which implicates and relates the viewer to the filmic images in new and startling ways because the film is

...no longer capable of being kept at the sort of distance that engagement via the eye and mind assures. Instead of the bounded image, the mode of engulfment works with the ambient image, in which it is sound that now 'locates', 'cues' and even 'narrates' the image, producing a more corporeal set of perceptions; instead of voyeurism and fetishistic fixation, there is spatial disorientation; instead of the logic of the 'scene', it is semantic clusters, mental maps, spatial metaphors that organize comprehension and narrative transformation (Elsaesser, 1998:204).

In terms of Elsaesser's concept of "engulfment", it would appear that "meaning" in the post-classical or postmodern film derives from the eclectic play of images, scenic constructions, conceptual intricacies, visual and aural effects, and disruptions of logical time and space. The viewer receives images which may be accorded meaning and significance according to his or her particular frame of reference. Elsaesser (1998:205) suggests that the postmodern film "proposes various paradigms" and it therefore leaves it "...up to the viewer whether to be engaged as (already) a post-classical viewer within the classical mode, or (still) as the classical viewer within the post-classical mode". Furthermore, such films are not only open to multiple readings, but also position themselves within the New Hollywood by being "...able to combine the viewing experience of the big screen and the small screen, the monitor and the video-arcade..." (Elsaesser, 1998:205-206).

In a world that has become increasingly "artificial" and devoid of "meaning", it is surely natural that people should seek a means of escaping actuality, if only through the *hyperartificial* fantasies (thrill-ride adventures, erotic romances, and even fear-inducing thrillers) which cinema presents:

...by foregrounding the cinematic spectacle of special-effects and precisely choreographed action, and by constantly referring to their own status as cinematic entertainment for a captive audience, these films offer temporary relief from the real-life problems which their stories focus on but can never solve (Krämer, 1998:304).

As filmmakers discover more effective ways of indulging such fantasies, it appears

reasonable (and profitable) that such technologies should be embraced and exploited. And, if the "fantasy" can be extended beyond the frames of the screen, into toy and memorabilia shops, it seems that imaginations have indeed been "captured":

Special effects and the hypercinematic experiences of Las Vegas and other theme parks are not a substitute for either rationalism or that liberation which situationists called "the revolution of everyday life." These are not environments where such needs are fulfilled. They alone will not "free" us from rationalist structures of control. But is it not so important for mass culture to show us how to attain liberation, release, and the rest of it. It is enough - actually, it is more than we might expect and more than many scholars will admit - for them to recall for us the possibilities of irrationality and its continued presence in a supposedly rational world (Bukatman, 1998:268).

Many may argue that narrative has lost out in the battle against spectacle and technology, but - from an alternate perspective - narrative includes those purely cinematic elements which embrace the capacity of the medium to convey "meaning" through an array of images. Increasingly, the dreamlike and the "realistic" are becoming indistinguishable, just as Baudrillard argues that "virtual reality" is becoming more "real" while "reality" is becoming more "unreal". However, it is within the capacity of the cinema to transform the process of simulation into a humanising, life-affirming act. David Mingay suggests that even purely visceral films are "meaningful":

Every action movie and Disneyland ride is an attempt to recapture the visceral thrill of simulating sensory experience and exposure to danger and menace. Why? Because the effect is cathartic. To experience a performance of confrontation with and escape from danger is a meaningful fantasy (Mingay, 1997:209).

Hollywood is in the business of providing audiences with visual spectacle. Spectacle allows the viewer to become involved in a wide range of pleasures, satisfying emotional and visceral desires, while remaining fundamentally detached from the experience which surpasses any equivalent in the "real" world. Just as the Roman "mob" were kept entertained through spectacles of violence and brutality which remained distanced from their own everyday "reality" through the very act of spectatorship, so contemporary cinema serves to indulge our desire to take views of the artificial construction that we term "reality".

The act of *showing* which is foregrounded in the cinema, constitutes an appeal to the spectator to *see*, and it is through *seeing* that the spectator is compelled to reflect upon his or her own humanity. It may therefore be argued, that even those films which concern themselves solely with the presentation of viscerally-appealing

spectacles are, in fact, providing a starting point for unlimited exploration of our own place in the world. Pfeil (1998:151) notes, for example, that out of the "distances", "disappearances" and "convergences" which are evident in the high-concept movies which dominate the world's cinema screens, "...the new subjects of domestic post-Fordism construct and receive various narrative versions of their own uneasy dreams". Even as postmodern societies spiral towards the vapid generalisation of human culture, individuals are afforded the responsibility of recognising their own place within the fantasies and dreams of screen entertainment. In the chapter which follows, it is the cinema's natural predilection for *showing* which is under discussion. A great deal of contemporary cinema now indulges in various forms of visual and narrative "transgression", whereby traditional cultural borders are ignored and images which would once not have been deemed tolerable are now incorporated into multi-million dollar works of "art". The graphic portrayal of violence, sex and other "questionable" acts is the source of endless debate around the decay of human morality and social purity. Similarly, cinema and the media in general are blamed for the "dumbing down" of culture which is coupled with the proliferation of popular "lowbrow" texts and images which are thought to effectively bankrupt social development through the spread of mindless, corrosive entertainment. Chapter five explores these notions of cinematic "taboo-breaking" using a number of specific films to investigate the arguments for and against our exposure to ever-more explicit images of once-unimaginable "realities".

Five

The aesthetics of cool: framing transgression

Certainly it is hard to find clear cultural boundary markers today. The rise of consumerism and of TV has accelerated the 'implosion' of reality, obscuring previously cherished distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow, between the culture of the elite and the culture of the masses... (David Lyon in Olivier, 1996:179).

It should be cause for concern that, in the values and mores of society, we have created a quagmire from which monsters are bound to emerge...far too much of what passes for popular entertainment pollutes our society and creates a new tolerance in which what was thought to be beyond the pale becomes acceptable (Andrew Neil in Murdock, 1998:67).

Cinema, like many of the popular entertainment forms which have preceded it, has been blamed for the apparent depletion of morality in society. In recent years, the debate around media violence, for example, has escalated to become one of the more topical social discourses, usually dividing commentators into two opposing camps: those blaming society's ills on the decline in moral values evident in the visual media, and those arguing that the media merely reflect society. According to Graham Murdock (1998:67-68) the image of the visual media having a "direct effect" upon those caught in the grasp of its supposedly hallucinatory power is drawn "...from a deep reservoir of social fear and dogma which first formed in the mid-nineteenth century as commentators began to link the social costs of modernity with the proliferation of new forms of popular entertainment". These commentators typically perceive "modernity" in relation to an idealised and misconceived past. Murdock (1998:69) further notes that the debate surrounding the negative effects of media has always focussed on the idea that what young people watch is directly linked to their behaviour in later life. Commentators (many of them journalists) during the mid-nineteenth century emphasised the direct connection between spectatorship and moral corruption. The arguments against media representations of violence, sex and other "morally corrosive acts" continue to be fuelled by the notion that viewers will be "...rapidly corrupted and demoralised..." (in Murdock, 1998:69). It should be realised, of course, that such fears which established themselves as accepted assumptions about human nature during the mid-1800s are linked to social fears regarding the decline of morality and social restraint, and notably, the "...loosening grip of religious [Christian] faith..." (Murdock, 1998:70). The ongoing campaign to "purify" popular entertainment forms can therefore be seen as an attempt to re-inject Christian values and morality into society.

While I have no interest here in engaging in a discussion around the moral implications of films which offer realisations of "depravity" and "ugliness", it is evident that contemporary attempts at pushing the boundaries of transgressive culture are relevant to the discussion of the art of cool. Just as people are inexplicably seduced by simple spectacles so they are inexplicably seduced by spectacles of sex, violence, and various other "taboos". Such spectacles are, in effect, an extension of the "reality" which we construct in terms of our visual experience of being in the world. The ability to see affords us a visual curiosity which is essentially concerned with desire- and wish-fulfilment. Part of the magic of cinema, lies in its endeavour to simultaneously stimulate and satisfy "visual curiosity", which amounts to a potentially provocative attempt to reflect the spectator's own act of *looking*. Norman Denzin observes that postmodern films "...bring the unrepresentable...to the viewer and challenge the boundaries that ordinarily separate private and public life" (Sarup, 1993:176-177). In a sense, it is the cinematic drive to satisfy the viewer's desire to see the unseeable (and, perhaps, to understand the unknowable) which contributes to an understanding of postmodern cinema as a manifestation of humanity.

In *American Beauty*, the first time the viewer sees central character, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey), he is masturbating in the shower. In voice-over, Lester tells the viewer that this will be the highlight of his day. Later, Lester fantasises about his teenaged daughter's "best friend", while his new neighbour turns out to be a closet-homosexual who encourages his son to adopt a bigoted attitude towards homosexuality. *American Beauty* has been praised by critics and analysts around the world for its powerful message, raising both high-praise and discussions of its deeper "significance" and "meaning":

It's a wonderfully resourceful and sombre comedy and, like the greatest examples of the form, is as much about the perennial themes of self-delusion, conceit and madness as it is about the ephemeral idiocies of the day (Jackson, 2000a:40).

Many critics argue that the treatment and validation of "distasteful" themes in popular forms such as cinema amounts to little more than a form of cultural onanism which provides precisely what Lester Burnham suggests: a quick, cheap thrill. While *American Beauty* embodies a relatively "high-brow" aesthetic which provides what most critics would describe as a sophisticated narrative context for its profane (socially-transgressive) images and themes, many contemporary films appear to be concerned with the foregrounding of socially-aberrant elements. *American Beauty* is certainly an excellent example of a film which blurs the once-clear distinction between

"low-brow" and "high-brow" values, but its excesses are relatively limited in comparison with much of the aesthetic experimentation around "debased humour", sexual explicitness, and violent imagery in a growing number of mainstream and arthouse movies. Furthermore, while cultural boundaries are disappearing, the levels of acceptability and tolerance within each of these areas is also constantly shifting, creating space for further experimentation. It is in this context that Glenn Kenny makes the following observation of the predominant reaction to *American Beauty*:

Masturbation. Voyeurism. Pedophilia. Repressed homosexuality. Teen promiscuity. A movie that deals frankly and, in some instance, explicitly with those themes would generally be regarded as pretty strong, or torrid, or even scandalous material. Not so, apparently, at the turn of the century (Kenny, 2000:60).

Just as new markers or boundaries are established and new precedents are found by which we presume to have determined the "rational" limits of acceptability, so these (artificially established) barriers are challenged, stripped away, questioned, eroded and dissolved. With each shift, the boundary between private space and the public sphere is also shifted. After all, the images and ideas which would once have been entirely unacceptable in the cinema, must necessarily begin with a human idea.

The politics of taste

Nobody likes movies like Teenagers from Outer Space [Tom Graeff, 1959] or Wrestling Women vs. the Aztec Mummy [Las Luchadoras contra la momia, René Cardona, 1964] save any loon sane enough to realize that the whole concept of Good Taste is concocted to keep people from having a good time, from revelling in a crassness that passeth all understanding....But fuck those people who'd rather be watching The Best Years of Our Lives [William Wyler, 1946] or David and Lisa [Frank Perry, 1962]. We got our own good tastes... (Bangs in Sconce, 1995:371).

Jameson and Baudrillard see the postmodern as "...the blurring of hitherto sacrosanct boundaries and polarities, the elimination of any position from which to speak, the reduction of all to one level, often seen as that of the *simulacra*" (Kaplan, 1990:142). They believe, however, that it is "American capitalism" and its "...desperate search for ever new markets and its uncanny ability to co-opt subversive discourses..." which "...has incorporated many that were oppositional in the sixties, into dominant ones, blurring distinctions" (Kaplan, 1990:142). Lester Bangs' argument that "Good Taste" is itself a matter of taste, may be interpreted as ironic extension of Jameson and Baudrillard's observations of the postmodern erosion of the divide between high art and popular culture. In a sense, Jameson and Baudrillard identify the dangers evident

in the commercial exploitation of "lowbrow" values, while Bangs is motivated by the privileging of pleasure which may be associated with entertainment that is unrestricted in terms of "taste" and "social acceptability".

Elitist cinematic taste has traditionally been "...asserted negatively, by the refusal of *other* tastes" (Pierre Bourdieu in Sconce, 1995:371, my emphasis). Postmodernism, however, asserts itself as the erasure of the very notion of *otherness* (even if this erasure is a result of the capitalist logic of unlimited gain). One of the primary criticisms which has often been lodged against postmodern art is that it lacks the edge of critique which is traditionally seen as a co-factor of artistic expression. An obvious position from which postmodernists might tackle this criticism, would be to reject or deny this function of art and maintain a position of "art-for-art's-sake". Another, more "valuable", position would be to emphasise that popular culture is capable of offering critique in much the same way as any form of "high art". Indeed, it may be argued that popular culture is more capable of presenting its forms of critique to a wider audience; popular culture is, after all, "*mass*" culture. Critics of the postmodern aesthetic suggest that the erosion of the boundary between high art and low art leads to, and even promotes, both hedonism and anarchy. Anarchy is believed to be promoted through the erasure of art's critical function. Modernist art, which seeks to question and explore, is replaced in postmodernism by surface thrills, by spectacle and by wilful superficiality. Where there is no critique - or, indeed, no depth which can be penetrated - unlimited license (and anarchy) is presumed to result. It is in this sense that Nick Currie suggests that postmodern cinema offers "more choice" in favour of "less respect". This position is also suggested by Irving Kristol (in Medved, 1992:26) who defines postmodern art as "...a politically charged art that is utterly contemptuous of the notion of educating the tastes and refining the aesthetic sensibilities of the citizenry". Such developments are supposedly "evidenced" not only in cinema, but in extensively-publicised performance art exhibitions such as John Fleck's early-1990s act which included a sequence in which he urinated on a picture of Christ. Equally infamous, is the "estimable and outspoken" Annie Sprinkle, whose act included masturbating with a variety of sex toys, on stage, before inviting audience members to "...explore her private parts with a flashlight" (Medved, 1992:27).

While mainstream Hollywood movies generally do not explore the levels of explicit transgression enacted by such contemporary artists, some of the "arthouse" or "niche market" films discussed in this chapter dare to investigate themes which are generally

considered inaccessible to "mass audiences". Indeed, works by David Cronenberg and Gregg Araki are unlikely to ever be considered "mainstream" or "popular" by conventional standards, and it is safe to assume that their films have never been intended to become box-office blockbusters. Michael Medved argues that such innovators of cinema are intent on producing works which emphasise the negative and have a "bias for the bizarre":

The most significant shapers of the entertainment industry, in their quest for artistic legitimacy, have adopted a view of the world that is surprisingly dark, even desperate, highlighting elements of chaos, cruelty, and random violence while emphasizing every possibly failing of America and its institutions (Medved, 1992:29).

These "significant shapers of the entertainment industry" are also responsible for making films which acknowledge various aspects of the "real" world which have frequently been ignored or marginalized worlds by the institutions of popular culture. One example is the acclaimed *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Andersen, 1997) which explores the world of hardcore pornography from the point-of-view of a rags-to-riches-to-rags male "porn star" named Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg). While never graphically depicting the explicit sexual "performances" of its subject matter, the film takes the viewer into a world where "alternative" or "transgressive" lifestyles (and cinematic practices) are brought into focus.¹³¹

Mainstream contemporary cinema has been increasingly concerned with foregrounding and normalising taboo subcultures and transgressive or anti-social groups which are normally treated with derision by those seeking to preserve the "values and mores of society". The "monsters" which now emerged from the "quagmire" include likeable gangster protagonists (in *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Snatch* (Guy Ritchie, 2000) and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, for example), young hedonists caught up in a lifestyle of drug-taking, thrill-seeking and basis desire fulfilment. *Go* and *Human Traffic* (Justin Kerrigan, 1999), for example, both deal explicitly with so-called underground cultures of drug-use, rave parties and dance clubs, while *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) focuses on a heroin addict who shares his experiences with the viewer through intimate and detailed voice-over narration. Terry Gilliam's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) presents the delightfully crazy antics of its non-stop drug-taking protagonist (Johnny Depp) as an hallucinogenic amalgam of garish effects, comical fantasy set pieces and subversive social commentary. Effectively, the film takes the viewer on much the same narcotics-induced "trip" as that being experienced by Depp's character who also narrates the

details of his bizarre situation.

An increasing number of films also present the viewer with detailed portraits and intimate character studies of wholly disagreeable, offensive, frightening and dangerous characters. *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), for example, takes the viewer into the home (lair) of a serial killer, while an imprisoned psychopathic cannibalistic murderer (Hannibal Lector played by Anthony Hopkins) assumes a position as one of the protagonists. In Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000), which is adapted from Bret Easton Ellis' disturbing novel, the viewer is taken on a cinematic journey through the murder- and sex-obsessed mind of the psychopathic central character, Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale). The viewer is encouraged to laugh at the images of bloody killing, sexual perversion and obsessive self-denial which are part of Bateman's lifestyle of choice. Equally, however, the viewer is encouraged to identify Bateman's twisted world as one which exists entirely inside his head. Like the sick fantasy which has invaded his consciousness, *American Psycho* (like countless other movies which foreground the profane) is itself nothing more than an echo or reflection - a journey to the surface of what society considers to be in "bad taste".

According to Lyotard (1998:146), taste is related to the judgments which are made about the divide "...between the capacity to conceive and capacity to present an object corresponding to the concept...". Such judgements are "reflective" and must therefore be seen in relation to individual points-of-view, personal experience and socio-cultural perspective. Lyotard's understanding of "taste" relates the concept to the experience of pleasure (1998:146), which implies at least some degree of subjectivity. Traditional understandings of the "low-brow" / "high-brow" dichotomy therefore suggest something of the way in which cultures construct taste as a component of social "reality". Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues that "taste" is ultimately responsible for classification. Such classification is undoubtedly a social construction based on dominant beliefs, ideas or experiences of "reality". The postmodern debate around such issues highlights that taste is a socially-constructed by-product of factors such as race, class, economics and education which produce and ultimately emphasise "otherness". It is in this sense that postmodern culture is strongly identified with the collapse of the boundary between high-brow and low-brow culture. The diffusion, fusion, absorption, integration and re-deployment of elements which are traditionally considered to represent different tastes has led to the widespread

blurring of cultural boundaries, thereby liberating and fragmenting various spheres of artistic production and creativity.

According to Bourdieu, the emergence of cultural dominants is related to the institutionalisation of art, aesthetic practice and cultural fields. "Purity" of form and the "cultured gaze" are socio-cultural constructions which effectively eradicate all prior functions of art: thus the work of art which is displayed in a museum becomes "pure" form which is disconnected from actual life. Such a work becomes solely the object of the spectator's gaze:

Though originally subordinated to quite different or even incompatible functions (crucifix and fetish, Pieta and still life), these juxtaposed works tacitly demand attention to form rather than function, technique rather than theme (Bourdieu, 1984:30).

The institution therefore serves to distinguish between the relative significance of an object of social objectification. A soup commercial displayed in a high-brow art gallery serves a different function to the same commercial placed in a popular (or low-brow) magazine. The art gallery advertisement exemplifies "the aesthetic", while the magazine advertisement exemplifies "commerce". Bourdieu (1984:6) notes that such distinctions effectively produce "...a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation". Furthermore, such wholly artificial distinctions between socially-differentiated practices ensure that "...art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu, 1984:7) the operation of which Bourdieu calls the "ideology of art". Postmodernism struggles against this socially predetermined notion that only a privileged minority are able to appreciate the "genuinely" tasteful, since postmodern practices do not recognise the artificial distinctions between various categories of cultural and artistic practice. Bourdieu (1984:32) writes that "...it is not easy to describe the 'pure' gaze without also describing the naive gaze which it defines itself against". While the so-called "naïve gaze" is considered to be the gaze of "the popular aesthetic", the "cool" gaze may be considered to be the gaze of the popular which may be simultaneously naïve and informed, involved and detached. Kristol (in Medved, 1992:26) sees postmodern art as "deliberately" trying "...to outrage those tastes and to trash the very idea of an 'aesthetic sensibility'". The "cool" gaze suggests willing, but "knowing", participation in the transgressions of "outrageousness" and "trash" which are in evidence in a wide range of contemporary films.

Warhol and the art of cool

Cool is precisely the hijacking of low and marginal culture into the mainstream – borrowing from the black ghettos, from the drug world of the streets, from gay clubs, from S&M dress (O’Pray, 1999:22).¹³²

Art critic Barbara Rose describes Andy Warhol as “the inventor of the lifestyle of the 60s”, and he accordingly encapsulated “...all its idealism, experimentalism, arrogance (even, at times, its silliness) and most of what was understood as *cool*” (in O’Pray, 1999:22). Rose’s interpretation of Warhol as “cool” relates significantly to McLuhan’s use of the word “cool” to describe his simultaneous “involvement” in, and “detachment” from, the world of media. Warhol’s camera observed and recorded, but failed to capture “meaning”. His films fail to communicate any more information than the spectator or viewer is capable of generating him- or herself. Warhol’s cinematic experimentation with certain obscure elements of marginal culture constitute a cool detachment from a particular “reality”, while being involved at the level of observation. His aim was not to pass judgement or comment on that which he captured on film, but rather to provide images whose meaning is generated in terms of the viewer’s individual response. Warhol’s films were, in many ways, forms of “pure” cinema.

According to Michael O’Pray, Andy Warhol’s films were significant in what they gave to both Hollywood and avant-garde cinema. While Hollywood absorbed Warhol’s embrace of “gritty street-life realism”, the explicit depiction of various forms of sexuality and “on-the-edge performances”, the avant-garde took advantage of his long takes and use of a “fixed camera aesthetic”. His simple shooting style combined with a type of “performance” which made Warhol “...in an odd way, the ultimate Bazinian in an Eisensteinian montage-based film culture” (O’Pray, 1999:22). Film-making, Warhol confessed, was easy; simply aim the camera at the subject, turn it on, and wait for the film reel to run out. His apparently improvisational films capturing “interviews” with various people, as well as the day-to-day events which played themselves out in his Factory, were “[n]ever banal in the everyday sense of realism...”, however, and instead his films can be interpreted as “...fantasy projections depicting a world both glamorous and dangerous” (O’Pray, 1999:22). Warhol was adept at *showing* without offering commentary or criticism. He showed a version of “reality” which was so obviously already-performance, and therefore also already-

artificial. The *cool* detachment with which he captured images of what might be considered perverse, obscene and decidedly sexual is now almost certainly "...a cornerstone of our visual culture" (O'Pray, 1999:22). Warhol's films present basic elements of a "cinema of cool" which is characterised by his overwhelming interest in the surface of things. And while his interest lay in capturing or arresting life, the incidents which he filmed play out as cinema of pure spectacle, suggested by the following description of his 1964 film, *Couch*:

It showed various people, some famous, some not, doing this or that: hanging out, sleeping, hoovering, eating bananas, sucking cocks, fucking each other, cleaning a motorbike and so on. Silent, slowed down and shot in high-contrast black-and-white chiaroscuro, the work at times had a classic sculptural look – especially the sex scenes. Such narcissism and passivity were utterly new, and created a cinema of fantasies acted out, uncluttered by dialogue, storylines, stars, even – in its dreamlike movement – time itself (O'Pray, 1999:21).

Warhol, simply by capturing the everyday on film, elevated the banal to the level of spectacle. Such effortless "spectacularisation" essentially demonstrates the depthless nature of his work suggested by Shaviro's (1994:205) understanding that, "[w]hat is scary and uncanny about Warhol's art and films is that *it has no latent content at all.*" Warhol's films were only concerned with the desire to capture the surface of a "reality" which was being played out (performed) in front of his camera. These "...surfaces are impenetrable precisely because there is nothing beneath them, no depth into which one could penetrate" (Shaviro, 1994:205). It is in this sense that Warhol's films come to represent a cool (simultaneously detached and involved) acceptance of the artificial nature of the medium as well as an embrace of the hyperreal world that is made up of "meaningless" images.

The viewer, according to Shaviro (1994:238) is lured by Warhol's films in a "...ridiculous, drugged-out, non-judgmental, noncritical..." way, such that "...the elucidations of the intellectual critic are even more ridiculous". Modernist attempts to penetrate the surface of his films and generate meaning are considered ludicrous in that they (by virtue of their impenetrability) reveal more about the viewer than about the work itself. Shaviro (1994:205) advocates "...an aggressively postmodern reading of Warhol..." which accepts the literal claim that his films "...present nothing but surfaces". Warhol's work embodied postmodernism before the term became a source of critical debate: "His films, his plastic art, and his construction of a social persona all assume a world of media-drenched simulations, in which nothing can be regarded as authentic because everything is always already 'sort of artificial'" (Shaviro, 1994:202). Warhol himself claimed (in an interview with Gretchen Berg in 1967) that

all his films are artificial, an idea which was further reflected in his fundamental belief that everything tends towards artificiality. For Warhol, the boundary between "the real" and "the artificial" was indeterminable, as was the boundary between "history" and "the present". Similarly, contemplation of the "loss" of the real lacked significance because, for him, "...there is no prior condition..." (Shaviro, 1994:202); "the real" never existed in the first place. Grounded in the eternal present, he believed that this tendency of all things towards the artificial necessarily makes "authenticity" in works of art unattainable. The "real" is inclusive of the artificial, and the artificial is an extension of the "real" (*cf.* Baudrillard's belief that "the real" flounders in the hyperreal). "Reality" and artifice collide and collapse into one another, with the definition of the "real" itself becoming bound up in the artificial.

The cinema's "will-to-spectacle" (particularly that of Hollywood) is therefore understood to be an extension of nature. Shaviro (1994:202) explains that, for Warhol, Hollywood does not represent the displacement of nature, "...because Hollywood is already at one with nature". Warhol's films embrace "...the enigmatic condition of hyperreality..." (Shaviro, 1994:202) as an extension of both the real and the artificial. Warhol's films demonstrate a fascination with the subject that is linked to his discovery that prolonged observation of any object inevitably leads to the disappearance of meaning (Shaviro, 1994:202). Through repetition, and what one might term "a fixated gaze", Warhol's assertion that his work is really quite devoid of meaning is evidenced when identity is absorbed by the condition of "self-resemblance" leaving "...only the physical trace..." of the subject (Shaviro, 1994:202). What remains when the film is watched, is a body, an object, nothing but an image that is detached from any meaning. In this sense, the film becomes pure spectacle. Warhol's films "...at once perform and testify to a perverse, parasitic marriage of the real and the artificial" (Shaviro, 1994:212).

The camera, or whatever recording instrument has been employed, is responsible for transforming both the subject and its status. Performance, for Warhol, is artificial, and the act of recording transforms "reality" into a mode of performance which eradicates the distinction between the "real" and the "artificial":

Self-conscious reflection is evacuated before the camera, to be replaced by the unfettered display, in strange slow-motion suspension, of carnal stupidity (Shaviro, 1994:213).

For Warhol, the detachment of the physical body from the act of signification is

comparable with "postmodern simulation", which Baudrillard and Jameson have defined "...in terms of the ubiquity and precedence of the code, the freeing of the sign from referential meaning..." (Shaviro, 1994:202). When considering *Empire* (1964), Warhol's eight-hour film which shows nothing but the Empire State Building, for example, one could argue that it is the repetition of the same image which removes all curiosity or interest in the subject, because as the same image is repeated so its meaning becomes depleted. As referential meaning is gradually removed through repetition, all that remains is the act of simulation, the process of screening the film. The process - the actual mechanical turning of the film - is no longer associated with the image thus produced, because this image has become static and, consequently, meaningless, disassociated from the process whereby the (moving) image is screened.

Naturally this (complete) lack of (hidden) meaning also functions to make the surfaces of Warhol's work completely open or "porous" because his films "...are so blandly and passively open to whatever constructions we try to impose upon them" (Shaviro, 1994:205). Warhol's films are open to infinite interpretations, all of which may be considered to be "...equally plausible and equally unfounded" even when such interpretations may be considered to contradict one another. In this sense, "[t]he 'real' Warhol never appears; all we see is a mask, but there is nothing behind the mask" (Shaviro, 1994:205). This is possibly the key to the fetishistic fascination that Warhol's films hold: that no matter how much we look upon his subjects, how intently and intensively we gaze upon the screen surfaces, we can never fully discover their "truth" or "meaning". An image of the Empire State Building is an image of the Empire State Building is an image of the Empire State Building:

The only subject to remain totally impervious to Warhol's camera was the Empire State Building. The most infamously conceptual of the films, *Empire* is actually one of the most visually subtle and richly reflexive. The longer one watches, the stronger the desire one feels to witness some structural collapse, some disturbance of that phallic monumentality. "The Empire State Building is a star," said Warhol, mocking the model to which no model can measure up (Taubin, 1994:23-24).

The camera's fixated gaze with regards to the Empire State Building is linked to Warhol's lack of critical engagement with his subject. This condition corresponds to a culture which celebrates artifice, spectacle, and image. His gaze demonstrates a logic of bland, banal acceptance of things "...rather than any utopian transcendence of the real" (Shaviro, 1994:202).

Of course, the voyeuristic intention that motivates the camera's fascination with the human subject is somewhat different from any search for meaning in the endless restraint of *Empire*. According to Shaviro (1994:208), the body is "seductive" because it has a "certain primordial stupidity" (207). The passive body incites the viewer/voyeur to continue looking, because "...our desire for comprehension and control is never satiated" (Shaviro, 1994:208). As we are endlessly perplexed by the meaninglessness of the imaged body, our only release is to finally abandon our search for "meaning". When watching the human body, we are compelled to *look* because of our similarity to it, while being simultaneously perplexed by our own unique difference from it. The act of watching (the body) forces us to remain voyeurs, forever fascinated (involved, intrigued) but unable to become physically engaged with the object of our own fixated gaze (because we remain detached, distant). It is in this sense that pornography, for example, is said to "...provide titillation and provoke boredom" (Shaviro, 1994:237) because the viewer/voyeur is forever the outside observer unable to participate in the film's simulation of desire. In Warhol's work, this suspension of tactility is coupled to the voyeuristic remoteness of the camera, which is passed on to the viewer:

Warhol's silent films and some of the sound films that followed in 1965 and 1966 existed in the tension between presence and absence, assertion and denial. Fetishistic in the extreme, they allowed the receptive viewer access to the fundamentals of cinematic pleasure. Their surfaces opened on to the depths of *your* psyche (Taubin, 1994:21, my emphasis).

An example of this penetration of the viewer's psyche can be gleaned from Warhol's *Blow Job* (1963). The film daringly captures a thirty-six minute close-up of a young man who is being fellated by an off-screen "other". All that the viewer sees is the man's face and the wall behind him. According to Vogel (1974:238), as the camera refuses to move or reveal the source of the young man's pleasure, "...the act, reflected, exists for itself; there is no message". The viewer is left to discern his or her own personal response to the "anti-pornographic" images which flicker by. Meaning is not generated by the images themselves, but through the viewer's response (fantasy, detachment, concern, disgust) to what is on the screen or what is perceived to be on screen. The actual source of the young man's pleasure remains a personal experience on the part of the viewer. The viewer, in effect, creates (simulates) his or her own cinematic "reality".

While Warhol's films necessarily force the viewer to generate his or her own "meaning", all such meaning must be considered to be artificial. Any other

interpretation or meaning may be considered equally feasible or inappropriate. Warhol's films demonstrate that truth and meaning are wholly pliable, random, and artificial, having no absolute basis in any "reality". Through their artificiality his films reveal the actual world to be artificial. "The real" is *shown* to be constructed in much the same way that the viewer constructs meaning through a personal response to his film images. In Warhol's films, it is the *cool* (detached, but somehow involved) use of the camera which ultimately exposes the artificial nature of both "real" and film worlds:

Warhol never seeks to undo or to unmask the mechanisms of normalization, of subjectification, of ideology, and of cinematic illusion; but by hyperbolically assuming and incorporating these mechanisms, by subsuming subjective self-presentation and cinematic process within them, his films coolly foreground the ways in which such mechanisms are always already at work, unsurpassable, immanent to the real (Shaviro, 1994:230-231).

Warhol's films present only a simulacrum of an already-artificial world and our voyeuristic act as viewers is necessarily unstable because we are engaged in an act (one that simulates everyday experience) which eradicates the ability to make distinctions between "...reality and artifice, sincerity and affectation, normality and eccentricity, activity and passivity, voyeurism and exhibitionism..." (Shaviro, 1994:232). "Realism" in Warhol's documentary-styled films is comparable with the fabrication of identity by drag queens, for example, who create their own "reality", thereby burying "...the myth of the authentic self beneath a delirious proliferation of wilfully excessive, eccentric 'personalities'" (Shaviro, 1994:230). The social construction of identity and the perceived meaning of images and looks is thoroughly destabilised through a mode of performance which "...produces an *effect* of resemblance" (Deleuze in Shaviro, 1994:230).

Warhol's films recall Baudrillard's understanding of the real as an extension of the hyperreal. Yet Warhol is at odds with Baudrillard's nostalgic yearning for "the real":

Strictly speaking, then, Warhol's films do not *represent* the real. Rather, passively and casually, these films actually *enter into* the real: they trace it, embrace it, amplify it, multiply it, and thereby empty it out. What you see is what you get, since the reality of the image is precisely equal to the reality of the object of which it is an image. It is only "lack" that has been removed, only the unfathomable depths of signification, representation, and interiority that have been "lost" (Shaviro, 1994:203).

Presence and immediacy are replaced in Warhol's films by an active dissemination of "...those very signs, images and traces that Baudrillard depicts under the colors of inexorable fatality, and secretly deplores" (Shaviro, 1994:234). The simulation of

actual events in the form of projected images constitutes something that is more "real" than the actual event. Hence,

This is a vision of hyperreality without Baudrillard's apocalyptic sense of closure. The event is swallowed up in its own replication, but this replication is only one event the more, contingent and superfluous (Shaviro, 1994:234).

Warhol views the hyperreality on a cinema screen as "...more unreal and *therefore* more real..." (Shaviro, 1994:235). In Warhol's films, "presence" is not lost in the hyperreal universe of simulacra and images. Rather, his work demonstrates that the postmodern fabrication of "reality" is no more and no less artificial than the actual event prior to being filmed:

American film and media culture today, from David Lynch to Arnold Schwarzenegger to Madonna, [which] emulates Warhol by exalting the media fabrication of selfhood, by indulging in the kitschy display of ostentatiously fake sentiment, and by placing emotions 'in quotation marks' (or, as one might say, under erasure) (Shaviro, 1994:236).

Warhol's films are cool in that they involve the viewer while forcing him or her to remain detached from their meaningless surfaces. By capturing so-called "reality" on film, Warhol did not simulate that "reality", but rather simulated an artificial or virtual "reality" that is always coolly beyond the grasp (or comprehension) of the viewer:

How better to contain the danger immanent in the factory scene than to make it into an image - a virtual world, exciting but never threatening. Once the camera rolled, Warhol never intervened in the action taking place before it. He merely watched through the viewfinder, responding with an occasional zoom, tilt or pan (Taubin, 1994:23).

Warhol's films foreground the notion of an already-artificial (or "virtual" as Taubin notes above) world. If we exist in a world which is "virtual", our only reaction can be a cool one - an ironic revelry in the present moment, signalling our simultaneous involvement in and detachment from "reality".

Pushing the limits of lowbrow...without leaving a bad taste in your mouth

Let's face it, some people like low comedies and some don't. Fans appreciate the way wilful lowness thumbs its nose at good taste; critics prefer to dismiss such films as tasteless, or, when they actually enjoy one, to categorise it as a guilty pleasure (Spinrad, 1998:30).

Comedy is not elitist. Whether it's an Oscar Wilde play or a fart, if it makes you laugh, it's hitting the same nerve. It's all on the same level to me (Matt Stone in Collins, 2000:94).

"Guilty pleasure" is a term frequently employed by critics (or analysts) to describe the

moments of enjoyment produced by that which should - by highbrow standards - remain an unspoken pleasure. More than this, the term describes "natural" or "instinctive" human pleasures or sources of enjoyment, often experienced through the act of viewing, which are usually deemed to exist outside the limits of social acceptability. "Guilty pleasure" may also be linked to the somewhat political debate around notions of "taste" with respect to cultural preferences as well as levels of social or community tolerance. At the same time, however, discussions around "bad-taste" cinema, lowbrow comedy, cinematic trash, paracinema, "badfilm", "schlock", and even pornography, have featured widely in various publications and journals, while it is not uncommon for decidedly "low-brow" films to become the subjects for provocative and intelligent academic discussions. Such levels of discourse have helped to further blur the superficial distinction between "artistic" cinematic productions and those (popular or unpopular) films which supposedly serve only to satisfy a series of "guilty pleasures". Postmodern discourse has served to valorise "low-brow" cinema and suggests that even the sleaziest of film narratives may be "...rich with 'cultural capital'..." (Sconce, 1995:375).

In one form, this valorisation of previously marginalized cultural output may be found in Hollywood's most profitable form - the blockbuster films which "rediscover" the B-grade movies of the past. In other ways, too, the film industry is exploring an "alternative" version of its own history. Tim Burton's biographical account of the independent 1950s filmmaker Ed Wood Jr (*Ed Wood*, 1994), for example, brings to light the career and private life of a man whose films "...are remarkably incompetent from a conventional perspective" (Sconce, 1995:387). It is widely believed that Wood's films, such as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) and *Glen or Glenda* (1953) fall into a category of cinema known as "badfilm", owing largely to his inability or unwillingness "...to master the basics of continuity, screen direction or the construction of cinematic space" (Sconce, 1995:387) as well as his reliance on extremely low production values, "awful" dialogue and trite "plots". Yet, Burton's critically-acclaimed film contributes to the argument that "...Wood is now seen, like Godard, as a unique talent improvising outside the constrictive environment of traditional Hollywood production and representation" (Sconce, 1995:388). From a particular point-of-view, Ed Wood is now considered to have been representative of a certain brand of "otherness" (or "uniqueness"), rather than simply being an incompetent hack.

"Lowbrow" or "trashy" filmmakers are clearly nothing new. Rather, the popularisation

of the postmodern aesthetic has served to bring previously "underground" filmmakers into the mainstream and, in turn, to bring the "trash" aesthetics which those filmmakers cultivated into popular, commercial cinema. John Waters, who has been called "a genuine American dadaist" (Lyons, 1994:134), has frequently been celebrated (and cursed) for his treatment of the "extremes" of the polymorphously perverse, while he has been labelled "disreputable" by various "bastion[s] of cinematic conservatism" (Sconce, 1995:373). *Pink Flamingos* (1972)¹³³ is perhaps his most infamous film which thoroughly and uncompromisingly "...upends bourgeois virtues in the best Buñuel spirit" (Lyons, 1994:134) as it deals with a bizarre contest in which the participants war for the title of "Filthiest Person Alive". Described by *Variety* as "...surely one of the most vile, stupid and repulsive films ever made..." (in Dermody, 1997:119), the film includes a variety of depraved and offensive subjects, including cannibalism and incest, and a famously nefarious scene in which Babs Johnson (played by obese transvestite Divine) eats a "dog" turd (actually the performer's own excrement) after uttering the line "Oh my God. Someone has sent me a bowel movement!". Ultimately, *Pink Flamingos* serves as a suitable context in which Waters reverses "...such conventional antitheses as beauty/ugliness, cleanliness/filth, and crime/goodness" (Lyons, 1994:134). While this low-budget movie celebrates its own brand of deviant camp by imposing the acts of transgression upon the narrative, the individual moments of extreme lowbrow excess are intended to shock precisely because they test the limits of mainstream acceptability. Furthermore, *Pink Flamingos* embodies and celebrates lowbrow tastes by refusing to play according to the "rules" of the highbrow "game".

While Waters' more recent films have hinted at "mainstream" potential (*Serial Mom* (1994) being the most notable example), he continues to defy the limits of "social acceptability", while using his medium to self-reflexively investigate the nature of film and "art" in general. The namesake hero of his fifteenth film, *Pecker* (1998), achieves fame and fortune by taking photographs of "...virtually anything in his sordid environment..." (William, 1999e:8). In one particularly poignant scene, Pecker (Edward Furlong) and his best friend (Brendan Sextant III) develop a series of photographs which Pecker has taken in a gay strip club. One particularly curious photograph has captured a transgressive moment of "teabagging" (which is not even tolerated in the transgressive club) which, as the photograph clearly shows, involves the dunking of a stripper's testicles on the forehead of a customer. Pecker's friend gleefully acknowledges that were it not for Pecker's photographs, there would be a

great number of things in the world that he would never find out about. Indeed, Pecker's camera – his art – allows him to explore and demystify a variety of unusual and unfamiliar aspects of the world in which he lives. Like the film in which the action takes place, Pecker's photographs offer "...continued proof that there really is a very thin line between treasure and trash" (Kermode, 1999:51). His curiosity (and the curiosity of his camera) transforms the world of the unknown into a form of "trash realism", a series of photographs which capture unique, bizarre and undiscovered "truths" about the world.

Pecker's audaciously personal style is ultimately what leads him to become an overnight celebrity. Yet, while his photographs are less popular with the local inhabitants of his native Baltimore who see themselves as the victim of the camera ("real" people transformed into "subjects" for art), the art critics and glitterati of New York are dazzled by his "fresh" talent. Waters bluntly argues that concepts such as "art" and "talent" are subject to the appeals of personal taste which exist, in the case of the visual arts (such as photography and cinema), in the eye of the beholder (spectator). Even more relevant, perhaps, is the suggestion in *Pecker* that contemporary notions of artistic excellence or incompetence are artificially created by the media which impose their own tastes on the various mass audiences which they inform. Pecker is quite clearly established as an artistic "flavour of the moment" destined to draw instant and widespread media attention until the next "promising young star" is identified.

Waters appears committed to the appropriation of low-budget techniques and transgressive narrative choices, and he makes pointed use of deliberately "offensive" visual images:

The brash vulgarities are something like the sands of the sea in number. These include a talking plastic Virgin Mary of, to put it mildly, dubious authenticity, strip joints, straight and gay, which give rise to what is hailed as [Pecker's] major work, the pubic hairs of a stripper, a revolting, continuously gurgling child (until she is diagnosed as hyperactive and stupefied by Ritalin) a neighbourhood of surly, foul-mouthed proletarians...a fag-hag sister working in a gay bar... (Williams, 1999e:8).

His "offensiveness" is particularly deliberate, however, and it appears to be focused on a blunt questioning of the socially-imposed limits of "good taste" and "refined sensibilities":

As usual, Waters' coy sweetness is tempered by an almost bloody-minded need to offend somebody. So we get to see two rats having sex, a man masturbating

on a washing machine, a psychotic child snorting peas up a \$10 bill, a lecherous phone caller (Waters himself) making pointed use of the word 'vagina', and even a sub-soft-porno-style insert of 'beaver bush' which will presumably keep the film out of some family-oriented video stores (Kermode, 1999:51).

Mark Kermode's observation that Waters appears to take delight in trying to offend "somebody" suggests something of the filmmaker's attempt to force his audience to react or respond to what they are seeing. His well-meaning platitudes regarding the construction of artistic taste are supported by his own reflexive use of mechanisms designed to gauge the viewer's own levels of acceptability. In a sense, Waters puts taste on trial in his film both within the narrative and as an element of visual and stylistic "excess" targeted at the spectator. Self-reflexively, the film comments on the nature of cultural taste and its artificial construction, as suggested by the film's discussion of the concept of "beauty":

...Shelley (Christina Ricci) becomes the auteur's mouthpiece when she realises true beauty can be found even in 'the brilliant green of a grass stain, the subtle yellow of a urine-soaked sheet, or the aqua blue of cold water as it dilutes a violent red blood stain' (Kermode, 1999:51).

While the film itself employs what appear to be "slap-dash" production values, it is this aspect of the film's formal structure which works to self-reflexively highlight the narrative aspects of Waters' off-beat production. Pecker creates "art" merely by photographing that which *he* finds "beautiful" or interesting. In one scene, he and his best friend stage a series of photographs around a general theme of everyday banality gone awry. While his friend places unwanted products in the shopping carts of unsuspecting shoppers, Pecker merrily snaps away. Later, as the minor practical joke causes mayhem at the cashier area, Pecker photographs his friend while he steals copious amounts of photographic film. Consequently, Pecker's work is not only unique, controversial and "different", but it spills over into "reality" as irate shoppers argue about their purchases and as Pecker and his friend are chased for their artistically-inspired shoplifting. Later in the film, once Pecker has earned widespread fame for his "alternative" photography, he and his friend stage a similar shoplifting scenario in a clothing store. When they are caught redhanded by the clerk, she forces them to hand the camera over to her, whereupon she forces them both to expose themselves in front of her. As an act of revenge, the clerk photographs the photographer with his own genitalia ("privates") on display. The scene serves to literally enact a metaphoric moment of trite, heavy-handed "realism" which questions the very notion of "realism" by evoking the question of the clerk's motivation for her moment of glory: Art or simply a vengeful lesson in reality? Once an artist is in the

process of creating art (by taking a photograph, for example), "reality" recedes as it becomes bound up in the artificial.¹³⁴ Waters suggests that "art" and "reality" are bound together in the moments of "trashy" excess and transgression which are foregrounded in his movie.¹³⁵

While John Waters is still considered something of an outsider, his "lowbrow" aesthetic approach may be seen at work (or, more accurately, "at play") in an extensive array of contemporary mainstream Hollywood productions. In a review of the hugely profitable *Austin Powers The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Jay Roach, 1999), Xan Brooks (1999b:36) argues that the film

...is even more amateurish than [its precursor, *Austin Powers International*] *Man of Mystery* [Jay Roach, 1997], the latter a loosely knit set of skits, sketches and pooh jokes that doesn't even attempt to cohere into a *bona fide* narrative.

Brooks' point is that the film serves as a framework for showcasing low-brow jokes and seemingly feeble allusions to the espionage genre films which it so blatantly parodies. However, while the film's superficial scatological imports, "running penis jokes" and over-the-top refusal to succumb to political-correctness, conveys a flimsy exterior, it did reach the number one position at the US box-office, earning \$50 million during its opening weekend. More than this, the film has become part of social consciousness and popular culture in a way which challenges the stereotypical conception of what constitutes a "blockbuster", particularly with regards to style, effects and "good taste" in terms of production values. Thus, one might be forgiven for passing *The Spy Who Shagged Me* (a clear allusion to the James Bond title, *The Spy Who Loved Me* (Lewis Gilbert, 1977)) off as "...strange, garbled and elusive" when it may, alternatively, be considered "...a film which has it both ways: [it is also] a spoof so affectionate as to buttress effectively that which it sets out to ridicule, a studio product which poses as amateur night entertainment, an anti-blockbuster with a blockbuster's publicity budget" (Brooks, 1999b:36&37). While the film is undoubtedly an outrageous and somewhat ridiculous satire of genre conventions, English customs and Sixties' culture, it is more subtly a hyperbolic parody of the mediated view of such conventions, customs and culture which the world has come to accept as "reality". In this sense, the film is irreverently self-reflexive and also highly ironic in that it sets out to parody various films (such the James Bond series) which exist, to some extent, as parodies themselves.

Brooks (1999b:36) calls the film "...a loop of self-referentialism; a spoof of a spoof of

a genre that was already two-parts spoof to begin with", noting that it is the film's "staleness" which imbues it with its most valuable qualities. In one scene, Austin Powers' superior (played by Michael York) advises the oversexed spy on the complexities of time travel by saying, "I suggest you don't worry about this sort of thing and just enjoy yourself", whereupon he turns to the camera and addresses the audience with: "That goes for you all, too". While the moment is a banal attempt to explain away impossible and unrealistic plot elements, it simultaneously reiterates the concept of the viewer's "participation" in the construction of a narrative which actually questions the way in which we view cinema. Director Jay Roach (in Brooks, 1999b:37) refers to what he calls the film's "...theme park version of the 60s...", which is precisely the view of "nostalgic" periods and "tourist destination" places which cinema- and television-viewers are "taught" through media products which work to assert their own "realism". The "cheap" refusal of a low-comedy like *The Spy Who Shagged Me* to acknowledge the possibility of an unmediated "reality" creates a distancing effect which may well allow the viewer to accept the explicit humour which dominates the narrative. While foul humour is traditionally reserved for the "public privacy" of bars, men's clubs and innuendo, low-brow comedies assert and publicise their anti-social values.

The film which is probably directly responsible for the escalation in the popularity of the taboo-breaking comedy genre at the end of the twentieth century is *There's Something About Mary* (Peter and Bobby Farrelly, 1998). While the film has been extensively criticised for its violation of social propriety, it has also been praised for its entertaining amalgamation of a romantic comedy narrative with transgressive and "un-PC" jokes:

To say it's not for prudish tastes is a grave understatement. But *There's Something About Mary* is truly an excellent comedy, one that proves the considerable latitude afforded filmmakers in the permissive late 1990s resulted in more than just an inordinate amount of fart jokes (Doberman, undated).

While scatological and sexual references abound, the film is ultimately a heartfelt love story that focuses on two genuinely caring and honest characters. There are moments and themes in the film that are considered to be offensive and even degrading by some critics. These include scenes in which Mary's mentally handicapped brother Warren (W. Earl Brown) becomes the target of slapstick, and often violent, humour. In another scene, an elderly woman's breasts are depicted in an unflattering manner. While such exploitation of the "unfortunate" circumstances of certain characters has been condemned from certain quarters, it is possible to argue that it is the film's

intention is to provoke social reaction by engaging with these types of taboos and thereby bringing them into public focus.

The film handles sex and sexuality as a source of genuinely physical humour. On the evening of his high school prom, Ted Stroehmann (Ben Stiller) visits the bathroom of his intended date, Mary Jenson (Cameron Diaz). In a scene that conflates many of the fears and obsessions which might arise on a night which is depicted in numerous films as pivotal to the development of American youth, Ted gets his penis caught in his zipper. Not only does the film graphically depict bits of genital skin protruding from the claws of the zipper, but the audience is given a taste of genuine embarrassment when Ted is forced to endure having Mary's entire family, neighbourhood and local security services bear witness to his tragedy. In the most notorious scene from the film, masturbation becomes an extended joke when Mary's long-time admirer Ted masturbates before what is to be his first successful date with her. After masturbating, Ted cannot find his spent ejaculate, and gives up looking when Mary arrives at the door. When Mary notices the blob of semen in Ted's hair, she takes a handful, thinking that it is hair gel, and uses it to rework her own hairstyle. The joke remains with the viewer for some time since Mary's unusual hairstyle is sported for most of the date, and serves as a repeated reminder of the earlier taboo-breaking moment. However, the joke is also a creeping reminder that the source of revulsion or disgust is created almost exclusively in the viewer's imagination. The semen-in-the-hair is implied by the masturbation scene, but it is the viewer who must complete the joke. Mary, on the other hand, gives no indication that she would even imagine such a joke.

A film which is thoroughly direct in its approach as a "low-brow" sex comedy is *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999). The film deals almost exclusively with issues related to teenaged sexuality and is described by Darren Bignell (2000:108) as "[a]n efficient update of the lads-desperate-to-get-laid routine...". Freer (1999:14) argues that it is precisely this honesty - or total lack of "spin" - which contributes to the film's "winning formula":

Four teenage lads make a pact to jettison their virginity...by prom night. That's it. No Shakespearean backbone or Dawson-esque irony, just an eternal adolescent dilemma pared down to enticing purity and played out with a keen comedic eye for teen torments... (Freer, 1999:14).

The film focuses on a well-tested formula in which the "funny" aspects of teenage sexual misadventure are explored. However, such misadventures in *American Pie*

frequently lead to "grotesque" scenes that "...indulge in calculated grossness..." (Freer, 1999:14), including one in which one of the characters inadvertently drinks from a beer glass that contains a friend's recently ejaculated semen (imitating the *Austin Powers* turd-swilling cliffhanger and out-grossing the semen-as-hair-gel scene from *There's Something About Mary*). Despite the occasional instances of crassness-for-the-sake-of-crassness, many of the teen sexploits may be considered "tasteless" precisely because they are so brutally honest and so down-to-earth:

So had you harboured and highfalutin' idea of film comedy developing in sophistication then think again, because as this clearly proves, bodily functions jokes are alive and thriving, and the post-laxative-overdose panic is still an absolute giggle guarantee (Bignell, 2000:108).

It is in its down-to-earth honesty that the film attains its humanity, appealing to the audience's sense of humour through its candid depiction of the types of trials and tribulations with which anyone may potentially be faced.

American Pie's screenwriter, Adam Herz (in Wilson, 1999b:4), has noted that his film attempts to deliver some of the "most appalling" stories about high school "kids" because these are inevitably "the funniest". It is therefore no accident that the film includes

...such instructive aspects as umpteenth masturbation references (visual and spoken), several sexual sequences, a flautist with an unmusical use for her instrument, voyeurism (in front of a pre-teen too) and an enthusiastic recourse to that old bucolic standby, the human fart (Wilson, 1999b:4).

In one, much-publicised scene, Jim (Jason Biggs) uses a recently baked apple pie as a substitute vagina, having been told that this wholesome American family desert is a reasonable simulation of the texture and temperature of the "real thing". To Jim's embarrassment, he is discovered "in the act" of pie-defilement by his father, whose equal embarrassment reflects the way in which society traditionally views many of the "dark secrets" which are frequently dealt with to comic effect in low-brow cultural products. The film touches on numerous similarly taboo subjects and such issues are problematised by the fact that the characters are teenagers:

One question I got a lot was 'Is nothing sacred?' [...] But people nowadays are becoming more open about their sexuality. The things that we always joked about in private we can now joke about in public, and laugh about them together (Adam Herz in Kenny, 2000:60).

The guilty pleasures of lowbrow entertainments are certainly becoming the "accepted" excess and transgressions of the public sphere. As Kenny (2000:60) argues, "It's hard to take a movie to task for its gross-out gags involving semen when much of the

serious political dialogue last year concerned a presidential emission of the same".

Even more notorious for its vulgarity and obscene imagery than either *American Pie* or the relatively "sweet" *There's Something about Mary*, is the animated feature *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (Trey Parker, 1999), which is based on the equally notorious television series, *South Park*. A self-reflexive satire about the hypocrisy of censorship, the film uses an absurd, surreal plot in which America and Canada go to war as a result of a concerned mothers' group's outrage at an "offensive" movie. Basically, when the children who are the film's heroes sneak into an adult-rated movie and begin to emulate the bad language used by *their* film heroes, the children's parents become obsessed with an ultimately violent campaign against the creators of crude and lascivious films (of which the *South Park* movie is such an obvious example). The *South Park* movie is thus entirely self-reflexive, satirising the world-wide reaction to the cult television series upon which it is based. According to Ronge (2000d:21), the television version of *South Park*

...tested every limit of TV censorship and showed exactly where the barriers stood. Everywhere it was shown, it provoked cries of outrage and demands that it should be banned because it attacked family values, polluted young minds and demeaned all religions.

The film confronts those who lobbied against the series and simultaneously challenges those same individuals and groups who would undoubtedly react negatively to the film itself. Consequently, the *South Park* movie is about itself, commenting on its own inevitable impact within a highly conditioned society. The film targets the "reality" of the cinematic context within which it was created, written from the perspective of filmmakers who have often incensed a wide spectrum of people:

We write about what we know. With the movie, what we knew was people being angry about the shit we were doing - so that's what we wrote about, and everyone was, like, "Oh, it's satire." Well no, it's just our point of view (Trey Parker in Collins, 2000:93).

Accordingly, the film's deranged, nightmarish plot is an exaggerated reflection of its own calculated interaction with everyday "reality".

The transgressive imagery, low-brow humour, profanity and blasphemy in *South Park* assume an important function. The taboo-breaking devices serve as a foil for those elements in the "real" world – such as war, hatred, intolerance and "real" violence – which the filmmakers rightfully understand to be far more dangerous and damaging than the frequent use of "obscenities" by a group of amateurishly-rendered cartoon

children:

The overall goal of the film's satiric intent is abundantly clear. This extreme, violent reaction to a few kids saying the F-word is ludicrous. The more we deny people the right to say certain things in a certain way, the greater their compulsion to do so. If they can't do it openly, they will do it covertly. Censorship does not remove or end the attitudes and practices it opposes - it just diverts them into more secretive and concealed forms. It adds deception and hypocrisy to the mix and forces people to harden their attitudes, close their minds and become extreme (Ronge, 2000d:21).

The film's stance against censorship is radical to say the least, and it is in this sense that animation proves to be most useful, transforming the dialogue and action into a surreal "...flow of outrage, blasphemy and obscenity [that] just does not stop" (Ronge, 2000d:21). The film openly and unequivocally attacks as many social, racial, ethnic and religious groupings that it can manage to deal with, thereby testing the limits of censorship from as many different perspectives as possible:

Everything is attacked - gays, Jews, blacks, Muslims, Christians and believers of every stripe are savaged (Ronge, 2000d:21).

Ironically, while the film serves to mock, abuse, defame and "savage" every possible brand of "otherness", its purpose is to paradoxically confront viewers with their own prejudices and latent biases. As Ronge (2000d:21) argues, satire loses its validity the moment that exceptions are chosen and certain groups are seen as "victims". In order for satire and mockery to function as "valid forms of expression" within society, "...then that satire must be able to say anything about anyone":

The moment you make exceptions, you choose victims. The satire loses its function and becomes a mask for racism, class distinction, self-interest and a mass of other nasty things (Ronge, 2000d:21).

The film consequently opts for an all-out comic assault on a wide range of "types", and the filmmakers argue that this approach is not concerned with hatred, but with the ability to laugh at anything and everything in the world, rather than being limited by socially-constructed barriers:

If you're joking about Jesus, why does that mean you don't like Jesus? We have this whole freedom-of-speech thing, and art and literature go to forbidden places - why can't comedy go to those places? (Matt Stone in Collins, 2000:94).

It is precisely this line of thought which is central to the postmodern collapse of the division between "high" and "low" culture. Comedy uses a particular framework from which to explore "forbidden" subjects and it is often because comedy has broad (mass or popular) appeal that it is marginalized as unsophisticated and therefore unsuitable for engaging critically with social problems. *South Park* works to counter this argument precisely because it is so heavy-handed in its confrontation with

"legitimate" society:

For all the surface crudeness of the film, the argument is sophisticated and fearless and it confronts us with a paradox - which is an excellent thing (Ronge, 2000d:21).

Ultimately, however, such a "paradox" inevitably falls on deaf ears since those who oppose the crude surfaces of popular culture are unlikely to alter their perception of "reality". The film is therefore destined to remain a mere reflection of its own effect on the "real" world.

While a culture of toilet humour and sexual comedy is nothing new (long before Waters, *South Park* or Austin Powers, Aristophanes celebrated the "humour" of these mundane human activities by including them as integral features of his plots), such subjects are being treated with increasing vigour - particularly in combination with comic violence and taboo imagery - in contemporary commercial cinema. Stephen Hunter (1998:9), in a scathing discussion of *There's Something About Mary* and the irresponsibility of filmmakers finds that there is nothing enlightening in the film, but rather that the filmmakers are arrogant and "self-important", having produced a film which verifies the "...vanity of corporate greed-heads!" (Hunter, 1998:9). Xan Brooks, in an equally critical discussion of *Very Bad Things* (Peter Berg, 1998), argues that

Alongside *8 Heads in a Duffel Bag* [Tom Schulman, 1997] and the Farrelly brothers' *There's Something about Mary*, *Very Bad Things* is suggestive of an emerging trend, a 'new sadism' at work within left-of-centre US cinema. ...this scabrous little comedy comes on like some bastard progeny of the 80s Brat Pack movies.... Black burlesques like *Very Bad Things* thrive on shock tactics, on the gut-punch of the audience gross out (Brooks, 1999a:59).

Very Bad Things does indeed make use of a variety of "shock tactics", including a scene in which a prostitute is accidentally killed by a bathroom clothes-hook while being fucked by one of the central characters who has just engaged in an orgy of alcohol and cocaine. Perhaps even more shocking, is the film's treatment of the situation as a moment of transgressive comedy which delights in the bloody image of the naked woman hanging from the hook which has penetrated the base of her brain. Later the film references a plethora of existing movie scenes as it depicts a range of violent and horrific spectacles, deploying them through a darkly comic filter. Ultimately, the film not only finds humour in bloody, brutal, vicious displays of maiming and killing, but it savagely satirises the concept of marriage (depicting it as a wholly perverse institution) while exploiting the suffering of the maimed, injured and disabled in a number of grotesque scenes designed to elicit a comic response (in a similar fashion to *There's Something about Mary's* treatment of mental disability).

Hunter links the approach of such films with an appeal to the “lowest common denominator”: a market driven purely by economic concerns:

What is this thing called ‘humour’ anyway but the sound of the bourgeoisie enjoying its ill-gotten gains and of filmmakers refusing to acknowledge their responsibility to enlighten the masses?” (Hunter, 1998:9).

While both *Very Bad Things* and *There’s Something About Mary* deal with “moral” issues, they are also what Hunter (1998:9) calls “...dreadfully anti-humanist document[s]...” with stories that are “...infantilising of our responsibilities to our fellow creatures on spaceship Earth”. Such films, Hunter (1998:9) contends, are invitations to “...revel in man at his most elemental...”, while “privacy” itself becomes disrespected and ignored. It would seem that while Hunter’s argument revolves around the issue of taste and the limits of appropriate representation, the “low” comedy has developed apace into what critics now regularly term “gross-out” comedy. A recent example of the “grossout” comedy which has its roots in both *American Pie* and *There’s Something About Mary*, is Todd Phillips’ *Road Trip* (2000):

The only boundary all three of these ruinously moral films break is the delicate one of taste (Perry, 2000:61).

According to Kilday and Levy (2000), “[e]ver since 1998’s *There’s Something about Mary*...Hollywood comedies aimed at the broadest possible audiences have reached for new lows. [In 2000,] analsex jokes have set the bar under which moviemakers are happily limboing”. In *Road Trip*, for example, one of the college student protagonists (Seann William Scott) “...is tamed by a fearsome sperm bank nurse who massages his prostate...” (Kilday and Levy, 2000), while one of the strongest sight gags involves a senior citizen knocking ornaments over with his unchecked erection. Examples of this nature abound. In *Nutty Professor II: The Klumps*¹³⁶ (Peter Segal, 2000), a man is sodomised by a giant hamster and in another scene the geriatric Grandma Klump (Eddie Murphy) performs oral sex on Buddy Love (also Eddie Murphy) in a hot tub. In *Me, Myself & Irene* (Bobby and Peter Farrelly, 2000), multiple personality disorder sufferer Officer Charlie Baileygates (Jim Carrey) awakes one morning to find that he is urinating as though he has “...been up all night having sex”. To his horror he then discovers that his less inhibited alter ego, Hank Evans, had also made use of an enormous dildo during the previous night’s sexual adventure. In the horror-spoof film *Scary Movie* (discussed in greater detail in chapter three), one character “...is impaled by an erect penis in a bathroom stall” (Kilday and Levy, 2000).

The incarnations of so-called “gross-out” comedy are, as the name implies, concerned

with pushing the limits of depraved hilarity as far as possible. As the limits of social acceptability for such entertainment are tested and broken, so increasingly "volatile" situations are exploited for their comic potential. It may well be that films like *Road Trip* merely rely on a succession of sexual jokes and sight gags, strung together by the flimsiest of storylines, in order to provoke shock reactions from audience members:

Daily Variety editor-in-chief Peter Bart, who often functions as the industry's unofficial chaplain, wrote: "From these latest effusions, it's clear they're not competing for laughs, just jolts. We're seeing wit fade before the onslaught of what Mel Brooks used to call 'dolt and filth'..." (Kilday and Levy, 2000).

By pushing the limits of public acceptability and taste, the makers of these films are, along with the creators of "progressive" advertising and television, and popular music artists, proving to be some of the most consistently high-profile innovators of cultural authority. Saturated with lewd, crude and admittedly "cheap" jokes and sight gags, films of the "low-brow" ilk bring into the public sphere, subversive strategies which go against the grain of established "moral sensibilities". In the seclusive darkness of the cinema theatre (or in the privacy of our own living-rooms), the low-comedy allows the viewer to laugh even at that which he or she has been taught to find offensive and anti-social. Even when these comedies turn nasty (a penis visibly caught in the protagonist's zipper in *There's Something about Mary*, for example), the viewer is given the opportunity to respond without recourse to the social norm - to react beyond the limits of social responsibility. If these films - with their often "perverse" sensibilities - achieve nothing else, then it is their "enabling" of a postmodern detachment which is their most significant achievement.

Such an "achievement" recalls Vale and Juno's view of the "trash aesthetic" which suggests that radical or unpopular social values are addressed by such narrative elements in an attempt to "...assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality [and] violence" (Sconce, 1995:383).¹³⁷ Films which tend towards a "trash" aesthetic may thus be seen as self-conscious, detached, and highly ironic ways of compelling "...even the most casual viewer...to consider, if only superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation" (Sconce, 1995:393). Jeffrey Sconce (with particular reference to what he terms "paracinema") argues that "[t]he...viewer's recognition of a narrative's artifice...is the first step in examining a field of structures within the culture as a whole, a passageway into engaging a larger field of contextual issues surrounding the film as a socially and historically specific document" (Sconce, 1995:392-393). It is perhaps in this sense

that "...sleazy' genres such as horror and pornography" as well as various other films imbued with "...the trash aesthetic..." have become the subject of academic and intellectual study (Sconce, 1995:373). Such studies frequently originate from wholly ironic strategies of cultural investigation, but the spread of such aesthetic practices into the mainstream of popular culture indicates that the levels of acceptability amongst members of the filmgoing public, are changing.

So-called "low comedies" are possibly the most accessible (or accessed) form of a "trashy" sensibility (or aestheticism) at work (or "at play") in popular cinema. The various films discussed here are some of the more popular examples of this highly profitable "genre". All of these films have proved popular at the box-office, while their engagement of taboo subjects and transgressive imagery has resulted in both critical adulation for their feistiness and severe criticism for their irresponsible attitude towards the social construct that is "accepted morality". These films receive both praise and scorn for their uncompromising ability to induce the irresistible "mass release of tension" through their "*épater le bourgeois* sensibility" (Spinrad, 1998:30). Taken up with brash and frequently banal bouts of outright rudeness, lasciviousness, toilet humour, sexual crudity, pure smut, taboo imagery and transgressive violence, such films may be considered characteristic of a cultural phase such as "postmodernity" in which "...the grotesque aspect of (human) life is foregrounded..." (Olivier, 1992:102). The "low" humour in evidence in numerous contemporary films allows the viewer to confront many of the "horrific" aspects of postmodern life, in a sense distancing us from the unspeakable "truths" which we dare not face in our "everyday lives". Spinrad (1998:30) acknowledges that such films celebrate immaturity and literalise a rejection of established authority, but he argues that these films, which he terms "brat movies", give adults license to re-engage with a childlike ability to "...get away with almost anything". Perhaps the "guilty pleasure" alluded to by high-minded critics who question the mass consumption of dirty jokes and visceral humour, is best described as a sort of "extreme" or "brat" postmodernism, which Spinrad (1998:31) describes as "[d]eliberately offending grown-ups with your immaturity while running rings around them intellectually...". The resulting "play of opposites" relates directly to the observations of both Jameson and Baudrillard, whose theories suggest that the collapse of the lowbrow/highbrow split is a result of emerging trends in contemporary capitalism.

Cool transgression

Pornography doesn't exist. What exists is censorship which defines pornography and separates it from the rest of film. Unless, that is, people think that as a race we are pornographic - in which case we need an operation! Pornography is the sexual act taken totally out of context, and made into a product for consumption.... Pornographic cinema doesn't exist - there's no cinema in pornographic films. There are no actors, because they don't carry any emotions. They are just flesh (Breillat in Williams, 1999b:14).

Catherine Breillat's sexually explicit *Romance* (1999) has drawn much controversy because of its graphic depiction of aroused genitalia, penetrative sex and "transgressive" sexual practices including bondage and degrading situations.¹³⁸ Breillat's film represents an "arthouse" transgression of norms which are established by "mainstream" social institutions such as religion and governmental agencies. Such norms - as practiced in "mainstream" cinema - are generally entrenched through the limitations of taste and "morality" enforced by various institutions of censorship. Warhol's films were frequently the source of censorial controversy during the 1960s, and tended to find their audiences in so-called "underground" cinemas and in film clubs and societies. Today, however, the same types of cinematic transgression which made Warhol notorious, have become "...very fashionable in arthouse cinema...", to the extent that, "[t]oday, art films have almost lost their ability to shock" (Felperin, 1999:12,13). In the Western world, in fact, "arthouse" has almost become an apologetic term used to excuse the depiction of increasingly "transgressive" and explicit sexual acts in films available for public release. According to Leslie Felperin,

The tide has turned back so far that censors are barely worried about the potentially corrupting influence of anything with subtitles because they expect only a small percentage of the audience will be watching. *Romance* has been passed uncut by the British Board of Film Classification as an '18' in the UK despite the fact that it includes footage of Marie being penetrated by penises (shot side on, but seemingly unfaked) and by hands (seen more directly) - her own, her doctors' and her lover's (Felperin, 1999:13).

Indeed, Breillat's "arthouse" film features apparently "pornographic" elements¹³⁹ within a philosophically-complex narrative that attempts to "explore female sexuality" by "...address[ing] its audience not as a sex film but as an intellectual artefact about sex" (Vincendeau, 1999:51). According to Breillat (in Williams, 1999b:14), her images of explicit sexual behaviour differ from pornographic treatments of sex, because her images represent "...an idea and the characters experience emotion". Breillat believes that the viewer experiences these images differently from pornography because he or she is able to "intuit" these emotions from her *cinematic* images.

Postmodern cinema is said to bring aspects of the private lives of individuals into the public sphere - a transgression of Western moral proclivities which is increasingly the norm in contemporary hypermediated societies. In *Romance*, Breillat significantly pushes the envelope with regards to which aspects of privacy are included in the film. As if to break down as many cinema taboos as can be accommodated, the film includes scenes with sexual intercourse, fellatio, cunnilingus, anal rape, erect penises, male and female masturbation, "real" childbirth, gynaecological examination, bondage, "a gynaecological gang-bang" (Rix, 2000) and an incidence of fleeting ejaculation. Many of these scenes are obviously "real", but there are several which refuse to reveal or disguise their degree of authenticity. Breillat argues that there is a degree of hypocrisy associated with distinguishing between "actual" or "real" sex on screen and those sexual acts which are simulated for the camera. According to Breillat,

...it's hypocrisy to ask: "Do they really penetrate or not?" Actors do not simulate: they don't simulate emotions, so at the same time they cannot simulate pleasure - they have to act it. So as they are not going to be able to simulate pleasure, they are going to have to act pleasure. After that it's just really a physical detail (Breillat in Williams, 1999b:14).

Indeed, Breillat's take on "eroticism" is a decidedly "cerebral matter" and it might be argued that the narrated voice-over by the central protagonist, Marie (Caroline Ducey), invites us into her private life just as intimately as our shared visual experience of her various sexual encounters. To an extent, the sense of intimacy which is heightened by our potentially voyeuristic observations of Marie's private life may be likened to the purely physical response which is thought to result from using pornography. During a scene in which Marie is gynaecologically examined by a number of student doctors, she informs the viewer in a voice-over that

Porn movies...protect your libido: you watch a surrogate image. But what you can't tolerate, you can't tolerate in images, either. An image is just as compromising, since it stands for you.

In *Romance*, Breillat "...radically undermines her movie's potential for titillation and voyeurism in a number of ways, often by using prosaic details" (Vincendeau, 1999:51). Furthermore, Ginette Vincendeau (1999:51) notes that the film's presentation of many of the transgressive scenes occurs "...in such hyper-realist detail [that] they becomes almost abstract". Other interpretations, however, insist that *Romance* "...shows that the line between art and pornography seems to be getting even finer" (Rix, 2000).

For Breillat, taboos (and the notion of "pornography") are established through social restrictions - such as censorship - which aim at distinguishing acceptable images from those deemed offensive and dangerous to the prevailing moral climate. While certain filmmakers (like Breillat) seek to destabilise such artificial notions of "acceptability" by blending "...serious....philosophical commentary..." (BBFC press release in Felperin, 1999:13) with visual taboos and transgressive imagery, Richard Falcon (1999:11) notes that there is also an increasing tendency by certain filmmakers to "...have fun' with the taboo". For Falcon, transgressive cinema, in the hands of a group of (postmodern) European directors, has become an "object of nostalgia". Absorbed by mainstream Hollywood comedies and genre films, many once-transgressive concepts have lost their "authentically transgressive" edge. Falcon argues that today's transgressive filmmakers tend to be motivated by "...a need to keep the audience aware that cinematic norms are being challenged" by continually drawing attention to images which clearly resonate beyond the limits of "social acceptability". Actual copulating genitals, acts of "depraved" sexuality, grotesque depictions of bizarre violence, and thematic concerns which transcend the bounds of "normal" human behaviour, are woven into comic and irreverent narrative formats which may be suspected of spectacularising their transgressions rather than attempting to "tell a story" as such.

Bruce LaBruce¹⁴⁰ is a highly controversial Canadian filmmaker whose "avant-garde" style accommodates the "...conventions of gay male pornography while simultaneously sending them up and using them to ask salient questions about the politics of sexual identity..." (de Waal, 2000b:5). While his films include "explicit sex", LaBruce insists that his works are concerned with legitimate issues and employ "real narrative". Part of his concern, he argues, is to counter the "body fascism" which is evident in "all gay porn today" because rather than the human subjects being depicted as individuals with "a distinctive body", they become "...interchangeable cocks and pectorals" (LaBruce in de Waal, 2000b:5). For LaBruce, conventional pornography has become "...monolithic, and the meaning has been flattened out" because "...it's a really conventional medium..." (LaBruce in de Waal, 2000b:5):

...there's a formula, even for these European companies that are making slightly more unusual products. There's a style.... There [have] to be x number of sex scenes, Character A has to fuck Character B x number of times, it has to last x number of minutes, different positions have to be covered... (LaBruce in de Waal, 2000b:5)

In 1999, LaBruce was commissioned by a pornographic film company to make *Skin*

Flick, which he finally cut as two different movies, a "hardcore" and a "softcore" version. The film was billed in the United Kingdom as LaBruce's first "legitimate" porn film. In order to counter the conventional "flattening out" of meaning, LaBruce incorporates "layers of irony" (de Waal, 1999b:5) including reversed stereotypes and iconoclastic moments which are designed to offend. One such scene includes a neo-Nazi skinhead gang-member masturbating over a copy of *Mein Kampf*.

While LaBruce's explicit and graphic depictions of sexual encounters are certainly meant to draw interest and perhaps even arouse a certain type of spectator, it may be argued that "*Skin Flick* is evidence of just how narrow today's gay porn's visuals and narrative vocabularies are" (Arroyo, 1999:56). Despite the "legitimate" attempt to make pornographic material an intellectual exercise, it has been criticised precisely because the sex scenes fail to function as spectacles of titillation:

...sex scenes in porn function as spectacle, designed to turn punters on and get them off. In *Skin Flick*, despite the cast's obvious attractions, these scenes don't work. Perhaps we all appreciate our own porn, but find everyone else's boring, embarrassing or offensive. Or it could be that by trying to do too much within the genre LaBruce forfeits its primary function as masturbation material and risks creating boredom, embarrassment and offence (Arroyo, 1999:56).

Perhaps there is some irony behind a filmmaker using the attractions of a film marketed as "pornography" to question the ideological discourses usually perpetuated by the genre. In one scene, for example, LaBruce attempts to overturn the traditional representation of black men as "...sexual potentates, virile, aggressive people..." (LaBruce in de Waal, 2000b:5), which he views as a form of racism:

So I decided to make a character you're not supposed to represent - a black guy who's into [dominant] white men, getting raped by a gang of skinheads (LaBruce in de Waal, 2000b:5)

While the scene is designed to upset the dynamics of representation by calling into question, and ultimately satirising, more formulaic "rape fantasy scenarios", it also problematises the character's situation by raising the question: "Is this his ultimate nightmare or his ultimate fantasy?" (LaBruce in de Waal, 2000b:5). While scenes such as this stir up discomfiting questions regarding identity politics, LaBruce's medium is chiefly problematic in that its political function interferes with its primary function.¹⁴¹

While actual sex is now increasingly found in "legitimate" cinema as it works its way into the formal narrative component of transgressive arthouse movies, the pornographic film industry itself is growing in stature. While pornography became quite popular during the 1970s, when it was "trendy" to watch *Deep Throat*, for

example, the stigma attached to the watching of pornography coincided with its popularity as a more private "entertainment" and "titillation" form suggested by its virtually complete crossover to the video format. "Encouraged by loosening social mores, pornography has moved towards the mainstream" (Helmore, 1999:2), suggested by both the burgeoning porn market (indicated by increased productivity and sales) and the widespread proliferation of pornographic material via the Internet (the Internet site *Sex.com*, for example, "...claims to have nine million subscribers paying \$24,95 a month" (Helmore, 1999:2)). There is little doubt that the changing availability of visual images featuring nudity and sexual activity has impacted on the perceived acceptability and (by implication) popularity of such material. The question arises as to whether pornography constitutes a form of (postmodern) artistic expression, since it may be understood to be the merging of technology, economy and performance in the service of "entertainment":

Even though George Eliot and Freud taught us, in different ways, to listen to the body, our knowing of the body still seems to be obsessed with viewing it, striving to see it in its moments of most intense sensation. Linda Williams has discussed the pornographic film as an example of Michel Foucault's 'knowledge of pleasure': the apparently insatiable need to see the body perform erotically, organised around moments of orgasm - especially male orgasm, which is visually demonstrable, the orgasm that cannot be faked. Although pornography remains a special realm, its demarcations from acceptable artistic expression have been repeatedly questioned, in ways that define some of the issues of the body and knowledge in our time (Brooks, 1999:145).

In many ways, just as any mainstream narrative film attempts to engage the viewer in an experience by *showing*, so pornographic films attempt to engage a particular type of experience (albeit a very specific form of pleasure) by *showing*. While the basic reactions to each type of *showing* may differ, there exists a fundamental similarity in that the "meaning" of each product is inevitably unique for the viewer. Pornography - like mainstream cinema - simply demonstrates the particular tastes of the individual spectator.

It is the way in which such transgressions (*seen* larger than "life" by the cinema viewer) conflict with the everyday experience of "personal reality", which is perhaps most significant. Breillat's *Romance*, for example, has been criticised because of its presentation of sex acts which conform to "erotic tropes" which too closely resemble "...old-fashioned, oppressive male fantasies..." (Vincendeau, 1999:52). Vincendeau's argument, however, suggests that such fantasies already exist within the popular imagination. Cinematic transgression may therefore be considered to be not so much a dangerous act by the camera, but a representation of socially-constructed ideas of

what constitutes "transgression". Cinema typically becomes "socially inappropriate" and "undesirable" (as many censors term pornography, for example) when it is allowed to mediate enactments of the personal, the private and the intimate. Thus, as increasing numbers of "serious" filmmakers begin to explore "...the parameters of acceptable on-screen...sexual activity...", it may be argued that various so-called "transgressive" cinema forms are merely reworking socially-constructed understandings of "taste" and "excess".

Crash-course in desire

The topic of Crash is the intersection of (sexual) bodies, (automobile) technology, and (catastrophic) medicine, with the cars standing in for modern society, becoming sheer representations of the death drive, and it seems Freud's idea that people are driven towards death and destruction as much as towards survival and reproduction is still wildly transgressive (Dick, 1997:48-49).

The body is always a central concern – and image – in the work of David Cronenberg. His films frequently depict a variety of ways in which the exterior of the human body is penetrated. These penetrations (usually of the flesh) appear to signify a desire to locate some profound truth connected more with human consciousness than with the surface and viscera of the body. His framing of the human form, which often occurs in violent and sexual scenarios, has attracted much negative criticism, such as that of Michael Medved (1993:28) who delivers scathing description of Cronenberg's surreal *Naked Lunch* (1991): "In the course of the film, director David Cronenberg depicts gigantic talking vaginas, and huge insects with dripping penises dangling from their foreheads". Medved's criticism – suggested by his description of specific images in the movie – focuses not on Cronenberg's thematic concern with the (human) body, but on his apparent perversion of socially acceptable references to (human) genitalia and associated (human) sexuality.

In another discussion of Cronenberg's work, Shaviro (1994:141-143) describes how the physical transformations of Cronenberg's characters "literalize" and therefore comment on certain sexual ideological beliefs (Shaviro, 1994:141-143). These transformations – usually as a result of man-made technologies – are visual critiques that question certain gender representations that are typified by particular social, political, and cultural ideologies. Cronenberg's films allow the viewer to observe that, for example, femininity is equated "...with passivity, receptivity, and castration" as a

result of cultural bias, rather than having originated from any "natural necessity" (Shaviro, 1994:142):

Anatomy is not destiny, precisely in the sense that the corporeal is the realm in which the Symbolic inscription of fixed gender identity reaches its limit, and can be broken down (Shaviro, 1994:142).

Cronenberg's objectification of the body is associated not with gender-specificity, but with its arbitrariness and vulnerability, whether male or female, to penetration. When the body is penetrated in his films, sexual conduits are not the only points of entry. Wounds, mechanical pores, and even "Bioports" for the organic "game-pods" of the future, *become* both sexual *and* sexless sites for physical penetration. Similarly, the penis need not be the only object which penetrates the body. Hence, in *eXistenZ*, bodies are penetrated by the cords used to interface with "virtual reality" consoles, while in *Naked Lunch*, syringes are used to inject bug powder into the veins of addicts. This thematic concern with the human flesh and its inter-(enter)ruption finds its way into all of Cronenberg's work, and is frequently foregrounded in one of his most controversial films, *Crash*¹⁴² (1996). Highly criticised for its graphic "transgressive" imagery, the film deals with the strange relationships that develop between a group of seemingly alienated individuals who are connected by a shared sexual fetishism – they all find themselves aroused by automobile accidents.

In *Crash*, danger and sexual excitement commingle in the instant of ("orgasmic") release which is suggested by the explosive impact – or crash – of an automobile. Sexual excitement and "desire" are literally equated with the danger, terror and potential death which emanate from the experience of cars colliding or careening off the side of the road. Just as car accidents are themselves "unnatural" events, constituted by disastrous experiences involving manmade machines, so the film depicts numerous sexual episodes and expressions of desire as highly artificial constructions which refuse to draw the viewer into anything more than detached fascination with the apparently "erotic" spectacles:

...despite its perverse subject-matter, *Crash* is oddly and unexpectedly detached, sombre, even pensive (Creed, 1998:175).

While the characters appear to be absorbed in endless struggles to seek out "authentic" experience, their efforts are subverted at every turn by the intrusion of some artificial surrogate (a car crash, video footage of car accidents, or even the fetishistic metallic aircraft against which Catherine Ballard (Deborah Unger) has sex during the opening scene). According to Barbara Creed, even those sex scenes which

involve seemingly natural encounters may be understood as extensions of some form of prosthesis:

...in all of the sex scenes the woman offers herself to be penetrated: she bears the 'wound' that is fucked, and she is represented as the prosthetic other. The possibility of union between human and machine is displaced, in the main, on to the woman's body (Creed, 1998:178).

Essentially, *Crash* aims to literalise the (sexual) union of human flesh and human technology, using various images which allude to the fact that man and machine have already merged at a level which transcends the flesh. Sex, therefore, even when it occurs as an act of human "intercourse", serves as an expression of mankind's fusion with technology.

The idea of car accidents assuming a sensual and sexual quality serves to underline the director's concern with the artificial ways in which sex and gender roles are established in human society. Assumptions around traditional patterns of patriarchal authority, sexual identity and the construction of desire are vividly questioned in this "shocking" movie where sexuality refuses to be governed by accepted norms, where the boundaries between various hetero-, homo- and polysexual experiences are literally, figuratively, and visually questioned, where sexual desire is mediated by non-biological subjects, and where unnatural (man-made) orifices become the focus of erotic s(t)imulation and penetration:

Sheaths of metal, shards of glass, ripped leather upholstery, blood glistening on the steering wheel, two crash survivors copulating in a car, a man fucking a wound in the leg of a female crash victim, repeated episodes of anal sex, a car fetishist re-enacting the James Dean crash 'for real' – images such as these confront the viewer in David Cronenberg's film, *Crash*.... (Creed, 1998:175).

Spectacles of ambivalent, confusing, and even disturbing "pleasures" are in evidence throughout *Crash*. The film's ambiguously cold world simultaneously suggests a universe of recognisable "realities", while constantly re-asserting itself as a completely insular universe which is necessarily *different* from the image of the world with which we are familiar (such *difference* is suggested by the film's treatment of ambiguous sexual identities, and the fetishisation of automobile accidents, for example). Cronenberg's treatment of transgressive material is such that he "...disrupts the power mechanisms normally attributed to classic narrative cinema not by distancing himself from them, but by pushing them as far as they can go" (Shaviro, 1994:156). *Crash* is problematic because it fails to offer any causal motivation for the feelings which it provokes. Cronenberg constructs images and scenes which resonate a strong seductive impulse but which cannot be explained. This impulse is echoed by the

desires of the characters themselves, who find that they are captivated by erotic urges which they cannot explain. This desire-beyond-comprehension is a desire constructed at the surface without any rational or causal explanation, no latent meaning or interpretable logic. The frequent depiction of mediated erotic encounters displaces (or interrupts) the viewer's established "logic" of erotic identification and compels him or her towards a form of voyeuristic detachment.¹⁴³ It is in this sense that Shaviro (1994:156) argues that Cronenberg's films locate the viewing subject's "...most intense pleasures...in the unresolved tensions of vulnerability, ambivalence, and fear", to the extent that "[t]he cinematic gaze [becomes] violently embedded in the flesh".

Cronenberg's thematic concerns are not without inspiration from the "actual" world, however. The images of sexual arousal arising from the surfaces of mechanical objects such as cars can be linked (indirectly, perhaps) to a range of media images (typically advertising) which attempt to evoke the same superficial interest in mechanical commodities by seducing the eye with human models in various states of undress or in various sexually alluring poses. However, as Creed (1998:177) points out, "[u]nlike the images of modern advertising – to which *Crash* pays tribute – the car is ultimately rendered desirable not because of its sleek, perfect lines and gleaming metal, but because of its potential to fuse with human flesh". Leslie Dick (1997:48) notes that "...the cars in *Crash* have a perceptual presence that outweighs their styling" and ultimately, they serve as "...representations of technology, imbued with the promise of sex and death...", but they are "...not consumer desirables". Furthermore, in *Crash* it is the wound (the interruption or penetration of flesh) rather than the flesh itself which is eroticised as the site of union between the body and metal. This eroticisation of the wound is the theoretical terrain of Mark Seltzer, an American who defines "wound culture" as "...the convening of the public around scenes and mass spectacles of violence" (Seltzer in Davey, 1998:4), which is illustrated by the mass media hype generated around the death of Princess Diana, for example. Creed points out that Cronenberg is fascinated with wounds (evidenced in *The Fly* (1986), *Dead Ringers* (1988), *Videodrome* (1982), and *eXistenZ* (1999), for example), but that this interest "...finds it[s] most extreme statement in *Crash*, specifically in the sequences in which the characters eroticize (touch, caress) the wounds of other accident survivors" (Creed, 1998:177-178). To a certain extent, these characters' obsessive interest in wounds and accidents is simply an exaggerated echo of the perverse interest in disasters and tragedies (such as the Diana crash)

shown by countless people in the "real" world.

In *Crash*, desire becomes directly connected to the subject's fetishisation of spectacles involving collisions, accidents and the wounds which result from these forms of "artificial violence". This "desire" is inevitably expressed as sexual desire which is most strongly suggested during a scene in which a group of fetishists watch video footage of car accidents as though they were enjoying a pornographic video. Creed (1998:175) argues that the film "...asks us to consider the nature of desire in the postindustrial, postmodern age". In this sense, desire is understood as "...the opposite of the Romantic ideal of truth, beauty and wholeness; the postmodern desiring subject yearns for an experience marked by crash culture – division, simulation, brutality, obscenity, perversity, death" (Creed, 1998:175). *Crash* consistently presents the notion that desire is an extension of the unimaginable, the intolerable, the unexpected, the insurmountable. Desire is, ultimately, the need to know the unknowable. In its extreme form, desire is coupled with death - the ultimate unknown, and the ultimate obsession.

Shaviro (1994:155) argues that Cronenberg's films reject fantasy and embrace abjection, "...just as they undermine symbolic and ideological processes in order to affirm the impropriety of the real body". Everywhere in *Crash*, Cronenberg appears to be constructing images which wilfully shatter our understanding of socially engendered norms regarding the body and its primacy as a sexually defined entity. In a particularly lengthy and relatively explicit scene, James Ballard (the central character, played by James Spader) penetrates his wife (Catherine) from behind as they engage in extremely passionless sex. During sex, Catherine questions James in an attempt to arouse him by activating his latent homoerotic desires/curiosities:

"Can you imagine what his anus is like?... Would you like to sodomize him? Would you like to put your penis right into his anus, thrust it up his anus? Tell me, describe it to me... Describe how you'd reach over and unzip his greasy jeans... Have you ever sucked a penis?... Have you ever tasted semen?"

Effectively, the visual spectacle of the heterosexual lovemaking act becomes a simulation of other, hidden desires which Catherine and James share. While the *visual* spectacle of intercourse suggests a moment of heterosexual eroticism, the questions which Catherine uses as an aid to their mutual orgasm are directed outside, beyond the spectacle. Catherine's pornographic rambling concerns the mysterious bisexual character, Vaughan (Elias Koteas), who later shares other ambiguous sexual experiences with both James and Catherine.

Ultimately, *Crash* forces the spectacles of transgression into banality by encouraging the viewer to remain focussed on the spectacle of taboo-breaking. Consequently, the viewer becomes bound up in detached contemplation, so that "[w]hen James gets around to fucking [Gabrielle's unspeakable wound,] it is both shocking and very amusing because we can't forget the taboos around disability, this ultimate site of the forbidden" (Dick, 1997:49). Botting and Wilson (1998:185) further argue that Cronenberg is concerned with the "...extinction of sexual desire...", while the fetishistic framing of car accidents serves to imbue them with "...a new, erotic meaning". The "desire" for flesh is thus replaced by the illusion of "desire" through the simulation of the erotic:

Liberated from any taboo that might once have given it meaning, all 'normal' sexual activity disappears and the phallus (the taboo) is desired precisely as a body that has been beaten black and blue, scarred with twisted metal. Imagined and fetishized as the signifier of the desire of an Other now seen as machine, the battered and broken body is the last remnant of a human erotic imaginary in the face of a fully automated form of desire. As the bedroom is replaced by the car, sexual organs and erogenous zones are replaced by scars in a technological supplementation of quasi-erotic energy and intensity; ultimately, cars, scars and signifiers conjoin to sever sex from bodies and organs (Botting, 1998:188).

It is perhaps in this sense that Leslie Dick (1997:48) argues that the film's "medical gaze" makes *Crash* "[n]ot a pornographic text, [but] rather a text on pornography, a cool, detached look at sexual obsession itself". In much the same way that both still and moving images have enabled the source of desire and eroticism to be replaced by modes of mechanical reproduction (epitomised by the production of pornography, for example) the site of some intense automated experience becomes the source of the thrill in *Crash*.

In another sense, *Crash* depicts the human "desire" to achieve the immortality achieved by screen legends through artificial means such as automobile accidents (exemplified by James Dean). Botting and Wilson (1998:190) point out that Hollywood has a tradition of romanticising both disasters and the victims of disasters. Photographic images, they argue, are "...the only means by which the hypermodern subject can verify its existence imaginarily and symbolically in an umbilical connection to a reality 'that has been'" (1998:190). While photographed or filmed images suggest an imaginary "frozen" moment in time, so the scars and wounds left on the bodies of accident victims represent a momentary – and supposedly "real" – transformation of the subject through its contact with the source of the wound. Thus, "[a]bsolutely bound up with a hyperhomogenizing system whose only point of fissure is the 'crash'

itself, crashes become, for the hypermodern subject, simulations of the traumatic (missed) encounter with the real" (Botting, 1998:190). In this way, photography and cinematography bear some similarity with the immortalising crash itself; both offer the human subject a hint of immortality, while they are both also representations of the mechanical at work in contemporary society. When the crash is filmed or recorded photographically, this becomes a way of imprinting the artificial "near-miss" on yet another artificial surface (as an image), rendering the final image *hyperartificial*. Crash-fetishist Vaughan, aspires to achieve immortality by photographing his own final car crash. This act will, however, necessarily prove to be his undoing – the moment in which his mortality is *realised*.

The final scene of the film reinforces the central thesis of the "...illusion of a sexual relation" (Botting, 1998:191) between James and his wife. Having attempted to enact a fatal car crash with Catherine, James finds her still alive after ramming her from behind with Vaughan's 1963 Black Lincoln. The atmosphere is consolatory and reassuring, with James tenderly uttering "maybe next time, darling...maybe next time" before the couple begin to make love at the scene of the non-fatal accident. Whereas most of the film has shown the crash to be a surrogate for the enactment of "real" sexual desire, now sex becomes a consolation for the couple who have failed to achieve the desired "...fatal bliss in the orgasmic instant of the crash" (Botting, 1998:191). The scene offers the illusion of a restored relationship, but in effect the relationship is now hollow, suffering from an accumulation of artificial desire. The emptiness of their relationship reflects the relationship of the viewer to the film itself, emphasising itself as a cool, detached experience which we have merely been witnesses to:

The screen discloses itself to be an empty space of repetition: sex, sex, sex, car, crash, car, sex, sex in car, sex, crash, cars, sex in car, crash...and so on. Just as there is no sexual relation, so, in *Crash*, there is no cinematic relation, no fantastic unification between audience and moving images, scars having become too visible as vicious visual slashes severing voyeur and screen. Indeed, instead of the pleasurable cinematic spectacle of a narcissistic [*sic*], urban alienation, *Crash* offers only the relation of non-relation, an experience of redundancy in the face of endless work-sex-pleasure that unfolds on film in the absence of a *jouissance* that is always missed, that occurs elsewhere, in another scene, at another time, beyond human comprehension in the missed instantaneousness of the crash (Botting, 1998:191-192).

Natural born outsiders and the road to *Nowhere*

Come the 60s, the reckless joyride became the most authentic, expressive and rowdiest way for a new generation of self-exploring Americans to redefine their territory and thumb their noses at their parents' Levittown-style middle class of two-car garages and automated kitchens. Today, there's little frontier to speak of and little hope of national rediscovery, and the movies confirm the general sense of Generation-X defeatism by transforming the travelled landscape into a bricolage of cinematic tropes - especially the omnipresent stench of burnt gunpowder and smoking bodies - and by being, with or without a helpful dollop of irony, unabashed Road Movies (Atkinson, 1994:17).

Dennis Hopper's cult "road movie", *Easy Rider*, is a "classic" example of a film genre which is possibly best defined in terms of its refusal to follow the logic of cause and effect. Instead, this tradition of films takes both its protagonists and its audience along quite arbitrary stretches of actual or imaginary highway as a simple excuse to explore various themes, sub-plots and pop-cultural phenomena. Usually, therefore, it is the journey rather than the destination which is of central concern - the highway becomes a landscape for some form of personal and social discovery framed by the endless narrative of the road movie itself:

Characters hit the road less for any concrete, plot-driven reason than because they've seen a lot of movies and that's what you do (Atkinson, 1994:17).

In a sense, road movies are ontological journeys, offering the viewer a range of sensations and experiences from which to construct an individual journey. And because the highway (or any road for that matter) is an essentially a symbol of both human "progress" and "interconnectedness", it is also a perfect link with the contemporary human condition. An ever-present reminder of past journeys, as well as present social, commercial, and technological developments, the road is also a symbol for an unknown future. In cinema, the road becomes the perfect avenue from which to "view" postmodern culture.

Oliver Stone's MTV-styled serial-killer road movie, *Natural Born Killers*, was originally penned by Tarantino, and although he later publicly disowned the film, it certainly bears some of his familiar trademarks. A frenzied, fast-paced multi-media concoction which serves as a send-up of the mass media, this road movie has its *Bonnie And Clyde*-styled Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis) driving "...roughshod through the detritus of 1990s popular culture" (Winnert, 1995:266). Richard Falcon (1998a:24) sees *Natural Born Killers* as the "...acme of the pop promo's influence on the movies..." and sees the film as "...an attempt to use one

dream/nightmare of the video age – the ‘MTV aesthetic’ – to critique another (‘reality television’), with even less capacity for coherent meaning than either”. The assemblage of recognisably contemporary mass media images runs the gamut from a farcical satire of the nuclear family sit-com (entitled *I Love Mallory*, the programme-within-the-film includes vivid allusions to incest and wife-beating, while depicting scenes of masturbation, assault and murder) to an hysterical parody of sensationalistic television “documentaries” (*American Maniacs*, whose ratings-obsessed host/star ultimately sacrifices his life in an absurd attempt to sustain the wave of “popular” crime which his show exploits).¹⁴⁴

Stone’s direction employs a mishmash of multi-media effects and imagery, visually confusing digital effects, ostentatious back-projections, and a variety of animated inserts which add up to “...white-hot invention mark[ing] this pop-assemblage beast out as a towering film achievement” (Winnert, 1995:266). Clark Collis (1994:28) refers to the film as “...a must-see for anyone with even a cursory interest in the exploitation of violence, the state of 90s society, or stunningly innovative filmmaking”. Indeed, it is Stone’s use of high-risk “all-out audio-visual” cinematic techniques which conflates the (hyperreal) film world with the viewer’s own (hyperreal) world. We are, after all, confronted with an onslaught of multi-media images (amounting to sensory assault) on a daily basis, and these are deployed throughout *Natural Born Killers* in ways which simulate our own “actual” experience of the hypermediated world:

Where NBK succeeds...is in being the kind of risk-taking, all-out audio-visual experience that comes along all too rarely. Using a variety of different film stocks, back projections, narrative structures, synapse-searing set designs and a remorselessly pounding soundtrack, Stone has constructed an extreme, yet frighteningly recognisable vision of modern day America that would have the Founding Fathers weeping into their beards. It’s an assault from start to finish, and at times is bleakly and undeniably funny (Collis, 1994:28).

His technique reflects our day-to-day experience of a hypermediated world which is experienced as “reality”. In a sense, Mallory’s violent rescue from the banality of a television sit-com world (of canned laughter, predictable endings, unquestioned patriarchal authority and subliminal emotional abuse) is a metaphor for the experience of watching *Natural Born Killers*, which emphasises the hyperreal clichés which ordinarily keep us hostage (the way Mallory is a prisoner in her own home). Escape from one hyperreality only plunges Mallory and her rescuer (Mickey) into another, however, and the two lovers soon become exploitation material in the hands of a consumer-driven investigative documentary dealing specifically with serial killers and mass murderers. Having destroyed one television world, Mickey and Mallory are

soon drawn into another: they become the "stars" of *American Maniacs*, which is hosted by a television reporter (Wayne Gayle, played by Robert Downey Jr) who is obsessed with media ratings and personal stardom. Thus, while Stone's film is constructed as though it were a music video concoction of disconnected images with transgressive themes, its characters are themselves trapped within a world which can only exist through mediation.

Another subversive road movie is independent filmmaker Gregg Araki's *The Doom Generation* (1995), which has been described as *Natural Born Killers* "...with a sense of humour, involving decapitation, ejaculations and major sacrilegious spectacle" (Worsdale, 1999g:12).¹⁴⁵ While the "road to nowhere" allows Mickey and Mallory Knox to become hyperreal media personalities, for the doomed "heroes" of *The Doom Generation* the road represents a means of escaping the ever-watchful "eye" (gaze) of traditional society:

Gregg Araki's films...are filled with people who are going nowhere, even when they take a road trip. When they leave town, they're still in La-la Land. There is a sense that they never even know how they came to be in Los Angeles (Blashill, 1995:124).

In *The Doom Generation* (subtitled "A Heterosexual Movie by Gregg Araki")¹⁴⁶, the protagonists – like the audience – spend a great deal of time *looking*. In fact, for the three unlikely co-navigators of this particular road-encounter, a drive-in cinema is the starting point for a rebellious attempt to escape "the system" which is marked by overwhelming banality, mediated violence, endless consumerism, an apocalyptic fear of sex brought about by the dreaded AIDS-plague, and a proliferation of coded systems (symbolically denoted by the religiously-loaded numeric code, "666"). The concern with acts of looking is a reference to the viewer who is constantly engaged in the act of watching (and thereby "experiencing") the film itself. Just as the film's characters experience the world through the view provided by the windows and mirrors of their vehicle, so the viewer experiences the cinematic world through the frame of the screen. While the three central characters are clearly products of a contaminated "reality", they seek comfort and reassurance by turning their gaze towards each other in an attempt to detach themselves from the outside world (society). The result is an intense relationship which recalls the far gentler and less subversive *menage-a-trois* comedy-drama, *Threesome* (Andrew Fleming, 1994). In both films, it is the watching, suspicious – and frequently, paranoid – eyes of the excluded outside world which represent danger and anxiety (or fear) for the respective "threesomes" (in *Threesome*, guilt eventually drives the characters apart,

while in *The Doom Generation*, Jordan is violently killed by supposedly militant members of the "outside world"). According to Araki,

...the film is about innocence and a relationship that's too pure for this world. It's about this very American sensibility of destroying that which you do not understand. The world doesn't understand these kids and their relationship, so the world cannot allow them to live. That's why I don't see any of my movies as mean or nihilistic, because the protagonists are kind of innocent. It's the world that is bad (in Blashill, 1995:22).

Ultimately, it is a film about the social rejection of "otherness".

In some sense, the film offers an empty picture of the postmodern world, framed by a narrative which is at once tragic and frivolously entertaining:

Briefly put, *Doom* concerns three beautiful twentysomething kids who embark on an accidentally satanic crime spree, during which they eat a lot of junk food and do each other every time they stop driving. The film ends with a sacrificial homo-cide. The dialogue is fuck-you simple, the leads are magazine-model sexy, and the soundtrack is intense-rad. *Doom* is a generational coming-of-age film, but once the heroes and heroine cum, there's nothing left. No epiphanies, just a bag of Doritos in the backseat (Blashill, 1995:120).

However, a sense of the film's concern with "humanity" is evident in the tenderness and compassion that "...occasionally wriggles free from beneath [Araki's] confused, seminihilistic surface" (Blashill, 1995:120). While his characters are indeed doomed, they at least believe in love, because, as Araki (in Blashill, 1995:120) puts it, "...they have to believe in something". Araki draws viewers into the journey shared by the three protagonists because we too have to "believe" in something, and in a world of freewheeling nihilism, these three are the only representatives of hope. Furthermore, the viewer can relate to the characters in at least one major respect: like the protagonists, the viewer is engaged in an act of complicit voyeurism which is a necessary by-product of the act of cinema-viewing. Just as the three central characters turn their gaze to one another in order to detach themselves from the outside world, so the viewer focuses his or her gaze on the screen, and, more specifically, on the humanity of the three characters on that screen.

In one of the most obvious displays of blatant voyeurism, Xavier¹⁴⁷ (Johnathon Schaech) watches from outside a motel bathroom while Jordan (James Duval) and his girlfriend, Amy (Rose McGowan), make love in the bath. Araki concentrates our gaze on the deep concentration of the voyeuristically-involved Xavier who masturbates throughout the proceedings. What is immediately evident, is that Xavier's onanistic voyeurism is not directed towards a mechanically reproduced image of sex or

sexuality (he is not using pornography or "reality video" as was the case in *sex, lies and videotape*), but at an act of love-making which is supposedly unmediated within the context of the film. Yet, it is necessary to remember that in terms of the film, Xavier is himself the "mediator", conveying a sense of the erotic act which is denied to the viewer. Failing to spectacularise the sex scene itself, Araki actually draws attention to the intentional omission by focusing the viewer's gaze on the ecstasy of Xavier's experience. More than this, Araki highlights the fact that by ignoring the coupling in the bath he can simulate a far more vividly transgressive act than heterosexual lovemaking: male orgasm. Xavier's out-of-frame ejaculation is followed by a close-up of the semen, which effectively stands in for the aforementioned transgression. The film then forces the viewer to share Xavier's fascinated contemplation of the taboo substance, culminating with a shot in which he licks it from his hand.¹⁴⁸

The extent of the on-screen transgression transforms the scene into a spectacle which draws attention to the viewer's own act of spectatorship through the self-consciousness of Xavier's voyeurism. However, the film's conscious framing of taboo imagery serves to highlight the fact that while Xavier's act of looking is immediate, our experience is mediated by the film camera. Later, when Xavier and Amy fuck, the unmediated nature of his original masturbation scene is made even more apparent as if Araki wishes to draw a very firm distinction between *presence* (or "being there") and *absence* (or "having a detached view by means of a voyeuristic agent such as a cinema screen"). This scene recalls Xavier's earlier voyeuristic act in that he allows Amy to *look* at his exposed tattooed penis¹⁴⁹ before they have furious sex in the back of her car (Amy had earlier *watched* Jordan while he had been urinating, prior to their love-making in the bath). When Xavier and Jordan have simultaneous intercourse with Amy, and Xavier is in effect also making love to Jordan, his connection with them during his earlier unmediated voyeurism is once again recalled. His "being there" has evolved into a "real" situation in which his fantasy has finally been realised. Similarly, the same sense of "being there" is finally realised for Jordan who had previously masturbated outside another motel room while watching Amy and Xavier making love. For the viewer, however, "being there" in relation to mediated sex scenes remains always an impossibility.

It is the three-way (unmediated) voyeurism between these central characters which draws them together and, in a sense, serves to disconnect them from the outside world. Simultaneously, however, the viewer becomes a necessary part of that outside

world, for our relationship with these three characters is necessarily mediated. For Amy, Jordan and Xavier, escaping the watchful eye of this outside world is no easy fantasy. Just as we are able to watch their most intimate moments (Xavier's masturbation scene, for example), so the watchful gaze of the outside world (which is constantly under surveillance or mediated observation) is ultimately inescapable for Amy, Jordan and Xavier. Each time Xavier, Amy and Jordan stop in order to overnight, they encounter potential dangers in the form of representatives from the society which they are trying to escape. Jordan's initial description of Xavier, aptly summarises their predicament; he tells Amy that "[Xavier's] sort of like us. Lost. Like he doesn't fit in". Araki's film is clearly concerned with finding a space for the acceptance of "otherness" (for those who do not "fit in") and it is in this respect that it is a very "human" road movie "...about the search for love in this world of shit" (Araki in Blashill, 1995:122).

In many ways, both *Natural Born Killers* and *The Doom Generation* recall aspects of Godard's *Weekend* (1968). Considered one of his most political films, "...scenes of rage and violence..." are set up to create "...an apocalyptic vision of capitalist consumer society, centring on flaming highway deaths and car crashes – the end of civilization exemplified by the automobile" (Vogel, 1974:27). For Godard, the automobile is a symbol of consumerism and material desire which can be linked not only to sexual politics, but also to violent carnage and social corruption. The most famous sequence of the film is "...a seemingly interminable horizontal pan along the length of a monstrous highway traffic tie-up, revealing crashes, indifferent drivers, boredom, playing children, death: an original, terrifying metaphor for the decline of civilization" (Vogel, 1974:28). Indeed, the dreadful, almost ominous presence of the camera as it moves along and casually, unobtrusively captures an endless image of humanity come to a halt, is a terrifying and disturbing one. Without voice-over commentary, without focus on specific characters or dialogue, the camera merely "shows". It is also a devastating indictment of contemporary society. *Weekend* may represent the most static of road movies, but it certainly evokes the same feelings of social discontent suggested by faster, flashier and more contemporary films of the same "genre". It also evokes image of social hopelessness which is frequently associated with the concept of "a road to nowhere":

Road movies are too cool to address seriously socio-political issues. Instead they express the fury and suffering at the extremities of civilised life, and give their restless protagonists the false hope of a one-way ticket to nowhere (Atkinson, 1994:16).

In an age of indifference, the road movie becomes an ideal stretch of detached exploration, succinctly described by the Indian mystic M. N. Chatterjee (Atkinson, 1994:16), who notes that when the destination is unknown, "...any road will get you there". For the characters in such films, it is the freedom – or sense of escape – which is the "dream":

The journey's the thing, and anyone who thinks differently is just wasting gas. Once Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper declared "the American Dream" as their destination, it became obvious that where you were going hardly mattered, and that the Dream was the road itself, even (or especially) if it runs in a circle and ends in hapless carnage (Atkinson, 1994:16).

As these roads are inevitably endless, it is left to the viewer to continue the journeys into the "real" world, transforming cinematic experience into acts of human significance.

The cult of the surface

In the arts, the trivial and the profane experienced a renewed valuation through pop culture. The old dichotomy between high and low culture receded, because the self-centered, career- and consumer-oriented yuppies sought relaxation, rather than education or edification, from culture (Gronemeyer, 1999:157).

While *The Doom Generation* uses the free-wheeling structure of the road movie as a *cool* means of depicting a misplaced generation engaged in an artificial "escape" (or at least attempt at escape) from the "evils" of contemporary existence, Gregg Araki's *Nowhere* (1998) "...revels in...cartoon camp; [and] its storm of sex and violence celebrates American pop culture with punning, postmodern artifice" (Spencer, 1998:36). A subversive take on the "all-American high school movie", Araki's film blends surrealistic fantasy with "Day-Glo hyper-realism" used to effectively produce "...an eye-scorching trip through the millennial madness of contemporary Los Angeles" (Spencer, 1998:36). Once again, Araki replicates a sense of wilful superficiality which – in his film at least – appears to have devoured "reality". The result is an enjoyable romp through a pastiche high-school movie which at once recalls the world in which we find ourselves, the world of countless referenced films, and a world of pure superficiality and artifice.

Araki fills the film with an assortment of strange, over-the-top and frequently transgressive characters (bulimics, drug addicts, dominatrices, a lesbian named

Lucifer, aliens and an abductee). Liese Spencer (1998:36) writes that the characters in *Nowhere* "...are not so much real characters as 'drag' teens parodying the highly skewed solipsism of adolescence". And, indeed, the explicit violence and sex do play out as if they were pure parodies of various cinematic worlds, epitomised by the image-splattered landscape of Los Angeles. The central protagonist, Dark Smith (James Duval), is a bisexual schoolboy trying to find happiness in a cartoonish world of polymorphous perversity. Popular images and "image" are all that is left by way of culture in Dark's darkly colourful world and Araki constantly references popular culture in order to allude to our own hypermediated hyperreality. In one particularly "violent" scene, for example, a man named Elvis batters another character named Handjob to death using a can of Campbell's soup. Spencer (1998:36) notes that, as if to over-emphasise the double reference to Warhol and pop art/culture, the hyperreal blood which splatters over the various onlookers, Elvis and Handjob himself, could quite easily "...be Warhol's Own Brand Ketchup". Essentially, Araki's film is a hyperbolic suggestion that the "real" and the hyperreal are inseparable, with the latter having absorbed and extinguished the former. Ironically, Araki revels in this site of disappearance of "the real", producing a film which is at once comic parody and social satire.

Another film which presents its artificial excesses in a playful and thoroughly superficial way, is the comedy-horror film, *Bride of Chucky* (Ronny Yu, 1998) which offers a contemporary twist on the popular slasher horror movies of the Eighties: "In this post-*Scream* era of savvy teen chillers, *Bride of Chucky* is irreverent towards itself, with the characters aware of Chucky's previous exploits" (Hunter, 1999:4). Linda Ruth Williams (1999:38) praises the film's layers of parody:

Relentlessly erudite, as *Bride of Chucky* piles on the references you get the strange sensation you're watching a parody of a parody, a film which gleefully grabs this very 90s form of self-reflexivity, chews it up and spits it out: been there, done that, bought the T-shirt.

Bride of Chucky, in fact, goes to "excessive" lengths to reiterate its endless stream of self-conscious displays of playful references to its own history. The opening scene, which features a uniformed police officer wandering through an evidence storage facility, pointedly references other horror films which have given rise to sequels by focussing on artefacts from movies such as Michael Myers' mask from *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), Freddy's glove from *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Leatherface's chainsaw from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and Jason's hockey mask from the *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980). In fact, as

Williams (1999:38) writes, "[s]o embedded are these references in a context of fiction, it's absurd to try to relate them to fact. *It's Alive* [Larry Cohen, 1974], *The Exorcist*, *Hellraiser* [Clive Barker, 1987], *Natural Born Killers*, even David Cronenberg at his most gynaecological, are all points in the film's reality co-ordinates, along with its own fictive past referred to in Tiffany's newspaper cuttings".

The film makes a marked point of referring to its own classical inspiration by having Tiffany (Jennifer Tilly), who is destined to become Chucky's "bride", watch James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) at the time of her demise at Chucky's hands. In fact, she is electrocuted by a television on which Elsa Lanchester (the actress playing Frankenstein's bride) can clearly be seen. Ironically, while Frankenstein's bride is "brought to life" by means of an electrical current, Chucky's bride-to-be is killed by an electric current. Also, the two possessed dolls live out a journey that parodically recalls that experienced by another outlaw duo in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie And Clyde* (1967), and also by the more recent Mickey and Mallory Knox of *Natural Born Killers* infamy. Further irony occurs when the young lovers, Jesse (Nick Stabile) and Jade (Katherine Heigl), whom the dolls use to hitch a lift, are compared, on television news, to the pairs of mass murderers (or serial killers) of the two aforementioned road movies. The viewer is made to realise that in this particular movie world, the distinction between "reality" and mediated "reality" (or hyperreality) does not exist. Williams (1999:38) notes that "[u]nlike *Scream*, where the participants redirect their world so it looks like a movie, *Bride of Chucky* refuses to countenance that there is a world beyond the movie". The "reality" referred to in this film is the artificial "reality" of other film worlds, while the film itself becomes a *hyperartificial* parody of those worlds.

Early in the film, a character calling himself Damien¹⁵⁰ Baylock (Alexis Arquette) remarks that Chucky is "so 80s". Indeed, "Chucky" is himself a cinematic artefact born and raised during the 1980s and this, the fourth film in the series, accepts itself as a film which is way out of its temporal orbit, imposing on itself the need for self-parody. The result, however, is a comic twist on the genre, coolly "out-parodying horror-as-parody" (Williams, 1999:38). In fact, in one scene where Chucky is about to use a large knife to kill the dislikeable Chief Warren Kincaid (John Ritter), Tiffany reminds him that his choice of weapon is old-fashioned and that something a little more extravagant is required in order to stage a Nineties' killing. Taking the advice, Chucky sets up a device which launches a barrage of nails at Kincaid. The result is

further intertextual referencing as we realise that Kincaid's nail-impaled face is a low-budget version of the Pinhead character in the *Hellraiser* series. For those viewers who fail to note the *Hellraiser* reference immediately, Chucky goes on to comment that the picture looks "familiar". Of course, the fun with this particular aspect of horror as a reference does not end immediately. When Kincaid shows signs of life some time later, Chucky does indeed use the knife to finish him off. Tiffany responds by remarking that "a true classic never goes out of style", which is as much a comment on the choice of weapon as it is on the genre and its history. Not only a tribute to the numerous films which it references, *Bride of Chucky* also refers to a plethora of films which inject violence and killing with a "knowing" sense of humour. Worsdale (1999c:12), for example, compares the "...vein of humour in the killing stakes..." of *Bride of Chucky* to that of *Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death* (J.F Lawton, 1988), "...which featured a former chat show host who turned into a 'man-eating Piranha-woman'". As a result, *Bride of Chucky* offers "...a campy and ironic view of how we get a thrill, and even a laugh, out of seeing people getting 'slagged' on screen" (Worsdale, 1999c:12). The film forces the viewer to laugh at the "creative" ways in which screen characters are massacred for our pleasure, thereby acknowledging its own horror and sadism as a type of "guilty pleasure".

Much of the homage and intertextual referencing is used as a foundation for ridiculous cinematic humour, extending the relationship between horror and surrealism: here the two plastic dolls not only have sex, but Chucky's bride does indeed spawn an infant for a new generation of filmgoers (in a new generation of sequels, one imagines). In her review of the film, Williams (1999:38) concludes that:

Whether this parody is plagiarism, pastiche or punk postmodernism is perhaps irrelevant given the fun *Bride of Chucky* has with its sources. Mixed together in this unholy way, what emerges is a loving homage to a movie history gleefully raided by body snatchers.

Bride of Chucky represents yet another variation of the post-classical horror film genre. Here, the director goes all out to indulge an obvious, over-the-top and completely self-reflexive brand of fun. In fact, one may reasonably argue that the material from which the dolls are made points to the foregrounding of the movie's self-conscious superficiality. In other words, the literal depthlessness of the two possessed dolls (which are made of plastic) reinforces the idea that the film is a *reflection* or *symptom* of a society which is defined by surfaces rather than meaning or depth. These characters are therefore uncompromisingly artificial and the self-reflexive nature of their actions, their dialogue and of the entire film, reflects the

inevitably detached involvement of the audience – at the surface of the film. The narrative is mediated by pastiche and parody elements which make the material so “erudite” and “laudably cerebral” (to quote Williams, 1999:38) that it is impossible to become drawn into the action.

One of the most influential contemporary European filmmakers is the Spaniard, Pedro Almodóvar, whose work can be described as “[w]ilfully frivolous and superficial...as identity parades, an acting out of roles with no depth or essence” (Smith, 1994:10). Almodóvar’s films are often considered perverse, cruel, and contemptuously cool (his cinematic observations of perversion and cruelty are not necessarily intended to arouse either positive or negative reactions; his films are simultaneously “involved” and “detached”). His body of work has evolved in direct response to a repressive Catholic schooling, and his films have grown from “...a bunch of zero-budget campy sex flicks....[t]he most notorious of [which] was *Folle Me, Folle Me, Tim* [1978] (slang for Fuck Me, Fuck Me, Tim)” to such recent successes as *The Flower of My Secret* (released in 1995) which has been dubbed by some as “...a mature, sensitive post-modernist melodrama” (Worsdale, 1998:13), and *Carne Tremula (Live Flesh, 1997)*, a sensitive tale about love and revenge. His films shatter taboos and explore socially transgressive themes, while being informed by a playful predilection for camp and kitsch. Almodóvar normalises fringe and marginal characters who “...seem to have tumbled from the soundstages of a nearby television soap opera” (Howe, 1998:4) or who indulge in “...scabrous comic violence, drug-taking and kinky fetishism” (Worsdale, 1998:13). Yet, his films serve as bizarre social commentaries which make use of dark comedy to inject “...our Jerry Springer-hosted world with a strange dose of sanity” (Howe, 1998:4). Frivolity and superficiality abound in his films and it is through these surface level elements that Almodóvar engages viewers in an experience which is at once involved and detached.

According to Smith (1994:10), Almodóvar’s devotion to the “...cult of the surface is nowhere more evident than in *Kika*”, which was released in Spain in 1993 while the country faced political scandal, record unemployment, and when particular concern was being levelled against the encroachment on the personal by the newly-regulated media. Prior to its release in the United Kingdom, Paul Julian Smith wrote of *Kika* in terms of the social cynicism of the time:

Ever sensitive to the mood of the moment, Almodóvar’s latest feature offers evidence of a new pessimism clouding a famously sunny outlook; the erstwhile

muse of Madrid now proclaims the city to be "unliveable", swamped by drug-related crime. The winter would also seem to mark a new low for the once promising Spanish film industry (Smith, 1998:6).

Kika's colourful surface belies this sense of doom, but the film does play out as a transgressive black comedy which is highly critical of the mass media. Almodóvar's approach is distinctly *cool*, however, and his characters are stylishly framed by the hyperreal world of surfaces and images which constitute that which he also attacks. Thus, *Kika* employs excess and artifice in the form of "...glossy production values which few films outside Hollywood could aspire to" (Smith, 1994:9). In fact, at a superficial level, "image" appears to be the prime concern of most of the characters – particularly Kika (Veronica Forque), who is a make-up artist who "touches up" corpses so that they can look "perfect" at their own funerals. The film opens with a stylish montage featuring a keyhole, a spotlight, a camera shutter, and a photographic shoot which is filmed so as to suggest that the photographer is seducing the model. The references to the act of *looking* (particularly through some sort of viewfinder) and the voyeuristic "transgression" which this implies, occur frequently throughout the film. Almodóvar's self-reflexive fascination with the camera itself has always inspired his work "...since his first feature *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* [*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap*] (1980) had its three eponymous heroines make a video version of their lives" (Smith, 1994:8).¹⁵¹ *Kika* examines the voyeuristic potential of the camera (photographic, video and television) and, in the process, foregrounds the fact that we (the film viewers) are always already-engaged in the voyeuristic act (we are *watching*, after all).

In the film's core scene Kika is raped by Pablo¹⁵² (Santiago Lajusticia), a mentally challenged, sex-mad escaped convict (who, besides being an ex-porn "star", has become a television celebrity because of his infamous criminal behaviour¹⁵³). Later, this ordeal, which has been videotaped by an unknown voyeur, is screened on public television:

In the central scene of the film, Kika is raped by an escaped convict who has grown tired of screwing "queers" (*maricones*) in prison. The crime is presented as a comic *tour de force*; certainly it provoked much hilarity from the young, mainly female audience on the night I saw the film in the massive Palace of Music theatre in Madrid. However, Kika's humiliation comes not so much from the act itself (which she vigorously resists), as from its television screening by the wicked dominatrix Andrea, who has procured graphic video footage from a mysterious voyeur (Smith, 1994:8).

The media's "exploitation" of Kika's rape becomes, in effect, another rape – this time,

however, the crime is simulated in the form of a television broadcast. Almodóvar personifies the exploitative media "rapist" in the form of Andrea "Scarface" Caracortada (Victoria Abril) who is not only the presenter of an exploitative television show about real-life crime (*The Worst of the Day*), but actually has a video camera mounted atop her motorbike helmet as she roves around Madrid looking for human misery that she can transform into hyperreal entertainment. This extra (mechanical) eye, together with her Gaultier-designed black rubber suit, transforms Andrea into the living embodiment of exploitation television. The fact that she broadcasts her show from a studio which has rows of empty seating for its "live" studio audience perhaps further indicates Almodóvar's suggestion of the power of the media to place "humanity" at a distance.

Perhaps it is in the aftermath of the extended rape sequence that Almodóvar achieves his own theoretical "climax". Here, after the rapist is finally forcibly removed from his victim, he hurries to the balcony and masturbates to the point of ejaculation. His ejaculate lands - in offbeat melodramatic slow-motion - on the cheek of the wicked Andrea, who has arrived at the scene in order to procure footage for her "reality" crime-show (which is ironically sponsored by a milk company). This simulated "cum-shot" (or "money shot"¹⁵⁴, both terms I borrow from the adult film industry) highlights Almodóvar's attitude towards the exploitative practices of the media. While male porn stars are paid per filmed ejaculation, female performers are paid for the use of their bodies, but ultimately possess the freedom to "fake" (simulate) sexual arousal, pleasure and orgasm for the sake of the camera. In this scene, while Kika has been victimised by a "mentally retarded" ex-convict, it is Andrea (who personifies the exploitative nature of the television medium) who ultimately gets the "money shot". The moment in which Kika's rapist inadvertently ejaculates in Andrea's face becomes a transgressive metaphor for the media's "violent" exploitation of the private and personal lives of individuals. Kika is the victim of the rape, but it is the media's representative who is complicit in the rape:

An unlikely Spanish Godard, Almodóvar uses *Kika* to rub our faces in the self-conscious (hi)stories of cinema [and other media] held to be typical of a postmodern culture (Smith, 1994:8).¹⁵⁵

It may well be that Almodóvar ultimately recognises the fundamentally voyeuristic and exploitative nature of the media. It is with respect to the treatment of violence that mainstream cinema is considered to be most exploitative.

Effects, defects and cool violence

If there is any topic of conversation at dinner parties bound to send the guacamole flying, it's violence in movies. The argument has been rehearsed and re-rehearsed, from Bonnie And Clyde and The Wild Bunch through to Reservoir Dogs and Fight Club - namely, do violent movies cause atrocities such as: the murder of James Bulger (blamed on Child's Play III [Jack Bender, 1991]); the massacre at Columbine High School, Ohio (attributed to The Basketball Diaries [Scott Kalvert, 1995]); spates of road-trip shootings in America and France (stand up Natural Born Killers) and a series of rapes in early 70s Britain (take a bow, A Clockwork Orange [Stanley Kubrick, 1971]). Even the recent shooting of a toddler by a six year-old boy in America was laid at the door of the silver screen, though not to any particular movie. "He watched violent films," the Daily Mail reported robotically (Smith, 2000:84).

The controversial slayings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in April 1999, launched a series of federal investigations into the influence of the entertainment industry marketing practices on young people, as well as a study of the difference between "...pretend violence and the real thing" (Turan, 1999:1). Hollywood has for years denied the existence of a direct link between screen violence and actual "real life" violence, but current "evidence" once again suggests that the entertainment industry at least shares some of the blame for the "moral disintegration" represented by the Columbine massacre. Kenneth Turan (1999:4), film critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, describes the situation as a necessity of business, arguing that although "...Hollywood is by nature resistant to facing reality, there are reasons why the Dream Factory is going to have to shoulder some responsibility or face serious consequences":

If society, as is likely, forces someone to pay in order to feel better about itself, show business is the usual suspect. It's not that movies are more to blame - they're clearly not - but that they're the most vulnerable. [...] And not only is the entertainment sector most vulnerable, its culpability is on people's minds more than Hollywood realises. Blinded by its own fiscal success, by the millions of dollars that enter theatrical box offices every week, the movie business thinks the people are on its side. The truth is, a lot of those patronising theatres on a regular basis are either too young or too disinterested to vote (Turan, 1999:4,9).

Clearly, Hollywood depictions of graphic violence, sadistic shootings, brutal crime, bloody slayings, comic torture and brutal mutilations, are considered by many to be very much a part of the "real" world. Or, at least, the depiction of violence in the cinema is considered to influence events in the "real" world. The very fact that the Hollywood Dream/Nightmare Factory is believed to bear at least some responsibility for events in the world could be explained by what Olivier (1996:178-191) refers to as "the normalization of violence" through the *treatment* of violent material in

postmodern cinema. Olivier refers specifically to *Pulp Fiction*, and argues that such a film confuses the boundaries between acceptable (ordinary) and harmful (abnormal) behaviour:

[*Pulp Fiction*] is bound to affect the behaviour of social actors in specific ways, by knitting together the "ordinary" and the violent in a seamless manner, with the concomitant suggestion (however tacit) that, if social actors (criminals) who act violently as a matter of course also behave in ordinary ways for the rest of the time, it may be okay for "ordinary" people to indulge in a bit of murder and mayhem from time to time (Olivier, 1996:183).

Of course, Olivier's argument does suggest that cinema viewers are passive (perhaps, completely absorbed) observers of the images on screen, and that the spectator's experience of violence is somehow different to the interpretation of other, equally artificial, screen acts which are somehow viewed as "ordinary". There are numerous arguments for and against screen violence, each of which inevitably lead to further debate without definite answers (echoing the timeless question: "Does art imitate life or vice versa?"). In terms of the negative criticism which violent cinema receives, what is the significance of the postmodern aestheticisation of screen violence?

Tarantino's name has become associated with a significant trend in the screen aestheticisation of violence during the 1990s, and his treatment of violence has come under a great deal of attack because of the apparent moral ambiguity of his characters as well as the comic framework within which bloodshed and sadism are foregrounded.

Scarcely into his 30s, Quentin Tarantino has - like Alfred Hitchcock and Stephen King - become a brand name. [...] But if Tarantino is a brand name, what is the product? In two words it is cool violence (Wilhelm, 1995:29).

Peter Wilhelm's categorization of Tarantino begs the obvious question: "What is 'cool violence'?" The answer to this question is rather succinctly suggested by Kenneth Turan's (1994:23,24) critical description of *Reservoir Dogs* as "...a showy but insubstantial *comic opera* of violence..." which "...glories in its excesses of blood and profanity, delighting - in *classic Grand Guignol* fashion - in going as far *over the top* as the man's imagination will take it" (my emphasis). According to Derek Winnert (1995:166), the tone of his first two films gave Tarantino an instant reputation for "designer violence" having "...burst into the big time with his stylishly violent directorial debut...". Indeed, both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* seem to exploit violence, not only eliciting amusement from audiences, but also drawing attention to the fact that violent spectacle is firmly embedded in the history of popular culture:

Bone-shattering, skin-splitting, blood-spurting, Quentin Tarantino's cinema of

viscera is written on the flesh of outlaw men and women. In his latest movie, *Pulp Fiction*, he returns to a world of casual violence and blunt sentiment, one fuelled by a hardboiled past and fired by a pop-happy present. In this world where the coffee's always black and the cigarettes are surely unfiltered, the divide between the normal and the pathological isn't just blurred, it's obsolete (Dargis, 1994a:6).

Dargis clearly acknowledges that Tarantino's violence is a product of past and present cultural influences. His characters are "outlaws" moulded from earlier cinema and television, but who can discuss the world of today. Their violence pays homage to numerous "hardboiled" crime movies, thrillers, and horror films, but the style of their violence (and Tarantino's aestheticisation thereof) is geared towards audiences of the 1990s.

Consider, for example, the narrative framework of *Reservoir Dogs*, which has one of its central characters, Mr Orange (an undercover police detective played by Tim Roth), dying for most of the film's duration. While this may be seen as a gratuitous, in-your-face depiction of bloody, gory, graphic and somewhat visceral presentation of violence-for-the-sake-of-violence, it bears considering that the viewer is in fact being confronted with the unsettling task of continuously anticipating the death of a likeable character. At one stage in the film, we are told that a wound to the stomach results in an extremely lengthy death process because of the slow bleeding which occurs. The film does not highlight the act of violence itself (although we do see the rapid exchange of gunfire which results in Mr Orange's fatal wound), but instead insists on reminding us of the tragic result of that particular act of violence. Tarantino shows the slow death in a luminous display of bright red, thickly flowing, slowly oozing blood which represents the extinction of life from a character who might just as easily have died instantly, without the viewer's lengthy contemplation.

Will Self (1997:74) refers to the aftermath of the shooting of Mr Orange as being "...depicted in a self-consciously hyper-real fashion; depicted in such a way as to raise insistently in our minds the question of the degree to which what we are viewing is naturalistic or not". This is an artificial engagement with the "real" effects of violence which is intensified by the duration of Orange's death, the amount of "blood" which is used, and the absurd circumstances in which his death takes place. While the slow-death is necessary for the film's narrative strategy, it is also a visual reminder of its own hyperartificial difference from death in the "real" world. In the "real" world, death is never experienced from this particular (cinematic) point of view. Here, the

simulation of death in a manner which is necessarily artificial, brings the viewer *unnaturally* close to the "reality" of this spectacularised eventuality. Tim Roth (in Bernard, 1995:176) points out that the humour and enjoyment experienced as a result of the scenes set around the ongoing death scenario inevitably force the viewer to share in the guilt of the genuinely guilty characters, and in this way, the viewer is "affected" by the violence. Such affectation, however, is constituted in a wholly artificial manner. Roth identifies, for example, the viewer's appreciation of the soundtrack songs and the extremely dark humour, and argues that the audience's strongest reaction is to the juxtaposition of these pop culture devices with depictions of perverse violence. In essence, the film simulates the experience of shock in the viewing subject by displacing his or her "natural" reaction to violence.

Self (1997:74) argues that the "self-consciously hyper-real" depiction of violence in *Reservoir Dogs* begs certain questions of the viewer which "...didn't come off the screen alongside the clever, parodic 'Sound of the Seventies' soundtrack..." but rather "...made their way into post-viewing conversation, into the newspapers, into the culture". Tarantino's "hyper-realisation" of the effects of such a shooting produce a stylistic "overkill" which is the equivalent of a "...stylisation that engenders a peculiar, moral queasiness..." which forces us to "...believe in the reality of what is depicted – because the alternatives could only be worse" (Self, 1997:75). The viewer has no choice other than to accept the "realism" of a worst case scenario, rather than deal with the truly horrifying alternatives which violence in the actual world might offer. Screen violence (which is simulated) shares an ambivalent and ambiguous relationship with actual violence. When the viewer is confronted with an image of violence or death which appears more "real" than actual violence, he or she is presumably forced to deal with the hyper-violent event. The realistic portrayal of Mr Orange's death becomes a "meta-critical" aspect of the film that is taken soberly, despite the fact that the film is "...arch, self-referential, [and] not altogether to be taken *seriously*" (Self, 1997:74-75).

In the hyperreal world that Baudrillard has theorised, "real" violence has been absorbed as part of television news, for example, which consequently renders such violence meaningless. Tarantino's violent scenes constitute set pieces which compel the viewer to react with shock, laughter, horror, or nausea. These scenes elicit a response, which, although generated *artificially*, nevertheless serve to establish a degree of critical distance which accentuates the difference between actual violence

and screen violence. This hyper-realisation of violence is typical of directors such as John Woo (one of Tarantino's influences), whose origins lie in ultra-violent Hong Kong action movies. His more recent American-made films such as *Broken Arrow* (1996) and *Face/Off*, have continued a tradition of hyperreal violence and action that is fuelled by an Oriental tradition of balletic fight scenes and finely choreographed displays of (excessive and over-the-top) violence. Woo's treatment of violence may similarly be termed hyperartificial as his camera forces the viewer to observe acts which cannot be experienced with the same intensive gaze in the actual world. Screen violence of this type is necessarily dislocated from any possible experience in the actual world, because the cinema's construction of each images or image-sequences is exaggeratedly artificial and therefore forces the viewer to see the violence in ways which cannot be accomplished in actuality.

The violent scenes in Tarantino's films demand that they be interpreted as unreal, over-the-top, excessive, hyperrealistic, and therefore *hyperartificial*. Forced to acknowledge that such violence exceeds any expectation which we might have for violence in the "real" world, the viewer must inevitably distance him- or herself from the onscreen act (this is typically achieved through the *cool* laughter which Tarantino manages to elicit in the wake of these violent scenes). Indeed, while Wilhelm (1995:29) mistakenly identifies Tarantino's use of "violence for laughs" as something new¹⁵⁶, Taubin argues that the source of such humor lies not only in the way in which the director constructs the image-sequences, but also in the way in which the audience experiences them:

Tarantino's aestheticising of violence is a version of Warholian cool in which an image of splattered brains is an image of splattered brains. Tarantino's films are interesting not for what they have to say about the construction of masculinity, or for what they refuse to admit about race relations, but for the way they *force their audiences* to confront the sado-masochistic pleasure they derive from images of violence (Taubin, 1995:10, my emphasis).

One has only to consider the stupefying effect of television and newspaper reports of violence, war and crime, for example, to realise that people relish information which is tinged with details of bloodshed or violence.¹⁵⁷

While Tarantino's aestheticisation of violence draws the viewer into an uneasy, ambivalent relationship with the act itself, the reporting of actual violence in the mass media severs any "real" connection with, or experience of, the act. While television news functions as a means of translating actual violence into a type of story, violence

which is aestheticised *à la* Tarantino or Woo demands detached involvement in the act itself. Tarantino's screen imitations (simulations) of the real thing are often difficult to watch because he insists on "sensitising" the viewer to the acts of violence. According to actress Patricia Arquette, "What Quentin does is he writes these characters and makes you get to know something about them before he kills them. We're so desensitized by violence on TV, that's the real violence" (in Bernard, 1995:93). Yet it is in Tarantino's apparent disregard for any distinction between the fictional and the "real", particularly with respect to violence, which has been the source of the strongest criticism against his films (Olivier, 1996:178).

Tarantino's use of violence demands comparison with the concerns of Hollywood's most successful female action film director, Kathryn Bigelow (1990:313) who claims, "[t]he only kind of violence I'm interested in is when it's a necessary evolution of the plot, when it moves the story forward in an organic way, not an artificial way". Yet, Bigelow shares the point-of-view that the emotional experience of the viewer towards violence on screen is positive when it "...shakes up your world a little", in much the same way that Tarantino's aestheticisation of violence draws the viewer into an interpretative relationship with the violent act. This relationship, however, draws attention to the artificial nature of violence in the actual world (where death and disaster are experienced primarily as part of the hyperreal world of television news, for example). In Tarantino's movies violence is an artificial point of focus which the viewer is forced to watch (because it is *shown*), and deal with. When, for example, violent acts are transformed into comedy routines (morbidly often replaced by jocularity, fear by laughter, and anxiety by instant relief), the result is a distinctly different reaction from that which we might experience in the actual world. In a sense, Tarantino's gaze forces an artificial reaction to his own depiction of the violent scene. This juxtaposition of irrational emotional responses does not so much normalise the act of violence in the film, as it forces the viewer into an experience of cool detachment.

A similar experience of filmic violence may be read from Jan Kounen's *Dobermann* (*Le Dobermann*, 1997), which employs violence as "...a spurious extension of the film's paramount concern with 'style'" (Richards, 1999:45). The film employs a style which is often termed "comic excess" in order to blur the boundary between "real" and "cartoon" worlds. The effect is similar in nature to the occasional integration of cartoon animation in certain parts of *Natural Born Killers*. Kounen's characters are

necessarily established as "otherworldly", suggesting the iconic presence of comic book heroes and villains who are rendered "...with the broadest of brush strokes" (Richards, 1999:45). As with graphic novels, for example, the film hinges on the extravagance and power of its style. Narrative cohesion and moral issues fade into the background as the film endeavours to impress with its excessive violence and taboo imagery:

...it is in love with its own attempts at modern mythmaking and the erotic, extravagant charge of its images - whether Monica Bellucci's Nat calmly blowing up a bank doorway with a huge rocket launcher, or Olivier's infant son sitting bewildered atop his mother's bloody corpse (Richards, 1999:45).

Kounen's (admittedly outrageous) treatment of violence has frequently been compared to that of Tarantino, to the extent that he has been criticised for offering a damagingly nihilistic vision of the comic possibilities of violence in a world which he so blatantly distances from our own:

Like Tarantino, Kounen enjoys pushing ultraviolence into the realms of comic excess: a cop stands in the middle of the street, struggling unsuccessfully to remove a primed grenade from his crash helmet. Excruciatingly, Yann [Vincent Cassell] dispatches Christini [Tchéky Karyo] by forcing his head on to the road before a speeding car. Damagingly, Kounen achieves stylistic excess by sacrificing relevancy to the real world (something that didn't matter in [Sergio Leone's pre-civilised wilderness]) (Richards, 1999:45).

Another film which transforms the excesses of gangster violence to a near-fantasy cinematic "environment", is *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. Much of the criticism against this film is also concerned with its humorous exploitation of brutality, yet in one review of the film, Collins (1999:116) makes the valid argument that "...the body count may be high, but the actual violence is deceptively tame, and there's your real similarity with Tarantino".

Olivier (1996:178) argues that "...*Pulp Fiction*...marks a phase in the development of postmodern popular film culture which could variously be described as the aestheticization, the domestication or the normalization of violence", meaning that his films effectively affect our interpretation of violence in the real world. This understanding of "normalized" violence can be traced to Raymond Durnat's (1991:93-96) study of film gangsters and gangster genres in which he identifies a popular trend in contemporary gangster films to "...upfront The Disturbingly Normal Gangster" which usually bestows upon these criminals a normal or popular personality evidenced already in films such as *The Godfather* and *Prizzi's Honor* (John Huston, 1985):

Such 'normalisation' of violence recurs in the child gangster films and is newly abundant in other genres, e.g., the cop film (Dirty Harry's "Make my day"), comedy (*Throw Momma from the Train* [Danny DeVito, 1987]), horror (*An American Werewolf in London* [John Landis, 1981]). Such films don't just establish, they trace in fascinated detail mixtures of guilt-free callousness with punctilious or sensitive sociability. The gangster films ask: How far does gangster amorality/violence/greed require some Ingredient X, or some special, somehow defective, character structure; or how far is callous amorality normal, natural, rational and sane? (Durgnat, 1991:96).

Durgnat (1991:96) seems to suggest that such films offer the viewer "questions" relating to their own humanity, and that such questions are sharpened by "moral and cultural relativism". Donald Lyons (1994:114), in a satisfying account of *Reservoir Dogs*, commends the film as "...the most antiviolence [*sic*] movie ever made...". His analysis of the film is based on the straightforward interpretation of the fact that as viewers, "...we spend much of [the film] looking right at the results of one gunshot wound" (Lyons, 1994:114). The results of this single wound are indeed unpleasant to watch. Hyper-realistic to the point of indulgence, the sight of this ongoing simulation of a man bleeding to death in a large, empty warehouse is as much an appeal against violence as it is a homage to gore-rich movies which exploit (and even reify) images of violence and death. As has already been pointed out (refer to Taubin's comments earlier), this visual confrontation with the hyperartificial image of violence forces the viewer to confront his or her own sado-masochistic impulses:

Every cinephile has his/her own litany of blood movies. A mere mention of certain titles summons up the image of red; spurting, gushing, suffusing the screen. Pulsing veins, severed limbs, flayed bodies float before the mind's eye. It's our visceral response to such images that fixes them in memory. But even the most intensely visceral images fade unless they also embody other kinds of meaning. Not that there isn't guilty pleasure in gore for its own sake (Taubin, 1995:8).

The extended "death" in *Reservoir Dogs* draws attention to an image which artificially induces a visceral response in the viewing subject.¹⁵⁸ This artificially induced response suggests that human visceral and emotional responses can be, in Baudrillardian terms, simulated.

Just a few metres from where Mr Orange bleeds to death in *Reservoir Dogs*, another violent scene takes place. To the tune of Stealer's Wheel's "Stuck in the Middle with You", Vic Vega (alias Mr Blonde, played by Michael Madsen) gets to work torturing a policeman. He begins by telling the unfortunate victim why he is about to do what he does:

MR BLONDE

Now I'm not gonna bullshit you. I don't really care about what you know or don't know. I'm gonna torture you for a while regardless. Not to get information, but because torturing a cop amuses me. There's nothing you can say, I've heard it all before. There's nothing you can do. Except pray for a quick death, which you ain't gonna get. *He puts a piece of tape over the cop's mouth* (Tarantino, 1994b:61).

He then turns on a portable radio, tuned to "K-Billy's 'super sounds of the seventies' weekend", and dances around casually lashing out unexpectedly at one point in order to slash the cop's face with a razor. Finally, he dives onto the cop's lap and – with his back to the camera – begins to hack off his ear. Tarantino has the camera veer away from the action and focus on a corner of the warehouse for the duration of the (imagined) mutilation. It is this scene, however, which generates the greatest degree of concern from viewers and critics alike, notably because of the "intimate" nature of this particular sort of violence. Tarantino suggests that he uses the ear as a focus for intense physical pain because, like eyes and fingers, they are particularly vulnerable.¹⁵⁹ The general response to this particular scene is a sense that "real" pain is being inflicted.

Ironically, however, the "actual" ear removal is performed out-of-frame. In many ways, it is the *silence* of the unseen, gagged policeman which offers the most profound commentary on the terrifying sequence. His silence replaces the actual pain which cannot really be reproduced, but only imagined. The irony lies in the fact that he is having his ear removed, but we are unable to hear his terror – his screams are never articulated because of the gag over his mouth and we are spared the full agony of his torment, which can never be fully comprehended because images cannot replicate feeling. A further explanation of the scene might be that while visual depictions of violence can be simulated (in this film, for example), the suffering which is endured by the victim of such torture cannot be simulated, because pain and suffering are relative experiences. The silence and the diverted gaze of the camera actually simulate the film's inability to communicate pain. According to Bernard (1995:210), Tarantino is concerned with the difference between what he refers to as "...the cartoon violence of most movies..." and "real" violence:

In *Reservoir Dogs*, I want [the violence in the ear scene] to hurt.... The lightness, the catchiness, the frothiness, it makes it harder not to watch. That song can never be heard the same way again. Real violence is a couple laughing one minute and the next minute there is blood on the walls (Tarantino in Bernard, 1995:210).

Gross offers a similar sentiment when he argues that explicit screen violence is less

shocking than the depiction of human beings in "extreme emotional states"

For all the violence in cinema, little that we actually see on screen is genuinely shocking. Killing people in gory ways, for instance, doesn't shock very often. What does, in my opinion, is the vivid, accurate rendering of extreme emotional states of being, states we have all glimpsed in life, but which are rarely represented. This is why it's so scary when Isabella Rossellini holds a knife in proximity to Kyle MacLachlan's underwear-clothed genitals near the beginning of *Blue Velvet* [David Lynch, 1986]. The expressed ferocity of her fear, suspicion and rage has enormous impact, despite the fact that the action itself is unexceptional, physically (Gross, 1997:20).

In this sense, Tarantino's decision to subject his viewers to the "unexceptional" view of an empty corner of the warehouse while being prevented from seeing an obviously horrific act, may be likened to the terrifying tension created by an unpredictable knife-wielding character in Lynch's movie. Similar "terrors" evolve in Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man* (2000) when the film unexpectedly cuts away just as the invisible Sebastian (Kevin Bacon) attacks a woman whom he has been voyeuristically watching for some time. The viewer is left to decide (imagine) whether or not Sebastian rapes the woman, or merely "scares her a little" as he later admits to a colleague (for further discussion of *Hollow Man*, see the conclusion of chapter seven).

Linda Ruth Williams identifies "a cinematic conceit" built into the fact that the torture scene in *Reservoir Dogs* takes place off-camera:

...at the nastiest (and wittiest) moment...we see nothing but a bare wall, and the muffled screams as knife meets flesh are drowned by Stealer's Wheel's...'Stuck in the Middle with You'. While the sound and sight of Mr Blonde slicing off Nash's ear are central to Tarantino's movie (making this the film's most notorious scene), what we actually see and hear is but a cinematic conceit: at the crucial moment the camera looks demurely away, sliding to the left with a wicked humour that does the censoring for us, only to look back once the deed is done. [...] The impression is of breathtaking explicitness, an audacious transgression...awesome sadism, demanding that we laugh and be sick at the same time in the time-honoured tradition of full-frontal schlock, yet the violence takes place elsewhere and nowhere (Williams, 1994:14).

While one might argue that this "cinematic conceit" forces the act of violence to occur in the imagination of the viewer (recalling Greek theatrical conventions regarding death and violence which always occurred offstage), Self (1997:75-76) recognises a grave - "deeply sinister" - danger inherent in the treatment of this particular torture scene. During the torture, he argues, the viewer is no longer able to recognise which point-of-view is being experienced (whether it is that of the policeman, the helpless Mr Orange, or the sadistic torturer himself). The result is that Tarantino abdicates or "foists" moral responsibility for the screen violence, displacing this onto the viewer

(Self, 1997:75-76). Self (1997:76) compares this abdication of responsibility to "...the de-centring, the displacement, of the overarching, 'moral' narrative voice from the contemporary novel", which he considers morally and artistically problematic when transferred to the hyperreal world of film.

Similar reflections on the use of mixed media in *Natural Born Killers* lend themselves to the argument that "...rather than producing a provocative, ontological confusion..." such a displaced point-of-view "...induces the kind of slightly nauseous queasiness that one associates with too much channel-surfing" (Self, 1997:76). According to Self, the viewer's feeling of potential implication or culpability makes catharsis uncertain and even invalid:

The catharsis effected by scenes we cannot witness is the emotional release of knowing that by *not watching* we cannot be implicated...By contrast the catharsis effected by those filmic depictions of violence that attempt to place us in the driving seat, give us the POV, is both manifold and disturbing (Self, 1997:78-79).

Self (1997:80) compares the displaced or indeterminable point-of-view in films such as *Reservoir Dogs* and *Natural Born Killers* to what he calls an "*inadvertent snuff film*" made when a bureaucrat committed suicide at a press conference only to have the terrible event captured by a camera-operator. He further argues that such a snuff movie is simply the "pure form" of the visual experience reproduced by films such as *Natural Born Killers*:

We moderns now feel ourselves all to be passive victims of such snuff contexts, mediated by the media. This tracks back all the way to Vietnam, the so-called 'first television war'. It was at that point that McLuhan's Global Village gained its own global vandals, thugs, rapists and murderers, and the newly installed security cameras began to garner film of them (Self, 1997:80).

Natural Born Killers is quite clearly a visual simulation of the various media contexts which give rise discussions around the "morally corrosive power" (Smith, 1994:9) of violent images. Ironically, perhaps, it is in this way that "...this...director and screenwriter famed for his often violent portrayals" has created a film which "...begs America to confront its fascination with, and the tabloidization of, gratuitous violence..." (Goldman, 1995:104).

Stone's movie tests and explores the limits and the limitations of filmic representation by plunging the viewer into "...a phantasmagoria of aesthetic anarchy..." which extinguishes "...critical distance, identification and narrative continuity...in a gleeful frenzy of deranged visual overload". In this way, not only is the viewer denied a

consistent frame of reference, but the film itself "...flips in and out of different planes of reality - as if criss-crossing a half-dozen parallel universes - producing extraordinary moments of suspension and dissociation" (Smith, 1994:10). Gavin Smith (1994:10) calls this displaced perspective a form of "Schizophrenic Realism" which appropriates various forms of experimental visual technique and serves them up as a "critique of representation". The violent spectacles come fast and furious in Stone's film, as if his style and narrative is in violent competition with the media's own constant exploitation of violence and crime used to sell newspapers and tabloid television shows (such as the one which is parodied in *Natural Born Killers*). Stone (in Smith, 1994:10) acknowledges that the film is "...in a sense constructed via television and as a homage to television..." evidenced through the "...aggression of the imagery [and] the channel-surfing philosophy of moving on".

One shot in *Natural Born Killers* summarises this understanding of the film. Mallory, in a violent demonstration of her commitment to escape her present incarceration, fires a "warning shot" directly through the hand of Wayne Gayle. Directly after the shot is fired, the film cuts to a reverse angle shot in which Mallory and Mickey and others are seen *through* the hole which has now replaced Gayle's palm (they are, effectively, "framed" by the hand which is framed by the cinema screen). Smith (1994:9) calls the shot a "throwaway gag", and it may be read as a moment of violent comic excess which is "...most representative of [the movie's] approach to violence: cruel, mean, gratuitous even - but above all, absurd, blatantly cartoonish". The "framing" device, however, serves to highlight our "detachment" from the violent act which has just been perpetrated. Like the framed world which the "site" of violence (the hand) exaggerates in this particular shot, violence comes to us daily through the frame of the television or newspaper photographs. Stone's literally "violent frame" is but one artificial instance of cruelty evoking a sense of a world which is dominated by the proliferation of such frames.

Cynthia Freeland (1995:129) offers yet another reaction to the inclusion of "home video version" violence in cinema, stating that "[p]oint of view and real time are wrenched in a disconcerting way, with contradictory effects". She argues that this stylistic treatment has the effect of distancing the spectator and making the violence "seem less awful", having the deliberate effect of depersonalising the characters that are involved. Indeed, in *Natural Born Killers*, the violent scenes take on the unrealistic nature of cartoons and music videos. A secondary, oppositional, effect is that the

violence takes on the appearance of "the real". "Unplanned", "unexpected", and "awkward" are words used to describe the violence which occurs as if it had not been staged at all, but filmed spontaneously from the "real world". However, from a Baudrillardian perspective, it is precisely this comparison with the artificiality of a music video which makes the type of violence in *Natural Born Killers* and *Reservoir Dogs* problematic and therefore destabilising for the viewer. By encouraging the viewer to question the "reality" status of the violence on screen (whether through shock or through devices such as Stone's surreal satire and "cartooning" of real images), the film necessarily forces the viewer to gauge his or her own response to it.

Smith (1994:9) notes that *Natural Born Killers* "...employs outrage, extremism, cruelty and indecency as rhetorical devices" thereby rendering the film as "...a double-edged sword [which is] unafraid to implicate itself in the sadism of its spectacle". The film's "in-your-face excess" endures from the violent opening scene massacre in a roadside diner, to the merciless killing of Gayle during the final minutes of the movie. The effect of this relentless and excessive visual assault is echoed by Tom Whalen's "criticism" of Tarantino's deployment of violent spectacles in *Pulp Fiction*:

In the postmodernist world of *Pulp Fiction*, violence takes the place of feeling; its radical juxtapositions (of the artificial to the real, of event to response) have the effect of short-circuiting sense and affect - it flatlines us (Whalen, 1995:4).

However, in a cinema which articulates and emphasises its own artificiality, this "short-circuiting" of authentic response inevitably compels the viewer to distinguish between screen events and "real world" events. Violent images have taken the place of the "real" horrors and tragedies of the contemporary world, for our postmodern hyperreality offers pain, suffering, violence, and death which are simply no longer "real enough" to be experienced as "real". The excesses of violence in contemporary films is concerned with engaging the viewer at the level of thrilling spectacle, by enthralling, fascinating and shocking us with images of blood, carnage and death which we do not and would not want to encounter in the "real" world. Despite our intimate involvement with such artificially-constructed spectacles, we remain detached from the action through the distancing and alienating effects of what is simultaneously a perverse pleasure and a shocking transgression.

The politics of cool

Of course, we are all sick, and our society is sick, and our system is sick, and we can't wait to take off all our clothes, and cross-copulate and wife-swap and engage in polymorphously perverse diversions (Sarris, 1969:203).

It is necessary to take seriously the hypothesis according to which only an excess of imagination seizes the profundity of the real... (Henri Lefebvre in Chambers, 1998:191).

Postmodern films, to greater or lesser degrees, bring aspects of the personal and private into the public sphere while attempting to provide a greater sense of the unrepresentable. They also demonstrate the erosion of distinctions between acceptable understandings of high and low culture, "blurring distinctions" between categories and tropes, reducing all categories of cultural production to the same level. Andrew Sarris (1969:203) refers to the increasing number of "salacious movies" which appeared during the 1960s (referring to those sexually provocative and even explicit films which challenged the boundaries of censorship), as part of "...the hedonistic tide which seems to be the logical consequence of capitalism and materialistic individualism". Sarris refers specifically to the censorship court case involving Warhol's *Blue Movie* (1969). In its defence, Warhol's producer Paul Morrissey compared the film to Vilgot Sjöman's *I Am Curious - Yellow* (*Jag är nyfiken - en film i gult*, 1967), and argued that there was nothing that could be deemed more objectionable in the former title, suggesting that the distinction had been based wholly on taste. Sarris pinpoints Warhol's "transgression" as what might be considered the overstepping of the fine line between "art" and "pornography":

...Warhol breaks the rules, however hypocritical, by plunging right into his simulated pornography, after which his two participants (Viva and Louis Waldon) discourse on such social issues as Vietnam, Mayor Lindsay and the garbage strike. Vilgot Sjöman had the good grace to spend a whole hour in *I Am Curious - Yellow* punishing the audience with his social insights before satisfying its prurient curiosity (Sarris, 1969:203).

Today, Warhol is remembered as an artist, and his films serve as cool reminders of the derision which he showed for the various artificial boundaries which distinguish between different categories of taste and modes of expression. *Blue Movie* had it both ways, simulating both the transgressive carnal exercises of "real" pornography while imitating the banal sensibilities of socially-redeeming arthouse cinema.

As has been discussed in detail, the spectacles of sex which were once reserved for

specialist "arthouse" productions on the one hand, or - more explicitly - for pornographic films on the other, are now being experimented with in films which attempt to bridge the once clearly defined gap between the two forms of cinematic discourse. Similarly, the bloody, gory, brutal and extravagantly violent spectacles which were once associated with "cheap thrills" (or, perhaps, "guilty pleasures") aimed at the "lowest common denominator", are now frequently discussed as significant aspects of important cinematic "works of art". While violence in the cinema is frequently under fire from various "concerned" groups because of its anti-social impact (particularly on children), it may be noted that certain forms of transgression are now even regarded as being indicative of artistic development. One film industry representative notes, for example, that

[w]e are seeing more and more people moving to the margins of what has been in the past the outer limits of representation of sexual relationships. I think arthouse audiences are responding instinctively to the recent wave of transgressions and are expecting real artists to go further (James Shamus in Farrow, 2000:27).

Film audiences appear to be growing increasingly immovable, unshockable and, ultimately, curious. While pornographic cinema and violent exploitation films do exist, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the "legitimate" cinema intends to satisfy similar curiosities and obsessions to those addressed in what has traditionally been termed "exploitation cinema". Richard Falcon argues (1999:11) that "...real transgression involving the audience in a life-altering shift of perspective is increasingly a Holy Grail...", which means that "...the social theatre of shock and embarrassment..." must be enacted in order for such transgression to be of any value. According to Falcon (1999:11), it is to this end that there are now a number of films linked specifically by their "...aggressive desire to confront their audiences, to render their spectator's experience problematic" and the means to that end is "...to attract exposure through transgression...".

Not all social commentators share an interest in the value of a "social theatre of shock", however. Several established film "artists" frequently attract negative exposure from a variety of critics because they deal with uncomfortably transgressive and taboo subjects. In their discussion of the British press campaign which strove to ban *Crash*, Mark Kermode and Julian Petley (1997:16-18) detail instances where members of the press and other campaigners fought to keep the film from British screens on the basis of, amongst other "deviant" representations, the depiction of "sex with cripples":

In the...9 November issue of the *Daily Mail* which launched the 'Campaign to stop depraved movie from being shown in Britain' appeared the first of many attempts by the paper's film reviewer, Christopher Tookey, to raise the temperature. In lurid prose (headlined 'Morality dies in the twisted wreckage') it is declared that *Crash* "promulgates...the morality of the satyr, the nymphomaniac, the rapist, the paedophile, the danger to society" and marks "the point at which even a liberal society should draw the line." As evidence of this perverted morality, the reader's attention is drawn to the fact that "the initially heterosexual characters lose their inhibitions [and] they experiment pleasurably with gay sex, lesbian sex, and *sex with cripples*" [our emphasis] (Kermode and Petley, 1997:16).

This anti-*Crash* campaign in Britain had begun on the 3rd of June 1996, when a review by the *Evening Standard* reviewer, Alexander Walker, declared that the movie contained "...some of the most perverted acts and theories of sexual deviance [he had] ever seen propagated in main-line cinema" (Walker in Kermode and Petley, 1997:16). In stark contrast with this analysis, is the idea put forward by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (1998:186-192), that *Crash* adopts Michel Foucault's notion that "sex is boring", combining "...the stylized ennui of a seventies German urban alienation film with the grainy, low-tech, humourless repetition of a seventies German porn film" (186). Thus,

...the film's opening sexual encounters present sex as a matter-of-fact, workaday activity: an automatic emptying of the liberation of sex into the free-floating realms of consumer capitalism, a 'pornographic culture' of materialized appearances, mechanical labour and copulation (Botting, 1998:186).

Botting and Wilson (1998:186) argue that *Crash* deals not with the potential of stylised sexual imagery to excite or to augment desire, but rather with the absorption of sex and transgression into the banal hyperreality of consumer economics.

It is perhaps this aspect of the film which prompted a different kind of criticism of the film, notably by those who had expected an even greater degree of transgression:

Leaving aside for a moment the howling outrage elicited in Britain by *Crash*, it is striking to note that some Ballard fans condemn the film for the opposite reasons: not violent enough, not extreme enough, not transgressive enough. A no-win scenario, in which a film is denounced as both shocking and dull. However, I would propose that this film is indeed both shocking and dull: any obsession that one doesn't share is undeniably dull, while often shocking (Dick, 1997:48).

Cronenberg highlights the "dullness" which Dick associates with obsession by preventing the viewer from identifying with the characters themselves. This he achieves, by refusing "...to provide us with those narrative trappings like motivation or personality..." which might otherwise involve us with the details of the obsessions which the film explores (Dick, 1997:48). The film retains a "clinical look" (Dick,

1997:48) which derives from the detached involvement of the characters themselves. The spectator is prevented from becoming involved with the delights and obsessions of the characters because it is their own clinical (observational) distance which, in a sense, defines their obsessions. Like the viewer, the characters are keen observers, simulating the obsessive gaze of the film camera itself:

Crash is a brilliant, brave film - non-narrative, anti-realist, cool as a cucumber, it sticks to its conceptual guns, refusing to situate the audience comfortably, calmly bringing forward a celebration of sex and death, as if for our consideration. It is this very calm - the stylisation, the use of tableau, the subtle intensity of Howard Shore's score, the emptiness of the characters - that makes the film so disturbing, witty and dispassionate, as it studies an obsession that is itself shocking, and, necessarily, as obsession must be, a little dull (Dick, 1997:49).

In an extreme sense, the "shocking dullness" which *Crash* offers its audience may be read as an echo of the act of looking at images. Simulating and ironising actual "involvement", the cinema with its moving images of artificial "realities" becomes a site of detachment from experience.

The "involved detachment" of dullness that is designed to shock may be linked to the debate around cinema violence which is frequently a media-fuelled attempt to link film images with the "real" world. The so-called "effects" debate centres around the argument that depictions of violence in the media lower tolerance to violence in the "real" world while provoking increasingly desensitised spectators to engage in acts of violence which are simultaneously brought into the realm of their everyday experience. According to Barker (1995:12), however, the methods used to study the "effects" of some aspect of cinema tend to reduce "...films to stimulus-response mechanisms, without history or meanings, and their viewers to twitching semiconductors without prior expectations, understandings or skills". Such studies inevitably ignore the possibility that each and every film is likely to produce multiple "meanings" and is unlikely to be received in precisely the same way by different viewers. A case in point is the extent of the critical debate which followed the release of *Natural Born Killers*. In this respect, the film's only obvious, unquestionable point of contact with the "real" world, is the widespread discourse which arose in response to the treatment of violence in the movie. Barker (1995:13) argues that such widespread critical "debate" constitutes the discourse which is very much a part of the "meaning" of the film. More than this, *Natural Born Killers* is itself a discourse around the history and meaning of screen and media violence, a point which is most strongly evidenced by scenes in which violent movie scenes are projected into the background

of the film's surreal world. Stone creates, quite literally, a mediated universe in which his characters participate in the ongoing discourse around the issue of cinema and media violence. Just as Stone's earlier films, including *Platoon* (1986) and *JFK*, were concerned with issues connected to our own time, so the violence in *Natural Born Killers* addresses the very concerns which it inevitably raises. The presentation of transgressive violence in films like *Natural Born Killers* and *Pulp Fiction*, may be seen as a mirror up to a culture which pays more attention to media violence than to violence itself. The "Columbine Massacre" only becomes the "Columbine Massacre" because the media sees fit to present it as such. Similarly, cinema violence is most likely to penetrate "reality" in the form of media coverage. As Barker (1995:13) notes, the majority of the reviews for *Natural Born Killers* were primarily concerned with the nature of the message about violence which it carried, and this is an indication that the film "is far too *important*" to elicit mere discussions around its "quality". Its "message", Barker (1995:13) notes, is "...an abrasion on the scabs and sores of [our] uneasy cultures".

Sarup notes that postmodern cinema is frequently concerned with finding imaginative ways to "...break down the barriers that keep the profane out of the everyday" (Sarup, 1993:177). Many of the films discussed in this chapter successfully achieve precisely this transgression¹⁶⁰ in ways which may be linked to what Olivier (1992:97) terms "the phenomenon of the grotesque". Explored through readings of various philosophical-theoretical frameworks, Olivier sees the "grotesque" as strongly associated with the postmodern tension between "reality" and "fantasy". Olivier (1992:96) notes that the grotesque is characteristically related to both the absurd and the horrifying (or simply "horror"), and it is this sense that the writing of Samuel Beckett is frequently described as "grotesque". In the cinema, depictions of the grotesque characteristically arouse simultaneous "disgust and mirth", producing both shock and laughter (or delight) within the same emotional space. While "grotesqueness" may be associated with "...anything which is found to be in sufficiently grave conflict with accepted standards to arouse emotion..." (Clayborough in Olivier, 1992:102), it should also be associated with a playfulness that serves to temper the "...demonic by means of some comic relief" (Olivier, 1992:102). Many postmodern films make the grotesque "bearable" by locating it somewhere in the tension between "horror" and "the ludicrous", precisely because the "grotesque" is

...a fundamentally ambivalent thing...a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some forms at least, ...an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of

existence (Thomson in Olivier, 1992:101).

Thus, far from being a phenomenon which occurs only in the imaginative worlds of cinema, drama and literature, "...the grotesque manifests itself in the everyday or the lifeworld as well..." (Olivier, 1992:97). Derived from the Italian *grotte* ("caves"), the term "grotesque" has been used in various ways throughout history (according to Olivier, at least since the early Christian phase of Roman culture) to describe the aesthetic combination of heterogeneous elements and forms, as well as the associated appropriation of elements of the bizarre and the ridiculous. Philip Thomson (in Olivier, 1992:97) notes that certain writers have described the grotesque as a "...vulgar species of the comic...", which is a notion that is strongly associated with "black comedy".

The grotesque can, in other terms, also be associated with a corruption of the classical opposition between the "ideal body" and the "exaggerated or interrupted body". According to Olivier (1992:98), the "grotesque" image of the transgression of the "ideal body" can be traced "...back to a carnivalesque origin and the way in which vulgar humour, typically, expressed itself by overturning normal standards of bodily appearance on these occasions". The grotesque body was thus clearly a transgression from an established notion of "perfection" or "the ideal", and was frequently manifest in exaggerations of those apertures or protuberances which interrupt or protrude from the "classical lines" of the "ideal body". The grotesque exaggeration of sexual and other bodily functions in carnivalesque performance was thus not only an interruption of social modesty (decency), but a transgression of aesthetic "purity". The grotesque can therefore be associated with cultural and artistic taboos which, in turn, can be linked to the Freudian insight that "...the unconscious harbours everything that has been repressed because of cultural prohibition..." (Olivier, 1992:101). If one understands transgressive cinema as inclusive of those films which present that which has traditionally been "repressed" in the public sphere, then the potential impact of the films discussed here becomes apparent, particularly with regards to their ability to transform the way in which "the real world" is conceived:

...[according to Freud] this repression produces, *inter alia*, dreams in an attempt to fulfil wishes, [suggesting that] it should be clear why film images address audiences so powerfully, especially in the case of grotesque images that are likely to fall in the category of culturally prohibited (and therefore repressed) representations... (Olivier, 1992:101).

The erotic, the violent, the vulgar and the perverse are all categories which may, in some sense, be described as bearing some affinity with the "grotesque", which is

essentially a representation of the "clash of opposites" which underlies human existence. Cinematic manifestations of the grotesque reflect the ambivalent nature of the spectator who is simultaneously repulsed by and drawn to those images and representations of the "repressed" which locate themselves in imaginary and "realistic" worlds, larger-than-life, on the movie screen.

When, in 1969, the police seized the Andy Warhol film *Blue Movie*, Andrew Sarris commented on the changing face of cinema censorship, noting that

[w]e have come from an era when no one went to bed with anyone else to an era when people spend more time in bed than Oblomov ever did and to even less purpose. The fantasy of superhuman restraint has been replaced by the fantasy of superhuman release, and the truth has been passed about halfway on the path of the pendulum. Even the most revolutionary among us probably misses some of the charming footwork of actors and actresses as they circumvented the truth of the libido. But it must be remembered that the censors allowed us nothing when we asked for so little, and so now it is only fitting that we allow the censors nothing no matter how base the screen becomes. There can be no compromise with censorship even when there is regret for some of the lost charm of repression and innocence (Sarris, 1969:219).

Even more than during the so-called sexual revolution of thirty years ago, the cinema seems obsessed with stretching the limits of transgressive representation. The taboos of nudity and explicit sex are being eroded from both ends of the cultural spectrum ("lowbrow" pornography and "highbrow" arthouse cinema), while representations of extreme violence, vulgar humour, blasphemy and the grotesque in all possible forms have infiltrated the industry at every level. Cinema, in this respect, mirrors the obsessive curiosity of the spectator-voyeur. Society has established numerous repressive mechanisms such as censorship to "protect" us from our own vices. Yet, transgressive cultural artefacts are created and do exist (and are extremely popular) within society. Such artefacts may be designed to satisfy some basic curiosity or to elicit some more "legitimate" (perhaps intellectual) reaction. Whatever function they might be intended to serve, the moments of transgression in various forms of contemporary cinema ultimately reflect the condition of eternal conflict which afflicts postmodern life: In the contemporary secular world, humankind craves "meaning" despite an acute "...awareness of living in an indifferent universe..." (Olivier, 1992:101).

Such craving may be compared with the comments by Laura Kipnis regarding the place which pornography – considered an ultimate cinematic transgression – assumes

within our culture:

Whether the pornography experience is seen as pleasurable or profoundly displeasurable, it holds a mirror up to our culture, mapping its borders and boundaries through strategic acts of transgression. Pornography is dedicated to propriety violations of every shape, manner, and form, and proprieties have deep links to the maintenance of social order and to who we are as social subjects.... The links between the culture, proprieties, and the deep structure of the psyche are evident in how very transfixed we are, as viewers and as a culture, before the pornographic scene, whether with pleasure or disgust, intellectually or viscerally (Kipnis, 2000:155).

Pornographic representations ultimately generate questions regarding the power of images that reveal too graphically aspects of our private lives. Baudrillard understands pornography as something that is both natural and "hypersexual" – more sexual than sex. Pornography may indeed mirror the natural desires, fantasies and urges of its viewers, but it does not necessarily suggest a distinction between mediated sex and "real" sex. Sex on screen remains a contentious and problematic issue for many, largely because it impacts on issues of privacy, but also because it tests the limits of "social reality". Much of the discourse around pornography has focussed on the argument that the depiction of explicit nudity and graphic sexual acts leads to heightened or perverted desire on the part of the viewer which potentially leads to illicit behaviour in the "real" world. It might also be argued that screen sex – the disclosure of intimate and private pleasures, fantasies and desires in larger-than-life imagery – is felt to be dangerous because it "cools off" the authentic version of those experiences in the "real" world. In the case of Breillat's *Romance* and Cronenberg's *Crash*, for example, sex on screen (even when it is demonstrably "real", as in the case of *Romance*) remains an illusion and, ultimately, an insubstantial substitute for the "real thing". These films include scenes which simulate pornographic imagery in an attempt to reflect the artificiality of pornographic representation.

The contemporary treatment of screen violence by certain directors may be understood in a similar light. In stark contrast with the offstage violence of ancient theatre, contemporary films frequently indulge in graphic depictions of bloody, brutal and gory spectacles which foreground violence. These films are frequently the focus of criticism and censorship because they are seen to promote and provoke violent and aberrant behaviour in the "real" world. It has been argued, however, that such occurrences of hyperviolence exist in stark contrast with the impersonal, fleeting and distancing effects of mediated reports of actual violence (on television, for example). Graphic screen violence therefore serves to involve the viewer in the unimaginable

horrors which are no longer encountered as "real" within the actual world. Contemporary films increasingly present the unimaginable, the grotesque, the inexplicable and the untenable in ways which force viewers to distinguish what they are seeing from the mediated "truths" presented on television news programs. Just as the Surrealists made use of a "...recognizable' reality within which [to explode] conventions and artificial boundaries with the imaginary" (Fotiade, 1995:401) so transgressive images and spectacles in postmodern films serve to "assault" the mind, and disrupt the process of "rational thought" which results from the social construction of "reality".

Screen transgressions – be they sexual, violent, profane or banal - are ultimately "cool" reflections of the "realities" of everyday life, ironically distancing us from a world which we are unable to recognise in terms of the illusion that it is. Depicting the unknowable, the thinkable, the untenable, cinema merely places at a distance that which already underlies the artificially-constructed surface of social "reality". While in this chapter it is the transgression of "social reality" that has been discussed in terms of cinematic representation, chapter six focuses on the illusion of "reality" on screen – "realism". Whether it is the concept of "history" or "fact" or "truth" or "documentary", screen "realism" remains a provocative issue for discussion. The postmodern subject is constantly bombarded with images that are perceived as being "real" simply because they are packaged as such. Increasingly, the world's spectators are being entertained by fake documentaries, overblown stories from the past and images captured by "spy cameras". And, increasingly, it is not the material itself that speaks to us of the "real" world, but the medium and the techniques used to capture such images. In the postmodern age, "realism" has become an entertainment of mediated (and ultimately cool) deceit.

Six

Postmodern "realism"

[Cinema] technology has stressed the attainment of an ever-sharper realism through which to present the objects and stories which carry the messages of the day (Andrew, 1984:113).

Maybe cinema missed its calling, got swept off-course by money and drugs. It's often struck me that with its photographic realism, its lingering attention to surface, its fetishistic concern for the details of clothes and flesh, cinema's true vocation has always been pornography (Currie, 1993:41).

The word "film" literally means "skin" (Gronemeyer, 1999:7). In this sense, the word refers to the physical material (celluloid) which has traditionally enabled films to be made. Of course, this definition assumes a more metaphoric meaning when one considers that celluloid is no longer required in the filmmaking process. Digital technology (as discussed in chapter two) has, effectively, altered the significance of the word "film". The understanding of the word "film" as "skin" may be more appropriate as a reminder that the images found in even the most "realistic" films are artificial. Images are merely simulations of, or references to, the observably "real" world - the visual component of human "existence" that we experience on a daily basis and which we accept as "reality" (constructed "reality"). Like the art of magic, the cinematic art is concerned with illusion - specifically, the illusion of "reality", which is frequently associated with various forms of "realism". Even films that attempt to bring to life fantastical and imaginary worlds (science-fiction, fantasy and many horror films, for example) usually attempt to connect their narratives to the viewer's experience or understanding of the "real" world. To some extent, films serve to highlight the experience of "reality" as a projection or construction of human consciousness. The film spectator assembles "meaning" and significance from the moving images of the cinema in much the same manner that "reality" is constructed through the subject's interaction with the world around him or her.

André Bazin¹⁶¹ postulated a spiritual theory of cinema that places emphasis on the ability of the photographic image to capture the unfettered "reality" of God's creation. "Realism" in this understanding of cinema refers to a cinema which delivers images that closely resemble scenes from the observable world around us. New developments in the technologies of film and other moving image media continually give rise to renewed debate over the question of "reality" and its relationship to representations of that "reality". Accordingly, "realism" is now increasingly understood as a relative

concept referring to a range of techniques that mediate various "realities". Quite often, as has been suggested in previous chapters, these "realities" originate in the cinema and in other media. There is, for example, an increasing trend – particularly in television programming – to present mediated situations as "reality", usually as some sort of game show¹⁶². While contestants in these so-called "reality television" programmes supposedly participate in actual "real life" scenarios, the very existence of these situations implies that the "reality" has been constructed for the benefit of the cameras and for the audiences who will eventually watch the edited material. The problem exists, however, in trying to determine what exactly qualifies as "real" in a postmodern cultural landscape which includes "realities" that exist solely in cyberspace ("virtual reality", for example). In other words, not only situations that are simulated for television, but also convincingly "realistic realities" that are generated by computer and digital technologies, may be understood as representing forms of contemporary "realism".

It is reasonable to argue that cinematic "realism" exists in a variety of forms and, more radically, that these "realisms" refer to a variety of "realities" which exist both in the actual, objective world, and in the virtual spaces of digital and otherwise imagined or mediated worlds. The postmodern subject experiences mediated "reality" in certain ways that are relatively new in human development (and many that were unknown to Bazin, for example), and these notions of emerging forms of "realism" may perhaps be understood as a starting point for what might be termed "postmodern realism". This (perhaps ironic) understanding of contemporary strains of "realism" suggests that some "realities" exist only to the extent that they are reflected in the moving images that comprise our hyperreal universe. Peter Matthews (1999b:25) writes that

[n]owadays, of course, it is a truth universally acknowledged that reality is a construction, [and] Bazin's reputed innocence on this score no longer raises sectarian hackles – more like a condescending smile.

Bazin's influence on the history and development of film studies may no longer be considered particularly significant, but there is some connection between his somewhat metaphysical theories and the postmodern discourse around "realism" in the cinema.

The high priest of "realism"

On his death an obituary notice in esprit cited Bazin as predicting that: "The year 2000 will salute the advent of a cinema free of the artificialities of montage, renouncing the role of an 'art of reality' so that it may climb to its final level on which it will become once and for all 'reality made art'." In this as in so much else, Bazin the jubilant millenarian has been proved exactly wrong (Matthews, 1999b:25).

Paying homage to the work of Bazin, who posed the question "What is cinema?", writer Sylvia Harvey notes that cinema occupies a "...position in both a 'universe of hours', of facts and figures, and in a 'universe of meanings', of emotional response and of cultural significance" (Harvey, 1996:229). By this she implies that cinema is rooted in both the "reality of everyday life" and the metaphysical. According to Harvey (1996:229), Bazin's ontological approach to the study of film was heavily rooted in a combination of "...sometimes militantly anti-establishment Christian socialism..." and a line of influence that was both religious and somewhat mystical, drawing on the writings of the Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and scientist. Harvey argues that it was in de Chardin's influence that Bazin found a means whereby the "material world" could be linked to the "immaterial realm" and whereby the cinematic image could be analysed.¹⁶³ Hence, despite Bazin's academically rational approach to writing about the cinema, his work is "...matched or shadowed by a less explicit but no less formative concern with the spiritual, with the presence of the divine in all things" (Harvey, 1996:229-230). Bazin's search for a way to elucidate his ideas of the photographic image – and of his cinematic experiences – was hinged with a search for the presence of the divine in the world of the image:

For Bazin...both the cinematic image and the real world share in the divine presence and the divine voice; matter is a bridge which 'fades into' but also carries the world of the divine (Harvey, 1996:230).

The image, for Bazin, was a powerful link to the "real" world created by God.

Cinema, like the photographic image, represented "...the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real" (Bazin in Harvey, 1996:230). Accordingly, for Bazin, cinema paralleled "reality" in its ability to serve as a place for the "recognition and expression" of divine omnipresence. Central to his thesis, was the belief that the film camera testified to the miracle of God's creation simply by being able to photograph the world. This understanding of cinema, postured in his famous essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in 1945 drew on the understanding that a photograph is

possessed of an irrational power to convince us of its truth. The process of mechanical reproduction means that human agency is removed from any involvement in the production of the photograph, and herein lies its irrational link with truth and "reality". Bazin viewed the photograph, and its "spawn", the motion picture, as having an objective and privileged relationship to "reality", in that it is "...first of all a sensory datum and only later perhaps a work of art..." (Matthews, 1999b:23). Bazin's spiritual inspirations led him to see the primary responsibility of the cinema as being to "document" the world, without interpreting or critiquing it, because those photographic media concerned with "the image" are, in his understanding, required "...to bear witness to the beauty of the cosmos"¹⁶⁴ (Matthews, 1999b:23). In keeping with his spiritual assessment of the progressive technological achievements of photographic and motion picture technology, Bazin believed that advancements are made as a result of the natural human desire to be able to more accurately capture or approximate "the real". His esoteric conception of film's transcendence of the technological appears to stem from Teilhard de Chardin's projection of "...an evolutionary spiralling of human consciousness until it fuses with divine revelation" (Matthews, 1999b:24), and certainly echoes the search for truth and meaning evident in the work of the existentialists. Bazin acknowledged that art is essentially artifice, and felt that the failure of cinema to "merge" with life results from the process of transferral from "reality" to celluloid. After all, the moment in which film can be imagined to become life's exact double, is the moment in which cinema ceases to exist as such. In order to reveal life, then, cinema must remain an artform that can never quite merge with "the real". Bazin (1992a:38) further acknowledged that "[t]he faithful reproduction of reality is not art":

The cinematic staging of the real can be carried out in untold ways, so that it would be more suitable to speak of "realisms" than of a single definitive realist mode (Matthews, 1999b:24).

Matthews (1999b:24) notes that, in this respect, "...Bazin comes closer to endorsing the postmodern shibboleth of pluralism..." than those who are opposed to his theories might realise, although he "...happily forgoes its nihilism".

In an analysis of cinema between 1920 and 1940, Bazin was taken up with a distinction between "...those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality" (Bazin, 1992b:155). Bazin defined "image" as those aspects of the cinematic representation which "add" to the object represented. Bazin felt little affinity for those films which distorted or rearranged reality in the manner of the

German expressionists, for example. The expressionistic use of lighting and décor represented "...a wilful attempt to bend reality out of shape and force it to reflect perverse states of mind" (Matthews, 1999b:24). Bazin's film aesthetic was directly opposed to that of Sergei Eisenstein, the Russian filmmaker who established montage as the basis for the composition and structure of his films. Montage techniques which were developed by filmmakers like Eisenstein represented ways of reassembling a dissected version of "reality" into a particular distortion of the "real". For Bazin, such manipulation of "reality" through montage techniques represented an attempt to create a synthetic or false "reality" into which the audience is hurtled during viewing. He therefore viewed editing as the "...destruction of the essence of cinema" (Kolker, 2000:14). Montage was considered "heretical", representing an attempt to arrogate God's power over the construction of meaning in the universe.¹⁶⁵ Bazin saw a numinous significance in those directors or "*metteurs en scène*"¹⁶⁶ whose work tended towards a capturing of "reality" in an embrace of what he saw as a cinema of "transparency". For Bazin, painting represented an "...ongoing urge of the imagination to preserve images of the world" and was therefore embedded in the prehistory of cinema. The cinema similarly served as a tool for "preservation". He understood that cinema "...always condenses, shapes and orders the reality it records...", but he sought in filmmakers a desire to "serve" reality by their "...unwillingness to do violence to it through ideological abstraction or self-aggrandising technique" (Matthews, 1999b:24).

For Bazin, the concrete depiction of time and space, as necessary aspects of "reality", were best captured in lengthy uninterrupted takes which could best simulate the continuousness of natural "reality". Unlike Eisenstein who wanted the viewer to "...respond to the invisible space that is created by images in conflict", Bazin felt that it was the spectator's role to *look* and piece together the different parts of an image (Kolker, 2000:15). He was further taken up by the idea that "...tactful deployment of the *mise en scène* could sustain the illusion of life spilling over the borders of the frame" (Matthews, 1999b:25). Both these ideas were fruitfully celebrated in the work of Renoir whose combinations of long takes and deep-focus cinematography tended towards a realisation of Bazinian "realism". Bazin saw deep-focus as the "very essence of modern cinematic realism". Deep-focus presents everything in the frame with equal clarity, thereby bringing "...the viewer into closer contact with the scene than that which she would experience in reality..." which effectively allows greater ambiguity because the viewer's attention is not drawn to particular areas of the frame

(Turner, 1999). This ambiguous framing of the world forces the viewer to decide for him- or herself what she or he considers to be of personal interest or to have "meaning".¹⁶⁷ According to Bazin it is the arrangement and movement of the various elements within the frame or shot which results in meaning that is "read" by the viewer who is involved in the scanning and interpretation of the various elements within the frame. For Bazin, this freedom of choice with regards to interpretation and meaning emulates life in that the cinema, too, provides the human subject with certain "responsibilities" relating to ethical or moral choice. The viewer must decide or interpret what his or her relationship to the content of the frame is. In a sense, this "spiritual" participation by the viewer during the interpretation of the film image, is questioned by V. F. Perkins' (1972:71) notion that there is a difference between "film reality" and "actual reality", and argues that "[t]he film medium can never become 'too lifelike' to offer a valid fictional form so long as we retain our awareness of the distinction between film and reality...". For Perkins (1972:71), the act of viewing rather than participating, implies a necessary distinction between the film world and the actual world and he therefore concludes that cinema "...cannot duplicate reality because it cannot directly reproduce our perception of reality". Vogel (1974:11) further refutes Bazin's interpretation of "realism" in the cinema, arguing that cinematic images "lack depth [and] density" and do not relate to "the space-time continuum". Furthermore, cinema lacks "...the non-selectivity of reality..." emphasising certain aspects of a particular world-view while ignoring or excluding another. The "fixed frame" of the cinema screen, according to Vogel, isolates certain elements in preference to others.

Bazin was heavily challenged for his "spiritual" search for meaning in cinematic images, and as a result, was largely discarded when the linguistic turn in cultural (including film) studies took hold during the 1960s. Drawing on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, this new approach to the analysis of cinema "...sought to replace any previous confidence in the 'transparency' of human communication with a recognition of the material presence of the ubiquitous and irreducible sign" (Harvey, 1996:230). Henceforth, "...the object of cultural analysis (and of film studies) was to be the material world of visual and verbal sign systems and not the immaterial world of pure expression – the spirit unclothed by the form of language" (Harvey, 1996:230). Bazin's desire for an "ontological" interpretation of film was more or less replaced by analyses of the process of cinematic representation. However, a postmodern reading of Bazin may suggest that he saw films as sites for

the absorption of "reality". According to Graeme Turner (1998:35), Bazin saw the "real" and the aesthetic as inseparable¹⁶⁸, and Brian Henderson notes that, for Bazin

...film art has no overall form of its own, but that of the real itself. Bazin has a theory of the real, he may not have an aesthetic (in Turner, 1998:35).

It is from this perspective that a connection may exist between contemporary cinema and a postmodern reading of Bazinian "realism". Films which foreground the absorption of the "real" into the "hyperreal" inevitably require each viewer to locate his or her own humanity within the context of the cinematic illusion.

The end of history

If you long for new kinds of history, if you think we need new ways of relating to the past, don't despair. Postmodern history has been born and is currently alive and well. It exists less on the page than on the screen and is the creation of filmmakers and videographers. By both traditional and modern standards, this should not be surprising. The visual media have become our chief means of telling each other about the world. And filmmakers clearly have much less invested in traditional ways of rendering the past than do historians - though they have no less investments in its meaning (Rosenstone, 1996:205-206).

Any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning (Hayden White in Tomasulo, 1996:69).

According to poststructuralists and postmodernists, all "history" is a product of some or other mediated discourse, while all events are understood to be narratives ("stories" or "texts") which serve to convey an interpretation or representation of "historical occurrences" (Tomasulo, 1996:70). While this notion of history has been criticised for its reliance on postmodernist techniques and for attempting to undermine the stability of "legitimate" structures in contemporary society, there is little doubt that the visual media (such as film and television) are the prime "constructors" of any existing notion of the past. Film technologies construct images of a time and re-present these as "realistic" depictions of that time. This ability to re-create the past in the form of images distracts the viewer from the fact that what is being viewed is, in fact, only a re-presentation. Whereas the recording of history has always been subject to the subjectivity and influence of the personal perspective (ideological and political, for example) of the "writer" or "historian", filmic representations tend to have the ability to eliminate doubts concerning the authenticity of historical documentation:

...increasingly, the postmodern world has been called upon to rely on cinematic and electronic evidence for its depiction and understanding of historical events. In short, our concepts of historical referentiality (what happened), epistemology (how we know it happened), and historical memory (how we interpret it and what it means to us) are now determined primarily by media imagery (Tomasulo, 1996:70).

Images tend to be taken as fact, particularly when they are presented as "real", and in the contemporary age, numerous media "events" have served as examples of Western humankind's "...increased reliance on media imagery to define and verify daily news events and the historically real..." (Tomasulo, 1996:71).

Tomasulo (1996:71) further notes that, unlike the (written) historical records left by historians throughout recorded time, a "reality effect" is produced when one sees "...quotidian historical events..." occur "...within the historiographic space of a motion picture or television screen...". Given the ubiquity of media representations in "the society of the spectacle", *seeing* has indeed become *believing*, and contemporary "history" is being created on the television, cinema and computer screens which feed into our socially-constructed notion of "reality". However, it is quite clear that even news programmes and documentary films may distort or corrupt "reality" as images are selected at random and subjected to various processes including, for example, editing. The film medium, perhaps even more than written histories, is adept at collapsing the boundary between historical fact and historical fiction, precisely because images tend to be taken at face value far more readily than words which must inevitably be interpreted by the reader. However, it should be understood that history itself may be "...defined as the discourse *around* events, rather than as those original events that prompted the discourse in the first place" (Tomasulo, 1996:69).

Hayden White (1996) provides several examples of cinema working as an abstraction of the historical, including Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), which both deal with Twentieth Century historical events. Both films also fictionalise their subject matter to some degree through particular choices made by the filmmakers, and through the stylistic treatment of the material. Indeed, White discusses the severe criticism which Stone received in response to his treatment of the mystery surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy. The primary criticisms against the film focussed on the "irresponsible" way in which the "...film seemed to blur the distinction between fact and fiction by treating an historical *event* as if it there were no limits to what could legitimately be said about it..." (White,

1996:19). In this way, the film distorts the "...very principle of objectivity as the basis for which one might discriminate between truth on the one side and myth, ideology, illusion, and lie on the other" (White, 1996:19). Christopher Sharrett (1998:220) notes that the "media assault" on *JFK* is "disconcerting" because it presumes that "...American popular art is usually reverential toward the truth of historical events". Thus, *JFK* "strays from the 'truth'" only "...with the proviso that the truth usually supported by Hollywood is one comforting to specific concepts of race, gender, and class interest" (Sharrett, 1998:220).

Sharrett (1998:220) refers to a number of films, including *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), *They Died with Their Boots On* (Raoul Walsh, 1942), *The Green Berets* (Ray Kellogg, 1968) and *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker, 1988) which "...have taken far greater liberties with historical evidence than does *JFK*". He argues that these films "...have not only suffered less calumny but even enjoyed approbation from contemporary reviewers who felt that such renditions of American history did no disservice to our collective sense of the Real" (Sharrett, 1998:220). *JFK*, it may even be argued, should be considered a less contentious film than many others because it stylistically acknowledges the presence of the camera as a mediating force. Stone's style, to an extent, reflects the nature of the memory of the Kennedy assassination as an extension of a collective mass consciousness: as a media event. The reception of the film is perhaps symptomatic of the typically postmodern "memory" of the Kennedy assassination as something which exists purely in "...the realm of the spectacle", which the film actually serves to highlight:

As if to admit to the collapse of (in Fredric Jameson's words) civic idealism and the death of politics itself after the public execution of so many liberal and progressive leaders, the film also seems to acknowledge that, in the current moment, public outrage is discovered and retained in the channels of private fantasy (Sharrett, 1998:240).

One of the film's chief values, perhaps, lies in the unearthing of the undeniable fact that the political has been replaced by the cultural, and that "real" experience and memory have been absorbed by the popularising effects of mediation.

In a scathing critique of the widely praised and extremely popular film, *Forrest Gump*, Martin Walker (1994:16-17) describes how the film merges with contemporaneous American politics to present an isolationist view of American history that is both "sugar-coated" and "stupid". History and culture are intimately interconnected and Walker highlights the notion that the comedic revisionism of the past fifty years

(which is represented through the experiences of the film's naive "stupid superstar" title character) is also a conservative rewriting of the past:

For the baby-boomer generation, increasingly uneasy at the performance of the first of its number in the White House, it makes for a comforting, because comfortably lobotomised, trip down memory lane with a happy ending in store. *Forrest Gump* is *The Big Chill* [Lawrence Kasdan, 1983] with a comfort blanket, Hollywood's disturbing vision of that totalitarian ability to sanitise the past which George Orwell identified as the deepest peril to truth (Walker, 1994:17).

"Truth" becomes both subjective and alterable when filmic narrative - even if presented as pure fantasy or comedic metafiction - engages with the past, or with aspects of socially *known* "reality". History itself becomes subjective and questionable when subjected to the type of whimsical interrogation offered by the computer-generated technological insertion of Forrest Gump (Tom Hanks) into archival footage, for example. "Scenes" from American history are transformed into comic spectacles in Zemeckis's film, as Gump appears to meet the "real" John F. Kennedy and, in another scene, casually drops his pants in front of the "real" Lyndon Johnson. Thus, even though the film uses 40 years of American history as an historical background, many critics agreed that it is ultimately "...defeated by its own glibness..." and consequently "...ends up signifying less about the times it describes than the back of a chewing gum wrapper" (Felperin Sharman, 1994:42). While such an assessment of the film seems harsh, Felperin Sharman's description metaphorically relates to the way in which history is experienced in contemporary times. Television news and documentary programming bring us the history of the day in formats that are designed not only to inform, but to entertain. To a degree, the delivery of daily history into our homes focuses on the viewer as central to the experience of events as they occur in time. The television viewer is addressed directly, whether by news readers, on-the-spot reporters or voice-over narrators, and this places the spectator quite clearly before the "spectacle of history". *Forrest Gump* emulates this perspective in the sense that the titular protagonist remains at the centre of events - no matter how spectacular - as they unfold throughout the film's "40 years" of featured history:

...despite its constant invocation of history, represented by clever retouching of archive footage, world events are never more than a flickering spectacle behind the unvarying constant that is Forrest (Felperin Sharman, 1994:42).

The presentation of historical events in *Forrest Gump* (which acknowledges its status as fiction) is therefore significantly in tune with the contemporary spectator's involvement with history as the media allow it to evolve on our television screens and in the various news delivery systems.

Computer technology is used in this film to innovatively integrate historical "fact" with fictional story-telling. The technique enhances "the film's realism" rather than creating "the unbelievable" (Felperin Sharman, 1994:42), while the effect is to reiterate *both* "history" and "fantasy" in terms of the spectator's present. The contemporary viewer alone is able to discern the significance or meaning of the "rewritten" or re-framed version of history which emerges in terms of his or her personal perspective. As Walker (1994:17) points out, "[t]he film has become a palimpsest, on which audiences may inscribe whatever message they choose". Indeed, Zemeckis insists that the film is an attempt "...to present this generation without commentating on it..." (in Walker, 1994:17), and Forrest's unassuming attitude - his naive, non-judgemental observations - allows each viewer to impose their own point-of-view onto his situation as it occurs in various moments in history. It is in this sense that *Forrest Gump* functions as a postmodern text which is open to multiple and mutable readings, suggesting the extraordinary way in which "history" itself is open to manipulation, distortion and "re-writing" (or "re-viewing"):

Its significance lies less in its glib straddle of politics than in its eerily precise exploitation of the endless pliability of the American past. It is a sum of newsreels rewound and made blandly, briskly suitable for the age of 'Headline News', seconds of archive footage here and brief soundbites there. Civil rights and Vietnam and flower-power and Watergate reel past, with soundtrack triggers of dozens of rock hits played just long enough to tickle the memory but not enough to command it (Walker, 1994:17).

The film's "bland" and "brisk" treatment of archival footage suitably situates the viewer in a "reality" which reduces history to images which are only as "real" as the memories which they evoke.

Many postmodern films highlight the fact that the past cannot be recalled or recollected as a single knowable truth or "reality". Postmodern thinkers have an aversion to "History", suggested by Robert Rosenstone's (1996:202) comments that "[t]he notion of postmodern history seems like a contradiction in terms" and that all theorists agree that at the "...heart of Postmodernism...is a struggle against History - with a capital 'H'". Postmodernism, by definition, stands in opposition to the narratives, truth-claims and discoveries of History. Within Postmodern thinking, History is seen as

...the great enemy, the Oedipal father, the metanarrative of metanarrative, the last and greatest of the White Mythologies used to legitimate Western hegemony, a false and outworn discourse that fosters nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, colonialism, sexism - and all other evils of contemporary society (Rosenstone, 1996:202).

Rosenstone's understanding of the postmodern attitude towards "History" suggests that History is ultimately a mediated story about "reality" as it has unfolded as a means of empowering certain groups and entrenching certain ways of thinking. However, according to Gianni Vattimo, in the postmodern era, all sense of history disappears as subjects encounter an "...experience of the 'end of history'" (Petro, 1996:189). This experience is a result of the absorption of cultural and artistic creativity into the process of endless rearticulation in which prior events and experiences are recycled as images and spectacles within an age of nostalgia. The "past" has become a "location" into which contemporary issues, ideas, beliefs and concerns may be explored and interrogated - an activity which effectively extinguishes prior understandings of the "past". Consequently, instead of History, we have contemporary views of the past.

Postmodern films include explicit and/or "...implicit admission[s] that the technologies of storytelling inflect the unverifiable rhetoric of narration" (Rosenheim, 1996:227). Rosenheim points to "stylistic *cinéma vérité*" which is "...now ubiquitous in television..." and "...is a way of keeping reality claims at bay - warding off presumptions to direct representation" (Rosenheim, 1996:227-228). Such moving image formats may, when apparently documenting the past, serve to "...illustrate the slipperiness of memory" (Rosenheim, 1996:228). In Rosenheim's analysis of Errol Morris's stylistically challenging documentary series *Interrotron Stories*, he notes that Morris insists that with the "recreation" of "actual" historical events for the programme, what is actually produced are "ironic commentaries" which "...are not *evidence* for anything" since they actually highlight that what is being *shown* "...may be a lie' or only one of many possible interpretations of an event" (Rosenheim, 1996:228). Television programmes such as *Interrotron* are described by Rosenheim (1996:231) as "...something like the fulfilment of [Walter] Benjamin's prediction, where the permeation of mechanical equipment permits not the direct representation of reality, but the presentation of the *rhetoric* of direct reality". This may be described as a form of "transparent realism" which effaces technology: the style of such representations "...remind us that the peculiar charge of nonfiction filmmaking still lies in the privileged claims it can make about the world" (Rosenheim, 1996:231). Furthermore, such representations foreground "...the seductive and manipulative powers of the camera..." while serving as "...both a source of pleasure and a way of acknowledging the contingency of representation" (Rosenheim, 1996:231).

According to White, this "narrativization" of historical events is radicalised by technological developments in the electronic media which have equally allowed events such as the Rodney King police beatings to "explode" in front of television viewers. Shot from a hotel balcony by an amateur videographer named George Holliday on the evening of March 3rd, 1991, the footage of Rodney King being beaten, kicked and Taser-blasted by a group of twenty-seven Los Angeles police officers has profoundly impacted on the way in which the framing of "reality" is perceived in relation to the greater social perception of "reality". The recording of actual events on camera effectively encodes those events for those who will ultimately serve as spectators to a mediated view of those events. When the viewer then encounters the images that are framed in this manner, the meaning, significance and "reality" of the events becomes subject to the viewer's interpretation of the images which have been dislocated from their original context. Indeed, during the broadcast of the most significant eighty-one-seconds of Holliday's tape on news programmes (most significantly on Cable News Network) around the world, viewers "...reacted to the scene according to his/her own subjectivity and experience (often based on gender, class, and race)" (Tomasulo, 1996:75).

While the Rodney King saga demonstrated how the framing of a "real" event - "*historical reality*" - in terms of cinematic/televsual images may come to represent a news event almost by accident, there have been numerous examples in recent years of the power which the visual media have to actually "create" history. The media's power to *create* "history" is demonstrated by the scandalous Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair, the O. J. Simpson trial, and the massive interest generated by the death of Princess Diana. Indeed, these events not only came to be sensationalised by the media, but continually reinforced the media's power to blur distinctions between facts and lies (or fantasies) simply through the presentation of particular scenarios to the viewing public, for example. These particular news spectacles also present themselves as "postmodern events" as they bring into the public sphere aspects of the personal lives of the various "characters" involved. Such contrived representations certainly demonstrate just how appropriate the epithet "society of the spectacle" is when describing a world where the media enjoy particularly suspect powers in the establishment of notions of "reality". Indeed, when the televisual media choose to present particular "newsworthy" events as truth, it seems appropriate to consider "...any one version of making sense of events...as 'truthful' as any other" (Tomasulo, 1996:70).

The war on "reality"

As broadcast live and round-the-clock by CNN, the Gulf War was a highly successful made-for-television movie even while it was happening. Never before in the annals of history had an international combat situation so merged with its own representation (Hoberman, 2000:18).

The "Gulf War" which kept much of the world glued to their television screen in 1991, is perhaps the strongest example of an "historical event" which, to many analysts, existed largely as a media spectacle which played out as a round-the-clock news and actuality programme on channels such as CNN. J. Hoberman (2000:18) notes that it is widely understood that the Gulf War has received little cinematic attention precisely because of its "initial oversaturation". According to Hoberman (2000:18), "[t]he journalistic draft turned out to be the final draft as well", suggesting that one mediated version of the historic war was considered sufficient treatment of the subject. So spectacular was the effect of the media event that was Operation Desert Storm - one of the central moments in the epic Gulf War narrative - that its opening evening became the second most-watched telecast ever (although, percentage-wise, there were more televisions tuned to John F. Kennedy's funeral) and on that night (16 January 1991), no serious crimes were reported in Washington DC (Hoberman, 2000:18). However, while the Gulf War and Operation Desert Storm were presented to the world as unfolding significant events in the history of contemporary humankind, it may be argued that these events were presented less "realistically" than the simulated battles of war films such as Spielberg's shockingly "realistic" *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

Hoberman suggests that the actual implication of viewing the literal presentation of the actual Desert Storm event "...inspired fascinated disassociation" and notes that "[t]he viewing experience was routinely compared to Nintendo and *Top Gun* or, as the event was almost immediately theorised by postmodern academics, to the aesthetic pronouncements on the beauty of war made by the Italian futurists" (Hoberman, 2000:18). The war's tragic imminence became a "cool" event through the process of televisual representation which served to distance the viewer from an event which now shared the same cultural space as sit-coms, soap operas and television advertising. Indeed, this was a "war" which became economically lucrative for networks and news channels who used the "Pentagon's *mise en scène*" (Hoberman, 2000:18) to sell advertising space to advertisers who could be assured of captive

audiences eager to situate themselves as observer-participants within an actual (completely mediated) war:

Television watchers were routinely placed inside a missile sensor system even while military officers acted as assigning editors in determining where to dispatch the reporter pool. Show business or simulation? Historian Elaine Scarry would compare Desert Storm to Jean Genet's *The Balcony*: 'All possible political positions began to orient themselves in relation to the theatrical spectacle rather than to the reality of the events themselves' (Hoberman, 2000:18-19).

History-in-the-making was, in a sense, transformed into a television narrative which, in the Western world, rallied viewers towards a collaborative "nationalism" and universal "patriotism". In a sense, an Allied victory against the "tyrannical" Saddam Hussein was assured even before any major fighting took place - the media had already branded and condemned Hussein and his forces to moral subjugation. This subjective broadcasting by the Western hype-machine is parodied in the recent animated satire, *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* (discussed in greater detail in chapter five), in which Hussein is portrayed as being more unequivocally fiendish than his homosexual lover, who is none other than a ridiculously camp Satan. The film, which continually alludes to the pervasive power of the media to *create* versions of the "truth" and thereby *invent* "reality", literalises the American perception that Hussein is "in bed with the Devil" by actually depicting this image as part of the somewhat over-the-top (surreal) narrative.

America's Gulf War "victory" became an equally lucrative marketing device which transformed "history" into a series of products and mediated images:

Used to advertise everything from motorboats to condoms, the victory over Saddam Hussein not only occasioned all manner of commemorative collectibles (t-shirts, engraved guns and knives, model Patriot missiles) but, beginning with General Norman Schwarzkopf's 27 February Riyadh news conference, was commodified in a succession of videos produced for the home market. These included CNN's *Desert Storm: The War Begins* and *Desert Storm: The Victory*, a confidently jazzed-up alternative to the more sober CBS bowed set *Desert Triumph*. The British perspective was provided by ITN's *Gulf War: The Complete Story* while the National Football League put out *Victory in the Desert*, complete with Whitney Houston's melodramatic Super Bowl XXV (Desert Storm Day XI) rendition of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' (Hoberman, 2000:19).

Since the Gulf War was almost obsessively pre-packaged as a media event complete with its own "home movies" and feature films which offered true-to-life "realism", it is not surprising that Hollywood failed to pay any significant attention to the war. The Gulf War had already been dealt with in explicit detail, and it undoubtedly seemed risky or redundant to treat a "reality" which had already been transformed into a

media "entertainment package" in terms of yet another "fictional" narrative context:

Up until now the Gulf War was deemed a little too close for comfort to get all 'Nam revisionist about. On hypocritical grounds of taste, this so-called "media war" was considered out-of-bounds, apart from the odd sturdy thriller like 1996's *Courage Under Fire* [Edward Zwick] (Nathan, 2000c:10).

One of the first major films to deal with the Gulf War is David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (2000), which satirically condemns both war and, more specifically, the media's infatuation with this particular war. In his review of the film, Ian Nathan notes that the film opposes the conventional Hollywood historicisation of war by bypassing "...the usual 15 years of telling-it-as-it-wasn't filmmaking..." (Nathan, 2000c:10) by presenting a fictional tale about the war in terms of the media-entertainment aesthetic which was used to bring the "real" war into millions of homes around the world:

Three Kings doesn't break new ground. There's not much to say about war except the obvious: it's inhuman and barbaric. It's how Russell says it that makes the movie tough-hitting, often startling. He turns the video game we saw on TV in on itself: at times, the movie plays out as though it's virtual reality. But underneath the thrills the movie's dead serious in a darkly humorous way, commenting tartly on the cruelty of war and the inhumanity of all the participants (Pretorius, 2000:11).

In this sense, Pretorius (2000:11) sees the film as an "anti-war movie" which is contradictorily constructed a "commercial action" film.

While the film is a "war movie", it also plays with many of the conventions of traditional war film, suggested by the fact that it actually opens just as the war itself has ended. Russell's film also noticeably alludes to numerous recognisable films which deal with war (and violence), thus linking it to a tradition and history of productions which treat the subject in a variety of ways:

...[Russell] tosses slices of *Catch 22* [Mike Nichols, 1970], Tarantino, [Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, *M*A*S*H* [Robert Altman, 1970] and *Saving Private Ryan's* verisimilitude into the movie blender to create a violent, blackly comic, ultra-cool, anti-war satire (Nathan, 2000c:10).

Most significantly, it is a movie which deals explicitly with the notion that a contemporary war – such as the Gulf War – is actually constructed in terms of media images. The final product is extravagantly designed to emulate the visual elements which are often employed in popular music videos and big-budget advertising. The bright, ultra-"clean" look of the film (achieved by missing a bleaching stage during the film development process) combines with numerous visual and sound enhancement techniques in order to link the film directly and inarguably with the creative techniques

most commonly employed in non-confrontational television formats. The imaginative use of camera angles, frequent swish pans, slow-motion effects, occasionally-enhanced "real" sound-effects and highly energetic soundtrack relate directly to the aesthetic sensibility of the television medium which first made the Gulf War a "reality" for millions of viewers around the world. Both the narrative and the style of the film constantly allude to the interaction and co-dependence of the American media and the American military. In certain parts of the film, Russell enhances the "reality"-effect by emphasising certain events through slow-motion, ultra-realistic (exaggerated) sound recordings and detailed biological close-ups. In this way, he not only draws the viewer's attention to acts of killing and wounding, but refers to the spectator's fascination with *seeing* – in detail – the horrific acts of violence which are usually brought to us via television news and documentary footage or re-enactments. Self-reflexive films such as *Three Kings* serve to suture the viewer to the screen while simultaneously revealing or demonstrating how such suturing actually occurs. The self-reflexive representation of "actual" events and "historical" events thus "...forgoes the conventions of authority predicated on the neutrality and objectivity of the camera" which suggests itself as "...historical filmmaking for the MTV generation, in which what is at stake is not the authority of the camera (its pretence towards autonomy and objectivity), but its implicative dexterity and seductive force" (Rosenheim, 1996:233). *Three Kings* more than adequately suggests that films may serve as catalysts for the interrogation of historical records, enlivening the debate around the establishment of accepted truths regarding History.

Examples of this type of interrogation may be found in even the most "commercially accessible" films. Early in James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), for example, the viewer's attention is drawn to the distinction between "history", as it is known to the world, and memory, as it exists in terms of personal experience. Within the film, a variety of images resulting from a range of representational media, are used to "spark off" an old woman's memories of her experiences aboard the "ship of dreams" which is the site for the development of the film's "flashback narrative". At first, it is a simply drawing of herself that reminds the woman of her encounter with a young man aboard the ship all those decades before. Then, underwater video footage of the sunken ship reduces to the woman to tears as the images "take her back in time" towards a vivid retelling of her experience of the vessel's first and final voyage. It is hardly surprising that, in an earlier scene, the woman had remarked that she never goes anywhere without her photographs - images from her life which serve to remind

her of her own "history".

As the film suggests, however, both history and memory are products of both "fact" and fantasy/fiction. These combined elements are also the narrative tools used by filmmakers to create stories set within the "real" events of history. The significance of *Titanic*, for example, lies in the way in which it incorporates various "historically accurate details" while pandering to contemporary tastes and expectations. Thus, fictitious characters and plot elements are integrated into an actual event from the past in order to make the "factual" tale more personal and engaging, while significantly enhancing the reliability of the fictional romantic tale which is the focus of the movie. Ironically, fantasy is made more "real" for the viewer because of the universality of the romantic intrigue that serves to personalise the action and spectacle of what is essentially a disaster movie. Further devices concerning the viewer's knowledge of "history" are employed to actually remind the spectator of the film's deference to actual "history". In one scene, for example, Rose (Kate Winslet) is depicted unpacking a number of paintings which are supposedly by Pablo Picasso. A moment of trivial humour ensues as Rose and her fiancé argue about the quality of the artworks; he insists that the artist will never amount to anything, while she points out that they have been painted by "someone Picasso". While interiors, costumes, props and social "nuances" are portrayed with apparent faithfulness to "historical fact", various anachronistic scenes (such as the Picasso discussion) serve to highlight the inherently artificial way in which an image or idea of history may be constructed by narratives which include what Hayden White (1996:18) refers to as "historical metafiction". *Titanic* effectively belongs to a class of film which echoes the historical novels of the nineteenth-century which presented an interference between actual "real" historical events and an "imaginary" story with the effect "...of endowing the imaginary events with the concreteness of reality, while at the same time endowing the historical events with the 'magical' aura peculiar to the romance" (White, 1998:18).

Nicci Gerrard (1998:2) criticises this form of historiography as a form of "the dumbing down" of history and asserts that blockbusters such as *Titanic* are "disturbing" because they "...erase all difference in the history they use..." making "...it so familiar and user-friendly that all that is left is Americana", leaving us "...with a tired and noisy collection of clichés in which nothing is foreign or threatening, nothing challenges our contemporary self-satisfaction". Essentially, Gerrard's concern is with a somewhat

postmodern aspect of most historically-situated films: the location of the present *within* the past. Gerrard similarly criticises the animated feature film, *Anastasia* (Don Bluth and Gary Goldman, 1995), arguing that such films (like Shakespearean dramas, for example) eradicate the sense of distance and respect for history and historic characters which should be nurtured in film viewers. For Gerrard (1998:2), "history" is increasingly losing "...its great objective weight and [has] become something more entrancing and intimate for us". Indeed, as the Gulf War demonstrated, history is increasingly created in the moment of its depiction - whether on television or on the cinema screen.

As we are increasingly able to broadcast, record or document (historical) events as they occur in the world around us, making use of cinematic and televisual technologies, so our ability to distinguish between historic actuality and mediated "reality" is destabilised. History may be described as a collection of memories which attempt to organise the story of humankind, but the intervention of the camera changes this understanding of history not only by prioritising certain events, but by attempting to *show* that which is *unshowable*: "truth". Cinema is deliriously caught up in a struggle with "reality", by its very nature attempting to turn the "real" into artifice and discovering instead a dynamic tension between "reality" and "artificiality" which is exacerbated in the postmodern age where "reality" is already-artificial. The artificial is an extension of the "real" and media representations corrupt and distort our ability to distinguish between the two. Just as the assassination of Kennedy and the beating of Rodney King have become "events" or spectacles which exist because of the camera and the media, so cinema continually seeks new ways of telling stories which are realised "events".

When "reality" and hyperreality merge

The concept of characters moving in and out of film and television screens seems to have become a distinctive new genre (Worsdale, 1999a:12).

...cameras are everywhere and the whole world is watching in the late twentieth century... (Tomasulo, 1996:71).

"He has the world's most recognisable face - he can't disappear" (The Truman Show).

Currently, one of the most popular formats for popular "realism" is what is referred to

as "reality television". The idea of capturing unusual – but "real" - situations on camera and packaging them as mass entertainment has long been in existence (and long before the days of cameras and television, gladiators fought elaborate and spectacular tournaments for the amusement of mass audiences). The more clinical forms of "reality" entertainment which have recently enjoyed burgeoning popularity, involve highly fabricated scenarios, extensively auditioned participants and noticeably scripted or "guided" events which strain the limits of the imposed "reality". However, as increasingly bizarre situations and scenarios are thought up as a context in which "real" human beings can perform "as though the cameras were not even there", millions of television viewers are sold the idea that they are the privileged voyeur-spectators of a truly unmediated "reality". Whether participants in such programmes attempt to endure the hardships of life on a desert island (as in *Survivor*) or to resist lustful urges (as in *Temptation Island*), such programmes are, ultimately, providing nothing more than the illusion of "reality":

...that subtle shift from simply being to performing for an audience is what is what makes reality TV so fascinating. It's show business giving us what we all want – reality that is well-lit, cleverly filmed and cut into nice 60-minute segments. That's the kind of reality we can all deal with (Ronge, 2001b:6).

Baudrillard (1997a:162) elaborates on this sense of the "unreal real", noting that the entertainment value of such shows lies in the "[p]leasure in the microscopic simulation that allows the real to pass into the hyperreal" and he draws a light comparison with pornography which is similarly a case of the hyperreal posing as "reality".

Contemporary "reality television" programmes may be considered innovative in their specific choice of contexts, but the idea of "reality television" is nothing new. In 1973, American television broadcast a "documentary series" entitled *An American Family* (directed by Alan and Susan Raymond) which, according to Baudrillard (1997a:162), was a "vérité experiment" consisting of "...seven months of uninterrupted shooting, three hundred hours of non-stop broadcasting, without a script or screenplay, the odyssey of a family, its dramas, its joys, its unexpected events, non-stop – in short, a 'raw' historical document...". The Loud family who featured as the "stars" of this original hyperreal television drama came to a sticky end when the parents' marriage fell completely apart leading to an on-camera divorce demand from wife Patricia to her husband William. While the family's every move was being filmed, the eldest son, Lance, came out as a gay man. The series, which was promoted as a show which was being recorded as if the film crew were not even there, calls into question the very notion of "unmediated reality":

What was most apparent...was that when people are being filmed by a crew, no matter how unobtrusive, they start to act for the camera. They manufacture dramatic moments and overreact to events. It is possible that the Louds might have worked through their family tensions on their own. But the TV cameras subtly goaded them to sharpen the edges of the family drama, to give it shape and theatrical impact as they played to the gallery (Ronge, 2001b:6).

For Baudrillard (1997a:163), such confusion of the "real" and the hyperreal, the medium and the message, suggests that "[t]here is no longer a medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real, and one can no longer say that the medium is altered by it".

Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* offers an entertaining perspective on the postmodern vision of the western world as a place reduced to pure mediated hyperreality. *The Truman Show* adds a hyperbolic twist to the Loud family concept in that it deals with the experiences of one (fictional) man who is filmed continuously from the moment of birth and is therefore the unwitting star of the world's most popular television programme. Much like *Cable Guy* (Ben Stiller, 1996), another film featuring Jim Carrey, *The Truman Show* deals with the perverse intrusion of the television camera and television set into the lives of contemporary human beings. In *Cable Guy*, Carrey's psychologically disturbed character, Chip Douglas, admits that he was raised by television, and that the flow of images from the household "idiot-box" played a greater influence in his development as a child than did his parents. At the end of that film, when Chip's fall onto a television transmitter interrupts the broadcast of the outcome of a popular sibling murder trial, a montage of television viewer responses shows people ignoring their televisions and returning to "simpler" pleasures such as reading and interacting. The point made in this particularly poignant sequence is that television generates its own insular "reality" – one which distracts viewers from the "real" world. Producing an endless cycle of continually flowing images, television compels audiences to keep on watching, lest some detail is missed, or some moment in history escapes attention. Television ideally requires a dedicated (preferably uninterrupted) viewership in order to sell advertising space in an increasingly competitive market. And, it needs to compel viewers to stay tuned while those adverts are running. *The Truman Show* taps into this particular mentality by making Truman Burbank (Carrey) the naïve central protagonist of his own non-stop, around-the-clock television show. "The Truman Show" spectators are depicted as addicted "fans" who are thoroughly absorbed in another "reality", unable to turn off or tune out.¹⁶⁹

Unlike the suburban Santa Monica household occupied by William Loud and his family, Truman's world is not "real" and his "reality" is little more than a simulation devised by a television corporation. Furthermore, although "...*The Truman Show* is set in the [near] future, its town is a 50s idyll of identical clapboard houses built around a curiously small business centre of corporate buildings and populated by the ideal demographic" (Whitehouse, 1998:9).¹⁷⁰ Not only is his "reality" little more than a gigantic television sound studio, but it is also a simulation of the types of sets used in numerous television programmes from which "The Truman Show" draws inspiration. Ultimately, Truman's world is not even based on an "objective social reality", but on a mediated interpretation of that "reality" filtered through the sterile gaze of the television camera. Furthermore, with the exception of the innocent and relatively naïve Truman, the folk who populate this "idyllic" town are all actors, paid to keep up the appearance of "reality" and the illusion of unmediated respectability. Of course, the cracks in this slick postmodern melding of "reality" and fiction occasionally make themselves conspicuous in the form of distracting product placement moments, actors who attempt to let Truman know the "truth", and even technical failures such as lights which mysteriously (magically, for Truman) fall from the sky.

In another sense, however, Truman's world resembles our own surveillance-obsessed culture, and in some ways the show's creator Christof (Ed Harris) looks down on his "creation" in the same way that a police stake-out team might monitor a high-crime area. *The Truman Show* may make light of the postmodern equivalent of Cold War paranoia, but the hidden cameras in Truman's bathroom, bedroom, office, and most private room, his basement, reflect the possible dangers posed by our knowledge that video and security cameras are now remarkably inconspicuous and potentially anywhere and everywhere. Tony Scott's recent action-thriller *Enemy of the State* (1998) turned the same paranoid fantasy into a high-paced socio-political nightmare in which the "Big Brother" American government makes use of "...an extraordinary range of devices for eavesdropping and spying on ordinary citizens" (Ronge, 1999a). In this rapidly edited film¹⁷¹, Scott shows the potential for evil posed by various types of surveillance equipment (cameras, microphones, satellites) which can be used to investigate practically any aspect of an individual's life. The film highlights the notion that, when the power to command such equipment falls into the wrong hands, the right to privacy of any member of society can be violated and abused with devastating consequences. While *Enemy of the State* turns the infringement of personal privacy represented by the all-intrusive surveillance into a life-and-death conspiracy theory

thriller, *The Truman Show* satirises this same situation as a hyperbolic, somewhat-fantastical comedy.

The ever-present cameras which observe Truman's life, dislocate his every attempt to experience life as authentic, because his life - which is reflected on the screens of television viewers - is reflected as "always already-artificial". Thus, as an example, although Truman wants to travel to Fiji and to find his true love, the television "gods" have intervened and undermined his ability to travel on water, thereby preventing his escape from the monotony of his own television universe. Metaphorically, *The Truman Show* represents the power of the media to corrupt our own unique human sensibilities, desires, and instincts. Images (particularly when they flow endlessly) have the perverse power to corrupt the will-to-action by presenting dreams as already-fulfilled. In a cinema, the film ultimately comes to an end, whereas television promises the next instalment the following night or the next week. *The Truman Show* takes the serialisation of moving images to the level of endlessness: an infinite simulation of the "real" which compensates for "reality" by living up to the expectation that its promise of entertainment will never stop. (Cinema, it may be argued, occasionally offers the promise of the same wish-fulfilment fantasy, but after two hours, when the house lights come up, the spectator is compelled to action, even if only to leave the movie-house.)

Moreover, the concept of reality-television represented by *The Truman Show* condenses and compacts time into an endless succession of "presents". When the here-and-now is continually represented as image-flow, there remains little room for the past or for the future. The present is always succeeded, not by the future, but by itself, in the instant. Truman is not only trapped by the huge dome of his specially-constructed studio world, but by the ceaseless intrusion of the present on his "character" in the television programme of which he is the central figure. Reality television's conversion of actual experience into framed images, converts temporal "reality" into a flow of perpetual "presents". In a very similar way, Truman's desire to escape his hyperreal world is a need to escape the "unwitting celebrity" (Whitehouse, 1998:10) which holds him prisoner until the spell which his show has over audience members is finally broken. Indeed, when it comes to the crunch, fans of *The Truman Show* television broadcast are ultimately keen to see Truman escape the shackles of his television world (perhaps suggesting their own desire to escape their imprisonment at the hands of their own televisions). As Charles Whitehouse

(1998:10) puts it, "...crucially, that audience of bar girls and security guards seems not to be watching soap, but something closer to sport". Indeed, these viewers really want Truman to escape into the "real" world, and this is demonstrated by their reaction during the final moments of the film. The consequence of watching *The Truman Show* (the movie), however, is that the spectator is compelled to ponder the artificiality of the world that Truman enters after exiting his television "reality". Essentially, he is departing one corruption of "reality" (which, to some extent, at least admits that it is artificial) only to enter a world which chooses to *allow* such perversions of truth and "reality". It is sadly pertinent that the "Free Truman" campaign which rages in the "real" world of the movie is supported by a minority, while the indifferent masses indulge their viewing desires with relentless abandon.

A film which deals with similar issues to those raised in *The Truman Show*, but is perhaps more closely related to *An American Family*, is Ron Howard's *EdTV* (1999) which deals with many of the problems associated with existence as part of a mediated hyperreality. The film portrays the rapid disintegration of a man's life when he becomes the "star" of a "reality" television programme that broadcasts his life as, when and how it unfolds (although, unlike contemporary "reality television" shows such as *Big Brother*¹⁷², he is allowed to go to the bathroom alone). Ed Pekurney (Matthew McConaughey), who carries on quite "normally" in front of the cameras, soon proves his best friend's theory that "it used to be that people were famous for being special; now they're just special for being famous". However, Ed also soon discovers that the hyperreal world of television stardom (while having some initial appeal in terms of his incredible instant popularity) interferes with, and ultimately threatens to destroy, his once-ordinary ("real") life:

...even though he lives in a country where the ultimate goal of millions is to be on television, to the extent [that] they'll confess illicit affairs to their partners and the nation at the same time, Ed...soon discovers [that] fame and exposure 'ain't all they're cracked up to be (Coleman, 1999c:8).

The film depicts how Ed's love life is turned upside down when viewers begin to voice their disapproval and dislike of his girlfriend Shari (Jenna Elfman) on other television shows which feature interviews with Ed's fans. On another pseudo-intellectual talk-show, Ed's life (and television "performance") is discussed to the point where "meaning" is quite literally replaced by diatribe and speculation. Being a celebrity, Ed discovers, is hardly compatible with leading a "normal" life. When Ed's fans want him find an alternative girlfriend, opinion polls soon reveal to network executives that another television celebrity, Jill (Liz Hurley), should be the new love interest in their

favourite "soap opera". Naturally, the right strings are pulled, and soon millions of eager spectators prepare to watch the two stars make love. When the passionate sex scene goes hysterically awry (Ed falls off a table onto Jill's cat), there are once again numerous critical and speculative comments from his voyeuristically "involved" (but quite "detached") fans.

EdTV, while an often-irreverent comedy, is no mere fantasy. As discussed in further detail below, the Internet now features several (well-established) websites that allow subscribers to watch while various "real" events unfold in front of live action video cameras. Many of these cameras are situated in the homes of people willing to be the subject someone's voyeuristic gaze – in return for economic compensation. Most of these sites attract viewers seeking a sexual thrill and cameras are even mounted in bedrooms and bathrooms. While *EdTV*'s Ed is followed around by a crew of two camera-persons and a boom-swinging on a 24-hour basis, the film never approaches pornography or anything which is distastefully explicit. Two scenes do, however, suggest the potential invasion of privacy which might result from being the subject of a camera's unyielding gaze. The first day that Ed appears on his show, he awakes to unexpectedly find himself greeted by the presence of the television crew, their cameras nonchalantly filming what Darren Bignell (1999:21) refers to as Ed's "...'early morning chubbie' manipulation...". Later in the film, as millions of viewers prepare to watch Ed and his freshly chosen love-interest have sex on her dining room table, it is quite evident that the cameras have no intention of being turned off for the sake of privacy. Both *The Truman Show* and *EdTV*'s most threatening revelations are twofold. Firstly, the films reveal the danger that our worship of a hyperrealising agent such as television will ultimately collapse all barriers between private and social (or public) existence. Secondly, they raise the concern that the postmodern subject will eventually emerge as nothing more than a "character" in a hypermediated society. The camera may ultimately disrupt all understandings of who and what we are in relation to the cameras which mediate our "reality".

As is suggested in *EdTV* the desire for "screen realism" frequently inspires filmmakers and television producers to point their cameras at ever more private "intrigues" in the search for images which will satisfy the curiosities of viewers.¹⁷³ However, while this may be a reflection of the transition of "entertainment" and "imagination" into purely obsessive, intrusive voyeurism, it is equally suggestive of the possible demise of personal privacy and what could amount to a proliferation of public paranoia resulting

from an inability to escape the gaze:

We are witnessing the end of perspectival and panoptic space...and thus the *very abolition of the spectacular*. Television, for example in the case of the Louds, is no longer a spectacular medium....dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV – indiscernible chemical solution: we are all Louds doomed not to invasion, to pressure, to violence, to blackmail by the media and the models, but to their induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence (Baudrillard, 1997a:163).

Already, surveillance cameras are found in numerous public places where they are used to the apparent advantage of the greater good. By "seeing" what limited numbers of police and security personnel are unable to watch, such cameras have proven themselves useful for the safety and security of individuals and businesses, but they imply that the possibility of our being "absorbed" by the medium and its gaze does exist. While surveillance technology may have originally been introduced as a pro-social convenience designed to aid communities in areas such as crime prevention, certain issues surrounding the day-to-day use of cameras constitute the possibility of permanent infringements on the privacy of individuals. American Civil Liberties Union representative Susan Goering (in Keegan, 1997:143) notes that "[a]s the technological capability to invade our privacy increases, that reasoning leads to the argument that we could never have any expectation of privacy". Goering's sources have also revealed that the American government already has sophisticated infrared technology with the capability to "look" through walls. Meanwhile, the producer of *Enemy of the State*, Jerry Bruckheimer, has insisted that the CIA co-operated fully with the makers of the movie and that "...every surveillance device used on screen, including the satellites, tools within the agency's armoury" (Ronge, 1999a) The implications of such technology are unimaginable, suggesting a not-to-distant future in which private space no longer exists and George Orwell's phrase "Big Brother is watching you" resonate strongly in our social consciousness.

However, Goering's fears and Orwell's prophesies may well have more significance in discussions around the basic voyeuristic compulsions of ordinary human beings than in any contemporary conspiracy theories. According to Richard Falcon, "...reality video begs questions about its exploitation of our baser voyeuristic instincts" (Falcon, 1998a:25). While the form of voyeurism which may be encouraged by the screening of programmes such as *An American Family* and *EdTV's* "EdTV" may be considered a natural human impulse brought about by equally natural curiosity, it could quite easily be labelled as "...that truly oxymoronic perversion - authorised 'unauthorised' looking" (Stables, 2000b:10). This less flattering interpretation of the interest generated by

various forms of surveillance-type entertainment is perhaps most suitably applied to the devotees of the many Internet websites that are now devoted to broadcasting fly-on-the-wall footage from any number of sources. One of the most phenomenal (and potentially banal) aspects of current Internet technology, for example, includes websites which are concerned with little more than satisfying the interests of compulsive "watchers". *VoyeurDorm.com* ("the Real-Life, Adult-Version of *The Truman Show*: 31 Cameras, 7 Women, 1 House, 24 Hours, 7 Days a Week, All Year Round!!" (in Sinker, 1999:28)) is one of these 24-hour surveillance "venues", which Kate Stables (2000b:10) describes as "...the original voyeur-cam website, that very postmodern moving-image entertainment thrown up by the lucrative medley of new technology, age-old desires and online credit-card billing". The site allows subscribers continual access to images generated by any of the 48 "webcams" set up in a house in Florida which is inhabited by seven female "students". *VoyeurDorm.com* relinquishes the cinematic frameworks of narrative and spectacle, providing viewer-observer-spectators with what may well be described as unfettered "reality". The extent to which the images "broadcast" on this site may be likened to "reality" is debatable, particularly since the onscreen "world" is a wholly mediated one, and the "real" performers "acting" out their day-to-day routines are completely aware of the cameras which potentially observe, broadcast and record their every move. As Stables (2000b:10) notes, for example, "reality" is frequently interrupted by "...spontaneous lingerie parties, strip poker [and] bodypainting" because "...female nudity is the only true reward..." available to subscribers.

Mark Sinker (1999:28) observes that "Netlore supposes that the only sites that can charge for entry and prosper are those posting porn", and most discussions around sites which offer images from webcams (surveillance cameras linked to computer web-sites) are concerned with "the virtual-sex need" of users. However, while *VoyeurDorm.com* offers the "blatant" promise of sex, there are numerous sites dedicated to broadcasting images of the mundane, the ordinary and the everyday without such promise. One such site, *everydayitems*, announces that it is "...not an adult site [although] there may be images and content which could offend some viewers" (in Sinker, 1999:28), and numerous other "programmes" relay images of "...busy traffic intersections, empty traffic intersections, a dentist's reception area in northern Japan, [and even] the queue for *The Phantom Menace*...while countless...supposedly cute pets live their unsuspecting lives out on webcam". Such webcam sites seem absorbed in the banal and obsessed with boredom, as they

continuously linger in the hope of observing "reality" for the sake of observation, surveillance and *showing*.

The viewer does, of course, have the capacity to construct some sort of narrative from the constantly available imagery. Providing a choice of cameras, and options such as zooms and stills, *VoyeurDorm.com* does offer interactive capabilities. And while the viewer is generally positioned as an ubiquitous voyeur who is even provided the capacity to watch the "performers" asleep under the high-angle point-of-view of infra-red cameras, subscribers may engage in daily online "cyberchats" with "Dorm girls" of their choice. Such web-mediated interactions serve to heighten the impression of "realism", suggested by numerous requests to "Dorm girls" to perform spontaneously in accordance with subscribers' desires. Not only are the high-angled surveillance cameras an indication of the site's objectifying function, but the "...ontological obsessions with the reality of the image..." (Stables, 2000b:10) suggests something of the desire to control - to possess, even - the actions of living, breathing individuals. With the public, socially-acceptable format of cinematic viewing eliminated, such viewing sites become the ultimate postmodern version of what might be termed "the pornographic gaze" - the human compulsion to see everything as "reality". The sites which offer such relentless, obsessive surveillance provide the viewer with precisely the "reality" which they seek, and the nature of this "reality" goes unquestioned:

...the pervasive mechanical eye continues to be trusted because - like the home movie before it - what it records is unstructured, uncrafted, meaninglessly random low-resolution anti-art. It has to be real because who'd bother to fake it? (Sinker, 1999:28).

It is the sheer lack of meaningful content which makes such arbitrary sites of "realism" so fascinating, particularly when compared to Hollywood's emphasis on "...reality's technological enhancement" (Sinker, 1999:28).

"Surveillance cinema" - as webcam sites might be termed - suggests something about the reception of "reality":

If we are, as everything indicates, in the twilight era when the (represented) real could be recognised by its clumsiness, its artlessness, its tedium, then sites like [*VoyeurDorm.com*] offer this version of reality in its final, pure warrior state, defiantly militant in its commitment to boredom (Sinker, 1999:29).

Boredom, however, exists only as a symptom - or by-product - of a lack of imagination. While the banal images of a mediated (ordinary) "reality" may present

themselves as "boredom" in the nascent state, there must exist some potential for the eruption of such tedium into something altogether more promising and imaginative. The potential for imagination and fantasisation of each viewer may plausibly lead to the promise of something beyond boredom and ennui. While webcam culture suggests something of the basic human desire to *know through seeing*, the same techniques of "anti-art" representation are being used to more recognisably entertaining ends by a variety of "innovative" filmmakers.

Shoestring "realism"

[The Texas Chainsaw Massacre]...is more a piece of artifice than a movie...[and]...what makes the film truly scary is that there are no artificial music plugs or sleazy atmospheric shots to get you terrified. It is almost like an amateur home movie - it becomes really terrifying because there are few tricks. It's akin to viewing Kosovo atrocities on CNN, just stuck in the Seventies (Worsdale, 1999c:12).

Internet sites such as *VoyeurDorm.com* distort the viewer's perception of "reality" by presenting themselves as unmediated "truth", whereas their images are wholly mediated by the very existence of the ever-present air-vent perspective cameras. Certain "more authentically" cinematic forms are, however, successfully emulating the imagined "realism" of webcam surveillance by subscribing to the types of anti-cinematic techniques which made *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, for example, the memorably horrifying production that it is. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is described as a film that "...manages to chill one's spine with its sheer sense of voyeuristic pleasure in seeing people getting knocked off" despite being "...appallingly shot and amateurish..." (Worsdale, 1999c:12). In fact, it is apparent lack of conventional studio production values that adds a layer of *faux*-authenticity to what *Variety* (Wyatt, 1998:76) described as one of New Line Cinema's "freak" films. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* could be called a "pure" horror film in that it relies almost exclusively on visual story-telling and spectacle to achieve its disturbing effect. Adopting a "...documentary-like style using static set pieces, grainy film and a no-nonsense technique", Hooper uses next to no budget to create a "filmed nightmare" that "...gets under the viewer's skin like no horror movie before or since" (Firsching, undated). The film ultimately achieved its status as a cult horror film because of the stylistic implications of an extremely low budget.

Treading similar ground to *Chainsaw Massacre* is the brutal and gory *Cannibal*

Holocaust (Ruggero Deodato, 1979) which combines shocking "realism", faux-documentary footage and what appears to be authentic documentary footage in order to produce what has been cited as the most violent and excessively cruel films ever made. The film capitalises on the tongue-in-cheek tagline that "Those who filmed it were devoured alive by cannibals!" by revealing the violent fate of the fictional documentarians within the film through their own footage. *Cannibal Holocaust* breaks various screen taboos relating to violence and sexual violence, apparently in an attempt to strengthen the patina of "realism" which makes the film so shocking. Scenes from the film include the actual slaughter of wild animals, an extremely "realistic" castration, various scenes of dismemberment and human mutilation, frequent male and female nudity, a ritual murder in which a woman's vagina is mutilated with an oversized phallus, apparently authentic scenes of human execution in various third world countries, a lengthy rape in which two men assist each other to violate a young woman and a sex scene in which the participants finally notice that they are being filmed. What makes the footage alarming and disturbing is not so much the nature of the acts of violence and gore, but the audience's inability to determine which scenes are authentic and which are "real". Throughout the film, the characters acknowledge the camera and thereby underscore the contrivance that what the film spectator is seeing is documentary footage. The filmmaker mirrors this ontological confusion in two ways. Firstly, much of the "documentary" footage which is supposedly being shot by the documentarians actually features all four documentarians. There is footage which simply could not have been filmed by the characters in the movie. Secondly, the narrative concerns the way in which the documentary filmmakers fabricate various situations in order to add drama to their footage. In one encounter with a tribe of cannibals, for example, the filmmakers set fire to their village in order to induce panic and fear and to simulate the effects of inter-tribal war for their documentary. Despite such narrative "mirroring" of the effects of the faux-documentary style, *Cannibal Holocaust* remains banned in numerous countries around the world and is even believed by some to be an actual snuff film.¹⁷⁴

A far less controversial and more contemporary manifestation of such experimental pseudo-documentary projects is been the hugely profitable "horror" film, *The Blair Witch Project*. Made on a significantly small budget¹⁷⁵, from largely handheld video footage, the film is a mockumentary¹⁷⁶ in which three student filmmakers come to an unfortunate end while creating the very "documentary" that is the film of the title. In

this sense, much like *Cannibal Holocaust*, the film also works intratextually. Continuously referring to its own creation, the film forces the viewer to remain aware of the fact that the action actually revolves around the making of a movie. Essentially, it is the film's insistence on asserting its own in-authenticity as a work of fiction which makes the material so compelling. The format and style ensure that the final product lacks any true plot, while the "action" simply arises from a basic premise (three documentary filmmakers get lost in the woods and disappear) around which various ideas and events are constructed. Much of the success of the film can be linked to the subversion of narrative and genre codes which transform the viewing experience into an act of questioning whether the motion picture constitutes a "real" or an artificial artefact (Is this mediated "reality", or is this the medium at play?). *Blair Witch* is a form of non-narrative, pure cinema, in a sense, in that it subjects the viewer to visuals (and thereby visceral) experiences, but does not aim to draw the viewer into a story (other than that which exists in the spectator's imagination). Thus, there is no meaning as such, only sequences of suspense and thrills, and the film constitutes a wholly subjective experience. Like several of its forebears, *Blair Witch* achieves its most impressive effects by overturning cinematic expectations in favour of artificial "realism", or what James Sey (1999) refers to as "primitive realism":

The result effectively reconfigures a host of dog-eared horror clichés for the video-literate MTV generation in a manner that, if it doesn't make *Blair Witch* the scariest movie ever, certainly places the film well in the top half of the Premier League (Collis, 1999:94).

Essentially, it is the way in which *Blair Witch* endeavours to avoid the rules of conventional filmmaking and the horror genre in particular, that allows it to interfere with the spectator's ability to discern the "real" from the artificial.

Stephen Pizzello (1999:97) refers to *The Blair Witch Project* as "...a cinema vérité nightmare..." documenting the final days in the lives of the three film students as they get lost in the woods "...and are subjected to an array of increasingly ominous supernatural events". The three "characters" become "...lost, hungry and increasingly harassed by unseen, and presumably supernatural, hands" (Collis, 1999:94), but there is really nothing supernatural (or even unusual) about the harassment which they receive. Much of the fear and torment which they experience is the result of "...their own agonized imaginations" (Pizzello, 1999:97), and - in effect - it is the audience's imagination which is called upon to do much of the work in the construction of the character's fears. According to Pizzello (1999:97), the film "...manages to raise gooseflesh without ever resorting to the horror genre's

predictably lurid clichés - i.e. gratuitous blood and gore". The film's creators saw as their "primary goal" the creation of "an atmosphere of bone-chilling dread" while "avoiding the literal" (Pizzello, 1999:97). Myrick, explains that he and Sanchez "...wanted to do a horror film that seemed 100 percent real" (in Pizzello, 1999:97), while Sanchez (in Collis, 1999:95) acknowledges that they "...were after complete realism" which they tried to achieve by eliminating any of the distancing techniques which are usually built into the filmmaking process. Indeed, the film seems "real" because there are no attempts to disguise the intrusion of the medium itself. The "meaning" of the film (which translates directly into the experience of fear) is established as a product of obvious, undisguised mediation. Furthermore, the film avoids many traditional trends in horror filmmaking. *Blair Witch* excludes sex or even sexual tension, there is no music of any kind, the camera refuses to employ the "killer's point-of-view" perspective, and there is no visible monster.¹⁷⁷ Ruled by psychological disorder, the film works to invade the spectator's mind rather than the screen. The camera, theoretically, takes the viewer as close to the "actual" events as possible without actually being there.

There is nothing accidental in the illusion of "reality" generated by the film's unprecedented style. Using a unique directorial approach which included leaving notes with instructions for the performers, the filmmakers found that the result of their eight days of filming was a "*faux cinéma vérité* thriller" (Corliss, 1999c:65) which was ultimately "scripted" during the editing process. Rather than creating a film out of a script and a succession of planned shots, the filmmakers sent their actors into an improvised situation with the film equipment they were to use to record a series of mostly spontaneous events. Sanchez describes the process whereby the film was made as unlike any traditional mainstream filmmaking exercise:

We knew that if we did it with a crew, it wouldn't work. From the beginning we wanted to do it as an improvised film. We were basically going to leave the actors for certain amounts of time on their own, tell them what was happening, and let them shoot it for a couple of hours at a time. Then come back, review the footage, and go on to the next scene. Then Gregg said, 'Listen, when I was in special forces training they put us through this P.O.W. camp scenario where we were the prisoners. And after two or three days of being in that camp surrounded by these guys hitting you, and yelling at you in Russian, and not letting you sleep, and hosing you down with water, you start believing that it's really happening.' He said, 'You know, we could do this to the actors.' Dan and I were like, Yeah! (Sanchez in Collis, 1999:95).

Both what was going on during Gregg Hale's special forces training, and the process by which the film was made, represent forms of simulation, whereby "reality" is

"created" in its own image, but is entirely artificial. "Myrick and Sanchez designed a 'method filmmaking' plan that would immerse the actors in the story's reality" (Pizzello, 1999:97). Indeed, there is a story, but this story does not get told in the form of narrative development - rather it unfolds as events reveal themselves. This anti-cinematic aspect of *The Blair Witch Project* may be a clue to discovering the very nature of an audience's filmic experience. The film is primarily experiential: the audience is duped into "believing" that the on-screen visuals represent what the characters in the film are experiencing. This is the nature of the medium - it supposedly records a framed version of the "real" world.

In many ways, the film proves an important point about the way in which the viewer is driven to experience "fear" by constructing his/her own idea of "reality". According to cinematographer Neal Fredericks (in Pizzello, 1999:100), the filmmakers "...wanted the nighttime scenes to fall off into blackness so the audience would have to wonder what was out there beyond the range of the light. Most of the action was off-camera or away from the light, and everything was staged in conjunction with a variety of sound effects to create a scary atmosphere". The film's "realism" lies significantly in its "...refusal to pander to viewers' preconditioned reflexes..." (Logan in Pizzello, 1999:100) which typically associate the "horror genre" with graphic depictions of violence and blood. *Blair Witch*, on the other hand, allows the viewer to create an imaginary "monster" within their own imaginations, thereby avoiding visual clichés and linking the source of fear to something which is both "real" and unknown to the viewer. The technique also compels the viewer to experience a very personal form of fear.

As Corliss (1999c:64) points out, *Blair Witch* goes against the current Hollywood horror film standard which uses "technical finesse" to simultaneously reassure and excite audiences. He also compares *Blair Witch* to similar projects which he terms "bizarro indie horror" movies that lack the technical finesse of the Hollywood big-budget film, and therefore seem "...unmediated, out of control, a blurred or garish snapshot of lunacy":

The conceit goes further in *Blair Witch*, since so much is shot in video...it could be an episode of some cheesy real-TV show. Says Sanchez: "The rule is, if you see a shaky handheld video image, it must be real (Corliss, 1999c:64).

The Blair Witch Project exacts fear precisely because it is presented not as a cultural artefact, but as a "real" artefact - a document of factual record, which supposedly

avoids both spectacle and "narrative" - constructed as an artistic product. The effect, for the viewer, is perhaps comparable with watching a typically vulgar exploitation film or an inadvertent snuff documentary. The viewer experiences the film as authentic, because it simulates the type of footage which any camcorder user might find themselves creating. While the major trend in horror filmmaking (as exemplified by the *Scream* trilogy and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997) and its sequel) during the 1990s was concerned with establishing "...ironic or knowing or tongue-in-cheek..." contexts in which to toy with creating fear, inspiration for making the film had come from the horror films, such as *The Exorcist* and *It's Alive*, which had frightened the filmmakers as teenagers. Sanchez and Myrick, however, "...concentrated on scaring the bejesus out of as many people as possible" and they set out to achieve this with a "plot" which "...was hardly original" (Collis, 1999:95). It was through their style and approach that they "...were after complete realism..." (Sanchez in Collis, 1999:95).

The rule-breaking film established major extra-cinematic appeal because it was sold as a true story. Another (fake) documentary was even made around the making of the film to heighten the illusion of the film's authenticity beyond the scope of the actual movie. Further clues as to what "actually" happened to the three filmmakers in the woods are also to be found on the production team's website which offers excerpts from one of the character's fictional diary. The marketing was so pervasive that many viewers were manipulated into believing that what they saw was in fact "real" footage. In ontological terms, however, there is some room for discussion around the concept of "authenticity" in this case. There is, really, very little that is "fake" in the film. While the actors may be seen as faking their emotional and psychological responses to their situation (which they know is not really as horrifying as they suggest), the only real source of fear is the unknown which - to an extent - engulfs the viewer. Since the film never really acknowledges that there is any other fear-inducing force (besides the unknown), it may be argued that the footage itself is really quite "honest" and merely serves as a source for the viewer's own interpretation. In a sense, the film remains more "authentic" than the viewer's reaction to it. The viewer experiences fear in response to unknown influences, while the film merely presents images which constantly assert themselves as being "mediated". Furthermore, the film's ending remains enigmatic, with no attempt at closure or explanation, leaving "...the ultimate fate of its characters in limbo..." (Pizzello, 1999:100).

Perhaps most significant about the success of *Blair Witch*, is the way in which it has attracted the interest of the public and attained cult status as a work of what Robert Greig (1999:12) calls "anti-film". By resisting those "...soothing features and formulae of mainstream cinema...", the film has become a form of "...alternative virtual reality" (Greig, 1999:12) because the video format and style correspond so obviously with a plausible "reality" that filmgoers understand. The "...grainy, ill-lit, shaky footage, leering into distorting close-ups, as well as random footage of the forest" (Greig, 1999:12) simulate the type of footage captured by home video cameras to such an extent that many viewers are unable to accept that the "film" is not "real". In a sense, the *Blair Witch* "project" blurs the distinction between the "real" and the "hyperreal" by infiltrating the "real" world at a number of levels (by simulating "factual" data on the Internet, and by simulating the "reality" of home video, for example) and thereby calling the status of both cinema and "reality" video into question:

The commercial significance is that it is anti-commercial. A project like this threatens the commercial base of studios, fulfilling the dream that cheap video equipment will make filmmakers of everyone (Greig, 1999:12).

Undoubtedly, Hollywood majors will latch onto the *Blair Witch* concept, but the influence of big-budget production values on this unconventional formula remains to be seen. Compared to current trends in Hollywood cinema, *Blair Witch* is decidedly unusual. Whatever influence *Blair Witch* will have on the future of cinema, it remains a highly artificial experiment which, by disrupting the distinction between two already-artificial media, may be understood to be *hyperartificial*.

Dogmatic artificiality

1. *Shooting must be done on location; props must not be brought in*
2. *The sound and images must never be produced separately*
3. *The camera must be handheld*
4. *The film must be in color*
5. *Optical work and filters are forbidden*
6. *The film must not contain superficial action or violence*
7. *The film must take place in the here and now*
8. *Genre movies are not acceptable*
9. *The film format must be Academy 35mm [and]*
10. *The director must not be credited*

(*Dogma 95's decalogue as set down by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in Corliss, 1999:71*).¹⁷⁸

"The Vow of Chastity" listed above is more widely known as the *Dogma 95* manifesto, set out by two Danish director, Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, whose ideas for

a simplified, yet rigorous filmmaking style has suggested another interesting alternative to the more extravagant "traditions" of New Hollywood. The manifesto attempts to dictate rules which purposefully counter the big-budget obsessions of contemporary filmmaking in a way that is "[u]nabashedly reactionary", "loves innocence" and "...aims for a primitive purity" (Corliss, 1999:71). In a sense, the rules are an artificially constructed means of purging new narrative forms and meaning out of the "stories" which can be told by way of cinema. It has further been stated that the *Dogma* rules seek to "...purge film so that once again 'the inner lives of the characters [justify] the plot'" (Geldenhuys, 1999:11). Peter Matthews (1999:39) notes that the *Dogma* manifesto is a protestation against "...the decadent illusionism of contemporary cinema":

Like so many fiery Martin Luthers seeking to restore the true faith, the *Dogma* directors swore to reclaim reality by a wholesale purge of their aesthetic means (Matthews, 1999:39).

Corliss (1999:17) notes that the *Dogma* rules are a "...call to disarm, to strip away the veneer, to walk without crutches supplied by..." the emerging technologies, just as several previous movements in cinema history may be seen as "...a revolutionary call to arms". Sey (1999) further notes the similarity between what he refers to as the "new realism" of the *Dogma* movies and the "primitive realism" which results from the "handheld camera technique" of *The Blair Witch Project*.

Dogma 95 represents a less-than-spontaneous contrivance designed to revitalise cinema by refocusing on storytelling and the "essentials of filmmaking" (Anthony Dod Mantle in Corliss, 1999:71). Having caught the attention of "serious" filmmakers around the world, the first *Dogma 95* film was Vinterberg's critically successful *Festen* (*The Celebration*), made in 1998. The Danish film is a frequently unnerving black comedy about a family birthday celebration which is disrupted when the guest of honour's son announces that he and his sister were sexually abused by their father during their childhood. What is celebrated in *The Celebration* is not the birthday or the family at the heart of the narrative, but rather the development of a "new" film format - the creation of a new *artificial reality*, a new way of engaging the viewer's understanding of narrative. *Festen's* alternative style is immediately evident as the camerawork, casual framing and seemingly impromptu sequences suggest that what is on screen is the work of a bystander who happens to have a camera on hand. In this way, the film imitates (or simulates) the anti-art of the webcam sites discussed above. The erratic editing and the lack of any music or sound effects track imposes a

further "distancing" effect on the viewer whose experience of the images may be compared to that of viewing amateur or home film footage. However, while the filmic style certainly reminds the viewer that the film lacks any of the trappings of "big budget" Hollywood productions, such stylistic "innovations" also prevent the viewer from seeing past the "low budget" artifice. As Matthews argues:

From neo-realism to *cinéma vérité*, film history has reliably proved authenticity is a chimerical goal. Sooner or later, the impression of raw immediacy congeals and stands exposed as a style like any other (Matthews, 1999:39).

While the film clearly distinguishes itself as standing apart from the type of product most cinema-goers are familiar with, *The Celebration* asserts a "style" that is perhaps even more imposing than the most lavish Hollywood productions. The "*faux-naïf*" cinematography combines with an undisciplined editing technique to produce what Matthews (1999:40) refers to as "...nearly the most outré style imaginable". Indeed, to the experienced cinemagoer, the film is almost "hypnotically vulgar" in its failure to comply with the "rules" of conventional filmmaking. The effect is compounded by the seemingly banal melodrama which plays out as a family gathers for a sixtieth birthday celebration. And if the film attempts to shock the viewer with its wavering narrative and refusal to provide any recognisable plot-line, it also compels the viewer to "keep looking" for meaningful explanations for the on-screen events:

...*Festen* means to keep the viewer wavering precisely between belief and incredulity - sometimes stitched into the reality-effect, sometimes holding it at a long tether (Matthews, 1999:40).

It is this tenuous balance between obvious artifice and apparent "reality" which is perhaps most exciting about the film and the *Dogma* manifesto which it represents.

Certain aspects of the Vow of Chastity serve to enhance the effectiveness of the formal components of cinematic reproduction. Vinterberg (in Macnab, 1999:17) notes that "[I]mitations have always been a major source of inspiration" and several of these "limitations" have indeed been "...designed to enable its followers to move away from bloated, cliché-ridden, formulaic film-making" (Macnab, 1999:17). Performances, for example, are frequently enhanced by the fact that the camera followed the performers rather than their having to hit their marks. Improvisation and "realistic" behaviour could be captured by a highly mobile camera which, according to Macnab (1999:16) "...is the catalyst that transforms..." the film, "...catching details of the actors' behaviour with an almost anthropological eye". Handheld, the camera becomes part of the action, and allows the spectator to become "involved" in the frenzied "restlessness" of the screen drama. More than this, notes Macnab (1999:16),

"[t]he handheld camerawork accentuates the sense of queasy claustrophobia and disorientation..." as the narrative unfolds. The seemingly improvised nature of the camera movements also contributes to the apparent improvisational quality of the often chaotic action. There are moments in the film when the camera seems to "decide" - on the spur of the moment - which part of the action to follow. Camera movements and shot compositions are similarly *ad hoc*, a point which is highlighted by scenes in which the actors actually bump into the camera. Just as a tourist or news cameraperson must decide in the instant where to focus the camera, so Vinterberg appears to have deployed his cameras in a random fashion - *in search of* the important narrative elements. Yet, while the handheld camera movements suggest a degree of authenticity, such "realism" may be regarded as a formal stylistic element which attempts to conceal its own artificiality.

Dogma 95's full statement of aims makes the (knowingly ironic) proclamation that, despite any *faux-vérité* style, "...the movie is not an illusion" (in Falcon, 1999:12). Such awkward pretence, however, is ultimately a mock gesture, a simulated "...revolutionary stance that pretends to want to revive a modernist transgressive cinema within a sceptical post-modern climate" (Falcon, 1999:12). Von Trier's *The Idiots (Idioterne, 1998)*, for example, evokes "realism", but fails any test of "authenticity" precisely because of its commitment to transgressing the boundaries of good taste and censorship:

What the strict rules of *Dogma 95* have meant for von Trier is giving up some of the control from which only successful film-makers fully benefit and allowing his actors to improvise on collective regression while the camera records the results. His script was written in four days... The rest was improvisation.

If the result is to transgress industry technical norms, *The Idiots* also encroaches on Britain's censorship of genitalia and sex. In a scene in which a "spassing party" turns into a mock gang bang - an actors' workshop turned orgy - von Trier's handheld camera takes in the copulating genitals of his performers (Falcon, 1999:12).

The mediated transgressions of the film, however, remain artificial attempts at breaking down rules and institutionalised notions of acceptability. While the "artistic" framework and "auteur" sentiments of "a work by Lars von Trier" may constitute an ontological difference between his framing of sex and genitalia and that of a hard-core pornographic film which circumvents causal narrative, the final result remains the same: *mediated sexuality*. Von Trier's transgressions do, however, evolve with the intention of conveying some narrative "meaning":

...the camera tilts to a close-up of a character's penis dribbling with difficulty

into a urinal while being held by tough-looking bikers who are in danger of discovering that his supposed mental incapacity is an aggressive joke on them. It is surely a landmark in the history of cinematic transgression that an image like this carries an immediately apparent narrative context, even suspense (Falcon, 1999:12).

Herein lies the obvious difference between the banal and seemingly senseless observation of potentially pornographic surveillance webcam sites. While von Trier seeks to discover a sort of *faux*-"meaning" within the context of some narrative, surveillance cameras deplete the "meaning" of the "reality" which they capture.

Vinterberg claims that "*Dogma* is democratic..." and makes film production "...easier for everyone..." (in Macnab, 1999:17). Indeed, such "democratisation" may be the most significant aspect of this particular "realist" movement. Von Trier (in Geldenhuys, 1999:10) states that the real significance of the (now-defunct) *Dogma* manifesto is that it has led potential filmmakers from all over the world to realise "...that it is also possible for them to make a film, no matter how difficult or expensive it is". In the establishment of a film form which is potentially inexpensive and downplays the importance of elaborate spectacle and technologically-driven effects (by demonstrating that spectacles and affects can be produced in other ways), the *Dogma* manifesto may therefore be considered a valuable contribution to cinema history. The Vow of Chastity proscribes a number of formal elements which are considered typical of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking and the result is to force the spectator into a "different" viewing experience:

Its famous rules demand of the viewer exactly the reaction s/he would once have offered, unasked, to the viewing of a home movie (or a snuff movie): a response, that is, to the unfakably real (Sinker, 1999:29).

However, it must be noted that it is perhaps through their emphasis of transgressive, taboo and "shocking" themes, images or ideas that the *Dogma* movies are most likely to arouse reactions which are "unfakably real". "Real" erections, "real" penetrations and "real" silliness are increasingly the subject matter of these *faux*-realists (witness Gaspar Noé's *Seul Contre Tous (I Stand Alone)*, 1998) and François Ozon's *Sitcom* (1998), for example), but ultimately these are Warholian excesses put to creative use by "manipulative multimedia operators" who may be described as the "auteur cousins" of the creators of "reality television" shows and webcam sites. "Realism" may, in fact, be a mere side-effect of *Dogma's* somewhat artificial manifesto.

"Reality" at play

Live in your world, play in ours (Sony PlayStation advertising slogan).

It is generally agreed that videogames "...conflate art and entertainment and throw the usual distinctions between different media, and different concepts of narrative, into total disarray" (Bracewell, 2000:12). However, Steven Poole, an authority on the ontology of videogames points out that there is a major critical difference between them and the other art forms, such as films and literature, with which they are often compared. According to Poole, the simple difference lies in the fact that the function of videogames is to be "played". Poole links videogames to a classical Platonic definition of "play", noting an age-old debate concerning the distinction between art and "reality":

It's a version of a very old question about art, concerning what Plato called mimesis ('representation'). How can videogames claim to be realistic at all? But the peculiar nature of videogames gives the old question several intriguing and novel digital spins. The problem of mimesis in this context – the virtual representation of 'realities' – informs the inner life of nearly every videogame (Poole in Bracewell, 2000:12).

Stables (2000d:5) notes that the interactivity of videogames "...creates an entirely different relationship from that in cinema, both to activity on the screen and with the protagonist [which the player is controlling]...". While many of the characters which are constructed for interactive games are designed to be appealing in much the same way that many cinema performers are used solely because of their aesthetic appeal, interactivity inevitably eliminates the emotional appeal of videogame characters. Such "adopted" characters exist solely to represent a range of kinetic (rather than emotional) actions "created" by the player. Stables (2000d:5) argues that in the case of the highly popular videogame character, Lara Croft (in the *Tomb Raider 4 - The Last Revelation*, for example), the "...visual pleasure to be got from her depiction...is dwarfed by the active, visceral joys of guiding your avatar through landscapes, booby-traps and shooting matches". Ultimately, rather than serving any purpose as tools for empathy or compassion, the digital characters of videogames are "proxies" for the player/interactor "...in the fantasies of empowerment which games like these provide" (Stables, 2000d:5).¹⁷⁹

While certain films have begun to demonstrate the potential of emulating the

interactive "narratives" and "plotlines" of computer and video games, there are many games designers who are working in the "opposite direction". Robyn Miller, the co-creator of *Myst* (1993), the biggest-selling computer game in history, believes that the possibility exists for the "stories" which are told in computer games to "affect" in ways that are comparable with books and films:

I'm interested in pushing interactive further to accomplish one of two things: to find ways to affect people in an interactive world, or to convince myself that an interactive medium is not suitable for affecting people (Silberman, 1999:234).

Another designer, Peter Molyneux, believes that "...gaming is destined to remain on the mass-market fringes unless it can learn from cinema's historical trajectory from slapstick to diverse, sophisticated content: 'If computer games are going to be truly mass market we have to think about how we can make people cry, feel sad, care about characters'" (Stables, 2000a:12). Molyneux effectively sees the advantage of computer games in the fact that they "...have the power of interacting directly..." with the player-spectator (Stables, 2000a:12), which suggests greater "realism" in terms of emotional contact and response. According to Molyneux, the gaming industry is capable of producing products which resemble movies in terms of visual quality, but the "experience" which these games are capable of providing spectator-players is not necessarily limited by the same factors that influence the "fixed" narratives of films:

Molyneux sees 'intelligent' storytelling in games as akin to storytelling within an oral tradition in that it can be malleable and responsive to each successive audience rather than firmly fixed as in novels and films (Stables, 2000a:12).

While many of Hollywood's big-budget products are concerned with satisfying the needs of the broadest possible "target audience" (an economically-motivated function which is often referred to as "dumbing down"), Stables (2000a:12) notes that "...gaming's use of AI [artificial intelligence] could eventually have players experiencing moral quandaries and emotional charges that would be the envy of film directors". Poole, who has conducted an analysis of the meaning and significance of videogames in his book *Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames*, believes that "...the value of videogames – what Plato calls 'charm' in his definition of play – will only be realised if their content can keep pace with the maturing of the medium" (Bracewell, 2000:13):

...if videogames continue to plough clichéd visual and formal ruts, they will furnish the anomic mental landscape of an impoverished and unimaginative future generation (Poole in Bracewell, 2000:13).

According to Stables (2000a:12), games designers like Molyneux are not "...so much borrowing from cinema as reinventing concepts we recognise from film - character,

plot, camerawork - for an interactive medium in much the same way as early cinema pioneers reinvented theatrical concepts to build a new screen language".

The latest generations of videogames, according to Poole, share the "ambition of television" to create programming which is fully interactive. Accordingly, "...the new media of videogames is set to make virtual worlds which the player participates in rather than simply plays" (Bracewell, 2000:13). In some ways, the designer-directors of interactive games may be engineering the future of cinematic "realism", in ways already suggested by numerous movies which have explored a variety of possible scenarios in which interactive games might come to simulate human "reality". One such film is *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), which does not actually propose that "games" will touch on the "real", but that filmed images might effectively be coupled with "real" feelings, emotions and sensations, thus taking "realism" out of the cinema and into the minds and bodies of the spectator/interactive-player. Indeed, Poole foresees the possibility of the emergence of a "virtual *The Truman Show*" in which the game offers "...a window on to a 'living' community...", while the player-spectator becomes a "benign version" of the show's god-like creator, Christof (Bracewell, 2000:13).

"Reality" killed the movie star

...realism in art can only be achieved in one way – through artifice. Every form of aesthetic must necessarily choose between what is worth preserving and what should be discarded, and what should not even be considered. But when this aesthetic aims in essence at creating the illusion of reality, as does the cinema, this choice sets up a fundamental contradiction which is at once unacceptable and necessary: necessary because art can only exist when such a choice is made. Without it, supposing total cinema was here and now technically possible, we would go back purely to reality. Unacceptable because it would be done definitely at the expense of that reality which the cinema proposes to restore integrally (Bazin, 1972:26).

Several commentators, such as John Chittock, now believe that cinema is likely to become divided into two major streams: one focussed on the creative, storytelling aspects of the medium, and another (dedicated to "...bringing greater realism to the big screen...") becoming a form of "location based entertainment" concerned with spectacles which allow the "viewer" to be completely engulfed and absorbed by simulated "realities" (Chittock, 1997:222). Ronge argues (2000a:10-12) that while the introduction of cinema little more than a century ago amazed our forefathers, cinema in the new millennium will "take us beyond our wildest imaginings". He argues

that the technology (CGI and other special effects and computer-enhanced wonders), both in production and delivery, will result increasingly mesmerising screen adventures which will both capture the imagination and allow viewers to "...experience a total immersion in the events on screen" (2000a:10). Digital technology, it is believed, at least partially contributes to the democratisation of moving image entertainment by making it easier, cheaper and quicker to shoot, edit and distribute movies (as discussed in chapter two), and by enhancing the viability of increasingly interactive moving image entertainment forms. Viewers are no longer merely passive observers of onscreen events, but increasingly have the ability to determine aspects of plot and narrative just as video game players determine the fate of the characters which they control. Already, DVD (digital versatile disc) versions of movies have begun to include alternative endings or the possibility of viewing the action from a variety of angles, for example.

German filmmaker, Tom Tykwer's "...supercharged, exhilaratingly hyperactive movie...", *Lola rennt* (*Run Lola Run*, 1998), demonstrates some of the "...potential of interactive cinema..." (Falcon, 1999:52) by offering three different narrative outcomes to one particularly explosive and dangerous event. In many ways, the film is constructed like a computer game and the viewer learns more about the environment of the heroine (Lola) with each successive "version" of the narrative. Lola's first two "attempts" at saving her boyfriend's life, by racing across town, result in her tragic death, after which she is "resurrected" and afforded another "chance". As Richard Falcon notes,

When Lola dies, she begins her quest afresh. And when she succeeds at the end, we feel, irrationally, that she has earned this for her exertions over the three mutually exclusive stories, none of which is more real than any other (Falcon, 1999:52).

Indeed, computer games typically offer the player a number of "lives", each of which is a learning experience and a further opportunity to survive and succeed. The film also resembles many contemporary computer games in that it makes use of a variety of mixed media and editing effects.

An even more complex version of "interactive cinema" has been demonstrated in Mike Figgis's *Timecode* (2000) which shows four parts of one story simultaneously on a screen divided into quarters. What is most compelling about the (somewhat experimental) production, is that the four parts were filmed simultaneously and without cuts or edits. Filmed and played out in "real time", the film has no editor,

because, as Jonathan Romney notes,

...how could there be one except the viewer, who constructs the film by flicking between the quarter screens? (Romney, 2000b:7).

Figgis's film is interactive in the sense that it requires the audience to make decisions concerning what to watch and therefore leaves the spectator to "decide" how the story is to be "constructed". The film is also blatantly self-reflexive in that it is both Hollywood satire and an investigation of its own viability as a form of cinema. Towards the end of the film, "...a trendily precocious European auteur..." (Romney, 2000b:16) or "...glacial teenage prodigy..." (Brooks, 2000c:37) named Ana (Mia Maestro) pitches her concept for a new project to a group of Hollywood executives. Proclaiming that "[Eisensteinian] montage has created a false reality" and that "digital is demanding new expressions", she proposes the very film which Figgis has made: a film consisting of four continuous takes, filmed digitally, and running simultaneously on one screen. One of the executives, Alex Green (Stellan Skarsgård), promptly counters Ana's own enthusiasm by calling her idea "the most pretentious crap I've ever heard". It is in this respect that *Timecode* is most significantly satirical of Hollywood which is notorious for its slow embrace of those innovations and experimental forms which frequently go on to become associated with what is popular and commercial in filmmaking. The film's connection with "reality" (or at least, one particular "reality") is further signified by the convergence of the action at the offices of Red Mullet films, which is the name of Figgis's own production company. Equally significant, are those aspects of the film which arise from the largely improvised nature of the performances and the cinematography which is the result of one continuous 93-minute take using four digital-video cameras which were turned on simultaneously and run on a common timecode:

At one stage a tell-tale hand can be glimpsed holding open the door as we trail Salma Hayek's starlet into the washroom, while on several occasions where the narratives overlap two frames move into such close proximity that the cameras must be mere inches away from clashing (Brooks, 2000c:37).

In such respects, *Timecode* attains a connection with the physical "realities" of the filmmaking process while essentially attempting to keep this process from interfering with the one-take "realism".

According to Figgis, the viability of a project like *Timecode*, which requires the audience to "cope" with four different images simultaneously, finds its basis in "...a diet of channel-surfing and multi-media [which] has made sophisticates of modern-day filmgoers, equipping them to process a bombardment of information thrown at

them on various frequencies" (Brooks, 2000c:37). However, while contemporary media "realities" such as CNN, MTV and twenty-second commercials satisfy audience appetites "through frenzied editing", *Timecode* rejects editing completely and allows the audience to construct its own "reality":

Formally separate, these two modes of communication are spiritual cousins. The difference is that while the dominant MTV style is traditionally accused of spoon-feeding its public, *Timecode* empowers them. It serves up four dishes and invites us to sample instances of drama from each one (Brooks, 2000c:37).

Ultimately, it is this need for "drama", which prevents the medium from being entirely liberated from a sense of narrative. In order to tell a story, the material – the images – are necessarily ordered, while the soundtrack is manipulated in order to draw attention to certain segments of dialogue (so, while there is no film editor, Figgis himself was responsible for overseeing the sound edit). Similarly, the drama in each of the four "sections" of the film is synchronised so that the action slows down in certain parts while it "combusts" in others. The viewer is certainly provided with a certain degree of spectatorial freedom, but this is "...freedom within limits" and the film "...can never quite escape the godlike hand of Figgis..." (Brooks, 2000c:37). Thus, while "[t]his conception of cinema as interactive badminton is something we haven't quite seen before (Romney, 2000b:7), it ultimately "...falls some way short of attaining the Holy Grail that is the first truly interactive feature film..." (Brooks, 2000c:36). The film nevertheless represents a conceptual innovation which throws light on one of the paths leading to the future of the interactive cinema.

Seeing everything, knowing nothing

Alas! In the future...notorious personalities will instinctively "pose" for cinematographic popularity, and historical events will tend to be concocted for its sake. [...] The charmed masses will learn not to think any more, to resist all desire to reason and to construct: they will know only how to open their large and empty eyes, only to look, look, look... (Louis Haugmard in Schrader, 1996:203).

The possibilities of "interactive" motion picture forms have been suggested in various ways, including the wholly voyeuristic formats employed by various Internet channels. While websites such as *VoyeurDorm.com* may not constitute "cinema" in the strict sense of the word, they epitomise the strident move towards a cinema which equates "reality" or "realism" with pure spectacle – the foregrounding of the scene as a site to be viewed. Such representations of "reality" – together with emerging forms such as "virtual reality" – place the concepts of narrative and "meaning" in an altogether new

light, suggested by Paul Schrader's vision of the future of motion pictures:

The autocratic artist will finally face the consequences of democracy, he will be a creative partner. A film-maker won't direct a movie, he'll instigate it (Schrader, 1997:205)

And, as "audiences" increasingly become collaborators in the creation of the entertainment form which is "instigated" by a "filmmaker", the resulting experience may indeed be seen as an extension of the viewer-player's subconscious "reality". Mingay (1997:208) notes that interactivity is now frequently referred to as "the sixth sense", and that "...the experience of interactivity applied to entertainment on the screen of a computer is different in kind from passive viewing", but Virtual Reality, Video Games and interactive cinema forms "...do not represent an advance on the Aristotelian rules of dramatic art". Rather, these entertainment forms immerse the viewer-player in an experience which supports catharsis in much the same way as more traditional cinematic forms (Mingay, 1997:209).

The potential dangers of the interactive potential of movie image technology are highlighted when the extended, extra-cinematic effects of films such as *The Blair Witch Project* and sites such as *VoyeurDorm.com* are revealed. The Internet in particular demonstrates how the spectator-spectacle relationship can be interfered with to the extent that "reality" may be manipulated and disrupted. Subscribers to voyeur and surveillance sites will inevitably seek out those images which are most exciting, titillating and entertaining. If a film such *The Blair Witch Project* simulates "reality" in the interests of entertainment, and fear is the source of that entertainment principle (or pleasure), then it is possible that the closer a film can come to simulating the viewer's experience of "hands-on", interactive fear, the greater the experience of "pleasure" for that viewer. The most frightening and dangerous possibilities of this degree of interactivity have already been demonstrated through a particularly unpleasant Internet child pornography-and-abuse case. An international syndicate of Internet users connected to a site which was linked to a camera in a Belgian hotel room. The camera focussed on a group of men who had in their possession several (very young) children. Site users could send messages to the men in the room thereby instigating and manipulating various acts of rape, torture, and other perversions involving the victimised children.¹⁸⁰ This, of course, represents the sordid extremes of "reality" viewing, which are related to the creation of snuff and exploitation movies which have nothing to do with art, and very little to do with cinema. Such forms represent the destructive capabilities of moving image technology

when the unfathomable desires of human exploitation achieve synthesis with mediated "reality".

In an article which discusses the frightening extent to which cameras and other technologies concerned with "watching" may come to influence our lives, David Brin (1996) describes a future in which a culture of surveillance will have infiltrated the psychological fabric of society, while cityscapes will be dominated by surveillance equipment. Cameras, designed to prevent crime and other intolerable public acts, will eliminate the concept of "privacy" as individuals exist as full-time spectator-voyeurs. Brin believes that the basic infrastructure for such widespread technology is already in place in the form of police-surveillance cameras as well as closed-circuit television cameras which are generally controlled by the private sector. Of course, the world is also being "watched" by documentary and television news cameras, voyeuristic Internet feed-cameras, and countless other (digital) image-capture devices of which only some solitary "director" (in the form of an anonymous "spectator") is aware.

Sinker (1999:28) suggests that the result of a mass-media controlled, "over-surveilled" society has galvanised the sites of moving-image "entertainment" towards "hilarious creative perversity". While some aspects of the society-society in which we exist are anything but "hilarious", there is a great deal of relevance to Sinker's notion that "[o]bjects are becoming subjects: active, alert and perilously inventive". The human fascination with *looking*, *seeing* and *watching* is now exacerbated in a world which has removed the objects of observation from cinema screens, art galleries, and various sites of spectacle and entertainment, and repositioned them in the context of ordinariness: anywhere, anytime, everywhere, all the time. The postmodern age is an era in which "public nightmare[s]" have spilled over into "private film space" (Sinker, 1999:29) and "reality" has overwhelmed the potential marvels of cinematic artifice. This vanishing "private" space is reflected in the nature of the videogames and game-play technology which is currently becoming available. It is in this context that the eagerly awaited PlayStation 2 gaming console, which will bring an entire range of digital services (besides videogames) into the homes of users, suggests that

...as we live in a real world of increasing surveillance and paranoia over access to the data that's the official record of our existence, we are creating, through videogames, a portrait of our own situation (Bracewell, 2000:13).

Paul Virilio has argued that "...as representation advances, reality retreats", implying that "...the artificial memory of photography and film..." has the capacity to supplant

human memory, contributing to an "...erosion of faith in human perception..." (Butler, 1995:412). Such (admittedly extreme) analyses of the power of representation are suggested not only by the ubiquity of the visual media today, but also by the proliferation of surveillance and other overtly "voyeuristic" technologies. Mark Tapnack (1998:64), drawing on similar observations, writes that "[v]oyeurism is the entertainment of the 90's" and that we are "...continuously snooping the sad, sleazy lives of people – both real and fiction-factional".

Already in 1913, the Catholic essayist, Haugmard, had foreseen the apparent "dangers" of an artform which is able to "show" everything. Many contemporary critics argue that cinema and television which aspire towards portraying the banal "realities" of actual life, actually undermine social intelligence and offend the limits of cultural propriety. Evidence of such banal "realism" may be found on surveillance camera monitors, Internet voyeur sites, and on television programmes which invent events for the sake of having something to show. It is undeniable that "[e]volution in the cinema has followed a relentless path towards greater realism...", even if this form of "realism" is informed by "creative interpretation" rather than "similitude" in the true sense of the word (Chittock, 1997:217). As Bazin himself theorised, each technological advancement in the development of cinema - sound, colour, larger screens, surround sound systems, 3D - may be attributed to "...the quest for greater realism" (Chittock, 1997:217). However, Bazin's notion of where "improved realism" would lead cinema has been skewed by the way in which our hypermediated environment has altered our understanding of "reality". As Mark Sinker notes,

Film believes in creating 'truth' out of glamour, action, violence, drama, dynamic craft; faced with enervation as a fact of life, it seizes it and works it into its opposite (Sinker, 1999:28).

Our betrayal of the potential of a medium which offers the excitement and wonder of dreams and fantasies may well suggest the end of "cinema as art".

Perhaps Chittock's prediction that cinema will divide into two streams is best described as something of a paradox, since it is highly likely that these two streams of filmmaking are one and the same. While high-tech, interactive projects attempt to engulf the spectator-players in fantasies of overwhelming proportions, those dreamlike fantasies will inevitably become a part of the subject's "reality". Equally, as some filmmakers attempt to bring greater "realism" to the cinema, they will effectively be substituting one form of hyperreality for another, equally artificial, one.

As Bracewell notes of the changing nature of interactive videogames:

Certainly the move away from conflict and high drama towards a mimesis of daily life – the most volatile and random scenario of all – would seem to be on the cards. Ultimately, we just want to play at being ourselves, after all (Bracewell, 2000:13).

Moving images are certainly providing "spectators" with opportunities to confront themselves – within both known and unknown "realities". Furthermore, just as we may be given to playing "god" within various "virtual realities", it is certain that questions about the nature of our own identity will result from our inevitable disappearance into various virtual spaces. The postmodern subject is simultaneously witnessing and "directing" his/her own absorption into hyperreality. In chapter seven, several films which explore this ontological blurring of different planes of mediated and simulated "reality" are explored and discussed in terms of the overwhelming influence that images have over the human subject's experience of life.

Seven

Simulating the artificial: the art of dreaming

At no other period in its history has cinema been so enslaved by escapist fantasy – and never have we been less certain of the status of the real (Matthews, 1999b:25).

As soon as the lights are lowered, the huge rectangle of the screen – previously noted without interest – becomes the viewer's total universe. What transpires here in bursts of light and darkness is accepted as life; the images reach out to him; he enters them (Vogel, 1974:10).

The cinema was for us an immense discovery at the moment when we were elaborating Surrealism...we then considered the film as a marvellous mode of expressing dreams...we thought the film would propose extraordinary possibilities for expressing, transfiguring, and realizing dreams. One can say that, from the birth of Surrealism, we sought to discover, thanks to the cinema, the means for expressing the immense power of the dream (Marie Mabire in Fotiade, 1995:396).

Keyan Tomaselli argues that the way in which individuals perceive the actual world around them is an experience which is unique to each and every human being:

...cognition is selectively organized and because the cognitive map of an individual is not a photographic representation of the world, but is rather a partial, personal construction in which certain objects, singled out by the individual for a major role, events are perceived in an individual manner. Thus the perceiver paints a picture of the world (or experience) that expresses his individual view of reality (Tomaselli, 1977:5)

The relevance of this "personal construction" theory of "reality" is noteworthy, particularly as it relates to the specific perceptions of individual film spectators. In many ways, however, the way in which cinema attempts to "construct" reality is similar to the way in which humans experience dreams. Vogel (1974:11) notes that despite any apparent similarity between the world and any film image, such an image "...remains a distortion of life". He believes that the way in which seemingly concrete images are enabled to magically "reflect reality" while "actually distorting it" causes a particular tension between the viewer and the film. In the cinema, the viewer's "...sense of dislocation and disquiet..." are intensified and the subconscious becomes vulnerable and penetrable (Vogel, 1974:11). It is no wonder, then, that the act of watching a film has frequently been compared to dreaming, and it is within the framework of understanding cinema as an experience of the sub-conscious mind that film can perhaps be understood to simulate the experience of dreaming.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, this act of "seeing" the film as a motion picture is in itself a deceptive one, for during spectatorship one is in fact at the mercy of an "...intricate web of deception, involving the very technology of the film process and the nature of it's

victim's perceptions" (Vogel, 1974:10). The viewer is, according to Vogel, a "victim" and this relationship between viewer and screen is necessary for the cinema experience to transpire: "Without the viewer's physiological and psychological complicity, the cinema could not exist" (Vogel, 1974:10). Dudley Andrew (1984a:113) argues that cinema spectators experience movies as though they are "...the totalizing agents of whatever appears before their eyes", suggesting that the act of *seeing* necessarily makes every individual the centre of a fantasy or illusion of "reality". The process of looking out at the world makes each individual the centre of the world. While in the cinema, each spectator is presented with the same film and with the same vision of "a world", each spectator necessarily experiences that film differently. While a film may present us with a cohesive, logical world which is entirely narrated in terms of a specific vision, it is left to the viewer to "...totalise the world they inhabit..." (Andrew, 1984a:113) through the experience of viewing.

Stanley Cavell claims that in viewing a film, we are left without the responsibility of partaking of the world. He further argues that by *showing*, movies effectively

...convince us of the world's reality in the only way we have to be convinced, without learning to bring the world closer to the heart's desire (which in practice now means learning to stop altering it illegitimately, against itself): by taking views of it (Cavell, 1979:102).

He describes the experience of viewing in the cinema as a relief from "private fantasy" and the responsibility which that involves. Cavell's argument is based on the notion that cinema represents shared fantasies, shared dreams, shared memories. He further argues that since "...the world is *already* drawn by fantasy", cinema viewing relieves us of the responsibility of "...withdrawing our longings further inside ourselves" by permitting "...the self to be wakened..." (Cavell, 1979:102). In other words, cinema is not simply an escape into dreams or memories, but a physical reminder of our own experience of the fantasy that we understand to be "reality". The human experience of "reality" is a subjective and personal one, just as the act of spectatorship calls for a subjective and individual interpretation of what is viewed (or experienced).

René Gardies saw the cinema as providing a "privileged instrument for de-realizing the world' (*déréalisation du monde*)" through what could be understood as an "...alchemical 'transmutation of reality'" (Fotiade, 1995:395). According to Christian Metz (in Neale, 1981:19), viewers are "...not duped by the diegetic illusion..." for they are aware that what unfolds on the screen is fictional. Even more than this, the

representation is itself "...imaginary [since] the material [is] already a reflection" (Metz in Neale, 1981:18). Rather, the cinema is a mediated connection with the physical world through its evocation of that world "...in terms of concrete details...", while functioning as "[a]n art of desire, of illusion..." (Fotiade, 1995:394). In this sense, according to Ramona Fotiade (1995:394-395), spectators become "...believers of a new cult, worshipping the super-reality and 'super-disorientation' (*sur-dépaysement*) of film". While cinema clearly constitutes an "artificial" means of *seeing* the world, it is also the medium which has most effectively allowed us to re-present the world "realistically". Increasingly, contemporary filmmakers are able to use computer technologies to imaginatively collapse what Breton referred to as the "...artificial boundaries between what we see and what we only begin to see, or have never seen before..." (Fotiade, 1995:395). The Surrealists sought ways to revolutionise communication through an act of *seeing* which transgressed "...the conventional barriers between perception and imagination, virtuality and actuality..." by presenting "realities" in terms of the "...nonverbal, visual unfolding of dreams" (Fotiade, 1995:396). More and more in contemporary cinema, these "conventional barriers" are ignored and transcended as the "virtual" and the "real" become indistinguishable. Accordingly, the major trend in cinema is towards a representational form which shatters the illusion of an artificial "reality". Like history, "reality" is constructed in terms of memories. The technological processes of cinema which stress "the attainment of an ever-sharper realism" are effectively providing a means of duplicating, simulating and creating memories which challenge our understanding of "reality", truth and history.

Siegfried Kracauer (1959:4) believed that cinema – above all other media – had an unprecedented influence on the spectator. His argument follows Cohen-Séat's understanding of the influence of the cinema's "...turmoil of shock-like emotions..." to render the viewer "powerless" in terms of his or her rational thought (Kracauer, 1959:5). According to Cohen-Séat (in Kracauer, 1959:5), "...even a mind most capable of reflective thought..." is subjected to a type of "mental vertigo" linked to the overwhelming "physiological tempests" which rage within while watching a film in the cinema. According to Kracauer, it is from this point-of-view that the "self" is thought to relinquish control when subjected to the power of this particular medium, and this cessation of control differs remarkably from the position of the theatregoer:

"In the theater I am always I," a perceptive Frenchwoman once told this writer, "but in the cinema I dissolve into all things and beings." Wallon elaborates on

the process of dissolution to which she refers: "If the cinema produces its effect, it does so because I identify myself with its images, because I more or less forget myself in what is being displayed on the screen. I am no longer in my own life; I am in the film projected in front of me" (Kracauer, 1959:6).

Kracauer compares the act of film spectatorship to a number of activities, all of which describe the lowering or suspension of the spectator's conscious physical and psychological control. For Kracauer, film viewing is associated with the desire to lose contact with "reality" to some degree, and to be lulled into a world which transcends actuality. He (1959:6) notes that the mind is lulled by the darkness of the cinema which "...automatically reduces our contact with actuality...". Kracauer (1959:6) also notes that since the twenties, the effects of the medium have variously been compared with a "...sort of drug..." which has profoundly "stupefying effects":

It would seem a sound proposition that the cinema has its habitués who frequent it out of an all but physiological urge. They are not prompted by a desire to look at a specific film or to be pleasantly entertained; what they really crave is to be released for once from the grip of consciousness, lose their identity in the dark, and let sink in, with their senses ready to absorb them, the images as they happen to follow each other on the screen (Kracauer, 1959:6)

Kracauer (1959:7) further finds some comparison between cinema and hypnotism, and he refers to Pudovkin's understanding of cinema as having the ability to communicate not only with the brain, but with the entire body of the spectator¹⁸².

Kracauer (1959:7) also describes the ability of film to communicate more readily to the human spectator, because she or he is being forced to accept an idea "under the pressure of unconscious drives", which she or he might reject at an intellectual level. Vogel (1974:9), in a brief discussion of the work of André Breton¹⁸³, also describes the state of the spectator in the "darkened theatre" environment, describing a "greater openness to suggestion" as well as "...the semi-hypnotic trance of the viewer, the surfacing of deeper desires and anxieties, and the inhibition of reasoned response in favour of 'gut-level' reaction".¹⁸⁴ Kracauer further expands on these concepts:

Since film images lower the spectator's critical faculties, it is always possible to select and arrange them in such a way that they adjust his senses to the idea advertised. They need not refer directly to it; on the contrary, the more they proceed by indirection – showing events and situations seemingly unconnected with the message they impart – the greater the chance that they will reach unconscious fixations and physical tendencies which might have a bearing, however distant, on the championed cause (Kracauer, 1959:7).

Kracauer uses the example of a propagandistic Nazi war documentary *Victory in the West* (*Sieg im Westen*, Svend Noldan, 1941), which shows the French to be mingling with Negroes and dancing in the Maginot Line in a "flippant and degenerate" way, in

order to very simply describe how cinema can be abused in order to force the spectator to assume the attitude of the filmmaker:

It was debunking in a way, or rather sham-debunking; and it most certainly played a role in manipulating the spectator's mind. The complete absence of verbal comment further increased the challenging power of the images so that they were all the more able to stir up in him organic dislikes and sympathies, confused fears and dim expectations (Kracauer, 1959:8).

His analysis of the effect of the documentary reveals that images are quite clearly an unreliable indicator of truth, fact or "reality". Because the images are allowed to source their "own meaning" in the imagination of the spectator, they actually reveal nothing of the "reality" which they claim to represent. Kracauer's understanding of images as being ambiguous recalls Polan's theory that by "showing everything" the image can "say nothing". Documentary or documentary-style images present a further distortion of the relationship between actuality and what the mind or imagination "chooses" to understand by what is seen in such images. The image (or moving image) is revealed to be a challenge to the human capacity for comprehending "reality":

...is truth not the best propaganda weapon? Whenever a documentary succeeds in swaying the mind, part of its success is due to the spectator's conviction that he is in the presence of irrefutable evidence. Everybody tends to believe that pictures taken on the spot cannot lie. Actually they can (Kracauer, 1959:8).

Kracauer describes a photographic experiment in which the German photographer Helmar Lerski took over a hundred photographs of a young man, using different lighting in each case. The result was that each photo recalled a different character, not one of them recalling the model himself. Once again, Kracauer's example suggests the radical distinction between "reality" and images which are intended to capture "reality".

Vogel describes how the cinema experience induces a state which is somehow "different" from that of being in the "real world": "Removed from the real world, isolated even from fellow-viewers, the spectator falls to dream and reverie in the womb-like darkness of the theatre" (Vogel, 1974:10). Drawing on the work of Ralph Stephenson and J. R. Debrux, Vogel indicates that while the eyes and ears are at work in the cinema, the body itself (including the other senses) is in a state of rest, "...thus allowing imagination, stimulated by the filmmaker's emotionally charged, expressly-selected material, to exert deeper and more lasting influence" (Vogel, 1974:10). This lowered consciousness, according to Kracauer (1959:10), actually "...invites dreaming", and places the moviegoer, in the words of Gabriel Marcel "...in a state

between waking and sleeping which favors hypnagogic fantasies". Of course, the condition of the spectator will fluctuate according to the kind of spectacle on offer. Certain films tend to refer more directly to the types of "spectacle" on offer in everyday life, while others may be more fanciful or imaginative:

In Lebovici's words: "Film is a dream...which makes (one) dream." This immediately raises the question as to what elements of film may be sufficiently dream-like to launch the audience into reveries and perhaps even influence their course (Kracauer, 1959:10).

Hollywood has been referred to as a "dream factory" because as the forms of mass entertainment produced there "...are bound to cater to the alleged desires and daydreams of the public at large" (Kracauer, 1959:11). Elaborating further on the relationship between "actual dream patterns" and screen events, Kracauer notes that the fact that most commercial films are made for the consumption of mass audiences, it can be assumed that a direct relationship between screen fantasies and the daydreams of cinema patrons does exist. In other words, commercial cinema reflects the imagination or desire of the filmgoer and in this way lures the viewer into its world through our subconscious identification with the fantasy or dream which evolves onscreen. Kracauer (1959:11) observes that there is an ongoing interaction between "mass dreams" and the images found in films:

Perhaps films look most like dreams when they overwhelm us with the crude and unnegotiated presence of natural objects so that it is as if the camera had just extricated them from the womb of physical existence and as if the umbilical cord between the image and actuality had not yet been severed. There is something in the abrupt immediacy and shocking veracity of such pictures that justifies their identification as dream images (Kracauer, 1959:12).

Kracauer (1959:12-14) describes two different modes whereby cinematic film assumes a dreamlike character. The first of these involves the spectator's helpless feeling of attraction to the phenomena on the screen before him or her, because of the nature of the images which are being presented: "It is as if they beckoned him to come nearer" (Kracauer, 1959:12). These images, according to Lucien Sève, cause confusion in the viewer, rather than bringing any sense of certainty, and the result is a journey of "...inquiry into the beings of the objects they record..." (Kracauer, 1959:13). This inquiry aims not at an explanation of the images, but rather at an investigation of the secrets held by these objects. In this way, the viewer "...drifts toward and into the objects...", but cannot possibly grasp the "true" nature of these objects "...unless he meanders, dreamingly, through the maze of its multiple meanings and psychological correspondences" (Kracauer, 1959:13).¹⁸⁵ Kracauer further questions the exhaustibility of the objects in an image contemplated by the

spectator, arguing that it is possible that the journey through the various possibilities proffered by each image and by each object is an endless one: "When this indeterminate murmur – the murmur of existence – reaches him, he may be nearest to the unattainable goal" (Kracauer, 1959:13).

The second mode of cinematic dreaming, according to Kracauer (1959:13-14) exists as a product of psychological influences, involving the surrender of the viewer's organised self in favour of his or her "...subconscious or unconscious experiences, apprehensions and hopes...". Any filmic shot, therefore, may act as an "ignition spark" which sets off a series of "chain reactions in the moviegoer" (1959:14). Such a spark results in "...a flight of associations which no longer center around their incidental source but arise from [the moviegoer's] agitated inner environment" (1959:14). Hence, the spectator is drawn away from the image which is provided on the screen, and into "subjective reveries". The image mobilises "repressed fears" or induces an excitement related to "prospective wish-fulfilment" in the spectator, while the image itself recedes.

Kracauer sees these two modes of dreaming as inseparable from each other: "Trance-like immersion in a shot or a succession of shots may at any moment yield to daydreaming which increasingly disengages itself from the imagery occasioning it... [The viewer] is wavering between self-absorption and self-abandonment" (Kracauer, 1959:14-15). These two "...intertwined dream processes constitute a veritable stream of consciousness – cataracts of indistinct fantasies and inchoate thoughts – still bear the imprint of the bodily sensations from which they issue" (Kracauer, 1959:15). Vogel (1974:10) refers to Kracauer's emphasis of "...the dialectical wavering between self-absorption (leading the viewer away from the image, into personal associations triggered by it) and self-abandonment (the movement toward the image)." However, Vogel further compares this dialectic to the ideas of Hugo Mauerhofer and André Breton, who suggest that "...the state of the viewer...is closest to that between waking and sleeping, in which he abandons the rationality of daily life while not yet completely surrendering to his unconscious" (Vogel, 1974:10). At the heart of this argument, is the understanding that images result in deeply personal, subjective and individual responses (and meanings) in different viewers. It is therefore significant that a great deal of contemporary cinema effectively traces its own effect on the viewer by dealing with the dreamlike nature of "reality" itself. In many cases, the "reality" dealt with becomes imaginary, hallucinogenic or "virtual".

Virtual dreams

The virtual is here. The issue now is whether we allow it to remain the province of the techno-military apparatus and the vertically integrated entertainment corporations, or whether, like the personal computer, it can be appropriated to the task of dismantling the structures of "Truth" which would pin us to some "Authorised King James Version" of The Real. Leibniz was right: the actual world is but one room in the unnumbered halls of the multi-verse. And from this crucial insight we must find our own way to the apex, to the uppermost hall of the pyramid. There we shall knock on the door and wait to see who answers (Keep, 1993).

Only a tradition bound to the precious object as commodity would find problematic the replacement of 'reality' by a 'simulacra of simulations'.... Moralistic critics of the simulacrum accuse us of living in a dream world. We respond with Montaigne that to abandon life for a dream is to price it exactly at its worth. And anyway, when life is a dream there's no need for sleeping (Youngblood in Keep, 1993).

C. J. Keep (1993) discusses the significance of the realm of "virtual reality" with reference to Leibniz's concept of "...what might fairly be called the first reality engine", envisioned in the *Theodicy* (1710). Leibniz claims that "...the mind of God comprehends an infinity of possible worlds, each of which exists *in potentia*", but that only one such world was brought into being because it is the one that "...fulfils the divine plan for creation" (Keep, 1993). For Leibniz, our world is the best option (for "reality") precisely because it is the world that God - acting according to supreme reason - selected. In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz writes of a dream in which the dreamer Theodorus is guided through a pyramid filled with alternate possible futures:

The pyramid is a series of tactile, three-dimensional, but wholly fictional environments through which Theodorus can physically move and experience the full spectrum of sensory stimuli - sight, sound, taste, smell and touch (Keep, 1993).

According to Keep (1993), the story anticipates the development of present day virtual reality technology and also suggests the "...epistemological problems arising from it". Theodorus, in his dream, was able to experience a "...sense of depth, of fullness and representational plenitude..." (Keep, 1993) that hints at the present day goals of virtual reality (or VR) technology:

Current attempts to realize these goals usually require the user to don a headset which completely encompasses the field of vision, and one or more other items of peripheral hardware such as a glove or a body harness. These input devices are equipped with remote sensors which translate the body's movements into a stream of digital information. Thus trussed up, the modern day Theodorus is connected to the "reality engine," a high-speed graphics-oriented computer (Keep, 1993).

The computer then sends information to the headset conveying images of three-

dimensional landscapes and environments. Immersed in the "cyberspace" environment, the user's movements then determine the movement and reaction of the digitally created surroundings. Added "reality" inputs such as stereo sound effects and tangible, touchable objects within the environment would further serve to reinforce a physical experience of "being there", within the virtual space.

Eric Davis traces the origins of the term "virtual reality" to Antonin Artaud's use of it in *The Theater and Its Double* in 1938. For Artaud, the theatre represents a "virtual reality" for it is a space in which the imagination is given pause to replace the prevailing "objective social reality" with some alternative. Artaud believed that theatre creates a "virtual reality" (*la réalité virtuelle*), "...in which characters, objects, and images take on the phantasmagoric force of alchemy's visionary internal dramas" such as transforming lead into gold (Davis, 1999:190). For Artaud the theatre is not really concerned with representing "ordinary life", but with catalysing (through symbolic ritual) "...the same psychological states once produced in the 'archetypal, primitive theater' of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the shamanic Orphic cults of ancient Greece" (Davis, 1999:190). It was in this sense that Artaud believed the theatre held the ability to "transform" the "unreal" into a "virtual" state. Davis suggests that the notion of "virtual reality" was effectively "rediscovered" towards the end of the Twentieth Century, when it became associated with experiments that were being performed in cyberspace:

Most of us first heard the term *virtual reality* in the beginning of the 1990s, when a large and very clever dreadlocked gearhead named Jaron Lanier started showing off various goggles and gloves capable of launching the mind into three-dimensional worlds made of computer graphics. Hitting the mass brainstem like a rush of crack, the term rapidly took on the millennialist charge of all pop futurisms. Though the hype died down when the technology failed to deliver digital dreamtime, virtual reality remains a fundamental *raison d'être* of computer culture, a holy grail that keeps beckoning through the forest of tangled protocols and clunky hardware (Davis, 1999:191).

Thus, while the notion of "virtual reality" is generally accepted at the conceptual level, it seldom evokes the idea of a dreamt or imagined "reality" that Artaud envisioned.

Contemporary understandings of "cyberspace" are largely taken from interpretations of the work of writers like William Gibson who invoked a culture of cyberconsciousness with a single image from his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination...A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system....Lines of light ranged in the non space of the mind" (Gibson in Davis, 1999:191).

"Virtual reality", in contemporary thought, exists in a digital universe – the "consensual hallucination" described as cyberspace. Cyberspace has become a mythological landscape where digital "realities" are conceived, "inhabited" and "visited" by millions of computer users every day. The development of cyberspace has signified the emergence of the hyperspace of digital communication. While John Perry Barlow simply describes cyberspace as "...the place where you are when you're on the phone" (Davis, 1999:192), many other writers have expounded on Gibson's notion of a "consensual hallucination". Margaret Wertheim, for example, argues that cyberspace is a created space that "...follows the virtual laws of thought rather than the concrete laws of matter..." and therefore "...provides a cosmos where the psyche can once again live and breathe" (Davis, 1999:192) Wertheim (in Davis, 1999:192) believes that cyberspace "...returns us to an almost medieval position, to a two-tiered reality in which psyche and soma each have their own space of action". Cyberspace may be considered "spiritual" simply because – like the cinema, comic books and novels, for example – it provides a space where the subject is able to suspend the rules which typically govern and constrain his or her physical "reality". Davis (1999:192) further argues that "...unlike the media, cyberspace is a shared interactive environment, an electronic 'soul-space' that beckons the postmodern psyche to both find and remake itself".

According to Fanie de Beer (1998:93), cyberspace represents a vastly significant shift in the way in which information is handled and how human beings are to be conceptualised and understood. De Beer notes that the way in which information is distributed and exchanged within a "virtual space" represents a major shift in terms of the "social dynamics" of human activity. As communication and information exchange shift into a new "space" which is described as "virtual", so the nature of social interaction is altered:

We encounter in fact an interactive, a moving space, a space of 'the new consultation'...which is an educational project, and addresses the question of how to make new knowledge available in a different way....The *social dynamics*, described in terms of Rheingold's (1993) virtual community, reflects a unique character and stands in a specific relation to knowledge, a collective intelligence emerges, not in a numerical, but in a spiritual sense....That our whole environment shall become human is our utopia. The heart of the making of a new social bond across geographical boundaries exists in the economy of human qualities. Democratisation in the full sense of this term can never be properly understood without this insight (de Beer, 1998:93).

De Beer thus sees hope for a more democratic, more interactive humanity through

the "virtual interaction" which is believed to occur through the "superhighways" of cyberspace. He further believes that cyberspace will serve as a valuable context for *inventive imagination*, supposedly resulting from such "interaction". Noting that "...invention tends to occur when unrelated areas, ideas, or forms come together in unexpected ways", de Beer (1998:93) argues that cyberspace becomes a "special" environment for inventions to occur.

For some theorists, cyberspace represents the hope that computer technology can serve humankind with a new form of spirituality. Mark Pesce, who was partly responsible for transforming the World Wide Web into "...a *world*, or rather a universe of worlds, each capable of nesting information within a kind of virtual theater..." (Davis, 1999:192), believes that "[c]omputers can be sacred simply because human beings are sacred" (Davis, 1999:193). As humans communicate and interact within cyberspace, the mediated form of our communication attains something of "the divine" which is associated with human spirituality. There may be cause to doubt Pesce's technopagan philosophies and the implications of a technology-based spirituality, but his ideas do provide some hope in an age when spirituality appears overpowered by communication and media technologies. It is inevitable that traditional notions of spiritual existence will be forced to adjust to a transformed global landscape. It may well be that postmodern societies, through communication systems such as the Internet, are rigorously engaged in alternative forms of "spiritual" or "hyper-" consciousness, simply because communication is "spiritual". Davis refers to yet another example of how digital technologies and cyberspace may essentially be associated with the "spiritual" development of humankind. He refers to James Burke and Robert Ornstein, who argue that

...from the very beginning of human culture, "axemakers" have produced technologies that put selection pressures on the human brain, pressures that encouraged our minds to develop logical and analytical procedures that gradually alienated us from the matrix of nature (Davis, 1999:194).

According to Burke and Ornstein, this "great divide" has had "...devastating social and ecological costs...", but that the computer – what they term "the ultimate ax" – may return us to the mental level where we were before the human brain differentiated itself through technological development (Davis, 1999:194). Burke and Ornstein encourage the possibility that "...the icons, associative links, virtual spaces, and parallel processing of multimedia computing may resurrect the 'arational thinking' of earlier days, a mode of consciousness based on intuition, imaginative leaps, and fuzzy rules-of-hand" (Davis, 1999:194). Thus, as computers assume control of those

routine functions which cloud the human mind in its current stage of development, the mind may be freed up to access "...knowledge that is structured more like the natural world rather than being reduced to alpha-numeric codes" (Davis, 1999:194).

It would appear that the flow of information within the virtual environments of cyberspace has the potential to lead to new, alternative "realities". Cyberspace is therefore a "special place" where "...a new world can, and perhaps should, be invented. In view of this it may become possible, for example, to invent wealth where there is currently poverty – in the material as well as in the spiritual sense" (de Beer, 1998:93). It should also be noted, however, that this cyberspace is "an information space" which, by absorbing us ("...as well as our attention and imagination") places us "within information" (de Beer, 1998:91). No longer can information in this sense be understood as linear, logical or controllable – instead it becomes a space in which our experience of the world, and of "reality", is altered. According to de Beer (1998:92), not only "reality", but human beings themselves have been altered by the way in which information is now available to the world:

It is simply no longer possible to look at humans as we used to.... Human beings have changed and are in the process of changing even more. They are newly related not only to texts, knowledge, and information, but particularly to one another in the sense of a different kind of collectivity, namely collective intelligence (de Beer, 1998:92).

De Beer's assessments of the effects of cyberspace on social development are rather positive and point to the development of human consciousness through the "interaction" of information within a virtual space. This may be considered to be a somewhat premature observation, and it may be equally probable that this sort of *virtual* interaction within the cyberspace mediated environment will result in developments within an equally *virtual* "reality".

Mark Nunes (1995) notes that the Internet functions as both "technological artifact" and "popular image", and "...provides a site for exploring 'the world'...". More than simply a tool for networking the globe, the Internet "...creates a metaphorical world in which we conduct our lives". From a Baudrillardian perspective, the Internet represents an example of hyperreality - or even "virtual reality". The metaphorical "space" described by the term "cyberspace" is no longer a representation of the world, but has become "the world" - an immediate and transparent world which places individuals in detached, yet instantaneous contact with one another:

...technically it's a new universe, obviously in the world of communication. It

reaches for new heights, and, in fact, attains them. It *is* communication. I think that it is, at the same time, an extension of determination, interrelations, connections, interaction, but I don't believe in all that. [...] Communication is technical – it's not change. Change is perhaps something else psychologically, symbolically, etc. The concept of communication is sustained, *generated by technology* so, really, with the internet we attain the highest limits of communication. But what I would ask is, 'Who is it that communicates?' Who is it? There is one terminal and then another. There are two terminals, two specific areas of abstraction which change the information. But also, all the personality changes, in fact all the charm, all these things disappear inside it. Communication is something which is factual and also artificial. [...] I think it's a very powerful means of disappearance. [...] It is the art of disappearance (Baudrillard in Fordham, 1997:80).

Nunes (1995) argues that "...the more ecstatic the promises of new, possible worlds, the more problematic the concept of 'the world' becomes", supporting Baudrillard's belief that the postmodern subject is in the process of disappearing, presumably into some "new" (and equally "problematic") "world" or alternate "reality". In this view, humanity is no longer governed by the authentic interactive capabilities of human beings, but by the artificial traces and links which are established between people in order to maintain the illusion of "real" communication which is the illusionary space into which "reality" has been absorbed.

While current "virtual reality" technology does not offer the kind of verisimilitude suggested by some of the films discussed later in this chapter (*The Matrix* and *eXistenZ*), it appears likely that, given the ongoing developments in digital imaging technology, it will not be long before technology is able to give us truly convincing virtual "realities". According to Keep (1993), "The possibility that we will be able to mould and shape our own private alternate worlds, that there will exist for each of us a means of realizing some personal Platonic ideal behind the mask of a stereoscopic LCD display..." not only exists, but also "...raises serious issues concerning the epistemological status of the real". Should the virtual be able to replace the complete spectrum of sensory experiences that are available to the human subject, then digital technology might well optimise – or hyperrealise – those experiences to the extent that "the real" pales in comparison to the virtual. Furthermore, the distinction between the sign and the referent will collapse completely – to the extent that the "real" will be said to be "...produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models..." and will, effectively be redefined as "...that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction" (Baudrillard in Keep, undated). It is, possibly, at this stage in the development of the hyperreal (and in the evolution of representation) that the artificial absorbs and extinguishes the "real". Such cynical

projections are not the only possibility, however.

"Virtual reality", as the experience of a simulated "reality" in which all activity, all action, all experience occurs within some form of cyberspace or as a multi-sensory simulation, will eventually allow participants in an alternate (programmed) "world" to rediscover themselves through moments of extreme subjectivity. "Virtual reality" is a crucial milestone in the ongoing project of human representation which will ultimately bring dreams to life and allow individuals virtually "real" access to imaginary, otherworldly places and fantastic experiences. Dispossessed of a literal body experience, the participant (the spectator-players of the future) in a "virtual reality" programme will have the "...ability to radically and compellingly change one's body-image [which will almost certainly] have a deep psychological effect, calling into question just what you consider yourself to be" (in Keep, 1993). While narrative cinema challenges issues of subjectivity by exposing viewers to alternative points of view, "virtual reality" may effectively allow participants to assume the roles of various characters in ways far more effective than those currently offered by interactive computer games, for example. Keep (1993) refers to the world of "virtual reality" as an "ecstatic realm" in which everything becomes "pliable, changeable, improvable" allowing the realisation of dreams and the experience of incorporeality (having no body). "Virtual reality" offers the possibility of leaving the constraints of the body behind in order to explore the unimagined possibilities of experience in countless "combinations, relations and forms".

McLuhan sees our postmodern technological capabilities as extensions of mankind: "During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space [while in the modern world] we have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing time and space as far as our planet is concerned" (McLuhan in Bukatman, 1997:76). McLuhan's theory suggests that the human nervous system has been extended outside of the body itself, but at the same time, virtual reality technology brings the spectacle of moving image and experiential image technology inside the body, into our central nervous systems so that the viewer/player/interactor becomes immersed within a computerised experience which has the potential to be generated from within our own bodies (to be experienced in much the same way as an extremely vivid dream). By simulating and generating the experience of "reality" within the central nervous system, the future of "virtual reality" implies not simply the blurring of "reality" and hyperreality, but the realisation that "reality" is simply one of

the possible dreams or memories available for our consumption. The *nature* of the spectacle of the "real" may continue to change (or evolve), but its function will not necessarily differ from that of the earliest cave wall drawings. Representation in the context of "virtual reality" will continue to reflect the nature of the human subject. While cynical readings of much contemporary entertainment support the argument that image and spectacle remove the power of choice and action (and therefore rob the subject of individual autonomy), it would appear that interactive "virtual reality" scenarios disprove this theory. Debord has argued that "[I]ived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle" (in Bukatman, 1997:76), and it would appear that the future of the spectacle resides not simply on the screens of cinemas and computers, but on the inner screen of the brain itself where images lead to virtual action as dreams and imagination are invaded by simulated memories.

In many ways, the concept of Virtual Reality recalls the depiction of a nightmarish attempt at brainwashing in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). The scene, in which violent protagonist Alex (Malcolm MacDowell) is strapped into a cinema seat and restrained - with his eyes forcibly held open - suggests an attempt at introducing a different "reality" directly into his brain via his forced "contemplation of the spectacle". While simultaneously representing an assault on the organs of vision (an assault which consists of cinematic images of brutal violence and violent sexual imagery), the experiment is clearly shown to have little or no long-term impact on the subject who is supposed to be cured of violent and sexual fixations. The concluding sequences from the film clearly also suggest that cinematic images do not impact on the individual in such a way that they are likely to induce a character shift or reinvent the personality or personal worldview of the subject. However, as is suggested by contemporary technology, Virtual Reality "...inverts the process [of using cinema screens], using small screens directly in front of the eyes and individual headphones, rather than large screens in spacious auditoria, to achieve the experience of immersion" (Allen, 1998:126). Indeed, in the case of *eXistenZ* (see below), screens are abandoned altogether and the nervous system is accessed directly, in ways which are far in advance of current "Virtual Reality" technologies:

It works on the principle of totally enclosing the user's sensory capabilities (mainly the head, but also the hands) in high-technology equipment (headsets and datagloves), thus, theoretically, depriving him/her of real-world sensory stimulation. A simulated environment is then created via computer, to replace this newly lost world. Users of Virtual Reality are simultaneously in two realities: the virtual world, experienced via their eyes, ears and hands, and the real world, generally experienced, or at least sensed, through the rest of the body

(Allen, 1998:126).

While 1991 saw the realisation of the commercial possibilities of Virtual Reality in the form of "...a screen-based game using Mattel's Power Glove...", the technology is thought to have greater potential for public amusement in theme parks and other similar entertainment venues:

Sim-cabs suspended on hydraulics, with passengers wearing helmets, and true-to-life sound and wind effects generated, give the impression of being in the 'real' space of the fiction. The 'heightened-experience', spectacular, non-narrative nature of VR links it back to earlier multi-sensory systems such as Cinerama and IMAX (Allen, 1998:127).

Such "virtual reality" rides and simulations may be thought of as a means of augmenting and intensifying the type of visceral action and spectacle that is typical of many blockbuster feature films.

"Virtual reality" is the ultimate realisation of Baudrillard's fatal theory of the hyperreal, but it also offers the possibility of an end to the ubiquity of the image. "Virtual reality" transforms the spectacle of the surface into an experiential endeavour which seeks to involve all the senses in order to heighten the effect of a simulated "reality". This offers the potential for a representational form which not only allows the subject to react to stimuli, but to (virtually) react and respond within a simulated environment, perhaps offering "...a way out of the cultural epistemological dead-end of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality" (Keep, 1993). Finally, since "virtual reality" is ultimately a representational space which simulates "real" experience of a world which is itself no longer "real", it has the potential ultimate *hyperartificial* cinema form – the authentic simulation of the artificial, the illusion of a "reality" which wholly recognises that the "real" is always constructed. Like the central character in *Fight Club* (discussed below), who discovers that he can do anything that he dreams, and the main protagonist in *The Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997, also discussed below), who learns that the divide between nightmare and "reality" is a matter of perspective, the "virtual reality" player will not only participate in a spectacle which is entirely simulated, but will interact with, and experience, the digital details of that spectacle as though they were "real".

If one is to accept the definition (implied in chapter three) of cinema as "moving image", then it may be possible to include the "virtual reality" entertainments of the future as descendents of contemporary cinema. Currently, cinema allows us to observe the hyperreal world at a distance, but "virtual reality" will allow this distanced

"reality" to be experienced as though the "viewer" is a part of what is seen and experienced. These are the possible cinemas suggested in a literal sense by *eXistenZ* and *The Matrix*, and in a metaphoric sense by *Lost Highway* and *Fight Club*. "Virtual reality" may be considered the "screenless cinema" of the future, in which the viewer becomes a participant, whether in a game-like "reality" envisioned by *eXistenZ* or the dreamlike "reality" suggested by *Lost Highway* or *Fight Club*. "Virtual reality" is likely to become the ultimate form in a natural evolution of both representation and the moving image. The image is becoming increasingly digitised and is becoming increasingly reflective of the possibility of perfect simulation (noted in the cinematic technologies of computer animation and visual effects creation, and in the narrative concerns of hyperartificial films). *Fight Club*, for example, combines all these elements producing what is essentially a work of "cinematic virtual reality" which refuses to illuminate any distinction between a virtual imaginary "reality" and the "hyperreality" which exists outside the filmic world. Like the characters who tap into the virtual reality game in *eXistenZ*, *Fight Club's* central character has slipped into his own virtual world – one which is both inside his head and a projection of the mediated "reality" which circulates as both actual and dreamlike experience all around him. The cinema-players of the future will no doubt experience simulated "realities" comparable with those lived by the characters in the films discussed in this chapter. Ironically, however, these films also suggest that our "reality" is already comparable with their own.

These dreamlike possibilities for the future of a "virtual reality" cinema suggest an entertainment form which simulates dreams and nightmares that are likely to result in existential crises on a par with our own everyday experience of the actual world. However, the theme-park/thrill-ride aesthetic noted in numerous other postmodern films which include elements of self-consciousness or recycling and nostalgia (*Austin Powers*, *Jurassic Park* and *Star Wars* are all prominent examples) will almost certainly provide a framework for another strain of "virtual reality". It should be noted that the simulations of B-movies that are now produced as major blockbusters exist *because* of the advances in image design technology. Developments since the release of *Star Wars* in 1977 have enabled filmmakers to simulate the hyperreal dreams, fantasies and imaginative wonders which inspired far less convincing earlier films with increasingly sophisticated levels of "realism". This really is not a loss of historicity so much as an interrogation of earlier dreams and memories, an attempt to revisit and finally realise the visions which, a few decades ago, failed to adequately convince

audiences because of their lack of "authenticity". We know these earlier versions of imagined universes to be artificial, but the "realistic" reinventions (simulations) of these films is even more artificial since they now conflate imaginary scenarios (what might be called "popular surrealism", perhaps) with effects and imaging technology which convincingly simulate "realities" that we know to be "unreal". The "virtual reality" technologies of the near-future (as is being suggested by current developments in computer games) hold the possibility that we will ultimately encounter a cinema which allows our complete (if virtual) participation through absorption into seemingly "real" alternate "realities".

There are critics of "virtual reality" who view it with much cynicism, noting "...its potential as a kind of electronic opiate for the masses..." (Keep, 1993). Kevin Robins (in Keep, 1993) sees it as a "...cynical substitution of simulation for reality [that] can only superficially overcome the alienation of our social existence; our pain will return to haunt us as nightmares the more we seek refuge in the 'dream' of virtual reality". Keep (1993) counters this arguments by suggesting that "virtual reality" offers a return of representation to the body "...at the very moment that it frees us from it". He sees "virtual reality" as an alternative way of using the voice, facial expressions and hand gestures to communicate and interact, once again, now using "alternative bodies" and "alternative body languages". Hence, according to Keep (1993), "[t]he utopian impulses which atrophied in the age of the hyperreal, in the age of our mute transfixion before the sign, are revived in the age of the virtual". Keep (1993) argues that the difference between the "hyperreal" and "virtual reality" is that the "hyperreal" is "...constituted by the play of surfaces..." and "...a paralytic fascination with exteriority...". "Virtual reality", on the other hand, "...offers images with depth, images which one can enter, explore, and, perhaps most importantly, with which one can interact":

Paradoxically, however, it is at the point where the virtual most completely approximates the physical world, when VR seems to collapse the distinction between the sign and the referent, that it illuminates difference. At the asymptotic limit of representation, VR breaks free of the gravitational pull of the actual and opens a new space for the imagination (Keep, 1993).

The virtual differs from existing cinema forms in that it "...is thoroughly interior....[and] ...takes you inside spaces, lets you be surrounded" (Keep, 1993). Such "depth" does not give sovereignty to the "real", however, since "virtual reality's "...depth is self-reflexively fictional, tentative, open to change and adaptation" (Keep, 1993).

"Virtual reality" may be understood as a possible means of "de-realising the world", by challenging our experience of constructed "reality" and interrogating notions of personal subjectivity. By stretching the experiences of viewers to encounter new "realities" from a range of subjective positions, the understanding of "reality" itself is stretched. We are consumed by and obsessed with a "reality" which we can only experience at a distance because the "reality" of the postmodern subject is always already-mediated ("cool"). "Virtual reality" is thus the next, vital step in the development of hyperartificial moving image entertainment – the simulation of a "reality" of which the individual subject is necessarily the centre. In this context, all meaning is produced and interpreted by the individual who is immersed in a spectacle of subject-centred "reality" where issues of narrative, genre and character, for example, are abandoned in favour of pure entertainment and play which ultimately amount to further discovery of the self. The "virtual reality" experience has the potential to be one in which humans encounter themselves, their memories and their own potential in ways which have only been suggested by cinematic representation thus far. Keep (1993) notes that virtual reality "...looks forward to a time when its simulated worlds will seem more real than the real, when the latter will come to have the uncanny sense of appearing similar to the virtual".

Baudrillard has hypothesised the "end of the real", but the "real" has actually never existed. The "real" has always been virtual, and this is a point which is emphasised and examined repeatedly in contemporary cinema. "Reality" is point-of-view, frame of reference, perspective, a way of *seeing*, a way of *looking* and, possibly, a way of *being seen*. Keep (1993) argues that advances in the technology which allow the "virtual" simulation of physical objects tells "...us something we have always secretly suspected: that reality is an effect, a historically, socially, even technologically determined means of regulating and representing experience". The possibilities of "virtual reality" technologies reinforce the notion that, with enough (audio-visual) information, experience of "reality" can be garnered from contact with wholly virtual worlds, incorporeal worlds which have no life other than that which exists as imagination, dream and memory. Keep (1993) further reflects that what the fears surrounding the development of "virtual reality" technology "...overlook, or attempt to repress, is the simple fact that it is too late to go back to some putative 'real true world'; we already live, and perhaps have always lived, in the virtual":

The portentous fears of critics..., or films like *The Lawnmower Man* [Brett Leonard, 1992] (in which VR is responsible for transforming an innocent

simpleton into a Nietzschean *Übermensch* with homicidal tendencies - and a Christ complex to boot) are expressions of a kind of panic, a panic arising from loss of the comforting assurance of the real, from the desire to return to the certainties of the symbolic (Keep, 1993).

In more recent years, "virtual reality" has been explored in the cinema in numerous ways, not simply to explore the dangers of the technology, but to reflect on the nature of the "reality" with which it supposedly competes. Two films that offer insights in this regard are Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* and the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*.

Existence vs. eXistenZ

*For me, all reality is virtual and it takes incredible creative energy to maintain those realities
(Cronenberg in Wise, 1999:108).*

*Reality and virtual worlds collide time and time again in Cronenberg's film, until no one, probably
not even Mr C, has any idea which level you're on or what the hell is actually happening (Frost,
1999:4/5).*

Chris Rodley (1999:8) argues that while in Cronenberg's "quintessential" work, *Videodrome* (1982), "...the alarming nature of the cinema's invasion of the passive self" is explored, in *eXistenZ* "...the interactive self invades cinema". In this sense, *eXistenZ* is the "inverse twin" of *Videodrome*. Cronenberg's most recent film, *eXistenZ* interrogates the relationship between "reality" and "virtual reality" games. Using the film medium, however, Cronenberg cleverly distorts the film-viewer's ability to fully comprehend when and if any of the characters are "playing" the game that they are supposedly "jacked into" or not. The surface of the film refuses to reveal the imaginary layers which its narrative suggests exist, because "reality" and the imaginary are so intimately entwined. In this film, whatever game is being played "...plugs so effectively into an individual's desires and fears that the frontiers between fantasy and reality disappear, leaving the player wandering compassless in landscapes and situations that may or may not be of their own imagining" (Rodley, 1999:8). Similarly, the viewer - seated in a cinema - is "plugged into" a complex web of "reality"/"virtual-reality" levels that are totally indistinguishable.

"Virtual reality" in the future, Cronenberg postulates, is created with the aid of a unique Game Pod that is "an organic creature grown from fertilised amphibian eggs stuffed with synthetic DNA". Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh) who is the creator of *eXistenZ* (the game), actually caresses and talks to her Game Pod as though it were a

living creature (which it certainly appears to be at times). In order to play the game, the human player's central nervous system must be "hotwired" to the Pod via a UnbyCord which is plugged into a Bioport at the base of the spine. In order to access this particular version of a "virtual reality", the player necessarily allows "...unrestricted access to personal memories, anxieties and preoccupations" (Rodley, 1999:8). The player – and his or her nervous system – is "penetrated" by the biotechnology of the Game Pod. "Virtual reality", therefore, is a complete merging and interaction of human and man-made components. As has already been suggested (in chapter five), Cronenberg's films are profoundly concerned with the way in which the human body "mediates" experience:

Cronenberg's films heighten, and indeed celebrate, those extreme situations in which even the intimacy of my own body is an exposure, a vulnerability, and not a refuge. These films bear witness to the birth of a new form of subjectivity: one that is entirely embodied, that has no sense of privacy, and that can no longer be defined in terms of fantasy. Without fantasy...there is no way to stabilize identity (Shaviro, 1994:149-150).

In *eXistenZ*, the body is literally invaded by an alternate "reality" and as a result, the mental and psychological landscape is also invaded. In the film, the body, which is physiologically designed to resist intrusions from the exterior world, is shown absorbing and welcoming an alternate, artificial "version" of "reality" - in this case, the "virtual reality" simulated by the game pod. According to Cronenberg:

It just occurred to me that what people are really doing in computer games and video games, is trying to get closer and closer to fusing themselves with the game. And so I thought I would just make that little leap myself and we have...the idea that the game would, in fact, plug right into your nervous system made perfect sense to me. It's all really an attempt to fuse with the fantasy, and make it real, and make it physical, and make it organic (Cronenberg in television documentary interview).

"Existence" or "experience" can therefore also be absorbed from the outside, and internalised in a manner similar to that of the game pod. This aspect of the film perhaps further alludes to the fact that we are created in the image not only of natural (biological) influences, but also in the image of the artificial cultural landscape which pervades (invades) our "reality".

Eric Davis (1999:203) writes that "[i]n many ways, [computer] games are to digital technology what porno videos were to the VCR: the 'killer app' (or application) that, by simulating gargantuan desires, creates a mass consumer market for a new media technology". It may be disquieting, but is hardly surprising that hordes of young people (not only children) escape into video arcades and computer codespace in order

to escape "reality" and experience the thrills and pleasures which comics and television simply cannot emulate: simulated "involvement". The compulsion which players develop for these games will certainly become a major field of study in the years to come, but it is this compulsive desire to play – to escape "reality" – which serves as one of the driving forces behind the characters in *eXistenZ*. Indeed, Allegra Geller's infatuation with her game is reinforced throughout the film, and the status that her character (as a game designer) is accorded no doubt underscores the power that such games have over their players (or followers). Indeed, in the near-future suggested by *eXistenZ*, the creators of virtual-reality games are pop-culture icons or "megastars" in much the same way that some film directors have a degree of superstar status today. They are effectively the "creators" of alternate "realities", new experiences, and new existences.

While *eXistenZ* certainly suggests that virtual reality games of the future will come to represent modes of near-permanent escape from "reality", current technology is not as convincingly absorbing (or potentially disturbing). Davis attempts to locate the source of a player's compulsive (potential) addiction to such games in their current form. According to Davis, it is Freud's notion of the id which inspires the digital entertainment industry, and he quotes an advertisement for the Philips games *Nihilist* and *Battle Slayer*, which states "Psychologists say inside every 18- to 35-year-old-male, there lies a potential psychotic killer," and poses the quirky question: "Can he come out to play?" Accordingly, Davis argues, many games are "...constructed and consumed as what *The Pilgrim's Progress* author John Bunyan might call a 'similitude of a dream'" (Davis, 1999:204):

However demanding the strategic challenges of such games are, the pleasures of higher cortical function alone cannot account for their addictive power. In fact, some of the most popular games seem to reach right down to the lizard brain, catalyzing an intense fixation physiologically comparable to a trance state (Davis, 1999:203).

In many ways, computer and video games attempt to simulate a trajectory of partially logical development by combining the surreal images of the subconscious with compelling narratives or challenging and compulsive goals. Much of the imagery (nightmare worlds, for example) and even some of the experiences (flying, falling) are taken from the dreamlike imagination, and Davis (1999:204) even notes that "...hard-core gamers often report that their screen obsessions seep into REM sleep."

Like the worlds occupied by "virtual reality" players in *eXistenZ*, current network

gameplay technologies allow more than one person to share the same "simulated dreamscape" simultaneously. In many ways, "virtual reality" is being accessed when theme-park type centres allow groups to participate in games that simulate battles, for example, which are played in computer landscapes (cyberspace). An alternative to the notion that computer games act as an "escape valve" for the antisocial id of Freud's interpretation of the human mind, is the Jungian concept of the "collective unconscious" or the *mundus imaginalis* (imaginal world) of Henry Corbin:

Perhaps what we are building in the name of escapist entertainment are the shared symbols and archetypal landscapes of a tawdry technological *mundus imaginalis*. The evil creatures who must be conquered to advance levels are the faint echoes of the threshold-dwellers and Keepers of the Gates that shamans and Gnostics had to conquer in their mystic peregrinations of the other worlds (Davis, 1999:205).

It is interesting to note that while many of the creatures in current computer games represent imagery from beyond the bounds of current "reality", the virtual landscape of *eXistenZ* is populated primarily with everyday-looking characters. Yet, since Allegra Geller's game feeds off the player's own fears and emotions, fantastic experiences are possible and do occur. The levels of experiential "realism" are frequently skewed for the players as they undergo spatio-temporal shifts that are not regularly encountered in the "objective social reality". In Cronenberg's vision of a "virtual reality", there are few of the typically cartoon-like creatures, animated histrionics or medieval mythology that is so prevalent in contemporary computer games. His "otherworldly" set-pieces are sophisticated and complex. While some of the featured elements of current games are included, these generally serve as a source of humour for viewers who might be familiar with the types of games being parodied; the oriental restaurant, for example, alludes to the clichéd proliferation of Orientalist scenarios to be found in many contemporary computer games.

In the final moments of the film, one of the characters asks whether or not the game is still being played. Indeed, the only honest answer is "yes", for Cronenberg is certainly still playing with the viewer. Definite answers are not provided as simply, however, and just as the characters, with their personality implants and pre-programmed narratives, cannot truly escape the ultimate level of the game/movie ("reality"), so the viewer is unable to make complete sense of Cronenberg's complex structure. However, this becomes the very point of the film - that an honest "virtual reality" scenario is completely seductive and "colonises the interior of the self" in such a way that the virtual experience is inevitably more than virtual. *eXistenZ* suggests

that the interior worlds of the imagination (as interpreted by the "virtual reality" game play levels) are no different (or indistinguishable) from "reality" itself. In this way, Cronenberg supposes a "real" world which is just as artificial as the worlds constructed by game designers. "Reality" is depicted through image, surface and spectacle, in much the same way as the "virtual reality" world that is depicted. For the game players in *eXistenZ* (the movie), life and game are merged in an unfathomable distortion of fact and fantasy, truth and deception, existence and "eXistenZ". Cronenberg's fusion of possibilities represents the crux of Baudrillard's conception of a hyperreal existence, where the endless array of communication mechanisms which are at play actually replace (or destroy) the "real". At one point in the film, one of the protagonists Ted Pikul (Jude Law) asks how he will know whether or not he is still "in" the game. Of course, in our own hyperreal world, there is simply no way of knowing. *eXistenZ* is ultimately a cinematic realisation of "...Cronenberg's love-affair with reality distortion...to the point of insanity" (Frost, 1999:5):

Cronenberg works this game/movie connection into a metaphor so effective that as soon as *eXistenZ* is over you feel the need to 'play' the film again to understand its rules more fully, certain you must have missed something (Rodley, 1999:9).

Of course, the point is that one need not have missed any of the rules, but that there can be no such thing as hard and fast rules in a game which feeds off human impulses. Unlike a computer game which has been programmed according to binary codes, *eXistenZ* explores what happens when human unpredictability co-exists and fuses with programmed technology. The way in which the film's "reality" and the game's "virtual reality" are framed, is so similar that the two worlds literally "bleed" into one another, upsetting the balance of normality for the viewer as much as it is thrown off balance for the game players within the film.

In one scene, when the integration into the "virtual reality" world of *eXistenZ* becomes too "real" for Allegra's co-player Ted, he anxiously tells her: "I'm feeling a little disconnected from my real life.... Kind of losing touch with the texture of it.... You know what I mean? I mean, I actually think there's an element of psychosis involved here!" Allegra's response is somewhat surprising: "Yes! This is a great sign." The point being made about Ted's ability to actually "feel" his sense of disconnection alludes to Cronenberg's concern with generating a similar "questioning" of "reality" in the audience:

One of the excitements, of course, about...getting into the game in the movie is to find yourself questioning what reality is. To what extent do we create our

own reality? To what extent are we all characters in our own game?...And as you get older, you begin to realise that it becomes a strongly evident and palpable thing that people define their own characters almost as though they've written them. You decide what things appeal to you, about how you project yourself in society, and so on...and you...we all do play certain roles (Cronenberg in a television documentary interview).

Cronenberg's blurring of the distinction (for the viewer as well as the players) between "reality" and "virtual reality" is an attempt to remove the distinction between fantasy and "reality" and thereby reveal that "reality" is beyond the limits of any single truth or understanding. "Reality" may therefore be said to transcend itself, revealing that it is both plastic and malleable, and relative to the experience of the individual "game player". Human experience, it would seem, is therefore not based on what might be considered to be "reality", but on the individual construction of "reality" based on personal choices and options. "Reality" can therefore potentially be "created" just as "virtual realities" can be constructed.

Despite the current lack of complete immersion technology which might allow the type of "virtual reality" experience depicted in films such as *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982), *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) and *eXistenZ*, this drive towards "...both a greater or heightened sense of 'realism' and a bigger, more breathtaking realization of spectacle" (Allen, 1998:127) continues to serve as the major influence on the technical developments in cinema. By assessing consumer (or spectator) demands and striving to deliver bigger, better and more overwhelmingly convincing depictions of "reality" as an alternative, contemporary cinema continues to make giant strides forward in the depiction of ever-more fantastic spectacles. Just as our first ancestors attempted to access the spiritual by depicting themselves and their experiences on the walls of caves or in carvings of fertile women, so humankind continues to seek access to a sense of meaning by recreating "reality" in the form of illusionary worlds, altered truths and subverted fictions. Art has always attempted to reflect "reality", but the current trend represents an attempt to merge our minds with simulations of "reality" in order to achieve "virtual reality" – or what might be termed "experiential cinema". *eXistenZ* proposes the game-like applications of such technological artforms, while in the fantasy-action-sci-fi thriller, *The Matrix*, "virtual reality" is the world as we know it.

What is *The Matrix* dotcom ?

Get this: what if all we know as reality was, in fact, virtual reality? Reality itself is a ravaged dystopia run by technocrat Artificial Intelligence where humankind vegetates in billions of gloop-filled tanks – mere battery packs for the machineworld – being fed this late 90s VR (known as The Matrix...) through an ugly great cable stuck in the back of our heads. [...] What sounds like some web freak's wet dream is, in fact, a dazzlingly nifty slice of sci-fi cool (Nathan, 1999:17).

With the development of increasingly sophisticated graphics and interactive technology, the journeys into imaginary or hyperreal worlds (as suggested in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* adventures, or Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*, for example), are becoming increasingly conceivable. Cinematic depictions of life as a type of "virtual reality" are nothing new, but increasingly, these have incorporated computer imagery which blurs the distinction between the "real", filmed footage, and those images (or scenes) that are computer-generated (or hyperreal). In their own ways, these films contribute to the problematical questions about the status of "reality" by infringing on the spectator's reliance on the act of *seeing*. The connection between science-fiction cinema and Baudrillard's concept of a hyperreality which has erased "the real", is possibly most vividly portrayed in what Kim Newman describes as a

...cluster of films [that] will eventually be said to have caught the turn-of-the-century zeitgeist...those based on a particular concept of 'virtual reality'. [...] In these films...a quotidian reality that conforms to the conventions of the action movie (or sitcom) is revealed to be a construct designed either to entrap the mass consciousness of humanity or to enslave a single representative specimen (Newman, 1999b:9).

In such films, many of the themes posed by science-fiction writers (with whom Baudrillard has been compared) are explored and visually elaborated on so as to – in greater and greater degrees – offer viewers the suggestion that our perception of the world (or at least, our notion of "reality") is greatly flawed. Verhoeven's futuristic thriller, *Total Recall*, toyed with the theme, and Cronenberg's *Videodrome* gave the world a frightening vision of "virtual-reality" snuff pornography. But as we approach the end-of-the-Millennium, a spate of films exploring the blurring of "reality" with an alternative understanding of what "the real" actually represents, have captured the imaginations of cinema audiences. According to one critic, "[w]e haven't seen a fantasy environment this whole and convincing since *Blade Runner*, [although] *The Fifth Element* [Luc Besson, 1997] and *Dark City* came close...*The Matrix* outstrips them and sets a new level of excellence" (Ronge, 1999b:19). The dominant theme is no longer science-fiction or fantasy, but is concerned with the rigorous questioning of

the status of "reality" which is symptomatic of postmodern experience. *The Matrix* is surely one of the "most extravagant" of such films, and according to Nick James (1999a:3), it is the film which has given "...the strongest sense so far that, given enough money, you can do anything imaginable within the parameters of a two-dimensional moving-image screen". The film offers the viewer not only a spectacular visual experience (a brilliant indication of how computer-generated imagery throws into question our notion of "reality"), but also – in a more hyperbolic sense – deals with the issue of the end of "reality".

The Matrix operates on the possibility that the actual world in which we exist is nothing more than a virtual (or simulated) world. The chief premise of the film, according to Larry Wachowski (in Probst, 1999:33) is "...that everything in our world, every single fiber of reality, is actually a simulation created in a digital universe". Set in a "...fake world resembling a North American city..." (Newman, 1999b:9), *The Matrix* is "...an exhilarating comic book/Hong Kong/sci-fi treatise on the nature of reality..." (Bozzola, undated). While the "everyday world" that the viewer first encounters is reminiscent of our own world, and the year is supposedly 1999, it is not long before it is revealed that none of what is going on around our principal protagonist is "real" at all. Instead, the time is closer to 2199, and the inhabitants of earth are victims of The Matrix, which is a colossal artificial intelligence system that feeds an illusion of a "real" world directly into people's minds. The machines that now rule the world and control The Matrix require the humans only as a source of energy – people have become organic batteries for the machines which years before conquered their creators in a global war. At the centre of the tale is Thomas "Neo" Anderson (Keanu Reeves) who, after being initiated into the "Real World", must lead the physical and psychological battle against the malevolent machines. It is a film that suggests that "virtual reality" may well serve as a means of human imprisonment. More importantly, it suggests that we may already exist in this state of imprisonment and that the "prison" is what we refer to as "reality".

The film opens with a high-paced action sequence that immediately forces the spectator to question the authenticity of what is *seen*. Combining a range of computer-enhanced kung-fu gymnastics and immeasurably impossible stunts, one of the central characters, Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), is chased by a number of "policemen". Her hyper-kinetic journey takes her over, under, and through a number of buildings and rooftops, only to escape via a public telephone; apparently

disappearing down the receiver. The viewer is left doubting not only the physical possibility of what has just been shown, but also the nature of the world in which we have first encountered Trinity and her pursuers. The filmmakers indulge their technological ability to displace the viewer's sense of the film's relationship with "reality", not only by confusing us visually, but by introducing a number of visual elements that refer to a displaced (or alternative) "reality". Trinity's disappearance down a telephone receiver is but the first of numerous references to communications technology and its link to an alternative "reality" or plane of existence. The film continuously foregrounds its many references to our highly mediated contemporary world, suggested by Trinity's physical capabilities which are reminiscent of the skills of a computer game character. Later, when we realise that this opening sequence has occurred not in "reality" but in the "virtual reality" which is controlled by the machines, it becomes evident that Trinity's skills are actually downloadable. In a scene in which Neo is trained in a hyperkinetic style of kung-fu, for example, he prepares for his first training session by acknowledging that he suddenly "knows kung-fu". All the skills that he requires for this high-powered fighting technique have been downloaded into his brain from a computer so that he can recall them and utilise them when participating in the "virtual reality" that he once understood as "reality". It is thus possible for Neo – and other characters, for that matter – to perform beyond the limits of "reality" within the programmed, simulated, virtual world which we associate with our own everyday world. In a world that exists purely as an illusion within our own imaginations or dreams, anything that can be imagined or dreamt becomes possible. Indeed, it is during the final scene of *The Matrix* that Neo is able to overcome the illusion of physical "reality", thereby suspending the usual scientific rules associated with physical "reality" and the restrictions of our bodies, in order to achieve flight.

This act of flight which results from an act of "digital faith" on Neo's part represents a moment of spiritual consciousness – an awakening from an inert slumber which has, until this moment, kept Neo a virtual prisoner of the illusion of "reality". While the version of cyberspace which currently exists in our "subjective reality" may never fulfil its mythical or spiritual potential, *The Matrix* refers to numerous avenues of faith and spirituality within its own fundamentally mythological narrative framework, in which Neo represents salvation for humankind. According to the film's cinematographer, Bill Pope, *The Matrix* may be interpreted as "a pretty complicated Christ-story" (a futuristic rendition of the Christ myth, perhaps), but this mythological narrative basis

is also the equivalent of so-called "origin" stories found in comic books which outline the "...beginnings of a superhero like Daredevil or Spiderman" (in Probst, 1999:34). As with Christ, Neo must first face several tests before being betrayed by one of his supposed disciples (Cypher (Joe Pantoliano), who sells out his human friends in return for a promised lifetime of simulated happiness). Neo, too, is killed by his enemies before being "raised from the dead" (although this death occurs within the "virtual reality" of "the matrix") in order to finally overcome the forces of darkness. Neo is an obvious anagram for "One" (and he may well be the "New One"), signifying that he is *the* hyperreal saviour¹⁸⁶ (a techno-era Christ figure) who will save Mankind from the machines which have "alienated us from the matrix of nature". The film narrative powerfully underscores the importance and significance of humankind as a spiritual being in the scene where Neo is "brought back to life" by a kiss from Trinity, who represents love, devotion and, ultimately, faith. Human qualities such as these are fundamental to our spiritual nature, and in the film Trinity's "resurrection" of Neo suggests that the human spirit is ultimately more powerful than any "reality".

Before "Neo" discovers the "truth" about the world and "reality" he is told by the human rebel leader Morpheus¹⁸⁷ (Laurence Fishburne) that "No one can be told what The Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself". Morpheus's words are equally significant for the viewer, because The Matrix is very much embedded in the visual character of the film itself. As one reviewer notes, "...this movie prides itself on taking the audience through the same clueless journey that our hero...goes through..." (Sanders, 1999). Neo, may be the hero who is literally called to action in this film, but he is very much a representative of the viewer, in that he constantly questions his own personal experience of the "reality" around him. "Reality", for him, has become indistinguishable from his dreams, his fantasies or a computer generated "world". Just as cinema presents the viewer with a "reality", so Neo's consciousness presents him with a "reality" that no longer distinguishes itself from imagination. The film (through Neo) poses the age-old question: Do we create our own "reality"? Indeed, as it turns out, "reality" is not at all as it seems, because "...the world as we know it is a computer-generated illusion" (Ronge, 1999b:19); it is a form of "consensual hallucination" – a programmed "reality" which is dreamlike or virtual. Since this "virtual reality" closely resembles our own "objective social reality", it is wholly convincing as a simulation of what we understand to be "reality". In this "virtual world", however, we are immediately introduced to fantastical action – created on film through sophisticated camera techniques and choreography – which confuses and

distorts our initial suspension of disbelief. Only later in the film do we realise the connection between the hyperbolic action sequences and the types of hyperrealistic stunts that are performed regularly in countless other movies and, perhaps even more significantly, in numerous interactive computer games.

The film abounds in references to media and communication, and includes a scene in which Neo opens a seemingly ancient volume of *Simulacra and Simulations*. Indeed, it is in this particularly important work that Baudrillard (1981) finally theorises that the "real" has been replaced by the "hyperreal". Baudrillard notes that a "...simulation is different from a fiction or lie in that it not only presents an absence as a presence, the imaginary as the real..." but also "...undermines any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself" (Poster in Baudrillard, 1992a:6). As if to underline the significance of this particular reference in the film, it must be noted that the "book" is in fact itself a "fake", containing not pages, but a hollow space in which Neo keeps illegal computer programmes which he sells.¹⁸⁸ While giving one of these programmes to a fellow cyberspace junkie, Neo notes that he is having trouble discerning the difference between being awake and dreaming. The remark, of course, is another reference to Baudrillard's concern in *Simulacra and Simulations*, that "...the world of 'hyper-reality' bypasses the distinction between death and life" (Poster in Baudrillard, 1992a:6). In the world ruled by the machines, humans exist not as living beings, but rather as vessels into which simulated lives are downloaded and experienced as "real". Furthermore, just as Neo is unable to distinguish between when he is awake and when he is dreaming during the early part of the film, so the viewer is never entirely sure which parts of this highly plastic movie are generated by computer technology and which are "performed" by actual actors.

While the radical visual effects in *The Matrix* frequently blur the distinction between "reality" and "hyperreality", the narrative suggests that the virtual space of the hyperreal may constitute a new mythology for a society which is dominated by various media and communications technologies. The film envisions "reality" as a dream-like or hallucinogenic projection in which the subject finds him- or herself unable to determine the authenticity of experience: "Neo's already a bit freaked since dreaming and being awake don't seem that different anymore" (Coleman, 1999b:15). The twist is that Neo's is a double-coded blurring of "dream-life" and "real-life", because everything which he has ever experienced has been part of a downloaded "dream", fed directly into his subconscious by the machines that now rule the world.

The film therefore necessarily also suggests that even the so-called "real" world (that in which the machines and a few rebels who exist in the "real" world are actually active) is potentially also a "virtual reality" projection. Neo's experience of existence as a virtual dream is comparable with Baudrillard's references to the interchangeability of "reality" and "virtual reality". Potentially, our "reality" is already simulated, just as Neo's "reality" is a downloaded dream:

Today, much of First World reality is mediated by computers. The latest digital technologies have created a virtual world in which numbers rule and your power is determined by the capacity of your hard drive. In *The Matrix*, the Wachowski brothers make us confront the amazing and frightening possibilities that lie in this human-machine interface. They posit a dystopian, post-Orwellian world in which the machines control everything, including reality (Fortune, 1999:8).

Given the close connection between our existing "reality" and the dystopian nightmare hypothesized by *The Matrix*, it seems reasonable to assume that the film would be taken as a bleak and disturbing warning against the hazards of unchecked technological expansion.

Paradoxically, *The Matrix* (like the *Terminator* movies) is a parable which exploits the advances in computer and digital technology in order to convey its message and to create a dazzling array of visually inventive and entertaining spectacles:

From head to tail, the deliciously inventive Wachowskis...have delivered the syntax for a new kind of movie: technically mind-blowing, style merged perfectly with content and just so damn cool, the usher will have to drag you kicking and screaming back into reality (Nathan, 1999:17).

As Nathan suggests, *The Matrix* is "cool" precisely because it so contemptuously ignores the inevitable argument from any potential cynic that the action and other spectacular events which occur in this film are *unreal*. The film questions the nature of our "reality" by fusing ideas and images that simultaneously enliven and make "imaginable", or even "possible", an alternative version of existence. More importantly, *The Matrix* proposes that the world that "actually" exists is, in fact, entirely a hyperreal projection – a dreamlike construct that exists entirely in the "imagination" of each individual. This notion, when considered in terms of the imagistic nature of dreams (for example), may be more than simply a farfetched postmodern theory. As Christopher Probst implies, *The Matrix* may be closer to a form of "realism" than that achieved by surveillance cameras and the makers of documentaries:

Computerized gadgetry has assumed such an increasingly pervasive role in our everyday lives - from microprocessor-controlled automobiles to hyperspeed

Internet e-mail and cell phones - that one might wonder if the tail is wagging the dog. With the impending end of the millennium inducing waves of paranoia and Y2K computer-crash hysteria, it's not surprising that technophobic films such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) seem ever-more accurate in their depictions of microchips run amok (Probst, 1999:32).

The Matrix may simply serve as a lavish and highly provocative work of cinematic entertainment, but it also highlights many of the fears that are associated with our ever-expanding technological advancements. We exist in hyperreality, but it may well be that this version of "reality" is but part of a "consensual hallucination", a dream into which all postmodern subjects are simultaneously plugged. Neo may emerge as a cinematic superhero whose destiny it is to fight "reality", but this may be a role which we are all, at some level, fulfilling. One film that asks us to bravely fend off the artificial "reality" that exists around us, is *Fight Club*.

Fighting "reality"

We're making these fucking movies and they're all, like, prototypes....So you have to find something to start with that you know. I knew who the narrator was because he was me. At some points in my life, I've said, 'If I could just spend the extra money, I could get that sofa and then I'll have the sofa problem handled.' As I was reading [Chuck Palahniuk's] book, I was blushing and feeling horrible.

How did this guy know what everybody was thinking? And I also know, just from personal experience, that if I could choose to be someone else, it would be Brad Pitt (Fincher in Taubin, 1999:18).

David Fincher's *Fight Club*¹⁸⁹ wants the viewer to experience a radical shift in thought, to "compare notes" with the shifting agenda of the fantasy "freak character" played by Brad Pitt. To what extent would we - as film spectators and as participants in a consumer-driven world - be prepared to accept the anarchic philosophies presented by this icon of Hollywood celebrity? Taubin (1999:16) notes that "...the film disrupts narrative sequencing and expresses some pretty subversive, right-on-the-zeitgeist ideas about masculinity and our name-brand, bottom-line society - ideas you're unlikely to find so openly broadcast in any other Hollywood movie". For the contemporary viewer it is a film which grapples with the illusion which we have come to experience as "reality":

Fight Club. It's more than a film. It's a generational-zeitgeisty-millennial hymn, a blaring sign o' the times - much more than, say, that new Schwarzenegger film *End Of Days*, or a record by Nine Inch Nails, or a rap by Busta Rhymes, or the Gatecrasher Kids. It's a properly visionary, reflective, hilarious, disturbing film that you should see twice this week. It's an immediate hit and a straight-off

cult classic. *Fight Club* dissects 'tiny life', cursing meals for one and travel toothpaste, and wondering how the hell personal space became a personal box (McLean, 1999:68,71).

Fight Club successfully shows us the difficulties involved in actually changing a world which seems so all-consuming. It presents consumerist discontent as a crisis of "horror movie" proportions (Ellis, 1999b:49), establishing that *consumerism* ultimately amounts to *being consumed*, and graphically depicts the anti-social alternatives which are against everything that we have been raised to believe. In a sense, the film underscores the notion that we have been force fed a particular understanding of "reality". More than this, the film engages with the way in which we are manipulated and moulded into *seeing* the world in a particular way:

It's about what happens when a world defines you by a nothing job, when advertising turns you into a slave bowing at a mountain of things that make you uneasy about your lack of physical perfection and how much money you don't have and how famous you aren't. It's about what happens when you're hit by the fact that your life lacks uniqueness; a uniqueness that we're constantly told we have (by parents, by school, by the media) that simply doesn't exist. *Fight Club* rages against the hypocrisy of a society that continually promises us the impossible: fame, beauty, wealth, immortality, life without pain (Ellis, 1999b:49).

By conforming to a particular concept of "reality", our existence becomes routine - a continuous attempt to live up to an image of "perfection" which we accept as authentic. The "violence" suggested by *Fight Club's* underground bareknuckle boxing fraternity is not an advert for self-destruction, but a metaphor for rediscovering "reality".

Simply put, *Fight Club* is a "...comedy of terrors..." (Andy Lowe in Crook *et al.*, 2000:72) in which an average guy known to us only as "the Narrator" (Edward Norton) has been "...numbed into insomnia by a tastefully banal life" (McLean, 1999:71) and entertains rather extreme (fantastical) measures to "reinvent" his life:

...it's about an aimless, disaffected, over-educated, white-collar drone...stuck in a meaningless job and an utterly regimented way of life that continuously reminds him of his spiritual malaise... (Ellis, 1999:49).

This "Narrator" has systematically been seduced and ultimately overwhelmed by an excessively material lifestyle and as a result has lost touch with "reality", and "...his life is emotionless and meaningless" (Wise, 2000b:3). This inability of the protagonist to feel emotion serves as the motivation for the journey into his own psyche upon which he embarks. As Charles Whitehouse (1999:46) notes, *Fight Club* is "...a conspiracy thriller that never leaves the splashy imagination of a paranoid narrator".

His (fantasy) journey becomes one of rediscovery, in which he searches for the feeling and meaning which is now absent from his life. Ultimately, it is the struggle to compensate for the emptiness of postmodern existence which ultimately leads to the formation of the "fight club" of the story:

The nameless narrator of *Fight Club*...is like Winston in George Orwell's *1984*. Instead of Oceania there is the consumer society, but it's the same thing. It leaves him feeling powerless and hollow and cold. He is bored with a life of accumulation and no struggle....He compensates for all this emptiness by attending cancer support groups....But better than pretending to be dying, better than hugging the terminally ill, is the Fight Club. It's the fighting that allows its members to feel alive again (Hicklin, 1999:63).

Chuck Palahniuk (in Hicklin, 1999:64), the author of the novel on which the film is based, claims that it is concerned with "...the frustration with consumerism being the only validated thing out there". He further adds that "[p]eople build their lives around accumulating and feel tricked and let down by it. It's an immediate substitute for a real, vicarious experience of life". According to Hicklin (1999:64), the film's "[v]iolence is emancipation from a big safe world where the only thing to do is shop". Norton (in Hicklin, 1999:64) offers a somewhat Baudrillardian analysis of the film, noting that "[i]t is profound cynicism, even despair, even paralysis in the face of an onslaught of information".

According to Andrew Pulver (2000), "*Fight Club*...taps into a virulent skein of rage that's been dominating American protest politics for years - the dehumanising effect of an all-pervading corporate culture". The film foregrounds corporations such as the coffee franchise Starbucks and "exclusive" furniture group Ikea as targets for its attack on corporations:

To recap: you're meant to find *Fight Club* funny. It isn't really saying that violence and anarchistic male militias are a valid, sustainable response to a society that emasculates men by cauterising all real feeling - a society whose chief weapon is the consumerist hypercane which insists that Ikea flatpacks will make you a fully-rounded person, and that the khakis-clad orthodoxy *always* drinks at Starbucks (McLean, 1999:71).

In one early scene, the protagonist describes - in voice-over - how he has equipped his apartment with designer Ikea furniture which he has carefully selected from various magazines and catalogues. As he describes his furnishings, the sequence on screen depicts Norton's character standing in a virtual version of the apartment; a perfect, but noticeably artificial, marriage between a photographic image of the actor, and a computer-generated three-dimensional image of the apartment. Suddenly, the viewer is made aware that the apartment is necessarily a simulation, a virtual space

filled with meaningless objects. Alongside each item of furniture, digitised text appears, just as it might appear alongside a photograph in a magazine. Fincher's computerized imagery clearly conveys the message: Norton's character "lives" in an artificial world – a world of simulation. In one sense, his apartment is filled with furniture which has been mass-produced and therefore each piece is a simulation of some non-existent original. In another sense, the image on screen *shows* this character apparently standing in a simulation of his apartment. He is *in* a simulated "reality". He exists *in* the hyperreal, which is his experience of contemporary life.

As Norton's character is increasingly unable to "feel" anything, he seeks situations which will potentially expose him to "reality" ("real" feelings and emotion, in this case). On the casual advice of his doctor, he begins to attend a support group for men with testicular cancer. There, he finds himself crying during an emotional "sharing" session as he embraces Bob (Meatloaf), a "man" who has lost his testicles and developed enormous breasts because of the ensuing hormonal changes. The irony, of course, is that this "sexless" man had once been a powerful athlete who had used steroids to *artificially* enhance his performance. The steroids have since caused his testicular cancer and the emotional pain and trauma which has accompanied this disease (he notes, for example, that it is the reason why his wife had left him). Finding himself addicted to the emotional experience, Norton's character soon starts attending a range of support groups for people with a diversity of perplexing problems and diseases. Ironically, however, he finds comfort in the "real" experiences of other individuals, but must fake his own disabilities in order to attend the various sessions. Ultimately, he simulates an alternative version of himself: Tyler Durden, who is only revealed to be a projected version of Norton's character towards the end of the film. For most of the unfolding film, however, the viewer believes (along with Norton's narrating self), that Tyler Durden is another personality altogether. In fact, this simulated character is played by another actor (Brad Pitt¹⁹⁰) and supposedly represents the protagonist's "significant other", "*doppelgänger*" or "alter-ego" (Taubin, 1999:16). In one scene, Norton's character beats himself up in front of his employer, demonstrating the extent to which personality and character can be simulated.

In a particularly ironic scene, Brad Pitt's Tyler Durden notices a fashion advert for an exclusive label, featuring the body of a well-built, half-naked man. As if reciting a slogan for imminent social revolt, Durden (Pitt) announces that "self-improvement is

masturbation". Durden goes on to make a scathing remark about individuals who choose to work out in gyms and suggests that the model in the advertisement is not a "real man". The irony lies in the fact that while Pitt's character mocks the cult of male physicality and body-worship, several other scenes reveals his own body to be a finely-tuned product of extensive physical training. Hypothetically, Brad Pitt represents the embodiment of what men would like to look like, just as the model in the advertisement represents an image of desirability. *Fight Club* deals largely with the disappearance of "the real" in contemporary western society and the projection of Pitt's image constantly serves to underscore the tension between that which is "real" and that which we experience as "real" through our experience of various images.

Pitt's character, who is Edward Norton's alter-ego is essentially "...a freak character who seems to have been created by Norton's debased fantasy of who he really wants to be" (Ellis, 1999b:49), and yet he seems so violently opposed to all that is the backbone of consumer culture. In the film, he represents social anarchy in its purest form. As Norton (in Crook *et al.*, 2000:72) notes, "...*Fight Club* probes into the despair and paralysis that people feel in the face of having inherited this value system out of advertising". Thus, it seems that "...irony cuts both ways..." and we are forced to contemplate the question:

[D]oes Brad's beauty reinforce or undermine the movie's critique of a soulless society in thrall to pretty surfaces? (de Waal, 2000a:12).

Pitt's character becomes emblematic of a culture of desire rebelling against itself, and perhaps this is the very point of the film: we cannot ignore those superficial desires which are motivated by the images which are established in our imagination by that which we see with our eyes. Equally, we need to recognise the source of our discontent before we can engage it. Bret Easton Ellis (1999:49) refers to the film as "a statement, a wake-up call" which touches on issues and ideas that are "...rarely addressed in American movies: mainly the troubling things men think about but never admit. (Come on, the movie dares you, what are your real feelings about the rapes at Woodstock 99 or the shootings at Columbine?)" Metaphorically, Ellis (1999:49) argues, the film concerns the erosion of "men's masculinity" when existence no longer includes tests and challenges, and when "...making money and looking presentable..." seem to be life's sole concerns: "defiance" of the social system becomes "...the only way of regaining maleness". The film suggests that individuality and "authenticity" emerge in the rejection of social "reality".

Towards the film's conclusion, once Norton's character has realised that he is actually Tyler Durden, he has another on-screen fight with himself, this time literally against his alternative incarnation. Both Norton and Pitt are seen in the same shots, recalling earlier scenes in which the "two" characters had consensually fought "one another". Several intra-filmic shots, depicted on surveillance camera monitors, reveal that only Norton's version of Durden is actually present in the scene. The sequence, when edited together, reveals the plasticity of the "reality" suggested by Durden's world. Fincher's film is unsettling because it reveals "reality" to be entirely relative, to the extent that his own filmic images reveal different versions of the "truth". In one vision of Durden's "reality", the viewer shares the illusion of two co-existing versions of the same character: Norton fighting Pitt. In the other vision (the intra-filmic surveillance camera point-of-view), the viewer is *shown* only Norton's version of the character. These contradictory images defer the viewer's understanding of "reality" by forcing us to experience both points-of-view as artificial (after all, both points-of-view have been simulated for Fincher's film). Later, Norton's version of Durden finds himself having to shoot himself through the head in order to "kill" his alternate self. For him, like the viewer, the experience of *seeing* the imaginary "self" in the way in which this is suggested by the filmic images, constitutes a threat to the actual or "real" self. This is the same threat posed by cinema itself: in their necessary resemblance to our visual experience of actuality, film images (like the images on a surveillance camera monitor) force us to question that which we see in the world around us.

Fight Club never pretends to be anything other than a movie - a piece of artifice. Fincher employs deliberately "cinematic" devices to communicate this notion of the film's artificiality. In one scene, Norton addresses the audience while his alter-ego Durden performs several attention-grabbing activities in the background. Norton explains, for example, how Durden - while working as a projectionist at a movie theatre - splices single frames of pornography into family films. In the auditorium, film-goers eye each other suspiciously and young children burst into tears. Moments before the end credits of *Fight Club* begin to roll, the film appears to literally, physically "slip in the gate" as an image of a flaccid penis fills the screen for a brief moment, echoing the subversive, subliminal moment brought about by Durden's cinema-guerrilla tactic (of course, the image also reminds us of one of the film's central themes: emasculation).¹⁹¹ The moment of self-reflexivity reminds us that we, as spectators, are merely watching a film, because the narrative has already self-consciously identified this particular subliminal technique. We are therefore made

aware of yet another of the film's own ironies. Yet these ironic, subversive twists are never without significant impact, as suggested by one critic:

...just like hanging around in terminal illness support groups, going to the movies is a vicarious thrill. Anyone fool enough to start their own fight club will think again after the first punch on the nose. And anyone who carries on fighting, simply enjoys it, and is going to do it anyway. *Fight Club* is a subversive movie because it seems to be more dangerous than it really is, while slipping in some rather more complex ideas about the changing face of masculinity in a politically correct consumer society (Wise, 2000b:3).

Ultimately, even the moment of anarchic subversion in which the penis flickers onto screen, is achieved artificially. The penis itself is a prosthetic which had to be fabricated in a certain way so as to ensure that *Fight Club* received an R rating in the United States:

...the penis could not be erect or have a hand, mouth or any other body part in the frame, and it had to feature black pubic hair "so no one would think it was Brad's". So the perfect penis had to be fabricated - the film's one, crowning moment of anarchy is just an expensive fake (Wise, 2000b:3).

Yet, this single moment of "fake-real" anarchy echoes the nature of the social subversion that is foregrounded throughout the film. Much of the controversy surrounding the film focussed on its supposed flirtation with "fascist imagery" and that it encouraged the use of homemade explosives with its "irresponsibly authentic" recipes. Alexander Walker (in Pulver, 2000) of the *London Evening Standard* called the movie "...not only anti-capitalism but anti-society, and, indeed, anti-God", while Kenneth Turan (in Pulver, 2000) referred to the film as a "...witless mishmash of whiny, infantile philosophising and bone-crunching violence...". The film has been criticised for the nature of its (consensual) "underground" violence, and yet it is plausibly more reasonable to accept the film as "...a satire on the whole concept of 'dangerous' movies: the threat of copycat violence mingled with a brutal disregard for the whole structure of society is bound to push every possible button" (Wise, 2000b:3). While the momentary appearance of the fake phallus is unlikely to stir anything other than bemusement or shock, the film's narrative blending of violence and anarchy is aimed at stirring reaction. It is in this sense that Fincher (in Crook et al., 2000:72) notes that he is "...interested in movies that scar. The thing I love about *Jaws* is that I haven't been swimming in the ocean since".

The final images of *Fight Club* perfectly suggest the film's refusal to distinguish "reality" from nightmarish fantasy. Having eradicated his alter ego (Brad Pitt), Tyler Durden (Edward Norton) stands hand-in-hand with Marla (Helena Bonham-Carter),

the woman he has come to realise that he loves, and together they watch as the high rise buildings of the surrounding cityscape are demolished, one by one. This destruction of the "artificial" world (the concrete jungle) has been Tyler Durden's dream since early in the film when he had actually destroyed his own apartment in an attempt to escape his existence which had been constituted in an excessively material world. As the office blocks of the city centre are now blasted and destroyed, the viewer anticipates that it is not only buildings which are being eradicated, but a series of monuments to capitalism and an entire socio-economic system which stratifies, fragments, and ultimately commodifies contemporary life. Tyler Durden's dream has been to destroy this artificial way of life. As the spectacle unfolds, however, it is quite clear that the vision of magnificent destruction is itself a fantasy. The buildings which are being demolished are not "real" buildings, and the explosions which take place are, equally, not "real" - this is a computer simulation of a spectacular dream. And the film itself is also an imaginative fantasy which just happens to reflect the artificial world from which we would, perhaps, like to escape:

It implies that fear, blood, disease, pain, violence, torture are the only things that make us feel truly human. Beauty, love, freedom - these are illusions and concepts that aren't possible because of how society is structured. In a consumerist world enslaved by the tyranny of objects (buying, owning, coveting) the only means of escape is through destruction. This dangerous, anarchic thesis might - on a daily level in our 'real' lives - be easy to disregard, but the filmmaking is so strong that this idea connects with us intellectually and - probably for many men - on an emotional level as well... (Ellis, 1999:49).

Fight Club suggests that in order to escape the artificially created "reality" in which we are entangled, it is first necessary to dream or imagine the alternatives.

Memory's doppelgänger

The power of the image, our fear of it, the thrill that pulls us toward it, is real. Short of closing one's eyes - in cinema, a difficult and unprecedented act - there is no defence against it (Vogel, 1974:9).

Analyses of postmodern films reveal that they "...simultaneously display the two features...that Jameson has identified: namely an effacement of the boundaries between the past and the present (typically given in the forms of parody and pastiche), and a treatment of time which locates the viewing subject in a perpetual present" (Sarup, 1993:176). In David Lynch's *The Lost Highway*, time is treated not only as malleable (in a scene where the mystery man's desert hideout spontaneously

combusts and then reassembles perfectly as Lynch merely "rewinds" the scene), but as arbitrary, imaginary, and artificial (when Fred Madison uses a cellular telephone to call the mystery man who is simultaneously standing in front of him and is apparently at his house). Without the usual reference points provided by time, the viewer is placed in a position of confusion, unable to discern when and how any of the screen events fit into the "big picture". Of course, the point is that there is no "big picture", for the film thoroughly distorts any perception of a single "reality":

The plot of *Lost Highway* binds time's arrow into time's loop, forcing Euclidian space into Einsteinian curves where events lapse and pulse at different rates and everything might return eternally. Its first and last shots are the same - the yellow markings of a straight desert road familiar from a thousand movies scrolling down as the camera speeds along low on the ground to the pounding soundtrack. But this linearity is all illusion, almost buoyantly ironic, for you can enter the story at any point and the straight road you're travelling down will unaccountably turn back on itself and bring you back to where you started. That emblem of pioneer America, the road ahead, that track to the future, collapses here into a changeling tale, in which contemporary phantasms about identity loss and multiple personality, about recovered memory, spirit doubles, even alien abduction, all unseat the guy in the driver's seat and lay bare his illusion of control. The film is made like a Moebius strip, with only one surface but two edges: the narrative goes round and round meeting itself, but the several stories it tells run parallel and never join up (Warner, 1997:6).

Lost Highway is terrifying not only because of its eerie surreal imagery and ominous characters, but because its elusive narrative suggests the awesome power of cinematic images to simulate an entirely artificial reality. The film, according to Newman (1997:48), "...delights in contradictory or unexplained events, fracturing narrative logic at every turn." Indeed, it is the elusive and unstable use of images which allows Lynch to replace the cinematic concept of "narrative" with the surrealistic concept of "illusion". At its most gruelling, the film literally proves the extent to which images and film footage can invade and disturb the human consciousness. Early scenes in the film depict a husband and wife couple (Fred and Renée Madison, played by Bill Pullman and Patricia Arquette) finding video cassettes from an unknown source on their front door step. When played back, these videos reveal footage taken inside the Madison home by an unknown intruder. More disturbing, is the apparent fact that the second of these tapes reveal that both Fred and Renée are asleep in bed while the footage had been filmed. The third tape appears to reveal Fred brutally killing his wife, but Fred has no memory of the murder. When Fred is left with his own thoughts, however, the viewer is occasionally given glimpses (literally momentary flashes) of colour footage (as opposed to the black and white images from the videotapes) which appears to represent Fred's "actual" memory. These moments of memory suggest

that Fred is indeed responsible for killing his wife, but one is unable to discern whether these flashes are Fred's memories or simply more bits of anonymous film footage. Earlier in the film, when Fred and Renée are asked whether or not they own a video camera, Fred explains to the enquiring policemen that he hates video cameras because "I like to remember things my own way...how I remember them, not necessarily the way they happened". Indeed, this strange comment earlier on becomes increasingly meaningful as one considers that the colour images suggesting that Fred is the killer need not be representations of the truth at all. Effectively, these "memories" which now begin to plague Fred, may simply be a result of the images which he has seen in the incriminating video. Indeed, simulated memories (and "realities") are central to the film's discourse.

It is also significant that in a film which constantly provokes the viewer to question what is "real" and what is merely a fabrication of some version of "reality", the main character makes a point (it seems) of revealing that he is uncomfortable with having "reality" reproduced in the way that a camera records it. Perhaps this is also the key to an understanding of the power which Lynch is suggesting that cinema holds for its viewers. The recording of "reality" ("the way things happened") in *Lost Highway* inevitably suggests that even memories can be simulated. As with the use of photographs to support the simulated pasts of replicants in *Blade Runner*, Lynch reveals that recording technologies are capable of deceiving the viewer, and of creating "unreal" memories. A pertinent example from *Lost Highway* is revealed in a shot of a photograph featuring both characters played by Patricia Arquette. In the photograph, Renée Madison (Arquette in a black wig) stands alongside her *doppelgänger*, Alice Wakefield (Arquette in a blonde wig). Of course, the photograph itself refuses to be an accurate source of "truth", for the viewer is aware that Arquette plays both roles, and therefore that the photograph is a fake, or a simulation of some imagined scene. Similarly, Lynch wishes us to feel uncomfortable with the fictional world that he has created in the movie. He uses disturbing ideas, images and sounds to induce the viewer's fear of the unknown or irrational. In so doing, Lynch manipulates our experience of "reality", providing us with a nightmare vision of a world. This is a world which we recognise but are simultaneously unfamiliar with.

The fabrication or simulation of the "real" is also explored through Fred's *doppelgänger*, Pete Raymond Dayton (Balthazar Getty), whose apparent translocation to Fred's prison cell is never explained. When Pete's gangster patron, Mr Eddy/Dick

Laurent (Robert Loggia), offers him a pornographic video, he declines the offer. In the scene which follows, the viewer learns that Pete prefers "the real thing" as he makes love to his girlfriend in the front of his car. Ironically, however, Lynch's handling of the scene suggests an artificial attempt to emulate the type of gratuitous sexual scene which Pete might have been watching instead - had he accepted the video from Mr Eddy. In this, and several subsequent scenes, Lynch depicts Pete's sexual encounters (with both his girlfriend and with Alice) in increasingly graphic detail. Indeed, it is during these fairly explicit sexual encounters with Alice that Lynch cuts to extreme close-up shots of both Pete and Alice's eyes. The shots suggest that the act of *seeing* is not necessarily connected with "reality", "truth" or "meaning". Indeed, later, when Pete arrives at 2224 Deep Dell Place to help Alice rob the shady Andy (Michael Masee), he enters the house only to find his *femme fatale* appearing in a pornographic film that is being projected on the lounge wall. Of course, while this gigantic spectacle of supposedly "real" - but decidedly simulated and necessarily artificial - sex occurs, Alice herself enters the lounge as if to reinforce the notion that she is "not really" in the pornographic scene.

Later, Lynch uses several images of simulated (artificial) pornography to demonstrate how the context of certain kinds of visual images can be used to manipulate the viewer's emotional response. In a frightening sequence in the desert, the mystery man (Robert Blake) hands Mr Eddy a portable viewing-screen depicting gruesome images from what appears to be a snuff porn movie. By intercutting sexual and violent imagery, Lynch evokes horror that is linked to the darkest parts of the human imagination. However, in an earlier scene during which Alice recalls her first meeting with Mr Eddy, the visual spectacle is of Patricia Arquette forced at gunpoint to remove her clothing. While the snuff movie visuals are fast-paced and rapidly edited, the strip scene is slow-moving and the camera eroticises the actress's naked body. A comparison of the two scenes, however, reveals an uneasy tension in Lynch's thematic treatment of sex and violence. In the snuff film scenes (which simulate extreme overt sexual violence), Lynch creates unease and disgust through confusing editing and an abrasive soundtrack. When Arquette removes her clothing, however, it is also under the threat of violence (albeit more subtle and understated). His treatment of the two scenes reveals that the viewer's response to certain types of visual stimuli can be manipulated by artificial techniques (sound effects and editing). In effect, this also reveals that the gaze itself may also be entirely artificial. Indeed, the snuff movie scenes are almost self-consciously "fake" - shown to Mr Eddy on a

television monitor and cut without revealing any "actual" sex or death. When Alice is coerced into removing her clothing, her naked body is framed without artificial adjustment.

There is some suggestion that the film is principally concerned with the artificial nature of media, such as pornography, which produce visual images. During Pete and Alice's final (and most graphic) sexual encounter in the desert, Pete tells his lover: "I want you Alice". Alice's response, however, reminds the viewer of the elusive nature of the models/performers in pornographic films: "You'll never have me," she responds before walking away (forever). It is at this point that Pete again *becomes* Fred, rising from the ground as the original Bill Pullman character. The viewer can only speculate as to the nature of this inexplicable transformation, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that when Fred *becomes* Pete, it is through a fanciful diversion into a fantasy (memory, dream, nightmare, film) which is experienced as "real". During an early sex scene between Fred and Renée, various shots of Fred suggest that the experience of making love to his wife is no longer meaningful to him; in a sense, his sexual experiences with her pre-echo Alice's final words to Pete. The similarity between Fred's wife and Alice (who are played by the same actress) may suggest that the entire film narrative is an elusive ("artificial") simulation of "reality" in which Fred must *become* the younger, more potent, Pete in order to experience the fantasy of "meaningful" sex.

Fred's complete absorption into this hyperreal existence, however, constitutes a danger in that it threatens to erode his own identity. In a particularly disturbing scene towards the end of the film, the mystery man points a hand-held camera at Fred and viciously asks: "And your name? What the fuck is your name?" There is some sense that Lynch's narrative depicts the way in which images (which here attain the level of virtual - or artificial - "reality") seduce the viewer into a questioning of the status of the actual world. Just as the viewer cannot truly ascertain who, when or what Fred actually is, so images have the ability to render the "real" world artificial. Fred's attempt to reconstruct his memory - some recollection of the past in the present - is confronted with a sense of failure in the face of a vanishing "reality". Fred wishes to experience as "real" that which has already vanished or possibly never existed in the first place. His predicament recalls Baudrillard's (1994:117) interpretation of postmodernity in which the "...revival of vanished - or vanishing - forms, this attempt to escape the apocalypse of the virtual, is a utopian desire, the last of our utopian

desires". Baudrillard (1994a:117) further notes that "...[t]he more we seek to rediscover the real and the referential, the more we sink into simulation, in this case a shameful and, at any event, hopeless simulation".

Lost Highway continually reveals itself as a film about the very event of surveillance; the everyday experience of life as a performance in front of a camera. Sarup (1993:177) notes that postmodern films challenge the distinction between the private and public spheres by accessing and presenting "the unrepresentable", which might include "sexual violence" and "sado-masochistic rituals", for example. By blurring these distinctions, "...postmodern films echo and reproduce the tensions and contradictions that define our time" and "...awaken desires and fears that expose the limits of the real and the unreal in contemporary, everyday life" (Sarup, 1993:177). Some of the first moments of "horror" in *Lost Highway* accompany the viewing of videos sent to Fred and Renee which reveal that some camera-wielding intruder has been inside their home. This invasion of personal, private space is taken to shattering levels later when the intrusive power of the camera – of the image – seems to invade Fred's *interior* (mental, psychological) private space. By taking the camera (the image) inside Fred's mind, Lynch attempts to reveal how images create the illusion of a "reality" which no longer exists and is therefore necessarily artificial.

After being arrested for murdering his wife, Fred complains bitterly about a pain inside his head. The repetition of apparent flashbacks to the scene of the crime (the gruesome scene in which his wife has been brutally killed) suggests that Fred's head is in agony from the "weight" of invasive images which have colonised his mind and which have begun to challenge his memories, shattering his version of "how things were". Just as Fred cannot construct a meaningful version of "reality" from the diverse images which inhabit his mind, so our understanding of the film's narrative is broken down by a perpetual sequence of images that fail to give away the entire "story". Perhaps one must simply accept that the film is more concerned with its own artificial nature than with the construction of any traditional, cohesive narrative:

...*Lost Highway* is telling a story about the medium....it expresses disquiet, distrust, even repudiation. Lynch may not be strongly invested in sincerity as a quality, but this latest movie certainly mounts an attack on film narrative's mendacity, showing deep alarm at its hallucinatory powers of creating alternative realities. Simultaneously, it also calls into question film's capacities to document and record: everything filmed is fabrication, but that fabrication has the disturbing power to supplant reality (Warner, 1997:10).

Lost Highway serves not only to undermine the principles of linear narrative

storytelling, but effectively *shows* how cinema is inherently at odds with the very notion of “a reality”. For Fred – and ultimately also for the viewer – all versions of the various “realities” that occur in the film come into conflict with the “social objective reality”. In this sense, they are “virtual realities” representing experiential planes of existence which occupy our lives as dreams, imagination, memories and, increasingly in the postmodern age, as “hyperreal” images. The virtual and the “real” in this scenario become indistinguishable as they tend towards the “hyperartificial”.

Eyes wide open

For in man's evolution, images antedate words and thought, thus reaching deeper, older, more basic layers of the self. Man begins with what he sees, progressing to visual representations of reality. Their transmutation into art does not seem to diminish the images' impact. As holy today as in man's pre-history, the image is accepted as if it were life, reality, truth (Vogel, 1974:11).

The late Stanley Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), brilliantly simulates our world as a dream-like hallucination while exploring the ways in which our “reality” is constituted *artificially*. Featuring real life husband and wife, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman as a married couple (Dr William and Alice Harford), the film appears to attempt some hyperreal echo of their marriage in the “real” world. While the film presents itself as a “...dark, destructive odyssey of revenge and exploration...” (Hofstätter, 1999:5), it is an equally profound inquiry into the ambiguous relationship between film and “reality”, and the seductive relationship between film and viewer. More than this, perhaps, is the strong association between the film and its original source, the turn-of-the-century short novel by Arthur Schnitzler, *Dream Story*. Indeed, the film is rendered “dreamlike”, unfolding as “...an analogous mixture of pedantic realism and extravagant unbelievability” (Gross, 1999:21). As Gross (1999:23) points out, “...the use of the dreamlike as a narrative mode – as form as well as content – is a way of making the audience aware of the processes of cinematic representation”. Each scene presents the world (or its own dream world, perhaps) as a realm of appearance and surfaces, such that Gross (1999:22) notes that the film rapidly reveals “...that the rhetorical difference between our eyes being wide open or being shut is overrated”. As the title suggests, *Eyes Wide Shut* comments on the superficial (imaginary) nature of its own images. Equally, it reveals the hopelessness of attempting to appropriate “the real” from (or to assign meaning to) the artificial environment in which we exist. Indeed, Kubrick depicts (simulates) the world as a

hyperreal fantasy or dreamscape/cinemascape comprising that which we see or that which we imagine in terms of *seeable* images. Even when surfaces are penetrated and masks are removed (literally in this film) Kubrick ultimately *shows* that the "real" nature of the human subject is elusive and *unshowable*. The search for meaning in the world therefore remains wholly frustrating.

According to Richard Schickel, Kubrick essentially made the same film over and over again, each time presenting "...vivid, brilliant, emotionally unforgiving, imagistically unforgettable variations on the theme that preoccupied him all his mature life":

That theme was at once simple and sophisticated: a man (or sometimes a group of men), without thinking very hard about it, places his faith either in his own rationality or in the rationality of the systems by which his world is governed, whereupon something goes awry, his illusions of order are stripped away, and he is left to fend with the sometimes deadly, always devastating consequences of that loss (Schickel, 1999:48).

Fantasies – both (hyper)real and imagined – prove to be at the centre of the puzzle with which both Bill Harford and the viewer become obsessed. The hyperreal "fantasy" is the erotic image which enters Bill's mind when Alice tells him (while absorbed in an alternate, marijuana-induced "reality") about an instance of sexual desire and obsession which almost brought her to destroy her marriage a year earlier. In strong contrast to the coy nature of the games of extra-marital flirtation which both Bill and Alice had indulged at the party earlier in the evening, the viewer actually *sees* the fantasy of Alice having sex with the naval officer who had once attracted her attention. Of course, the fantasy sequence (which recurs several times in the film) exists entirely within Bill's imagination. He, in fact, creates (simulates) this image which is to become a source of his own emotional torment. For the viewer, however, this imaginary image (which is supposedly only in Bill's imagination) is experienced as "real" in that it can be *seen*. Bill's imagination is effectively depicted as a visual sequence experienced by the viewer as "Nicole Kidman simulating sex with an anonymous man". Kubrick *shows* us this fantasy scenario which becomes a fixed image in both the film and in Bill Harford's mind. It is no surprise, therefore, that Bill's graphic fantasy of his wife's imagined sexual affair takes on the typical form of a soft-core pornographic scene. Not only is it a familiar scene which he can patch together from his (and our) experience of familiar (cinematic) images, but it is so disturbingly obtrusive, that it "...is enough to buckle then burst the boundaries of his neatly ordered world" (Hofstätter, 1999:5).

The imagined "fantasy", again for both Bill and the viewer, revolves around the possibility that Bill is responsible for the death of a woman whom he meets during a particularly unsettling ritualistic orgy sequence. This possibility, Gross (1999:22) argues, "...projects [Bill] towards the fantasy of a punishment he desires but in no way deserves..." such that "...he now wants to solve a crime neither he nor the audience is sure has been committed". In a sense, Bill's sexual odyssey which lands him at the orgy is itself a "fantasy of punishment" for Alice's "crime" of adultery which has only been committed in Bill's imagination. While Bill's "fantasy" of his wife having sex with another man leads him on an ineffective crusade in search of sexual revenge, his "fantasy" that he has caused the death of an innocent woman leads him to pursue an equally unsuccessful investigation into both the level of his complicity and into "reality" itself. The blurring of dream and "real" worlds, however, is so complete that even when Victor Ziegler (Sydney Pollack) "...exonerates Bill of all his fantasised guilts...", by "factually" relating the "truth" about the orgy and its aftermath, neither Bill nor the audience are reassured in the least (Gross, 1999:22). Indeed, Ziegler/Pollack's subtly ambivalent tone suggests that he, too, is not necessarily convinced either way.

Linked to Kubrick's concern with the blurring of "realities", is an interest in the construction of image as an aspect of social performance. Just as the film reveals that *showing* does not necessarily translate into believable "reality", so the portrayal of many of the characters (particularly those from "polite" society) reveals that social image does not necessarily relate to the "true" nature of the individual. The wealthy Ziegler is a perfect example of the dichotomy which exists between surface image and actual character. Indeed, what Ziegler does with an unconscious female in the privacy of his bathroom remains hidden behind the high society veneer which is the artificial persona with which the world is familiar. In fact, when Ziegler gets together with other members of the elite to take part in an pseudo-ritualistic orgy, masks and costumes are prerequisites. The social world, it is suggested, is concerned with the malleability and adaptability of surfaces. Appearance masks or cloaks "humanity" in much the same way that the hyperreal distorts "reality". From early on, as the Harfords allow themselves to be flirted with at Ziegler's extremely upper-crust party, it is suggested that the "restrained sexual decorum" of the social sphere hides some bizarre (sexual) evil which is going on in the bathroom upstairs (Gross, 1999:20). When Bill wanders through the palatial house in which numerous and random acts of explicit sexual activity are taking place, he is intrigued by the scenes which have

aroused his curiosity, but he remains a cool observer/voyeur just as the film spectator remains a cool spectator of the bizarre events. What he witnesses are transgressive scenes composed like pornographic film scenarios, somehow detached from everyday life and belonging to some virtual world. The signs of Kubrick's precise staging are everywhere. From the masks of Greek tragedy to the suggestion of a Hieronymus Bosch painting to the "...overall pastiche of Corman horror movies..." (Gross, 1999:22) and better-budgeted pornography, the orgy scene reveals itself to be a reference to the spectacle of representation. Bill (along with the viewer) is curious, but (like the viewer) cannot participate in the scene.

As Wilhelm Snyman (1999:6) points out, the film focuses on the seemingly insurmountable divide between "...what appears at the surface and the undercurrents and desires that often provide the hidden (even to ourselves) motivation for our deeds". The film, which explores its subject matter with a sumptuous ease of pace (allowing the viewer to see a great deal) reflects a world in which "the real" remains tellingly elusive. In fact, what gives the film the colourful, glossy texture of the advertising world with its "perfect" human subjects and precise photography, is that *Eyes Wide Shut* merely holds up a mirror to...the image we have of ourselves and reflects the 'mendacity'...that underlies so much of what we do or are" (Snyman, 1999:6). Perhaps what Kubrick achieves in this film is a postmodern "translation" of Bazinian "realism" which reveals the overwhelmingly superficial nature of the world in which we live and transforms the "real" into a dream. "Realism" becomes synonymous with *showing* that the "real" is simply not there.

The film seduces the viewer into its world because we share Bill's curiosity for the possibility of encountering "reality". However, like Bill, we soon realise that we are "...way out of [our] depth..." (Hofstätter, 1999:5) because the film, like a dream, refuses to answer any of the questions which it provokes. When Bill attempts to describe his dreamlike journey to Alice, he tells her that "...no dream is ever just a dream", it becomes evident that his fantastical odyssey of discovery had in fact been a journey of self-discovery, an exploration of his own humanity. In other words, his dream connects him to the world. Kubrick, in fact, regularly references some of the "realities" of our world, such as "...Aids, mourning, drug-related death, child sexual abuse and homophobic street violence as confirmation that sordid, unsubjective, all-too-grim realities co-exist with Bill's [dreamlike/hyperreal] journey" (Gross, 1999:23). When Bill returns home from his journey through the landscape of his own

imagination, he ironically tells Alice "I'll tell you everything, I'll tell you everything". Of course, his words represent a paradox as it would be difficult to imagine that Bill really knows anything at all, particularly since his experiences are effectively distorted reflections of various "realities". Later, Alice attempts to console Bill by telling him that "[t]he reality of one night is not the whole truth". Indeed, the most valuable point of Kubrick's film is that "reality" is fallible. Who and what we are is not determined by "reality" or "truth", but by something much deeper, something much more significant. It is how "reality" is dealt with that determines who we are. Humanity is not demonstrable. Rather, individual human autonomy is the unique source of how each and every person experiences what is seen or imagined.

"Remembering"

RICKY: Hi! My names is Ricky. I just moved next door to you.

JANE: I know. I kind of remember this really creepy incident where you were filming me last night.

RICKY: I didn't mean to scare you. I just think you're interesting.

JANE: Thanks, but I really don't need to have some psycho obsessing about me right now.

RICKY: I'm not obsessing. I'm just curious.

(First meeting between Ricky Fitts and Jane Burnham in American Beauty).

American Beauty brings together many of the elements of contemporary cinema that have already been discussed above. The film juxtaposes the banal events of "everyday reality" with the chaotic ramifications of "nightmarish surreality" in a mesmerising narrative that allows everyday life and mediated memory to become intertwined and confused. The film explores similar territory to that of David Lynch's much darker *Blue Velvet* (1986), a superbly crafted "...hallucinogenic mystery-thriller that probes beneath the cheerful surface of suburban America to discover sadomasochistic violence, corruption, drug abuse, crime and perversion" (Williams, undated). Lynch's "...map of the terrain between wet dream and nightmare...achieved a mood and tone which would indelibly influence popular culture for the remainder of the 20th century" (Hastings, undated) and its influence on the far more uplifting *American Beauty* is clear. Lynch sought to challenge and thereby subvert prevailing Hollywood depictions of youthful innocence, sexuality and romantic love by transposing his grotesque observations on the horrors of contemporary urban life into the idyllic world of small town America:

Though it specifies no particular time, *Blue Velvet's* "golly gee" milieu of Lumberton, replete with soda fountains, convertibles, and hardware stores is a Reagan-era idyll, an exaggeration of the 1980s concept of the American Dream

(Hastings, undated).

With his surreal eye clearly focused on shaking up many notions of suspect "truth" that are established through the ways in which films and other mediating forms convey their stories, Lynch's film deftly steers its way beneath the thin surface of the American façade. Using startlingly beautiful and equally grotesque imagery, it invited cinema-goers to experience the postmodern nightmare as surreal spectacle.

Recalling the melancholic weirdness of *Blue Velvet's* twisted suburban life, *American Beauty* uses black comedy and witty surrealism to underscore its thematic investigation of "...the dark side of an American family, and...the nature and price of beauty in a culture obsessed with outward appearances" (Deming, undated). By exposing the tremors that threaten to tear apart the surface of hyperreal life, the film makes fresh observations on an old theme:

The worm in the well-manicured bud of suburban life, the fears and loathings and sexual lacerations that lurk behind the white picket fence - these are no new subject for American cinema (Kemp, 2000:25).

Like *Blue Velvet*, some of the film's central concerns are related to the tension between appearance and "truth", memory and experience, as well as between dreams, "reality" and "mediated reality". As with Lynch's *Lost Highway*, the film repeatedly reminds the viewer of the "magical" potential of the film medium itself, pertinently referring to its function as a recording device with the power to establish memory, disguise truth and question "reality". On another level still, *American Beauty* - like *Blue Velvet* - falls into a category of postmodern films which locate "...within small-town America all the terrors and simulated realities that Lyotard and Baudrillard see operating in the postmodern period" (Sarup, 1993:176).

Like the narrator of *Fight Club*, *American Beauty's* central character (and narrator) is an everyman, an individual struggling to find himself within the world. One of the important differences between the two films is that of tone. *Fight Club's* Narrator is introduced to the viewer in a scene which suggests that his life is about to end rather violently (he has a gun pointed at his head). *American Beauty's* Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) introduces himself to the viewer by casually narrating the fact that he will be dead in less than a year, while the visuals present an idyllic overhead view of tranquil suburbia. Thus, while *Fight Club* opens with an image of nihilistic futility and evolves into a fantasy about hope in which the protagonist is given the opportunity to "re-view" his life, the protagonist in *American Beauty* has reached the end of his life

and is given a final chance to "live life to the full". Lester is a world-weary man who – because of a transgressive fantasy of having sex with his daughter's best friend – decides to rescue himself from the hopelessness of his earlier banal existence. While Lester is, in a sense, "already dead" at the start of the film, he allows his dreams and fantasies to become "reality", just as *Fight Club's* Narrator projects his alter ego into the objective world. In both films, the central characters concern themselves with a search for "self", a search for authenticity:

Curiously furrowing similar turf to the more testosterone-heavy *Fight Club*, *American Beauty* is about male empowerment and self-discovery, with mid-life as coma where the only answer is a Zen-themed search for 'whatever makes you happy' (Nathan, 2000b:12).

While *Fight Club* offers "testosterone-heavy" images and *American Beauty* appears to be somewhat "Zen-themed", it is evident that both movies are primarily concerned with the quest for personal identity, for individual freedom and, ultimately, for a sense of what it means to be human.

American Beauty associates memory with identity, and serves to remind the viewer of the painful realisation that one's identity within society is established by the way in which one is reflected and remembered within that society. Just as the stars and celebrities in *Celebrity* are known to the world only in terms of their public image, so the characters in *American Beauty* are acknowledged as existing in terms of how they are known to the rest of the world. The film suggests that individuality and identity fade as we allow ourselves to be absorbed into the faceless society of which we are necessarily a part, but which continuously reflects and comments on who and what we appear to be (and consequently believe ourselves to be). In one scene, this notion of "disappearance" is treated as comedy, as Lester attempts to avoid humiliation at learning that a colleague of his wife has forgotten who he is:

Lester's anger is muffled by acute self-knowledge. As he says to a colleague of his wife whom he's met before, 'It's OK, I wouldn't remember me either.' Watching *American Beauty*, we gradually realise we are seeing one man's journey towards redemption, towards remembering who he is (Kemp, 2000:25).

It remains an underlying theme of the film, however, that "remembering" itself is somehow an artificial process which is strongly coupled to the act of *seeing*. More than this, the film appears to suggest that remembering is not always concerned with recalling the past, but is also "seeing" for the first time. Thus, Lester somehow begins to acknowledge his own existence when he first notices his daughter's best friend and is drawn to her through the dream-like haze of an erotic fantasy. In his dreams,

fantasies and imagination, Lester re-encounters his own history and identity through “memories” which are a part of his immediate present rather than a part of his past – memories which he experiences for the first time.

Fight Club offers a similar insight in that the Narrator must see himself for the first time – in the form of Tyler Durden – before he is finally able to acknowledge his own identity. His persistent rejection of Marla, for example, arises out of his inability to see himself as a human being, and he only accepts his feelings for her once he discovers his own sense of self worth and remembers – for the first time – who he is. This theme is explored from another perspective in Paul Verhoeven’s *Hollow Man*, in which invisibility becomes synonymous not only with the inability to be *seen* or to *see*, but also the inability to remember one’s humanity. When the invisible scientist Sebastian Caine (Kevin Bacon) is asked how he could bring himself to commit murder, he coldly replies that “[i]t’s amazing what you can do when you don’t have to look at yourself in the mirror anymore”. Prior to becoming invisible, Sebastian had revealed delusions of immortality in the form of somewhat innocent “jokes” including one rather ironic comment to one of his colleagues:

How many times do I have to tell you? You’re not God. I am!

It would appear that it is Sebastian’s refusal to acknowledge that he is a part of humanity which leads to his transformation into a heartless (“hollow”) killer. Although Sebastian cannot see himself, however, the viewer is given momentary glimpses of his human form – in the shape of “hollow” images which materialise when he makes contact with liquid or gaseous substances, for example. When viewed through thermal goggles, Sebastian takes the shape of heat-specific colour patterns allowing a suggestion of his physical form, but not his true appearance as a human being (which would allude to his identity, humanity, mortality), to be observed. Unable to be *seen* as human, Sebastian becomes less than human – a quality which he associates with immortality.

Perhaps unintentionally, it is the name “Sebastian” which links *Hollow Man* to another film which actively contemplates immortality, human authenticity and the nature of memory – *Blade Runner*. In *Blade Runner*, J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson) is the name of a genetic engineer who, because of a genetic flaw known as Methuselah Syndrome, embodies the physical decrepitude associated with accelerated aging. Ironically, J. F. Sebastian – who engineers “life” forms, but is physically weak and genuinely humble – is marked by his stark contrast in relation to Sebastian Caine.

Caine, who is able-bodied and consciously conceited, aspires to immortality through disappearance. J. F. Sebastian, on the other hand, uses technology to create "life" where it does not exist. The "lives" which he creates – in the form of replicants – are, however, limited almost exclusively in terms of their pre-programmed expiration date. They are, in other words, certifiably "mortal" despite their incredible physical strength and demonstrable invulnerability to the extremes of hot and cold, for example. The film deals rather explicitly with the notion that mortality is necessarily connected to humanity, and in contrast with Sebastian Caine's desire to become a "god" by attaining invisibility, the replicants (like human beings) attain mortality at the instant that they become visible to the world.

Blade Runner overtly depicts two types of replicant, however. The first group, who represent some sort of danger to humankind, are those who are aware that they are replicants. The second group is represented by Rachael (Sean Young) who, recalling a typical *film-noir femme fatale* seductress, is unaware of the fact that she is not human because she has been given "memories". Just as her appearance recalls the appearance of earlier cinematic incarnations of characters in similar roles (but different genres, perhaps), so her "memories" recall the experiences of "another" (in fact, Rachael has been given the memories of the niece of her "creator", Tyrell (Joe Turkel)). Memories, the film continually suggests through its "...concern with simulacra of one kind or another - toys, models, mannequins, photographs and so on" (Neale, 1998:135), are entirely artificial – reproductions of experiences and events which belong to *another*. In this way, the film essentially suggests that we are all potentially "replicants" of a sort, relying on memories of prior experience in order to acknowledge our own humanity, with the inevitable possibility that such memories are entirely artificial. However, as Mulhall (undated) argues, it is the responsibility of the viewer – a responsibility which Deckard is taught through a deadly "game" which nearly ends his own life – to recognise and acknowledge the humanity of "others", be they humans, replicants, or even characters within the cinematic frame.

This notion of humanising the subjects within the cinematic frame leads back to one of the most significant themes in *American Beauty*. It is particularly poignant that some of Lester's greatest insights come from his teenaged neighbour Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley), an "amateur filmmaker"-cum-"curious voyeur" (Nathan, 2000b:12) who earns large sums of cash by selling drugs so that he has "...plenty of time to voyeuristically videotape everybody and everything....[which] is his way of maintaining

safe, distanced intimacy" (Carr, 2000:4). In many ways, Ricky may be seen as a young Lester whose life lies ahead of him, but who has already suffered greatly at the hands of his own violently abusive father (a retired Marine colonel (Chris Cooper) who has long ago "bullied" his wife "into numbness" (Carr, 2000:4) and represses his own sexuality in favour of dehumanising homophobic sermons to his son). The film draws an important contrast (or, perhaps, parallel) between Ricky and Lester, which relates directly to the role of the cinematic apparatus itself. While Lester concocts his dreams and fantasies in his imagination, Ricky must film "reality" in order to create memories which he can experience as "beauty" (or "dreams", perhaps). Ricky must, in a sense, distance himself from the world by filming it, before he can allow himself to become involved in it. Lester's "alternative reality", however, is activated through his conscious and sub-conscious imagination, suggested by the opening scene in which he masturbates in the shower, several scenes in which he fantasises about his daughter's teenaged friend Angela (Mena Suvari) and one scene in which he hallucinates a brief erotic encounter with the same teenaged girl while experiencing a particularly potent marijuana trip. Ricky "collects memories", while Lester "creates" them, just as Bill Harford "creates" the memory of his wife's affair in *Eyes Wide Shut* and Fred "creates" memories of an alternative existence in *Lost Highway*. These films allude to their own role as activators and creators of "memories" which are accorded the viewer's own personal interpretation and meaning during the viewing process.

Of course, Ricky's obsessively curious, ever-voyeuristic camera binds him - and *American Beauty* - to a long succession of films that are concerned with the act of watching. And, of course, to cinema itself. Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), for example, draws attention to the cinema's function as stand-in voyeur by placing the spectator "...like the hero...in the position of the spy..." (Houston in Jenkins, 1984:35). Kim Newman (2001b:130) notes that the film's "narrative complexity" lies in the fact that the protagonist is "...a voyeur whose involvement in human stick figures is exactly that of the audience...". It is hardly surprising that Hitchcock's hero L.B. "Jeff" Jeffries (James Stewart) has often been described by critics as a "Peeping Tom" who clearly represents the cinema-viewer - he is, in many respects a prototype channel-surfer¹⁹² who has the power to flip between various "reality" shows:

"All cinemagoers, after all, are Peeping Toms of a kind"...."*Rear Window* unmasks the Peeping Tom in all of us and is some of the most charmingly disarming face-slaps an audience ever received"...."...the essence of the movie and its central and forbidden joy is the voyeurism. What a treat to stare into the lives of other people through uncurtained windows" (in Jenkins, 1984:35).

This same "treat" which forms the basis of Hitchcock's film, is the reward that viewers of contemporary "reality television" shows are supposedly after. Hitchcock encourages his viewers to recognise the similarity between Jeff's window onto the world and the cinema screen upon which that view of the world is being projected. During Norman Bates' moment of transgressive voyeurism in (both versions of) *Psycho*, in which he spies on Marion Crane through a hole in the wall, the film viewer is shown the same view which, by being looked upon, constitutes a forbidden image. Hitchcock's treatment of the scene calls into question the privileged position of the unseen spectator. Can the viewer's curiosity ever be truly satisfied simply with *seeing*, or is active involvement with the subject of the human gaze an obsession which inevitably follows "looking" (for example, Norman Bates goes on to murder Marion Crane). Nearly half a century after *Rear Window*, *Hollow Man* explores the implications of a man being able to assume the "transparency" of a voyeuristic camera. In Verhoeven's imaginative science-fiction thriller, however, the "voyeur-camera" has interactive potential, able to stalk, rape and kill the objects of his godlike gaze. According to the director, *Hollow Man* bases its contemplation of invisibility on the ruminations of Plato:

In *The Republic*, Plato says if you would become invisible, you would steal whatever you can get, you would enter every house, rape every woman, kill all the men or perhaps put them out of prison, and behave like a god. Plato is probably right that we are restrained only by society to be righteous and just and decent (Verhoeven in Abele, 2000:70).

The disembodied view of the camera ultimately has the ability to empower anyone with a sort of virtual invisibility, which *coolly* distances the spectator (viewer-voyeur-player-interactor) from the world while allowing him or her to be completely immersed in it. This distance places a degree of responsibility with the spectator, whose capacity as an autonomous human being determines the "meaning" which such "views of the world" will assume.

This notion of personal autonomy is dealt with explicitly in *American Beauty*, particularly through Ricky, who comes to represent both the cinematic apparatus (recording) and the spectatorial process (watching). In one particularly significant scene Ricky and Lester's daughter Jane (Thora Birch) simulate the cinema-viewing situation as they watch one of Ricky's strangely beautiful home videos. The scene would have the spectator imagine that s/he is seated directly behind the two teenagers as if they themselves were sitting in a cinema auditorium. Together with Ricky and Jane, the viewer observes on Ricky's television an image of a plastic bag being blown around in the wind. While the footage of the plastic bag would appear to

be particularly banal, it is somehow mesmerising, and the teenagers watch as if entranced. Ricky explains the significance of the seemingly meaningless imagery to Jane:

It was one of those days when it's minutes away from snowing and there's this electricity in the air. You can almost hear it. Right? And this bag was just...dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That's the day I realised that there was this entire life behind things. And there's this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid. Ever. Video was a poor excuse, I know, but it helps me remember. I need to remember. Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can't take it. And my heart is just gonna cave in.

Ricky's speech suggests something of the significance of moving image technology. While such technologies may represent a "poor excuse" for the wonder of the world (a lesser alternative, perhaps), they nevertheless provide us with a powerful choice. As spectators, we may choose to only look at (or only see) the superficial beauty which focuses our attention on the thrill of the image, or we may choose to look deeper, into our own imaginations, and discover beauty and meaning for ourselves. Ricky gives meaning and beauty to the bag, suggesting that both "reality" and taste are relative. Like the bag, unable to defend itself against the elements, Ricky is a victim of circumstance, having to deal everyday with his abusively violent ex-Marine Corps father, Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper). Ricky has various ways of coping with the hand that has been dealt to him. Most superficially, is Ricky's use of marijuana to escape "reality" and gain at least temporary relief from his personal circumstances. More valuable to Ricky, perhaps, is his ability to "see" the world "differently". Refusing to submit to the harsh, ugly "reality" of the life imposed on him by his father, Ricky looks for beauty even where it does not appear to exist. His person outlook allows him to endure emotional and physical assaults from his father, because he insists on looking beyond the obvious and the superficial.

It is Ricky who points out to Jane's "best friend", Angela, that while she may be considered beautiful and therefore think herself special, she is in fact ordinary - precisely because she conforms to an image which is perhaps the "American Beauty" of the title. Beneath Angela's surface, however, lurks a tragic character "...who is quite beautiful and believes that that alone makes her a worthwhile person" (Deming, undated). It is Angela's attempt to seduce Lester which reveals exactly how dishonest she has been. Throughout the film, she flaunts her extensive "experience" in matters sexual, only to finally inform Lester that she is a virgin just as he is about to have his way with her. While Lester has been framing Angela within a series of sensual and

provocative fantasies in his imagination and dream world, Ricky similarly uses his video camera to transform the world around him. By pointing his lens at just about anything (from a plastic bag to a dead bird to Lester posing naked in his garage), Ricky seeks to give meaning and beauty to the banal and ugly "realities" that pervade his world. This use of the camera is Ricky's most interesting "coping" mechanism. Dreams, like memories, are woven into the fabric of the "reality" which we have created for ourselves. Ricky's "reality" has been displaced by the observing, curious gaze of his video camera which, in turn, has become a substitute for his undoubtedly unpleasant memories and dreams.

The same night that Ricky shows her the video of the bag Jane has a terrible argument with her mother. During the verbal confrontation, Jane is slapped across the face and when her mother leaves the room, Jane goes to her mirror, as if to check if the experience had been "real". Unable to experience the slap again simply by gazing at her face in the mirror, Jane goes to her bedroom window which she knows is being watched and, not surprisingly, videotaped by Ricky. As if she has finally come to understand the significance of Ricky's need to maintain contact with the past through artificial memories, Jane takes off her blouse and bra and allows Ricky to film her naked body. Ricky uses his camera to both gaze upon and record Jane's body, and it is in this moment that the two teenagers finally make emotional contact with each another, realising that they are both victims of circumstance. Finally, Jane comprehends Ricky's need to *look* and she discovers her own need to be *looked at*, or rather, to *be seen*. Unlike the first time Jane had caught sight of Ricky videotaping her, which she had experienced as a "really creepy incident", she is now willing to be filmed, willing to be remembered. She needs to be remembered, in fact, since being human implies mortality (inevitable disappearance from the scene/*seen*) which is evident in her parents' ongoing "slow fade" from the "scene" (and later, Lester's murder serves to concretise this notion of mortal transience). By willingly allowing herself to be filmed by someone whom she trusts and whom she knows will acknowledge her humanity through the acts of viewing (*seeing*) which will follow, Jane also recognises Ricky's inherent goodness, his kindness and ultimately his humanity. This important emotional encounter is, however, violently disrupted when Ricky is attacked by his father whose brutal beating of his son echoes the far less traumatic slap given to Jane a few minutes before.¹⁹³ After the attack by his father, a shot of Ricky's television screen reveals that his video camera has not recorded the confrontation with his father. In an attempt to "record" the memory of what has

happened to him, Ricky goes to his own mirror and looks at his bleeding face. Like the filmic spectator, Ricky needs to see in order to have memories and in order to establish "meaning". Of course, while *seeing* the results of the attack necessarily makes the experience *more "real"* (hyperreal) for Ricky, it also places the experience at a distance, detaching him from the actual event as it is transformed into an image, a reflection.

Just as Ricky needs to see what his father has done to him, Edward Norton's Narrator in *Fight Club* needs to see himself, in order to re-discover himself (or discover who he is for the first time, perhaps). By doing this, he simulates both his own doppelganger (in the form of Brad Pitt's Tyler Durden) and a "virtual reality" within which to exist. By escaping the illusion of socially constructed "reality", the Narrator begins to experience life once more – or for the first time. Of course, his fantasy of schizophrenic mayhem is not entirely positive. But, it is when things go awry and he is forced to undo the damage which Tyler Durden has unleashed on the world that he encounters himself as an autonomous human being, making choices and braving the odds in order to feel alive. While Charles Whitehouse (1999b:46) notes that the film offers "...a brilliant solution to depicting the divided self as a protagonist...", this solution is essentially fulfilled by the cinematic apparatus itself. Fincher (in Pulver, 2000) notes that today filmmakers are "...dealing with the most plastic medium there is [because n]ow there are computers that can make anything look real, and make anything happen":

...so you have to be very careful about what you show an audience. I think the first rule of cinema is that the movie has to teach an audience how to watch it. That's what the first act is, showing the audience the things they have to take seriously, the characterisation, and technique, laying the groundwork for point of view, and how you will or won't betray it (Fincher in Pulver, 2000).

The act of viewing connects the spectator with the process of representation – the art of *seeing* ourselves and our "reality" at a distance. Ultimately, *Fight Club* is very much a film about rediscovering the art of remembering (dreaming and imagining) within a world where illusion has absorbed the "real" and therefore eliminated the need to remember.

Just as *Fight Club* "...never leaves the splashy imagination of [Norton's] paranoid narrator..." (Whitehouse, 1999b:46), and *American Beauty* presents life as a struggle between the dreams and nightmares of surreal existence, *Eyes Wide Shut* also functions primarily at the level of a dream. The final scene, in fact, involves a

discussion between Bill and Alice Harford in which they candidly discuss their ordeal while alluding rather pointedly to the dreamlike nature of the film itself:

ALICE

Maybe we should be grateful. That we've managed to survive through all of our adventures. Whether they were real or only a dream.

BILL

Are you... Are you sure of that?

ALICE

Am I sure? Um. Ah. Only, only as sure as I am that the reality of one night, let alone that of a whole lifetime, can ever be the whole truth.

BILL

And no dream is ever just a dream.

ALICE

The important thing is we're awake now and hopefully for a long time to come.

BILL

Forever.

ALICE

Forever.

BILL

Forever.

ALICE

Let's not use that word. It frightens me. But I do love you. And you know there is something very important that we need to do as soon as possible.

BILL

What's that?

ALICE

Fuck.

Bill and Alice's conversation takes place in yet another "fantasy environment" (a toy store), which alludes to the passing of childhood, of innocence and of naïve dreams, and thereby hints at ways in which "reality" is altered as we grow older and as our memories change. Significantly, Alice refers quite pointedly to the nature of "reality" itself, suggesting that it is a fleeting, transient thing. Like dreams (and film images), moments in "reality" pass, leaving only memories. Such memories exist solely within the imagination of the individual, highlighting the notion that no "reality" can ever be the whole truth. As Alice's final thought suggests, this predicament – this inability to establish for ourselves a single, intransient "reality" – finds its solution within the experience of human existence and how we represent that experience: as human beings it is not the nature of the "reality" which we encounter that is important, but the way in which we encounter one another.

Conclusion

"Cool" reflections

One consequence of considering that we are in transition out of modernity, or perhaps are already in Postmodernity, is that film may come to be seen as an archaic and marginal cultural form. Postmodernity may rob film's modernity of the sense of the new and the now (Dyer, 2000:4).

The moving image has immeasurably transformed the understanding of "reality". With the development throughout human history of various forms of representation leading to the evolution of cinema and numerous associated media, humankind has come to a new perception of itself and of the "reality" which has us in its thrall. With the rapid expansion of communication, media, and now digital, technologies, "reality" – whatever that might mean – has been radically altered, as has the matrix which connects the different "realities" of different individuals. It has been argued throughout that whether an image relates to any particular objective "reality" or simply alludes to some fantastical "unreality", its significance for, and impact on, the human subject (the viewer or spectator) is far-reaching. In postmodern societies, "reality" increasingly exists in terms of the images and communication systems ("virtual realities") which now define our experience of the world. Such "virtual realities" have always existed, but with advances in technology, the types of images and forms of communication that are available to us have been radically altered. It is in this way that both the so-called objective and the subjective experience of "the real" are continuously spiralling towards an inevitable absorption into pure artifice. The *hyperartificial* is that manifestation of the artificial which no longer serves as a guise for truth, but represents itself as wholly and unquestionably artificial. Certainly, if one analyses artistic and technological developments in numerous contemporary moving image representations, it becomes apparent that the "real" simply cannot be represented, while self-mirroring representations of pure artifice compete vicariously with the traditional notion of "reality".

It has been argued that contemporary humankind exists in the shadow of the images and media systems which dominate postmodern life. "Reality" (and its representation) is now viewed at a distance, on the flat surface of the television screen and the computer monitor which we now perceive to be "truth". The premise of this thesis, outlined in chapter one, is that cinema, in this age of burgeoning *hyperartificiality* may be seen as presenting a "cool" view of an always already-mediated "reality". This

representation of a "reality" that is always constructed or simulated in its own image, effectively serves to highlight the notion that there is no such thing as a single, universal "reality", but rather that there are various "realities", each of which are as virtual as the next. Instead of "truth" there are "truths", and rather than existing in a world of meaning, we exist in a realm of experience where new, unique and individual meanings are always waiting to be discovered, shared and ultimately replaced by alternative meanings. It is likely that the "power" of the image over the subject – its ability to impact significantly on the individual experience of "reality" – is indicative of the purpose and function of the representational arts: to offer an idea of who and what we are, or what we have the potential to be. Films, in this sense, offer us personal insights through individual responses, and in so doing may contribute to our awareness that our existence as human beings – our involvement in the project of humanity – holds greater fundamental power than any "reality" (refer to chapter seven). Contemporary cinema is *hyperartificial* in that it has distanced itself from the "real" to such an extent that it reflects the highly artificial nature of all "realities". The art of cool is essentially the placing at a distance of our dreams and memories and images of "reality" so that they take on the appearance of the "virtual reality" which *is* our existence.

As is discussed in chapters two and four, the critics of contemporary entertainment bemoan the decay of originality and the demise of artistic endeavour in cinema, arguing that (Hollywood) filmmakers are businessmen who have forsaken "the real" in exchange for global dollars. I would argue, however, that box office takings very often are the "reality" and represent a mass desire for spectacle. For many viewers, the cinema is a place of retreat into "unreality", a place where the illusion of everyday life can be put on hold as the truly artificial – the hyperartificial – involves him or her from a cool distance. While our voyeuristic interest in the images on screen may provoke our spectatorial involvement, our detachment from these images echoes our detachment from the "reality"/"hyperreality" which we inhabit in our normal lives. Cavell (1979:102) argues that the human desire to view the world is essentially a desire for "the condition of viewing", suggesting that we need to see – we need to place the world at a distance in order to reflect upon our place in it. "[V]iewing, feeling unseen", or looking "out at" the world "from behind the self", has become our innate means of perceiving and experiencing the world, and therefore *viewing* the world - or having different ways of *seeing* it - is effectively a means of "...establishing our connection with the world..." (Cavell, 1979:102). Distancing ourselves from the

world – from "objective reality" – through a magical process that allows us to see the dreams, imaginations and fantasies of others, we are effectively given the opportunity to perceive the world in its truly artificial state.

Virtual magic

One thing these (cinematic) innovations do show is that our dreams about the screen are moving in a different direction these days. The audience for one of the first ever films (of a train pulling into a station) fled in terror because they thought they were going to be run down. In the past, we've dreamed of things coming out of the screen at us. Now we want to go the other way. We want to be drawn into the film image. And as with all the other areas of our lives, we want more information. Reality may once have run at 24 frames per second. But as we all know now, reality just isn't enough any more. We need hyper-reality, 60 frames per second at least (McClellan, 1994:53).

The rapidly changing world in which we live may be defined in terms of the retreat of "reality" into ever-more virtual spaces such as the Internet and the advancing "realism" of digital technology. Virilio has argued that "representation advances" as "reality" retreats (Butler, 1995:412) and this point is echoed by the technical and artistic developments evident in evolving moving image forms. Increasingly, films include animation and special effects which aim at simulating visual "realism" even as they refer to something which does not exist. As the boundary between "reality" and mediated illusion is blurred, the "reality" of everyday life is thrown into question – it becomes "virtual". Within postmodern societies, representation intrudes on the "real" in ever-more sophisticated forms. As we have seen in chapters six and seven, contemporary filmmakers are exploring new ways of disrupting the distinction between fictional and documentary footage, and demonstrating that fantasies, dreams and imagined "realities" can effectively compete for credibility with the "reality of everyday life". Furthermore, many of the films discussed here deal with the ways in which "reality" is constructed in terms of its representation in the media – including the cinema itself.

As discussed in chapter four, the critics of postmodern – or postclassical – cinema have argued that the trend towards a vertically-integrated film industry has destroyed the art of film narrative because spectacle and style are prioritised in the bid to draw audiences within a competitive global marketplace. Many writers divide contemporary cinema into two distinct forms: "arthouse" films which function within the traditional narrative framework (telling character-centred stories), and those which serve to thrill

and entertain on a largely visceral level (cinema as "theme-park ride"). Such a distinction suggests an enduring tradition of distinguishing between elitist art and popular culture. Such categorisation of cinema is typically based on assumptions that spectacular action, violence, sex, profanity, taboo-transgression and infinite other "superficial" thrills fail to contribute to a film's artistic worth, a point raised in chapters four and five. In postmodern cinema, however, these categorical notions of what constitutes "art" fail to account for the way in which spectacle and style, for example, contribute to the viewer's assimilation and construction of "meaning" during the viewing process. We exist in a world that is obsessed with image and style and appearances – these are, in fact, the tools which operate our hypermediated "reality" (see chapter one). The world "means" only in terms of our ability to see or experience it, and therefore it is what we see in the cinema that gives a film its meaning and relevance to ourselves. A film that depends primarily on the impact of the visuals compels a fundamentally human process – the human desire to *look* and thereby establish "meaning". Godard noted that "...all you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun" (Reid, 2001:70), acknowledging that cinema is about sex and violence, but referring no doubt also to the cinematic attraction of *seeing* (or experiencing) the "romance" and "action" which mirrors our dreams and nightmares on the flat surface of the screen. The cinema is first and foremost a representational form which *shows*, and herein lies its strength as a mirror up to the very experience of being human. Like the films which defined auteurist cinema and the French New Wave, for example, contemporary films are markedly concerned with showing or alluding to the process of their production. Whether in their manipulation of the footage or the treatment of the narrative, postmodern films regularly draw attention to their creation of a "reality" which is necessarily artificial.

One of the most significant observations concerning postmodern cinema is that it serves to "...bring the viewer into the film with a rather startling immediacy..." resulting in the revelation that the everyday world is itself artificial (Sarup, 1993:176). Increasingly, cinema technologies and techniques are transporting viewers into "realistic" representations of "realities" that we experience as "real" for a variety of reasons. Whether these "realities" are the mediated "truths" of *faux* documentaries, or the *faux* unmediated "realisms" of home video style cinematography (discussed in chapter six), or the nostalgically revisited cinematic "realities" of previous eras (discussed in chapter three), or "hyperrealities" created entirely within cyberspace (discussed in chapter seven), or even the socially challenging depictions of "hyperreal"

violence and simulated pornography (discussed in chapter five), they are all artificial simulations of "the real". The "real" does not satisfy us as entertainment, since today the world itself exists as hyperreality. As McClellan suggests above, the contemporary subject is no longer satisfied by mere "reality". This suggestion further alludes to the notion that, in postmodern societies, "reality" itself no longer "runs at 24 frames per second", but has been dramatically – almost unbearably – speeded up by the overwhelming flow of information and imagery which envelops and drives contemporary existence (discussed in chapter one). It is the magical ability of the cinema to artificially induce moments in which the viewer can reflect upon this existence by observing "reality" at a distance.

Virtual memory

For André Bazin all representational art can be traced back to the practice of embalming: at its root is a 'mummy complex'. In cinema that complex is usually repressed - we prefer to think not that photographic images memorialise the dead but that cinema keeps the dead alive, indiscriminately animating the dead and the still-living, making them indistinguishable from each other (Romney, 2000:33).

Romney's observation that the cinema serves as a type of artificial means of animating the dead is equally relevant to the way in which moving images serve to artificially create the illusion of "memory". Postmodernism has been described as the breakdown of history into images – effectively the transformation of "reality" into "mediated reality", which is discussed in various ways in chapter six. This understanding may be extended to include the transformation of memories into "mediated memories" (see chapter seven), or subjective human experience which is affected (infected) by various mediating forms (also discussed in chapter seven). Such a description of how both history and human memory are informed by media representation is epitomised by the ways in which television presents and documents history as a form of "live" entertainment. Films such as *Three Kings* and *The Blair Witch Project* each offer dramatically different approaches to understanding the manner in which "mediated reality" encroaches on the human perception and perspective of history and actual (or "real") events. In *Three Kings*, Russell imposes a glossy hyperrealism reminiscent of television news and music videos on his production in order to draw attention to the way in which the Gulf War became "real" for most people simply because of the manner in which it was broadcast by the media. In an

alternative, but related, way *The Blair Witch Project* convinces viewers of its truth precisely because the anti-cinematic production values simulate the apparent "realism" of home movies. "Reality" in both of these films, is an imaginary referent alluded to solely because of the ways in which postmodern subjects come to confuse media images with "reality". Consequently, "reality" is entirely virtual, a simulation of a form of "realism" that relates not to the "real world" but to a world which is always already-mediated.

McLuhan (in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:303-304) notes that when movies were new they were often described as parodies of life – a "...transcript of ordinary visual life into a medium [that] created hilarious comedy". He further notes that the word "parody" refers to "...a road that goes alongside another road" and thus argues that "[a] movie is a visual track that goes alongside another visual track, creating complete terror" (in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:304). This ultimately suggests that movies are parodic simulations of life that interfere with our interpretation of the "actual world" ("virally infecting" our experience of "reality", to use a Baudrillardian metaphor). Films, by their very nature, compete with "reality" to some extent in the same way that dreams, fantasies, hallucinations and memories compete with the "reality" of everyday life. In the contemporary world, it is the media that most effectively compete with "reality", and many of the films dealt with here have suggested the degree to which photographs and films are capable of "creating complete terror" in the human subject. Such terror, ultimately, results from the implicit realisation that our memories and experiences within the world may simply be illusions simulated or engineered in much the same way that cinema simulates "reality". In *Blade Runner*, for example, replicants (or simulated humans) make use of photographs to establish personal histories and to give substance to their "memories" of the past. The film itself functions as a form of pastiche which combines elements from film genres and periods recognisable solely in terms of cinema representation. In this sense, memory and history are not simply parodied, but are effectively invaded and absorbed by the images which simulate the observable "reality" of both the replicants and the viewing subjects. In *Lost Highway*, video recordings shatter Fred's ability to locate himself in terms of space or time. Unable to determine the reliability of his own memories, his "reality" destabilised just as Lynch demonstrates that the cinematic "reality" which he has created is similarly malleable, inconstant and illusionary. "Reality", as it appears to be understood in the examples of hyperartificial cinema discussed here, is always "virtual" – always a reflection of itself as it is

simulated through the various moving image media.

If we accept that there are *various* cinemas that imagistically re-present our "virtual realities", then we might also accept that these cinemas manufacture an alternative "reality" – or, rather, an alternative "artificiality". Cinema reflects our place within a "virtual reality" by presenting its narratives in terms of what might be thought of as "virtual memories" – visions and views of the world which conspire to highlight the significance of human subjectivity in the construction of "reality". Whether our "reality" is virtual, dreamlike, fantastical, illusory, hyperreal or simply a re-presentation, it exists in terms of our memories which inform our experience of life in much the same way that the spectacle of cinema informs our understanding of the world. Ultimately, through the process of *showing*, cinema constantly comments on its own magical transformative ability – the ability to represent human dreams and memories through technologies that have evolved dramatically over a very short period in human history. The cinema represents a virtual magic which is made "real" via the experience of *viewing* by the spectator who is solely responsible for imbuing the "cool" visions of the screen with "meaning" and significance. Placed at a distance for our observation, the virtual "realities" and dreams of the cinema may be precisely the "realities" towards which we are destined to evolve. Our current "reality" is but the fulfilment of desires and fantasies and imagined possibilities which once occurred to us as dreams. Our dreams and memories are, ultimately, "realities" which we experience as virtual, or virtually "real".

Virtual voyeurism

The cinema was the typical survival from the Age of Machines. Together with still photographs, it performed prizeworthy functions: it taught and reminded us (after what seemed a bearable delay) how things worked, how we do things...and of course (by example) how to feel and think (Hollis Frampton in Butler, 1995:408-409).

Postmodern culture increasingly marks the disruption of distinctions that have traditionally existed between private and public life. As private life becomes spectacularised for the benefit of public consumption, "social reality" is altered to encompass alternative "realities" which increasingly tend towards the virtual since these are experienced at a distance, in terms of mediated representation. The extremes of this tendency within moving image representation essentially constitute

an abuse of the intrusive capacity of cinema technology. This abuse of technology essentially amounts to an abuse of power in which the viewing subject – through the position offered by distanced observation – attains a sense of mastery or control over the subject within his or her gaze. In this power relationship, the filmed subject is ultimately objectified as he or she becomes a "victim" of the intrusive gaze. The intrusion of the camera into private "realities" has the potential to elevate levels of schizophrenia and paranoia in a world where everyone is simultaneously the viewed and the viewer, and where there is no longer space to escape the objectifying gaze of the camera. Several of the films discussed in chapters six and seven, for example, vividly suggest the power of recorded or filmed images to disrupt the "normal" ways in which individuals encounter one another.

In chapter six it is argued that the collapse of boundaries between personal and public spheres, as well as the resulting interfusion of these two "realities", is already strongly impacting on the ways in which postmodern societies function. Postmodern technologies seem obsessed with heightening the sense of interpersonal communication and interactive involvement between different individuals – made increasingly "real" because of the increasing sense of immediacy which informs the interpersonal experience. McLuhan argues that such interpersonal involvement would compel people to "encounter each other in depth all the time". However, this expectation is accompanied by the warning that such "encounters" effectively compel individuals to remain detached and distant from one another. Ultimately, the ability to encounter other subjects "in depth all the time" actually works against any meaningful, authentic engagement with the subject. The viewing of "reality" by means of voyeuristic technologies necessarily transforms the "real" into the virtual thereby exacerbating the viewer-spectator's experience of the world as an always already-mediated one.

Perhaps, in this respect, the extremes of "postmodern realism" signify the end of art (postmodernism does, after all, signal the effacement of the boundary between art and "reality") and even the "cooling off" of life itself through the acts of filming, showing and viewing (seeing). When the camera is used for acts of pure surveillance, voyeuristic spying and the invasion of privacy the result is not only that "real" life is placed at a distance, but that the filmed subject becomes a victim. Such examples of the abusive and intrusive uses of moving image technology allude to what Mulhall (undated), in another context, refers to as the "death-wielding potential" of the

camera – the ability of the camera to enslave. Whereas other forms of contemporary cinema discussed here deal purposefully with the various ways in which "reality" is constructed in terms of media images, surveillance cameras used for entertainment contribute to the "cooling off" of "reality" itself, transforming the "real" into its opposite. Surveillance cameras and the resulting voyeurism further eradicate the boundary between what is authentic and what is fictional, fantastical or spectacular.

Increasingly, cinematic representations of taboo, transgressive and intimate aspects of human life are finding a legitimate place in both "popular" and "highbrow" culture (see chapter five). While pornography and voyeurism are increasingly legitimised through the Internet, for example (a point discussed in chapter six), levels of tolerance with regards to universally marketable entertainment are being stretched to unprecedented levels. The treatment of violence, sex and various forms of "profanity" reflect not only new levels of acceptability within our culture, but also that our socio-cultural "reality" has changed. As sex and violence are explored on our cinema screens, it is the artificial nature of mediated sex and violence that is exposed as a potential threat to our experience of "real" sex and "real" violence. As "art" and "entertainment" absorb the profane and the vulgar, the illusion of what might be considered "socially unacceptable" also disappears. By framing our transgressions, cinema affords the viewer the opportunity to seek insight into the nature of such transgressions. As cinema viewers, we have the opportunity to voyeuristically observe the limits of our own tolerance, to encounter that which provokes our own fantasies and dreams, and to discover how we react and respond. Contemporary cinema does not so much teach us "how to feel and think", but rather allows us to examine how *we*, as individual subjects, feel and think.

Virtual cinema: the hyperartificial is rendered "cool"

The idea of and wish for the world re-created in its own image was satisfied at last by cinema. Bazin calls this the myth of total cinema (Cavell, 1979:39).

To think in terms of entertainment, or even of art, is probably to miss the point. We are building ourselves mirrors that remember – public mirrors that wander around and remember what they've seen. That is a basic magic.

But a more basic magic still, and an older one, is the painting of images on the walls of caves, and in that magic the mind of the painter is the mirror, whatever funhouse twists are brought to the remembered object. And that cave is also my Kubrick's garage, and whatever he's driven to cook up in there will simply be another human dream. The real mystery lies in why he is, why we are, willing, driven, to do that (William Gibson, 1999:229).

The future of film appears to be, paradoxically, filmless. This is not to argue that cinema itself will ever disappear (certainly not as a concept), but rather that the traditional forms of the medium are unlikely to remain viable. The future of "filmless film" has already been heralded by the "digital revolution", and is set to become the norm for moving image art and entertainment. As is suggested in chapter two, it is also quite clear that, in addition to filmless production, the modes of distribution, exhibition and viewing movies will be radically transformed in the not-to-distant future. A trend towards smaller, more personal forms of "cinema" (such as microcinema and, more drastically, individual "virtual reality" interactive "cinema") is likely to result from the proliferation of digital and Internet technologies that are currently influencing the state of home and computer entertainment. So, while we may in the future no longer talk of "film" (or even of "going to the movies"), it is unlikely that we will do away with the "moving image" as an art and entertainment form. Such modes of representation have been with us since our ancestors first paid attention to shadows flickering on cave walls, and as the technologies improve (or merely "evolve"), our fascination with *seeing* ourselves and our world mirrored within an alternative virtual landscape is unlikely to disappear. It is more likely that our craving for new levels of "artificial reality" will evolve along with the radical developments in the technologies which enable cinematic and other moving image representation.

As cinema moves away from its celluloid roots, it may well be that it is finally coming into its own as a representational art form (note, in particular, the films discussed in chapter seven). No longer merely a "skin" that replicates the surface of various "realities", cinema is becoming its own unique "virtual reality" - created, marketed,

distributed and exhibited all within the confines of digital cyberspace. And, ultimately, cinema may not even be watched at all, but experienced as though it were, virtually, "real". We will have "virtual reality" and, having entertained that medium, we will seek out even more radical ways of rendering our own artificial "realities". This is not to suggest that the roots of cinematic representation – painting, photography, or even cinema theatres – are necessarily doomed with extinction, but rather that technological evolution will ultimately enable the transformation of our dreams into "realities" and, more significantly, our "realities" into dreams.

Cinema is in no danger of becoming "...an archaic and marginal cultural form" (as suggested by Richard Dyer in the introduction to this chapter). Rather, cinema may be seen as reaching a vital stage of maturation in its development as a unique representational art form. As filmmakers develop the means to place any vision, any spectacle, any imaginable image on screen, their art assumes monumental power over the illusion of "reality". And yet, this power includes the ability to move spectators to tears, to laugh aloud in moments of elation, to experience the virtual thrill of a dizzying journey through space, to be shocked by graphic sexual conduct or to be repulsed by gory images of violence. In the provocation of these and countless other emotional and physical responses, the cinema confronts the viewer with his or her own power to alter the fabric of "reality". The ability of cinematic images to transform our dreams and fantasies suggests our concomitant ability to alter "reality" through our sheer willingness to do so. As a communication tool that competes with "everyday reality", the moving image not only provides a "...sense of the new and the now", but has effectively *become* the new and the now. If I, like most of the film directors discussed here, have anything to say, it is that cinema is necessarily a reflection of human existence in terms of mediated human memories and dreams. Cinema, in its use of images and spectacle, necessarily refers to the "virtual realities" of human existence, but in its "melding of sound and vision and drama" through the process of *showing* it is ultimately a reflection of who and what we are. As spectators within a world of continuous consensual hallucinations, we look to the moving image for a means of looking at ourselves and at the "reality" that we imagine ourselves to inhabit. We are too absorbed in the matrix of our everyday "reality" to truly appreciate that its greatest significance lies in relation to our perception of it. Cinema necessarily relativises our experience of "reality" by allowing us to perceive (observe and "experience") various "realities" at a distance. It is in this detached but involved relationship to the moving image that the hyperartificial is rendered "cool".

Notes

¹ To some extent, advertising, news reporting and visual storytelling may be seen as one and the same thing.

² See Guy Debord's 1967 manifesto, *Society of the Spectacle*.

³ "Artificial" refers to that which is not natural, but rather made by art and therefore not "real".

⁴ "A photograph is, visually, 'high definition.' A cartoon is 'low definition,' simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone" (McLuhan in Sandman, Rubin and Sachsman, 1972:232-233).

⁵ For the purpose of this study, I discuss only Western cinema (most frequently, American films), and this is by no means accidental. There are profound and extremely valuable differences between "Western" and other societies which are not addressed here, but which significantly impact the use of terms such as "society", "culture" and "individual" or "subject". McLuhan (who, it should be noted, was greatly influenced by Wyndham Lewis who argued that "...the whole Western culture was based on sight" (McLuhan in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:304)) describes a variety of differences between "visual" and "aural" (or "ear") cultures, referring to what he calls "semi-literate" cultures as "aural cultures": "All semi-literate...cultures are aural cultures, whether it's Ghana or China. They organize space differently, at all times. The Eskimo world is an ear one. When asked to draw maps, they draw areas they've never seen. From their kayaks they've heard water lapping against shores. They map by ear and it later proves quite adequate when checked by aerial photo. [...] The natural world of non-literate man is structured by the total field of hearing. This is very difficult for literary people to grasp" (McLuhan in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:310). McLuhan further describes how an aural culture influences the development of certain aspects of artistic activity within that culture: "It isn't accidental that the primary arts of Russia are music and ballet. They are not a literary people at all. [...] Russia never had a Renaissance, in terms of space. Realism, perspective art, is avant-garde for them. When you have the means of realistic representation, you also have the means of mechanical production. Mechanical production comes out of visual realism in the Western world. What we think of as realism is to them (Russians) absolute fantasy. [...] A lot of this aural culture is found now in the Negro world. The reason that they are so far ahead of us in the arts is, quite simply, that they haven't trained their visual sense to the point of suppressing the other senses. In music - dance and song - Negroes are ahead" (McLuhan in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:311). It stands to reason that these types of cultural differences will influence the way in which "reality", "artificiality", and the state of cinema, may be interpreted. I have generally restricted my discussion to the Western world and to Western cinema. This in no ways means to suggest that all or any Western societies necessarily share any peculiarities. Nor does this suggest that Western cinema (or art or culture in general) is considered to be more significant or valuable than any other form. My frame of reference is grounded within a generally "Western" aesthetic (despite the fact that I was born and raised in Africa), and I have limited my discussion to films for which I have a broad social, cultural or artistic understanding. Furthermore, it should be noted that Western film directors - Tarantino is a prime example - are frequently influenced by the style and content of non-western cinema and culture.

⁶ The scare quotes are used variously throughout this thesis as the concept of "reality" is questioned and redefined throughout.

⁷ Specifically, Western life.

⁸In contrast to the principle of "reality" which parents and society expose their children to, Zipes (1997:123) notes how fairy tales offer the possibility of understanding and experiencing "reality" as an illusion. Zipes further argues that cinematic versions of such tales are useful in exposing children to the concept of "reality" as an artificial construct of various social mechanisms: "It is...through the cinematic adaptations of fairy tales that reality can be displayed as artificiality, so that children can gain a sense of assembling and reassembling the frames of their lives for themselves" (Zipes, 1997:124).

⁹This is a premise which is acknowledged in our language through the use of idiomatic "truths" such as "Seeing is believing" and "Drugs alter one's perception of reality". Note, for example, the current preoccupation in Western society with conspiracy theories which have demonstrated their power to generate doubts regarding established "truths" simply by presenting hitherto unexplored "facts".

¹⁰Schutz refers to this "paramount reality" as the "world of working" (in Van den Bulck, 1999:4).

¹¹Paul Watzlawick and Daniel Boorstin are cited by Van den Bulck (1999:5).

¹²Berger and Luckmann's understanding of the construction of "subjective reality" tends to overlook the importance of mediation in this process.

¹³This is not to say that the word is "dead". Commentators such as Colin MacCabe (1998:22) have argued that in contemporary culture, the word and the image continue to be combined in "...ever more sophisticated ways".

¹⁴When asked in an interview in 1997, what he considers to be his "profession, Baudrillard replied: "I'm not a sociologist because the sociologists don't recognise me as one of them. I'm not a philosopher because I don't follow a history of ideas or maintain any inter-reference with other philosophers, so they don't recognise me either. What can I say? A worker, but what does that mean? No, a writer doesn't mean anything either. Thinker? But then you have the impression of Rodin's *Thinker*. No, I have no response. That's *your* problem" (in Fordham, 1997:83). For the purposes of this work, however, Baudrillard is regarded as a postmodernist.

¹⁵Although, as Kellner points out, Baudrillard's "we" is entirely superfluous; "...like everyone else, Baudrillard speaks solely for himself" (Kellner, 1989:204).

¹⁶According to Baudrillard, "[t]he deep immunity of a being resides in its non-transitivity, in its non-conductability in the multiple fluxes which surround it, in its secret and the ignorance where it is of its own secret – it is not by chance that today everywhere the loss of immune defenses [*sic*] coincides with the excess of information (Baudrillard in Kellner, 1989:205).

¹⁷McLuhan (in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:315) believes that "[w]hen man is overwhelmed by information, he resorts to myth" which is "...inclusive, time-saving, and fast".

¹⁸Baudrillard's early writing (1968), from a neo-Marxist perspective, explores the notion that consumption is the primary component of the social order. His analyses at that time revealed that products were coded by an advertising system which enabled one product to be differentiated from another. When a product is consumed, the "meaning" of the object is transferred to an individual consumer. This "play of signs", according to Baudrillard, serves to order (control) society while imbuing individuals with a *sense* of freedom. Ridley Scott's science-fiction film, *Blade Runner* (1982), depicts this notion of a consumer society which is "controlled" by the flow of advertising codes. Scott, who began his career in the advertising world, saturates the New Los Angeles cityscape of the film with various forms of advertising which literally engulf its inhabitants. In this futuristic society which has apparently "given in" to the power of capitalism, consumerism and advertising, there are only a few corporate identities, and these are clearly woven into the design of the city. Scott's vision of a future Western city is a bleak one, but its imagery is strongly reminiscent of Baudrillard's understanding of pervasive advertising as offering (the illusion of) more choice, while the oppressive social regime clearly indicates that individuals have less freedom. To a certain extent Scott's vision suggests a cultural claustrophobia which has given rise to social fatigue

evident in the languid, gloomy disposition of the film's greater population. Baudrillard's book, *Consumer Society* (1970), continues his argument that objects available for consumption (or purchase) aggregate to form a "system of signs" which, when consumed, serve to distinguish between groups within the population itself. He saw objects of consumption not as needs-specific goods, but rather "...as a network of floating signifiers that are inexhaustible in their ability to incite desire" (Sarup, 1993:162). Whereas goods once had a value which was related to their use for some human need, they were now considered by Baudrillard to be nothing more than signs (in the Saussurian sense), with an arbitrary meaning "...determined by [their] position in a self-referential system of signifiers" (Sarup, 1993:162). This concept of the "commodity-sign" leads to the view of consumption as principally concerned with the consumption of signs. For Baudrillard, objects are the material foundations whereby individuals seek out their place in society and the world. Commodities serve not only to satisfy the needs and wants of individuals, but also to give sense to the individual and his/her place in society: "Consumption is not just the end point of the economic chain that began with production, but a system of exchange, a language in which commodities are goods to think with in a semiotic system that precedes the individual, as does any language. For Baudrillard there is no self-contained individual, there are only ways of using social systems, particularly those of language, goods and kinship, to relate people differently to the social order and thus to construct the sense of the individual" (Sarup, 1993:162). Baudrillard's *The Mirror of Production* was an attack of the Marxist discourse "...that split French academia..." (Fordham, 1997:80). In it, Baudrillard distances himself from "...Marx's alleged economic reductionism, and the alleged inability of Marxist theory to conceptualize language, signs and communication" (Sarup, 1993:162) and continues to emphasise the importance of "symbolic exchange". Since the disruptive effect of that work, the influence of Baudrillard's writing "...has been like a virus, tormenting the manifestations of ideological dogma and the preconceptions of liberalism alike" (Fordham, 1997:80).

¹⁹ Or Jarryesque pataphysical.

²⁰ "While McLuhan and the ideologues of the post-industrial society celebrate the new media and information technologies as purely progressive forces, with purely (or largely) beneficial results, Baudrillard sees them as producing predominantly, if not completely, baleful results (Kellner, 1989:206).

²¹ In fact, there is seldom agreement between all critics and theorists regarding whether a text or work of art is modern or postmodern. Not all aspects of art become postmodern simultaneously. It is generally regarded as fruitful to acknowledge an overlap between the two movements.

²² Lyotard (1998:148) asserts that "the postmodern" is "...undoubtedly a part of the modern" and in a "slightly mechanistic" understanding of the word, postmodernism can be understood not as the end of modernism, but modernism "...in the nascent state...constant". Thus, "[a] work can become modern only if it is first postmodern" (Lyotard, 1998:148).

²³ This elite frequently views the growing interest in the popular cultural forms as an attack on its position of prestige and privilege - a position which may be considered political in that it serves to divide culture according to economic and social status. Olivier (1996:49-50) poses a relevant question regarding the responsibility of academics to educate students with regards to the viewing of "popular" film. He further asks, in respect of this: "...does a postmodern exploration of film reception hold out the possibility of an audience's genuinely *critical* appropriation of a film, or does it have to content itself with the mere, unavoidable reinforcement, on the part of the audience, of the world as represented by the film?" (Olivier, 1996:50). I would argue, in terms of my own theories on the subjective nature of cinema today, that the greater awareness students (and others) have of the multiple possibilities for interpretation which film texts present, the greater their ability to engage critically with a film in terms of its multiple and mutable "meanings".

²⁴ I use this term in specific deference to notions of high art and culture employed by the elite as discussed here.

²⁵ Jameson further expounds on the symptomatic development of so-called "contemporary theory", which challenges the notion of a more traditionally situated "technical discourse of professional philosophy" (Jameson, 1996:186). He refers to this increasingly accepted form of writing simply as "theory", and expounds on the system as follows: "This new kind of discourse, generally associated with France and so-called French theory, is becoming widespread and marks the end of philosophy as such. Is the work of Michel Foucault, for example, to be called philosophy, history, social science, or political science? It's undecidable, as they say nowadays; and I will suggest that such 'theoretical discourse' is also to be numbered among the manifestations of postmodernism" (Jameson, 1996:187).

²⁶ One example of this "confusion" might be the use of high-tech computer software to design graphics or advertising which may be simultaneously seen as works of art, or simply an extension of the commercial sector.

²⁷ Gibney Jr. and Luscombe (2000:44) refer to the concept of "commodity chic" which, they note, has become both "affordable" and "mandatory" as a result of efficient manufacturing and "intense competition" across a wide range of goods and products.

²⁸ Refer to Ihab Hassan's complete table of modernism/postmodernism categorical contrasts in Brooker (1998:11-12).

²⁹ Lyotard argues against Jacques Lacan's concept of the unconscious mind being like a language.

³⁰ A similar argument may be developed for cinema, which has been theorised both in terms of its language-like qualities, and in terms of its dream-like structure (i.e. composed of images).

³¹ Hereby also adopting Wittgenstein's terminology (Lapsley, 1992:207).

³² Jameson does not really view the postmodern era as postindustrial, but rather as "...an intensification and latest phase of a capitalist world system" (Powell, 1998:35). Sandra Braman outlines the identification of "postindustrial society" with "information society" as follows: "The earliest references to an information, or post-industrial society focused on it as the replacement of the fundamental human economic and social activity of manufacturing with information production and processing. In this view, put forth first by a Japanese scholar named Umesao in the early 1960s and almost simultaneously by American sociologist Daniel Bell in his famous *The coming of post-industrial society*, human societies go through a process of development over time from hunting and gathering through agriculture, industry, and now to information" (Braman, 1998:70).

³³ "This new moment of capitalism can be dated from the postwar boom in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s or, in France, from the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958. The 1960s are in many ways the key transitional period ... in which the new international order (neocolonialism, the Green Revolution, computerization, and electronic information) is at one and the same time set in place and is swept and shaken by its own internal contradictions and by external resistance" (Jameson, 1996:187).

³⁴ See Jameson's essay, entitled "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", first printed in *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), pp. 53-92.

³⁵ And, according to Jenkins (1995:113), "a new socio-cultural logic".

³⁶ A survey conducted recently in South Africa suggested that people making use of the Internet on a regular basis have begun to make significantly less use of both television and newspapers for the gathering of news. (Naudé, 1999:62).

³⁷ Consider, as an example of the cultural invasion represented by television, the concerned levelled against the imposition of a broadcast infrastructure in Bhutan in October 1999: The last year of the Millennium and Bhutan is the "...last and most isolationist of the Buddhist Himalayan kingdoms, which through cunning, diplomacy and blind geographic luck has somehow avoided getting overrun by history, is bracing itself for the most pitiless invader ever loosed upon this world: television" (de Jonge, 1999:13). This developing country where

anti-materialism has been official policy since the king's declaration of a commitment to "Gross National Happiness" in 1970, and where 85 percent of the population is still engaged in subsistence agriculture, was until recently, one of the few remaining countries in the world to have existed without television. Now, observers will undoubtedly sit back and watch as the "bloodless coup" of media invasion takes hold of the collective Bhutanese imagination. Indeed, as one of the very last countries on Earth to be plugged in to the entertainment phenomenon of the Twentieth Century, the impact on the tradition-steeped social life of this nation will be under close scrutiny. Despite its adoption of a policy that enforces Bhutan's determination to "...acquire the latest technology without losing its distinct national self..." the decision to finally set up its own broadcasting network has provoked at least some concern at this "...clash of ancient and modern cultures": "...now that a broadcast infrastructure is in place, it seems only a matter of time before another ancient culture fades to black. [...] Clearly, TV moving into virgin territory holds a dark fascination to those already vanquished. Perhaps it's a chance to observe in a kind of controlled experiment just how pernicious the medium really is. Even with the Himalayas at Bhutan's back and a beloved monarch at the helm, there's no stopping the translucent ooze of Western culture. [...] Maybe they can last five years. Maybe 10. And by then, at least, maybe they will have cable" (de Jonge, 1999:13). It would appear that what is offered by the most invasive of popular Western cultural artefacts, "the blinking monster called television" (de Jonge, 1999:13), is not only an endless supply of entertainment, news, education and advertising, but a nightmare of cultural colonisation. Television represents the contemporary phenomenon of image-saturation which is necessarily coupled to the Westernisation – and more specifically, the Americanisation – of Humankind.

³⁸ "Premodernity is associated with the oral culture that characterised pre-industrial societies, both agricultural and hunter-gather. Referentiality in premodern cultures is to a spiritual world; meaning therefore, is derived hermeneutically. The narrative form in which individuals and societies find their identities and motives for action is the sacred cycle; texts, therefore, are describable as pre-real. Modernity is associated with print culture, which as McLuhan pointed out, emphasises linear thinking. It is characterised by a belief in the possibility of direct referentiality by language and symbols to an empirical world, the 'real'. [...] Postmodernity is associated with digital culture. Texts and symbols refer neither to a spiritual nor to a material world, but to other texts and symbols in a condition Baudrillard has named the hyperreal. In the postmodern condition it is believed there is no meaning, certainly no method, and genre lines are unstable, permeable and blurring" (Braman, 1998:69).

³⁹ Baudrillard sees postmodern societies that are dominated by the proliferation of computer and television technologies, as having entered a "new reality" described as the Third Order of Simulacra. Evaluating the evolution of the relationship between reality and its simulacra through history, Baudrillard sees the postmodern era as being dominated by models or codes. Class status, during feudal times, was supported and adhered to thanks to a belief in a divine myth symbolising the sanctity of social stability. Early Renaissance modernity saw the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the result of this change to social mobility can be linked to the artificiality of images, signs and symbols which were used to describe or recreate an image of the world. Baudrillard called this sense of an attempt to copy objects or ideas from the real world using artificial material "the First order of Simulacra". The "Second Order of Simulacra" coincides with the Industrial Revolution, during which time mass reproduction of originals was made possible (and economically favourable). The difference between these first two orders of simulacra exists in the means of production: artificial replicas were first produced by hand, but in the industrial era, mechanisation enabled mass production or assembly of vast numbers of exact replicas of originals. Art, too, became a part of this mass production age with the development of photography and cinema. Because mass production is essentially controlled by the economics of supply and demand, in the industrial era these market forces came to dominate Western culture. The postmodern era – or Third Order of Simulacra – is the era of the model or the code, according to Baudrillard. Culture and cultural life is reduced to a system of binary oppositions, represented by the either/or code of choices. It is via this system of regulated choices, that contemporary life is controlled, and through which radical change is suppressed. Options are thus limited, in Baudrillard's view, because such a system

of binary opposites represents a form of closure that is self-perpetuating. Difference, therefore, far from appearing to be a vast and complex system, is limited to a simple, cybernetic equation that is represented by the choice between "yes" and "no". Thus, in a postmodern cultural system, there is no real choice at all: nothing is real at all and each possibility is but another simulacrum.

⁴⁰ Concerned that postmodernism has no meaning and is itself totally artificial, Baudrillard refers to it as an already-regressive system. In light of this, Baudrillard can perhaps be viewed as a post-postmodernist, embodying the notion that postmodernism always reflects the present as "that-which-has-already-been". Since his recent writings suggest that everything has already been rehearsed and played out through the various media, he believes that there is nothing left that is still likely to occur or likely to interest western society.

⁴¹ Compare this with Elizabeth Klaver's view that "[r]ather than being secluded by the spectatorial gaze outside of the spectacle, the TV viewer experiences a strange feeling of hyperreality as television begins to exert its own form of agency. Even as the bricoleur assembles her text, her subjectivity is being assembled at the imagistic surface of the screen. This is why one can legitimately say that there is no spectator here and no spectacle: as Jean Baudrillard writes, 'all becomes...immediate visibility'" (Klaver, 1995:318).

⁴² McLuhan (in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:313) argues that "TV has begun to dissolve the fabric of American life. All the assumptions – all the ground rules – based on visibility, superficiality, blueprinting, connectedness, equality, sameness – disappear with TV".

⁴³ Baudrillard (1998:152) calls this the "reversion and death sentence of every reference."

⁴⁴ Baudrillard (1992:187) writes: "Ecstatic: such is the object of advertising, and such is the consumer in the eyes of advertising. Advertising is the spiralling [*sic*] of use value and exchange value to the point of annulment, into the pure and empty form of a lack..."

⁴⁵ In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard describes what he calls "the successive phases of the image": "(1) It is the reflection of a basic reality. (2) It masks and perverts a basic reality. (3) It masks the *absence* of a basic reality. (4) It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum." He then goes on to describe the nature of these phases: "In the first case, the image is a *good* appearance: the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an *evil* appearance: of the order of malefice. In the third, it *plays at being* an appearance: it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation" (Baudrillard, 1998:152-153).

⁴⁶ Compare this to McLuhan's understanding of "...an electric information environment [in which] minority groups can no longer be contained – ignored. Too many people know too much about each other. Our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other" (McLuhan *et al.*, 1996:24).

⁴⁷ Thus, while cellular telephones (for example) tend to make the world "smaller" in that individuals are able to remain in contact with one another more easily, such contact is not "real" in the sense of the word that I use here. Telephones *simulate* "direct" human interaction, but by serving as mediatory devices actually assist in making the process of communication *artificial*.

⁴⁸ The phrase has been traced back to as early as 1959 by Peter Krämer, but the term was only adopted academically in the 1970s (Smith, 1998:10).

⁴⁹ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, for example.

⁵⁰ According to the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, "[e]xploitation films were defined as low-budget films that concentrate on the erotic" (Hawkins and Zimring, 1991:33).

⁵¹ According to Kolker (1983:7-8), breaks with mainstream filmmaking began early in the

history of cinema. Erich von Stroheim, for example, began by assisting D. W. Griffith, but then inevitably turned towards his own productions and "...challenged the rustic simplicity and Victorian melodrama of his predecessor". In Europe, German expressionism and the French avant-garde emerged – both in reaction to the conventions of American "realism". In America, films such as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* in 1941 broke the rules of conventional filmmaking, and in the mid-1940s *film noir* became Hollywood's own challenge to the dominant aesthetic and narrative codes. Kolker (1983:8) acknowledges, however, that it was only after the Second World War "...that a national cinema emerged to create a concerted alternative to the American style". Elsaesser identifies foreign filmmaking and distribution strategies – most notably those of Europe and Asia – as having made a positive contribution to the way in Hollywood (or New Hollywood) has begun to think about cinema practices: "In order to understand at least some of these factors, one has to cast one's eye sideways as well as backwards and include, along with these technological and demographic changes, the renaissance and international marketability of at first European (the *nouvelle vague* in France, the New German Cinema) and more recently Asian national art and/or cult cinemas (Taiwanese, Hong Kong and New Chinese cinemas) whose critical reputations seem invariably built around star directors" (Elsaesser, 1998:192). According to Kolker, European cinema has never developed a studio system which can be compared to that in America. Accordingly, the Hollywood studio system "...was in fact something unique in history – the mass production of narratives; an assembly line for products of the imagination; art integrated with and often subdued by commerce" (Kolker, 1983:3-4). America had always had the world as its market, while European and other foreign filmmaking countries made products largely for their own indigenous markets. Rather than try to compete with Hollywood for audiences, foreign filmmakers took advantage of other opportunities such as experimentation and the pursuit of a filmmaking aesthetic which was deliberately different to the "standard" Hollywood product: "This opportunity is often supported by the fact that in Europe and elsewhere there is a greater respect for film as an intellectual, imaginative activity, a greater willingness on the part of a producer to allow the filmmaker to work on his or her own, to write, direct, and even edit a film, to release it in the form the filmmaker desires. In recent years, this respect has been demonstrated through state support (particularly through television) for new filmmakers, or for established ones who cannot find commercial distribution. Certainly state support brings with it the problems of state control; but overriding this is the fact that it permits films to get made that otherwise would not" (Kolker, 1983:4). Yet, even before the intervention of the state and television, support for experimental and non-commercial filmmaking movements – such as the New Wave in France – was available, often from independent producers. European financiers have traditionally been more willing to back projects for reasons other than economic returns, which simultaneously allowed films that questioned and overcame cinematic conventions to be made. This lack of studio involvement meant that innovation and diversification was a major influence in European (and other foreign) filmmaking. Kolker identifies most of the formal developments made in early cinema as having occurred in Europe and Russia (much progress was made through the avant-garde work of Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Jean Renoir, and Walter Ruttmann, for example). While D. W. Griffith devised the basic structural form of film narrative which became established world-wide, most challenges and developments upon that structure occurred in the non-studio environments of Europe and other foreign filmmaking arenas. These developments and enriching agents would then be reabsorbed into the American system. Cross-pollination between the Hollywood "system" and foreign independents can be seen as an ongoing collaborative exercise about which "[a]n entire history could be written...a history that, depending on one's perspective, would show Hollywood as either enriching itself or perpetually homogenizing world cinema" (Kolker, 1983:5). Indeed, Hollywood cinema represents the dominance of established film trends and aesthetic strategies, but for foreign and independent filmmakers, such dominance represents a project that is "...always present to be denied, expanded upon, embraced, and rejected, only to be embraced again" (Kolker, 1983:5).

⁵² A "Director's Cut" version was released in 2000 with improved sound and visual effects.

⁵³ Jenkins (1995:114) identifies Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman, William Friedkin, Bob

Fosse, and Walter Hill.

⁵⁴ Maltby (1998:35) attributes the multiplex system as a key to the effective distribution of films during this contemporary period: "Multiplexes allowed for frequent reconfigurations of the number of seats available for each movie in order to maximize the use of space: a prestige movie might open on four or five screens at one site, while outside the peak attendance times of summer and Christmas spare screens were occasionally used for revivals and foreign films".

⁵⁵ Wasserman actually entered the film industry by purchasing Paramount's film library.

⁵⁶ The merger between a major film company and an international publishing interest suggests at least one major conflict of interest with regards to the impartiality of film writing and criticism. *Time* magazine includes a significant amount of film and media analysis and discussion. However, this often-unnoticed paradox within the media and publications industries is not limited to Time Warner. All film magazines tend to rely on advertising from the film industry, and newspapers which carry impactful reviews also carry adverts and listings for films.

⁵⁷ Balio (1998:59) lists Orion Pictures, Cannon Films and Dino De Laurentiis Entertainment.

⁵⁸ Balio (1998:59) lists Atlantic Release, Carolco, New World, Hemdale, Troma, Island Alive, Vestron and New Line, as examples of so-called independents.

⁵⁹ Balio (1998:60) notes that MTV Europe was reaching between 15 and 20 million homes during the 1980s.

⁶⁰ Balio (1998:60) cites the expansion of the home video market in the Asia-Pacific region (by an incredible 20% in 1994 alone) as an example of this tremendous global development.

⁶¹ Schatz also notes that these three classes of film correspond to "...ranks of auteurs, from the superstar directors at the 'high end' like Spielberg and Lucas, whose knack for engineering hits has transformed their names into virtual trademarks, to those filmmakers on the margins like Gus Van Sant, John Sayles, and the Coen brothers, whose creative control and personal style are considerably less constrained by commercial imperatives. And then there are the established genre auteurs like Jonathan Demme, Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, and Woody Allen who, like Ford and Hitchcock and other top studio directors of old, are the most perplexing and intriguing cases – each of them part visionary cineaste and part commercial hack, whose best films flirt with hit status and critique the very genres (and audiences) they exploit" (Schatz, 1993:35).

⁶² Even in South Africa, DSTV, the satellite arm of MNET's Multichoice company, has begun pay-per-view programming with a limited number of titles on offer per month. Subscribers pay extra to watch encoded films which are broadcast at specific times of the day, on certain days of the month only.

⁶³ Elsaesser cites the "new generation of directors" and "new media ownership and management styles" as the other two dominant factors, while "new technologies of sound and image reproduction" and "new delivery systems" may be seen as playing a significant role (Elsaesser, 1998:191).

⁶⁴ The content and style of contemporary films reveal the influence of these "signs, images and sounds" to have been increasingly dominant. Indeed, it is inevitable that there is a significant correlation between the tastes and interests of younger viewers and the increased spending power of the youth (evidenced in the economic power of the so-called yuppie generation, for example).

⁶⁵ In retrospect, his prescient film clearly signalled the nineties' obsession with "reality video" and the broadcast equivalent, "reality television", which is based on "real life" footage, usually collected by means of easily accessible home video cameras (refer to chapter six for further discussion of "reality television"). In this sense, the film is clearly concerned with the question of a nascent contemporary desire to replace "the real" with images (that simulate the "real").

⁶⁶ Hemmings plays a photographer in Antonioni's provocative film which examines the fine line between "reality" and "non-reality".

⁶⁷ A whole new discussion is introduced by those independent directors who reject the Hollywood system altogether (or who are, possibly more frequently, excluded from it). The independent films of Tom DiCillo, particularly his "...howl of rage against the restrictions of low-budget movie-making...", *Living in Oblivion* (1995), suggest the narrative and stylistic diversity between those filmmakers working inside the "system" and those who are excluded from it because their ideas fail to conform to a particular aesthetic (Collis, 1995:46). The film is a penetrating, if satirical and entertaining look at the "world of low-budget *auteurism*" from a director whose "...first film, *Johnny Suede*, received rave reviews and helped make Brad Pitt a star. Since then, however, the director has seen project after project crash on the rocks of Hollywood indifference" (Collis, 1995:46). The film is quite blatantly an attack on a system which continues to work according to a particular set of formulas until (as in the case of filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino or the team which created *Blair Witch*) it can be shown that there is a viable possibility for "something else" or "something new" in a market which is certainly always open to suggestion, change and opportunism.

⁶⁸ In a scathing attack on *Final Fantasy*, Nicky Agate (2001:89) criticises the illusion of "reality" that was so fervently discussed in the media prior to the film's release: "As for the much-hyped 'human' characters? Well, in close-up they are astoundingly constructed. Each freckle, each patch of stubble, each furrowed brow seems so real that to realise it's not is more frightening than any ghastly monster on screen. But once the virtual-camera pulls back, they're revealed as little more than clumsy virtual mannequins: watch them run with awkward, loping judders, or move their lips a fraction of a second behind the dialogue, making all the wrong shapes with their ever-smiling mouths. Ironically, it's the knowledge that these characters are nothing more than expensive data codes that proves the film's most fascinating aspect: you become so obsessed with the flaws in the CGI that you almost forget about the appalling substandard of pretty much everything else". This extremely cynical point of view is countered, however, by the analysis of Ian Freer (2001c:50), who argues that "...it is in its minutiae that *Final Fantasy* really impresses. Moments that would pass by unnoticed in a live-action flick become increasingly impressive as you witness a medium expanding its boundaries before your very eyes. [...] If the photo-realistic claim is extravagant, there are flashes when *Final Fantasy* completely blurs the distinction between CGI and live action".

⁶⁹ Hollywood's understanding of the "demands" of a mass audience are not necessarily accurate or reflective of the desires of film-goers. Audience interests and expectations are significantly impacted by the marketing of particular products as well as numerous other factors which influence filmgoing trends at any point of time. A popular, well-received film may trigger off an interest in a particular type of movie, while a poor production within a popular genre may negatively influence the viability of that category of film.

⁷⁰ Paul Dergarabedian is the chairman of Exhibitor Relations, which is a Los Angeles-based company which tracks the box-office performance of films.

⁷¹ Similar "mergers" between Western and Eastern paradigms within mainstream cinema include *Shanghai Noon* (Tom Dey, 2000) and *Kiss of the Dragon* (Chris Nahun, 2001).

⁷² Arthur Kroker, for example, "...argues that Subject, Meaning, Truth, Nature, Society, Power and Reality have all been abolished in the transformation of industrial-commodity society into a post-industrial mediascape" (Sarup, 1993:167).

⁷³ Indeed, as digital technology has now given rise to so-called "filmless film", the questions around the nature and definition of cinema become all the more important.

⁷⁴ According to Umberto Eco, "...photography took over one of the main functions of painting: setting down people's images. But it certainly didn't kill painting - far from it. It freed it up, allowed it to take risks" (Eco in Marshall, 1996:70).

⁷⁵ Carroll draws an important distinction between movies without movement and a slide show, for example, which clearly excludes any movement. He points out that "...as long as

you know that what you are watching is a film, even a film of what appears to be a photograph, it is always justifiable to expect that the image *might* move. On the other hand, if you know that you are watching a slide, then it is categorically impossible that the image should move. If you know it is a slide and you understand what a slide is, then it is unreasonable – in fact, it is irrational and even downright absurd – to anticipate that the image might move. Movement in a slide would require a miracle; movement in a film is an artistic choice and an always available technical option” (Carroll, 1995:73).

⁷⁶ Carroll cites a number of analyses employed by various writers to differentiate between the two: “Earlier philosophers, such as Roman Ingarden, attempted to draw the line between theater and film by claiming that in theater the word dominates and the spectacle is ancillary...while in film, action dominates and words serve only to enhance the comprehension of the action. However, there are significant counterexamples to this view....Photographic realists, in contrast, try to get at the distinction between film and theater by focussing on the performer. Because of the intimacy of the photographic lens to its subject, some, like Cavell, think of the quintessence of film acting in terms of stars, whereas stage performers are actors who take on roles. For Erwin Panofsky, stage actors interpret their roles, whereas film actors incarnate them. In the case of movies, we go to see Bogart, whereas in the case of theater we go to see Paul Scofield playing or interpreting *King Lear*” (Carroll, 1995:76).

⁷⁷ The purposeful and systematic disruption of the flow of the narrative. Tactics employed to prevent “narrative transitivity” (Stam *et al.*, 1996:198).

⁷⁸ The use of various techniques to inhibit identification. These may include “distanced acting”, “direct address” and “sound/image disjunction” (Stam *et al.*, 1996:198).

⁷⁹ Attention is purposefully drawn to the way in which “meaning” is constructed in the film.

⁸⁰ Various film “worlds” are presented within the same film, preventing the viewer from experiencing any coherent “reality”.

⁸¹ The filmmaker works against “closure and resolution”. The film thus “opens up” rather than resolving narrative and plot details (Stam *et al.*, 1996:198).

⁸² The film resists the pleasures which are usually associated with “coherence, suspense and identification” (Stam *et al.*, 1996:198).

⁸³ The film reveals itself to be “a film” rather than a representation of some fictional “reality”. In this sense, the film actually acknowledges what it really is (a piece of artifice) rather than working to establish itself as something mystical (Stam *et al.*, 1996:198).

⁸⁴ Techniques such as auto-citation, intratextuality and the use of *mise-en-abyme*, are not reserved for necessarily experienced viewers. Children, it would seem, are being “trained” to appreciate cinematic in-jokes. In David Kellogg’s *Inspector Gadget* (1999), for example, several references are made to the circumstances of the production and to its source material, a popular animated television series. In one scene, the talking “Gadget Mobile” informs his driver that he must wear a safety belt because “this is a Disney movie”. Elsewhere, reference is made to excessive viewing of Saturday morning cartoons, upon which the onscreen characters look questioningly at the camera – and out at the viewers.

⁸⁵ This is comparable with Juri Lotman’s notion of “genre mistakes” (Stam *et al.*, 1996:208).

⁸⁶ The film ultimately underplayed at the box office, suggesting perhaps that audiences prefer classic movie experiences to remain “classic”.

⁸⁷ Note the abundance of inter- and intra-cinematic references in Kevin Smith’s irreverent comedy *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001). While the film’s title clearly references the *Star Wars* sequel *The Empire Strikes Back*, the movie is unashamedly replete with references to and characters from Smith’s earlier works. The film includes numerous parodies of Hollywood movies, scenes in which established stars poke fun at their own careers, and even jokes aimed at Miramax Films, Smith’s long-time backer.

⁸⁸ Also known as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Romeo + Juliet*.

⁸⁹ Cam Winstanley (2001:92) writes of *A Knight's Tale*: "This aint [*sic*] history and an opening scene where tournament crowd chant along to a Queen track makes this clear. It's a fairytale world that merely looks a bit like medieval Europe. [...] Once you realise this, everything up to and including the rickety Millennium Wheel on the London Town skyline is totally acceptable, as the thoroughly modern characters try to bluff their way through the etiquette of the 14th century".

⁹⁰ It is in this respect that "Jürgen Habermas...thinks that if modernity has failed, it is in allowing the totality of life to be splintered into independent specialities which are left to the narrow competence of experts, while the concrete individual experiences 'desublimated meaning' and 'destructured form', not as liberation but in the mode of that immense *ennui* which Baudelaire described over a century ago" (Lyotard, 1998:141).

⁹¹ According to Jameson (1996:189), the idea of the "unique individual" may even be said to be ideological in nature. Two different approaches to this concept of the "death of the subject" are considered. The first acknowledges the existence, "once upon a time", of individualism and individual subjects, but this was only true during "...the classic age of competitive capitalism, in the heyday of the nuclear family" and with "...the emergence of the bourgeoisie as the hegemonic social class". However, this model of the "older bourgeois individual subject" has disappeared with the emergence of the "age of corporate capitalism" (Jameson, 1996:189). Jameson also offers a more radical position reminiscent of a poststructuralist approach. He refutes the notion of the "...bourgeois individual subject...", calling it a "myth" which has never existed: "...this construct is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they 'had' individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity" (1998:168). Which of these positions is more accurate, Jameson reflects, is not at issue. However, he insists that whichever point of view is preferred, the removal of the notion of a unique self which supposedly informed the "stylistic practice of classical modernism" suggests that the older models belonging to modernism can no longer function.

⁹² The immense hype and marketing campaign which went on around the release and pre-release of the film can be seen as symptomatic of an attempt to draw in a broad cross-section of *all* possible markets. This concept of the blockbuster and its appeal to the "mass" cinema market is discussed in both chapter two and chapter four.

⁹³ *The Phantom Menace* was able to generate over \$105 million during the first five days of its release in the United States (including \$28.5 million on its opening day, eclipsing the \$26.1 million record set by Steven Spielberg's *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* in 1997), reaffirming the massive impact of this cinema franchise which has inspired the film-going imagination since 1977. That approximately 2.2 million Americans stayed away from work or school in order to watch *The Phantom Menace* on Wednesday, 19th May 1999, further confirms the power of nostalgia, escapist desire, and cinematic fantasy. The fact that the majority of contemporary audience members likely to be attracted to the prequel had not yet been born when *Star Wars* was originally released, suggests that popular culture is subject to recycling and that collective memory does indeed play a part in the creation of popular myth. In terms of what the prequel ultimately delivered, it is fitting to consider Mark Lawson's appropriate "warning": "A note of caution should, though, be entered with regard to the relationship between cinematic anticipation and satisfaction. The first *Star Wars* (now IV) was a film of which nobody expected anything and yet which delivered almost everything. *The Phantom Menace* is a film from which millions expect almost everything..." (Lawson, 1999:19).

⁹⁴ According to Frank Krutnik, the term "*film noir*" was introduced by Nino Frank, a French *cinéaste* and film critic, in order to describe the wave of wartime Hollywood thrillers which could be linked to "...the tradition of American 'hard-boiled' crime fiction..." (Krutnik, 1996:15). The Paris release of five such films which had been produced during the war years, in July and August 1946, signified "...a series of narrative, stylistic and thematic departures from the Hollywood cinema of the prewar years ..." (Krutnik, 1996:15). Krutnik, however, finds distinct problems with the categorisation of such films, described by Spencer Selby as

"...perhaps the most slippery of all film categories..." (Selby in Krutnik, 1996:16). Thus, "[a]t a more popular level, the problematic identity of *film noir* serves to intensify its highly bankable and 'seductive' mystique: when a new film is labelled '*noir*' this serves as a promise of quality, that the film in question is more than just a thriller" (Krutnik, 1996:16), however: "As a post-constructed category (it was not a generic term recognised by the industry and the audiences of the 1940s) *film noir* has given rise to acute taxonomic problems. Across the critical and historical accounts there is little agreement not only about what characteristics it takes to make a particular film *noir*, and thus which films actually constitute the corpus, but also...about the precise status of the category itself. For example, Higham and Greenberg and Paul Kerr refer to *film noir* as a genre; Raymond Durgnat and Paul Schrader see it defined more by 'mood' and 'tone'; Janey Place and Robert Porfirio describe it as a 'movement'; while, most confusing of all perhaps, is Jon Tuska's position that *noir* is 'both a screen style...and a perspective on human existence and society'" (Krutnik, 1996:17).

⁹⁵ In *Gattaca*, which is also a science-fiction film with a *noirish* "look", the similarly "outdated" police use "Hoovers" to vacuum crime scenes as most investigations involve genetic decoding. While the police appear to employ similar techniques as one might find in a film set contemporaneously, their forensic methods are clearly highly advanced.

⁹⁶ Equally, of course, Buddy Holly is dead so there is no need for "him" to be polite, patient or efficient.

⁹⁷ Including *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), *Die Harder* (Renny Harlin, 1990), and *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (John McTiernan, 1995).

⁹⁸ To some degree, this cycle of self-reflexive horror films may also be seen to have emerged in the wake of what Barry Keith Grant terms "the yuppie horror film" cycle, which is identified with the late capitalist embrace of the "...values of conspicuous consumption and technology as unambiguously positive" (1998:280). Such films, although not typical in their deployment of horror film conventions and codes, exploit the fears and anxieties of young affluent urban professionals existing within "...an economy characterized by increasing economic polarization and spreading poverty..." (Grant, 1998:282). Such films, one might argue, position "social otherness" as the ultimate monster, as an ever-present "impending doom" which threatens to upend or destabilise the victim's privileged position.

⁹⁹ In *Scream 3*, Jameson's notion of the past being imprisoned in the present appears to be literalised by the inclusion of an inter- and intratextual scene in which a video cassette (supposedly made during the time of the action in *Scream 2*) is played to the main characters in order to guide them through the second sequel:

Randy (on the video tape): Told you I'd make a movie someday, huh!...Well, if you're watching this tape it means that, as I feared, I did not survive these killings here at Windsor College. And that giving up my virginity to Karen Colchek at the video store was probably not a good idea.

Dewey: Karen Colchek?

Randy: Yes! Karen Colchek.

Dewey: Creepy Karen?

Randy: Shut up! She's a sweet person, okay. [...] Anyway, the reason I am here is to help you so that my death will not be in vain. That my life's work will help save some other poor soul from getting mutilated. If this killer does come back and he's for real, there are few things that you gotta remember. Is this simply another sequel? Well, if it is, same rules apply. But here's a critical thing. If you find yourself dealing with an unexpected backstory and a preponderance of exposition, then the sequel rules do not apply. Because you are not dealing with a sequel. You are dealing with the concluding chapter of a trilogy.

Dewey: A trilogy?

Randy: That's right. It's a rarity in the horror field, but it does exist. And it is a force to be reckoned with. Because true trilogies are all about going back to the beginning and discovering something that wasn't true from the get go. *Godfather*, *Jedi*, all revealed something that we thought was true but wasn't true. So, if it is a trilogy that you're

dealing with, here are some super trilogy rules. One. You got a killer whose gonna be superhuman. Stabbing him won't work. Shooting him won't work. Basically in the third one you've gotta cryogenically freeze his head, decapitate him, or blow him up. Number two. Anyone, including the main character can die. This means you, Sid. I'm sorry. It's the final chapter - it could be fucking *Reservoir Dogs* by the time this thing is through. Three. The past will come back to bite you in the ass. Whatever you think you know about the past, forget it. The past is not at rest. Any sins you think were committed in the past are about to break out and destroy you. So, in closing, let me say: Good luck. Godspeed. And, for some of you, I'll see you soon. 'Cause the rules say some of you ain't gonna make it. I didn't. Not if you're watching this tape.

As the homemade video ends, the snowy image on the frame-within-the frame of the television monitor which the *Scream 3* characters are watching immediately suggests the simple irony of Randy's final words. Randy may not have survived to see the closing credits of *Scream 2*, but the home movie which he has made has ensured his presence in this second sequel (the third part of the very same trilogy that he refers to in his monologue), and by unexpectedly returning from the past, he clearly signals the self-reflexive nature of both his own video and the film which he has satirically infiltrated. While Randy's warning serves to inform viewers of the course which this particular plot will follow, Randy is himself part of the past which has re-entered the narrative in a contrived, yet highly self-reflexive fashion.

¹⁰⁰ At the time of Godard's first film, cinema became strongly associated with filmmakers and would-be filmmakers who channelled their enthusiasm for the artform into the production of movies that were essentially about movies themselves: "Anyone can now make a film, they sweepingly said: the problem has become not the first film but the second one. In the limited sense in which this 'anyone' was true, this meant that young directors had the chances no highly organized modern film industry had ever been able to afford them. But, inevitably, relatively few of the hundred or more new film-makers who turned up between 1958 and 1961 could find talent or the stamina to support their own enthusiasm. In this climate of chaotic excitement and opportunity, people wanted not so much to make films about anything in particular as simply to make films, to go out and show that they could do it too. One movie fed on another; a producer who struck it rich with one picture shopped for something which would achieve that entrepreneur's impossible dream of somehow looking different but exactly the same. Young film-makers made movies about themselves, and about their friends, who were also film-makers, and about other movies. In the public mind, some sort of composite image began to build up. The film would feature a group of young people, vaguely well-off or at least not much concerned with the problems of earning a living; they would sit around talking; they would go to the cinema and talk about that; they would drive off in their white Triumphs and Sunbeams for a high-speed sequence on the roads around Paris; the love-scenes would get the film a British 'X' certificate; someone would probably be killed; and in the background there would be a cool jazz score or an assertive piece of classical music. If the film came from the inner circle, a copy of *Cahiers du Cinéma* might somewhere be flourished, or one of the *nouvelle vague* directors would put in a friendly appearance in the cast" (Houston, 1969:102).

¹⁰¹ Penelope Houston (1969:103), for example, describes *À bout de souffle* as a film which "...spoke out in the strident voice of arrogant, assured, and very considerable young talent: it was the kind of first film which announces the arrival of someone who really will look at film-making in a new way".

¹⁰² Genre is discussed in further detail in chapter four.

¹⁰³ Interestingly, and rather significantly, when we first encounter Deckard in *Blade Runner*, he is also reading a newspaper. Godard's anti-hero is a look-alike of the "genuine" *film noir* heroes which he attempts to emulate, while Harrison Ford's detective is a simulation of such movie heroes.

¹⁰⁴ The thematic treatment of cultural differences occurs throughout *Breathless*.

¹⁰⁵ Madonna is discussed in great detail during the opening scene of *Reservoir Dogs*.

¹⁰⁶ The discussion of Macdonalds and Burger King between Vince and Jules in *pulp Fiction*, for example. Another allusion to the advertising world and the way in which the Western world has come to understand it, can be found in the firearms video "catalogue" satire in *Jackie Brown*. Tarantino also introduces his own "brand" names (such as "Apple" cigarettes) in his films, thus consciously ignoring countless "real" brands which might confuse his cinema worlds with our own "reality".

¹⁰⁷ Recent examples include filmmakers such as Jan Kounen (*Le Dobermann*, 1998) Guy Ritchie (*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, 1998), and Doug Liman (*Go*, 1999).

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, as the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment project has suggested, it is the belief in a single notion of truth, or reality, which threatens to generate structures of power which enslave and inhibit the worldviews of countless "Others".

¹⁰⁹ Less positively, Jarec Kupsc notes the obvious dangers in the development of the "blockbuster" concept which grew out of the success of *Jaws*: "After the release of *Jaws* in 1975, studio executives realize that the only way to make fast profit is to produce a blockbuster. Twenty years later, this horrifying mentality reaches near absurdity as Hollywood funnels its money into fewer and more costly projects of dubious merit, while neglecting modest and original work that has been the backbone of American cinema for the past three decades. [...] The media fuels this profit frenzy by providing weekly lists of top-grossing films and eagerly reporting record-breaking star salaries, equating quantity with quality. As a result, in the view of general public a good movie becomes one that lingers on a top-ten list for at least five weeks. These atrocious practices diminish interest in independent and foreign pictures, which cannot find distribution outside big metropolitan areas. Since the mid 1990s, multi-screen cineplex theatres continue to invade the country, solidifying the Great Hollywood Conglomerate of self-perpetuating mediocrity" (Kupsc, 1998:348).

¹¹⁰ According to *Total Film* (Cochrane *et al.*, 1999:57), the "top 20 box office takes of all time" by mid-1999, were:

Rank	Title	Year	Box Office Take
1	<i>Titanic</i>	1997	\$1,835,300,000
2	<i>Jurassic Park</i>	1993	\$919,700,000
3	<i>Independence Day</i>	1996	\$810,400,000
4	<i>Star Wars</i>	1977	\$780,000,000
5	<i>The Lion King</i>	1994	\$766,700,000
6	<i>ET</i>	1982	\$704,800,000
7	<i>Forrest Gump</i>	1994	\$679,400,000
8	<i>The Lost World: Jurassic Park</i>	1997	\$614,300,000
9	<i>Men in Black</i>	1997	\$586,200,000
10	<i>Armageddon</i>	1998	\$549,000,000
11	<i>The Empire Strikes Back</i>	1980	\$533,800,000
12	<i>Home Alone</i>	1990	\$533,700,000
13	<i>Ghost</i>	1990	\$517,600,000
14	<i>Terminator 2: Judgment Day</i>	1991	\$516,800,000
15	<i>Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade</i>	1989	\$494,700,000
16	<i>Twister</i>	1996	\$493,200,000
17	<i>Saving Private Ryan</i>	1998	\$479,000,000

18	<i>Aladdin</i>	1992	\$478,900,000
19	<i>Jaws</i>	1975	\$470,600,000
20	<i>Return of the Jedi</i>	1983	\$470,200,000

A quick glance at these titles reveals a definite market preference for particular types of films and, particularly, the success of escapist fantasy and massive effects epics. Even the historic drama of *Titanic* and the human comedy of *Forrest Gump* is engulfed by the proliferation of budget-eating effects and visual consumption of a particular style over content. Science-fiction, fantasy, epic adventure and comedies all dominate the list, which is equally devoted to the money-making genius of specific directors such as James Cameron, Steven Spielberg and Robert Zemeckis.

By late-2001, these statistics had changed to include two 1999 releases in the top 10 ranking box-office successes (Retief, 2001:4a):

Rank	Title	Year	Box Office Take
1	<i>Titanic</i>	1997	\$1,835,300,000
2	<i>Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace</i>	1999	\$922,300,000
3	<i>Jurassic Park</i>	1993	\$919,700,000
4	<i>Independence Day</i>	1996	\$811,200,000
5	<i>Star Wars</i>	1977	\$797,900,000
6	<i>The Lion King</i>	1994	\$767,700,000
7	<i>ET The Extra Terrestrial</i>	1982	\$704,800,000
8	<i>Forrest Gump</i>	1994	\$679,400,000
9	<i>The Sixth Sense</i>	1999	\$661,500,000
10	<i>Lost World: Jurassic Park</i>	1997	\$614,300,000

Perhaps the most unexpected new entry into this list of all-time biggest money-spinners, is *The Sixth Sense*, which is a moderately budgeted horror film.

It is significant to note that in these statistical analyses the changing value of the dollar is not taken into account. Changing ticket prices have also been ignored as influencing factors.

¹¹¹ Or, film which is appealing to the eye.

¹¹² Smith (1998:11-12) refers to the production of "...some 'arty' projects..." which enjoyed the support of the studios, and includes *Days of Heaven* (Terrence Malick, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *All that Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979), and *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980) as examples of these.

¹¹³ Interestingly, even today Hollywood continues to take chances, and is not averse to financing proven directors despite strings of box-office failures. A perfect example of this is the Hollywood backing of Renny Harlin's latest action adventure *Deep Blue Sea*, to the tune of R500-million. The Finnish-born director whose status as a maestro of action movies was proven with the success of hits such as *Die Hard 2* and *Cliffhanger*, has had less success with more recent big-budget productions, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* [1996] and the mega-failure *Cutthroat Island* [1995] (which made a return of only one-tenth its R600-million budget). Then again, *Deep Blue Sea* combines the best of contemporary special effects technology and has been described as "a clever combination of *Jaws*, *Aliens* [James Cameron, 1986] and *Titanic*", all of which scored impressively at the box-office (Mooney, 1999:5).

¹¹⁴ Buckland (1998:175) also identifies the need for further research regarding the

"constituents of spectacle" in the contemporary blockbuster, as well as the "influence of television" and the "impact of comic books on visual design".

¹¹⁵ An actor occasionally impacts the "meaning" and significance of a production to such an extent that he or she may be considered to be an "auteur" – a creative personality who co-"writes" the film: "...actors who not only influence artistic decisions (casting, writing, directing, etc.) but demand certain limitations on the basis of their screen personas, may justly be regarded as 'auteurs.' When the performer becomes so important to a production that he or she changes lines, adlibs, shifts meaning, influences the narrative and style of a film and altogether signifies something clear-cut to audiences despite the intent of writers and directors, then the acting of that person assumes the force, style and integrity of an auteur" (Patrick McGilligan in Dyer, 1992:625-626).

¹¹⁶ According to Petrikin (1999:69): "Schwarzenegger's career has been carefully orchestrated over the last 20 years, reflecting an aggressive business and marketing acumen. But the charismatic Austrian tripped and fell with the big-budget action/comedy *The Last Action Hero*, for which he earned a then-record \$15 million in 1993. *Last Action Hero's* box-office nose-dive ended a run of four consecutive Schwarzenegger films (*Terminator 2*, *Kindergarten Cop* [Ivan Reitman, 1990], *Total Recall* [Paul Verhoeven, 1990] and *Twins* [Ivan Reitman, 1988]) that had grossed \$90 million or more in the U.S. He bounced back with his follow-up the next summer, James Cameron's actioner *True Lies*, which garnered favorable reviews and expanded the action hero's range, demonstrating that he could play a suave spy as well as a bumbling family man. But since then, Schwarzenegger has tried to repackage himself via comedies (as in *Junior* [Ivan Reitman, 1994] and *Jingle All the Way* [Brian Levant, 1996]) or as the villain (as in *Batman & Robin* [Joel Schumacher, 1997]). Obviously, these outings haven't proved to be the commercial success that his action films once were, perhaps prompting Schwarzenegger to return to his roots: He recently began work on *End of Days*, a millennial thriller in which the former Mr. Olympia tries to save the world from the Devil".

¹¹⁷ In further criticism of Schwarzenegger's performance, Kermode writes that "[b]ad acting honours...are reserved ultimately for Arnie himself, who moves like the ice-demon in the lowest ring of Dante's *Inferno*, with about as much human warmth and slightly less facial expression" (Kermode, 2000:46). Another critic writes that "[i]n *End of Days* [Schwarzenegger] is imbued with some notional character by growing stubble and having a tragic past, and he comes reasonably close to resurrecting himself as a convincing action hero, though there he still has to battle against an accent worthy of a Nazi villain in a bad World War II movie and a physique with the grace of a hippo on land" (de Waal, 1999d:12).

¹¹⁸ It should perhaps also be noted that, according to Peter Hyams, *End of Days* is not an "Arnie movie" (in Nathan, 2000a:100), suggested by the Austro-American's departure from his "usual" character roles: "As well as not being a horror movie, this is not a Schwarzenegger movie. Gone is the wisecracking, bemuscl'd Teuton whose indomitability was only matched by the number of extras he ploughed down with his trademark Uzi. Instead, combining the tortured hero trademarks of Bruce Willis' Joe Hallenback from *The Last Boy Scout* [Tony Scott, 1991] (he's all washed up, gleaning life lessons from the bottom of a vodka bottle) and Mel Gibson's Riggs from *Lethal Weapon* (there's a dead wife and child that has left our hero dissolute and suicidal), we get Jericho Cane, a world-weary security operative" (Nathan, 2000a:98&100). This argument does not, however, detract from the fact that the film was marketed to the filmgoing public as a "Schwarzenegger movie".

¹¹⁹ An excellent example occurs in *The Specialist* (Luis Llosa, 1994), where every other scene has characters wearing a different style of sunglasses and frequent close-ups of the Peter Stuyvesant decal are included as irritating diversions. A more recent example occurs in the action movie, *Bad Boys*. In one sequence set in the apartment of wealthy-cool cop, Mike Lowrey (played by Will Smith), a lengthy pan-zoom begins with obvious focus on a pair of Nike running shoes, carefully placed with their insignia facing the camera. During an early scene in *The Matrix*, for example, where Keanu Reeves' protagonist receives a cellular telephone through the post, it is most clearly a Nokia. In my personal experience, this moment gave rise to the popular use of references to "The Matrix phone".

¹²⁰ Scott's motivation for using this motif in his cynical vision of the future has symbolic significance in that his film is greatly concerned with what "life" actually means.

¹²¹ The number of films that are based on existing children's television programmes or characters (particularly from animated series) is increasing, especially as computer technology now allows many previously unimaginable actions to be "executed" by (apparently) human performers

¹²² In a report on the development of animation, David Robinson writes that "over the last 15 years the animation industry has been subject to periodic predictions of expansion or collapse, often linked to the rising and falling fortunes of its market leader, the Walt Disney Studios. After a slack period of lacklustre productions in the early 80s, the studio has bounced back, achieving record box-office takings with *The Little Mermaid* [Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989], *Aladdin* [Ron Clements and John Musker, 1992]...and *The Lion King* [Roger Allen and Rob Minkoff, 1994]" (Robinson, 1994a:116). *Aladdin* employs the voice talents of a number of respected and talented movie performers, including Jonathan Freeman as Jafar, Gilbert Gottfried as Iago (the parrot), Douglas Seale as the Sultan, and most notably, Robin Williams as the Genie. In addition, as with *Beauty*, a lavish original musical score, as well as touching songs, were produced by composer Alan Menken and lyricists Tim Rice and Howard Ashman. The Oscar-winning song "A Whole New World" (along with other high quality numbers) was used to complete the full-throttle marketing campaign, which (justly) promoted the film as more than just a "children's cartoon". *Aladdin* is a classic tale which fits the Disney mould, whose "...stories depict an ersatz, pre-lapsarian fairyland, based loosely on classics of children's literature, whose temporal existence is always located prior to the viewer's lifetime" (Sharman, 1993:67). A children's movie, however, *Aladdin* is not, for just as this interpretation of a much older tale functions as an acknowledgement of a new world vision, so Disney's film serves to cater for a far wider, more universal audience: "In the early 80s Disney ventured into more adult territory in order to reach a broader audience who were put off by Disney's wholesome image. *Aladdin* is the first of the new animation films which appears to be self-consciously doing the same thing" (Dean and Kermode, 1994:57). By legitimising the film for adults as well as young audiences, much of the work for the extra-cinematic marketing campaign is also concluded, for parents are more likely to give in to their children's demands if they too share in the entertainment experience.

¹²³ In South Africa, Kellogg's placed miniature statuettes of ten of the major *Phantom Menace* characters in the boxes of two of its popular cereal lines. Labelled as "limited edition", the boxes of these cereals included images from, and information about, the film.

¹²⁴ See *Empire* 136, October 2000, for example.

¹²⁵ Legendary tales that have captured the imagination in numerous cinematic permutations and remakes are not uncommon. Martin Campbell's *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), for example, is the fifteenth American Zorro movie and the 52nd to be made worldwide (Mathews, 1998:5).

¹²⁶ Also, a highly successful package: *The Matrix* was the top-grossing film in South Africa in 1999.

¹²⁷ *Gladiator* earned \$34.8 million at the United States box-office during its debut weekend (Inverne, 2000:51). It also went on to win the 2001 Academy Award for Best Picture.

¹²⁸ In *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (2000), Jarmusch disrupts numerous genre conventions and expectations as the film follows the exploits of a black hitman who works on retainer for a mafia crime boss. Calling himself Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker), the hitman models himself on the traditions of samurai warriors, living according to their code of conduct even as he listens to contemporary urban street rap on his modern hi-fi equipment.

¹²⁹ Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872-98) was an English illustrator who was particularly noted for his stylised black-and-white illustrations. Gustav Moreau (1826-98) was a French symbolism painter.

¹³⁰ The unnatural speed and imperfect grain of the footage used here are obvious references to the early history of cinema, but the result of Coppola's self-reflexive technique is not

simply to acknowledge the period; he also tests the very notion of "vampire movies" by referring so self-consciously to the film medium. Coppola is discreetly – and playfully – acknowledging the implicit lie that is at the centre of any movie about vampires: if vampires exist at all, they (by definition) cannot be filmed. *Bram Stoker's Dracula* deconstructs this notion while simultaneously asserting the power of cinema to distract the viewer from this (most) obvious of details. By giving this scene a different grain and speed, which both highlight the fact that Dracula is in fact being intra-cinematically filmed, Coppola refers directly to the viewer and questions the logic of acceptance in a scene which is so clearly impossible. If vampires do not even have a reflection and cannot be photographed, they certainly cannot be filmed, and yet here Coppola suggests that Dracula has been filmed in his own (Victorian) time and then re-filmed in the 1990's film, doubling the error in logic.

¹³¹ Milos Forman's *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996) is another American film that focuses on the porn industry.

¹³² Compare this understanding of "cool" with earlier remarks concerning postmodernism and the relationship between "high" and "low" culture. Also, for an interesting discussion of the "trash aesthetic", as well as the ironic detachment that may be assumed when assessing or analysing such films, see the Jeffrey Sconce (1995:371-393) article entitled "Trashing the academy".

¹³³ And Waters can, of course, be linked to Warhol.

¹³⁴ Refer also to earlier comments regarding Warhol.

¹³⁵ During the closing scene, in which an eclectic celebration is held at the opening of Pecker's new exhibition (a series of photographs in which the glitterati themselves have been captured in awkward or unflattering poses), one of Pecker's New York fans calls for an end to irony. The all-but-unnoticed comment is itself somewhat ironic, however, since Waters' film consciously demonstrates that the film medium is necessarily self-reflexive.

¹³⁶ Also known as *The Klumps*.

¹³⁷ A similar effect is evident in Kevin Smith's intelligent, yet often insultingly obscene religious comedy, *Dogma* (1999). The film is littered with outrageous verbal utterances, a set-piece involving a demon made of turds, references to "perverse" sexual practices, and several scenes which offer "questionable" opinions of a religious nature, including the depiction of God as a mute, playfully silly, skeeball-loving "female". Such elements serve merely to disguise what is essentially an extremely devout film which argues for a return to "faith" even while a "prophet" named Jay (Jason Mewes) tells his friends that the female God (Alanis Morissette) has just given him an erection. Yet, while the film delivers a powerful message about the value of "faith", the popular and contemporary context drew extensive criticism from certain Catholic groups, to the extent that Miramax Films was prevented from releasing the film by the Walt Disney Co. According to Ben Affleck (who plays a fallen angel in the film), "It's a rumination on faith. With dick jokes" (in Corliss, 1999:82). It is this apparent contradiction which has drawn the anger of the film's detractors who see the non-stop barrage of foul language and relativist discussions of religion and religious mythology as an insulting package for the deliberation of sacred cultural beliefs. However, Smith's point about the true value of religious faith is made through the "dick jokes" which actually amount to "low-brow" manifestations of the celebration of human existence. Just as Jay is sexually aroused by a "woman" who also happens to be God, so the "dick jokes" in the film are vulgar expressions of the natural propensities of reproduction and physical pleasure which are served by sexual desire. To deny the existence of such desire approximates the denial of base human interests which are most frequently and casually expressed in terms of "low humour".

¹³⁸ *Romance* is far more explicit than comparable earlier films that similarly explore adult sexuality. Examples include *Damage* (*Fatale*, Louis Malle, 1992), *Henry and June* (Philip Kaufman, 1990), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Philip Kaufman, 1988) and even *9½ Weeks* (Adrian Lyne, 1986).

¹³⁹ The "narrative" aspect of any pornographic film is not really related to the "storyline" but

rather to the depiction of actual sexual behaviour designed to arouse or evoke arousal in the viewer/voyeur. Of course, whatever thrill that is provided by the depiction of "actual" sex amounts not to real sexual behaviour but mediated, performed hypersex - sex which is depicted as more sexual than sex itself. However, as sex is concerned with the connection between actual human beings (in various contexts) performing sexually - emotions aroused and stimulated in a way which cannot truly be described through images or words - the visual content of the pornographic film are entirely without "meaning". They merely evoke a reaction (arousal, excitement, etc) which is unique to the particular viewer.

¹⁴⁰ Also billed as Bruce La Bruce.

¹⁴¹ Arroyo (1999:56) argues that "...these very attempts to clue the audience in to the filmmaker's awareness of the politics of representing race and sexuality disrupt the conventions of pornographic representation and jolt the audience out of their usual engagement with this particular type of fantasy; the attempt to forestall a racist reading makes the depiction itself seem racist".

¹⁴² Adapted from J. G. Ballard's novel.

¹⁴³ According to Shaviro (1994:156), "[Cronenberg] discovers or produces, at the very heart of these mechanisms, a subject that can no longer be defined in the conventional terms of lack, denial, and fantasy, and whose intense passion cannot be described as a desire for mastery, closure, and self-possession".

¹⁴⁴ Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) similarly parodies the media's exploitation of violence in scenes from a would-be futuristic news programme, for example

¹⁴⁵ Also compare *Doom Generation* with Gus van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991).

¹⁴⁶ Araki's previous films, *The Living End* (1992) and *Totally F***ed Up* (1993), have tended to draw links between gay culture and popular culture as part of a movement variously dubbed "New Queer Cinema". Significantly, Araki's subtitle should be foregrounded by his further description of "...*The Doom Generation* as a heterosexual movie for homosexuals, in the way that films such as *Philadelphia* [Jonathan Demme, 1993] were homosexual movies for heterosexuals" (Spencer, 1998:37).

¹⁴⁷ **X**xavier's name almost certainly refers to the "X-Generation".

¹⁴⁸ A long-standing taboo in mainstream cinema, references to masturbation (and even simulations of the act itself) are now, apparently, somewhat more acceptable. Refer to earlier comments concerning the masturbation scene in *There's Something About Mary*. In Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998), a pubescent boy who obsesses about being a "normal kid" (Worsdale, 1999b:12), finally achieves his goal (metaphorically and literally) when he masturbates on a balcony while watching a woman who is tanning below. Solondz not only includes the taboo image of ejaculate in close-up, but has a dog lick the substance off the balcony railing. The change in attitude towards this particular taboo is evident when one compares Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) with Gus van Sant's 1998 remake. During the scene in which Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins, 1960; Vince Vaughn, 1998) voyeuristically watches Marian Crane (Janet Leigh, 1960; Anne Heche, 1998) through a hole in the wall, the remake explicitly implies that Bates is masturbating while watching. In the 1960 version of the film, any such inference is left to the viewer's imagination. Also see later comments concerning Almodóvar's *Kika*.

¹⁴⁹ Xavier has a tattoo of Christ on his penis and he tells Amy that he enjoys putting Jesus inside everyone.

¹⁵⁰ Yet another horror movie reference, this time to the anti-Christ child in *The Omen*.

¹⁵¹ *Law of Desire* (1987) actually deals (semi-autobiographically) with the private life of a gay film director whose private life is impacted by an obsessed fan.

¹⁵² Almodóvar's humorous treatment of the rape scene earned accusations of exploitation and misogyny.

¹⁵³ In the style of Mickey and Mallory Knox in Stone's *Natural Born Killers*.

¹⁵⁴ "Real" sex scenes apparently fail to convince if the actual ejaculation is not captured on film.

¹⁵⁵ "Reality" and hyperreality clash in another way in the film through the casting of Almodóvar's own mother as the host of a programme about, ironically, books: "Most gratuitously and intrusively, Almodóvar casts his own octogenarian mother as a television presenter and has her drop knowing references to her son's profession" (Smith, 1994:9). Almodóvar's mother is most unsuitable for the role, but her *performance* is relevant in terms of the film's message. This woman is *not* a television presenter, nor is she a book aficionado. When she tells her guest, Nicholas (Peter Coyote) that she has not actually read the book he has written, her words relate to her role in the film as well as in the "real" world. Television is too artificial for Almodóvar's *real* mother to appear "real" or to take seriously, and it is this dismissive attitude which *Kika* would have *us* adopt. In another scene, gratuitous nude shots of the transsexual performer, Bibi Andersen, are included to assert yet another (potentially erotic) use of the camera. The fact that Andersen is a "...celebrated chat-show hostess and [was] once billed as the tallest transsexual in Europe" (Smith, 1994:8) suggests that Almodóvar's interest lies in confusing the boundaries which exist between "reality" and hyperreality. By "exploiting" a body which represents the extremes of gender fluidity (a desirable woman who is a man who is a woman) the film interferes with the viewer's ability to make sense of a character/performer whose hyperreal identity/image (as understood from the various media) appears to contradict the "reality" that is *seen* on screen. It is possibly in this sense that Almodóvar's films suggest possibilities for change in terms of established Western notions of identity: "In his love of sex and gender fluidity, his hostility to fixed positions of all kinds, Almodóvar anticipated by a full decade the critique of identity politics now commonplace in Anglo-American feminist and queer theory. Once we are weaned from the reassuring comforts of the dichotomies of gay/straight, female/male, his cinema offers us English-speakers the promise of a nightmare and a dream for the 90s. The nightmare is a future of powerlessness in which (as in Spain) feminists and gays prove unable to organise and unwilling to found a sense of community on the experiences they have in common. The dream is a future of fluidity in which (as in Spain, perhaps, once more) sexual practices are not constrained by fixed allegiances and each of us negotiates our own price in the libidinal economy. The financial metaphor is apt. For as Almodóvar's constant concern for the bottom line has shown, economic clout is essential if any dissonant voice wishes to make itself heard in an increasingly globalised entertainment industry" (Smith, 1994:10).

¹⁵⁶ Michael Medved's book, *Hollywood vs. America*, which criticises popular culture's obsession with overturning traditional values, touches on at least one of the origins of violence for laughs in motion pictures. He refers to an article in the *Wall Street Journal* (October 1989) by Robert H. Knight, who condemns so-called "carnage comedies": "He particularly objected to *A Fish Called Wanda* ([Charles Chriton,] 1988), the bank robbery farce for which Kevin Kline won the Oscar as best supporting actor. Knight notes that in the course of the film 'we are not supposed to be disturbed when an inept killer is crushing a woman's pet dogs to death; we are supposed to laugh at his inability to kill the woman herself, which he finally does when she has a heart attack over the carnage. Are you laughing yet? The people at the theater I went to were howling. A couple of viewers cocked their heads as if they sensed something was out of balance, but then succumbed to the good humour around them. Who wants to be a wet blanket?' Knight also found himself dismayed at the reaction to *Batman* (1989), in which 'innocent people die grotesque, agonizing deaths while 'Joker' Jack Nicholson cracks one-liners. The result is an audience uneasily laughing at ghoulish depictions of human suffering. But laugh they do.... What is new is that violence and comedy are woven into the same scenes in quality, mainstream films.' This strange wedding of gore and good humour brings a chilling new dimension to the destructive messages that viewers derive from big screen brutality. [...T]oday's movies advance the additional appalling idea that the most appropriate response to the suffering of others is sadistic laughter" (Medved, 1992:191). There is a vital consideration which both Knight and Medved fail to consider: The tone and style of each of the movies which are cited as examples. *A Fish Called Wanda* is an offbeat

comedy which exploits unusual and improbable characters and situations. In no way does the film suggest that realistic versions of such acts could be considered amusing. The audience laughter is in response to more than simply the gratuitous slaughter of innocent animals or the heart attack of the woman; the construction of comedy - particularly dark comedy - is considerably more complex than the writers insinuate. Jack Nicholson's character in Tim Burton's *Batman* is a menacing and dark figure. The comic-book based character is also emotionally and psychologically complex. More than simply a stand-up comedian with a passion for carnage, the Joker (and, indeed, the imaginary Gotham City in which he and the Dark Knight exist) reflects many of the paradoxes which exist in our own world; we do not laugh at his infliction of suffering on others, but at his twisted personality - he is, after all, a "joker".

¹⁵⁷ Consider, also, the way people are drawn to the scene of an accident.

¹⁵⁸ An interesting take on death in the cinema is provided by Cam Winstanley: "Death, in reality, is squalid. Real people rarely burn out - they fade away ingloriously, and, for every memorable Captain Oates or Rasputin, there are a million forgettably crummy bed-ridden fatalities. Film deaths are everything that real deaths aren't. They're arty and profound and moving and stylish and memorable, and, no matter how rotten and dull a scuzzball's life might have been, he can be counted on to die with the flair and panache of a John F Kennedy or Catherine the Great. Because, of course, films are all about story-telling. They're simple morality tales where evil is punished and goodness prevails - stories plucked from our mediaeval past and embellished with helicopters, shootouts and yucky bits involving tweezers or gardening tools, stories with a finale that can be understood by honest, simple folk....Anyway, that's our shallow justification for revelling shamelessly in pictures of blood-spattered actors getting rubbed out, blown away, iced, offed, slotted, whacked, fragged, plugged, butchered, wasted and terminated with extreme prejudice. And we're sticking to it" (Winstanley, 1997:53).

¹⁵⁹ In discussing the finger-removal scene in *Four Rooms* (Allison Anders, Alexandre Rockwell, Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, 1995), Tarantino describes the effect of such violence: "Well, in its own weird way, it's identifiable. You can relate to it more. If you see a movie and someone gets decapitated, you can say, 'Oh, that was a neat special effect,' and everything, but can you really relate to it? In a movie, if you see someone get a paper cut, you go, 'Oooohh,' because you *can* relate to it. Little things like cutting off fingers, we could accidentally do that at any point during the day. I'm not gonna accidentally cut off your head" (In Dawson, 1996:196).

¹⁶⁰ It is perhaps noteworthy that certain writers feel that the cinema has lost its stronghold on the development of popular culture: "Cinema's relatively short career as a dominant cultural form has left it with a curiously ambivalent status. It is still, if only intermittently, castigated for its alleged power to deprave and corrupt; but on the whole, public anxieties about the effects of representations of sex and violence have shifted to television and radio" (Bazalgette and Staples, 1997:92).

¹⁶¹ Widely acknowledged as having developed and even "invented" film studies, Bazin was born on 18 April 1918 in Angers, France. He died at Nogent-sur-Marne on 11 November 1958, having been diagnosed with leukaemia in 1954.

¹⁶² One example is *Survivor*, which places teams of people in difficult situations. Team members then vote one another out of the game until a single "survivor" remains and wins a huge cash prize. Another show entitled *Temptation Island* exposed the partners in a number of relationships to numerous potential seducers in order to test their faithfulness to their original partner.

¹⁶³ Harvey quotes de Chardin from Bazin's biographer, Dudley Andrew: "...the purple flush of matter fading imperceptibly into the gold of spirit, to be lost finally in the incandescence of a personal universe" (Teilhard de Chardin in Andrew in Harvey, 1996:229).

¹⁶⁴ A belief which can, in itself, be described as somewhat unrealistic, given the nature of contemporary existence.

¹⁶⁵ Bazin's understanding of cinema is thus strongly contrasted with that of action filmmaker, Kathryn Bigelow (1990:313), who believes for example, that "[a]ction movies have the ability to be pure cinema, in that you can't recreate their kinetic, visual quality in any other medium. [...] Action *per se*, just from a technical standpoint, is a multitude of fragments edited together at a dizzying pace, creating a totally artificial momentum. You're able to have certain experiences in cinema that you don't have in everyday life, you can live them out on a fantasy level." For Bigelow, "pure cinema" is created by the cutting procedures of montage which so offended Bazin.

¹⁶⁶ Peter Matthews argues that there appears to be some contradiction in Bazin's pioneering of the *politique des auteurs* movement, which he later distanced himself from: "Given Bazin's passionate advocacy of this cinema of 'transparency', it may seem puzzling that he is likewise remembered in film history as an architect of the celebrated *politique des auteurs*. Under his tutelage the younger journalists at *Cahiers* championed such previously patronised talents as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks and Douglas Sirk, thereby shifting the critical goalposts forever. (Since many of Bazin's reviewing colleagues...went on to direct their own films, he is often regarded as the father of the *nouvelle vague*.) If Bazin's criticism constitutes a cine-theology, it might also be said that the auteur fulfils the role of saint – an inspired intercessor with reality. Bazin's stake in the *politique* can probably be traced back to his involvement in the 30s Christian existentialist movement known as personalism, which posited the creative individual who takes risks, makes choices and exercises his or her God-given faculty of free will. However, it should be added that Bazin eventually distanced himself from the priestly cult of the director-author because he felt it ignored the commercial context in which most films were produced. A keen observer of Hollywood cinema (whose 'classical' adaptability he was among the first to appreciate), he nonetheless set its geniuses on a lower rung than those who answered to his chaste and simple ideals: Renoir, Chaplin, De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Carl Dreyer and Robert Bresson" (Matthews, 1999b:24-25).

¹⁶⁷ This argument may be compared with the underlying understanding of contemporary cinema in this thesis, that film images are open to multiple and varied interpretation based on the particular judgements made by individual viewers.

¹⁶⁸ This notion of cinema being an exclusively representational artform which cannot escape its relationship with artifice, is further argued by Dudley Andrew: "Without trying to settle scores, I am happy to call attention once more to what may be Bazin's most significant insight into the medium he so loved: the cinema, he felt, was congenitally impure. No effort to purify it could long succeed: not the Dadaists of the twenties nor the Lettrists of his own day, not the Cinema-Verité movement of the sixties nor the political avant-garde that after 1968 marched in step with the changing of the guard at *Cahiers du Cinéma*" (Andrew, 1993:77).

¹⁶⁹ According to Malcolm McLuhan (1968:330), "...TV...has all the effects of LSD".

¹⁷⁰ *Truman Show* can be compared with Gary Ross' big-budget "television universe" movie, *Pleasantville* (1998), which has a decidedly rhetorical structure that opens up several pertinent questions regarding the relationship between "reality" and mediated hyperreality. The film uses the fictional "reality" of a television programme (ironically entitled *Pleasantville*) to draw attention to manner in which the media transforms actual "reality": "The atmosphere there is always pleasant: the temperature is constant, married couples sleep in twin beds of a designated size (there is no such thing as sex), dinners are ready when hubby returns home and firemen exist only to rescue cats from trees" (Worsdale, 1999a:12). It is into this world that "...unhappy Nineties twins David (Toby Maguire) and Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) are catapulted...", signalling their journey into a "...pre-post-modern idyll where life is perfect and claustrophobically boring" (Du Plessis, 1999:22). (Similar narrative devices are employed in Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) and Peter Hyam's *Stay Tuned* (1992).) These contemporary characters are, however, shown to be interchangeable with appropriate characters from that alternative (television) world, because their own "hyperreality" is mediated to such an extent that its differences from the television "reality" are actually quite superficial. For David and Jennifer, life in a television universe

appears to be an extension of contemporary existence. J. Hoberman (1999:15) notes that "The *Pleasantville* sitcom is essentially the same artificial world as the made-for-TV location of *The Truman Show*. But Ross gives his theme park a less paranoid, more obviously political inflection by having it promoted on the film's equivalent of Nick at Nite (a cable network specialising in just such canned nostalgia) with such post-50s Republican buzz terms as 'family values' and 'kinder, gentler'. It is also blatantly a fiction. Because this is television in its initial, triumphantly innocent incarnation, the rain never falls and the temperature is always 72 degrees. Toilets and double beds do not exist. [...] Albeit exaggerated, the *Pleasantville* show is nevertheless a pleasingly skilful simulation, not least in the hyperreal casting of William H. Macy and Joan Allen (who, having played Pat Nixon, is the icon of 50s womanhood) as the ideal parents Jennifer and David have suddenly inherited". Just as the Pleasantville of the television series is part of a mythical simulacrum which invades David's contemporary life, so the "real" world in which David and Jennifer exist represents the simulacrum which dominates our own contemporary lives. Interestingly, it is the knowledge which David has of his favourite television show that enables him to change the "reality" of the *Pleasantville* television universe. Andrew Sarris (in Hoberman, 1999:16) refers to David and Jennifer as "...secular missionaries from the advanced 90s", and in many ways this is their role - to infiltrate and alter an historic simulacrum represented by a particular interpretation of 50s television. Of course, even the "advanced 90s" which these twins inhabit is a simulacrum comprising images from both MTV and the nostalgic world of the *Pleasantville* television show, for example.

¹⁷¹ According to Ronge (1999a), "[t]he result is superb entertainment, filled with the fastest editing I have ever seen in a film and a flawless control of pace. This is the new commercial Hollywood at its best".

¹⁷² A show in which a group of strangers are constantly observed by infrared surveillance cameras while they live in an isolated house together.

¹⁷³ The ethical implications of surveillance as entertainment is irreverently dealt with in *American Pie*, a film that has been accused of offending social "reality" by transgressing the limits of "acceptable" representation (see chapter five). One scene which is particularly poignant, is also critical of the intrusion of surveillance technology into private life. Jim is convinced by his friends to broadcast images from his own bedroom through the Internet via a webcam (a small surveillance camera connected to his computer). Jim's unreasoned act of self-broadcast is not without some perverse purpose, however. The motive behind the amateur filmmaking lies in the fact the Jim plans to seduce a young woman (a foreign exchange student), and the broadcast is to be his undeniable proof (recorded memory) of finally losing his virginity. Whereas such a performance in the "real" world would amount to a degrading act of intrusive voyeurism committed against the woman in question (since she has no knowledge of the spying camera), in the film the scene is transformed into an ironic lesson in respect for the privacy of others. While Jim broadcasts the encounter in an attempt to prove his "manhood" to a few close friends, his plan backfires when he embarrassingly experiences pre-coital premature ejaculation in front of an audience of hundreds of unexpected Internet "watchers". While the scene may be considered to be an exercise in base "exploitation" humour by some critics, it is nevertheless one which comments both on postmodern technology/culture and on its own mode of address. The viewer is, in a sense, compelled to interrogate his or her own feelings regarding the ease with which amateur pornography can now be generated from the privacy of one's own bedroom.

¹⁷⁴ *Cannibal Holocaust's* rumoured status as a snuff movie is mentioned on the *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)* website at <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0078935>.

¹⁷⁵ Discussed in greater detail in chapter two.

¹⁷⁶ A fictional film which pretends - through style and subject-matter - to be a documentary. Typically, such films include fake, or improvised interviews as well as enactments of imagined events. The "reality" effect is often heightened through the use of some "authentic" footage.

¹⁷⁷ Joshua Mooney (2000b:109) notes that 1999's other horror film sensation, *The Sixth*

Sense, also veers away from many of the “manufactured contrivances” usually typical of the genre, while “...none of the film’s crucial qualities rely on the typical big-screen experience, [which include] special effects, Dolby Surround Sound, or the artificial enhancement of “shared” audience reactions...”.

¹⁷⁸A fuller version of the Dogme 95 “Vow of Chastity”:

“I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by DOGME 95:

- Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
- The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).
- The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).
- The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera).
- Optical work and filters are forbidden
- The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur).
- Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film must take place in the here and now).
- Genre movies are not acceptable.
- The film format must be Academy 35mm.
- The director must not be credited.

Furthermore I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a “work”, as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my character and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations. Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY” (The Vow of Chastity in Goldenhuys, 1999:11).

¹⁷⁹ It may be illuminating to compare experiences of Lara Croft as a digital computer game character and those of her as a “live-action” character - played by a highly desirable Hollywood actress (Angelina Jolie) - in the major 2001 action-adventure blockbuster movie, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West).

¹⁸⁰ This case was reported by one of my colleagues, a Senior Officer at the South African Film and Publication Board, during a discussion around child pornography on the Internet.

¹⁸¹ In other words, in a way that is similar to the manner in which the sub-conscious mind converts dreams (or thoughts, ideas and other products of the imagination) into images which approximate visual experiences, the material viewed in a cinema theatre can be seen to exist in our consciousness as a result of the process of seeing the film.

¹⁸² “The film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body” (Pudovkin in Kracauer, 1959:7).

¹⁸³ Vogel (1974:9) quotes Breton as saying: “It is at the movies that the only absolutely modern mystery is celebrated.” Breton, a surrealist, was interested in the “...curious combination of technology and metaphysics that is cinema...” (Vogel, 1974:9). Vogel further notes that the “...continuum from the rational to the irrational relates directly to the very nature of the film-viewing process” (Vogel, 1974:9).

¹⁸⁴ Vogel notes, however, a distinct difference between the process of watching a cinema movie, which is “total, isolating, hallucinatory”, and the “low-pressure television experience” which leaves the spectator open to an awareness of the viewing environment as well as other people and other sources of interference (Vogel, 1974:9).

¹⁸⁵ The French writer, Michel Dard, makes the following comments about the cinema-goers

whom he observed as far back as 1928: "Never, in effect, has one seen in France a sensibility of this kind: passive, personal, as little humanistic or humanitarian as possible; diffuse, unorganized, and self-unconscious, like an amoeba; deprived of an object, or rather attached to all of them, like fog; penetrant, like rain; heavy to bear, easy to satisfy, impossible to restrain; displaying everywhere, like a roused dream, that contemplation of which Dostoyevski speaks and which incessantly hoards without rendering anything..." (Dard in Kracauer, 1959:13).

¹⁸⁶ Thomas "Neo" Andersen, whose nickname means "new", is indeed destined to be the "new" saviour of humankind. At first, however, he is a "doubting Thomas" who is wholly insecure about his destiny.

¹⁸⁷ Morpheus, whose name recalls the mythical Orpheus, does indeed live beneath the surface of the earth.

¹⁸⁸ The chapter which Neo opens the simulated book to, is entitled "On Nihilism", which "...advocates terrorism as the means of 'checking in broad daylight' the mechanisms of control, but observes that the system is itself nihilistic and can absorb even violence into its indifference" (Rovira, undated).

¹⁸⁹ Adapted from Chuck Palahniuk's novel of the same name.

¹⁹⁰ Pitt's casting is, in itself, an extension of the film's flirtation with (immersion in) the hyperreal. Pitt has often been pronounced "sexiest man alive" or "most desirable man" by a variety of publications, so by simulating himself as a physical embodiment of the world's sexiest man, Norton's character evokes a particular fantasy for himself. This is demonstrated by the fact that Norton's character also lives out all his sexual fantasies through his alter ego, Tyler Durden (Pitt).

¹⁹¹ Ellis (1999b:49) writes that the film "... offers up a constant, horrible stream of threatening allusions to emasculation: castration, men with diseases that cause the size of their breasts to swell enormously, testicular cancer, Brad Pitt's perfectly sculpted body, the homoerotic element to the fights which are shot and edited to resemble fucking, subliminal images of erections".

¹⁹² Someone who endlessly changes television channels (usually with a remote control device), supposedly in the hope of finding something worth watching.

¹⁹³ In both cases, the physical acts of violence suggest a severe breakdown in communication, a gap between parent and child which can only be bridged by acts involving the infliction of pain (and, consequently, the further breakdown of communication and relationships).

Filmography

Listed alphabetically by title (alternative or non-English titles are given in brackets), followed by director/s and year of initial release.

1941. Steven Spielberg, 1979.
200 Cigarettes. Risa Bramon Garcia , 1999.
2001: A Space Odyssey. Stanley Kubrick, 1968.
48 Hrs. (48 Hours). Walter Hill, 1982.
54. Mark Christopher, 1998.
6th Day, The. Roger Spottiswoode, 2000.
8 Heads in a Duffel Bag. Tom Schulman, 1997.
8½ (Otto e mezzo). Federico Fellini, 1962.
9½ Weeks. Adrian Lyne, 1986.
About Last Night. Edward Zwick, 1986.
A Bug's Life. John Lasseter and Andrew Stanton, 1998.
A Clockwork Orange. Stanley Kubrick, 1970/1.
Addams Family, The. Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991.
Adventures of Baron Munchausen, The. Terry Gilliam, 1988.
A Few Good Men. Rob Reiner, 1992.
A Fish Called Wanda. Charles Chriton, 1988.
A Gun for Jennifer. Todd Morris, 1996.
A Knight's Tale. Brian Helgeland, 2001.
Aladdin. John Musker and Ron Clements, 1992.
A League of their Own. Penny Marshall, 1992.
Alien. Ridley Scott, 1979.
Alien Nation. Graham Baker, 1988.
Alien Resurrection. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997.
Alien³. David Fincher, 1992
Aliens. James Cameron, 1986.
All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre). Pedro Almodóvar, 1999.
All that Jazz. Bob Fosse, 1979.
All the Pretty Horses. Billy Bob Thornton, 2001.
All the Right Moves. Michael Chapman, 1983.
Almost Famous. Cameron Crowe, 2000.
Altered States. Ken Russell, 1980.
Amadeus. Milos Forman, 1984.
American Beauty. Sam Mendes, 1999.
American History X. Tony Kaye, 1998.
American Movie: The Making of Northwestern. Chris Smith, 1999.
American Pie. Paul Weitz, 1999.
American Pie 2. James B. Rogers, 2001.
American Psycho. Mary Harron, 2000.
Analyze This. Harold Ramis, 1999.
An American Werewolf in London. John Landis, 1981.
An Andalusian Dog (Un chien andalou). Luis Buñuel, 1928.
Anastasia. Don Bluth and Gary Goldman, 1995.
A Nightmare on Elm Street. Wes Craven, 1984.

- Antz*. Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson, 1998.
- Apocalypse Now*. Francis Ford Coppola, 1979.
- Arachnophobia*. Frank Marshall, 1990.
- Armageddon*. Michael Bay, 1997.
- Army of Darkness*. Sam Raimi, 1993.
- A Room With A View*. James Ivory, 1986.
- Arrival of a Train at the Station in La Ciotat, The (L'arrivée d'un train en gare La Ciotat)*. Lumière, 1895.
- As Good As It Gets*. James L. Brooks, 1997.
- A Trip to the Moon (Le voyage dans la lune)*. Georges Méliès, 1902.
- Austin Powers International Man of Mystery*. Jay Roach, 1997.
- Austin Powers The Spy Who Shagged Me*. Jay Roach, 1999.
- Babe*. Chris Noonan, 1995.
- Babe: Pig in the City*. George Miller, 1998.
- Baby Boy*. John Singleton, 2001.
- Back to the Future*. Robert Zemeckis, 1985.
- Back to the Future II*. Robert Zemeckis, 1989.
- Back to the Future III*. Robert Zemeckis, 1990.
- Bad Boys*. Michael Bay, 1995.
- Bad Influence*. Curtis Hanson, 1990.
- Bamboozled*. Spike Lee, 2000.
- BASEketball*. David Zucker, 1998.
- Basic Instinct*. Paul Verhoeven, 1992.
- Basketball Diaries*. Scott Kalvert, 1995.
- Batman*. Tim Burton, 1989.
- Batman & Robin*. Joel Schumacher, 1997.
- Batman Forever*. Joel Schumacher, 1995.
- Batman Returns*. Tim Burton, 1992.
- Bats*. Louis Morneau, 1999.
- Battleship Potemkin, The (Bronenosec Potjomkin)*. Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1925.
- Beach, The*. Danny Boyle, 2000.
- Beauty and the Beast*. Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991.
- Beavis and Butt-head Do America*. Mike Judge and Yvette Kaplan, 1996.
- Bedazzled*. Harold Ramis, 2000.
- Beetlejuice*. Tim Burton, 1988.
- Being John Malkovich*. Spike Jonze, 1999.
- Beloved*. Jonathan Demme, 1998.
- Ben-Hur*. William Wyler, 1959.
- Best Man, The*. Malcolm D. Lee, 1999.
- Beverly Hills Cop 2*. Tony Scott, 1987.
- Beverly Hills Cop*. Martin Brest, 1984.
- Beverly Hillbillies, The*. Penelope Spheeris, 1993.
- Bicentennial Man*. Chris Columbus, 1999.
- Big Chill, The*. Lawrence Kasdan, 1983.
- Big Daddy*. Dennis Dugan, 1999.
- Big Lebowski, The*. Joel Coen, 1998.
- Big Momma's House*. Raja Gosnell, 2000.
- Big Tease, The*. Kevin Allen, 1999.
- Big Trouble in Little China*. John Carpenter, 1986.
- Billy Elliot*. Stephen Daldry, 2000.

- Birth of a Nation, The*. D. W. Griffith, 1915.
- Blade Runner*. Ridley Scott, 1982.
- Blair Witch Project, The*. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999.
- Blast From the Past*. Hugh Wilson, 1999.
- Blow*. Ted Demme, 2001.
- Blow Job*. Andy Warhol, 1963.
- Blowup*. Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966.
- Blue Velvet*. David Lynch, 1986.
- Bob Roberts*. Tim Robbins, 1992.
- Body Heat*. Lawrence Kasdan, 1981.
- Body of Evidence*. Ulrich Edel, 1993
- Body Shots*. Michael Cristofer, 1999.
- Bonnie And Clyde*. Arthur Penn, 1967.
- Boogie Nights*. Paul Thomas Andersen, 1997.
- Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2*. Joe Berlinger, 2000.
- Boondock Saints*. Troy Duffy, 1999.
- Born on the Fourth of July*. Oliver Stone, 1989.
- Bowfinger*. Frank Oz, 1999.
- Bounce*. Don Roos, 2000.
- Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Francis Ford Coppola, 1992.
- Brazil*. Terry Gilliam, 1985.
- Breakfast Club, The*. John Hughes, 1985.
- Breathless (A bout de souffle)*. Jean-Luc Godard, 1959.
- Bride of Chucky*. Ronny Yu, 1998.
- Bride of Frankenstein*. James Whale, 1935.
- Brokedown Palace*. Jonathan Kaplan, 1999.
- Broken Arrow*. John Woo, 1996.
- Broken Hearts Club, The*. Greg Berlanti, 2000.
- Buena Vista Social Club, The*. Wim Wenders, 1999.
- Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, The (Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari)*. Robert Wiene, 1919.
- Cable Guy*. Ben Stiller, 1996.
- Caligula*. Tinto Brass and Bob Guccione, 1980.
- Cannibal Holocaust*. Ruggero Deodata, 1979.
- Cape Fear*. Martin Scorsese, 1991.
- Carrie*. Brian De Palma, 1976.
- Casablanca*. Michael Curtiz, 1942.
- Casino*. Martin Scorsese, 1995.
- Cast Away*. Robert Zemeckis, 2000.
- Celebration, The (Festen)*. Thomas Vinterberg, 1998.
- Celebrity*. Woody Allen, 1998.
- Cell, The*. Tarsem Singh, 2000.
- Charlie's Angels*. Joseph McGinty Nichol, 2000.
- Chicken Run*. Peter Lord and Nick Park, 2000.
- Child's Play III*. Jack Bender, 1991.
- Chocolat*. Lasse Hallström, 2000.
- Chopper*. Andrew Dominik, 2000.
- Christine*. John Carpenter, 1983.
- Citizen Kane*. Orson Welles, 1941.
- Claire Dolan*. Lodge H. Kerrigan, 1998.

- Clay Pigeons*. David Dobkin, 1998.
- Clerks*. Kevin Smith, 1994.
- Cliffhanger*. Renny Harlin, 1993.
- Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Steven Spielberg, 1977.
- Clueless*. Amy Heckerling, 1995.
- Cocktail*. Roger Donaldson, 1988.
- Color of Money, The*. Martin Scorsese, 1986.
- Color of Night, The*. Richard Rush, 1994.
- Color Purple, The*. Steven Spielberg, 1986.
- Con Air*. Simon West, 1997.
- Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, The*. Peter Greenaway, 1989.
- Cookie's Fortune*. Robert Altman, 1999.
- Courage Under Fire*. Edward Zwick, 1996.
- Crash*. David Cronenberg, 1996.
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