HYPERARTIFICIAL CINEMA AND THE ART OF COOL

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature: Date:

Summary

In this thesis, an ontology of contemporary cinema is developed using the position assumed by postmodern thinkers (notably Jean Baudrillard) and contemporary filmmakers. Using Baudrillard's perspective it is argued that the cinematic apparatus is an expression of both human curiosity and a desire to place "reality" at a distance. While the spectator seeks *involvement* with the viewed subject, he or she remains *detached* from the images which simulate the various "realities" in which he or she becomes "involved" through the act of *viewing*.

The contemporary Western subject is said to crave "meaning" in a universe which is increasingly secular, materialistic, individualistic and, to a certain extent, "virtual". Life is also said to be more ironic, providing illusory concessions such as communication in lieu of interaction, information instead of knowledge, choice in favour of quality, surfaces rather than depth, and images which ultimately extinguish "the real". Moving images may be said to allude to the artificial nature of a "reality" which is itself a human construction. This suggests that the role of the camera is to place both the world and human subjects "at a distance", thereby objectifying (and potentially dehumanising) the subject-objects of the gaze.

Many postmodern films are concerned with the functioning of the cinematic apparatus itself, and these films – implicitly and explicitly – deal with the way in which subjectivity is established through the cinematic gaze. "Realism" in the cinema has to a large extent shifted from the documentation of the world, to techniques which problematise the viewer's experience of "reality". Interactivity, *faux-verité* and the hyperrealism of computer graphic imaging, have contributed to the confusion of various forms of screen "realism", arguably impacting on the viewer's experience of "reality".

In another sense, "reality" has been transformed by the blurring of distinctions between high and low cultural paradigms, increasingly evident in work that privileges the *showing* of "perverse", "profane", "grotesque", "vulgar" and explicit "realities". Boundaries between private and public spaces are eroded as the cinematic apparatus takes spectators into increasingly intimate personal spaces, demystifying and popularising the unknown and previously hidden.

Considering the influence of commercial and socio-economic factors on the development of contemporary cinema (emphasizing Hollywood), the thesis looks at the aesthetic, thematic and narrative concerns of both mainstream and niche-market films. Focus is given to the so-

called postmodern aesthetic which is closely linked to what some critics call recycling (an inability to say anything "new"), some label "empty" (meaningless) and many see as "schizoid" (able to be read in various, often contradictory, ways).

The thesis proposes that contemporary (postmodern) cinema is a "pure" form which increasingly sets "reality" at a distance so that it's illusory nature is emphasised. It also demonstrates how contemporary films serve as reflections of a world which is itself nothing but a reflection (artificial construction). Like dreams, fantasies and other "virtual realities", the cinema represents a form of "remembering" which is detached from any particular time or space. In this sense, cinematic moving images enable viewers to engage with aspects of their own humanity which may be quite independent of the "reality" status of the world.

Opsomming

In hierdie proefskrif word die uitgangpunte van postmoderne denkers (by uitstek Jean Beaudrillard) en kontemporêre filmmakers benut om 'n ontologie van die kontemporêre film te ontwikkel. Vanuit Beaudrillard se perspektief word geargumenteer dat die filmiese apparatuur 'n uitrukking is van die mens se inherente nuuskierigheid en die behoefte om "realiteit" op 'n afstand te hou. Alhoewel die kyker streef na betrokkenheid by die subjek wat bekyk word, bly hy of sy altyd afsydig (*detached*) van die beelde wat die verskeie "werklikhede" simuleer waarby hy of sy in die proses van *kyk* "betrokke" raak.

Daar word beweer dat die hedendaagse Westerse subjek verlang na "betekenis" in 'n heelal wat al meer sekulêr, materialisties, individualisties en, tot 'n sekere mate, "virtueel" word. Die lewe is deurspek met ironie en maak allerlei illusionêre toegewings aan die "werklikheid", byvoorbeeld deur voorkeur te gee aan kommunikasie in plaas van interaksie, inligting in plaas van kennis, keuse in plaas van kwaliteit, oppervlakkighede in plaas van diepgang en beelde wat uiteindelike "die werklikeid" uitwis. Daar kan gesê word dat filmiese beelde (*moving images*) verwys na die kunsmatige aard van "realiteit", wat op sigself 'n menslike konstruksie is. Hiermee word dus gesuggereer dat dit die funksie van die kamera is om beide die wêreld en menslike subjekte "op 'n afstand" te plaas, en daarmee te objektiviseer (en moontlik te dehumaniseer).

Baie postmoderne films hou hulle besig met die manier wat die filmiese apparatuur self funksioneer, en hierdie films ondersoek die wyse waarop subjektiwiteit deur middel van die kamera verkry word. "Realisme" in die film het tot 'n groot mate verskuif van die dokumentasie van die wêreld na tegnieke om die kyker se ervaring van die "werklikheid" te

problematiseer. Interaktiwiteit, *faux-verité* en die hiper-realiteit van rekenaar gegenereerde beelde het bygedra tot die verwarring oor die verskeie vorme van filmiese "realisme", wat mens sou kon argumenteer 'n impak op die kyker se siening van "die werklikheid" het.

In 'n ander sin, is "die werklikheid" getransformeer deur paradigma verskuiwings waardeur die onderskeide tussen "hoë" en "lae" kulture vervaag, iets wat al meer gedemonstreer word deur werke wat verkies om die "perverse", "profane", "groteske", "vulgêre", en eksplisiete "realiteite" te *wys*. Die grense tussen private en publieke ruimtes verval ook waar die filiese apparatuur kykers in al hoe intiemer persoonlike ruimtes inneem, om daardeur dit wat voorheen onbekende en versteek was te demistifiseer en populariseer.

Met inagname van die invloed wat die kommersiële en sosio-ekonomiese faktore op die ontwikkelling van die hedendaagse film (veral van Hollywood) het, kyk die proefskrif na die estetiese, tematiese en narratiewe kwessies wat beide hoofstroom en niche-mark films kenmerk. Daar word veral gefokus op die sogenaamde post-moderne estetiek wat gekoppel word aan wat sommige kritici *recycling* noem (dws die onvermoë om iets nuuts te sê), ander as "leeg" (dws betekenisloos) beskou, en baie ander weer "shizoid" brandmerk (dws dit kan in verskeie, menige kere kontradiktoriese wyses, gelees of verstaan word).

Die proefskrif bevind uiteindelik dan dat die kontemporêre (postmoderne) film 'n "suiwer" vorm is wat dit geleidelik regkry om "realiteit" op 'n afstand te hou, om sodoende sy eie illusionêre wese te benadruk. Dit illustreer ook hoe kontemporêre films funksioneer as refleksies van 'n wêreld wat self niks meer is as refleksie (kunsmatige konstruksie) is nie. Nes drome, fantasieë, en ander "virtuele realiteite", verteenwoordig die film 'n tipe "onthou" (*remembering*) wat onafhanklik is van 'n spesifieke tyd of plek. In hierdie sin help filmiese beelde kykers om hulself te kontfronteer met aspekte van hulle eie menslikheid wat onafhanklik is van hul werklikheidsstatus in die wêreld.

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Contents

We need to study
     the films themselves
          as acts
               of discourse (Andrew, 1992:428).

The aesthetic and the cultural cannot stand in opposition.
The aesthetic dimension of a film
never exists apart from how it is conceptualised,
how it is socially practised,
how it is received;
it never exists floating free of historical and cultural particularity.
Equally, the cultural study of film must always understand that it is studying film,
which has its own specificity,
its own pleasures,
its own way of doing things that cannot be reduced to ideological formulations
or what people (producers, audiences) think
and
feel about it
(Dyer, 2000:7).

In memory of my friend Gregg Bartmann, 1973-1998.

Introduction

The spectacle of "reality"

Cinema is Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk realised: a melding of sound and vision and drama in a horrible maelstrom designed to sweep away all resistance. It is the triumph of image over idea, of spectacle over sensuality (Currie, 1993:41).

There is no denying that moving image technology has altered the fabric of human existence and impacted significantly on "reality" as individuals within contemporary societies experience it. During the twentieth century, the media emerged as a cultural dominant which continues to provoke extensive debate within a wide variety of discourses. Cinema, television, video, interactive video games and the Internet have been some of the major media formats that have contributed to the "...ubiquity of visual images throughout public culture..." (Brooker and Brooker, 1997:1). It is further evident that every sphere of contemporary life is influenced by the pervasive nature of advertising, news reporting and visual storytelling[1]. In this respect, the media have significantly impacted on issues such as human development, individual subjectivity, social morality and socialisation. Some arguments revolve around the extent to which the media have altered the way in which human beings encounter the world, suggesting that "reality" has been usurped by the images, signs and representations that are presented as "real" by the media and assumed to be "truth" by the viewing subject. It is this relationship between "reality" and mediated representation in the contemporary (postmodern) context that is explored in this discussion.

One of the foremost commentators on the disappearance of the "real" is Jean Baudrillard, who argues that "reality" ceases to exist when it comes to resemble itself, giving rise to the *hyperreal* – that which is more "real" than the "real". Baudrillard describes the media as a "virus" which "...controls the mutation of the real into the hyperreal" (in Bukatman, 1997:83). In terms of moving image technology, the hyperreal would refer to those cinematic, television or computer images which resemble "reality" (or what we understand to be "reality") to such an extent that the difference between the sign (screen image) and its referent (that which the image represents) is obliterated. This *simulation* of the "real" simultaneously results in the possibility of infinitely repeatable perfect simulations (which have no original). Originality and authenticity are essentially replaced by illusions of the "real" which, as perfect simulations, have no originals. "Reality" is confused with, and replaced by, its

own image and Baudrillard further argues that "reality" can no longer take on the appearance of "reality" (see chapter one for further discussion). Thus, Baudrillard's argument leads to the notion that images infect and destroy "reality": "[i]mage is virus; virus virulently replicates itself; the subject is finished" (Bukatman, 1997:83). The extinction of the subject in this metaphor occurs with the dissolution of the difference between the "real" and the representation, thereby giving rise to one aspect of the "postmodern condition" whereby art and life become indistinguishable. The hyperreal may therefore also be regarded as the condition whereby art is everywhere and everything (see the discussion of Andy Warhol in chapter five, for example) and the "real" has become confused with its own image. This is the condition described by Baudrillard as "implosion" – the extinction of all boundaries between "reality" and its representation.

While the concept of "reality" is discussed repeatedly throughout this thesis, "reality" itself emerges as a product of human construction that is difficult to define in rigid or straightforward terms. Indeed, it has become increasingly apparent that "reality" has no fixed meaning or significance. "Reality" may be understood as something that is constructed by each and every individual through collective experience and social interaction. Tony Kerstan (1994) notes, for example, that "reality" is not "a fact" and that individuals "...do not cope well with reality on an individual level...". "Reality" is rather that which human societies have constructed in order to cope with the circumstances of existence. "Reality" describes both emotional and physical aspects of our lives such that "...whatever excites and simulates our interest is real" (Kerstan, 1994). "Reality" is therefore always evolving - changing as the experience of everyday life changes. According to Kerstan,

> Reality envelops our most unconscious thoughts and conscious actions, it drives our most basic desires and neEds. As we pursue our desires and needs, we socially construct our individual realities and the *social reality* (Kerstan, 1994, my emphasis).

This "social reality" is the most intense "reality", and is often referred to as "the reality of everyday life". Compared to this "social reality", all other "realities" are finite and limited. Without the concept of "reality", human interaction would be untenable since "[r]eality is a world that originates in [human] thoughts and actions, and is maintained real by these actions" (Kerstan, 1994).

Baudrillard has argued that the postmodern world is a place where signs have actually ceased referring to "reality". He postulates that in a world where the media and visual

images have become dominant, "simulation" is the new "reality". Conceptual models that have no connection or origin in "reality" have replaced the "real". Ideal models that are presented in various imagistic forms through the media have come to determine postmodern "social reality". Such, according to Baudrillard, is the power of the media over human subjects. Accordingly, the boundary between simulation (the image) and "reality" implodes – or breaks down – resulting in our world of hyperreality where the "real" and the "unreal" are indistinguishable. In this way, the boundaries between facts and information, information and entertainment, entertainment and life, life and art, art and "reality" are said to break down, leading to the implosion of the social as the boundaries between meaning and the media collapse. In a sense, this refers to Marshall McLuhan's theory that "the medium is the message" – that the media have replaced "reality" and absorbed meaning. Implosion, for Baudrillard, means instability – the socio-cultural freeflow of undifferentiated images and signs.

Baudrillard's thesis therefore suggests that simulations (see chapter one) have become the postmodern "reality". He argues that there are several orders of simulation. The first order of simulation is a reflection of a basic "reality". The second order of simulation masks and perverts a basic "reality". The third order masks the absence of a basic "reality". The fourth order, in which postmodern societies now operate, bears no relation to any "reality" whatsoever: simulation becomes its own pure simulacrum. The "hyperreal" is a fourth-order simulation in which the image becomes "reality". According to Baudrillard, the transition from "reality" to simulation allows "nostalgia" (discussed in the context of cinema in chapter three) to realise its full meaning which results in

> ...a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production... (Baudrillard in Kerstan, 1994).

Baudrillard suggests that the simulation represented by the "hyperreal" is a strategy of deterrence, preventing action and reducing the human subject to a state of idle acceptance. Scott Bukatman (1997:74) argues that "[i]nto the 1990s, the human subject has become a blip: ephemeral, electronically processed, unreal". He notes that "...this implosion, the passage of experiential reality into the grids, matrices and pulses of the electronic information age", has already been identified by numerous

writers. Accordingly,

> [e]xploration outward has been superseded by the inward spiral of orbital circulation – in cybernetic terms, the feedback loop. The world has been reconstituted as a simulation within the mega-computer banks of the Information Society, and terminal identity exists as the mode of engagement with the imploded culture (Bukatman, 1997:74).

Bukatman (1997:74) further notes that these types of readings of contemporary societies and culture imply that "direct experience" is impossible – all experience is ultimately mediated. McLuhan's "the medium is the message" axiom is thus taken further by Baudrillard who finds "...that it is not only this implosion of the message in the medium which is at stake, but also the concurrent *'implosion of the medium and the real* in a sort of nebulous hyperreality...'" (Bukatman, 1997:74).

It is in light of this thesis that television can be described as "...the axiomatic form of electronic simulation..." (Bukatman, 1997:74) which does not simply mirror or reflect "reality" with its images of the world, but rather serves "...as a constituent portion of a new reality". In the process, it is society which comes to mirror television, leading to the blurring of the "real", the "unreal" and the "hyperreal". Baudrillard uses a biological trope to describe the effect of the media as "...a *viral*, endemic, chronic, alarming presence...dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV" as the human subject becomes an extension of the media, a "...terminal of multiple networks" (Baudrillard in Bukatman, 1997:77). Consequently, it is television which has been identified as the media form most consistently representative of the so-called postmodern condition. Television, by offering a choice of channels and viewing opportunities, presents the spectacle of democratic choice, by serving "...as a kind of guarantee of the freedom of the subject to choose, to position one's *self* within the culture, while the constant flow of images, sounds and narratives seemingly demonstrates a cultural abundance and promise" (Bukatman, 1997:75). However, according to Baudrillard (in Bukatman, 1997:75), such choice is itself an illusion since "...TV, by virtue of its mere presence, is a [form of] social control...". Postmodernity (which has been described as the "society of the spectacle"[2]) is frequently associated with the presentation of life as "...an immense accumulation of *spectacles* [while e]verything that was directly lived has moved away into representation" (Debord in Bukatman, 1997:95). Hence,

> The citizen/viewer, no longer engaged in the act of producing reality, exists now in a state of pervasive separation – cut off from the producers of the surrounding media culture by a unilateral communication and detached from the mass of fellow citizen/viewers as the new community of television families

and workplaces arise invisibly to take their place. The spectacle controls by atomizing the population and reducing their capacity to function as an aggregate force, but also by displaying a surfeit of spectacular goods and lifestyles among which the viewer may electronically wander and experience a simulation of satisfaction. Within the conditions of late capitalism, 'the satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by *an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs* which are reduced to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy'....'The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions'... (Bukatman, 1997:95).

The mass media (notably television) is thus interpreted as a pacifying mechanism with the power to subdue and control human societies. The spectacle of the media represents the commodification of every aspect of social life, whereby human subjects are subjugated by the ubiquity of signs and images. The postmodern individual loses autonomy to the controlling power of an economy which is based in the production of the spectacle.

The postmodern and the cool

The more new media technology with which we come into contact, the less mysterious and more natural it all seems. A camcorder lets us make our own television. The computer and modem let us upload the images we record for anyone else to see. When technology is more something we do than something done to us, it is no longer threatening. It is an extension of who we are and what we want to be. For new media to promote humanity and the nature that drives us, it must never be seen as acting on us, but rather as acting for us. We must refuse to be intimidated into believing that someone else knows better than we how it should be used. There are no digerati. There are no cybergurus. Media is no longer a magic act. To those of us lucky enough to have experienced media as a form of expression rather than a way of being manipulated, communications technologies such as the Internet have been demystified. They are rendered as unthreateningly natural as my father's slippers and their man-made soles (Rushkoff, 1998:31).

Postmodernism is a term that is considered contentious and highly problematic for a number of reasons and because it is used in a variety of ways. In one sense it is considered a movement (or way of thinking) that emerged in the 1960s, 1970s or the 1980s, "...depending on the medium in question..." (Collins, 1997:192). It may also be said to be "...a condition or milieu that typifies an entire set of socioeconomic factors..." (Collins, 1997:192), and those relating specifically to cinema are discussed in further detail in chapter two. These understandings of postmodernism have, in turn, come to bear on the forms of politics and modes of cultural production, address and analysis that have been identified during the late twentieth century. "Postmodernism" is also used to describe a distinctive style, or, more accurately, a diversity of styles, bearing various trademarks or characteristics (discussed in greater

detail in chapters one and three), while

> [i]ts most obvious examples have been found in a playful and allusive architecture and literature, or more precisely, 'meta-literature', since one of the most consistent signs of the postmodern has been its ironic self-referentiality (Brooker and Brooker, 1997:1).

While postmodernism was first noted with reference to architecture and literature, it is now inconceivable to discuss the postmodern without reference to the new visual media or the technologies of communication and information. Postmodernism refers both to the "society of the spectacle" described in the late 1960s by Guy Debord, and to the "global village" anticipated by McLuhan in the age of instantaneous communication.

This is the postmodernism that suggests Baudrillard's "...universe of detached, floating signifiers, free of content and reference" wherein our culture is one "...of unrelenting style and surface for which television's flattened screen provides the perfect medium and metaphor" (Brooker and Brooker, 1997:1). As has already been suggested, "...television is frequently referred to as the quintessence of postmodern culture [while] postmodernism is just as frequently written off as mere 'television culture'" (Collins, 1997:192). Postmodernism may thus be thought to describe an age in which the ubiquity of the mass media (and more specifically, television) is realised and human societies are dominated by "...the proliferation of signs and their endless circulation, generated by the technological developments associated with the information explosion (cable television, VCRs, digital recording, computers, etcetera)" (Collins, 1997:193). In light of these and other technological developments, Baudrillard further describes the "ecstasy of communication" and "promiscuity of information" (see chapter one) as symptomatic effects of the ever-increasing "...surplus of texts, all of which demand our attention in varying levels of intensity" (Collins, 1997:193). Furthermore, according to Jim Collins,

> [t]he resulting array of competing signs shapes the very process of signification, a context in which messages must constantly be defined over and against rival forms of expression *as different types of texts frame our allegedly common reality* according to significantly different ideological agendas (Collins, 1997:193, my emphasis).

Postmodernism, once again, can be understood as the implosion of "reality" as the spectacle of media images and signs come to dominate the cultural scene/seen.

As the industries of media and computer technology develop and expand, the boundaries into personal and domestic space are invaded and erased, while even the

human body itself is "transformed" and "augmented" (and even replaced by androids or genetically-engineered substitutes). Distinctions of all kinds begin to disappear as "...common grounds for discrimination and critical distance" erode and "[e]verywhere there is difference which makes no difference" (Brooker and Brooker, 1997:2). Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson see in the contemporary age forms of schizophrenia arising from "[t]oo great a proximity of everything..." (Baudrillard in Brooker and Brooker, 1997:2) and an abundance of "...distinct and unrelated signifiers..." (Jameson in Brooker and Brooker, 1997:2). The contemporary subject has

> ...unprecedented access to images and information which produces its mirror image, a loss of historical sense, the end of artistic originality and the unified subject, or individualism, seen now to be the illusion of an earlier cultural moment (Brooker and Brooker, 1997:2).

In this respect Jameson finds in postmodernism the aesthetic of depthless pastiche whereby individuality gives way to conspicuous stylistic "heterogeneity" and "diversity" (see chapter three).

While television may be understood as one of the most obvious and pervasive examples of postmodernism "in action", the position of cinema within the postmodern is somewhat more contentious. Some of the identifiable stylistic features of postmodernism that are evident in television are more difficult to associate with cinema which has traditionally been thought of as a modernist form. Consequently, postmodern cinema is difficult to define in specific terms. Although numerous critics have attempted to describe those aspects of contemporary films which signify that they may be considered "postmodern" (see chapter three), these descriptions fail to produce any single or specific understanding of what constitutes postmodern cinema. In one sense, the term may be used to refer to a *period* in cinema history which relates to certain changes in the strategies of production, distribution and consumption (discussed in chapter two). It may also refer to films which in one way or another describe, comment on, or relate to, the postmodern era. According to Madan Sarup, "...postmodern films echo and reproduce the tensions and contradictions that define our time" (Sarup, 1993:177). Films such as *Blade Runner* (see chapter three) are said to reflect the pessimism, rapidly evolving technology and simulation of "the real" which are symptomatic of postmodern existence. Simultaneously, *Blade Runner* reflects elements of the stylistic eclecticism and "nostalgia" (see chapter three) which are evident in postmodern art and cultural production. "Nostalgia" is identifiable as an element of sequels, remakes, "heritage films", standard genre films as well as films which obliquely and self-consciously refer

to earlier cinematic works. Increasingly, as intertextual narrowing reaches an extreme, films tend to simulate and recall various aspects of a wide variety of foregoing filmic texts. Other films reflect developments in the fields of computer-aided design and Internet technology which echo changes and advances that are occurring in the "real" world. In one sense, commentators have noted that cinema only approaches the third phase of Baudrillard's autonomous image in film animated entirely by computers. In 1996, for example, Disney released *Toy Story* (see chapter two), which may be said to have ushered in a new level of "realism" ("hyperrealism", perhaps) in that the film's depthless surface is indeed *depthless*, having been created entirely by computer. The film therefore echoes and articulates its own artificiality[3] through its very mode of production.

In another sense, postmodern cinema is used to describe certain aesthetic and narrative developments within films themselves. Some of these features are the ironic rearticulation of the "already said" (and even more specifically in cinema, the "already seen"), an emphasis on intertextuality and a heightened sense of self-consciousness. Some commentators have noted in postmodern cinema a double articulation, whereby the viewer is addressed both as a knowing consumer of culturally recycled ideas, and as an "innocent", first-time viewer. In a sense, postmodern cinema deals self-consciously with the status of the image itself, constantly reiterating its function as a medium for *showing*. In the act of *showing*, postmodern cinema achieves its most dynamic function as it problematises the experience of "reality" for the spectator. The issue of the potential of the photographic image (or moving image) to secure an infallible account of the past (or of "reality") is central to the concerns of this thesis, and it is raised in a variety of ways. In *Blade Runner*, for example, photographs are used as memory substitutes (or constructed memories) and serve to position the subject within an experience of self which is wholly artificial/fabricated/simulated. Simultaneously, the film itself serves as a nostalgic twist on the *film noir* genre, echoing traces of an historic past which is entirely mediated. History – or memory – is thus manufactured in terms of images. Other films (particularly those discussed in chapter seven) blend "reality" with dreams, fantasies, memories and "pure" cinematic experience, suggesting that distinctions between these different levels of "reality" are themselves illusory, giving rise to the notion that all "reality" is effectively "virtual".

The boundary between "reality" and "realism" (which is essentially another understanding of "hyperreality") is exploded most effectively in the developing and

increasingly popular forms of voyeuristic imaging and technology. Pornographic films, for example, have existed since the early days of cinema history, while "transgressive" images are increasingly finding their way into mainstream, popular cinema. Contemporary developments in communications technologies such as the Internet have aided the proliferation of "channels" and "films" featuring the private lives of individuals who either willingly or unwittingly become the object of voyeuristic observation. While Internet subscribers can watch the daily lives of households of scantily clad students, for example, television programmes featuring home-videos or secretly filmed comic incidents have long been popular. Even more invasive television programming includes pseudo-moralistic "quasi-realistic" "talk-shows" in which participants are encouraged to reveal their most intimate secrets in front of millions of viewers. The infamous *Jerry Springer Show*, for example, promotes venomous encounters between individuals who discuss the details of their personal relationships for mass media consumption. While the show thrives on the savage (and comic) verbal and physical attacks which make up the body of the programme, the host (Springer) concludes each programme with a slice of his own moralistic opinion. With the "realism" of such examples of "reality television" approaching the absurd levels of a violent cartoon, it has become apparent that postmodern cinema has also collapsed the boundary between transgressive and socially acceptable "realities". In one sense, certain filmmakers are refusing to conform to established notions of taste and are bringing aspects of the personal, private and hidden into the public sphere (see chapter five). In another sense, filmmakers are attempting to emulate the illusion of "reality" by emulating the appearance and style of so-called documentary (or home video) material (see chapter six).

Douglas Kellner, in an article on what he refers to as the "*Rambo* effect, the *Slacker* effect, and the *Beavis and Butt-Head* effect" (1997:189) concludes that "...media culture is drawn to violence and taboo-breaking action to draw audiences in an ever more competitive field" (1997:188). He argues that the media and its images and portrayal of (transgressive) ideas form part of a circuit of exchange in which "reality" and the media feed off one another, essentially forming a cultural hyperreality:

> ...so we see how media culture taps into its audience's concerns and in turn becomes part of a circuit of culture, with distinctive effects. Media cultural texts articulate social experiences, transcoding them into the medium of forms like television, film, or popular music. The texts are then appropriated by audiences, which use certain resonant texts and images to articulate their own sense of style, look, and identity. Media culture provides resources to make meanings, pleasure, and identity, but also shape and form specific identities

and circulate material whose appropriateness may insert audiences into specific positions (i.e. macho Rambo, sexy Madonna, disaffected Slackers, violent Beavis and Butt-Head, and so on) (Kellner, 1997:188).

Such a reading implies that the treatment and depiction of violence and other taboo-breaking activity in the media (and specifically, in cinema) carries both meaning and significance for film culture and for contemporary audiences. Many argue that the excesses of contemporary cinema are dangerous and lead to a violent, depraved and twisted society. The counter-argument states that motion pictures hold a mirror up "reality" and it is the ugly nature of the reflection that many people are afraid of encountering. The occurrence of transgressive elements in contemporary cinema is the focus of the discussion in chapter five, where cinema's obsession with sex, violence and profanity is considered in the context of the disintegration of the boundary between lowbrow and highbrow cinema forms.

In the distancing effects of surveillance cameras and "reality" television programmes the barrier between what is "real" and what is merely spectacular entertainment becomes impossible to determine. Our "reality" is defined not only by what we experience or encounter as "real" but also what we are *shown* to be "real". Recognising that the "real" has been replaced with its own representation many contemporary films refer to worlds (or "realities") created by the media, rather than to that which might be considered authentically "real". The contemporary cinema viewer may therefore be thought of as being subjected to a visual encounter with a world that – unlike the "reality of everyday life" – is *knowingly* simulated. In many contemporary (postmodern) films, "reality" collides with fantasy, dreams mix with waking moments and hallucinations blur the distinction between what is "real" and what is imagined. Often, these films present fragmented narratives that engage the viewer in a process of interpretation which resists any single interpretation of meaning. In this way, closure is also resisted and the narrative remains open-ended, capable of generating multiple interpretations. It is with this sense of contemporary cinema in mind that I have been led to the notion of cinema as *hyperartificial*. Whereas Baudrillard has postulated the hyperreal universe in which "reality" is usurped by images, the films discussed here are more arguably examples of "hypermediated anti-realism" which are aggressively and self-consciously aware of their own place within a cultural atmosphere that is constituted at the surface of self-referential images.

"Cool" meaning

I personally find very little joy in the effects of media. The only satisfaction I derive is learning how they operate. This is cool, in that it is at once involvement and detachment (McLuhan in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:331).

McLuhan has observed that the world is "diminishing in size" due to communication technologies which make (artificial) interaction across great distances easier, he also draws distinctions between what he refers to as "hot" and "cool" media. McLuhan (in Sandman, Rubin and Sachsman, 1972:232-233) refers to cinema and radio as "hot" media, while the telephone and television are "cool" media. He distinguishes between the two types of media in terms of the extent to which the medium "...extends one single sense...". A hot medium is therefore one which "...extends one single sense in 'high definition'" which "...is the state of being well filled with data". A photograph is therefore, visually, "high definition" because it provides the viewer with a great deal of visual information. "Realistic" cinema is an extension of this visual "high definition", providing the spectator with vast quantities of information within each frame. For McLuhan, "hot" media do not require much information to be filled in by the listener or viewer. "Cool" media, on the other hand, require that the listener or viewer (the receiver) fills in a great deal of information because very little information is actually provided. "Hot" media therefore require very little audience participation, while "cool" media require a great deal of participation by the audience or receiver.[4]

McLuhan's rather specific definitions of "hot" and "cool" media fail to adequately reflect that way in which the contemporary media environment is structured. Today, images, narratives and entire "media universes" may be said to co-exist in various contexts and formats. "Meaning" now functions across various spectra, thereby absorbing categories and disrupting the coherence of unique terms of understanding. As meaning fails to be totalised, our culture becomes one of "fragmentation and intertextual allusion" which characterises the "anti-universalism and anti-essentialism" of the postmodern age. Within the highly fragmented cultural environments of postmodern societies, "hot" and "cool" media commingle, collide and collapse into one another, allowing even the most superficial images to result in vast networks of information and meaning. This essentially disrupts the reliability of what is read from media images and makes the very concept of "meaning" relative. "Hot" visual media, in a sense, cease to produce high definition – or "hot" - images, since the viewer is

compelled to derive his or her own "meaning" from the surface of what is received. "Cool" thus becomes the dominant mode of reception in a media cycle which endlessly mirrors itself and in which cultural products necessitate some form of response or interaction. It is perhaps in this sense that McLuhan refers to his own response to the media as "cool" in that they demand "detached involvement". "Cool" may be understood as a form of "ironic detachment" which echoes the condition of film-viewing in a world dominated by media images that refer only to other images (or to themselves). "Cool" is precisely that condition of being "involved" in the "spectacle" offered by film images, while remaining "detached" through the very process of watching at a distance. While the spectator is involved in the action, drama and spectacle of the screen events, he or she remains consciously aware that these events are an illusion – they are not "reality".

The last machine

I have found myself asking: How could film be art, since all major arts arise in some way out of religion? Now I can answer: Because movies arise out of magic; from **below** *the world. [...] The better a film, the more it makes contact with this source of its inspiration; it never wholly loses touch with the magic lantern behind it (Cavell, 1979:39).*

The age-old dream of a liberated society has, despite ongoing "evidence" of political, intellectual and cultural attempts to achieve utopian ideals, produced "...a vacuum of values..." (Gronemeyer, 1999:156) which is symptomatic of the contemporary human condition. At the dawn of the Twenty-first Century, humankind is plagued by uncertainty and apprehension about a future which appears increasingly vague and unpredictable. Progress is affected by a relentless struggle to escape the past which has resulted in what certain commentators have described as the loss of historicity, yet human civilization is hopelessly bound to the effects of the past which we seek to deny. In terms of postmodern theory, human beings are no longer capable of locating themselves historically and we have lost our ability to deal with time (Sarup, 1993:146). Despite the lessons of history, the world continues to be afflicted by economic, political and social crises, and relationships between individuals and groups of people (in postmodern societies) have become dominated by virtual networks within a universe of relentless communication. The desire for peace and solidarity between all people has been upstaged by both globalisation and the ubiquity of mass media systems which impose their own "reality" thereby short-circuiting the

individual's connection with the world. In a sense, the terrible "realities" of poverty, war, pollution, environmental decay, murder, rape, crime and all types of abuse, have been transformed into images which distance us from their terrible effects while involving us in their overpowering ability to fascinate. Our own curiosity has led to our obsessive spectacularisation of "the real" which inevitably becomes as irresistible as the seductive images that pervade our dreams. Contemporary cinema[5] may be seen as a mirror reflecting those irresistible dreams as they "sweep away all resistance" and become our "reality". By looking at some of the developments in cinema during the second half of the Twentieth Century and, more specifically, at examples of contemporary films, I intend to investigate (and challenge) the assumption that postmodern culture is essentially anti-humanist. The extent to which such films encourage the involved detachment of the viewing subject may well suggest a new way of approaching moving images and demonstrating their significance in determining aspects of human autonomy, or humanity itself.

In 1971, Hollis Frampton (in Butler, 1995:408) wrote that "[c]inema is the Last Machine" and that "[i]t is probably the last art that will reach the mind through the senses". Both a technological device and an art form, cinema represents a way of both observing the actual world and simulating that world in such a way that the human spectator or viewer is given a new sense of what that world may be. While able to present us with simulated representations (simulations) of how things appear, how things work, and how we actually do things, cinematic (and photographic) images have also transformed the way in which individuals feel and think about their world. More than this, moving images have significantly impacted on the way in which the human subject is capable of understanding and interpreting the construction of "reality". Baudrillard has argued that the "real" has been replaced by simulacra, since there is no longer any "reality" to represent, but only the already-reproduced, or the already-mediated. "Reality" – or rather, hyperreality – is now an experience of the world as illusion, constructed and defined by media, communication systems and virtual spaces. In this sense, the cinema screen is not merely a reflection of some "reality", but rather a reflection of an "artificial" world which is always already-represented. Baudrillard (1992a:177) has argued that just as it is impossible to rediscover "…an absolute level of the real…", it is also impossible to stage an "illusion" since "…the real is no longer possible". Postmodern cinema mirrors the condition of the world in an ironic way (which I have termed "hyperartificial") suggesting a connection with our artificial "reality" while alluding to the illusory nature of that

"reality". While much of the counter-cinema of the modernist period functioned through the foregrounding (or disruption) of the mechanics of the cinematic process, postmodern (or hyperartificial) cinema foregrounds the dual processes of *showing* (representation) and *seeing* (viewing), thereby drawing attention to its own artificiality. Inevitably, this process leads the viewer away from the surface of the film images and activates ruptures in his or her experience of the "real" world which has been constructed in terms of similar systems of *showing* and *seeing* that exist within human society.

In the relatively short time that the cinema has existed, it has given rise to an extraordinary body of writing. Ideas, attitudes, opinions, facts, figures and trivia are proliferated in vast quantities, supposedly to enrich or expand our knowledge, appreciation or understanding of an artform which, according to Stanley Cavell (1979:40), presents science as magic. Cinema may be, and has been examined and analysed in numerous ways. It represents a cultural phenomenon which can be investigated from any number of perspectives. These perspectives can be broken down into their constituent components and can be examined separately in order to determine specific points of interest. Dudley Andrew considers the dangers of such an approach:

> The film, far from being a cold record of the world, is a record of that symbiotic rapport between intention and resistance, between author and material, mind and matter. The audience alone (including the author when he reviews his film) transforms this dull physical record into a vibrant human reality by experiencing that drama of mind and matter. When the semiotician spreads a film out for analysis, he stops the flow of time, the flow of the experience, and he risks treating the film like an object in nature. But the film is a hyper-natural object where truth exists only in the experiencing of it (Andrew, 1976:249).

It is this understanding of films as sites of "interactive" experience that is an essential basis for this discussion. Reading a film as "hyperartificial" serves to highlight its relationship with the art of filmmaking, as suggested by Cavell's understanding that film is rendered "art" because it comes "...from *below* the world". Yet, it is the magical ability of the cinema to reflect our "reality", our fantasies, our dreams - as though they were "reality" made "real" for the first time - which truly connects films with the "magic lantern" (the cinematic apparatus) of their creation. Indeed, this discussion shares with Cavell the opinion that cinema is "magical" in that it relates in manifold ways to the experience of being alive and being part of the project of "humanity".

Thus, by discussing various aspects of the development of contemporary cinema, and

focussing on a wide range of styles, techniques and themes that define postmodern filmmaking, I intend to investigate the significance of moving image representation for the human subject (or spectator), with particular focus on the various "realities" that inform our experience of the world. This discussion addresses some of what might be considered the most notable characteristics of Western films being made today, and includes some insight into the trends that will impact on the future of cinema in all its forms. Besides looking at some of the issues that have informed the historic development of Hollywood filmmaking and addressing some of the most notable aspects of postmodernism and postmodern cinema, this discussion explores ways in which cinema directly and indirectly deals with the question of "reality". Whether "reality" is a social construction, a cultural product or a purely mediated "virtuality", it enjoys a fundamental relationship with the cinema. The cinema is an apparatus for *showing*, and in this sense it also enjoys a relationship with our dreams, imaginations and memories. These relationships are explored through a series of discussions that focus primarily on specific examples of contemporary films.

Attempting to develop an argument usually implies that certain choices must be made and specific points-of-view must be assumed. While I have chosen specific films from which to draw inspiration, and have referred to specific writers to highlight certain aspects of this discourse, I would prefer to think that I have attempted to find a *position* from which to study films. There can be no right or wrong position, only one which is potentially useful and viable within a particular context. In this case, my position is mediated by the circumstances in which I have come to know, understand, experience and appreciate *certain* forms of cinema. My theoretical context, which has no doubt been most significantly influenced by various forms of cinema, is - like postmodernism - not a coherent theoretical framework at all. At the very least, my context - or frame of reference - is constituted by a personal interpretation of postmodernism, which is malleable, intangible and suspect. Essentially, what I have developed here, is not an argument at all, but a series of ideas about the system of *viewing* within the contemporary cinema which attempts to suggest that by *showing*, films are primarily humanising. I have attempted to construct a *sort-of* narrative which, according to the reader's own frame of reference, will hopefully produce new ideas, new meanings and new discourses.

One

Postmodernism and the end of "reality"

> *Social structures the world over are melting down and mutating, making way for the global McVillage, a Gaian brain, and a whole heap of chaos. The emperor of technoscience has achieved dominion, though his clothes are growing more threadbare by the moment, the once noble costume of Progress barely concealing far more wayward ambitions. Across the globe, ferocious postperestroika capitalism yanks the rug out from under the nation-state, while the planet spits up signs and symptoms of terminal distress. Boundaries dissolve, and we drift into the no-man's zones between synthetic and organic life, between actual and virtual environments, between local communities and global flows of goods, information, labor, and capital. With pills modifying personality, machines modifying bodies, and synthetic pleasures and networked minds engineering a more fluid and invented sense of self, the boundaries of our identities are mutating as well (Davis, 1999:1).*

Erik Davis uses this colourful description of the ferociously evolving contemporary world to give texture to what he sees as the "ultramodern condition" which describes the way in which Western societies have come to be established. Davis's description of "...the no-man's zones between synthetic and organic life, between actual and virtual environments..." into which we are drifting, conjures up an image of a world which borders on the "real" and verges on the dreamlike. Like the images of the world suggested by the surrealists, Davis's chaotic picture of "reality" is both frightening and somehow intangible. His imagery is suggestive of a cataclysmic future, while it clearly echoes the spirit of the era in which we now exist. This same view can be understood to describe what certain philosophers and writers have, for at least fifty years, referred to as "postmodernism". Jim Powell (1998:3) compares the intermixing of "[a]ll the world's cultures, rituals, races, databanks, myths and musical motifs..." to "...a smorgasbord in an earthquake", which may be critically compared to Davis's "whole heap of chaos". This tumultuous exchange between cultures and societies is the transient and playful landscape which is said to constitute *postmodern existence*. With reference to this contemporary cultural landscape, Iain Chambers (1998:194) suggests that "...we no longer confront 'organic' expressions but a cultural 'cut-up', a series of fragments..." which are inevitably sourced from a diversity of traditions, influences and experiences. This contemporary (postmodern) understanding of life can, in many ways, be compared to the cinematic art of montage. Cinema, much like Western existence today, offers an interpretation of "reality"[6] which is made up of (artificially) connected and interwoven images and image sequences.

Contemporary media and communication forms have enabled the abstraction of

information and imagery relating to the actual world to the extent that we now experience life itself as fragmented and superficial, and often from a detached perspective (via television news or security surveillance cameras, for example). As information and media technology expand and become more expansive, pervasive and intrusive, so the global nature of this cultural hybridisation becomes more a part of the human way of life[7]. Davis (1999:4) points out that the relationship between humans and our communication technologies is a special one, and that these "media" – or means of communication - are now "technocultural hybrids", combining both human scientific capabilities and aspects of human cultural endeavour:

> On the one hand, they are crafted things, material mechanisms that are conceived, constructed, and exploited for gain. But media technologies are also animated by something that has nothing to do with matter or technique. More than any other invention, information technology transcends its status as a thing, simply because it allows for the incorporeal encoding and transmission of mind and meaning. In a sense, this hybridity reflects the age-old sibling rivalry between form and content: the material and technical structure of media impose formal constraints on communication, even as the immediacy of communication continues to challenge formal limitations as it crackles from mind to mind, pushing the envelope of intelligence, art, and information flow (Davis, 1999:4).

Davis thus suggests that while developments in communication have occurred as a result of emerging technological achievements, such achievements have resulted from the basic human desire to transmit information – or, put another way, to communicate. The result of current information and communication technology is an ever-increasing interconnectedness whereby all things and all people are linked via a vast array of codes. Increasingly, communication technologies are able to eliminate or disguise the actual distances between individuals, thereby creating the illusion of immediacy and personal interaction. Vast distances are collapsed and differences of time and space are demonstrated to be artificial and illusory. Similarly, differences between societies, cultures and individuals are displaced in favour of "immediate" communication.

This understanding of the world has important implications for the development and interpretation of culture, art and entertainment, which are no longer reducible to categories such as "elitist" and "highbrow", or "popular" and "lowbrow". In a world where the music of Beethoven, the Beatles, and Body Count, can all be purchased from the same compact disc store, or where internet websites dedicated to primitive religion, sadomasochism or Quentin Tarantino can all be accessed from the same computer console, it is no longer reasonable to assign status symbols to any

particular culture or style of art. The Internet allows the fascinating and the banal to exist side-by-side as their relative "values" are absorbed into an imaginary landscape which renders all information and communication equally accessible as it is conflated into a single product. We now view the world as expanding and shrinking in the same instant because of the proliferation ("explosion") of ever-expanding communications technologies and an on-going development of "little cultures" through the "fragmentation" of existing cultures. It is to this view of the world that a number of contemporary thinkers assign the term "postmodern reality". According to Peter Brooker (1998:2), "[t]he terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism' surfaced briefly in the forties and fifties and were then employed, still earlier than is usually supposed, in the next decade as organising terms in critical essays registering tremors in cultural values". This understanding of a universe of "interconnected differences" suggests a world in which singular, easily definable notions of existence (or "reality") no longer apply. Hence, from a postmodern perspective, life is no longer reducible to any single conception of "reality", meaning, truth or reason. "Reality" is now understood as relative, and is constructed in terms of the individual subject's personal interpretation of the world and everything in it. Indeed, it is an attempt to understand this fragmented "reality" (if this is a viable term at all) in terms of the role played by contemporary cinema, which forms the basis of this thesis.

"Reality" as a social construct

'Erfahrung is die Ursache, die Welt die Folge (experience is the cause, the world is the result)'
(Von Foerster in Van den Bulck, 1999:6).

"Reality" is a complex concept which conjures up a myriad of social, psychological, philosophical, emotional and cultural definitions. Generally, it is assumed that "reality" refers to that which may be considered a "socially accepted" understanding, or knowledge, of the known world. Whether such an understanding (or knowledge) may be defined as "truth" is, according to the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, entirely irrelevant, because human societies tend to take a particular view of the world for granted, whether or not such a view is based on accurate knowledge. Schutz argues that "[i]t is the meaning of our experiences and not the ontological structure of the objects which constitutes reality" (in Van den Bulck, 1999:3). Each and every individual may be considered to have a unique understanding of "reality" based on a

particular perception and interpretation of their experiences in the world. Furthermore, individuals accord particular meaning and significance to their specific experiences in order to establish the concept of "reality" in their lives. This understanding of "reality" is suggested by Rene Descartes' popular idiom, "I think, therefore I am", which pertains to the notion that individuals conceptualise specific realities according to their own personal perceptions of their experiences in the world. From this perspective, knowledge and information do not really constitute "reality", but rather form a basis upon which "reality" may be defined. Nevertheless, individuals and entire societies frequently allow their "realities" to be constituted in terms of existing knowledge and information which may be more accurately described as hearsay, myth, history, belief, interpretation, faith or even fantasy. Such "knowledge" is fed to children from birth in such a way that they are exposed to a particular conception of socially-determined "reality". According to Jack Zipes (1997:123), "[a]dult versions of 'reality' are imposed on children to ensure that they are positioned physically, socially and culturally to experience their own growth and life around them in specified ways". From early in life, children are reminded that "reality" is an unbending, inflexible force which is "empirically verifiable"[8] (Zipes, 1997:123). It is important to note that, in order for any of these extant systems of knowledge to constitute a particular "reality", they must be the product of general social agreement (religious belief systems and codes of moral conduct are obvious examples of this form of socially constituted "reality"). Hayden White (in Tomasulo, 1996:70) goes so far as to argue that "[i]t does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined, the manner of making sense of it is the same". Indeed, societies are generally concerned with bringing to individuals a particular idea of a single, unquestionable "reality" against which all other forms of existence may be compared and contrasted. Notions of the world which fall outside this common (or shared) understanding of "reality" are established as "outlandish", "fantastical", "surreal", "imaginary" or "illusory", thereby reinforcing the basic reliability of the primary social "real".

According to the sociologists Berger and Luckmann (in Van den Bulck, 1999:3), it is because knowledge is unreliable that a distinction between "objective" and "subjective" social realities should be drawn. "Objective social reality" is what may be termed "the real world", or, as Van den Bulck (1999:3) defines it, "...the social order, society such as it is before and without the individual". This world may be unknown to, or ignored by, particular individuals, but necessarily continues to exist. Created

and sustained by people, such a "reality" exists independently of the contemplation and interrogation of individuals within society. This is "reality" as social fact (*cf.* Durkheim). "Subjective social reality", by contrast, is the "image" formed by individuals of "objective social reality" (Berger & Luckmann in Van den Bulck, 1999:3). By a process of "socialisation", people "internalise" a learnt understanding of "...how the world quite simply 'is'" (Van den Bulck, 1999:3). While it is impossible that any individual would be able to become completely socialised, successful socialisation may be described as the achievement of a high degree of correspondence between objective and subjective social realities. By this interpretation, it would appear that the constitution of "reality" within a society is best served by the adherence of the individual to an established set of "truths" or systems of belief. The greater the degree of symmetry between what society has constituted as "real" and what the individual believes to be "real", the better the chance that the individual will be accepted, or viewed, as a legitimate (socialised) member of that society.

"Subjective reality", which is the knowledge that an individual has about the world, is discussed by Schutz and Berger and Luckmann as having several characteristics (which may impact on my discussion of the relationship between cinema and "reality"). Knowledge of the world is assimilated "...subconsciously and incidentally..." (Van den Bulck, 1999:3) typically through the individual's interaction with the world and other people from an early age. Through imitation, reward and punishment, and other forms of learning, people develop impressions and perceptions of how "reality" is constituted (thus, so-called "abnormal" beliefs and behaviour may be seen to result from exposure to asocial or negative influences, or corrupting forces, for example). Individuals rely on the "truth" of the knowledge they gave internalised for as long as it continues to serve them satisfactorily. People therefore act according to an established view of "reality" until such time as they have cause to doubt the validity of such a view.[9] It is also argued that people believe their knowledge of the world to be the same knowledge that is shared by the majority of other people. Thus, by subscribing to a perceived shared "reality", individuals "...believe that the world 'is' the way they see it" (Van den Bulck, 1999:4). Finally, knowledge of objective social reality is generally limited to that which one needs to know. Routine actions are usually carried out without much detailed knowledge or understanding of *how* or *why* such actions are able to occur. Most people know very little about the way in which a film is able to be shown, for example, yet this does not prevent them from enjoying the experience offered by going to a cinema. Each individual's knowledge is therefore

limited to that which enables his or her day-to-day activities. Members of a society live according to a "reality" which is constituted by a "common stock of knowledge" which is shared by all the members of that society, or at the very least is believed to be shared by them (Van den Bulck, 1999:4).

Schutz uses the term "*Lebenswelt*" or "lifeworld" to describe "subjective social reality". This lifeworld is the physical world and knowable "reality" in which an individual exists and interacts with other individuals. Thus, even an individual's subjective reality is defined by the way in which *other individuals* understand "reality". Individuals, however, are not able to distinguish between objective and subjective reality, because the way in which one perceives "reality" constitutes "reality" for each individual. This does not mean that individuals are unable to distinguish between various kinds of "reality". Indeed, most people understand that the "reality" experienced during a dream or under the influence of drugs, for example, differs from a "normal" experience of "reality". Similarly, it is generally quite clear that when one watches a film, the world which "exists" on the screen is an imaginary one - a two dimensional representation of some "reality" which may, or may not, resemble the actual world in which we live. Such "realities" - dream worlds, drug-induced stupors and cinematic environments - are described as being "temporary", and are distinguishable from a single "paramount reality of everyday life"[10] to which one always "returns". This paramount reality cannot be denied, because it is constituted by a general perception of the world which is *intersubjective*. The lifeworld is, therefore, "...a quite literal 'environment' within which the individual lives together with others and interacts on the basis of socially determined processes of meaning construction" (Van den Bulck, 1999:4). Such an definition of a universal reality relies on the determination of shared forms of "meaning" which refer to the significance and understanding of various experiences in the world.

Van den Bulck (1999:5) argues, however, that subjective social reality is always "...an interpretation of the 'real' world". Since individuals are unable to know everything that constitutes the world, it would be impossible to expect anyone to have a complete understanding of "reality". Furthermore, since every individual must process each and every stimulus before forming a perception of it, the possibility exists that different people experience even the same stimuli in different ways. In this sense, according to Thomas Kuhn, individuals are indeed able to "...live in different worlds", or according to W. Lippman, "...live in the same world, but...think and feel in a different one" (in

Van den Bulck, 1999:5). Thus, while different individuals may come into contact with the same physical objects, their experience of these objects will be influenced by the *different* meanings which they assign or attach to them. Since "reality" is therefore always constructed according to interpretation, it is necessarily impossible to compare one's own understanding or knowledge of what is "real" with that which may be defined as "physical reality" or "actual reality".

Van den Bulck acknowledges four different forms of "constructivist" theory which each describe different ways in which "reality" is constructed. Naive constructivists "...assume that objective reality exists and accept without much questioning that their own image of it totally coincides with reality such as it 'is'" (Van den Bulck, 1999:5). Trivial constructivists, on the other hand, take it for granted that an objective reality exists independently of the perceptions of the individual. This assumption implies that there is a "reality" with which the individual's image of "reality" - or media depictions of "reality" - can be compared. In this regard, some authors[11] compare and contrast an existing "real" world with "...any 'non-existing' world" (Van den Bulck, 1999:5). Social constructivists theorise that language is responsible for all existence. "Reality" can, according to such theory, not exist without human perception, presumably because "reality" is itself a human concept. According to radical constructivists, "objective reality" is itself a construction and without the "constructive participation of the perceiver" (Van den Bulck, 1999:5-6), "reality" can never be known because it is impossible to compare one's perception of "reality" with the "reality" that led to the construction of that perception. Thus, "reality" as it is known to the individual, is the only "reality", or, by a similar interpretation, "reality" does not actually exist at all.

The German writer, Beck (in Van den Bulck, 1999:8), distinguishes between the two German words *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit*, both of which are translated in English as "reality". Beck points out, however, that *Realität* refers to that which is thought to exist "...without and outside cognitive reality...", and may therefore be thought of as "objective reality". *Wirklichkeit*, however, refers to that which the brain makes of *Realität*, such that *Wirklichkeit* is constructed by "brain activity". Thus,

> [t]he *Realität* does not exist in the *Wirklichkeit*, because the latter is the only concept which is accessible to us. *Realität* is nothing more that a 'cognitively necessary idea'. People cannot but accept the idea that there is a reality (Van den Bulck, 1999:8).

Beck's ideas may be simplified (particularly since many languages do not use different

words to differentiate between the types of "reality" to which he refers) by suggesting that individuals construct a "personal image of reality" or "subjective social reality" (*Wirklichkeit*) in response to the contact or interaction which they have with "objective social reality". Such contact may occur through direct experience or through communication. Communication, in turn, may include both personal "...face-to-face interaction with others or confrontation with media messages" (Van den Bulck, 1999:8).

An alternative understanding of such an aggressive reading of radical constructivism is that "reality" does indeed exist, but that it cannot "...be determined conclusively and objectively", rather "[t]hat through their actions human beings create a meaningful, 'experience-reality'" (Van den Bulck, 1999:6). The individual's perception of "reality" or a society's concept of "reality" can therefore not be measured against any "reality" which may exist independent of observation and cognition. The world is, in effect, the creation of human experience, perception and thought. "Reality" can really only be understood as some image or knowledge or idea of "*reality*" - particularly since that which exists inside the mind of the individual is always a notion of "reality" rather than "reality" itself. Equally, "objective reality" is merely the perception of objectivity obtained through the process of social experience by the individual who thereby gains insight into the social conception of "reality". An implication of this notion of reality is that each person's image of the real world may actually bear "...little resemblance to what exists in the real world, but is close to what his or her environment considers to be 'real'" (Van den Bulck, 1999:6). Curiously, such an understanding of "reality" begins to suggest a significant resemblance between what is considered to be "real" and what is quite clearly "artificial". This is particularly evident when one considers how individuals receive information about the world and about "reality". In order for individuals to construct an image or understanding or perception of "reality", information from the world must be received, and most of this information will inevitably be mediated.

Mediated "reality"

A sociology of knowledge should, in fact, start from a mediation theory as the social construction of reality is mainly a communicative process (Van den Bulck, 1999:3).

It is impossible for any individual to encounter everything which is likely to contribute to his or her "reality" through direct contact or face-to-face experience within the actual world. Indeed, as Van den Bulck (1999:6) points out, individuals "...seldom learn about reality directly", and much of the information that we receive about the "real" world may be mediated in some way or another.[12] While interacting with others and learning from personal experiences and mistakes may account for a great deal of the direct learning opportunities of individuals, the various media allow "...speech acts to be freed from spatio-temporal contextual limitations and [to be] made available for multiple and future contexts" (Habermas in Van den Bulck, 1999:6). This "freeing up" of speech acts makes it possible for experiences to be generalised and abstracted, "...so that they may be shared with people who lack direct experience, independently of distinct, individual cases" (Van den Bulck, 1999:6).

As will be explored throughout this chapter (and in subsequent chapters), much of what we understand to be part of "reality" is not learnt or internalised through direct experience. Habermas (in Van den Bulck, 1999:6) notes, for example, that various media allow communication to be freed from the limitations of time and space as contextualising agents, allowing speech acts to be postulated in "...multiple and future contexts". In order for specific or individual acts to become incorporated into the broader context of social generalisation, they must first be detached from the specific context in order to be shared by other individuals who are denied each particular direct experience. Furthermore, communication is required for such experiences to be "acquired" by non-participating individuals. It may be argued that numerous valuable "perceptions" of "reality" cannot be learned directly, but only through indirect means, through mediation. Many abstract concepts, for example, cannot be *seen* directly but must be acquired through symbolic or metaphoric examples (Schutz in Van den Bulck, 1999:6-7). The importance of *communication* in human interaction cannot be underestimated, while Luhmann (in Van den Bulck, 1999:7) acknowledges that this is "...the most fundamental and inevitable aspect of [all] social situations...". While, communication between individuals or groups of individuals forms the basis of

intersubjectivity (which may, in turn, be seen as the basis of human socialisation), such communication need not occur in one-on-one or face-to-face situations. Bandura (in Van den Bulck, 1999:7) has argued that since people possess "...the very advanced skill to learn through observation". Even more importantly, individuals are able to acquire significant amounts of information regarding "...human values, thinking patterns, and behaviour..." through symbolic portrayals of a "verbal" or "pictorial" nature (in Van den Bulck, 1999:7).

The evolution of various media forms which enable individuals and groups of individuals to acquire knowledge and experiential information has further complicated and diversified the structure of our shared "reality". According to Meyrowitz (in Van den Bulck, 1999:7), the development of the (mass) media has been chiefly responsible for the reduced importance of "...physical presence in the experience of people and events". While this now-popular notion suggests that direct experience ("physical presence") was once responsible for learning, it should rather be understood that the evolution of the various media has intensified and expanded the extent and importance of indirect experience. The media have introduced the "...possibility of learning about what is far removed from the 'here and now'" (Van den Bulck, 1999:7), which suggests that the social "reality" of any individual may result from a far wider range of learning "experiences". Van den Bulck (1999:7) notes that such forms of (mass) media communication "...can only be defined negatively as *all communication not based on direct face-to-face interaction...*", but argues that "...the ascent of the media..." has not actually "...created a new, previously non-existent, form of communication...". Media communication, therefore, is not to be understood as being in direct contrast with "direct" face-to-face interaction. In this sense, it may be argued that all "realities" are mediated in some way, even when they may be based on direct experience. Van den Bulck (1999:7) notes that "...almost every contact with social reality is mediated":

> ...all social interaction involves mediation in so far as there are always "vehicles" that "carry" social interchange across spatial and temporal gaps (Giddens in Van den Bulck, 1999:7).

Such an understanding of social interaction implies that all communication is mediated in some way, while Boeckmann (in Van den Bulck, 1999:7) notes that "...all that is not directly observable is observable only through communication (or through 'media')".

According to Adoni and Mane (in Van den Bulck, 1999:7), media contents – along with

other cultural artefacts such as art and literature – may be seen as a form of *"symbolic social reality"* which may be defined as "...any form of symbolic expression of objective reality". These "symbolic realities" differ from one another in terms of the various symbol systems which they employ. "Symbolic reality" is able to explain "social reality", and it is in this sense that many writers, note the importance of stories (Berger and Luckmann) and narrative (Habermas) in explaining or legitimising "reality". Stories, language and story-telling contribute to the way in which societies and individuals are able to share in a "common stock of knowledge" which ultimately establishes a particular understanding of "reality". Narratives and stories help to create and legitimise a particular image of the world and "how it is supposed to be", thus establishing a particular concept of "reality". Such perceptions of "reality" are generally experienced by individuals as being objective because they are already-established and supported by the society in which he or she finds him or herself.

The media may be seen as being responsible for informing individuals within a society about the world. In terms of Adoni and Mane's definition of "symbolic social reality", the image of the world which the media conveys should be "...seen as a 'reflection' or even a 'distortion' of reality" (Van den Bulck, 1999:8) which may be experienced in three different ways. Media messages can be received as some kind of perceived genuine interaction (*"para-social interaction"*) which convincingly give the receiver the impression that he or she is interacting with the contents of the media message. This occurs when, for example, someone watches a programme on television and believes that he or she is being directly addressed. Media messages – such as those received in the form of news broadcasts - may also be "...perceived as a kind of documentary, whereby the receiver believes that he or she is observing reality directly" (Van den Bulck, 1999:8). "Storytelling" is the name often given to the third way in which media messages may be experienced by individuals. Fictional (and non-fictional) enactments or dramatisations of stories or events make various experiences accessible to viewers, listeners and other "receivers". Television and cinema may be considered significant storytellers because they both offer impressions, "facts", ideas, opinions and information "...about the world, about the essence of human nature or about the consequences of actions in a dramatised and very realistic looking way..." (Van den Bulck, 1999:8). Numerous studies have shown that

> [f]ictional media accounts can...structure, shape and influence perceptions, beliefs and popular understanding (in some cases more powerfully than factual accounts) (Miller and Philo, 1996:20).

It should perhaps be noted that the media are also capable of "realistically" communicating information and ideas about experiences which do not originate in any "objective social reality", while allowing the receiver to interact in some way with the contents of the "message". The storytelling media now include computer and video games as well as interactive cinema forms which allow the viewer-player to manipulate the narrative aspects of a story.

Since the media make particular choices with regard to what information is distributed and which images of the world are made available to the public, the media may be understood to make a significant contribution to the contemporary experience of "reality". Receivers of media messages generally assimilate information from the media as though it were a part of "objective social reality". Accordingly, the media exert particular influence over the experience of both "objective social reality" and the "subjective social reality" of individuals. The various choices made by the media in either representing "stories" or "events" from the actual world, or depicting stories from the imaginations of television and film-writers, for example, contributes to the various interpretations of "reality" of various individuals. Not only do the media influence the ways in which people experience (or make "indirect" contact with) the actual world, but they also influence the content of this experience through the way in which they choose to reflect (or distort or comment on) this world. The media therefore both alter and influence "reality" through selection and interference. The significance of such influence is suggested by statistical reports regarding the choices made by the American media:

> Today, a foreign story that does not involve bombs, natural disaster or financial calamity has little chance of entering the American consciousness....Television news in the heyday of Walter Cronkite, John Chancellor and Frank Reynolds contained at least 40% international coverage. The figure today is 7% to 12% and dropping (Peter Arnett in Campbell, 2000:16).

Arnett (in Campbell, 2000:16) further argues that, "...seeking greater profits through larger audiences..." American television stations consistently feed "...the public a diet of crime news, celebrity gossip and soft features, choosing to exclude more serious topics that news managers feared would not stimulate public attention". Such statistics and analyses allude to the power of the media to manipulate and distort the worldview of those individuals who make "contact" with "objective social reality" through newspapers, radio and television. As Van den Bulck (1999:10) notes, "[r]eality is mainly 'social' and 'cultural'", and it is therefore inevitable that symbolic disseminators of information which have the power to reach vast numbers of

individuals within a society are more likely to be interpreted as "real" by those individuals.

Information in the age of the image

In our century, photography…'conquered space and time, the present whittled down to a shared iconography.' News became 'real' and 'true' when it had a photo attached, an image that could be seen simultaneously, all over the world (Vidal-Hall, 1999:1).

For many thinkers and writers, Western society is now firmly in the grasp of an endless supply of information, an era when notions of "reality" are constructed by the perpetual flow of images, signs and codes which feed our mass consciousness and present us with a series of representations of who we supposedly are or what we want to be. Society appears to "work so hard" at taking many of our experiences from the actual world and making them "seem unreal" by making them "…appear as spectacle rather than lived experience" (Phillips, 1999:95). Images from the world, by this understanding, would appear to serve as a means of transforming the "objectively real" into something which is somehow "less than real". Images allow us the opportunity to look away from that which is "too terrible" for sustained experience, or to prolong the enjoyment which we might experience from a particular moment in time. Peter Brooks (1999:145) notes that the postmodern age is "…intensely visual…" and is largely "…defined by film, video, dance, performance art, blockbuster museum shows". As Jean-Louis Comolli suggests, since the late nineteenth century we have lived in a 'frenzy of the visible', and certainly our own time has seen only an intensification of the frenzy" (Brooks, 1999:145). In this respect, Peter and Will Brooker (1997a:1) note that our (postmodern) culture is "…one of unrelenting style and surface for which television's flattened screen provides the perfect medium and metaphor".

Olivier (1996:161) refers to the Heideggerian argument "…that we live in the 'age of the world-picture', i.e. of the world as a picture or image", and notes that in contemporary times, "…representation has become ubiquitous, as the unexceptional presence of television in our homes amply demonstrates". He also notes that contemporary society is further preoccupied "…with the image in various modes"[13] (1996:161), ranging from the seemingly innocuous reflections provided by mirrors, to the frightening repercussions suggested by various forms of image-based surveillance

technology. Olivier (1996:163) also considers the link between certain forms of surveillance technology and the invasion of a wide spectrum of electronic media into the private and public spheres to be highly significant. We are, in a sense, increasingly becoming the subject-victims of various cameras. Current media technology has more than adequately demonstrated the "...awesome power which it wields (or can exercise) over our lives" (Olivier, 1996:163). Indeed, we exist in an age suggested by the announcement by the renowned French postmodernist, Baudrillard[14], that the consumer society has been replaced by "the information society" (in his 1985 book, *La gauche divine*). Postmodernity is associated with the foregrounding of so-called "information societies" in which the flow and accessibility of "information" is seen as the factor which determines the level of sophistication of that society. According to Brooker and Brooker (1997a:2), we exist now in a "future-present" where "...information has become the new object of power and vicarious stimulation the order of the day":

> ...we now speak of the information society in the same breath as globalisation, international competitiveness, foreign direct investment, scientific and technological innovation, life long learning (as if we're not always learning anyway), information and communication technologies and other staples of a neo-liberal economic outlook. The language and priority of basic social needs such as health, housing, education, labour standards and community issues have been relegated to a secondary status so e-commerce, intellectual property rights, online access to government information, and disjointed public information access projects now monopolise the information society agenda (Dick, 2000:7).

In postmodern societies, information appears to be prized above even the most basic of human necessities, while the distribution of information clearly serves to establish and maintain power relationships.

However, while information can easily be passed from one individual to another through the Internet, for example, "meaning" cannot be exchanged in the same way. In an information society, "meaning" fades into the background as information becomes the primary social and cultural currency. This transition, claims Baudrillard, demands our participation, but immediately asserts the absurdity of its own endlessness and self-perpetuation forcing the claim that "...we are fatigued in advance and perplexed..."[15] (Baudrillard in Kellner, 1989:204). While the consumer society offered "a grand spectacle of commodities" which was supplemented by poignant political activity and action,

> ...the new society promises to function in a quite different glacial and non-spectacular manner. Operationality has replaced usage, the contact, the

> networking and the promiscuity of information replace the prestiges of transcendence…. Absolute and excessive promiscuity. The simultaneity of all points of space, of time, of people under the sign of the instantaneity of light: no more language…. One speaks of the closeness (*proxemique*) of human relations. It is better instead to speak of the *procuring* (*proxenetique*) *of information*, of flux, of circuits, which institute a proximity of all places, of all human beings related to each other, the circularity of questions and of responses, of problems and of their solutions. The scatology of information: the dream of an absolute conductability [*sic*] can only be excremental (Baudrillard in Kellner, 1989:204-205).

Certainly, Baudrillard's view of the contemporary information era is a bleak one. He refers to the "ecstasy of communication" and "promiscuity" of information as symptoms of the developments in media and communication technology. At its worst, he sees the current excess of information as "…a sort of electrocution" which "…produces a sort of continual short-circuit where the individual burns its circuits and loses its defences"[16] (in Kellner, 1989:205). For Baudrillard, the Western world has become overwhelmed by the ceaseless flow of information.[17] Furthermore, much of this information finds its way to us in the form of images and visual signs which are continually present and visible (although the "message" or "meaning" may remain invisible or elusive) in the form of advertising or television news, for example.[18]

Baudrillard's view of contemporary information systems producing a "fatigued" and "perplexed" society relates rather closely to McLuhan's anticipation of the "…'global village' of instant communication and cross-cultural community" in response to the rising tide of technologies during the 1960s (Brooker and Brooker, 1997a:1). McLuhan's concept of the "global village" suggests how the development of modern communications systems have reduced the entire world to village-like proportions. McLuhan (in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:314) argues that village conditions, which he compares with life "…under a single roof in any family…", lead to "more diversity" and "less conformity" than one might find "…with the thousands of families in the same city". He argues that village conditions lead to "…more discontinuity and division and diversity", and that as the world becomes effectively "smaller", "…uniformity and tranquillity…" are consumed by "…spite and envy". The emergence of the "global village" implies that the world becomes a place where "…people encounter each other in depth all the time" because the "…spaces and times are pulled out from between people":

> The tribal-global village is far more diverse – full of fighting – than any nationalism ever was. Village is fission, not fusion, in depth. People leave small towns to *avoid* involvement. The big city *lined* them with its uniformity and impersonal milieu. They sought propriety and in the city, money is made by

uniformity and repeatability. Where you have craftsmanlike diversity, you make art, not money. The village is not the place to find ideal peace and harmony. [...] I don't *approve* of the global village. I say we live in it (McLuhan in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:314-315).

McLuhan's ideas have been accentuated in later years by Baudrillard who "...sees a universe of detached, floating signifiers, free of content and reference" (Brooker and Brooker, 1997a:1). Concerns raised by the overwhelming proliferation of information are complicated by the emergence and widespread use of computer systems, particularly with the transformation of the contemporary work and leisure environments through the development of the Internet and cyberspace (see chapter six for further discussion of cyberspace and its relationship to "virtual reality").

Umberto Eco (in Marshall, 1996:68) sees a further danger emanating from the dominance of cyberspace communication in the form of social, cultural or intellectual stratification based on access to information and knowledge. Eco raises the possibility of the risk of the development of a new type of social order – one in which knowledge brings control and offers power:

> There is a risk that we might be heading towards an online *1984*, in which Orwell's 'proles' are represented by the passive, television-fed masses that have no access to this new tool, and wouldn't know how to use it if they did. Above them, of course, there'll be a petit bourgeoisie of passive users - office workers, airline clerks. And finally we'll see the masters of the game, the nomenklatura - in the Soviet sense of the term. This has nothing to do with class in the traditional, Marxist sense - the nomenklatura are just as likely to be inner-city hackers as rich executives. But they will have one thing in common: the knowledge that brings control. We have to create a nomenklatura of the masses (Eco in Marshall, 1996:68).

While Eco senses some danger associated with the way in which the various computer technologies will influence social structures in the near-future, he does draw a distinction between the effects of television and the Internet. Essentially, Eco (in Marshall, 1996:70) feels that serious Internet use allows the user to "objectively" decide what material is to be looked at: "There is an objective difference between downloading the works of Chaucer and goggling at the Playmate of the Month". For this reason, Eco compares the Internet with television, arguing that television tends to reduce most programming "...to the fact of its own existence..." while the Internet does not. Accordingly, Eco (in Marshall, 1996:70) believes that McLuhan's "the medium is the message" slogan "...works a lot better for television than it does for the Internet". Eco's argument suggests that while the television may be experienced as a direct window onto (or link with) objective "reality", the way in which the Internet is

used allows it to remain a tool whereby access to information about various objective and subjective "realities" may be obtained. Furthermore, it should be remembered that while both television and the Internet may be considered mass media of communication, the Internet does not deliver its information simultaneously to any mass of individuals. Similarly, the Internet does not necessarily deliver all possible information to any number of individuals in the same way that a television channel is likely to do.

One of Baudrillard's major contributions to contemporary philosophy has been his development of a theory which attempts to understand the influence and effects of mass communication on contemporary society. His ideas have centred around the effects of existing in an image-saturated world which absorbs and transforms "reality" through increasing degrees of mediated self-referentiality. Evidence of his theories having been realised within Western societies abound, and during the 1970s and 1980s, he was considered by many to be "...the most advanced theorist of the media and society in the so-called postmodern era" (Kellner, 1989:60):

> In a sense, the crystallised orthodoxy of his ideas has taken hold and has dissolved into the technological realities surrounding us. He coined the neologism "simulacra" referring to the ambient play of images that is our culture, a place where authenticity is subsumed in an increasingly self-referential mediascape, where styles, events and destinies disappear and become fundamentally mediated chimeras (Fordham, 1997:80).

By the time he wrote *On Seduction* in 1979, Baudrillard favoured the Nietzschean critique of a centralised notion of "truth". His model similarly resists the privileging of rationality and espouses the postmodern celebration of surface-play, thereby "...challenging theories that 'go beyond' the manifest to the latent" (Sarup, 1993:163). Just as Baudrillard's view of the world tends towards a science-fictional[19] warning about the "fatality" of an information network which entirely connects all humanity, so his writings are highly ironic accounts of an apocalyptic vision of the present. His view of society is based on the "...key assumption that the media, simulations and what he calls 'cyberblitz' constitute a new realm of experience and a new stage of history and type of society" (Kellner, 1989:60). This theory is foregrounded by a reworking of radical social theory and politics, informed by his understanding of the world as increasingly influenced by consumerism, the media, information flow, and the proliferation of technology.

Just as it is accepted as postmodern "fact" that contemporary (Western) humankind is

at one with a continual (quite out-of-control) flow of information and images, so the technology which generates and facilitates this endless flow has enveloped us:

> Just as technology was developed to control nature, media was developed to control populations. "Mass media" is not the study of how people communicate with one another. It is the science of coercion through TV, radio, print, and advertising…. We fell in love with media itself, and began to value the processes of broadcasting more than any particular message (Rushkoff, 1998:31).

McLuhan, whose analyses of the development of an information society provide a basis for Baudrillard's cynical projections[20], sees the developments in the mass media as part of the very history of humanity. For McLuhan (1996:8), the advances made by humankind are more a result of the types of communication media available to us than the content of that communication. Baudrillard sees the outcome of an information society as "suffocation", the result of too much information which ultimately swamps us and reduces us to lifeless, although existing, forms. In another sense, the result of this proliferation of information is a Western world that is suffused with a seemingly infinite number of "realities". Whereas life for members of premodern communities and tribal societies might never have been exposed to the worldview of any other group, life today offers the possibility of "encountering" (or being made aware of) any number of cultures, influences, beliefs or "realities", in any number of combinations, often simultaneously, and frequently in a hybrid form. The global nature of the current communication network is a relatively recent development in human history and can be linked to the extreme momentum with which communications media have evolved during recent times. Information and images are proliferated in ever-increasing abundance, throughout the world.

In an article detailing the life of "the father of broadcasting", David Sarnoff, Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner (1998:44) reflect that "…television is the most influential medium of the 20th century", and that "[w]hile some people critique its content, no one debates television's power". "It is the window through which we see reality…", they write, "…as well as the window that permits us to escape from it." Initiated as what Sarnoff (in Carsey, 1998:44) referred to as "…an art which shines like a torch of hope in a troubled world", television has – like the other media which constantly reflect and comment on our world – become part of a communications system which "changes" reality into a series of images. Olivier (1996:160) notes that television is an information medium which "…mediates between viewer and world and, in extreme cases of media-saturation, seems to become a substitute for the world, in the form of what Baudrillard calls hyperreality". A similar understanding of the relationship

between cinema and "reality" is posed by Dana Polan who echoes Nietzsche with his concept of the film's *"will-to-spectacle"* which is an assertion of the idea that the world "...only has substance – in some cases, only is meaningful – when it appears as image, when it is shown, when it exists as phenomenal appearance, a look..." (Polan in Olivier, 1996:55). While no other human-conceived system, including language, is yet able to communicate the "meaning" of "reality", images come close to *showing* at least some degree of (superficial) "reality". However, according to Polan (in Olivier, 1996:55), it is in its ability to *show* "everything" that the image can "*say* nothing":

> ...it frames a world and banishes into nonexistence everything beyond that frame. The will-to-spectacle is the assertion that a world of foreground is the only world that matters or is the only world that *is*...the fiction film is an impressionist medium that claims that things described matter more than things understood" (in Olivier, 1996:55).

According to McGrath (1996:16), "...the mechanical image imposes a new order upon the world, fragmenting and pulverising knowledge". In a society which confronts individuals with *depictions* of "reality" while concealing any signs which suggest the manufacture of that "reality", the distinction between nature and man-made commodity (or between "real" and "artificial") is abolished. As McGrath (1996:16-17) points out, photographs were passed off as a part of nature from the moment of their invention. Thus,

> Placed on the threshold between an old natural magical world and a newly emergent manufactured universe, the technologies of photography and film represented a dream of the simulacral: the copy without an original; the sign without referent, ultimately a signifier severed from its signified (McGrath, 1996:17).

McGrath thus sees images, as they are produced by photographic and cinematographic means, as producing or even inducing an alternative understanding or experience of "reality".

Postmodernism: a world of interconnected differences

...in its relentless exposure of forms of essentialism, in its insistence on difference and diversity, postmodernism blends with anti-racism and struggles against oppressively normal forms of (hetero)sexuality. Its radical critique of the great meta-narratives of modernity, its attention to universalising market 'logics', its debunking of the radical pretensions and values of High Modernism, and its de-centring of the 'sovereign subject', have been useful and provocative
(Pickering, 1997:82).

"Postmodernism" is a poorly understood and frequently dismissed concept which has

proved to be extremely problematic. Notably, the concept raises concerns because of the multiplicity of ways in which it is used by a wide range of people, many of whom apply the term in order to satisfy specific interests or arguments. The term "postmodernism" has been in use for over half a century, and while it has always been "...an elastic and somewhat nomadic term" (Brooker and Brooker, 1997a:1), it remains a "remarkably slippery concept" (Lapsley and Westlake, 1992:206) which eludes satisfactory definition because it is perceived in so many different ways. For certain critics, the term is understood as an historical condition which refers to an age - the "postmodern age" - which is the era in which we are presently existing. Postmodernism, in this sense, may be described as a response to the experience of existing in this "postmodern age". For others, "postmodernism" may be seen as a critical response to "postmodernity" (which includes "modernity" and "modernism"), which would then be understood as a cultural phase (Olivier, 1992:102) which is associated with what Fredric Jameson (1996:185) sees as the rise of "the consumer society" or "media society", or what Guy Debord referred to in the late 1960s as "the society of the spectacle".

Philosophical debates about postmodernism are frequently understood "...to demonstrate a growing suspicion towards 'universal' or all-embracing systems of thought and explanation" (Hill, 2000:94-95). In this sense, postmodernity is associated with "...cultural fragmentation, plurality, heterogeneity and differentiation..." (Olivier, 1992:102) and is widely characterized by its direct contrast with those attempts at cultural unity and homogeneity demonstrated by the projects of cultural modernity. One of the most influential writers dealing with postmodernism, has been Jean-François Lyotard, who has defined "the postmodern condition" as a mounting "incredulity towards metanarratives" and "the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation" (Lyotard, 1984:xxiv). Lyotard has identified in contemporary thinking and culture a rejection of overarching and totalising systems of thought which have arranged and organised the world by telling universalist stories (or metanarratives) which are attempts at justifying the plurality (different narratives) of human existence. Such metanarratives (Christianity, liberalism and Marxism, for example), argues Lyotard, rely on inclusion and exclusion as forces of homogenisation which order the world according to certain principles which work to silence and exclude "other" discourses. Postmodernism is theoretically concerned with the collapse of such totalising systems, espousing the virtues of difference, diversity and heterogeneity. Postmodernism is therefore broadly recognised by its pluralism, which

also links it to post-structuralism, which is a theory critical of modernism, and in this form "...it includes a denial of any fixed meaning, or any correspondence between language and the world, or any fixed reality or truth or fact to be the object of enquiry" (Blackburn, 1996:295). Lapsley and Westlake argue that postmodernism describes a renouncement of modernism with its "...universalism and belief in progress...elitism and dehumanising utopian pretension" (Lapsley, 1992:206). Postmodernism is a direct reaction against the optimistic modernist belief in progress and assumption of a single determinate underlying "reality". Put another way, "...it implies a mistrust of the *grands récits* of modernity..." and "[i]t is usually seen as a reaction against a naïve and earnest confidence in progress, and against confidence in objective or scientific truth" (Blackburn, 1996:294). It is also strongly associated with the death of ideology as well as with the emergence of various forms of scepticism regarding the belief in Western supremacy. Postmodernism also questions the modernist ideals which favour progress, reason and scientific principles "...which attempt to offer comprehensive and all-embracing accounts of social and cultural phenomena..." (Hill, 2000:95) and thereby serve as agents upon which gender, racial, and social roles are constructed. Postmodernism further rejects "...the 'false universalism' of ethnocentric or Eurocentric systems of thought..." as well as "...both 'depth' epistemologies which seek to lay bare 'hidden' or 'essential' realities as well as ideas of a fixed notion of identity or human 'essence'" (Hill, 2000:95). It is in this sense that "the postmodern subject" has been described as being without a fixed identity, and in the words of Stuart Hall, assuming "...different identities at different times" (in Hill, 2000:95). In postmodern theory, the fragmentation of socially and culturally constructed "realities" is emphasised.

Jameson argues that, in most cases, postmodernism has emerged as a specific reaction to existing "...forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism that conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations" (Jameson, 1996:185-186). Despite the "fact" that postmodernism defines itself in contradistinction with modernism, no temporal distinction between modernism and postmodernism really exists.[21] As Olivier (1996:95) points out, "[p]ostmodernism may be regarded as a kind of crisis within modernism, one which manifests itself as scepticism concerning questions of universality, immutability, metatheory, and so on...". He further notes that both modernism and postmodernism respond to the "sociocultural effects" of modernisation through diverse modes of aesthetic and critical thought. For many critics and philosophers, the modernist

project continues alongside that of postmodernism.[22] According to Brooker and Brooker (1997a:3), the culture of postmodernism "...intensifies the features of fragmentation and intertextual allusion which characterised an earlier modernism, though now without its yearning for a redeeming order and unity" which might explain "...postmodernism's anti-universalism and anti-essentialism, and indifference... to matters of aesthetic and ethical value".

The value of the descriptive term "postmodernism" is not primarily that "...it represents an attempt to map the extraordinary diversity of contemporary artistic practice in relation to modernism" (Lapsley, 1992:207), but that it paves the way for the effacement of the dividing line between high culture and popular (or mass) culture. In its deliberate subversion of those styles which championed modernism, it is therefore understandable that postmodernism simultaneously serves to break down several existing definitions regarding notions of artistic expression. Most notably, postmodernism seeks to erase the distinction between everyday life and art. Lyotard (1998:149) notes that the postmodern is the putting forward of "...the unpresentable in presentation itself..." thereby imparting "...a stronger sense of the unpresentable". In this sense, postmodern works fail to conform to any established rules or criteria, thereby avoiding (or sidestepping) evaluation or judgement which is based on familiar codes, rules or categories. Postmodernism seeks to erase the traditional distinctions which rigidly separate "high-brow" or elite culture from "low-brow", mass or popular cultural forms, which is a distinction that has traditionally been upheld by the academic elite.[23] Chambers (1988:216) writes that "...the debate over postmodernism can...be read as the symptom of the disruptive ingression of popular culture, its aesthetics and intimate possibilities, into a previously privileged domain". Academic theories and discourses are, under postmodernism, confronted and challenged by "...the wider, unsystemized, popular networks of cultural production and knowledge". In the process, the privileges associated with the ownership of knowledge are threatened, as is the "authority" of the intellectual "elite". Postmodernism seeks to collapse the elitist distinction between artistic forms and promotes the eclectic combination of styles, the blending of codes and the transgression of social boundaries. Postmodernism therefore heralds the erasure of the great divide which has always existed between "high art" and "popular culture".

Postmodernism is characterised by an acceptance of popular cultural practices signalled by a new moment in the development of capitalism, often called the

"consumer society" or "media society". Arac (in Olivier, 1996:49) argues that "[m]ass culture is our element, neither a sudden and welcome liberation from a worn-out high culture, nor the threat to corrupt all that we most treasure" and that since the current understanding of cultural practice suggests some distinction from the pretensions of modernism, we should "...accept our condition as post-modern". While the creators and artists who championed the great modernist movements were considered outrageous and anti-establishment fifty years ago, they are, "...for the generation that arrives at the gate in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy – dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new" (Jameson, 1996:186). Postmodernism can therefore be seen as "...initially specific and local reactions *against* those models" (Jameson, 1996:186). Postmodern culture – or "popular culture" – is often seen as an "anything goes" culture which ignores qualitative measures such as taste, but can nevertheless functions according to the capitalist principle of financial value. Postmodernists all agree, however, that the Arnoldian metanarrative which claims a clear distinction between high culture ("culture") and the popular culture of everyday life ("anarchy"), has collapsed.

"Postmodernism" may well be applied to the widespread experimentation in all the arts which has emerged in advanced capitalist societies since the late 1960s. The anti-modernist revolution was undertaken by commentators such as Susan Sontag, Herbert Marcuse and McLuhan, who asserted that mass culture products deserved critical recognition. They argued "...for an aesthetics of kitsch, happenings, and random composition, for popular American fiction to replace the cloistral modernist canon and for the tribal hedonism of the new 'underground'" (Brooker, 1999:10-11). Sontag saw in the Sixties a new pan-culturalism which gave rise to her "sophisticated cosmopolitanism" (Brooker, 1999:11), while another critic who argued against the "*angst* and nostalgia" of modernism was Leslie Fiedler, who "...lit out for a gutsy primitivism sheltered by a benign technology and science indebted to McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller". Fiedler's "new age" was to be "post-humanist, post-male, post-white, post-heroic...post-Jewish" (Brooker, 1998:11). According to Umberto Eco, Fiedler's philosophy is a desire to simply destroy the "...barrier that has been erected between art and enjoyability" (Eco, 1998:228). Postmodernism, in this sense, is concerned with eradicating the distinction between entertainment (for entertainment's sake) and art (as a term denoting a form of "intellectual pleasuring"). The new interest in

> ...the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch, of TV

series and *Reader's Digest* culture...that whole landscape of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the late show and grade B Hollywood films, and of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel... (Jameson, 1996:186)

...posed a danger to the "realm of high or elite culture" which had always been the preserve of the academic elite which had access to those skills necessary for its own meta-academic games and inquiries.

Sarup (1993:132) points out that in postmodernism "[t]here are continual references to eclecticism, reflexivity, self-referentiality, quotation, artifice, randomness, anarchy, fragmentation, pastiche and allegory". Significantly, "[t]he decline of the originality and the genius view of the artistic producer has been replaced by the assumption that art can only be repetitious" (Sarup, 1993:132). In the process, the notion of "experimentation" itself becomes questionable, further destabilising the understanding of the term "postmodernism" and magnifying its ambiguous and relativist tendencies. Andreas Huyssen refers to postmodernism as "...the end of the avant-garde as a genuinely adversary culture..." (Lapsley, 1992:206). Postmodernism has brought experimental work out of the avant-garde (elitist) category and situated it in a more general and demystified arena of study. Lapsley and Westlake (1992:206) note that, in this sense, it is unclear as to whether postmodernism "...is the heir or the adversary of modernism, nor whether it is a term of praise or abuse". The new postmodernisms served to break down the distinctions between high art and commercial forms by incorporating these "surrounding environments" rather than merely "quoting" them, or referring to them. Postmodern discourses are concerned with eradicating the artificial boundaries which have traditionally been established between "everyday reality" (or "normality") and those "depravities"[24] which are associated with the "perverse", the "bizarre", the "grotesque" and the "lowbrow". As such, previously marginalized discourses are seen as expressions "...of the problematical nature of existence" (Thomson in Olivier, 1992:101), rather than features of some "other", intolerable (non-)"reality". The once obvious distinction between high art and commercial forms has become less and less well defined.[25] There is also some sense that postmodernism refers to a somewhat apocalyptic cultural epoch, and that (since the Eighties, at least) this climate of "cultural doom" has referred to the era in which we are now living. Postmodernism also tends to denote "...an aesthetic practice which is seen variously as co-extensive with the commodified surfaces of this culture or as a disruption of its assumptions from within through a 'micropolitics' or 'politics of

desire'..." (Waugh, 1992:3). Postmodernism refers to the way in which contemporary cultural practices "corrupt" or confuse artistic practice with commercial practice.[26] Some commentators note that we now exist in a "design economy", which may be understood as "...the crossroads where prosperity and technology meet culture and marketing" (Gibney Jr. and Luscombe, 2000:44). Such an economy has been influenced by the proliferation of images which establish, promote and ultimately sell "beauty" and "quality" in terms of particular images.[27] Style or "image" now enjoy considerable impact on the economy because the production (or reproduction of goods has become increasingly efficient while competition between manufacturers and producers of all kinds of products continually encourages superficial changes and modifications which are designed to impact flooded markets.

Postmodernism further differs from modernist thinking in that it favours decentring over the search for the centre which had been lost through Nietzschean nihilism. "Play" is a word which has gained significance in the light of a system which espouses, for example, "chance" over "design", "anarchy" over "hierarchy", "absence" over "presence" and "antiform" over "form" (Brooker, 1998:11-12).[28] For writers such as Ihab Hassan, postmodernism provides an open-ended system for tackling and critiquing the modernist project. Specifically, Hassan encourages "...diffusion as postmodern pluralism", and opposes "...the Enlightenment heritage in the name of a brave new world free of 'the tyranny of wholes'" (Brooker, 1998:13). Lyotard (1998:150) underscores this sentiment as the principal merit of postmodernism: "Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences...". Opposing a modernism whose proponents and practitioners seek to restore the centre as a means of recovering a sense of purpose and meaning, Hassan's postmodernism advocates a "playfulness" which prefers chance or randomness as its central "thesis". Postmodernists deny the prospect of universal essentialism, in favour of a society in which the diversity of cultures is celebrated. Grand Narratives, rather than being aspired towards, are accepted with playful irony as "realities" which need to be tolerated in order to function in this world. According to Brooker, however, this does present something of a contradiction:

> ...postmodernism, the enemy of totalising vision, contradictorily promises a global oneness, the 'one human universe', transcending postmodern heterodoxy. Hassan's cautious micro-politics is teamed with a vision that speeds towards the black hole of an empty humanism. Difference is asserted and then buried in an assumption of universal harmony; a gesture which no more than repeats the central, paradoxical supposition in postmodernism of radically decentred identities in a world of instant and unprecedented technical

connection (Brooker, 1998:13).

Michael Pickering notes similar "dangers" in the radical pursuit of a non-stratified vision of society with which postmodernism is so concerned:

> ...all the various conceptions of posteriority 'have no intrinsic political belonging in themselves', and in its more apocalyptic versions, postmodernism threatens to destabilise the grounds of political action by seeing everything as *imaged*, a mirage world of 'banal seduction' and 'mindless fascination' ' where any kind of judgement – not just artistic but moral and political – becomes impossible' (Pickering, 1997:82-83).

While Pickering understands postmodernism to be an interesting and helpful philosophical approach to understanding the contemporary world, he also argues that postmodernism condones an intellectual levelling which is the equivalent of idle non-action and passive acceptance of the (negative) conditions of existence. In this sense, he expands on the apparent pessimism of Baudrillard and Jameson, and regards the total "imaging" of "reality" as the collapse and complete failure of critical judgement.

Brooker (1998:13) suggests that the task facing a progressive postmodernism which supposedly remains "...committed to the possibility and necessity of 'basic political change' is how to articulate the commitment with postmodern dislocation and difference; how to achieve common political aims compatible with diverse social groups and agencies". He notes that embedded in the project of postmodernism is a "mystical humanism" which tends to avoid or "overlook" the various difficulties associated with a system that is completely anti-essentialist (Brooker, 1998:13). Perhaps the true value of postmodern thinking lies in its refusal to take the world "seriously" or to accept the notions of "reality" and "truth", for in such refusal lies the refusal to "simply accept" the condition of contemporary existence.

A further understanding of postmodernism is that associated with Jean-François Lyotard and his form of post-structuralism, which rejects the notion of a single "systematising, totalising theory". He further believed that a pre-given "reality" is not reflected in language[29], but rather that language presents "reality" through practices which cannot be compared or judged with anything else. During Lyotard's early cycle (circa 1971), he argued that while language is flat, two-dimensional, and suppresses desire, the unconscious is figural and visual, much like dreams which are three-dimensional and laced with "desire". Language requires linear representation while dreams (the unconscious) disrupt this rationalism because that which can be imagined or dreamt in visual form, cannot be simply represented in language codes.[30] For Lyotard, therefore, representations of "reality" should always remind us that they

differ from the original; the representation should always suggest its "Otherness". Such insistence of difference is an implicitly political act, and continually draws our attention to the "Other".

Later, in an attempt to describe the relationship between language and society, Lyotard – drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein - referred to language as a "...multiplicity of 'games' in which individual utterances were the equivalent of 'moves'"[31] (Lapsley, 1992:207). These "language-games" are all related to specific activities each of which is represented by its own particular framework or "narrative discourse". Each of the different activities in which man engages has its own individual language game; praying, placing horse-racing bets, discussing cinema, and seducing a romantic interest, are all examples of different kinds of language games that we can play. Finding this earlier terminological description too anthropomorphic, Lyotard later abandoned the description, replacing the term "language-game" with "phrase". He continued to place "...emphasis on language as constitutive and on linguistic practices as events" (Lapsley, 1992:207). Hence, for Lyotard, the modern era saw scientific discourse as a standardising narrative against which other standards were judged and typically marginalized simply because they failed to adhere to those "metadiscourses" or "grand narratives" which science uses to legitimise itself. Alternative discourses, employing modes of narratives which were rejected by science, were treated as "primitive" (Lapsley, 1992:207-208). In *The Postmodern Condition*, however, Lyotard argues against the assumption that science can be legitimised by grand narratives such as that science was a search for complete "knowledge of reality" (Lapsley, 1992:208). Lyotard's postmodern rejection of the scientific notion of truth and the metadiscourses represented by such an attitude towards life, meant that new forms of "invention and innovation" were available. Thus, "[a]gainst the techno-totalitarian nightmare of Auschwitz or the Gulag, the postmodern condition can embrace inventive pluralism and proliferate resistance to existing forms of oppression" (Lapsley, 1992:208). The relevance of this aspect of Lyotard's work to film lies in the resituating of avant-garde techniques within the arena of mass consumption and popular cinema, and the merging of popular culture with high art. Techniques such as self-reflexivity, discontinuity, and montage, which have been cornerstones of avant-garde art, have now been absorbed into mass cultural forms such as advertisements, television, music videos, and mainstream cinema. Similarly, according to Lapsley and Westlake (1992:208), "...elements of popular culture have begun to be incorporated into high art: pulp fiction into serious literature, advertising images into painting,

kitsch into architecture, and so on". From a postmodern perspective, the avant-garde which had previously been considered as separate from both "dominant art" and "mass culture", therefore, no longer existed as an oppositional form.

While Jameson – whose roots lie in Marxism - clearly situates postmodernism as a defining moment for a series of styles symptomatic of an effacement of modernist art movements, he is careful to emphasise the term as "...a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order..." (Jameson, 1996:187). To this "new economic order", Jameson (1996:187) assigns several possible names, notably "modernization", "postindustrial or consumer society"[32], "the society of the media or spectacle" or "multinational capitalism"[33]. Indeed, Jameson's general interest in the relationship between individuals and the material world is of central importance to an understanding of his postmodernism, which he equates with "the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"[34]. For Jameson, postmodernism is represented by the unrestricted and unprecedented proliferation of multinational corporations, which he sees as capitalism in its purest form. In this radical burgeoning of global capitalism, both humanity and nature are invaded and overturned by the restructuring of pre-capitalist agriculture and by the overwhelming impact of advertising on the human consciousness.

Henry Jenkins (1995:113) notes that the noticeable shifts in contemporary American filmmaking are attributed by postmodern critics to "the cultural logic of late capitalism", which includes "...the shift from a production-centred to an information-based, service-centred economy" as well as "...the fragmentation of social communities and disintegration of previously stable identities". Late capitalism, primarily indicated by the "information explosion", has also given birth to a new social order[35] whose "inner truth" is expressed through postmodernism (Jameson, 1996:187). This "information explosion" – which gives rise to the "information age" - is currently epitomised by the proliferation of computer-mediated communication[36] (Internet electronic mail, the World Wide Web, electronic bulletin boards, as well as the emerging cellular communication technologies which enable interaction between computer systems and mobile telephone equipment) and may be considered to be the realisation of McLuhan's "global village" (Naudé, 1999:58). In an age when information has become synonymous with consumerism and capitalist expansion, the use of computer technology to keep members of the public under constant

surveillance enhances the capacity for information gathering and retrieval:

> Right now, private industry is exploiting new information-gathering technology much faster than government bureaucrats are, driven by a stark Darwinian fact of life in the information age: Companies that gather the most precise and instantaneous profiles of consumers will flourish; those that don't will die (Keegan, 1997:142).

The information age goes hand-in-hand with the global economy, both of which are sustained by communication which is central to the "…increased interconnectedness of people and their activities across the globe" (Olaniran, 1999:65). According to one report, Western capitalist societies are "…wired to the Web and to one another…" and individuals are "…thirstily consuming new technology even before they know how to use it" (Gibney Jr. and Luscombe, 2000:42).

While the media and new technologies of communication and information distribution have come to "…exemplify 'post-Fordist' economic practices", they may also be seen as "…significantly reshaping social experience and subjectivity" (Hill, 2000:96). The proliferation of communication has increased human awareness of individuals and cultures on a global level. The speed with which information and images can now be circulated using computer and satellite systems "…has been seen as responsible for an increasing compression of time and space, a 'deterritorialization' of culture and the construction of forms of identity which are no longer strongly identified with place" (Hill, 2000:96). Baudrillard is particularly concerned with an associated debate within postmodernism which views the increased proliferation of media technologies as producing a cold, desolate realm of hyperreality which produces satellisation rather than universalisation: "Picturing others and everything which brings you closer to them is futile from the instant that 'communication' can make their presence immediate" (Baudrillard, 1988:42). Increasingly, Baudrillard argues, "transparent" communications systems are being simulated in which the media of communication no longer appear mediated. Images and signs no longer simply dominate the world in which we live, argues Baudrillard, but these are now our "primary reality". This Baudrillardian theory of the media coincides with the postmodern notion of a "reality" which is wholly illusionary.

"Postmodernism" remains an understandably problematic and elusive concept which refuses to provide any fixed meaning. Its pluralism and eclecticism imbue it with the ability to approach the subjects of its discourse from an anti-essentialist point-of-view. Lyotard (1998:145) describes "eclecticism" as the "…degree zero of

contemporary general culture...", a condition which defines the experience of life as universally interconnected:

> ...one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games (Lyotard, 1998:145).

In a world where different cultural experiences and perspectives are becoming increasingly interdependent and indistinguishable, the value of personal subjectivity becomes highlighted in favour of attempts at objectivity. According to Simon Blackburn (1996:295), postmodernism reveals that objectivity is "...a disguise for power or authority in the academy, and often as the last fortress of white male privilege" and that "[l]ogical or rational thought" is the "...imposition of suspect dichotomies on the flux of events". Part of what postmodernist thinkers attempt to reveal is how established "truth" is often a disguise for the fact that there can be no fixed version of an objective "reality". Contemporary postmodernism is concerned with a relentless questioning of notions of "reality" and "truth". Failing to provide any particular fixed understanding of "reality", postmodernism serves as the most appropriate framework for the discussion of contemporary cinema presented here.

Simulating the "real"

> *Eventually, we had so much media that no one could control it any longer. It was everywhere, and sending information back and forth in every direction. Best of all, we began to communicate to one another rather than just listen to the few people rich enough to own their own TV stations. The unfettered media allowed for the freeflow of thoughts, ideas and even feelings across what had seemed like boundaries (Rushkoff, 1998:31).*

According to Baudrillard, postmodern societies which are dominated by sources of information (such as computers) and transmitters of images (televisions), "...have moved into a new reality" (Brooker, 1998:48).[37] This new reality – or *hyperreality*[38] – offers "...images, spectacles and the play of signs..." in the place of "...the logic of production and class conflict as key constituents of contemporary capitalist societies" (Kellner, 1989:62). In describing the disappearance of the "real", Baudrillard (1992a:144) argues that "[r]eality itself founders in hyperrealism..." which is "...the meticulous reduplication of the real..." typically achieved by a medium such as photography or television.[39] As the real upstages itself through its own representation by various media, it becomes unstable and acquires an ephemeral quality which, for Baudrillard, is "an allegory of death". However, the loss of the real, in turn leads to its

own artificial reinforcement as it "...becomes *reality for its own sake...*" (Baudrillard, 1992a:145). In place of the real, emerges the hyperreal, which is, in a sense, the fetishisation of the real. The hyperreal exists in the "ecstasy" of the denial of the real.

Baudrillard has produced a tidal wave of critical thinking on the hyperstimulated consciousness of contemporary humanity, and it is no wonder that he has been dubbed "the high priest of postmodernism". Yet, he prefers to reject such popular epithets[40], preferring to see himself as an analyst of the "void" which has been left by "the end of the real" which he sees as the dominant process in contemporary Western societies. Baudrillard argues that a new universe of communication has emerged from the proliferation of mass media forms, and that this universe is dominated not by objects or truth but by simulations (Sarup, 1993:164). For Baudrillard, contemporary societies live in the "ecstasy of communication" and that in the contemporary world "...the boundary between representation and reality implodes, and that as a result, the very experience and ground of 'the real' disappears" (Kellner, 1989:63). The continual (over)flow of signs and information (usually in the form of images) in the various media, destroys or "obliterates" meaning by neutralising the content of such information. Media(ted reality) and "reality" are no longer distinguishable because the meaning of what is disseminated via the broadcast media, for example, has collapsed – or has been absorbed into the surface of the image(s) presented. Thus, "[i]n a society supposedly saturated with media messages, information and meaning 'implode,' into meaningless 'noise,' pure effect without content or meaning" (Kellner, 1989:68). This "pure effect" generated by the visual (mediated) transfer of information, with particular respect to the cinema, is recalled by Polan's "ideology of spectacle": "[t]he narrative of the film is always a narrative inside spectacle; the film cannot outrun the fact that it is *shown*" (Polan in Olivier, 1996:58, my emphasis). Reality is now replaced by "hyperreality" constituted by, for example, news which is created and hyped for the sole purpose of its broadcast and distribution. In other words, it is shown because it can be shown. In this sense, the hyperreal is characterised by its necessarily "artificial" nature. For the television viewer, such news becomes more real than the actual event which has been transformed into a series of images, and in a sense, the conversion of such events into images represents the playing out of the real in the virtual absence of any such reality. Images have assumed the role and function of actuality, diminishing meaning and replacing "the real" with spectacle and artifice. Baudrillard recalls, to some extent, the ideas of McLuhan, using "...a model of the media as a black hole of signs and information that

absorbs all contents into cybernetic noise which no longer communicates meaningful messages in a process in which all content implodes into form" (Kellner, 1989:68). However, Baudrillard claims that McLuhan's slogan that "the medium is the message" not only signifies the "end of the medium", but the absorption of "one state of the real" into another. The result is "the short-circuit" of meaning and truth brought about by the effacement of the difference between "the medium and the real" (Baudrillard in Kellner, 1989:68-69).

Baudrillard's concept of contemporary existence as a hyperreality permeated with images that are disconnected from what they represent, has, according to Brooker (1998:20), "...comprised a major proposition of what postmodernism means". Baudrillard defines the *hyperreal* as a condition in which the "contradiction between the real and the imaginary is effaced. The unreal is no longer that of dream or fantasy, of a beyond or a within, it is that of a *hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself*" (Baudrillard in Shaviro, 1994:200). Sarup (1993:165) explains that our sense of time and space has been "rearranged" by contemporary media practices, and that "reality" is no longer associated with our "direct contact with the world". Instead, we experience "reality" on television screens. Accordingly, "TV is the world" and "TV is dissolved into life, and life is dissolved into TV".[41] McLuhan (in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:302) argues that the electronic media have allowed even the most trivial events to "affect everybody", and further (1968:312-313), that an event such as the Vietnam war exists purely as a result of the information environment:

> Without an informed public there would be no war. We live in an informational environment and war is conducted with information. TV news coverage of Vietnam has been a disaster as far as Washington is concerned because it has alienated people altogether from that war. Newspaper coverage would never alienate people from the war because it's 'hot', it doesn't involve. TV does and creates absolute nausea. It's like public hangings – if there were public hangings there would be no hangings. Because public hangings would *involve* people. The distant statistical fact – 'At 5:30 this morning so and so was executed' – that's hot (McLuhan in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:312-313).

Baudrillard explains the same phenomenon by arguing that in the television environment, fictional accounts *become* "realised" and "the real" *becomes* fictional. Production has been replaced by "simulation" which is usually in the form of images. The "original" can not be invoked or referred to because, "[i]n the new postindustrial, postmodern era, the model or code structures social reality, and erodes distinctions between the model and the real" (Kellner, 1989:63). In a sense, then, "reality" has been replaced by "artificiality". This pessimistic view of the impact of the media

basically means that Baudrillard sees the function of the mass media and of television as being "...to prevent response, to privitize [*sic*] individuals; to place them into a universe of simulacra where it is impossible to distinguish between the spectacle and the real" (Sarup, 1993:165).[42] McLuhan's view is analogous to that of Baudrillard in that he believed that "TV will dissolve the entire fabric of society in a short time" (in McLuhan and Stearn, 1968:336). He argued that television invades and alters the "...sensory and psychic life" of the viewing public. He described television as "...an oriental form of experience, giving people a somber, profound sense of involvement".

Baudrillard refers to copies of objects or events that are real as "simulacra". He argues that until contemporary (postmodern) times, "representation" marked the central thesis of Western faith, implying that "meaning" could be passed on through the presentation of, or reference to, a "sign". He uses the system of religious signs as an example of his thesis. The concept of faith in a higher being is – and always has been – represented through signs which would have given meaning to that faith, and the benefit of that faith has been the guarantee of the existence of that higher being, or "God", for example. However, if "...God himself can be simulated..." or "...reduced to the signs which attest his existence", "[t]hen the whole system...is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (Baudrillard, 1998:152). If "God" can be reduced to a sign (or system of signs), there no longer exists any need for "God" himself, because faith has been deferred to those signs which bear no resemblance to "God" himself. Accordingly, "simulation" opposes the notion of "representation" which serves the "Utopian principle" that the sign and the real are one and the same thing (Baudrillard, 1998:152). "Simulation" devalues the sign and removes all value from any reference that it is supposed to have.[43] Baudrillard (1992a:187) refers to simulation as "...the ecstasy of the real", and argues that this notion is easily proven simply by watching television. This medium, he claims, "...allows for continuous and uninterrupted juxtapositions" of real and imaginary events which "...follow one another in a perfectly ecstatic[44] relation...".

Baudrillard sees signs as no longer being bound to any particular referent, meaning that simulation involves the exchange of signs among themselves exclusively, without interaction with the real. This "emancipation of the sign" means that signs are no longer obliged to "designate" this or that, but are now free ("at last") to engage in

"...a structural or combinatory play according to indifference and a total indetermination which succeeds the previous role of determinate equivalence" (Baudrillard in Kellner, 1989:63). Furthermore, the structure of representation is entirely enveloped by simulation, so that it too is a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1998:152) and the resulting simulated "reality" is without source or referent (Sarup, 1993:166). According to Baudrillard, there has been a definite change in the relationship between the real and the simulacrum through history (Brooker, 1998:48). The term "hyper-reality" is used to describe the "...postmodern detachment of image from reference" (Brooker, 1998:15), or "...a social, political, and perceptual organization based on the dominance of technological simulacra" (Davis, 1999:249). For Baudrillard, simulation is seen as "...the nihilistic 'extermination' of the real", which results in a nostalgic yearning for "the real", because "[b]eneath all the layers of irony, it seems that a nostalgia for concreteness, the last echo of lament for a vanished and irretrievable reality, oddly haunts the French master of cool" (Shaviro, 1994:234). Madan Sarup notes that "Hyper-reality" may be seen as "...a new condition in which the old tension between reality and illusion, between reality as it is and reality as it should be, has been dissipated". Today, according to Baudrillard, everything is "...in excess of itself" and therefore defined by the prefix "hyper". The condition of being "hyper" does nothing to solve, resolve or transcend "old oppositions", but "dissolving" them - making them disappear. The boundary between "reality" and "imaginariness" is cancelled, and with nothing to compare "reality" against, it now goes unchecked. As this "reality" is now in excess of itself - being "more real than real" - it is no longer "called to justify itself" and has therefore "become the only existence" (Sarup, 1993:165-166).

According to Baudrillard, the postmodern appropriation of the image has done away with the notion of a true or original copy, because the simulation does not bear any resemblance to any "reality". Rather, the copy has taken the place of the "real": the image "...bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum"[45] (Baudrillard, 1998:153). True or honest copies have been overthrown by successive stages of representation, which have gradually done away with the very concept of "representation". Equally, "[w]hereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1998:152). No longer do icons and images resemble any "reality", because the copy or simulation – the simulacrum – has taken the place of the "real". In a postmodern world where images are

proliferated and absorbed by a mass consciousness, any image will automatically be considered or understood as being "more real" than the "source" of the image. In the absence of the "real", nostalgia takes the place of meaning in an attempt to resurrect the "real". "Reality" is denoted only by signs and the "original" assumes a mythical status. Truth becomes a by-product, an experience rather than a source, and objectivity and authenticity become second-hand. Hence, everything is reduced to the level of artifice and artificiality.

We exist instead in a manufactured, coded, generalised and pre-programmed view of "reality" which has replaced the "real" world. We now live in an artificial world and our "reality" has become increasingly "virtual". Davis (1999:249) writes that:

> Like an ontological virus, the hyperreal invades and destroys the older frameworks for understanding the real, replacing it with a new order of reality based on simulation.

In this postmodern (generalisation of the) hyperreal world, however, polar antagonisms which are essentially a part of the "real", implode into one another, collapsing into a general or global singularity of codes. Particularly in the realm of politics, the hyperreal causes the collapse of binary units into single pre-established coded norms. As the "real" and the simulation become indistinguishable in the hyperreal, so binary opposites become neutralised and implode into a point of nothingness or absolute absorption. The world becomes filled only with simulations: invisibly coded identical versions of the same thing. Life becomes completely self-referential as people look in on pre-established representations of themselves (on television, for example). As polar dichotomies disappear, Baudrillard suggests that action is replaced by a "deterrence" model which propagates the cool, peaceful co-existence of former "opposites". Without opposites, the call to political action, for example, becomes unnecessary. Baudrillard's notion of "deterrence" is best understood in terms of his description of the mass media as a "speech without response" (Baudrillard, 1992a:207), meaning that media such as television prevent two-way communication:

> What characterizes the mass media is that they are opposed to mediation, intransitive, that they fabricate noncommunication – if one accepts the definition of communication as an exchange, as the reciprocal space of speech and response, and thus of *responsibility*. In other words, if one defines it as anything other that the simple emission/reception of information. Now the whole present architecture of the media is founded on this last definition: they are what finally forbids response, what renders impossible any process of exchange (except in the shape of a simulation of a response, which is itself integrated into the process of emission, and this changes nothing in the

unilaterality of communication) (Baudrillard, 1992a:207-208).

Furthermore, the lulled participant in this seduction into the hyperreal becomes part of a mass body which is aware of the hopelessness of acting out against a system which will only absorb such action as part of its ongoing strategy to maintain the conformist atmosphere which it has already created. The "social" as Baudrillard puts it, is "dead" and as a result, so is "the political".[46] Davis critiques this idea of society as being "neither authentic nor fake", calling Baudrillard's view "deeply apocalyptic":

> ...the mass media have become a kind of orbiting strand of DNA that "mutates" the real into the hyperreal, eroding any space of authentic resistance and establishing the absolute dominion of the society of the spectacle (Davis, 1999:250).

Baudrillard's theory essentially suggests that a culture which is dominated by images is unable to locate or identify "the real", for reality is no longer authentic, but is simulated. The notion of "reality" is ultimately obliterated because "...it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation...*it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real*, or to prove the real" (Baudrillard, 1992a:179).

Western societies are characterised by an endless array of images and signs that no longer bear any connection to "reality" – instead, they *are* "reality". Also, the fleeting nature of these signs and images suggest, for Baudrillard, an Apocalyptic vision of a collapsed cultural identity. Postmodern societies have transformed into an amalgam of signs which have fused in the hyperreal blender of multi-everything. Mankind's evolution through natural influences (such as geography and climate) into a creature of difference, has collapsed into a postmodern society that is ruled by deterrence. For Baudrillard, this is the new seduction, the new socio-political, the new (hyper)reality: a passive unified mass, co-ordinated by a flow of media images which surrenders to what he calls "the ecstasy of communication". This interconnected hyperreality surrounds and closes in on the individual so that we become pure reflections of the signs which make up this artificial universe. Our seduction, as we passively submit to the irresistible allure of ever-present images, is evidenced by our participation in the hyperreal. A world which has challenged our desire to act, has simultaneously ensured our unfailing submission to those challenges. Our overwhelming fascination with images and information holds us in its grip as we give in to the "mediated rapture" of ceaseless communication. "[Baudrillard] argues that 'the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication' has now mastered all spheres of existence, producing an omnipresent system of media flows that has colonized the interior of the self"

(Davis, 1999:278). "Real" experiences such as human intimacy, feelings of genuine passion and "psychological depth" have disappeared to the extent that individuals becomes sites of influence, reflecting networks of information and mediated imagery. Thus, as we cease to exist as

> ...subjects of our own experience, we abandon ourselves to a cold and schizophrenic fascination with an infoglut [which Baudrillard] likens to a "microscopic pornography of the universe" (Davis, 1999:278).

Towards the hyperartificial: the illusion of truth

> *If one is to believe Baudrillard, the American dream of material advancement and romantic self-fulfilment, of 'starting over', of a public façade built from the best of everything, from everywhere, out of nothing, has been achieved here and now in the sublime banality of a media-directed culture (Brooker, 1998:18).*

Baudrillard sees "reality" as an illusion of truth. This "reality" which we have created serves to protect us from the "original illusion" that there is any fixed truth to begin with. Furthermore, Baudrillard believes that traditional scientific methods attempt to force meaning into existence. In the search for simplicity, human subjects are compelled to seek meaning which can explain the world. Hyperreality is therefore a realm in which subjects find "escape" from the illusion of truth which has become conventionalised as "reality". In contemporary times, entertainment and art forms such as "virtual reality", computer animation and various manifestations of the moving image are tending more towards what we consider to be "real", while "reality" (in the traditional, accepted sense) is becoming increasingly "unreal". Wars, political activity, hostage crises and numerous other "real events" now take place more in the media than in "reality", rendering them hyperreal – "realities" which are disconnected from that which they represent. In other ways, "reality" is replaced by opinion polls and scientific research which provide the world with illusions of truth which promote apathy amongst the masses (according to Baudrillard). This shift from the "real" to the hyperreal is, for Baudrillard, the result of representation giving way to simulation.

Baudrillard views modernity as a period during which production is central, while postmodernity becomes characterised "...by radical semiurgy, by a proliferation of signs" (Kellner, 1989:67). Postmodernism suggests a period in which all boundaries distinguishing high and low culture, or appearance and "reality", or most other binary oppositions which have been put in place and sustained by traditional philosophy and

social theory are imploded, and a process of radical *"de-differentiation"* between various spheres of life occurs. The widespread proliferation of various broadcast media (particularly television), along with the "dissemination of signs and simulacra" implied by the use of such media, becomes central to Baudrillard's notion of postmodernity. The media can therefore be interpreted as "...key simulation machines which reproduce images, signs and codes which in turn come to constitute an autonomous realm of (hyper)reality and also to play a key role in everyday life and the obliteration of the social" (Kellner, 1989:68). The idea of the media as being merely a mirror up to "reality" is replaced, in Baudrillardian theory, by the concept of the media constituting a (hyper)reality which can be viewed as being *"more real than real"*. Sarup (1993:132) further notes that one aspect of postmodernism is the "...transformation of reality into images...". Such a transformation indicates an inherent danger associated with the superficial "reading" of images as "truth" suggested by Roland Barthes' opinion that "[p]ictures...are more imperative than writing [in that] they impose meaning at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it" (in Tomasulo, 1996:71). Barthes' understanding of the power of images to communicate "meaning" may be described in postmodern terms as the "play of surfaces" in contemporary Western society, where meaning is, quite literally, without "depth".

In the postmodern age, western society is overwhelmed by information which involves a perpetual play of images which offer the individual subject a myriad of surfaces which can no longer "relate" to any particular "reality". The result is a universe in which everything has become a simulation that is disconnected from the realm of the real because there are no longer any "originals". According to Baudrillard, "...we live in a world of simulacra where the image or signifier of an event has replaced direct experience and knowledge of its referent or signified" (Sarup, 1993:164). Our world – our "reality" – has broken down into images. Capitalist production and over-commodification leads to the proliferation of "unlimited artificiality" which is evidenced through the development of mechanical means of reproduction and through the recording of images from the world using photographic technology, for example. This trend finds its greatest level of dominance in media such as television and, increasingly, the widespread computer technologies. We live today, in the "shadow of reality", seeking to construct meaning and truth where they do not exist in order to provide rational explanations for that we which find beyond our grasp. According to Baudrillard (in Sarup, 1993:165), we are living "...in a universe where there is more

and more information and less and less meaning" and he suggests that in a society which suffers from "information overload", the only remaining form of resistance is "the refusal of meaning". If we are to survive the onslaught of information which comes to us in mediated form (as television images and newspaper headlines), we must receive these images "...only as signifiers, only as surfaces..." and essentially, we must reject any meaning which they pretend to have. We must reject their signifiEds.

Since "reality" is affected by the impact of information on individuals, and since today's information comes to us largely in "artificial" formats (television, newspapers, magazines), it seems reasonable to suggest that the media in fact serve to make our "reality" somewhat "artificial". If one theorises that human existence is "real" insofar as it is constituted by the process of *immediate* or *personal* interaction, then it may be argued that the various technologies and communication media that interfere with this process, serve to alter existence and "reality", rendering our lives "artificial". Thus, the greater the distance between individuals as they attempt to communicate (in a "*real*" manner), the more artificial this interaction tends to be. In a sense, communication *at a distance* is a *simulated* (and therefore "artificial") form of human interaction which has taken the place of "*the real*" in our day-to-day existence.[47] Baudrillard argues that simulations of "reality" (or various "realities") such as "virtual reality", computer simulations and high-quality graphic imaging are becoming more "real" but at the same time, conventional shared "reality" is becoming increasingly unreal. This deterioration into the "unreal" is exemplified by contemporary phenomena such as the hypermediated Gulf War, the spread of HIV-AIDS, the unprecedented number of televised horrors throughout the world, and in the nature of global economics which no longer appears to be connected with actual trade or industry. Indeed, much contemporary economic activity is related to so-called e-commerce (Internet trading), advertising and the dissemination of information through the various media. In some respects, this means that "reality" as it is known and understood in the Western world is drifting towards fantasy, illusion and perhaps even dreamlike "sur-reality". Equally, "reality" is becoming increasingly artificial in the sense that it is increasingly man-made, abstract, distant from nature. Entertainment and art follow this pattern in that sounds, images and even sensations are being recreated or created using electronic and digital technology which has little or no contact with nature or with any "original".

It is poignant at this juncture to recall Baudrillard's understanding of *the hyperreal*

"...as a condition in which the 'contradiction between the real and the imaginary is effaced. The unreal is no longer that of dream or fantasy, of a beyond or a within, it is that of a *hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself*" (Shaviro, 1994:200). If this notion of the hyperreal can be understood as a proliferation of images of a "reality" whose meaning is artificially constructed by each individual, then life within a Western cultural framework can be thought of as artificial. Furthermore, when this hyperreal world is itself depicted in the form of images (such as cinema, for example) which simulate this "hallucination" of the "real" more accurately than "the real" itself, then such forms may be said to be of the order of *hyperartificiality*. In this sense, those aspects of contemporary (post-classical) cinema which are thought to have eroded *meaning* from the film narrative are in fact merely reflections (extensions) of the eradication of meaning in the world. The discovery of "meaning" or "truth" beneath the surface of such cultural artefacts is therefore "...always a false problem..." which is typical of an ideological discourse which seeks to "...restore the truth beneath the simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1992a:182). Of course, an ideological discourse must necessarily impose meaning from the outside, because this is the nature of ideological belief. Such "meaning" must therefore be considered to be equally artificial as it comes not from the artefact itself, but from the particular point-of-view of the spectator or observer.

Two

Dream Factories: the narrative of global economics

Moviemaking is a business. The long list of credits at the end of a Hollywood film remind us of that (Lewis, 1998:87).

In cinema, as in many other industries and art forms, development is heralded by a variety of influencing factors. Like other industries, the cinema has discovered new competition (from television), new consumers (in the form of younger audiences), new demands (in terms of subject matter and style), and new technologies (in both the production and screening of films). These factors have, in turn, contributed to accelerated changes in the types of films that are being produced. The dynamics of the worldwide film-going public suggests that the American commercial cinema industry known as "Hollywood" lies at the heart of the contemporary film world. This chapter therefore focuses on some of the developments which have occurred in American filmmaking which have led to the emergence of what may be termed a postmodern film culture.

Gronemeyer (1999:157-158) notes that the beginning of the 1980s marked the commencement of the information age and "...a society totally dominated by media". The rise to prominence of video technologies as well as cable and satellite television broadcasting has established a global media landscape which has forced contemporary cinema to reassert its position within the entertainment industry. The cinema-released feature film is "...no longer the leading product, but has become one of the entertainment industry's many different products, which serve different audiences and effectively complement one another" (Gronemeyer, 1999:158). Frequently, the initial cinema release of a film serves merely to determine how it will be distributed in future releases in video and television markets. Video - which was originally seen as a threat to the cinema industry – has now become a highly profitable extension of a film's economic viability, creating a wider audience for movies than has ever been possible in cinema theatres. Changes in the technologies of visual and communication media continue to impact the ways in which audiences receive filmed entertainment, but the demand for an ever-expanding stream of new products shows no sign of slackening as the "leisure society" seeks out increasingly varied and accessible diversions from "reality".

The film industry today is a vast and diverse entity incorporating both enormously budgeted "blockbusters" and extremely low-budget products such as horror and sex films which are targeted at rather specific niche markets. Many of the lower-end categories of film are produced solely for direct-to-video use, while various television companies produce films for broadcast on their own channels. While "[t]elevision reaches its highest viewing ratings with media-specific formats such as sport and information broadcasts, game and talk shows as well as the addictively consumed daily soap operas", feature films made for cinema are produced at great financial risk with tremendous budgets that must be offset by optimal marketing and widespread appeal (Gronemeyer, 1999:159). In addition, if a film is to recoup budgetary expenses in excess of $200 million, it must demonstrate international appeal through significant cultural compatibility and potential fascination for a "mass audience". In recent decades, the trend towards highly spectacular, visually enthralling and technically innovative Hollywood productions has been coupled with the construction of larger and better-equipped cinemas designed to enhance the viewing experience and raise the entertainment value of cinema-going as a cultural "event". Most significant, perhaps, is the impact of marketing on the considerable audience growth which has accompanied the changes in Hollywood film production since the early 1970s. Indeed, while many contemporary films may be termed "amphibian" because of their adaptability to a variety of media (Gronemeyer, 1999:158), the success of Hollywood can undoubtedly be linked to the stimulation of extensive market interest through powerful hype coupled with an investment in both popular and experimental ideas.

Multimedia production line

In 1977, when Star Wars...*was first released, its influence on the market included Walls* Star Wars *skinless pork sausages, Trebor* Star Wars *chews and Letraset notebooks with new covers hastily added proclaiming them as 'Stormtrooper's Manual' and 'Princess Leia's Rebel Jotter'. This year, apart from the videos and the apparently endless series of novels, the predominant line of merchandise lies in games for the Sega and Nintendo of which* Dark Forces...*is a typical example*
(Brooker, 1997c:101).

John Belton (in Maltby, 1998:21) argues that contemporary Hollywood is "...stylistically youthful and inventive but politically conservative...", constrained by an "...inability to say anything that has not already been said". For Belton, the promise

which Hollywood represents - as the centre of the twentieth century's most important art form - has failed along with the traditions of classical filmmaking. Hollywood is now an integrated part of the United States' second largest export economy: the entertainment software industry (Maltby, 1998:23). While Hollywood must now find its place in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive global marketplace, it is necessarily stabilised by a worldwide synergy of industry concerns that have fundamentally transformed production and marketing strategies. Analyses of developments in contemporary cinema reveal that various shifts in areas of technology, aesthetics, and economics (or consumerism), have collectively contributed to the stylistic and narrative features of films today. This understanding of contemporary (Hollywood) cinema echoes a description of postmodern as "...a shift, prompted and enabled by social, economic and technological change, into the heteroglossia of inter-cultural exchange..." (Brooker, 1998:20).

Hollywood is today so thoroughly integrated into the business of global entertainment that the conglomerates which control the industry have begun to "...view every project as a multimedia production line" (Eileen Meehan in Schatz, 1993:32). Increasingly, analysts view Hollywood as a structured "interplay of moviemaking and advertising" (Schatz, 1993:32). Any and every marketable aspect of a film is necessarily exploited, while the priority of the film itself is dependent on the marketability of the movie and *all* its ancillary products in various market sectors. Cinema is thus not only concerned with high box-office sales, but also with the sale of soundtrack albums, action figures, toys, and other related (or completely unrelated) products. Note, for example, the groundbreaking statistics represented by *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) and *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989):

> In 1977 *Star Wars* took over $500 million at the box office, but the income from sales of ancillary goods far exceeded that figure, as well as extending the life of the product and guaranteeing the success of its sequels. In the early 1980s, worldwide sales of *Star Wars* goods were estimated to be worth $1.5 billion a year, while *Batman* (1989) made $1 billion from merchandizing, four times its box-office earnings (Maltby, 1998:24).

Simultaneously, Hollywood looks to the broader commercial sector for potential investors who may have an interest in exploiting a film which is likely to attract global attention. Such investments usually occur through the licensing of merchandise or marketing campaigns which somehow associate a product with the film itself.

Restaurants and fast-food chains, sunglasses, cigarette brands, clothing labels,

alcoholic beverages, breakfast cereals, and any number of household items or fashion accessories, are subject to commercial exploitation by Hollywood executives seeking to cover the excessive costs of contemporary ultra-budget films. Such marketing strategies are even defended as para-textual (or extra-cinematic) components of the film itself, serving as a type of "commercial intertextuality" which apparently deepens the film as an "entertainment experience" that extends into the "real" world of commerce and industry. Bukatman (1998:249) describes *Star Wars* as a prime example of the "extended afterlife" which a Hollywood film can anticipate when its cultural impact expands "...beyond the screen through such successive narrative and multimedia incarnations as sequels, computer games, internet discussion groups, novels, comic books and comic strips, screen savers, simulator theaters, and as a radio serial" and the film itself extends "...outside the cinema into a multimedia, global consciousness". Richard Maltby (1998:26) writes that such marketing "tie-ins and merchandizing arrangements" are easily "...dismissed as marginalia in a history of style, but the interdependency of cultural production and distribution – what is often called 'synergy' – has made it increasingly difficult not only to distinguish the film industry from other media or entertainment industries, but also to understand the movies themselves as cultural and 'textual' objects". The concerns raised by both Maltby and Belton lead to questions regarding the emergence of "the Hollywood" in which "synergy" has supposedly absorbed the artform known as cinema.

Hollywood gets taught a lesson; or "How a little *Deep Throat* went a long way"

Since the 1960s, there has been a proliferation of terms designating more-or-less fundamental shifts in the nature – and thus the appropriate periodization – of Hollywood cinema: the New Hollywood, the New New Hollywood, post-classicism, and more indirectly, post-Fordism and postmodernism (Smith, 1998:3).

It would appear that the emergence of "New" Hollywoods is consistent with the ongoing attempts by all manner of filmmakers to sustain an industry which is, first and foremost, a source of viable entertainment for a global audience. While Maltby mourns the loss of identifiable "cultural" and "textual" objects within a synergised entertainment industry, he fails to consider that this industry is one which sustains the interests of people around the globe. More than this, "Hollywood" has – despite stiff competition - managed to survive the extraordinary economic rallying of various

global entertainment industries. The "Dream Factory" may once have been dominated by studios which indeed functioned as factories, churning out regular products to a virtually guaranteed entertainment-hungry market, but Hollywood today comprises a diverse array of "systems" which must compete in an increasingly fragmented marketplace. Social, economic and political circumstances have time and time again altered the way in which Hollywood operates - both in the manner of its production and in its distribution techniques.

American film history after the advent of sound is traditionally periodised in terms of the emergence of television, but as Douglas Gomery points out, this conception of film history "...is fraught with historiographical contradiction" (Gomery, 1998:47). Many historians argue that the so-called "New" Hollywood finds its roots in the Paramount US Supreme Court decision in May 1948 which forced the major studios to sell off their theatre chains. Many analysts and historians agree that the most significant turn in Hollywood history was the so-called Paramount decision which effectively led to the decline of the studio system and the development of what analysts frequently refer to as the first "New Hollywood"[48], or what David James refers to as the "American art film" (in Smith, 1998:10). At the same time that the Paramount decrees began to effectively unravel the old studio system, government interference in the day-to-day functioning of Hollywood asserted itself in the form of a House Committee on Un-American Activities' blacklist against a number of creative personalities. Lewis (1998:89) notes that the result of both the collapse of the studio system and the banning of certain industry members served to develop a "...long-term strategy [of industry management] that persists (in a far more complex form) today". According to Lewis (1998:89), the studios found ways of circumventing "...the spirit of the antitrust decree..." simply by learning to work together.

Gomery (1998:47) indicates that other events during the 1950s, such as the advent of widescreen images in 1953 and the ending of blacklisting during that decade, may equally be seen as periodising moments signalling the emergence of the "New" Hollywood. The adoption of new business strategies by the new studio managers who have emerged during the second half of the twentieth century has transformed Hollywood allowing it to continue "...to dominate mass entertainment image making" (Gomery, 1998:47). Schatz (1993:8) cites the collapse of the "studio system" and the emergence of commercial television on the "newly suburbanized national landscape" as the primary markers of "the New Hollywood", which is a term he uses to describes

post-World War II cinema. Various studies[49] have suggested that Hollywood production underwent a definite change after televisions had found their way into the majority of American homes and became the dominant medium for entertainment, information and, indeed, for aggressive advertising. The "classical" era of Hollywood production (which had lasted from the 1920s until the early 1940s) came to an end as mass production (by the studio cartels) for "...a virtually guaranteed market", was replaced by a new "system", whereby "...motion pictures came to be produced and sold on a film-by-film basis and...'watching TV' rapidly replaced 'going to the movies' as America's preferred ritual of habitual, mass-mediated narrative entertainment" (Schatz, 1993:8). Maltby (1998:28) argues, however, that "...movies have never in their history had a monopoly in the business of turning pleasure or leisure into a purchasable product..." which suggests that television and video (and now the Internet) should be considered "alternatives" to cinema rather than rivals or opposition.

The development and increasing popularisation of television in the years after the Second World War is nevertheless widely regarded as being directly responsible for major adjustments in the business and art of Hollywood cinema. As a source of competition for cinema and as an extension of its distribution possibilities, the television industry was to radically alter the way in which movies are created. As studios were forced to find creative ways of drawing audiences away from the new medium which could be enjoyed in the comfort and convenience of the home, innovative new techniques such as 3-D and widescreen CinemaScope were introduced. Simultaneously, filmmakers sought new stylistic and narrative elements with which to lure viewers out of their homes and into cinemas. Cinema became a medium for the inclusion of more "adult" elements which could not be broadcast into homes via television. Films dealing with adult and taboo themes and incorporating mature language (which were largely independent productions) were successfully produced and distributed, while "art" and foreign films (which had never been bound by traditional Hollywood taboos) increasingly found markets in the USA. During the 1950s, new markets began to emerge as audiences - particularly amongst the youth - became dissatisfied with both conventional cinema offerings and domestic television (Wvyer, 1989:186).

Lewis notes that a spate of popular mature-content films released during the 1950s and 1960s were responsible for an important change to the way in which the content

of films was to be regulated from November 1968 onwards. As a short-term solution to the slump in cinema attendance several of the "long-standing codes of industry conduct" were willingly ignored by studio executives who were eager to penetrate "an otherwise dead box office" even if it meant circumventing "...the letter and spirit of the old code" which involved a cycle of censorship procedures which were both intrusive and costly (Lewis, 1998:90):

> To release a picture nationwide, the studios were compelled to submit scripts and preview films to a number of independently operated censorship boards and then forced to negotiate and / or capitulate to gain what amounted to a series of seals of approval. The development, production, and post-production costs prompted by local board input were significant and especially painful in times of box office decline (Lewis, 1998:90).

After a number of successful "adult" or "mature content" films, including *The Moon is Blue* (Otto Preminger, 1953), *Baby Doll* (Elia Kazan, 1956), *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1959), *Never on Sunday* (*Pote tin Kyriaki*, Jules Dassin, 1960), *Lolita* (Stanley Kubrick, 1962), *Kiss Me Stupid* (Billy Wilder, 1964), *The Pawnbroker* (Sidney Lumet, 1965), and *Blowup* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), did well during the 1960s and 1970s, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) introduced a new code, and successfully sold it to the American public by advocating such a system as an expression of the "changing times". Lewis argues that the new code was first and foremost a "business proposition":

> The code not only supported a product overhaul - American films after the fall of 1968 look and sound different from those produced before then - it also promised to better insulate the studios against local efforts to interfere with the production, distribution, and exhibition of their product (Lewis, 1998:90).

The system also enabled the establishment of new markets which had tended to be dominated by foreign and American independent ("art") films. The new production code ratings allowed the studios to "better differentiate" their films from television programmes which were more strictly regulated. By producing films for a particular "market" - either "G" (general), "M" (mature), "R" (restricted) or "X" (explicit), according to content - the studios were able to appeal to particular types of audiences and differentiate viewers on the basis of age. The public, however, was led to understand that the film classification or ratings system served to uphold "...the rights of local governments to prevent children being exposed to books or movies considered suitable only for adults..." (Maltby, 1998:32). The system was to have significant economic and artistic implications, particularly for films which were now likely to receive an "X" rating:

> Whatever the MPAA's Declaration of Principle had claimed about the rating

system's objective of encouraging 'artistic expression by expanding creative freedom', in practice 'the pressures to avoid an X may in fact constrain [it] as much as the old Production Code'. The constraints were, however, different in nature. Designed as a means of labelling movies according to the degree of explicitness in their representation of sex, violence or language, the rating system became a marketing device, inciting such representations up to the limits of the permissible (Maltby, 1998:33).

Maltby notes that the ratings system merely helped to further accelerate a trend dating from the release of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* in 1960, "…when the experience of going to a mainstream film began to be constituted as a sexualized thrill: a sort of sado-masochistic roller-coaster ride whose pleasure lay in the refusal completely to re-establish equilibrium" (in Maltby, 1998:33). By 1970, a United States Commission on Obscenity and Pornography report (in Hawkins and Zimring, 1991:34) argued that the increased sexual content of mainstream ("widely distributed") films "…had made labelling and categorization of many sexually oriented films almost impossible":

> Certain pioneering films and their imitators have, in effect, smashed the neat classifications of general release, art, and exploitation films which formerly existed as yardsticks for analyzing the sexual content of movies. The industry recognizes that something unique is happening, but the creation of any commonly recognized labels for these new "sex" films has not yet occurred (U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in Hawkins and Zimring, 1991:34).

Hollywood and its new ratings system had essentially contributed to the increased production of high-budget movies that mimicked "exploitation films"[50], since these were now marketable for adult audiences interested in, and fascinated by, the spectacularisation of now-"acceptable" visual taboos. The Commission defined these as "hybrid films" – "…combining the sexual explicitness of exploitation films with the distribution patterns of general release films" (Hawkins and Zimring, 1991:33).

According to Maltby (1998:32), a cycle of overproduction in Hollywood during the late 1960s resulted in a financial crisis between 1969 and 1971, while the first group of Hollywood films released under the new production code "performed poorly at the box office" until 1973 (Lewis, 1998:91). Interestingly, during this same period, the blossoming hard-core pornography movie industry was celebrating dramatic box office returns. In New York City, for example, six hundred cinemas ceased showing studio products and instead turned to the newly popular "skin flicks", thereby heralding the beginning of so-called "porno-chic", "…a short but telling phase in the history of cinema when it actually became hip and cool and fashionable to watch dirty movies, ideally with your partner, then talk endlessly about them afterwards at dinner

parties" (Ross, 1993:15-16). According to Lewis,

> Three early seventies' skin flicks, *Deep Throat* ([Gerard Damiano,] 1972), *Behind the Green Door* ([Jim and Art Mitchell,] 1972), and *The Devil in Miss Jones* ([Damiano,] 1973), outearned big-budget studio films not only on a screen-by-screen basis but in total box-office revenue nationwide... (Lewis, 1998:91).

According to Lewis (1998:91), had *Variety* magazine not limited its year-end top twenty lists to "legitimate" production, all three of these films would all have appeared as American box-office favourites.

The causes of the slump in the mainstream Hollywood during the early 1970s are said to be related to both the industry's "...'directionless floundering' in search of a successful formula to attract an audience with which it had lost touch..." as well as its massive overspending which made profit-making a near-impossibility (Maltby, 1998:32). Industry reshuffling during the five years which followed saw the restabilisation of the industry, so that by 1975 Hollywood's output had fallen to around 120 films per year. It was during this interim period of economic instability, however, that an observable "Hollywood Renaissance" transpired. Lewis (1998:91) argues that it was the "success of hard-core" pornographic cinema which at least partially led to the development of a new Hollywood which was desperately needed to compete in a very different entertainment marketplace. Specifically, it was federal legislation against X-rated movies which, in June 1973, compelled cinemas "...to reconsider the industry product or else risk prosecution by ambitious, politically conservative district attorneys" (Lewis, 1998:92). Lewis argues that competition offered by the hard-core pornographic industry taught "...the majors a lesson...about how to market a product and how to use artistic freedom toward better identifying that product in advance of release" (Lewis, 1998:92-93). This "lesson" combined with the appearance of a new generation of directors and the new ratings code to produce what effectively became known as a renaissance in Hollywood cinema.

Hollywood "New Wave"[51]

> *Cinema is a product of the modern age, a sort of propaganda targeted at the industrial masses. Modernist cinemas were the factories in which value was reproduced. In post-modernism we have less respect and more choice (Currie, 1993:41).*

Gronemeyer (1999:128), who follows a socio-historical approach to the development

of the cinema, notes that "...an atmosphere of fundamental cultural and political change gripped the world..." during the 1960s and 1970s, which led to persistent changes in the values of various (western) societies. Social morality was altering the existing social order (most notably in the United States) which began to realign itself in response to "...active engagement against discrimination through protests against imperialism and demonstrations for peace and free love, not only by African-Americans but also by other minorities such as women and children..." (Gronemeyer, 1999:128). Amongst the younger generations, counter-culture movements were springing up as the rejection of parental and traditional values "...overstepped the boundaries of the typical generational conflict" (Gronemeyer, 198:128). Such counter-culture movements found expression in various forms of experimentation (including lifestyle, dress, music, drugs, and jobs) which were originally sustained as purely alternative forms. However, while the generation which rebelled against "the systems" during the 1960s was absorbed into "mainstream" society, their alternative cultural movements and entertainment forms were also gradually absorbed into popular and mainstream culture.

Uncertainties which had begun to face the film industry saw the production of films for new markets and widespread experimentation in a variety of creative areas. Sensationalism, spectacle and assorted modes of exploitation became the popular tools used to lure young audiences to the cinema. While the major production companies were "...reluctant to abandon a concept of the undifferentiated audience..." (Maltby, 1998:34), the changing demographics could not go unnoticed. The forms of experimentation which took place during the late 1960s and early 1970s were ultimately "...a sequence of attempts to find both production and distribution formulae to appeal to this newly configured primary audience" (Maltby, 1998:34). The new strategies adopted by Hollywood were adapted from the techniques which had previously been used by exploitation companies during the 1960s. This included the widespread release of a film simultaneously in numerous theatres as well as advertising on national television. Sensationalist material which had previously been the staple of independent filmmakers (such as Roger Corman), became the highly-marketable terrain of the major production companies. The "19-year-old male audience" steadily became the primary focus of new production, marketing and distribution techniques. The youth market had also been captured by the allure of another emerging American cultural form: the building of suburban shopping centres in the 1960s and, since the 1970s, the creation of shopping malls. Chains of theatres,

specifically located in these centres, began to cater especially for this newly-established younger audience.

A great deal of the experimentation which occurred during the early 1970s was concerned with finding suitable material to satisfy the interests of this younger "primary" market. After the success of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1971) and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973[52]), the major Hollywood players became committed to producing "…the kind of overtly sensationalist material…" which had previously been left to independents filmmakers like Corman, who worked in particular niche markets (Maltby, 1998:34). Given the much larger budgets available to mainstream producers, films such as *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) and *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) were afforded blockbuster production values and high-profile marketing. These films also enjoyed widespread distribution in the newly located sites of moviegoing – the malls. Thomas Doherty refers to this trend of shifting film content to the visceral terrain of the exploitation genres as the "juvenilisation" of American cinema through the "juvenilisation" of its primary audience (Maltby, 1998:34).

Developing the popularity of genre formulas such as science-fiction and "youth" pictures, the studios were greatly concerned with drawing attention to the "…greater differentiation of each film - by the stars, or the director, or the concept…" (Wyver, 1989:186). With the decline of the studio system and the emphasis on the quality and value of each film which had to "sell itself" in order to reach audiences, production values and budgets were inevitably set to increase. One of the most significant shifts in Hollywood was related to the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers who were to lead the way in reworking the prevailing aesthetic and creative climate. According to Jenkins, it was as early as 1965 that American critics and analysts began to write about a

> …Hollywood 'New Wave', consisting of bright young directors who came to the cinema from television…. Their films…were praised for their location shooting, improvisational acting, and self-conscious experimentation with swish pans, repeated actions, zooms, jumpcuts, over-amplified sounds, colour filters, extreme deep focus, intimate close-ups, freeze frames, hand-held camera, split screen, jazz scoring and sound-image mismatches, a grab-bag of devices borrowed from the European New Wave movements (Jenkins, 1995:115).

Those filmmakers who emerged in the wake of this early period of the American "New Wave", came to Hollywood with "…a sophisticated grasp of film techniques", having graduated from film schools. According to Gronemeyer (1999:166), "[y]oung

This "new wave" of promising directors included formidable individuals such as Spielberg, Brian De Palma, Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader (Jenkins, 1995:115), who are frequently referred to as the "Movie Brats" (Elsaesser, 1998:191; Jenkins, 1995:115). Later notable Hollywood filmmakers were to include established Europeans (Wim Wenders, Paul Verhoeven), independent filmmakers (Gus van Sant, John Waters), women (Kathryn Bigelow, Penny Marshall), blacks (John Singleton, Spike Lee) and Spanish Americans (Robert Rodriguez). Film fans (Tarantino), virtuosos (the Coen brothers), commercial directors (Ridley Scott) and music-video makers who tend to borrow freely "...from the visual vocabulary of the avant-garde" (Jenkins, 1995:115) have all found their way into the heart of Hollywood filmmaking. Many of these filmmakers have – in the modernist tradition – been labelled *auteurs*, suggesting their "uniqueness" which is visible in terms of individual style and creativity. McClellan argues that the notion of the contemporary (New Hollywood) *auteur* was "invented" by Hollywood itself out of a need to keep in touch with the changing sensibilities of a younger generation of moviegoers:

> Why do the studios buy into the 'young auteur' myth? Mostly it's down to the lesson of *Easy Rider* [1969], Dennis Hopper's ramblingly trippy biker epic. Scared that it was out of touch and wowed by the film's success when it came to lucratively tapping the Sixties *zeitgeist*, Hollywood turned to Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Paul Schrader and others. The first generation of Movie Brats had arrived. Since then, with the regular discovery of new faces like Spike Lee, the Coen brothers, John Singleton and Quentin Tarantino, an enduring film myth has been established, the myth of the young auteur, a *zeitmeister* supreme with his finger on the mass cultural pulse and a direct route to the collective wallet (McClellan, 1993a:76-78).

It can therefore be seen as a survival tactic that the major Hollywood studios began to look to the themes, formal innovations and talented directors of alternative cinema during the early 1970s.

David Bordwell maintains that "...the principles of classical film-making still hold sway..." in Hollywood, although contemporary cinema "...has absorbed narrational strategies of the art cinema while controlling them within a coherent genre framework" (Bordwell in Jenkins, 1995:114). Post-classical filmmakers, rather than adopting features of avant-garde and "art" cinema in an attempt to emulate techniques of "distanciation", "...employ them to intensify our emotional experience of stock generic situations" (Jenkins, 1995:114). Jenkins identifies specific techniques such as "elliptical narratives", "abrupt cutting", "unusual camera angles and movements", and "jarring juxtapositions" in the work of post-classical filmmakers[53] in order to indicate non-classical techniques employed in the service of such "coherent

genre frameworks" (Jenkins, 1995:114). Post-classical cinema is therefore understood as involving natural progression from the simultaneous existence of an overtly mainstream and an overtly oppositional cinema, to a system whereby the two streams have absorbed one another. The result is a predominantly mainstream global cinema culture which embraces liberal and imaginative experimentation in the pursuit of financially-lucrative and visually spectacular entertainment. At the same time, however, it has been argued that such experimentation is politically conservative and serves to maintain a secure market base by providing the "best" entertainment which a capitalist system can offer. Murray Smith (1998:11), in fact, suggests that the new stability in Hollywood filmmaking during the late 1970s, came not from an American "flirtation" with European art cinema, but from what may be seen as "…*neoclassicism: a return to genre filmmaking, but now marked by greater self-consciousness, as well as supercharged by new special effects, saturation booking, engorged production budgets and, occasionally, even larger advertising budgets*".

In an attempt to identify the aspects of contemporary cinema which signify the advent or definition of a "post-classical Hollywood", Thomas Elsaesser refers to Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 movie, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, which he claims may "…be regarded as a professionally confident, shrewdly calculated and supremely self-reflexive piece of filmmaking, fully aware that it stands at the crossroads of major changes in the art and industry of Hollywood: looking back as well as forward, while staking out a ground all of its own" (Elsaesser, 1998:191). According to Elsaesser (1998:191), this film represents a kind of filmmaking (i.e. "post-classical filmmaking") which has only been possible within the context of the "…economic revival of Hollywood filmmaking since the mid-1970s…". Already in 1970, this label was used by Joseph Gelmis to describe "…a technical and aesthetic revolution in movies which will inevitably restructure human consciousness and understanding" (Gelmis in Maltby, 1998:22). Such a "revolution" was not an easy transition, because the development of cinematic conventions of form had taken time to evolve and to be absorbed and understood by both filmmakers and audiences. Techniques of image composition, editing, and the challenge of creating a suitably "organic", chronologically coherent narrative with a suspenseful but ultimately resolvable series of visual events, emerged over time, and once in place, were not easily dismissed or replaced. Conventions which had been "fixed" in order to make the filmmaking industry succeed as an easily accessible producer of narratives were generally standardised and eagerly exploited as economic strategies which helped maintain a stable audience base. The demand for innovation,

choice, and originality by an increasingly youthful paying audience has had further considerable impact on the way in which Hollywood (or New Hollywood) produces movies. The notion of "passive assent" no longer applies as rigidly and strongly in the general attitude of most film-going consumers, and much capital is now spent on aggressive marketing campaigns both in the print media and on television.

The world entertainment market has expanded rapidly since 1975, and as technologies of production, distribution and consolidation continue to evolve, this trend shows no sign of abating. Even when it seemed that the home video and pay television markets would bring about the collapse of Hollywood during the 1990s, this eventuality has instead been turned into a *cause célèbre*. The video industry has in fact developed into a subsequent release market which, in 1986, began to exceed the theatrical market turnover. The video industry has become a fundamental part of the distribution cycle, especially since the "...sales of pre-recorded videos increased from 3 million units in 1980 to 220 million in 1990" (Maltby, 1998:35). Furthermore, "[t]he growth of ancillary markets in video and television since 1980 has meant that by 1995, less that 20 per cent of total film revenues came from the domestic box office" (Maltby, 1998:24). As future developments in the DVD (digital versatile disc), "home cinema", and computer technology, segments of the market occur, these statistics are likely to further impact the stylistic, narrative, and marketing, strategies employed by Hollywood. As Smith (1998:12) argues, "[w]hen the bulk of profits is derived from sources other that the theatrical market, it is reasonable to assume that the pressures from these 'secondary' markets will command more attention in the making of the product".

Nevertheless, since the 1980s, the possibilities for theatrical distribution have improved worldwide. This trend has been particularly evident in Europe and Japan, with 500 new multiplex screens appearing in Britain alone (largely due to intervention by the American majors). During the 1980s the development of multiplex cinema theatre chains by a number of newly-established companies effectively raised the number of cinema screens in the United States so that by 1990 a movie could be simultaneously released in 2000 cinemas.[54] By 1999, *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999) was released on more than 2500 screens in North America (Corliss, 1999a:43). Of course, this saturation booking of cinemas has had a huge impact on the cost of prints and on marketing campaigns which, since the late 1970s, have frequently exceeded the cost of production. *Alien* (Ridley Scott,

1979), for example, cost $10.8 million to make and $15.7 million to advertise (Maltby, 1998:35). During the five years preceding 1990, the world market for filmed entertainment was doubled, and by 1989, the biggest percentage of Hollywood's foreign revenue came from video. By the mid-1990s, a Hollywood film was capable of generating 90 per cent of its income from outside the United States. Maltby (1998:36-37) identifies "globalisation", as well as a string of mergers between various film companies, and the accelerated convergence of "...software, computer and telecommunications industries..." as most likely to result in "...an industry dominated by a few giant concerns, each 'controlling a vast empire of media and entertainment properties that amounts to a global distribution system for advertising and promotion dollars'".

Into the *Jaws* of globalisation

The global commercialization of culture validates Corrigan's viewpoint, money serving as the great equalizer. Not only does it equalize Spike Lee, Ridley Scott, and Robert Bresson at the Video Rental Store, but it places even the most intentional auteur (Coppola is Corrigan's well-chosen example) inside a system that is larger than he, a system that quickly and crudely exchanges his value on the market in its own way (Andrew, 1993:81).

Schatz (1993:8) emphasises that "the New Hollywood" is not really an emphatic term, but rather a malleable concept whose meaning alters with periodic adjustments in the industry that it serves to describe. After the fall of the studio system, despite references to the "death of Hollywood", the American film not only survived but prospered within a rapidly diversifying and increasingly complex "entertainment industry" and "media marketplace" (Schatz, 1993:8). The reason for Hollywood's survival undoubtedly lies in the development of the "blockbuster", which "guided" American filmmaking through the 1970s and well into the decades which have followed (see chapter four for a detailed discussion of the blockbuster strategy that emerged during the 1980s). Maltby (1998:31) describes the "blockbuster strategy" as one of the necessary developments which grew out of a need to assert some sort of differentiation between television and popular cinema. According to Gronemeyer (1999:129), by the 1960s (at the latest), television had come to dominate the restructured media landscape and was undoubtedly "...the primary leisure-time entertainment of the masses...". Consequently, cinema was forced to redefine its function and position within that landscape. Timothy Corrigan (1989:47) notes that the idea of the "blockbuster" had been "...something between the exception and the

accident..." during the earlier cycles of cinema history, producing isolated examples such as D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. In the 1950s the rechannelling of resources into fewer films was the major trend in Hollywood, together with the introduction of colour and widescreen. By the 1960s, as few as 130 films were being made annually as a result of this market-driven strategy. While quantitative output had fallen, however, the rewards in terms of box-office revenues were significant. Prior to 1960, a mere twenty films had managed to gross in excess of $10 million in the American market, but by 1970, more than eighty had (Maltby, 1998:31). During the 1960s, only five films made at least $40 million profit, but four films managed to earn that much in 1979 alone. In terms of economics, the blockbuster strategy certainly proved to be the solution to Hollywood's burgeoning problems.

Gomery (1998:47-57) identifies two figures who played a central role in the development of two distinctly identifiable "New" Hollywoods which have come transformed American filmmaking since the decline of the studio system. The first of these characters was Lew Wasserman who, during the 1950s and 1960s pioneered the emergence of "...Hollywood style independent film and television production..." (Gomery, 1998:48), thereby sparking the first "New" Hollywood. Steven J. Ross, on the other hand, was responsible a generation later for transforming Warner Communications into "...the ultimate vertically integrated media conglomerate, Time Warner..." thereby initiating a second "New" Hollywood (Gomery, 1998:48).

Wasserman's innovations were largely located at Universal studios, which he transformed into the busiest Hollywood lot by the mid-1960s. His exploits included the introduction of radio and television production based in Hollywood, and in a bold move to engage both cinema and home audiences, was responsible for introducing movies made exclusively for television. Wasserman was also the first to draw on the long-term value of studio film libraries[55] by introducing the concept of reusing older films and television shows. His purchase of Universal studios allowed for the simultaneous direct production of broadcast television shows and distribution of feature films which were independently produced and financed. Wasserman's most important innovation, however, with regards to the development of contemporary Hollywood cinema was his pioneering of the blockbuster motion picture.

The release of *Jaws* in 1975 proved to be a test case for the introduction of a number of novel concepts which forever "...redefined what it meant to make a successful

Hollywood feature film" (Gomery, 1998:49). During the early 1970s, Wasserman began to consider ways of enhancing the profitability of feature filmmaking. With *Jaws*, he coupled prime-time television mass-saturation advertising with the simultaneous booking of the film in new shopping mall cineplexes right across the US:

> The film created a sensation and with it Universal initiated the era of the blockbuster feature film, and forever altered the Hollywood film landscape. Advertising on broadcast television became the key to turning a feature film into a blockbuster, enabling the studio distributor to milk millions and millions of dollars from 'ancillary rights' (Gomery, 1998:51).

The overwhelming box-office success of *Jaws*, and the marketing strategy which it represented, re-defined Hollywood, and transformed Wasserman's MCA/Universal entertainment corporation into an empire which "...stood at the apex of a renewed Hollywood moving image business" (Gomery, 1998:51). From an industry which, during the 1960s had been floundering in economic dire straits, "...Hollywood - as an industry of cinema, not the source of most prime-time television - stood atop the pop culture hierarchy, able with a single film to initiate a truly widespread popular culture phenomenon leading to infusions of dollars" (Gomery, 1998:51).

While Wasserman's business practices were rapidly assimilated by other film executives during the 1970s, the latter part of that decade and the early 1980s saw the introduction of cable television and home video which were to once again alter the way Hollywood functioned. While Wasserman was the frontrunner in the war against these new television forms, Steven J. Ross led a group of entrepreneurs who would develop strategies by which Hollywood companies "...could and would take full and complete advantage of all possible television 'windows of release' in every market in the world" (Gomery, 1998:51). This policy of vertically integrated media practice by which Hollywood practices assumed conglomerate power, introduced an era of economic profitability and power which outshone both the studio era of the 1930s and the later Wasserman era. Ross's success is evidenced by his transformation of the once languishing movie studio, Warner Bros., into the vertically integrated conglomerate, Time Warner[56], which had become the largest media empire in the world by the early 1990s. Ross proved that Hollywood could be the bedrock from which a host of media industries could be dominated. Film, television, home video, cable television, publishing and theme parks could all become part of a newly reinvented Hollywood. Ross demonstrated that "...while feature films would still begin their marketing life in theatres, a true blockbuster is really determined as millions are added from home video, pay-TV and cable TV" (Gomery, 1998:52). While, until the

early 1980s, most Hollywood features generated 75% of their income from box-office sales, the new "New" Hollywood (under Ross) saw this figure drop to approximately 25%. Income which, during the Wasserman era, had resulted from "ancillary markets", grew to become the greater portion of the revenue generated by a blockbuster in the later "New" Hollywood. While home video, for example, had represented a "fledgling technology" (Balio, 1998:58) in the early 1980s, with approximately 2% of American homes owning VCRs, this figure grew to represent two-thirds of homes by the end of the decade (Balio, 1998:58).

Lewis (1998:97) notes that the major Hollywood studios now "exploit synergies" in various ancillary markets. With business opportunities stretching from television companies (cable and network) to videocassette, DVD, laser disc and video game production, publishing and theatre ownership, the entertainment conglomerates have prepared the way for the future of the ever-expanding marketplace. Media conglomerates that are integrated vertically generate profits from a diverse range of mass-media enterprises, and according to Gomery,

> The significant change in the last sixth of the twentieth century has been the relentless building up of considerable vertical power by spending millions to acquire interests in movie theatres, cable television operations, over-the-air television stations, and even TV networks. Controlling the markets has become vital for the long-term survival and prosperity of any Hollywood operation (Gomery, 1998:53).

While Gomery outlines the developments of two distinct "New" Hollywoods, he disputes the possible emergence in the near future of a new era in Hollywood filmmaking. He argues that before technological advances can hope to "...alter Hollywood's long-held economic hegemony" such technologies must "...be tied to the innovation of fundamental business practices, and there are no signs of change on that front as the twentieth century comes to an end and the mighty media conglomerates of Hollywood hold more economic sway that they ever have in their history" (Gomery, 1998:55). But Gomery's argument may already be proving itself wrong as Hollywood embraces new narrative forms, the Internet and its capacity for marketing and distribution innovations, and a range of possibilities brought about by the proliferation of digital technologies. According to Lewis, preparations for the "next new Hollywood" have already begun. In the future,

> ...the film market may well be even more dependent on "home box office" and more integrated with the vaunted information-entertainment superhighway (Lewis, 1998:97),

Such transitions, to a Hollywood which increasingly integrates itself into the home and

interactive sectors of the entertainment industry, has resulted in a number of mergers between studios and computer software providers , as well as cable and telephone hardware providers.

While such integration is concerned with assuring security in the future as the entertainment industry continues to transform itself, the exploitation of various media outlets simultaneously serves as protection against potential box-office disasters. As production costs continue to soar to once-unimagined levels, the industry has had to rely more and more on "alternative" income avenues such as those represented by ancillary markets. Tino Balio notes, in his discussion of Hollywood globalisation during the 1990s (1998:58-73), that the international demand for cinema product "...increased at an unprecedented rate..." during the 1980s. This demand, he claims, was the result of a variety of factors, including "...economic growth in Western Europe, the Pacific Rim, and Latin America, the end of the Cold War, the commercialization of state broadcasting systems, and the development of new distribution technologies" (Balio, 1998:58). In the United States, for example, the growth in the home video market (refer to statistics earlier in this chapter) stimulated the demand for film product, so that the production of American feature films increased from "...around 350 pictures a year in 1983 to nearly 600 in 1988 (Balio, 1998:58-59). According to Balio (1998:59), this rise in production was mainly attributable to the so-called "mini-majors"[57] and independent film companies[58], while the number of productions by the majors remained relatively stable at between seventy and eighty pictures per annum. It was understood that these small companies could recoup their costs on even the most moderate productions by pre-selling the distribution rights to home video and pay-cable groups.

As both American and international demand for product stimulated production, Hollywood entered what Time Warner described as "...the age of 'globalisation'" (Balio, 1998:58), whereby the major players fostered "...long-term strategies to build on a strong base of operations at home while achieving 'a major presence in all of the world's important markets'" (Balio, 1998:58). This implied a three-tiered expansion: "horizontally" into world-wide emerging markets; "vertically" to form allegiances with independent producers; and by forming partnerships with investors around the world in order to generate alternative sources of finance (Balio, 1998:58). One of the results of such schemes was the development of the so-called "ultra-high-budget" film which, with Carolco's historically significant investment of $100 million in *Terminator 2:*

Judgment Day (James Cameron, 1991), saw production budgets reaching new highs (of course, it had not hurt that Carolco saw returns of $204 million, domestic, and $310 million, foreign). While initial investments in such projects seem excessive, the nature of the "globalised" market effectively reduces the risks associated with ultra-high expenditure because these films inevitably include "high concept" elements, major stars, and a wealth of visual effects (Balio, 1998:59). According to Balio (1998:59), these productions are usually quick to reclaim their investments because they are easily distributed, and because they tend to constitute "media events" in themselves, inevitably making profits both in the US and abroad. Profitability is further increased by the ease with which these films are supported by promotional tie-ins and generate continued interest in a variety of ancillary areas - from theme parks to home videos to television spin-offs and even sequels.

Outside the United States, the growth of the film market during the 1980s was precipitated by a "...pent-up demand for entertainment of all types" (Balio, 1998:59). Coupled with this socio-cultural demand stimulated by improved marketing strategies, were various other factors, including the improvement of cinema theatres, the loosening of state control over broadcasting, and the proliferation of cable and satellite broadcasting structures. Major American companies, together with European partners, began an intensive programme to upgrade cinemas in Western European countries such as Germany, Spain, Italy and Great Britain. Simultaneously, the deregulation of broadcasting enabled Hollywood to launch unprecedented marketing campaigns, infiltrating markets at a national level. Niche markets could be reached via new, Hollywood-based, channels such as MTV Europe[59]. Following the trend in the US, the overseas home video market came to be a greater source of revenue for Hollywood than the income from theatrical exhibition. By the end of the decade, the sale of videos was generating almost $4.5 billion, and most of this was attributable to Hollywood productions. Ultra-high-budget films are aggressively promoted for both theatrical and ancillary markets, and in the process, local projects are generally overwhelmed by a saturated "high-stakes environment" (Balio, 1998:60). Further expansion in cinema, video and television markets around the world[60] has increasingly improved Hollywood's stronghold as a global force with superfluous international economic power, not to mention immense social and cultural influence. While 1990 saw the combined overseas market achieving parity with the US domestic market, by 1994 the foreign market finally surpassed domestic (US) film rental income.

Recent years have seen the critical acclaim and box-office success of various non-American films as well as "...a few offbeat pictures and smaller art films produced either by independents or by subsidiaries of the majors..." (Balio, 1998:70). Films such as the British comedy, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994) and the social satire *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) represent a strain of moderately budgeted films which have managed to significantly surpass initial box-office expectations. These "smaller" films which demonstrate the unpredictability of the market tend to represent somewhat insular success stories, finding their way into niche markets, achieving cross-over success by accessing the popular consciousness, or simply by presenting unique and innovative cinematic experiences to a responsive market. Nevertheless, it is clear that "Hollywood...remains committed to megapics and saturation booking..." (Balio, 1998:70) and that the inevitability of rapid turnover from blockbuster and ultra-high-budget production strategies remains a priority for major Hollywood companies. This has the effect of ensuring that big pictures dominate most major cinema screens around the globe and simultaneously serves to inhibit the film industries of foreign nations (because of a saturated market). Balio (1998:70) points out that the process of globalisation has effectively enhanced the economic performance and power of the bigger Hollywood companies which have expanded at the expense of smaller firms in the United States and in foreign countries - either through extinction or merger.

It should also be noted, that while the blockbusters are strongly dominant in the global market, they are also responsible for the survival (and even success) of alternative cinema. The blockbuster high-budget concept demands that Hollywood channels most financing into a limited number of projects, but the result is an increased demand for more product in the market. This demand is attended to largely by moderately financed star vehicles which are carried by the major studios and which have several functions. Firstly, they may surpass expectations and become successes despite market predictions. Secondly, they serve as test material for new stars who are simultaneously afforded the opportunity to develop. Thirdly, such films keep Hollywood and ancillary arenas alive and functioning. Fourthly, these films "...maintain a steady supply of dependable mainstream product" (Schatz, 1993:34). More importantly, however, is the development and maintenance of a successful "niche" market which is exploited by smaller independent groups such as Miramax and New Line Cinema. These companies (usually subsidiaries of the major studios) output low-cost films and satisfy alternative trends in the general market. Additional

strategies might include the buying or financing of foreign or "art" films and distributing these relatively low-budget products to "...a fairly consistent art film crowd" (Schatz, 1993:34). New Hollywood, then, is most clearly stratified and divided along economic lines:

> ...we might see the New Hollywood as producing three different classes of movie: the calculated blockbuster designed with the multimedia marketplace and franchise status in mind, the mainstream A-class star vehicle with sleeper-hit potential, and the low-cost independent feature targeted for a specific market and with little chance of anything more than "cult film" status (Schatz, 1993:35).[61]

As suggested earlier, it is the rapidly emerging technologies - particularly digital compression capabilities and computer-based communication (such as the Internet and interactive games systems) - which will determine the future of the media and cinema industry. Current technology already enables pay-per-view satellite channels[62] as well as the direct broadcasting of hundreds of possible channels into the home environment. Digital compression will certainly enable dial-up-on-demand programming in the very near future, enhancing the possibilities of an interactive home entertainment environment. The Internet has already become the site for incredible changes in the concept of moving image entertainment and the possibilities which this already suggests for the future of cinema are discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

Hype is hope

> ...*if movies are the new rock 'n' roll...then the potential for new 'indie' label production and distribution of moving images is incalculable (James, 1999b:3).*

While a broad understanding of contemporary Hollywood may suggest that it is a rigidly structured and class-organised system, this is not necessarily the case. Instead, "...these classes of films and filmmakers are in a state of dynamic tension with one another and continually intermingle" (Schatz, 1993:35). Recent cinema has tended to resist rules and expectations, continually proving that it is able to stretch the artificial limits set by traditional genres, styles, and narrative conventions. In an article on contemporary trends in so-called "art house" cinema, Nick Roddick (1998:22-26) refers to some of the closing remarks of Christine Vachon's *Shooting to Kill*, a book which investigates the highs and lows of independent filmmaking:

> Noting that the success of independent movies goes in cycles, Vachon observes that they declined in popularity after the boom of the early 80s. "Then," she says, "came *Pulp Fiction* [Quentin Tarantino, 1994], *Shine* [Scott Hicks, 1996], *Sling Blade* [Billy Bob Thornton, 1996], *Welcome to the Dollhouse* [Todd Solondz, 1995] and *The English Patient* [Anthony Minghella, 1996], and the movement was reborn." Whoa! *Pulp Fiction* and *The English Patient* independent features? Technically, yes, in that anything not produced by one of the Hollywood majors is classified in the business as independent. Move away from that and the dividing line becomes hard to draw....the themes, cast and filmic language of *Pulp Fiction*, *Shine* and *The English Patient* – especially *The English Patient* – belong very much to the mainstream. An artistically ambitious, quasi-auteurist cutting edge of the mainstream perhaps, but the mainstream nonetheless. Which is to say that none of those films' makers had anything other than a general audience in mind when they made them (Roddick, 1998:22).

While "dividing lines" no longer appear to be all that important in gauging the potential success of contemporary films, it remains a fact that big-budget blockbusters continue to make the biggest overall returns (particularly when considering ancillary industries and markets) as well as some of the heaviest revenue losses. Three vital factors must be seen to exist at the heart of the merging cinema industry: brilliant marketing strategies, a wave of exceptional talent in the form of writers and directors with a penchant for tapping into the desires of an increasingly cine-literate public, and a movie-going public that is keen to experience something different, something new, and something innovative. There is therefore a new vibrancy in an industry whose market parameters are constantly undergoing change. As Roddick (1998:22) points out, it is also "...the genius of the new generation of quasi-independent directors to deny the existence of a divide between the multiplex mainstream and the art-house fare with which some of them started". In the light of success stories throughout the Nineties, however, one is compelled to wonder whether or not such a divide really does (still) exist. The $100 million grossed by the boundary-breaking *Pulp Fiction* can be linked in no small part to a marketing campaign worthy of the film which one critic called a "...Palm d'Or-grabbing motherfucker..." (Bernstein, 1994:46). Elsaesser identifies "new marketing strategies" as the most important factor to have contributed to the New Hollywood aesthetic (Elsaesser, 1998:191).[63] The primary concern in recent decades has been with the desire to attract generations of potential viewers who have been "...brought up on television and popular music" and who identify "...with the broader attitudes and values of 'youth culture' (non-conformism, rebelliousness, sexual freedom, fashion-consciousness and conspicuous consumption)" (Elsaesser, 1998:191). Since the mid-1950s, the American public and domestic arenas have largely been dominated by the

"signs, images and sounds" of this youth culture, and its importance to the development of Western culture cannot be underestimated (Elsaesser, 1998:191-2).[64]

One of the most important examples of the new techniques in "non-mainstream" marketing strategies is demonstrated by the way in which Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* was sold to the public. Owned by the major independent studio, Miramax Films, *Pulp Fiction* was afforded a intensively-strategised marketing campaign "...designed to cross over as soon as possible from an art house audience to a wider action-thriller clientele" (Wyatt, 1998b:81). Art house audiences were sold the film on the basis of its credentials (having won the main prize at Cannes), while an alternative image of the movie's combined elements of action, comedy, and sexiness, was evoked in order to win mainstream viewers:

> The trailer demonstrates this approach: the preview begins solemnly by announcing that the film has won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and that it has been one of the most critically acclaimed films of the year. Suddenly gunshots appear through the screen, and a fast-paced barrage of shots from the film stressing the action, sexuality and memorable sound bites. [...] This approach no doubt broadened the film's audience without alienating those drawn by the critical acclaim. (Hyatt, 1998:81).

Hyatt (1998:81) also notes that the use of a "one-sheet" to define the film's title can be seen as a strategy to enlighten "...the masses who might have been alienated by an 'obscure' title".

Of course, Miramax represents one of the few independent studio success stories, having begun to make small profits during the mid-1980s by "...acquiring distribution rights to films which, at the right pickup price, would enable them to reap at least a small profit" (Wyatt, 1998b:79). Run by Harvey and Bob Weinstein, Miramax rose to prominence when it acquired Steven Soderbergh's Palme d'Or-winning debut, *sex, lies and videotape* (1989). Not only is the film said to have "put Miramax on the map", but also to have taken "...American indie films into the shopping mall" (Matthews, 1998:9). While the company marketed the film as an intense and sexy comedy dealing with relationships, the critical acclaim was simultaneously exploited in order to realise a $26 million gross in the United States alone. This figure broke previous box-office benchmarks set by art house movies and can be attributed to a combination of Miramax's "...aggressive marketing and that come-hither title..." (Matthews, 1998:9), not to mention the film's critical success and a number of important awards. Whereas an independent film was once considered a box-office success if it grossed in the region of $3 million, since *sex, lies and videotape*, this benchmark figure has rise to

around $10 million (Wyatt, 1998b:79). In response to the film's success, however, Soderbergh noted that

> The positive aspect is that it shows that 'art movies' can be a viable commercial product. They don't have to remain ghettoized as an art film. The bad thing is that it's established an unrealistic benchmark for other films (in Wyatt, 1998b:80).

Of course, the film is also said to have tapped into the zeitgeist of the times, representing the intersection of culture and technology in an era of safe sex and AIDS paranoia. In the film, Graham (James Spader) videotapes women talking about their sex lives so that he can use the material for his self-professed reliance on masturbation as a completely safe sexual outlet. He finally "...overcomes his impotence when, instead of collecting the sexual confessions of his girlfriends to masturbate over, he appears in front of his own camera" (Falcon, 1998a:25).[65] *Cineaste* critic, Karen Jaehne (in Wyatt, 1998b:79), notes that "Soderbergh wants Graham to explode the neo-conservative Eighties with video the way David Hemmings did the swinging Sixties with photography in *Blowup*".[66]

The lessons learnt from the success of the *sex, lies and videotape* marketing campaign have frequently been replicated by Miramax. One technique is the deliberate challenging of the MPAA ratings system as a way of provoking huge media hype around certain movies, particularly those by recognised auteurs. Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) and Pedro Almodóvar's *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990) are examples of films which have received NC-17 (no children under 17 permitted) ratings from the Motion Picture Association of America only to be challenged by Miramax as evidence of "...the injustice of the ratings system for independent companies compared to the majors" (Hyatt, 1998:80). Miramax was able to generate enormous publicity with its campaign for Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) by "...engaging its audiences in current and timely issues – in this case, the national debate over homosexual rights, specifically the proposal to end the ban on gays serving in the military" (Wyatt, 1998b:81). Using the advertising tag line "Play it at your own risk. Sex. Murder. Betrayal. In Neil Jordan's new thriller nothing is what it seems to be", Miramax was able to side-step the political theme of the film and market it as a thriller with a "core secret". This "secret", that Dil (played by Jaye Davidson) is in fact a man, is revealed only halfway through the film, and was the source of the film's cross-over success in the form of a $62.5 million gross for what was essentially an art house venture. According to Michael Fleming and Leonard Klady (in Wyatt, 1998b:81), "Miramax sold the film as

an action-thriller with a big "secret". If it had been realistically pegged as a relationship film with gay connotations, it might never have broken beyond the major cities".

Roddick's interpretation of Miramax's successful marketing campaigns is less positive. He contends that the "new independents" were marketed so as to suggest that audiences would perceive them as "unproblematic": "...evening-out movies that wouldn't force you to confront difficult stuff – or having confronted it, would leave you feeling better for having done so" (Roddick, 1998:22). Of course, while *The Crying Game* allowed viewers a more-or-less unexpected opportunity to engage the theme of "gayness", discriminatory and "traditional" views were simultaneously being reinforced through the film's embodiment of certain clichés and stereotypes, including "...the in-the-closet relationship [between Dil and Stephen Rea's Fergus], the continual drug-taking and nightclubbing, and the mental/psychological instability invoked by the character of Dil" (Wyatt, 1998b:81). The cross-over popularity of the film, largely sustained by its image as a thriller, must therefore also be weighed against its "ideological stance". From a postmodern perspective, however, it is a legitimate consideration that the "surprise element" comments directly on the audiences who were paying to see the film. The very fact that Dil's gender remains a secret until the camera points out the obvious (in the form of fleeting nudity), must be understood as an immediate confrontation with a viewership that clings to traditional notions of centred gender norms and sexual politics:

> As with the 'gays in the military' issue, the film confronts the fears of straight men being considered a sexual object by someone of the same gender (Wyatt, 1998b:81).

Wyatt (1998b:81) notes that the film's thriller plot is foregrounded by the romance between Dil and Fergus, addressing not only "...the blurry line between attraction and repulsion...", but issues of "...constructed and essential differences across sexual, gender, class and national lines".

The impact of successful marketing strategies – particularly by independents who do not answer to major conglomerates – is perhaps best exemplified by the overwhelming success of the 1999 ultra low-budget horror film, *The Blair Witch Project*. Clark Collis (1999:94) describes this cinema phenomenon as the "...most talked about film of the year [and] the most profitable film of the year (in budget-to-gross terms)...". In stark contrast with any typical Hollywood film, *Blair Witch* has no

special effects, utilises mostly shaky handheld video footage, has almost entirely improvised dialogue, and avoids traditional notions of both narrative and spectacle. Directed by unknowns, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, and marketed by Artisan Entertainment, the film has been described by Richard Corliss (1999c:60) as having a "...sudden and seismic...utterly unprecedented..." impact on both American filmgoers and the industry itself:

> Never has a – let's be honest – *weird* movie budgeted at a ludicrously low $35,000 stormed both the box office and the pop consciousness. In nine weeks of release in the U.S., it grossed $137 million – an incredible nearly 4,000-fold return on its investment, making the film, in percentage terms, the most profitable ever. ... And the marketers...who built fervid want-see for the film through cunning use of the Internet, have been credited with revolutionizing the way films are sold (Corliss, 1999c:60).

There is much to suggest that the advertising techniques employed by the Artisan team may change the course of film marketing history, particularly as the major studios continue to spend huge sums on newspaper and television advertising, while *Blair Witch* engaged in creative schemes including "guerrilla marketing tactics" and laid out a mere $15,000 to launch its own website. With the increasing globalisation of the Internet, this independent production and its marketing strategy may have already served as a test case for major changes in the tactics employed by mainstream Hollywood. Artisan, which bought the film for a mere $1.1 million, turned the movie from a relatively inexpensive Sundance Film Festival purchase, into a cult craze by mythologizing the film on the Internet, creating the impression that the film was made from "real" video footage. In this way, *Blair Witch* became an international legend before hitting overseas markets.

The net result of the film's brilliant marketing strategy has included the success of a string of ancillary products including a best-selling book, a CD featuring the songs supposedly found in the tape deck of the car of one of the characters, and a comic book. Such extra-cinematic success proves that the "synergy" concept is not limited to the high-concept and ultra-high budget products of the major studios. While there is every possibility that *Blair Witch* represents an independent "fluke" success story, it has also been pointed out that the film's success has had much to do with the "...convergence of old and new media" (John Pierson in Corliss, 1999c:66). Also, the public's fascination with a fantasy that is indistinguishable from "reality" seems to have had major influence on the film's unprecedented box-office achievement. Indeed, the mythology around the *making of* the film has enjoyed as much speculative analysis as the film itself. While this particular anomaly may "...be a

fleeting fad with no profound meaning for the future of film..." (Corliss, 1999c:66), there is at least some sway in the argument that such huge box-office takings will somehow influence the relationship between cinema and spectators in a major way.[67]

In many ways, *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999) is a typical example of the way in which hyperbolic marketing campaigns have been used by companies such as Miramax to sell "arty" niche movies to the more general cinema-going public. The entire production was clouded in mystery – related both to the nature of the project and the work ethic of the director – and this helped to add an air of mystique to the product which was to eventually emerge (after being in production for over two years). Writing the day before the release of the film in the United States, Duncan Campbell (1999) noted that it "...may turn out to be a masterpiece of marketing – the director himself was behind the strategy to release as few details as possible in order to create the maximum tantalising speculation". Kubrick's death just prior to the release of the film further elevated its hype-potential, increasing the cult status of the acclaimed director, and significantly upping the mystery surrounding the film (Kubrick is no longer available to talk about his film). Most conspicuous, however, was the blatant use of the film's promise of flesh and sex to advertise and promote the film. Indeed, the promised spectacles of Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman in sexually provocative scenes as well as sensationalised reports of a "full-blown" orgy scene contributed significantly to the selling potential of a highly "artistic" film.

Campbell (1999) further notes that Warners (the film's producers) calculated that the strategy of speculation served to bring "...in people who would not normally see a 'difficult' Kubrick film" and that they traded "...heavily on the supposed sexual content of the film...". Gene Seymour (1999b:8) regards *Eyes Wide Shut* as the "...most overhyped movie of the summer...edging *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* by an eyelash" and containing very little "genuine eroticism" in what he calls its "...surprisingly uptight defence of monogamy...". It is strikingly significant that such criticism, which has been evidenced in numerous reviews and reports around the world, is blatantly aimed at the denial of "erotic spectacle" in this particular "mature audience" film. Seymour defends his position, which might suggest that he associates "mature viewing" with eroticism, by further complaining about the "...relative thinness of material...", and bemoaning the "...arid ponderousness..." of Kubrick's direction. Perhaps the ultimate insult is his criticism, in the same article, of the lack of weighty substance in "...both Julia Roberts movies [*Runaway Bride* (Garry Marshall, 1999) and

Notting Hill (Roger Michell, 1999)] and such noisy thrill rides as *Wild Wild West* [Barry Sonnenfeld, 1999], *Deep Blue Sea* [Renny Harlin, 1999] and *The Haunting* [Jan de Bont, 1999]..." (Seymour, 1999b:8).

As though it were patently impossible to keep critics and audiences satisfied, Seymour's analysis of "...the last US movie summer of the 20th century" is a scathing attack on both the type of films released and the massive marketing hype (which he holds genuinely responsible for the incredible success of 1999's big-budget films and smaller hits). His major criticism appears to be against the *success* of films, which results from either strategic marketing or the "natural" hype surrounding a particularly "big" (i.e. big-budget, high-concept) film. Seymour's impatience with successful films appears to ignore a central defining point concerning the cinematic artform. Since cinema is an art form which depends on its *being seen* in order for its message to be heard, or its story to be told, a wide, successful distribution is necessary. If "hype" can be used to effectively generate the type of interest from the public that films require in order to fulfil their "destiny", then it may surely be regarded as a legitimate social, cultural, and economic practice. And, one might easily argue that Seymour's pessimism merely echoes the widespread antagonism felt by many critics towards current development in cinema. Corliss, in his review of *The Phantom Menace*, neatly sums up this prevailing attitude:

> For now, *The Phantom Menace* is a phantom movie, the merest hint of a terrific saga that the final two episodes of the new trilogy may reveal. At least, that's what we, and Hollywood, want to believe. Hype, after all, is just moviespeak for hope (Corliss, 1999b:50).

Hype, it may be argued, is the spectacle of Hollywood marketing. Just as each big screen film release *hopes* to achieve box office success, thereby also validating its significance as a cultural product which penetrates social consciousness, so hype endeavours to capture the interest and imagination of the potential box office market. Hype may further be considered to be an extension of the cinematic experience, contributing to the potential viewer's understanding of the narrative and fuelling his or her expectations with regards to the presentation of spectacle. The most recent - and possibly most successful - example of the effectiveness of such hype, can be witnessed in the marketing campaign designed to generate unprecedented anticipation for the release of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). In the case of marketing strategies which include rumour-mongering, Internet chat sites, extensive magazine and newspaper spreads, book tie-in promotions and television "making of" documentaries, for example, such hype

serves to create a vibrant, living mythology around the core cinematic "event". This dynamic form of myth-making may very well (as was the case with *The Blair Witch Project*) blur the distinction between the film's "reality" and our own experience of "reality". Equally important, marketing hype has enabled the strategic blurring of once-clear distinctions between "mainstream" and "non-commercial" cinema "events".

Dreaming of the digital future

We know that the first decade of the 21st century is going to shake up the movie business more than most. Films can be shot digitally and more cheaply, images can be manipulated digitally in any way, even actors' appearances and performances are theoretically digitally alterable. A digitally originated and edited 'film' can be promoted in new ways through the internet and shown in a much wider variety of public and private spaces (James, 1999b:3).

While many of the "realities" of contemporary cinema are concerned with money-making, it may well be that many of the most recent technological advancements in filmmaking will be responsible for ushering in a new era in film production, exhibition and distribution. Cinema is currently undergoing what David Mingay (1997:207) refers to as "...the third great revolution in the field of moving pictures - the Digital Revolution":

> The future of film is coming into focus. Digital technology not only redefines movies, but also the very idea of the image. We were born in an analogue era, we shall die in a digital one. Film is an analogue, that is, a physical copy of something else, it is 'analogous' to what it photographs. A digital image is not a copy, it is an electronic and mathematical translation. Laserdiscs transform images and sounds into binary choices, millions of on-off decisions (Schrader, 1996:204).

Many writers believe that the new digital technologies – particularly those concerned with creating "realistic" or life-like imagery for the cinema – are responsible for bringing dreams to life, or making them "real". Gronemeyer (1999:177) notes that while "[a] hundred years ago, film offered something that had never existed before: moving pictures of reality. [... F]ilm can [today] realistically portray things that cannot exist in reality". The most considerable developments in mainstream, big-budget cinema during the 1990s have been those owing their origins primarily to technical innovations and have tended to be related to the computer graphics imaging which has enhanced the visuals and special effects of films during elaborate post-production manipulation of film products. Films such as *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), its sequel *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1997) and *Terminator 2:*

Judgement Day, have demonstrated the cinema's rapid progress in the effort to create images which appear deceptively lifelike.

Terminator 2 combined science fiction, suspense, action-thriller, adventure and romance elements in a big-budget package which included one of Hollywood's biggest "stars" and the most elaborate special effects which had yet appeared in cinema. Most spectacular, was the use of graphic imaging to create the illusion of a futuristic anthropomorphic robot passing through walls, steel bars and other objects, as well as being able to transform into a variety of shapes and sizes, including both human and inorganic forms:

> The most spectacular of the effects in *Terminator 2* are the literally flowing transformations of the malevolent liquid metal Cyborg. Before the viewers' disbelieving eyes and without change of camera, it passes through prison bars, re-emerges from a linoleum floor, assumes the form of a uniformed security guard, and regenerates itself again after apparently total destruction (Gronemeyer, 1999:178).

The technique used to create these effects is called "morphing" or "shape shifting" and is produced using a computer rather than with camera shots. While *Terminator 2* still employed insert cuts of various handmade models to give focus and brilliance to the transformation stages of the special effects shots, increasingly the technology is allowing entire scenes and even complete movies to be made using extraordinarily "realistic" images which are generated using computer programmes. According to Barry Ronge, CGI has enabled a new sophistication in the creation of celluloid fantasies:

> If [James] Cameron is the CGI warrior, then Steven Spielberg is its poet. Spielberg's gift for fantasy has always been his richest creative source and he dazzled us with his use of the conventional special effects technology. But when he turned to CGI in *Jurassic Park* his work went to another level. Spielberg made that prehistoric world so totally real, so believable that one never questioned it. It was impossible to believe that most of those dinosaurs existed only in cyberspace and were added to the film in post-production (Ronge, 2000a:11).

Ronge (200a:11) argues that Spielberg and Cameron have together "...constituted the CGI alphabet for a new generation of filmmakers".

In 1995, *Toy Story* (John Lasseter) became the first full-length adventure film to be completely generated on computer. The possibilities of using CGI technology to make animation look more "realistic" were first explored during the creation of Disney's Academy Award nominated *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise,

1991) and then the highly successful *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994), but

> ...it was in *Toy Story* that it all came together in a truly new fusion. The look of the images that are generated entirely in a computer, with fluid lines and brilliant colours, really opened a window into a completely new visual experience that audiences immediately embraced. It allowed greater freedom of writing and characterisation so that in films like *Antz* [Eric Darnell and Lawrence Guterman, 1998] and *A Bug's Life* [John Lasseter and Andrew Stanton, 1998] the adult audiences were as delighted as the children were (Ronge, 2000a:11).

Toy Story's phenomenal success has revitalised the cultural impact of animated features. The release of *Toy Story 2* (John Lasseter, 1999) in 2000 was one of the most eagerly anticipated cinema events of the year, while the emphasis on heightened "visual realism" is evident in computer-generated films such as *Dinosaur* (Ralph Zondag and Eric Leighton, 2000) and *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*[68] (Hironobu Sakaguchi and Motonori Sakakibara, 2001). The computer-generated DreamWorks production, *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jensen), combines spectacular animation with inventive comedy in a parodic pastiche of popular fairy tales that became one of the biggest box-office drawcards of 2001. Successes such as these have led to the decision by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to award its first Best Animated Feature Oscar in 2002.

Gronemeyer (1999:179) comments on another "...astonishing possibility of computer technology" suggested by Robert Zemeckis' Academy Award-winning epic comedy-drama, *Forrest Gump* (1993), which combined bluescreen technology with documentary film footage in order to allow the film's title hero to "meet" the "real" John F. Kennedy in one scene. Computer technology was used to alter the lip movements of the president in order to have him utter the appropriate lines in the movie. Gronemeyer (1999:179) argues that "...this advance will soon lead to further scanning of actors in digital studios...". When actor Oliver Reed died during the shooting of *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), digital technology was used to construct some of the scenes which required the dead performer's "presence":

> I was able to use three shots I already had and a body double and basically put the jigsaw together with the use of some CGI (Scott in Palmer, 2000a:53).

Similar techniques were also used to complete the 1994 action-fantasy film, *The Crow* (Alex Proyas), for which already-shot footage of the dead star Brandon Lee had to be "...cut-and-pasted...into new scenes" using "digital trickery" (Thomas, 2000:55). Such "trickery" may have startling implications for future cinematic ventures, and Gronemeyer (1999:179) notes that "[i]t is theoretically already possible to create a

new film with Marlene Dietrich or Clark Gable through the combination of pictures of live actors and information on deceased actors scanned from old films". In this sense, digital technology holds the potential to sustain not only the illusion of "reality", but the illusion of "life".

The digital effects technologies have opened up the create space for film writers and directors, since the film medium is increasingly able to merge the once-distant categories of "realism" and "fantasy". Now, the fantastical can be made to seem "real", while "real" images may be altered and manipulated in order to transform them into fantasies. According to Ronge (2000a:11), digital technology and CGI has brought about a transfiguration in the art of filmmaking, restoring what he calls "...an epic potential, a degree of magnitude and miraculous fantasy that the cinema has not had since the 1900s when a picture that moved seemed to be a miracle in itself":

> Today the whole palette of digital technology is much more subtle and supple [than was available for the first *Star Wars* films, for example]; if you can dream it, you can see it. And you can play with a scene – keep reshooting it on the computer, so to speak, until it's perfect. As Lucas puts it, "An artist working on a fresco had to paint everything before the plaster dried. Then oils were invented. That's what digital is to movies. You can go out in the real world and paint, then come back the next day and finish it." To makers of fantasy films, this is a pipe dream come true (Corliss, 1999a:46).

There is little doubt that the "Digital Revolution" is well under way in contemporary Hollywood. After shooting *Star Wars: Episode II* entirely on Sony's CineAlta high definition digital cameras, George Lucas (in Pennington, 2000:14) recently announced that he would "...never ever shoot another film on film". Lucas argues that special effects intensive projects are "liberated" by digital filming, because it makes the integration of computer generated images easier and quicker.

While computer graphics technology has been responsible for adding to the budgets of major motion pictures which aspire to transform dreams into cinematic "realities" (the special effects used in *Terminator 2* over a decade ago cost $17 million, or one-fifth of the total production cost), the digital revolution is also responsible for major changes in the world of low-budget filmmaking. Already, DV (digital video) cameras and desktop editing packages are empowering independent filmmakers in ways which the much more costly film medium never could. *The Blair Witch Project*, for example, has already suggested that it need not take big money to produce big box office hits, (although it cannot be overlooked that a great deal of financing was required in order to market, distribute and exhibit the film - a product must be made available to mass

audiences before it can achieve box-office success, and many prints of *Blair Witch* had to be made - at great cost - before it could begin to turn a profit). Nick James (2000b:3) notes, however, that "[d]igital projection represents a huge shift in the way films will be distributed and exhibited in the future".

> ...imagine cinema from all around the world on tap, piped through existing phonelines or via satellite, shown at your local cinema for a fraction of the cost of celluloid. So much for the death of cinema - instead it's cinema to infinity and beyond (James, 2000b:3).

The Internet, too, has also been identified as the "place" where films will be distributed and exhibited in the future, suggesting the possibility that in the future multiple prints or copies of films will become unnecessary. Motion pictures may be transmitted into private homes or into cinema theatres from a single distribution point. According to Rob Kenner (1999:217), "...Hollywood moguls are finding themselves playing catch-up to digital billionaires in the power game [as] even the most entrenched among the studio elite have come to realize that 'the future is the Internet'"

Kenner (1999:217) argues that while film is the youngest artform, it is also "...the one most reliant on technology":

> Arguably, inventions have shaped cinematic history just as much as directors, writers, and stars have. But every step of the way, each breakthrough – whether it was synchronized sound, color film, or motion-control effects – made onscreen magic more expensive (Kenner, 1999:217).

In recent years, however, increasingly affordable and highly portable image-capturing devices have begun to challenge this prevailing restriction on the creative possibilities of filmmaking. The newly affordable technologies are heralding the demystification and democraticisation of moviemaking transforming "[w]hat has been a costly and elaborate collaborative process [into what] is quickly becoming a one-person show" (Kenner, 1999:217). Of course, Kenner's comments refer to a specific avenue of primarily "underground" cinema which has been termed "microcinema":

> The term *microcinema* was coined in 1991 by San Francisco's Total Mobile Home Microcinema, where all the films are "underground" because they're shown in the basement (Kenner, 1999:218).

The founders of Total Mobile were concerned with initiating an "alternative movement", which may be likened to a "sort of cinematic microbrewery" (Kenner, 1999:218) in the sense that filmmaking is brought into the homes and lives of "ordinary people". Typically, "microcinema" describes an intimate and low-budget filmmaking format which inevitably makes use of inexpensive formats such as Hi-8

video or DV (and less frequently on older 16mm film stock). "Productions" tend to include examples from a wide-range of genres, including "...animated shorts, bizarrely impressionistic video manipulations, hard-hitting documentaries, and garage-born feature-length movies" (Kenner, 1999:218).

Kenner (1999:218) writes that microcinema "...opens a direct connection between filmmakers and audience..." and that it is this "connection" which allows "average people" to "...shoot, edit, and perhaps even disseminate their visions without answering to anyone" for the first time in the history of cinema. Examples of the work generated by this new "freedom" are to be found amongst both the avant-garde and the mainstream, and include notable box-office and critical successes. *The Buena Vista Social Club* (Wim Wenders, 1999), an acclaimed feature-length documentary, was shot using digital cameras (including one rented digital Betacam and two consumer-level cameras that use the miniDV format), while one of the biggest grossing films of 1999, *The Blair Witch Project*, was filmed by the actors themselves using "little" Hi-8 video and 16-mm film cameras. Digital video makes a significant contribution towards easing the financial burden of amateur filmmakers, cutting the costs of equipment hire, removing the need for costly film stock, and drastically reducing processing and editing fees which often make celluloid productions unaffordable. In order for a digital production to be screened in a traditional cinema, however, it must still be transferred to 35-mm film:

> Most movie theatres and film festivals haven't bought expensive digital projection systems, so they can accept media only in the form of big old cans of celluloid (Parks, 1999:223).

The value of digital video, for those filmmakers wishing to gain access to the mainstream or festival cinema circuit, therefore lies in "...accessibility of quality...which allows a production to be completed to an acceptable standard before being blown up to 35mm (Miller in Parks, 1999:223), usually at the expense of a distribution company.

The nature of DV equipment – particularly the size, weight, "...ease of use and...inconspicuousness..." of the cameras (Miller in Parks, 1999:223) – also contribute to the usefulness of the technology and the inventive possibilities of films shot digitally. Bennett Miller, who single-handedly shot an entire documentary on digital equipment, notes that "[w]ith film, you'd need a boom microphone and a DAT audio recorder, and you'd have to change reels every 10 minutes...[and] film is heavy"

(in Park, 1999:224). As has been suggested by commercially-released films such as *The Blair Witch Project*, *Buena Vista Social Club*, and Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration*, the medium affords the material a distinctly "immediate" – or "realistic" – quality:

> Like the Zapruder film, the Rodney King tape, and *When Animals Attack*, microcinema thrills by keeping it real (Kenner, 1999:218).

DV contributes to the possibilities of heightened "realism", while significantly improving on the audio-visual quality of earlier recording devices. Smaller, more inconspicuous, cameras can be introduced into everyday environments without disruption and without arousing excessive attention:

> ...another DV production, *The Saltmen of Tibet* [*Die Salzmänner von Tibet*, 1997, Ulrike Koch], used a small digicam to elude the attention of Chinese and Tibetan officials (Parks, 1999:223-224).

Another advantage lies in the fact that because the recorded footage is already in digital format, post-production changes (such as inserting titles, manipulating colour, adding effects, or tampering with the images) are easily and cost-effectively rendered. Accordingly, amateur DV productions range from those resembling untouched home video recordings to those resembling expensive advertisements which seem to rely on elaborate graphic effects.

The nature of digital video also makes it a particularly easy medium for distribution via the Internet, which has become "...a potent distribution channel and showcase" for the "makeshift community" of global microcinema enthusiasts (Kenner, 1999:218). There are now numerous Internet websites which have become devoted to delivering short digital films, animation loops and other suitable moving image entertainment to computer users in the comfort of their own homes. Websites such as *AtomFilms.com*, *ifilm.com*, *directorunknown.com*, *urbanchillers.com*, *thesynch.com*, *dfilm.com*, *binarytheater.com*, *reelscreen.com* and *thebitscreen.com* feature a varied supply of microcinematic works – many of which are shot or created digitally – offering online users not only choice, but also the possibility of commenting on works which are screened. These sites accept and broadcast short films for no cost to the filmmaker or the online viewer. Instead, the companies responsible for the websites typically make money through advertising and commerce on the sites, as well as through syndicated sales to airlines, television stations and other websites (Winstanley, 2000b:140-141). The small screen of the Internet has thus become a viable (and affordable) "alternative" exhibition space for independent and amateur filmmakers. The Internet

now also serves as a platform from which filmmakers can introduce their material or talent to those film companies which can provide funding for big screen distribution. Many major corporations are also making use of short films and digital animation pieces to enhance their websites, allowing would-be "filmmakers" the opportunity to make money in the form of corporate sponsorships. Besides the Internet, digital filmmakers are also finding audiences at some of the numerous "underground" (microcinema) film festivals being held around the world.

In the broadest sense, "classic microcinema" represents a "new wave" in cinema production which allows films to be made which would not exist were it not for the cheaper technology and the creative "immediacy" which such technology exerts. The new technologies not only make cinema affordable, but also encourage a different thinking about what moving images can do and how they should be used to entertain (or enlighten). According to one digital "filmmaker", Mark O'Connell, digital video streamlines and simplifies the process of creating cinema:

> Filmmaking is totally collaborative…. You used to need an army of specialists to do everything. But digital video is much easier and more direct. Now its something that really is the result of one author (O'Connell in Kenner, 1999:221).

Digital video therefore presents would-be filmmakers with newer and fresher ways of understanding how images can be used and therefore how cinema may actually function. O'Connell highlights the major difference between film and DV, noting that the latter "…is not film; it's multiple frames of digital information…" (in Kenner, 1999:121). The "problem" for developing a thoroughly "new" way of using this digital information may lie in O'Connell's observation that "Hollywood and TV have a very definite way of organizing visual information" and that such organisational patterns are "…ingrained in us" (in Kenner, 1999:121).

John Chittock (1997:222) argues that digital technologies are largely responsible for the emergence of "…a strain of movies where special effects *are* the movie…". Critics like Chittock view the new technologies of image-creation as a foil for the creative aspects of the film medium, and insist that these ultimately contribute to the excesses of high concept, big-budget Hollywood productions which rely on spectacle rather than "narrative". His analysis largely ignore the highly inventive possibilities of digital filmmaking, such those which have already been suggested by low-budget and amateur productions such as *The Blair Witch Project* and many of the short films being broadcast via the Internet. Nick James (1999b:3) refers to the future of

filmmaking as positively "dizzying" and he claims that the new (digital) technology available to filmmakers has already demonstrated "...the seeming irrelevance of classical film-making ideas...". While several years ago – around the time when cinema was celebrating its centenary - analysts and critics were discussing "the death of cinema", it is now clear that films will not die, but will be made, marketed, distributed, and screened in revolutionary ways.

On 9 January 2001, the American Film Institute (AFI, 2001) identified the digital revolution as one of the most significant moments in the development of cinema during the previous year. The Internet and other New Media were seen to have brought changes to the production, exhibition, marketing, distribution and copyrights of films. Mike Figgis's *Timecode* (discussed in further detail in chapter six) became the first full-length studio feature film to be produced entirely in digital format, and was premiered on the Internet on March 22 (its theatrical release in film format followed on April 28). The use of the Internet for the dissemination of information about forthcoming films "...by creating buzz campaigns, home pages for new releases and exclusive access to movie trailers" (AFI, 2001) was taken to a new level when the teaser trailer for the much-anticipated *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (eventually released December 2001) was downloaded 1.6 million times during the first 24 hours that it was available on April 7. According to the AFI (2001), the "...explosion of companies founded to exhibit short films via the Internet....not only created a global audience for the short-form, which is rarely programmed in movie theatres, but fueled the production of low-budget short films". Internet has created a new paradigm for the exhibition of films that are also produced digitally. One example noted by the AFI is the digital short film *405*, which was created by Jeremy Hunt and Bruce Branit with virtually no budget on their home computer using f/x software. The film was broadcast to millions of viewers on the Internet on 5 June 2000. A new age in digital distribution arrived on 17 November 2000 when *Bounce* (Don Roos) became The first major motion picture to be distributed digitally for public presentation in an AMC theatre in New York City's Time Square. During 2000, legal questions began to arise concerning the development of applications which allow the Internet to be used as a site for the copying, sharing and dissemination of films.

The so-called "digital revolution" has had a hugely significant effect on the cinema industry. While for some it raises concerns over the status of filmmaking as uniquely specialised art and entertainment form, it equally suggests that it will become

increasingly possible for films to be made, advertised, distributed and exhibited at low cost and with minimal resources. In extreme terms, according to William Gibson:

> Digital cinema has the potential to throw open the process of filmmaking, to make the act more universally available, to demythologise it, to show us aspects of the world we've not seen before. In that sense, it will be the "eyes" of the extended nervous system we've been extruding as a species for the past century (Gibson, 1999:229).

Digital film, like many of the changes and additions which have impacted on the evolution of moving images, will influence the cinema both technologically and aesthetically. As Gibson suggests, however, the changing nature of the material whereby we view the world will not necessarily make the cinema arts any more or less "artificial". Indeed, as it simplifies and "demythologises" the act of conscious watching, digital technology is simply a further step in the commodification of *viewing*. Digital films may suggest the direction of a new "independent" cinema, but such a cinema will ultimately require paying audiences.

Dreams wrapped in dollar bills

The concept of film as a mass-audience form – as something made for a multiplex – is where we are: culturally, economically and aspirationally. If there is nowhere left to show film-as-art, then what is the point in making it, since film, by definition, only exists as an artform when turned into two-dimensional images in a public place? (Roddick, 1998:26).

Cinema – whether thought of as artform or mere entertainment - is governed by a simple economic principle, highlighted by Baudrillard's observation that

> ...it is no longer possible to separate the economic or productive realm from the realms of ideology or culture, since cultural artifacts, images, representations, even feelings and psychic structures have become part of the world of the economic (Baudrillard, 1981:185).

Except in a few privileged cases, films are made in order to make a profit. Robert Phillip Kolker (1983:3) acknowledges that "[i]n cinema world wide those films that do not promise large returns remain unmade or unseen. [... E]very film must stand on its own in the circuit of exchange. It must make money". According to Janet Staiger (in Maltby, 1998:25), the position of American film within the system of economic capitalism has never been denied by film historians, while Kolker (1983:22) highlights the significance of this economic system, noting that "[t]he economics of the film business is no longer looked upon as a separate study, but as integrally involved with both technological and aesthetic developments". Jon Lewis (1998:87) offers a

somewhat cynical view of what, since the early 1980s, has been referred to as "the corporate era" in Hollywood, noting that "[a]t stake in every major film release is less the merit of the picture as a work of art than its measurable value as a product". Since the value of a film to the industry which produces it is measured in terms of the product's earning potential, its value is necessarily related directly to the projected appeal of the film. Those elements which go to make up a commercial film, including narrative and stylistic elements, are often largely attributable to the "demands" of a "mass audience" [69], while smaller – or niche-market – productions are often marginal products designed to meet the unique "demands" of a particular audience group.

Elsaesser argues that the acquisition of studios by various multinational corporations has altered not only the way in which films have come to be made, but their significance in the world entertainment market. Movies are now "...a minor element of the global entertainment industry, and the entertainment industry itself merely one part of multinational corporate planning, focussed on oil, transport, car-parks and property dealing" (Elsaesser, 1998:194). As the demographics of spectatorship have changed over the years, so the "terms of subjectivity" whereby mainstream (and therefore also oppositional) cinema narratives are constructed, have been forced to adapt and adjust. The terms of production continue to be influenced by new systems of technology as well as new economic and socio-political climates. Hollywood has always been driven by economics and salesmanship, and these factors are necessarily woven into the narratives which, through film products, feed our imaginations, our dreams, our hopes. And, of course, our "reality".

In its battle to ensure the survival of the youngest artform, Hollywood has in recent years not only looked to the future of entertainment, but has also cast its eyes backwards (to the B-movies, epics and *film noir* favourites of the past, for example) and sideways (to the filmmakers and "industries" of Europe and the East). Since the mid-1950s, Hollywood has rallied around the interests of an ever-burgeoning youth-culture (and its spending-power) while the traditional "family market" has regrouped around home entertainment forms constituting "the cable-satellite-videotape revolution" which has granted "...viewers a hitherto unknown freedom over the uses of the audio-visual product..." which has "...made even this audience 'invisible' to the statistical targeting strategies which formed the basis of the film and TV industry's traditional marketing strategies" (Elsaesser, 1998:192). The shift towards targeting the "youth market" has also been directly linked to the "...attunement of the culture to

youth audiences of whatever age..." (Elsaesser, 1998:193). Such reworkings of cultural "attunement" have been largely responsible for the swiftly accelerating dissolution of the boundaries between high and low culture. Such a breakdown, particularly in recent years, has been linked to what Michael Bracewell (2000:12) refers to as "...an infantilist reflex at work across the cultural landscape of the early 90s". Such "infantilism" may be seen as "...a pan-cultural expression of nostalgia for the values of adolescence..." which may be detected "...in both a debased and heightened form" throughout the landscape of contemporary popular culture (Bracewell, 2000:12).

A further factor in the development of Hollywood cinema since the 1970s, has been a dramatic shift towards a "market driven" filmmaking strategy which has been heavily influenced by the absorption of the major film companies into larger conglomerates, so that "...the potential for synergies between the previously separate entertainment industries could be realized" (Smith, 1998:13). The big screen movie has become the starting point for a stream of profit-making possibilities which include television and video, music soundtracks, computer games, clothing and accessories, and other brandable items from a variety of markets. The value of a strong advertising campaign, coupled with the need to "sell" the film product across a broad range of markets, has had a significant influence on the aesthetic development of contemporary cinema. To some extent, even popular film "theory" and criticism has been associated with cinema publicity:

> Perhaps it's time to officially write off the auteur theory. Is it really possible to suggest that a vast multi-media entertainment event like *Dracula* is the product of a single vision rather than a massive marketing team? Or should we simply admit that its billing as a 'Coppola film' is just as much as the presence of hot young stars like Keanu and Winona, a way of getting a certain sector of the audience interested? The theory is at its most threadbare when applied to young directors. After all, how feasible is it to claim a distinctive personal style on the basis of one film, knocked out in a few weeks using your parent's savings? (McClellan, 1993a:76).

The names of popular (or challenging) directors are frequently reified and exploited in order to improve the chances of success for a film product which might have limited appeal if associated with a "lesser" *auteur*.

In fiscal terms, the importance of marketing by companies such as Miramax and New Line Cinema (which have frequently used hype to promote their products) in the bid to create mainstream successes out of low-budget, independent, art house and niche

market films, cannot be overstated. The strategy of creating such cross-over successes is viewed less optimistically by some, however. Jim McClellan (1993a:78), for example, notes that the kind of hype which is generated around these films tends to impact on the style, vision and "...personal approach" of the directors who, as part of the publicity drive, are inevitably celebrated for their "artistic achievement". Commenting on the success of *sex, lies and videotape*, for example, Steven Soderbergh complains that he was "...set up as this independent poster boy and that was not my intent" (in McClellan, 1993a:78). The result of hype-driven marketing strategies has a tendency to shortcircuit the potential career-longevity of a "young auteur". Constantly seeking newer, fresher directorial talents, Hollywood is ever-ready to tap into the possible creativity (and bankability) suggested by a the next potentially marketable "auteur":

> As with old-style auteurs, the onus on today's new school is to find the space to work, to creatively negotiate with the studios, and above all, to try to ride out the hype. Paradoxically, if they do that, they might, on the sly, develop into the object of all the hype - a director with a distinctive personal vision and style. [...] Perhaps the only thing you can say for certain is that you can only be a 'young auteur' for so long; that next year, a whole new crew of younger, hungrier contenders will be snapping at your heels, still desperate, despite all the pitfalls, to be discovered by Hollywood (McClellan, 1993a:78).

Such an observation alludes, once again, to the commodification of cultural and artistic talent by an industry concerned with tapping into every possibility offered by an increasingly audacious zeitgeist.

The zeitgeist does appear to suggest noticeable changes in the attitude of Hollywood corporations which have begun to put money into increasingly challenging movies which do more than simply support conventional expectations. Rick Lyman (2000:10), for example, notes that a potential shift in the tastes of mainstream audiences has begun to influence the types of product coming from major Hollywood studios:

> After two decades of formula comedy, feelgood tales and big-budget he-man adventures, the mass audience seems much more willing to embrace movies that astonish, even in unsettling or downbeat ways, and use fresh storytelling techniques to upend their expectations (Lyman, 2000:10).

According to DreamWorks' head of marketing, Terry Press (in Lyman, 2000:10), whereas twenty years ago, high-concept filmmaking was an infectious idea which dominated both the production and marketing of mainstream cinema, the idea that audiences need a story which can be explained in two lines, has finally died. Popular box-office hits now include surprisingly non-formulaic, "genre-bending" films which include subversive twists, radical plot developments and even complicated narratives.

These include films such as *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), *American Beauty*, *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999). Walt Disney Studios president, Joe Roth (in Lyman, 2000:10) emphasises that it is the "surprise" element which has become the "crucial point": "We're at the point now where if you come at the audience in the traditional way, they're way ahead of you. But if the public hears about something fresh they're onto it immediately". It may also be argued that filmgoers have become more at ease with sophisticated or complicated themes and narratives because they are confronted with a range of "...interesting and sophisticated things on cable television and the Internet..." (Lasse Halstrom in Lyman, 2000:10). *The Sixth Sense*, which offers viewers "...more than a good old-fashioned ghost story..." but also compelling characters and an intelligent narrative which nevertheless managed to sustain an "...atmosphere of dread comparable to Robert Wise's *The Haunting* [1963], Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* [1968] and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* [1980]...", made over a quarter of a billion dollars at the box office in 1999 (Mooney, 2000b:109) thereby becoming the twelfth highest grossing movie ever (Horn, 2000:36).

A film which has been praised for being "...both deeply serious and consistently funny..." (de Waal, 2000e:16), *American Beauty* was never intended to be a Hollywood blockbuster, but its unprecedented success has also been notable. Independent producer Dan Jinks notes that "Everybody is surprised at how well this film - a small piece about an American family - has done overseas.... Every major studio except DreamWorks passed on the screenplay" (Jinks in Eller, 2000:9). The film was originally "...dismissed as uncommercial" (Eller, 2000:9) by all the major studios excluding DreamWorks SKG, but went on to be nominated for eight Oscars, while proving to be financially successful around the globe. Made for a mere $15 million, it had earned almost $200 million ($94 million in the US and $103 million internationally) by mid-March 2000, despite the fact that DreamWorks studio executives "...had zero expectations for the movie's box office" (Eller, 2000:1). A number of analysts have linked the film's success to the "surprise" factor: "People are mesmerised by this movie. They are riveted because they're taken by surprise. You expect the story to take one direction, and it takes you in another. I think a lot of people relate to the characters" (Chissick in Eller, 2000:9). According to Chissick, audiences in even tough-market territories like Hong Kong and Korea "...are taken with the theme of the movie..." (in Eller, 2000:9). Chissick's analysis of the film's success suggests that previous trends and understandings of "what audiences want"

are no longer necessarily valid and that much of the film's popularity can be linked to "outstanding" word of mouth publicity. Bruce Cohen (in Lyman, 2000:10), who co-produced *American Beauty* argues that "[a]udiences are tired of seeing the same movies over again….[t]hey don't want to have movies jammed down their throats, they want to discover them".

In the final analysis, however, emphasis still lies with basic economics. If audiences are going to pay to see something "new" and something "different" which costs studios less money to make (and to market), then it makes good economic sense to explore "new" directions. While some analysts regard this Newest Hollywood as a return to the "…more sophisticated cinema tastes of the 1970s", there are cynics who find it hard to believe that Hollywood would abandon tried and tested formulas which have been responsible for the huge returns which blockbuster films inevitably bring in (Lyman, 2000:10). For some, the change in attitude by Hollywood studios is a result of the burgeoning entertainment industry which has meant that competing media have forced filmmaking in an alternative direction. This direction, it would seem, is inspired and influenced by an independent filmmaking sensibility spawned by the success, in recent years, of events such as the Sundance Film Festival. Yet, Charles Gant (1999:174) argues that "[w]hile the independents are busy softening their edges for that elusive mass audience…", the larger studios are proving once again to be a source of "smouldering" creativity. He notes that *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999), *Rushmore* (Wes Anderson, 1998) and *Election* (Alexander Payne, 1999) were three of the most interesting films to have been released during the 1998/1999 season, and that these came from major studios. Meanwhile, Gant (1999:174) refers to *Happy, Texas* (Mark Illsley, 1999) and notes that "…it's depressing to see an independent film signal its crowd-pleasing intent so desperately", even if the American independents "…have always had one canny eye on the crossover market…". Gant argues that the film lacks the critical, experimental and socially-provocative edge which once defined independent films: "A face-licking puppy dog of a movie, *Happy, Texas* mislocated its soul somewhere en route to the multiplex - no great surprise for a film content merely to put a gay twist on *Nuns on the Run* [Jonathan Lynn, 1990]" (Gant, 1999:174).

According to Marc Norman (in Lyman, 2000:10), who co-wrote the Oscar-winning screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998), the studios are not abandoning formulas, but are rather "…in-between looking for the next formula, the next sure thing". It is perhaps unlikely that the studios are about to abandon old

formulas in favour of "...a riskier, more sophisticated form of storytelling" (Lyman, 2000:10). While audiences still go to the cinema to "escape", they also want "...to be more mentally stimulated and challenged..." (Paul Dergarabedian[70] in Lyman, 2000:10). The current trend indicates that there is a "...greater crossover between the films earning critical kudos and Oscar nominations and the films that are embraced by the young, hip audiences" (Lyman, 2000:10). Director Ron Howard (in Lyman, 2000:10) suggests that tastes are expanding and that audiences are willing to accept the "shocking or unexpected":

> I think shock value equals cool in today's world (Howard in Lyman, 2000:10).

Of course, it should be also be remembered that not a single studio paid any attention to Steven Spielberg's ideas for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) until his earlier blockbuster, *Jaws*, had demonstrated its potential success at the box-office. Stephen Heath (1981:200) has noted that reviews of *Jaws* inevitably commented on "...its status as *the* film..." which was "...not so much a super-production as a super-product..." determined in terms of its record-breaking performance at the box-office. In this respect, Heath (1981:200) argues, "...the product also *means*...and means as *entertainment*, a moving and pleasurable experience marketed and bought". Surely, if history is to be any indication, the real economically-driven "formula" which Hollywood is in search of, is a not a "formula" at all, but a yearning for any (new) idea which will tempt the interest and imagination of millions of potential filmgoers and persuade them so seek out their dreams by buying a ticket:

> ...few seem to understand why a massive consumer corporation like 20th Century Fox would release *Fight Club* [David Fincher, 1999]. Wasn't it attacking its own values? Wasn't it unwitting self-sabotage? Why would Hollywood do such a thing? "Hollywood's just trying to sell tickets," says Fincher bluntly. "...They're just trying to make money. They're not interested in the way we live our lives" (Wise, 2000b:3).

Indeed, the "global Hollywood" functions almost exclusively on business principles. However, the business of Hollywood is the merging of sound commercial practices with innovative, inventive, imaginative artistic endeavour.

Postmodernism, understood in its most "orthodox" and perhaps "purely symptomatic" context is usually thought of "...more as a capitalist way of culture than an ironic, deconstructive or possibly dissident mode" (Brooker and Brooker, 1997:8). This view of postmodern culture has been visible in the functioning of a vertically- and horizontally-integrated Hollywood, for example, which conflates culture, artistic practice and global economics. Of course, this "symptom" of postmodernism is clearly

in evidence in numerous popular cinema forms that are currently emerging. Increasingly, the divide between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" is becoming blurred as films readily merge the excesses and guilty pleasures of various transgressive practices with the so-called tasteful aspects of "classical" narrative forms (this is discussed in greater detail in chapter five). While such practices suggest the blurring of target audience groups and the potential absorption of marginal cinema forms into the mainstream, they also suggest the potential for experimentation and creativity. The global integration of cinema forms is also increasingly evident as existing genres, styles, stars and directors are mixed-and-matched in order to appeal to a wider audience. It is now increasingly common to encounter American movies featuring foreign film stars (such as martial artist Jackie Chan), or Hollywood blockbusters incorporating choreography and action inspired by Hong Kong directors (*The Matrix*, as an example of this, is discussed in chapter four). Not only are films influenced by a trend towards various forms of "global creativity", but at a business level, cinema is increasingly the product of global mergers and joint ventures. One of the major cinema releases of 2000, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee) is just such a film:

> The financing of this movie is an index of what the global film business really is these days. We had a French bank and an LA-based bond company; we had seven different pre-buyers and different distribution companies throughout the major territories in Europe; we sold it to two parts of Sony, Sony Pictures Classics and Sony Pictures Asia; and of course our producer was in China. Our lawyers were in New York, the producers were in Taiwan and Hong Kong and the pre-production was in Beijing. The production company had to bifurcate into two separate companies which eventually became three, and the Hong Kong company had a British Virgin Islands company because of the structure of the deals for tax purposes as well as North American limited-liability company. And all these deals had to be simultaneously closed for any money to start to flow (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* co-writer-producer, James Schamus, in Kemp, 2000c:15).

Films such as *Crouching Tiger* reflect changes within two established "realities" – that of the actual world, which is indeed becoming a global village, as well as the "reality" of the film industry itself, which is expanding globally (a microcosmic reflection of broader economic trends).[71] According to the AFI (2001), the success of *Crouching Tiger* represents "...a watershed moment in the ongoing emergence of global cinema which fuses storytelling style and substance from many cultures into a new sensibility that is accepted and enjoyed irrespective of language". The film is significant in that its critical and box-office success has paved the way for filmmakers from across the globe to experiment with the blending of "...Hollywood technique [and] their own unique narrative sensibilities..." (AFI, 2001).

It is also important to acknowledge that there are many films which do not conform to the principles of Hollywood economics. In fact, many of the films discussed here could never be described simply as "entertainment produced for mass consumption". Instead, it could be argued that many of the films discussed in the chapters which follow are self-reflective investigations into both their own status and the status of whatever "realities" they endeavour to represent. As a reflection of the mediated "reality" of which we are a part, many of these films reflect the impact which cinematic and media images have had on our experience of the world, and in this sense, they are more than mere mass entertainment products. Against the mainstream backdrop of Hollywood commercialism, an alternate stream in cinema has emerged, one which is challenging, self-reflective and parodic. These films self-consciously rework conventions, genres, styles, stars, narratives and themes in order to initiate a type of "dialogue" with the past or with the "conventional". Reworkable images and ideas do not circulate autonomously, however, but

> ...along the lines of Jameson's association of postmodernism with late capitalism, from an expanded industry and the further distribution of film as a mass medium *via* those other image technologies (TV and video) which market and make available films of all kinds, from all periods, for a variety of spectators" (Brooker and Brooker, 1997:6).

Seen in relation to existing images, many of the contemporary films that are discussed in chapters three through seven are concerned with reflecting difference, critiquing essentialism and deconstructing master narratives associated with race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and global culture. These films also deal with issues of self and identity. Many of the films discussed below engage critically and powerfully with issues related to the construction of identity through (frequently ironic and playful) dialogues with the history and nature of the medium itself.

Three

Towards a pure cinema: postmodern film

> *There is, then, a problem of critical oscillation between Adornian melancholia and breezy Fiskean populism, between productionist determinism and what is tantamount to an endorsement of the thesis of consumer sovereignty…. In postmodernist theory these polarised approaches are collapsed into each other in the name of stylistic eclecticism, irony, and pastiche, a self-conscious delight in mass-produced art, kitsch and the play of surfaces, and anti-realism and anti-historicism. This collapse is no solution to the problems they pose but rather an abnegation of the responsibility to deal with them. There would, however, be little point in denying that postmodernism has made important contributions to cultural critique in late capitalist societies. If these two evaluations appear contradictory it is because postmodernism itself is contradictory or 'definitionally incoherent'*
> *(Pickering, 1997:82).*

One of the most shocking moments ever depicted in world cinema remains the first sequence in *Un chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*, 1928), a surrealist film made by Luis Buñuel (and written by Buñuel and Salvador Dalí). For its shock value, the scene relies upon the edit between two shots. The first depicts a close-up of a woman whose eye is about to be sliced open with a razor. This is followed by a cutaway shot of the moon, while the following extreme close-up shows an ox's eyeball actually being sliced open. The resulting understanding of the moving image sequence – for the viewer – is that the woman's eyeball has been sliced open, damaged, violated. The edit, despite the cutaway to the moon, serves to create the illusion of one single action from the sequence. While the image is indeed disturbing and serves as a warning to cinema spectators that the viewing experience is easily and convincingly violated, the scene also has further significance in that it literalises a visual metaphor which throws into doubt our assumption that what we see constitutes some form of truth. Cinema has been taken up with its function as a deceptive medium since it was first introduced. Film images – no matter how reliably they parallel "the real world" - are always detached from that "reality". Indeed, it could be argued that if filmgoers wanted to be subjected to "reality", they would no doubt remain in "the real world". The cinema, on the other hand, is a place where "reality" is transformed into images which derive from both the imagination and their source in the world.

Sarup (1993:175) notes that cinema has always given relied on the pre-eminence of *images*. Commentators such as Christian Metz have argued that the succession of images – usually viewed in the dark – coupled with various degrees of wish-fulfilment, which constitute the film-viewing experience, is analogous with the experience of

dreaming. In response to early Surrealist cinema, Jean Goudal (writing in 1925) argued that "...the difficulty of uniting the conscious and the unconscious on the same plane...does not hold for cinema, in which the thing seen corresponds exactly to a conscious hallucination..." (in Fotiade, 1995:397). It may be argued that "...in their insistence on the ability of the cinema to 'visualize dream', to bridge reality and imagination" (Fotiade, 1995:395), Surrealists like Buñuel and Dalí had their fingers firmly on the pulse of postmodern debates around cinema. Indeed, from a postmodern perspective, "reality" and "imagination", or the "real" and the "artificial", are indistinguishable.

According to Stephen Shaviro (1994:41), "[c]inema is at once a form of perception and a material perceived, a new way of encountering reality and a part of the reality thereby discovered for the first time". He contends that the "kino-eye" is not responsible for a transformation of "reality", but that the cinematic eye has a dynamic interactive relationship with the world which constitutes "...the material and social real". Shaviro finds it

> ...odd that semiotic and psychoanalytic film theory...remains so preoccupied with the themes of ideology and representation, that it associates visual pleasure almost exclusively with the illusion of a stable and centered subject confronting a spatially and temporally homogenous world, and that it regards editing primarily as a technique for producing such an illusion, by 'suturing' the spectator and perspectivising the gaze (Shaviro, 1994:41).

Cinema represents a way of confronting the spectator with an illusion of "reality" whose effect is heightened by the very fact that "reality" is impossible to reproduce. This process is described by Elsaesser (1981:274) as "...the transformation of discontinuous particles (images) into a perceptual continuum...". This "perceptual continuum", he argues, structures and controls an "...artificially closed, psychologically active time experience in the spectator" (Elsaesser, 1981:274). By its very nature, cinema overthrows "reality", or – alternatively – creates a new "reality", an alternate world which *reflects* our own changing universe. The act of *seeing* (with the eye or the camera) is not necessarily to be associated with "reality", for illusions, dreams and imaginary worlds are just as effectively evoked on cinema screens. It is in this sense that André Breton called for "...the abolition of artificial boundaries between what we see and what we only begin to see, or have never seen before..." (Fotiade, 1995:395) and that the Surrealists sought to eliminate conventional understandings of *seeing* as a means of engaging the world, because

> There exists also what I have seen many times....There exists also what I am

beginning to see that is not visible" (Breton in Fotiade, 1995:394).

David Brewster describes the eye and the ear not as organs of "...truth or knowledge..." but rather as *fertile* sources of "...mental illusions..." (McGrath, 1996:15). It may reasonable be argued that the "cinema-eye" or motion picture camera is a similar source of "illusion" comparable with Goudal's notion that the "...'cinemtographic' image [represents] 'a conscious hallucination [which utilises a] fusion of dream and consciousness...'" (in Fotiade, 1995:396). Vogel relates the very process of cinema viewing as magical or illusionary:

> Subversion in cinema starts when the theatre darkens and the screen lights up. For the cinema is a place of magic where psychological and environmental factors combine to create an openness to wonder and suggestion, an unlocking of the unconscious. It is a shrine at which modern rituals rooted in atavistic memories and subconscious desires are acted out in darkness and seclusion from the outer world (Vogel, 1974:9).

In the postmodern universe, the illusory nature of cinema becomes the source of untold possibilities for the exploration of life's manifold "realities". Just as film continually appeals to the spectator through visual practices which recall both the experience of *seeing* in the "actual world" and the related experiences of dreaming and imagining, so cinema plays with the enigmatic conflict between illusion and truth, highlighting the notion that "reality" itself is nothing but a perception.

The moving image

> We ourselves no longer know by what intricate evolution of our consciousness we have learnt our visual association of ideas. What we have learnt is to integrate single disjointed pictures into a coherent scene, without even becoming conscious of the complicated psychological process involved. It is amazing to what extent we have, in a couple of decades, learnt to see picture perspectives, picture metaphors and picture symbols, how greatly we have developed our visual culture and sensibility (Balázs, 1970:35).

As the cinema moves into a new era, with current experimentation in digital film suggesting untold possibilities for the future of production and distribution, the debate over the relationship between cinema and "reality" remains a provocative one Essentially, it is a discussion which highlights the struggle to establish an ontological framework for systems of human production and creativity, and in the case of cinema, it is a system which merges art, technology, commerce and industry within a socio-cultural framework. Our world today has been described by Baudrillard as being "hyperreal" – "more real than real" – largely because of the endless cycle of images

and information which have rapidly transformed the western world over the last century. According to Baudrillard, the mass media have brought about a new era in human existence in which a new universe of communication has replaced old forms of production and consumption. This universe is unlike the old one, in that it "...relies on connections, feedback and interface [while] its processes are narcissistic and involve constant surface change" (Sarup, 1993:164). We exist in the ecstasy of communication which - having replaced "the scene and the mirror" with "the screen and network" - is "obscene". The media have invaded and infiltrated every aspect of existence, thereby erasing the spectacle of public space and obliterating the secrecy or private space. Public and private worlds are merged as media images proliferate transform the landscape of existence into a feedback loop which rearranges "...our sense of time and space" (Sarup, 1993:165). The media are said to dominate our world such that individuals are relocated to a "...universe of simulacra where it is impossible to distinguish between the spectacle and the real" and therefore experience images and simulations *as the world* (Sarup, 1993:165).

However, Baudrillard and his contemporaries[72] are not the first to concern themselves with the disappearance of "reality". Plato argued against tragic poetry because he found it to be more vivid than "reality" itself, while Aristotle found it necessary to draw particular attention to the distinctions between tragedies, which functioned as a form of "*mimeseis*" (or imitation), and "reality". In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard (1992a:169) discusses the "rage" of the Iconoclasts, whom he argues "...were in fact the ones who accorded [images] their actual worth, unlike the iconolaters, who saw in them only reflections and were content to venerate God at one remove". The destruction of images by the Iconoclasts was a reaction to the fear of the "omnipotence" of simulacra which were thought to have the power to replace God in the consciousness of those who worshipped him. Baudrillard (1992a:169) states that it is the power of the image to erase God and reveal the truth that "...God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum" which brought "metaphysical despair" to the Iconoclasts:

> One can live with the idea of a distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the images concealed nothing at all, and that in fact they were not images, such as the original model would have made them, but actually perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination (Baudrillard, 1992a:169).

Throughout history, humankind has been fascinated with various forms of representation and with our ability to create various "likenesses" which suggest our

fascination not only with our ability to *see*, but also our ability to *show* those illusions which comprise our memories, dreams, imaginations and desires.

Today, the cinematic image continues to be a source of extensive ontological investigation because of its imitative resemblance to the world in which we exist. The word "film" originally referred exclusively to the coated celluloid which was used to record picture sequences, but it was this novel material which was first able to reproduce "reality" in the form of "living pictures" shown to audiences for the first time in 1895. "Cinema" was originally used to refer to the first machine (the *Cinématographe*) which was developed by the Lumière brothers in order to play back the moving images captured on celluloid film. Today, "cinema" refers both to the entire genre of filmic entertainment and to the place where films are shown. Just as the earliest films enthralled audiences with their reproduction of "reality", so cinema today continues to fascinate and intrigue because of its startling ability to present newer, and more daring, versions of various "realities". Whereas cinema once held audiences spellbound because it re-produced the "real" world with such startling "realism", much contemporary film now astounds with its simulation of images and "realities" which are effectively "more real than real". According to André Bazin, such concern with the attainment of ever-more "realistic" images is the legacy of any human endeavour:

> Cinema participates in the same determinism of progress as all modern machines. We will have color as surely as we had the vacuum cleaner, and 3-D is as inevitable as the airplane. Perfection in this domain is certain; one need only let events take their course (Bazin, 1981:84).

Thus, while the reproduction of "reality" itself would effectively remove the artistic function of cinema, its determination to spectacularly simulate various "realities" may be seen as the very purpose of film art.

In discussions of cinema, according to Robert Kolker (1983:16), "realism" is undoubtedly the "most problematic" of terms. The relationship between "the real world" and the cinematic artform poses a particular ontological dilemma in that there is much in the *appearance* of motion pictures to suggest a significant similarity between the two. Noël Carroll, in his essay "Towards an Ontology of the Moving Image" (1995:68-85), attempts to define "cinema" in a way which draws particular attention to the distinction between film and "reality". Offering an argument which ignores the *essentialist* approaches to film theory offered by a more classical tradition, Carroll (1995:68-69) argues that most foregoing attempts to describe cinema are

concerned with the stylistic features of the medium. However, he maintains that artistic media are alterable and are frequently adapted, improved, and adjusted, in order to serve the needs of a particular stylistic function. Such stylistic features which may be evidenced in particular examples of cinematic art are therefore not necessarily descriptive of cinema itself. Similarly, Carroll argues that the nature of the medium does not *always* determine the style employed by any particular artistic practice. Indeed, stylistic innovation, or the need of certain artistic practitioners to evolve stylistically, often leads to changes or developments in the shape or nature of the medium. Furthermore, a single medium may result in numerous divergent stylistic progressions. This process of "evolution" of both styles and media is clearly evidenced in the various developments within cinematic practice over the last one hundred years. For Carroll, however, this rejection of the essentialist understanding of film raises the question of whether or not cinema may be considered to have "a set of essential features" which might allow film to be defined in any particular way at all.[73]

The first way in which Carroll attempts to define the essence of film, is concerned with the "photographic basis of the cinematic image" (Carroll, 1995:69). As Kolker (1983:16) points out, filmmaking is first and foremost based on the putting into motion of a photographic reproduction of an existing thing. This principle implies that "a close relationship" must exist between the film and "the physically real world". This relationship represents the prime cause of any conceptual confusion which tends to exist between "reality" and cinema. However, Kolker (1983:16) argues that the photographic image is both "...physically and perceptually removed from its origins in the world". Carroll develops this argument in further detail by first distinguishing between photography and painting.[74] Carroll explains that the relationship between a painting and the object portrayed therein "...is something like resemblance...", while the relationship between an object and a photograph thereof "...is said to be identity" (Carroll, 1995:69). In this regard, Carroll refers to André Bazin's concept of the photographic image as a *re*-presentation of the object in question:

> The photographic image is the object itself.... It shares by virtue of the process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is a reproduction; it is the model (Bazin in Carroll, 1995:69).

In discussing the Bazinian notion of the photographic image as a type of "realism" which serves to enhance the viewer's ability to see the object(s) being re-presented, Carroll draws on the argument of Kendall Watson who analogously compares photography to "prosthetic devices" such as microscopes, telescopes and binoculars.

Such instruments, it is argued, serve to expand one's visual powers, and photography similarly serves to expand our ability to see objects or events which are beyond our immediate grasp. Painting, however, differs from photography in that the painted representation of an object "...is dependent upon the painter's beliefs..." about that object (Carroll, 1995:70). Paintings are therefore representations of objects from the "real" world, while photographic and cinematic images provide the viewer with access to that instance from the "real" world "...in the same way that a telescope boosts our perceptual powers so that we see distant towers as if they were close by" (Carroll, 1995:70). The realist argument suggests that photographic and cinematic images are "transparent" in that they allow the viewer to gain visual access to the object being presented.

To counter this argument, however, Carroll suggests a certain physical difference between the act of looking at a photographic image and looking at an object through binoculars, for example. The position of the viewer's body in relation to the object being viewed differs in that a photograph does not allow the viewer to orient him or herself spatially in relation to the object. Spatially, there is some degree of discontinuity between objects presented in photographic images and the viewer, and this spatial disconnection alters the viewer's relationship to such a presentation of an object from the "real" world. According to Carroll, our "view" of what we see on a cinema screen is a "disembodied view" which is similarly referred to by Francis Sparshott as "alienated vision" (Carroll, 1995:71). Unlike the viewing of an object through binoculars, one cannot refer to a literal *"seeing of"* objects depicted on a cinema screen unless the viewer can relate him or herself spatially to the position occupied by that object:

> This requirement, of course, implies that I do not literally *see* the objects that cause photographic or cinematic images. What I do see are representations, or, better yet, displays – displays whose virtual spaces are detached from the space of my experience (Carroll, 1995:71).

Carroll's understanding of cinematic images as being analogous to representations or displays suggests that they share more categorical elements "...with paintings and pictures than with telescopes and mirrors" (Carroll, 1995:71). While the cinematic image may be defined in terms of its nature as a "detached display" or "disembodied viewpoint", this requirement fails to satisfactorily distinguish cinema from similar visual media. It is therefore necessary to find a suitable way of describing the distinction between the cinematic image and a painting, for example, because paintings may include a "disembodied viewpoint" resembling that of the cinematic

image.

Carroll (1995:72) refers to the writing of Arthur Danto who "...considers the relevance of movement to an essential contrast between things like film and other pictorial techniques, like painting". While such a distinction seems an almost obvious way of compartmentalising film, video and other forms of motion picture media which exist and are likely to be developed, this is an interesting point of departure because there do exist films in which no visible motion occurs[75]. Movement in film can be said to be a reasonable *expectation* on the part of the viewer, even if such movement does not occur. It is necessary to view a film in its entirety before concluding that it is static, because the possibility of movement is *always* present (a given based on the nature of the medium): "With moving pictures, the anticipation of possible future movement is always logically permissible; with still pictures, never" (Carroll, 1995:74).

Danto's categorisation of the moving image is based on the logical assumption that the spectator is aware of what he or she is viewing. This interpretation of "moving pictures" is a transcendental one which requires a single modification. According to Carroll, "picture" has a specific meaning and "...seems to imply the sort of intentional visual artifact in which one recognizes the depiction of objects, persons, situations and events" (Carroll, 1995:75). Since film may include objects, shapes and visual "creations" or abstractions which are not recognisable but tend more towards "nonrepresentational or non-objective imagery", Carroll (1995:75) suggests that a more appropriate descriptive term might be "moving *images*". A moving image may only be classified as such when it is possessed of a "disembodied viewpoint" and if it is reasonable to expect movement in the image. Carroll finds it necessary to further distinguish between the moving image and a dramatic representation, given the fact that it is equally reasonable to expect movement in a theatre performance, for example.

Carroll refers to theatrical performances as "detached displays" to the extent that the viewer is unable to orient him or herself in the space of the performance. Similarly, the viewpoint of the spectator is "disembodied" because whatever narrative is being enacted on stage provides no information which would allow the viewer to spatially relate his or her body to those being represented. A further distinction must be drawn between the cinematic image and the live performance[76]. Carroll (1995:77) asserts that there are also "deep differences" between film performance and theatre

performance based on the nature of the actual presentation (performance) of the work. There is a general tendency these days to categorise art works according to whether they are unique (an original painting or sculpture, for example) or involve multiple copies (printed novels, or reproductions of a painting, for example). Carroll notes that a film performance, like a theatrical performance, may be considered to be "token" events. In other words, a film performance may be a token of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, for example, and a theatrical performance may equally be a token of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, for example. If both performance types can be considered to be tokens, there exists at least some similarity between the two forms. Carroll highlights the difference between a dramatic performance (which may be "reproduced" many times in many different ways) and a film presentation (which will have the same appearance each time it is screened). Each film performance has been generated from a "template", which is a token that may be destroyed without destroying the film itself. Carroll, in fact, goes so far as to suggest that so long as a film survives in human memory, then the film itself is not destroyed. A film performance merely conveys the film to the spectator in much the same way that a copy of a painting in a book *conveys* that artwork to the reader. Only the original painting can be considered to be the actual artwork.

Carroll (1995:78) argues that whereas a film performance is generated by a template, a theatrical performance is not. Instead, theatrical performances are generated by "interpretation". Carroll compares the play to a "recipe" which must be followed by various artists (performers, directors) in order for the performance itself to take place. Each performance of a play (from evening to evening) is governed by an interpretation which is a conception of the play. This interpretation is a "type" which gives rise to, or "generates" various performances and these, in turn, are "tokens". A play is mediated by a particular interpretation, which generates a particular performance. Carroll (1995:78) notes that "...the interpretation can be construed as a type within a type". It is an interpretation – not a "template" – which allows a play to "become" a performance.

A play performance is generated by a particular interpretation, while a film performance is generated by a template. Carroll categorises the theatrical performance aesthetically, as an artwork in itself, while a film *performance*, which is generated from a template, is not an artwork in itself and cannot be assessed as such. Each performance of a particular stage play requires some degree of

interpretation, and it is this interpretation which becomes worthy of artistic assessment, whereas there is no requirement for any artistic or aesthetic assessment of the physical showing of a film which constitutes a "performance" of the movie. Hence,

> ...whereas film performances are counterfactually dependent on certain electrical, chemical, mechanical and otherwise routine processes, play performances are counterfactually dependent upon beliefs, intentions and judgments of people – actors, lighting experts, make-up artists, and so on (Carroll, 1995:79).

Carroll believes that moving pictures (or moving images) cannot be categorised as a performing art, despite the fact that performances are required in order for a film production to be made. Cinematic performances are, according to Carroll, not artistic events but mechanical engagements of a filmic template.

A possible counter-argument to Carroll's notion of cinematic performances involves an understanding of the audience as the locus of interpretation. This argument relies on the belief that the meaning of any film is unique for each and every spectator. For cinema audiences, the motion picture camera serves as an "exterior eye". Constructing frames and representations of various points of view, the filmmaker creates images which may only be interpreted when viewed in the cinema. In this way, a visual array is received and given meaning by the individual spectator. It is also important to bear in mind that "moving images" rely on both the concept of retinal retention ("persistence of vision") and the mental retention of images ("the phi-phenomenon") enabled by engaging memory, in order for the illusion of movement to be produced. In this sense, the illusion of movement is produced by both physical and mental processes, just as other illusionistic "art" forms:

> Photography and film owe much to magicians, conjurers, illusionists, charlatans – people who relied on the world of fantasy and imagination as much as on reality and fact (McGrath, 1996:15).

The direct link between our world - the "reality" in which we exist - and the moving images depicted on the cinema screen, provides the human mind with the opportunity to construct its own links between fantasy and "reality", science and illusion, life and performance, the possible and the impossible. Rooted in the ostensible "realism" of visual (and aural) information, cinema captures the imagination *because* it misrepresents itself to our senses so very well. We are forced, as viewers, to make some sort of sense of what we are experiencing visually:

> ...in uncovering a multiple positioning in viewing, the notion of the viewer as purely passive and simply acted upon by one medium can be given up and

replaced by a performative modality in which agency, as an aspect of interplay among viewing positions, is recognized. In other words, the viewer exerts agency by *performing* in the viewing situation, by bringing a history of media and life experiences to whatever show she is watching (Klaver, 1995:311).

In the cinema, the audience may be considered to be the actual source of the interpretative function which Carroll suggests is unique to the theatre. The "moving image" becomes a starting point for numerous untold "performances", each of which take place in the interpretative imagination or psyche of the individual spectator. Cinema is also an invasive medium which, according to McGrath (1996:15), has led to "...a reorganisation of the private internal space of the observer." It is only in the act of spectatorship that cinema acquires "meaning":

> The cinema is the space in which bodies and spectres, both real and fantastic, meet. It is the space of a new becoming-body. The space of the temple, gallery, showroom, museum – all words that were interchangeable – signalled a gradual dismantling of the older body, a displacement of an outmoded model of the subject, and the production of a new observer-consumer (McGrath, 1996:15).

Surface-surfing

Cultural theorists such as Baudrillard and Jameson have defined postmodernism in terms of an eclipse of the real, a proliferation of simulacra, a freeing of the sign from the referent. Capitalist commodity production culminates in a regime of unlimited artificiality, first expressed by mechanical reproduction and by the cinema... (Shaviro, 1994:200).

In Kathryn Bigelow's action-thriller, *Point Break* (1991), FBI Special Agent Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves) goes undercover in order to infiltrate a "tribe" of surfers who may be a band of bank robbers calling themselves "The Ex-Presidents". The film deals extensively and variously with the simulation of alternative or artificial personas, suggested principally by Utah's transformation from a career-driven law enforcement officer (who is comfortable in a suit and tie, and eating donuts) to a thrill-seeking surfer (arriving at his precinct wearing a vest with a surfboard under his arm). Of course, there is further irony in the fact that "The Ex-Presidents", who wear suits and don rubber "images" (masks) of American presidents over their faces when robbing banks in order to "finance their endless summer", are actually a group of freedom-loving hedonists. The presidential images, one might argue, reflect the ultimate personification of capitalist desires, while the typical image associated with surfers suggests the renouncement of capitalist economy-centred ideologies. One way of

understanding this paradoxical contradiction is that the surfers merely "simulate" artificial personas in order to finance their "authentic" lifestyles. Of course, the manner of their simulation necessarily effaces any potential for authenticity in either situation.

Utah, in order to infiltrate the "tribe" of surfers and help protect "the American way of life", must similarly "play" at being a surfer. At first the prospect appals him, but when he asks his partner why he cannot simply carry a surfboard under his arm and "act stoned", he is told that he "must *become* one of them". Cinematic logic being what it is, Utah quickly joins the ranks of this surfing tribe and discovers friendship, love, and the intense excitement of surfing. In one scene, Tyler (Lori Petty) tells Utah that he looks almost happy. Utah responds by saying that he cannot describe how he feels. Visually, the film conveys that Utah has reached a turning point in his life, and it is clear that the distinction between "agent" Utah and "surfer" Utah is no longer recognisable. Indeed, Johnny Utah appears happy, but it remains evident that his surfing persona is constantly under threat of extinction from the "real" (Special Agent) Johnny Utah. The film's narrative begs the question: Is Utah experiencing happiness, or merely the simulation of happiness? Moreover, can the subjective experience of an emotion be simulated? Certainly, the viewer *sees* Johnny Utah surfing, hanging out with his new "tribe", and kissing Tyler. But can these acts be understood as "real", or are they merely illusions, discernible from the acts they represent only in an hallucinatory sense? To what extent is Utah's undercover role-playing actually "real", and to what extent is it merely a "simulacrum" of a certain mode of behaviour? The film medium further complicates this questioning of the status of "the real" because the viewer is not really able to discern whether or not these on-screen acts which have the appearance of "reality", are in any way authentic. Post-production technology, for example, makes it possible for any of the surfing sequences, presumably performed by Keanu Reeves, to have been enacted by "real" surfers rather than this particular film star. The status of "reality" is thrown into permanent doubt thanks to the available digital and computer technology.

Towards the end of the film, Utah is forced to join The Ex-Presidents during what is to become their final robbery. During the hold-up, an off-duty policeman decides to take matters into his own hands, and he shoots Utah, who obviously has no means of proving that he is not really a bank robber. The situation in which he finds himself represents an extreme example of "simulation", in which the difference between "real"

and "fake" becomes indistinguishable: the "real" Johnny Utah has been eclipsed by his own "simulacrum". A similar scene plays out in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1991), where Mr Orange (Tim Roth) is shot while involved in a bank robbery getaway. Unbeknownst to the bystander who shoots him, Mr Orange is, in fact, an undercover policeman (assuming the role of a criminal). John Woo's hyperkinetic action-thriller, *Face/Off* (1998), deals with the questioning of "originality" by having the two central characters (one, a good policeman; the other, an evil criminal) actually swap faces. What is experienced by both of these "dislocated" personalities, is that by imitating, faking, or simulating the other character in *appearance* (thereby creating an artificial "copy" of the original), it becomes frustratingly difficult for each character to prove who he "really" is. This extinction of the difference between "authentic" and "fake", or "original" and "copy", or "real" and "artificial" is what Baudrillard refers to as the absorption of the real into the hyperreal.

Baudrillard has drawn significant attention to the relationship between media images and the construction of a simulated "reality" within postmodern culture, while Hill (2000:96) notes that it is television rather than film which "...is most commonly associated with the postmodern condition...". Television can be seen as embodying the postmodern world in the Baudrillardian sense that it has *become* the "reality" of postmodern society, culture and economy. Like the artificial world which it re-presents, television artificially connects us to the events and ideas which combine to become our perceived "truth" or "reality". Contemporary cinema, on the other hand, may be understood as "postmodern" in a number of different ways. The transformation of Hollywood production systems (from the studio system to the more flexible forms of the "New Hollywood") described in chapter two, for example, has been described as characteristic of postmodern economies, while the development of integrated entertainment industries also signals the postmodern "...blurring of boundaries between...industrial practices, technologies, and cultural forms" (Hill, 2000:98). While such economically-motivated aspects of cinema production may be seen to embody the postmodern condition, many of the aesthetic and thematic elements which are now typical of contemporary films may be understood to offer ideas, images and commentary which reflect the postmodern condition. Much of the cinema which is now produced may be read as either employing distinctly postmodern features (such as eclecticism, or the integration of highbrow and lowbrow elements), or wilfully commenting on various aspects of postmodern existence (through alternative narrative choices or by way of parody, for example).

With its adoption in the 1970s as a critical term, "the New Hollywood" was used to refer to "...the period of relative experimentation in the late 1960s and 1970s in Hollywood, made possible by the economic insecurity of Hollywood, still casting around for forms of durable and predictable appeal after the massive post-war decline in audiences, and the more immediate problems of overproduction in the mid- to late 1960s" (Smith, 1998:10). The term signifies a break with "classical cinema" and refers to a shift in American filmmaking which includes incorporating elements from the European art cinema, as well as the depiction of "...uncertain, counter-cultural and marginal protagonists, whose goals were often relatively ill-defined and ultimately unattained, in contrast to the heroic and typically successful figures around which classical films revolved" (Smith 1998:10). "Classical Hollywood cinema" is typically identified with terms such as "stability" and "regulation", both of which have both positive and negative connotations (Smith, 1998:3). According to Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis (1996:188), "[c]lassical cinema evokes the reconstitution of a fictional world characterized by internal coherence, plausible and linear causality, psychological realism, and the appearance of spatial and temporal continuity". In some sense, Hollywood classicism is sustained through the use of "conventional techniques and devices for achieving subjectivity in the spectator". It can be viewed as an approach to narrative and aesthetic aspects of film such as the maintenance of certain genre traditions, or editing rules, for example. Classical realism therefore implies "transparency" - or the illusion of "naturalism", which aims to reproduce "...the vague and non-theorized world of common sense..." which conceals "...traces of the 'work of the film'" (Stam *et al.*, 1996:188).

Alternatively, "classicism" can be said to refer to the studio system itself which sustained a certain form of production. In yet another understanding of the term, "classicism" can be seen to have acted as an homogenising agent or "psychic regulator" which determined the kinds of audiences that would keep on returning to cinemas (Smith, 1998:3). According to Jenkins, postmodern critics have identified several general aspects of "contemporary American film" or "post-classical Hollywood cinema". These include the devolution of storytelling conventions typical of classical cinema, the "fragmentation of linear narrative", a shift in emphasis from narrative "causality" to "spectacle", the "merger" of previously distinct genres, and "...the odd juxtaposition..." of "emotional tones" and "aesthetic materials" which were once clearly defined and differentiated (Jenkins, 1998:113). In these respects, many aspects of the "post-classical Hollywood" film are evident in the works of the 1960s

and 1970s which are usually referred to as belonging to the modernist period of American cinema. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie And Clyde* is frequently referred to as the spark which effected major upheaval in Hollywood when it was released to widespread criticism in 1967:

> For better or worse, American cinema changed forever the day *Bonnie And Clyde* was released. Almost every aspect of it was revolutionary: the debt to the French New Wave (it was offered to Truffaut before Penn); the championing of the anti-hero; the free-wheeling camera work and cinematography; the use of unknown stage actors in supporting roles; and, of course, the painfully-rendered violence, all were enormously influential (Braund, 2001b:115).

The film, which was referred to by critic Patrick Goldstein as "the first modern American film" (in Braund, 2001b:115), raised criticism not only for its bloody violence, but more problematically for its ambiguous morality: "…its glamorizing of two vicious killers and the easy manner in which it blended slapstick humour, overt eroticism and vivid bloodletting" (Braund, 2001b:115). These elements contributed not only to widespread outcries against the film, but also to a new era in American cinema entertainment (see chapter five for further discussion around screen violence and transgression). While it can be read and understood as a "modernist" picture in the sense that it brought a new, unique and individual cinematic vision to American audiences, aspects of the postmodern also abound. The film established its cult status only after an initially poor showing at the box office coupled with decidedly negative reviews from "old guard" critics following the lead of *New York Times* writer Bosley Crowther. Only after re-opening did the film go on to become one of Warner Brothers' biggest ever earners with 10 Academy Award nominations (and two winners) to its credit. The film's soundtrack album became a "…huge surprise hit…" while "…Faye Dunaway's beret and maxi-skirt look…sparked an international vogue for depression-era chic" (Braund, 2001b:115). It was a film that challenged conventions, altered perceptions of the possibilities for American filmmaking and effectively disrupted the homogeneity of the "psychic regulator" by appealing to new aspects of the collective imagination. It is in this sense that postmodern films include those cinema products which are referred to as "modern", "Modernist" or "*auteurist*".

Experimentation is frequently evident as both a framework for, and element of, postmodern (or postclassical) cinema. While *Bonnie And Clyde* challenged Hollywood conventions in a variety of ways, to the extent that it forever altered the very concept of "American cinema", today experimentation and innovation are essential to the development of moving image entertainment. Competition from other increasingly

sophisticated forms means that the contemporary cinema is a cinema of borrowing and integration. Evident in postmodern cinema is the merging of other media elements into film works, most notable in the use of computer imaging, video overlays or other electronic media forms to enhance various aspects of a cinematic production. The accessibility of home entertainment programming in the form of video and television (particularly channels such as MTV which offer an endless flood of short, seemingly new, and compulsively random images) has challenged the New Hollywood in yet another way, affecting both the stylistic and narrative properties of contemporary cinema. Commentators such as Jenkins seem to share Jameson's (1998:168) pessimism with regards to the possibility of cultural and artistic inventiveness. He suggests that viewers know all the possible stories already and this familiarity with plot and narrative provokes an interest in "...other levels of the film presentation..." (Jenkins, 1995:116). The "look" of the film, for example, has therefore become increasingly important, and has even inspired the critical discussion of what has become known as *"cinema du luc"*, which is most strongly associated with the work of French director, Luc Besson. In this respect, the filmmaker's aesthetic approach may be thought to communicate a sense of stylistic attunement and sophistication.

Cinema viewers are increasingly familiar with stylistic innovations in television, advertising, and music videos, for example, but also in other areas of popular culture such as magazine layout and design, computer game design, commercial architecture, and fashion. Accordingly, a great deal of contemporary cinema is identified with an increasing use of "...glossy colour schemes, rapid-fire editing, or dizzying camera movements which challenge [viewers'] comprehension and intensify their emotional engagement" (Jenkins, 1995:116). Much of the visually-compelling experimentation in cinematic technique which is evident in contemporary films has been criticised as a form of aesthetic indulgence or excess which undermines the success of the narrative. Such criticism is not universal, however, as is suggested by Danny Leigh's positive comments about the provocative visual style of Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2000):

> ...pounding and whirring into hard proof of a singular *cinematic* talent unafraid to experiment yet prepared to borrow from past iconoclasts....Of course, the usual term for such aesthetic grandstanding is MTV film-making, a put-down routinely applied to anyone under 40 who does more than point the camera at the actors (Leigh in Lawrenson and Leigh, 2000:28).

While Leigh applauds Aronofsky's *"cinematic"* style, elsewhere the film's visual

acrobatics are described as an indication that Aronofsky is too "...busy getting high on his own style..." which comprised "...a miasma of crash cuts, undercranking and stop motion" (Thomas, 2001:40). While the debate over the "tastefulness" or "artfulness" of so-called "MTV film-making" will undoubtedly linger for some time to come, it is nevertheless a stylistic feature that finds its roots in both the avant garde and contemporary media capabilities.

As the emphasis in contemporary cinema tends to be towards visual style and ingenuity, it is frequently argued that narrative and plot no longer play a particularly important role in the creation of Hollywood films. The viewer's knowledge of the existing range of plot possibilities (knowledge which is often used to market films) means that post-classical films need only suggest or evoke the narrative without complete development: "...narrative traditions can be merged, mixed and matched..." and also "...played against each other as new hybrid forms of entertainment emerge" (Jenkins, 1995:116). Smith (1998:13) identifies, for example, "...the gleaming, over-polished visual style of directors weaned on advertising, and the substitutability among film performers, stars and fashion models". Such "substitutability" ranges across all avenues of contemporary celebrity, evidenced in a number of films which have included sports stars, musicians, porn stars and other pop-culture "icons" in their casts. *Space Jam* (Joe Pytka, 1996), for example, features major American basketball player, Michael Jordan, who portrays himself in a sports-fantasy film that integrates live-action footage with animated characters and set-pieces. While the film was sold as a celebration of Michael Jordan's sporting prowess, it also appealed to a wider sector of the younger cinema-going public by showcasing popular animated characters such as Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Tweety, Sylvester, Porky Pig, the Road Runner and Wiley Coyote. By "playing" themselves in a film which occasionally acknowledges the cinematic environment in which the characters are situated ("Hey, I didn't know Dan Ackroyd was in this picture," exclaims one of the cartoon characters when Bill Murray arrives at a crucial moment to help save the day), these cartoons further help to blur the boundaries of what younger viewers may experience as "real" and "fantasy". In Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (discussed in further detail in chapter five), the line between art and pornography is blurred when a character played by Italian pornographic film star Rocco Siffredi applies a condom to his actual erect penis before having what appears to be unsimulated actual on-screen sex with the film's central protagonist. This blurring of the distinctions between "real" life and "reel" life evokes a provocative debate concerning the "reality" status of what is depicted on

film.

According to Sarup (1993:176) "...in postmodernist work it is not the signifying process but the fixed nature of *reality* that is questioned". It could be further argued that postmodern cinema is concerned less with representations of any socially-constructed "reality" than with creating a range of artificial "realities" which exist solely in terms of their cinematic construction. Just as Johnny Utah must hide his identity behind a surface image and Luc Besson is primarily associated with the surface appearance of his films, so postmodern cinema has largely been associated with the foregrounding of the *viewing* experience, a concentrated concern with *showing* and *seeing*. Postmodern cinema is, in this sense, a "pure cinema". Sarup notes that postmodern film "...operates largely on the model of and through the primary process" (Sarup, 1993:176), which privileges the act of seeing (or experiencing) the film. Such cinematic practice is primarily concerned with "spectacle" and with the value of *showing* as a means of constructing a "reality" (or world) which exists purely in terms of the spectator's *viewing* experience. The value of the surface appearance of the moving images is acknowledged and is generally privileged above narrative and discourse:

> If the advent of postmodernity means the (provisional) triumph of the many over the one...(then) it is no accident that so much of postmodernist cultural production has to do with surfaces, with superficiality and mere images. Postmodernist film is no exception – in fact, a preoccupation with surfaces (the many) instead of depth (the one) is one way of recognizing a film as being postmodernist, especially when this spatial characteristic goes hand in hand, in temporal terms, with ephemerality of images or image-configurations (Olivier, 1996:125).

Analyses of postmodern films suggest that the notion of "truth" is questioned through the *showing* of images and the play of surfaces details which, in various ways, call into question the concept of a single underlying "reality". Cinema may thus be interpreted as attempting to seduce the viewer into an "immediate" relationship with the ("pure") world / "reality" (artificiality) of the film and its images. Postmodern cinema is also associated with stylistic and narrative self-consciousness, frequently quoting from its own cinematic heritage through imitation, mannerism and stylisation.

Between parody and pastiche

Postmodern communication technologies, principally television, are said to flood the world with self-generating, self-mirroring images; an experience, now thoroughly eclectic and superficial, to achieve its final, "utopian" form in the instantaneous abundance and banality of a "cultureless" North America (Brooker in Baudrillard, 1998:151).

...the mixing of genres, the mania for citation and self-referencing so typical of contemporary cinema can be traced to the French nouvelle vague*'s admiration for the Hollywood of the 1940s and 1950s, and the use of film citation in the works of François Truffaut, Jean Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette or Claude Chabrol (Elsaesser, 1998:192).*

Jameson has noted that along with "reality", meaning – or the signified – has disappeared, and postmodernism results in

> ...that pure and random play of signifiers...which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type, but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage (in Sarup, 1993:174).

Much of the criticism aimed against recent Hollywood productions which have been described as "empty", conventional and ideologically conservative may be linked to Jameson's critique of postmodern culture. Jameson (in Hill, 2000:99) notes in postmodernity a "depthlessness" which is signalled by "...a new culture of the image or the [Baudrillardian] simulacrum...". According to Hill (2000:99), it is "...especially in the wake of the success of *Star Wars*..." that the inventiveness and "social questioning" of New Hollywood films has been seen to be in decline. Jameson argues that the use of pastiche and intertextuality in contemporary films is coupled with a loss of historical depth which is characteristic of the postmodern age. The result, according to Jameson, are films that are unable to create a "real" past, but instead imagistically simulate various pasts which are based upon representations and styles that already exist. Lyotard (1998:143) has further noted of the postmodern era that "...familiar objects, social roles, and institutions..." have now been de*realised* to the extent "...that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery...". It may also be argued, however, that it is precisely in its ability to serve as a vehicle for mockery that the postmodern film assumes an "oppositional" position which serves as a form of subversion. Through parody and irony, the postmodern cinema challenges "...audience expectations concerning narrative and visual representation..." (Hill, 2000:100).

Given the debate around the decline of social significance in contemporary culture, it

seems necessary (yet somewhat paradoxical) to mention two "streams" within postmodern cinema which have been identified by various commentators. Firstly, there exists the majority or non-oppositional stream which is most extensively noted in the canon of contemporary Hollywood production. This group of films is said to imitate the past in the mode of conservative (or mainstream) cultural production, thereby supporting traditional notions of narrative and representation. In the shadow of this mode of production, exists a minority stream, which may be seen as oppositional ("avant-garde") or contestatory. The postmodern aesthetic – both in mainstream and oppositional modes – relies on four sets of concepts: simulation; intertextuality; prefabrication; and bricolage. The oppositional mode is usually separated from the mainstream through a distinction between two terms which are used to distinguish two forms of simulation: "parody" and "pastiche". Jameson suggests that pastiche is the dominant form in postmodern culture. Pastiche is described as being a form of mimicry which, unlike parody, lacks any "ulterior motives" and may be understood as "neutral". Pastiche may therefore be seen to be taken up with a non-subversive imitation of earlier genres and styles, often recalling previous scenes or plot elements in a symptomatic recycling of cinematic history. Oppositional simulation is defined as parody which, unlike pastiche, is ironic and potentially subversive. Cinema in the parodic mode displays a degree of inventive and experimental interrogation of the past by mocking, disrupting or undermining various established codes (of narrative, style or representation, for example). Various forms of prefabrication, intertextuality and bricolage are played out according to either the pastiche or parodic modality.

Contemporary Hollywood productions frequently challenge the expectations of audiences whose knowledge of cinema (and other "popular" cultural artefacts) makes them simultaneously aware of and open to the parodic and ironic potential of works which would appear to offer no challenge whatsoever. In most critical writing, however, the "adversarial" or "challenging" qualities of postmodern cinema have been noted and discussed in terms of non-Hollywood productions. Hill notes that

> In this 'alternative' tradition of filmmaking, the reworking of old materials and representations by postmodernism is interpreted not simply as a kind of surface-play (or 'depthlessness'), but as part of a critical project to 'deconstruct' and subvert old meanings as well as 'construct' new ones through the repositioning of artistic and cultural discourses (Hill, 2000:100).

The parodic mode of oppositional filmmaking is generally seen as giving rise to valuable cultural discourses, while mainstream (Hollywood) productions are criticised

for their "depthlessness" through "empty" pastiche. Such a distinction between parody and pastiche is rather problematic, however, in that it produces modes of criticism which are based on judgements of taste and aesthetic preference (which have no place in postmodern criticism). "Judgements" such as these are suggested, for example, by Hill's interpretation of the ideological strategies of two films:

> ...the use of film quotations and references in a 1980s 'event' film such as *The Untouchables* (Brian De Palma, 1987) is largely characterized by the use of pastiche (as in the clever, but politically and emotionally 'blank', reconstruction of the Odessa steps sequence from the revolutionary Russian film *Battleship Potemkin*, [Sergei Eisenstein,] 1925). As such, the film's use of pastiche offers less a critique of the male hero (as *The Long Goodbye* [Robert Altman, 1973] does) than an 'alibi' for the film's ideological conservatism by inoculating the film against being read too straight (in much the same way as the more recent *Independence Day* ([Roland Emmerich,] 1996) also invests its conservative militarism with a measure of tongue-in-cheek knowingness) (Hill, 2000:99).

Hill's readings demonstrate how individual "ideological" perspectives generate particular types of critique. Any one reading, however, may be considered just as reliable as the next, suggesting that cultural recycling necessarily demands multiple interpretations.

It is therefore common to speak of the multiple narratives or multiple meanings of postmodern films. It is for this reason that postmodern critiques of contemporary films are often engaged in order to support the interests of marginal cultural groups by drawing attention to particular aspects of a work. Postmodernism is frequently felt to be concerned with various subcultural movements, particularly those which share the postmodern connection with disunity, heterogeneity, play and fragmentation. The once predominantly gay discourse on "camp", for example, shares with postmodern theory "...a penchant for irony, play, and parody, for artificiality and performance, as well as transgressing conventional meanings of gender" (Smelik, 2000:140). "Camp" may be understood as a way of reading popular culture from an oppositional perspective, offering pleasures, identifications and "thrills" which are usually denied to homosexuals by the dominant culture. As an expression of "gay sensibility", camp refers to "...a heightened awareness of one's social condition outside the mainstream" and the strategy of dealing with the difficulties of existing as an outsider by ironically transforming the experience of "pain into laughter" (Smelik, 2000:139). Camp – like postmodernism – finds meaning in the spectacle of appearance or performance. Gender is thus constructed from the outside, from the point-of-view of style, surface appearance and performance rather than any underlying identity. Postmodernism, in its "...critical engagement with prior representations...", such as those of non-

heterosexuals, "...has been seen as especially attractive to filmmakers who wish to challenge the traditional ways in which particular social groups or 'others' (such as blacks, indigenous peoples, women, and gays) have been represented and to do justice to the complexities of identity in the postmodern era" (Hill, 2000:100-101).

While "camp" may be seen by many as a highly superficial appropriation of postmodern film critiques, it remains a strategy which may be used to deconstruct and subvert existing "meanings". It is perhaps equally appropriate today for "camp" to be used in a more general sense, to refer to cinematic elements and moments which are knowingly self-mocking; a sort of knowledge built into the narrative that a "...story that worked on its own terms, that held its own reality yesterday, becomes self-parody tomorrow" (Thomson, 2001). It is in this sense that David Thomson identifies Ridley Scott's *Hannibal* (2001) as "camp". The film which once again gives life to cannibal serial killer Hannibal Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins) after his celebrated turn in Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1990). Thomson (2001) argues that the character of Lecter "...has become such a household joke that he can't be dreadful again". The character – and therefore also the movie – in *Hannibal* is thus somewhat different a decade after the "raw and terrifying" movies made by Demme ten years earlier:

> So Lecter now is Capote-ish, large enough for cloaks and Borsalino hats, and capacious enough as aesthete, perfectionist and scholarly scold for his disdain to extend over the rainbow. He is the kind of deliciously wicked uncle Clifton Webb promised as Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* [Otto Preminger, 1944]. As fruity as summer pudding. Is the character gay? Well, not in any sense that would alarm audiences or befuddle political correctness. But by the code of, say, the 40s – yes, indeedy (Thomson, 2001).

Campness therefore becomes the solution to a problem which is built into the narrative simply because *Silence of the Lambs* established such a particular name for itself. Any attempt to compete too directly with the chilling horror of the first movie would fail to stay watchable "...instead of advancing down one of the several crazy (and hideous) dead-ends available" (Thomson, 2001). Camp, in this sense, refers to the "...innately silly, self-mocking and ironic" (Thomson, 2001) positioning of a film within its broader, socio-historical context, rather than simply in terms of its internal narrative.

In a similar vein, many commentators understand postmodernism as being concerned primarily with the reworking of older narrative systems in order to (re-)examine the

present. Laura Kipnis understands postmodernism in terms of a "re-functioning" within cultural practice, while Jim Collins argues that through the juxtaposition of existing practices (such as the use of genre elements), postmodern cinema serves to interrogate them (Hill, 2000:100). In this sense, the aimlessness and emptiness which Jameson understands to be at the heart of postmodern cultural practice is replaced by the useful questioning of traditional modes of representation. This questioning aims to inventively create more appropriate forms of cultural expression for the diverse audiences within decentred contemporary cultures. The culturally significant "blaxploitation" movie *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971), for example, may be seen as a reworking of elements from numerous private detective films of its era while bestowing upon its titular hero, John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) many of the characteristics evident in the English superspy, James Bond. The significance of these reworked and re-appropriated elements lies in the fact that the film's hero is black, making "...him so refreshing for black audiences in the 70s" (James, 2000g:4). Despite a poor initial critical response, the film has gained a significant cult-following over the years since its release. The decision to revive the character in a contemporary film based on the original concept (*Shaft*, John Singleton, 2000), is a clear indication of the value attached to films which redeploy "meaning" through a type of pastiche which resituates socio-cultural and ethnic representation. Postmodern culture has given a voice to minorities. Through the creative relationship and merging of high and low artistic expression, marginalized groups and "others" have been given a platform from which to speak and express themselves. While it may be argued that the pursuit of capital growth has been the primary motivation for the production of films in ever more fragmented cultural arenas, artistic expression from once-marginalized (and even ignored) areas of "otherness" does contribute to the collapse of meritocracy and to a pluralism with regards to subjectivity. The universal norms which once governed culture and privileged certain forms over others, are dissolving as marginal filmmakers are finding funding for their ideas, and their films are finding screens and audiences.

Postmodern cinema is generally difficult to define in that it "...eschews aesthetic purity and revels in the often playful juxtaposition of different codes, modes and genres..." (Olivier, 1992:102), giving rise to what may be seen as a form of popular "counter-cinema" (a modernist concept supported by Peter Wollen). Wollen called for an aggressive "counter-cinema" (notable in the films of Godard, for example) which was pitted against mainstream cinema and which functioned as a foil for the conventions

and ideology of mainstream cinema. Contemporary postmodern practices, however, have popularised and foregrounded once-subversive strategies and these now serve to heighten the pleasure of audiences whose understanding of the formal aspects of cinema construction contribute to the enjoyment of the film as a work of artifice. Thus, while the formal components of counter-cinema proposed by Wollen served to disrupt the traditional act of viewing through techniques such as "narrative intransitivity"[77], "estrangement"[78], "foregrounding"[79], "multiple diegesis"[80], "aperture"[81], "unpleasure"[82] and *"reality* over fiction"[83], such anti-representational devices are now frequently used in order to contribute to the function of the postmodern film as an entertainment medium. In a sense, the postmodern aesthetic combines practices which were once considered "subversive" with the entertainment strategies of mass culture. In this way, high and low cultural boundaries are eradicated as contemporary filmmakers toy with cinematic images in playful pursuit of new ways of entertaining by *showing*.

Postmodern films may literalise the concept of "prefabrication" whereby images, scenes, and concepts are actually sourced from prior or existing examples of cinema or other works. In this respect, for example, Kobena Mercer uses the term "counter-cinema" to describe the postmodern strategy of "appropriation", which involves "...a reworking of pre-existing documentary footage, found sound, quotations, and the like, [and] involves both a 'dis-articulation' and a 're-articulation'..." (Hill, 2000:101) of various signifying elements in order to re-present certain aspects of history. "Prefabrication" refers to the use of elements from past works which have pre-existing meaning which may either be transferred to the new work or commented upon by its relationship to the other parts. "Transtextuality", however, is a broader and more inclusive term, introduced by Gerard Genette (1982), used to describe the multiple ways in which various texts relate to other texts (Stam *et al.*, 1996:206). Various types of transtextual relations which arise out of the "manifest or secret" references in one text to other texts, have been identified and distinguished. "Intertextuality" - Genette's first type of transtextual relation - is defined as the "effective co-presence of two [or more] texts", and occurs in the form of "allusion", "plagiarism" or "quotation" which appear to be an unavoidable features of contemporary cinema. The resultant relationship influences the way in which the newly constructed text is read (or watched). In mainstream filmmaking, the remake and the sequel represent the most conspicuously intertextual form, while allusions to existing films have become a source of fascination for contemporary viewers who tend to have a broad frame of cinematic

reference (particularly since the introduction of video). The reflexive practices which are evident in much contemporary cinema have been assigned a wealth of names and are demonstrated in an imaginative array of forms. During a particularly poignant scene in Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), for example, two studio screenwriters discuss the viability of a script described as "*Out of Africa* [Sydney Pollack, 1985] meets *Pretty Woman* [Garry Marshall, 1990]". Such a script (or film) which brings together the "prefabricated" storylines of two films, would represent a particular form of intertextual pastiche. In this case, it is a form of pastiche evident in Hollywood "high concept" movies which may be said to display a type of "collusion intertextuality", whereby familiar and similar narratives are combined to create something which is likely to be highly accessible amongst audiences. A similar form of "high concept" pastiche involves the amalgamation of disparate narratives, genres or styles, which may produce a type of "collision intertextuality".

Stam *et al.* (1996:207) draw on Genette's categories, and introduce more specific categories such as "genetic intertextuality" ("...the process whereby the appearance of the sons or daughters of well-known actors and actresses...evokes the memory of their famous parents") and "mendacious intertextuality" (the process whereby a "pseudo-intertextual reference" is invented and included in a film). Another effect which is especially evident is "celebrity intertextuality", which occurs when individual film stars transfer elements from one performance, genre or cultural milieu to another. This results in the deployment of residual meaning from one film to various other cinematic contexts. "Intratextuality" is described as "...the process by which films refer to themselves...", while "auto-citation" refers to a filmmaker's "self-quotation". Both of these techniques are employed in the highly successful *Scream* trilogy (Wes Craven, 1996-2000) which regularly refers to its own use of horror film conventions in order to satirise the genre of which it is a part. In *Scream 2*, for example, the opening scene depicts a young couple discussing the socio-cultural significance of the genre while they stand in a queue for an intrafilmic film version of the events of the first *Scream* movie (intrafilmically titled *Stab*). In a similar vein, "*mise-en-abyme*" (or "*mise-en-abîme*") refers to "...the infinite regress of mirror reflections to denote the...filmic process by which a...sequence plays out in miniature the processes of the text as a whole" (Stam *et al.*, 1996:200-201). Such a technique compounds the effects of various forms of intertextuality by referring to numerous sources which themselves refer to various sources.[84]

Elsaesser provides an account of the infinite regress provided by the *mise-en-abyme* in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992):

> Even the sources...confront one with a commentary on a commentary, whose *mise-en-abyme* structure can be celebrated as the film's particular authenticity, itself only heightened when one realizes how replete with citations to other films Coppola's adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel is: at the last count, no less than sixty titles. Besides the thirty-odd Dracula films, this still leaves a dense intertextuality... (Elsaesser, 1998:197).

Elsaesser (1998:197-198) identifies some of the films referenced in Coppola's film as Louis Lumière's *Arrival of a Train* (1895), Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et La Bête* (1945), Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), Walter Hill's *The Long Riders* (1979), Werner Herzog's *Heart of Glass* (1976), and also Herzog's *Nosferatu* (1979), which he notes is "...itself a remake of Murnau's famous film". Accordingly, the film offers the viewer "...a highly self-referencing text in relation to movie history, but also with respect to technology, in particular, the technologies of recording, visualization and reproduction: diaries, phonographs, Dictaphones, peep shows, the *cinématographe* all play prominent and narratively important parts" (Elsaesser, 1998:198). *Mise-en-abyme* may thus also refer to a film's concern with its own technologies of reproduction and representation. In *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, for example, recording and viewing devices of various kinds play a prominent part in the narrative. This serves to highlight the cinematic apparatus, which is "mirrored" by the various instruments pictured on screen. In this sense, even the evocation of paintings or other representational forms may constitute a form of intertextuality whereby the cinematic process is invoked.

A second form of transtextuality advanced by Genette, is "paratextuality", and may be described (with reference to cinema) as the relationship between a film and all the ancillary "texts" or products which might contribute to the meaning, significance or understanding of the film. Paratextuality would therefore refer to the relationship between a film and its advertising, publicity material, posters, merchandising, reviews, video packaging, and any other "...massages and commentaries which come to surround the text and which at times becomes virtually indistinguishable from it" (Stam *et al.*, 1996:207). In this respect, the sale of merchandising or the development of a video game based on a movie may be seen to contribute to the status and significance of that film within a broader cultural context. "Metatextuality" refers to the critical relationship - which exists or is evoked - between one film and another. Such a relation may exist merely because of the refusal of a particular film to

function according to the rules of a genre which it appears to echo. Such a "refusal" may evoke a previous genre film and serve as a critical discourse alluding to that film. As a film which mythologizes the fictional terms of its own creation, Altman's *The Player* itself involves a form of metatextuality in which Hollywood filmmaking in general is evoked as a starting point for parody. Linda Hutcheon refers to this type of "textual self-awareness" as "narcissistic narrative" which is evident in numerous contemporary films which exploit the viewer's cinematic knowledge in order to achieve a degree of "interactive participation" (Matthews, 1999b:42). The "narcissistic narrative" may be likened to Robert Alter's concept of "self-conscious fiction" which refers to a type of text which highlights the status of the work as an "artefact". Such forms of self-reflexivity occur intentionally and unintentionally throughout the corpus of contemporary cinema, and they may be read both consciously and "sub-consciously". "Architextuality" concerns a text's "...refusal to designate itself homogenously...", thereby provoking critical discourse around the true nature of the film's genre (Stam *et al.*, 1996:207).[85]

Bricolage is an element of postmodern cinema which refers to the assemblage of different genres, styles, textures or discourses. One example is the ultra-eclectic Robert Rodriguez movie, *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1995), which combines generic elements and stylistic twitches from a variety of film sources as if to intentionally present a *mise-en-abyme* of filmic quotes. The film rejects generic cohesion, reworking B-movie techniques using contemporary technology in order to construct a "trashy" film which is also a parody of "trashy" movies. Thus, in certain scenes, the special effects and make-up are used in-excess in order to draw attention to their creation as well as their underlying lack of sophistication. The resulting "fragmented narrative" in which sophisticated techniques are used to foreground unsophisticated forms, points to the postmodern erasure of the binary divide between "high" and "low" cultural forms evident in much contemporary cinema. A similar form of bricolage is used in the stop-motion clay animation feature film, *Chicken Run* (Peter Lord and Nick Park, 2000), which recalls and parodies prisoner-of-war / escape movies, but uses animated comedy and chickens to deal with issues that have found their way into the collective consciousness largely through images from cinema and television. Most notably, the film "quotes" from John Sturges' *The Great Escape* (1962):

> After each failed escape attempt, Ginger, the mastermind behind the chicken's plans, is confined to a coal bunker where she bounces a Brussels sprout just as "cooler king" Steve McQueen did a baseball in solitary confinement. The finale of the film also sees a tricycling Rocky, a rooster, pull off (albeit in reverse) the

wire-jumping motorcycle stunt that was McQueen's finest moment in *The Great Escape* (Newman, 2000f:41).

Since *Chicken Run* is undoubtedly designed to appeal to a younger generation of filmgoers (since animation is more generally associated with children), the use of quotation from a film which will be largely unknown to the target audience potentially undermines its parodic potential. It may be more appropriate to see such referencing as a form of homage which intelligently mixes "nostalgia" and "sweetness" (Errigo, 2000b:60). More significantly, however, is the notion that – in a world where "reality" exists in terms of an *image of* "reality" - the filmmakers' frame of reference is situated within a purely cinematic world. *From Dusk Till Dawn* is similarly constructed, in terms of various "experiences" which have been "gathered" from other films.

Other forms of what might be termed "quotational bricolage" which have become popular in contemporary Hollywood productions are demonstrated by a cycle of films based on old television programmes, including examples such as *The Mod Squad* (Scott Silver, 1999), *The Brady Bunch Movie* (Betty Thomas, 1995), *The Flintstones* (Brian Levant, 1994) and its sequel, *The Addams Family* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991) and two sequels, *The Beverly Hillbillies* (Penelope Spheeris, 1993), *Mission: Impossible* (Brian De Palma, 1996) and *Charlie's Angels* (Joseph McGinty Nichol, 2000). Barry Keith Grant suggests that such films represent a certain form of "yuppie anxiety":

> Truly based on nostalgic appeal, they recall both the historical 'better time' of the affluent 1960s, when the shows were first broadcast, and the ahistorical once-upon-a-time fantasy world of TV-land (Grant, 1998:290).

The recycling of past cultural creations also finds other source material such as comic books, which have given rise to numerous action-adventure-fantasy movies, including *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), *Batman* and, more recently, *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000). The existence of such material within the prevailing cultural consciousness makes them useful sources of readily-accessible (and easy-to-market) film narratives with characters that are both fantastical and embedded within the "reality" of popular entertainment. These films, which typically spawn a number of sequels (three each for *Superman* and *Batman*), appeal to a sense of nostalgia for fantasies which are located both historically and in the present. They appeal both to the imagination and to memories of two-dimensional heroes. In a similar way, video games are occasionally exploited to produce action-fantasy films such as *Mortal Kombat* (Paul Anderson III, 1995) and *Super Mario Bros.* (Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton, 1993). Such films

not only bring a series of recognisable characters and plot-elements to the screen, but also serve to broaden and enliven the popular culture landscape, making two-dimensional figures somehow more credible, while impacting positively on the marketability of such characters in other contexts.

The significance of identifying the connections between various films and also between films and other popular cultural forms, lies in the concept of *hypertextuality*, which refers to the relationship between a text (the "hypertext") and an anterior text (the "hypotext"). Hypertextuality necessarily highlights the transformative elements enacted by one text onto another, and can be achieved in numerous ways. Parody, for example, uses a distinctively humorous style or elocution to "trivialise" existing texts or styles. Gay filmmakers might rework existing texts through a homosexual-camp sensibility, emphasising social details which might previously have been marginalized or ignored by mainstream filmmakers. Many postmodern films include references to foregoing texts in order to alter the meaning of the current text or to apparently "comment" on the original. An extreme example of such hypertextuality occurs with the relationship between Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Gus Van Sant's 1998 remake. Van Sant chose to use the same screenplay and - to a large extent - the same shots. His version of the film is in colour, however, and uses an entirely new cast. He also updates certain attitudes concerning standards of social acceptability and morality. The result is "...more a work of 'metacinematic' research" (Smith, 1999:36) than a simple "remake", in that it comments on certain aspects of the original as it was contextualised by the prevailing social climate:

> By remaking *Psycho*, the film-makers have managed to replay formally notions of transgression and difference that manifested themselves in Hitchcock's original as themes and subtexts. So Van Sant's *Psycho* is both more and less than a remake. More in the sense that it literalises the notion of remaking by copying or transcribing Hitchcock's 1960 film, less in that it denies the standard remake strategy which demands that the remake transcend its origins by revision... (Smith, 1999:36).

In many ways, it is the temporal distance of the two films - as they refer to one another as products of two distinct socio-cultural environments - which serves to highlight the hypertextual "differences" between the two. It is through the very slight ways in which Van Sant's film "differs" from his source film that the viewer may come to understand some "hidden meaning" within the "original".[86]

Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* exemplifies what Jameson refers to as "[t]he allusive and elusive plagiarism of older plots..." which he identifies with pastiche (Jameson,

1998:17), but which is readily identified with parody. Tarantino references past cinema projects by including narrative structures, characters and scenes which "quote" an entire history of cinema, particularly the work of Jean-Luc Godard. His references to history are not limited to the cinema, however, and his work combines elements from a variety of popular culture forms and modes of representation:

> A pasticheur and pop-cultural relativist, the 31-year-old Tarantino is as at home with Elvis as he is with Steve McQueen, Pam Greer and Shakespeare. And even more than with *Reservoir Dogs*, his screenplays for *True Romance* (directed by Tony Scott) and *Pulp Fiction* are scattershot with references to movies and TV…. Tarantino shares in his generation's cheerful bad taste and prodigious appetite for the good, the bad and the idiotic (Dargis, 1994a:8).

Dargis (1994a:8) identifies some of the "…most obvious allusions in *Pulp Fiction*" as Sonny Chiba, *The Brady Bunch* (TV series, 1969), *The Partridge Family* (TV series, 1970), 'Frankie Says Relax', *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), *Superfly T.N.T.* (Ron O'Neal, 1973), *The Guns of Navarone* (J. Lee Thompson, 1961), *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), *A Flock of Seagulls* (*La Noche de las gaviotas*, Amando de Ossorio, 1975) and *La Femme Nikita* (*Nikita*, Luc Besson, 1990). Numerous other references and allusions to films, television and other forms of pop-culture abound, evoking obvious comparisons to Godard, "…who once described the initial period of the *nouvelle vague* as '*films de cinéphile* – the work of film enthusiasts'" (Dargis, 1994a:8). Tarantino's films blur those elements which refer to particular periods in history in a stylistic concoction that evokes an "indefinable nostalgic past" which is ambiguously set in the present and simultaneously "beyond history". What makes his films "pure" in a sense, is that these "indefinable pasts" are actually cinematic "events" rather than actual pasts from "objective reality". His films locate themselves in the enduring presence of film "history".[87]

Pastiche and parody may be said to imbue the cinematic image or text with a schizophrenic nature, open to double or contradictory readings which typically centre around the tension between "originality" and the illusion of, or allusion to, "originality". In terms of Lyotard's understanding of the postmodern, contemporary films frequently attempt to find new ways of imparting "…a stronger sense of the unpresentable" (in Sarup, 1993:177), which results out of a desire to be original. The mode of representation of "the unpresentable" often occurs by way of fantastical and imaginative narratives or the "…irruption of the diegetic space by the grotesque…", which may involve the introduction of fantasy elements into an established "realistic" narrative (Olivier, 1992:99). In this sense, the "grotesque", refers to the simultaneous

co-existence of elements of "realism" and "fantasy", which produces a clash of disparate or conflicting frames of reference. When a fantasy element is situated within a "realistic" framework, for example, "...it violates the latter precisely in the sense that the two different sets of conventions cannot be reduced or reconciled with each other" (Olivier, 1992:99). Such a violation gives rise to the grotesque which forces the viewer to confront his or her understanding of the "reality" which was originally presented. According to Thomson (in Olivier, 1992:99) the "grotesque world" which emerges to replace the initial "reality", continues to represent the immediate "reality" of the viewer:

> ...the clash of irreconcilable aesthetic-ontological modes, occurring within a realistic setting, understandably evokes bewilderment: having already 'read' the narrated events (or presented images) as 'real', the perception of something as being miraculous or fantastic – that is, as inexplicable by means of natural laws – is to say the least, disconcerting (Olivier, 1992:99-100).

The grotesque produces ontological confusion in the viewer, which is a prominent feature of postmodern films that are frequently concerned with locating "...strange, eclectic, violent, timeless worlds..." in what may be termed "the here and now" (Sarup, 1993:177).

The grotesque may also occur in contemporary cinema - in an increasingly popular manifestation - as a form of postmodern prefabrication. In this instance, the articulation of multiple filmic quotations may occur by disguising parody as pastiche within startling or unusual contexts thereby producing variously complex and unsettling, and frequently entertaining results. Tarantino uses this technique to great success in his crime movie, *Reservoir Dogs*. In one scene (discussed in greater detail in chapter five), Tarantino combines horror with comedy during a particularly brutal torture sequence. While the scene recalls gory elements from numerous B-movies, it is equally a reference to the combination of comic and horror elements typical of Abbott and Costello monster movies. The spectator is compelled to laugh with the torturer as he dances to a popular 1970s tune, while flinching at the terrible suffering being inflicted on the torture victim. In this way, Tarantino effectively parodies the act of spectatorship, highlighting the sadomasochistic relationship between viewer and film. His technique, in the construction of the scene, undermines the viewer's ability to comfortably accept any single point-of-view. This spectatorial schizophrenia is highlighted when, during the worst moment of torture, the camera is torn away from the horrific spectacle and the viewer is forced to stare at an empty corner. Whatever the combined effect of this disruptive strategy, the scene is ultimately a provocation

which undermines traditional modes of representation. In this way, the film challenges the divide between high art and low art while demonstrating an appeal to mass audiences.

In the postmodern film, narrative and style effectively become "cultural cut-ups" which are reworked in a multitude of ways in order to create the appearance of originality. This system of creative recycling echoes what David Harvey refers to as the "cultural fragmentation" evident in postmodern societies. According to Harvey, the postmodern universe involves the "collapse" of "very different worlds" into one another in the same way that "...the world's commodities are assembled in the supermarket and all manner of subcultures get juxtaposed in the contemporary city" (in Olivier, 1996:90). This "collapse" signals the triumph of a "disruptive spatiality...over the coherence of perspective and narratives in postmodern fiction, in exactly the same way that...all the divergent spaces of the world are assembled nightly as a collage of images upon the television screen" (Harvey in Olivier, 1996:90). The contemporary narrative disrupts the sense of "order" and "differentiation" which gave the continuity style of classical Hollywood cinema its coherent tone.

Furthermore, postmodern films frequently compel the viewer to experience a collapse of temporal perspective which is brought about by the quick succession of images and scenes. Elsaesser (1981:272) has argued that motion pictures impose an "unfreedom" and an "artificial rhythm" on the spectator who does not experience a movie at a chosen pace or "...in the random order one normally observes the 'world outside'". Fred Pfeil (1998:146-186) refers to the accelerated pace of narrative and the dislocation of the central characters in terms of time and space as formal aspects of the postmodern film. Genres such as the "male rampage film" (or contemporary action film) offer "brutal, industrialized thrills" which are presented through a "narrative logic and rhythm" which is primarily concerned with keeping the action going - moving on to the next action set-piece and showing the viewer "more, more, more" (Pfeil, 1998:147). Within this narrative logic of high-paced thrills, the viewer's experience of proximity and distance is destabilised and confused so that spaces become understood as "...*here* - and *here* - and *here*...spaces whose distance from one another is not mappable as distance so much as it is measurable in differences of attitude and intensity" (Pfeil, 1998:147). Cinema, through the very act of *showing*, locates the viewer in a series of eternal "here and now" situations or "events".

Elsaesser (1981:272) notes that the "disorienting" effects of the visual rhythm of a film is "...neutralised by the spectator's ability to construct...a time-space continuum as a perceptual hypothesis, which reduces the degree of anxiety caused by the sense of unfreedom and dependence, the passivity and state of receptivity to which he is exposed". The act of viewing in the cinema necessarily dislocates the viewer, fragmenting the spatio-temporal experience and relocating the subject within a very different "reality" (or "time-space continuum"). This imaginary, dreamlike or artificial "world" may be strongly associated with our postmodern universe and the "hyperreality" in which we exist.

Harvey's "cultural fragmentation" may also be observed in the stylistic eclecticism which is indicative of a number of postmodern films. Typically, such eclecticism is employed intentionally by the filmmaker in order to establish a look or style which is "original" despite the familiarity of its constituent elements. In Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*[88] (1996), for example, eclecticism occurs in a variety of forms, ranging from the frenzied combination of cinematographic techniques (impossible point-of-view shots, quick cutting of zooms, pans and wipes, ultra slow motion shots and grotesque extreme close-ups, for example) which recall the style of music videos, commercials and cartoons, to the insertion of a "classical" text into an action-romance cinema context. The film eschews "realism" in every respect, highlighting the mythical component of the "timeless" tragedy by establishing an excessive *mise en scène* through elements of camp and kitsch. In other films, such as Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca* (1997), "familiar imagery" is reworked to produce "an anachronistic world" (Romney, 1998:49). Such worlds typically evoke some sense of a not-too-distant future "reality", while recalling elements of a familiar style from the past. Stylistic features from the past, present and an imagined "future" coexist within a single narrative, producing an imaginary or fantasy world which Jameson has argued "...is typical of the dehistoricising effects of post-modern culture" (Arroyo, 1997:8). It may be argued, however, that the fusion of temporal and stylistic elements produces a mythical spatio-temporal "reality" which compels the viewer to deconstruct the various elements in terms of personal "realities":

> ...one could counter-argue that what [Jameson] calls dehistoricising can be a means of making past conventions of storytelling understandable in the present context. The construction of mythic time and place [creates] a no-time that is all time, and a no-place that stands for any-place, [which] is built bit by bit out of previous, inherited modes of telling, showing and understanding. These operate allegorically, and involve the viewer in sophisticated strategies of interpretation. So we are required to decipher what this constructed world

stands for and how it comments on our own (Arroyo, 1997:8).

As José Arroyo (1997:9) notes of *Romeo + Juliet*, "[i]t's a very hybrid film, one that quotes and borrows from everywhere..." and is "quite knowingly referential", but it is this aspect of the film's construction which serves as a type of "...vernacular that can convey Shakespeare's story to an audience in a filmic way...". Further examples of what Adam Smith (2001a:51) refers to as "anarchic anachronism", include Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* (2001).[89] Both films depict pasts which have absorbed later histories in order to entertain present-day viewers. As contemporary cinema becomes taken up with re-viewing, re-presenting and re-producing, it seems that there is an equally consistent move towards aesthetic and narrative "playfulness" which coincides with the eradication of fixed notions of identity, "reality" and history (the relationship between moving images and history is discussed in further detail in chapter six). "Meaning" is absorbed by spectacle and surface play which renders the postmodern film open to multiple interpretations. This, in turns opens "reality" up to multiple interpretations. Elsaesser (1981:272) has gone so far as to suggest that the "...primary material of the cinema..." is "...the viewing situation itself..." and that the actual "mode of production" in the cinema is the "transformation" of this viewing situation into "meanings". Meaning is rendered unstable, subject to mutations according to the perspective of the individual viewing subject. In a sense, such instability empowers audiences by placing them in what Christie (1994:236) refers to as "...a brazen new world of invention". Tarantino himself proudly suggests the limitless potential which cinematic self-referencing brings with it:

> I'm telling a story you've seen over and over again....We're going to follow the oldest setups in the world, but then we're going to go to the moon (Tarantino in Christie, 1994:236).

What goes around comes back

History does not break down into stories but into images (Walter Benjamin in White, 1996:17).

Jameson sees the discourse of postmodernism as a cultural dominant which has resulted in a move away from "institutionalised modernism" and a "decisive shift from monopoly to multinational capitalism" (Brooker, 1998:21). The emergence and widespread development (and infiltration) of the electronic media and the global

market has affected every level of human existence, "...producing a massively coded world of relentless commodification and dramatically altered social and psychic conditions" (Brooker, 1998:22). Simulation – the fourth phase of the image according to Baudrillard – may be understood as "...the hallmark of the age of postmodernism" which, in cinema, has been identified by Baudrillard and Jameson in terms of simple nostalgia (Bukatman, 1997:86). The Baudrillardian notion of a depthless image-based society is taken by Jameson to include the disconnection of objects from their means of human production. Critical distance and objectivity are lost as old differences and directions are abandoned, and the past becomes "...recoverable now only as pastiche, in the randomised play by which texts and knowledge are cannibalised and reshuffled to produce '*le style retro*' [or '*la mode rétro*'], evident in fashion, music and the Hollywood nostalgia film" (Brooker, 1998:22). Such forms of cultural "re-enactment" produce what Baudrillard sees as "...a web of representations which infect and transform reality" (Bukatman, 1997:86).

According to Jameson, the alienation experienced by the individual under the monopolistic capitalism of Enlightenment, is now replaced by a "schizophrenia" resulting from the dislocation of the "real" and the loss of authenticity. Jameson is heavily concerned with "...this newly riven and schizoid personality [which] is cast adrift in the perpetual present of a superficial, centreless world, replete with ever new, recycled images or representations" (Brooker, 1998:22). Stripped of an historical vantage point, contemporary humankind is deprived of an "interpretative grasp" with which to develop an "explanation of the social and cultural totality". Baudrillard (1994a:117) further critiques this notion of a dislocated present by describing the "resurrection" of various "retro" scenarios in this postmodern age as being hyper-real, and with the consequence that their "...resuscitated values are themselves fluid, unstable, subject to the same fluctuations as fashion or stock-exchange capital". The nostalgic recalling of past eras, according to Baudrillard (1994a:117), lacks historical significance, because such simulations occur "...wholly on the surface of *our* age, as though all images were being superimposed one upon another...".

Andrew (1992:422) argues that "borrowing" is the "...most frequent mode of adaptation" in the history of artistic endeavour, noting that the adapted work seeks to find an audience "...by the prestige of its borrowed title or subject" and to similarly "...gain a certain respectability...". Jameson (1996:187) similarly claims that "pastiche" is one of the most significant aspects of postmodernism today. Frequently

misconstrued as parody, pastiche also involves the "...mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles" (Jameson, 1996:187). Baudrillard sees this as a form of "repentance", a recycling of past forms and previous styles in an endless deconstruction of history. Naturally, the great modernists represent perfect targets for parody because the basis of their individuality is their distinct uniqueness. Such creative personalities developed recognisable (and categorisable) characteristics in their work that gave them an unmistakable quality which could not easily be confused with the stylistic qualities of other modern artists.[90] In cinema, the modernist tradition may be linked to the *auteur* theory which came to prominence during the 1970s. The *auteurist* tradition emphasised the influence of the director's "unique personality and individuality" on the creative process, and served to determine how his or her "...unique vision of the world" was expressed through a body of work (Sarup, 1993:175).

Parody, essentially, exists as a parasitic imitation of these stylistic trends and markers, capitalising on the "idiosyncrasies and eccentricities" of the host style in order to "mock" or satirise the original (Jameson, 1996:188). Usually the parodist enjoys some sympathy for the style being satirised, and while the resultant effect of parody is generally "...to cast ridicule on the private nature..." of the original, it is not necessarily true that the "satiric impulse" is a conscious desire in all varieties of parody (Jameson, 1996:188). In order to contrast parody with pastiche, Jameson asks what the result would be if the belief in "normal language", "ordinary speech" or "the linguistic norm" no longer applied. Jameson anticipates the erosion or fragmentation of society into private groups or associations as something that is co-dependent on the evolution of modernism and modern art. In the development of private "languages" or discourses which have asserted themselves as modernisms, society itself has come to evolve specialised, or fragmented, frameworks, "...each group coming to speak a curious private language of its own, each profession developing its private code or idiolect..." (Jameson, 1996:188). It follows that the next development of such a progression would be the linguistic separation of individuals who form various "linguistic islands", thereby extinguishing the possibility of any "linguistic norm". Without a norm standard, parodic ridicule becomes impossible. The implicit result of this development is absolute "stylistic diversity and heterogeneity" (Jameson, 1996:188).

Accordingly, the creation of "new styles and worlds" is also no longer possible because

the number of possible combinations is limited and all the unique combinations have already been thought of (Jameson, 1998:168). It is in this moment, where parody is no longer possible because of the disappearance of "an original", that pastiche appears:

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour... (Jameson, 1996:188-189).

Having already discussed the evolution of individual or unique styles as the predication of classical modernism, it seems clear that "...the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style" (Jameson, 1996:189). In a postmodernist framework, however, such concepts of "individualism and personal identity" are no longer applicable and the "old individual or individualist subject" is said to be "dead".[91] Jameson concludes that the death of the subject implies that "...in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (Jameson, 1998:169). In describing contemporary or postmodern art as being a new version of self-reflexivity, Jameson pronounces pastiche as the only possibility for art and aestheticism which are doomed to failure: "...it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past" (Jameson, 1998:169).

In addressing the subject of pastiche, Jameson refers to what he calls the "nostalgia film" as a type of cinema which deliberately attempts to recapture the past, or some aspect of the past, by employing a mood, a look, or a period, out of history. Typically, however, this "history" is actually already derived from a cinematic representation which has "translated" a period of history into a series of images. Jameson (1998:169) distinguishes the "nostalgia film" from the "historical film" (or period movie) which he considers a traditional generic category describing a type of film which attempts "...to recapture all the atmosphere and stylistic peculiarities..." of a certain time or era. "Nostalgia films", however, are described as evoking a sense of the past or referring to a period in history through various forms of stylistic recycling.

As an example of this form of contemporary cinema, Jameson refers to *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), which recalls not an actual historical period, but rather evokes the memory of

> ...one of the most important cultural experiences of the generations that grew up from the 1930s to the 1950s...the Saturday afternoon serial of the Buck Rogers type – alien villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress, the death ray or the doomsday box, and the cliffhanger at the end whose miraculous resolution was to be witnessed next Saturday afternoon (Jameson, 1998:169).

Star Wars addresses its audiences on two distinct levels. For adults the movie serves to satisfy a "deep longing", or nostalgia, of those who desire some re-exploration of an older (and now dead) period. The film allows such viewers to experience "strange old aesthetic artifacts" again, this time within the context of a contemporary film. For the younger generations, the film is a straight-forward adventure, combining "new" mythologies, fantastical mysteries and heroic action. It is, in many ways, a science-fiction film with "good old-fashioned values".

Star Wars "reinvents" the feeling and look of an older period or style and, in this way, is a metonymic nostalgia or "historical" film. Such films, argues Jameson (1998:170), evoke a sense of the past rather than "...a picture of the past in its lived totality...", which Noël Carroll has called "allusionism" and Jameson himself has termed "blank irony". Carroll understands allusionism to be the result of filmmakers and audiences having grown up and experienced the history of cinema together. Jameson links blank irony to a culture of nostalgia which is explained as the co-existence of a culturally perpetuated desire for myths and a pessimism about their value and ability to function effectively in contemporary times. Robert Ray sees in this double register effect a condition whereby "...the viewer is simultaneously addressed as a naive and an ironic spectator, as an innocent and a knowing one" (Elsaesser, 1998:193). Will Brooker (1997c:103) refers to a review in the *Evening Standard* which argued that with *Star Wars*, Lucas had "...manufactured a sort of 'group memory' for kids who never knew the fantasies and myths that films dealt in when he was young" which implies that whereas the film referred to the cultural past of older audiences, it brought something which was new and fresh to younger viewers.

Brooker (1997c:103) also notes that eighteen years after the first *Star Wars* film, the "group memory" lives on and is noted in films such as *Judge Dredd* (Danny Cannon, 1995). These films recycle the childhood myths of the so-called "*Star Wars*

generation". Thus, "*Star Wars* to 27-year-old Danny Cannon's generation, is the original; *Judge Dredd* is the nostalgia film" (Brooker, 1997c:102). For Brooker, the films which attempt to recapture the atmosphere of the original *Star Wars* become the source of a sort of undated "group memory":

> If *Star Wars* embodies Jameson's nostalgia cinema, *Judge Dredd* works within a Baudrillardian aesthetics of pure surface, a 'dizzying collage of everybody else's ideas', a lifting of images from *Demolition Man* [Marco Brambilla, 1993], *Terminator 2* and *RoboCop* [Paul Verhoeven, 1987] which themselves borrowed freely from cinema's iconographic stockroom; in a final irony, the grimy, drizzled Mega-City One which Dredd patrols virtually replicates the Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* [Ridley Scott, 1982], a text analysed to within an inch of its life for its notorious plundering of *noir* and Victoriana, Egyptian architecture and Japanese neon. That city's reappearance in *Judge Dredd* was described by one reviewer as 'a museum-display composite seen too many times before…Now That's What I Call A Dystopia Vol 27' (Brooker, 1997c:103).

Brooker's reading of *Judge Dredd*'s "plundering" of imagery from a range of science-fiction films suggests that filmmakers are increasingly likely to "borrow" from movies that remain in the recent memory of filmgoers. The notion of "group memory" thus becomes a more fluid concept which hints at a lack of creative inventiveness, but must also be recognised as a useful tool in establishing a recognisable context for a film narrative. Brooker recognises a far more cynical aspect of the "group memory" effect at work in films such as *Judge Dredd*:

> *Judge Dredd*'s reworking-by-numbers is simulation in Baudrillard's sense of an endlessly self-mirroring, self-reflexive collection of images for which the 'original,' if there was one, is lost in the 'uninterrupted circuit' of exchange and duplication; but it also, in the more popular sense of the word, brings to mind the aimless pleasure of a *Star Wars* flight simulator – Disney's 'Star Tours', or perhaps the 'Skywalker Park' of William Gibson's novel *Virtual Light* (Brooker, 1997c:104).

Of course, while Brooker refers to the simulated adventures and theme parks that are created as forms of homage to films such as *Star Wars* as sources of "aimless pleasure", he fails to note that these more visceral pleasures contribute to the film's intrusion into everyday life, thereby contributing to its stimulation of the collective "group memory".

This manner of generating a "group memory" was repeated with the release of the long-awaited *Star Wars* "prequel", *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* which in many ways serves to extend and exacerbate Jameson's "nostalgia effect". While the prequel could be said to appeal to those (much) younger viewers who had not even been born when *Star Wars* was first released, it has proved to be extremely popular with those seeking to rekindle their memories of a cultural experience which captured

the imaginations of two sets of audiences in 1977:

> The *Star Wars* phenomenon is the apotheosis of the child-adult. Twenty years ago, Lucas admitted that his ambition was to "create new myths for children". But the people lying on the LA sidewalks waiting for the advent of *The Phantom Menace* are not children (Lawson, 1999:19).

Of course, part of the "nostalgic effect" which is generated by the film and the hype surrounding its release, is coupled to the desire to re-experience the period (the late 1970s) when the first *Star Wars* movie was released. On another level, the dramatic technological advances which that movie demonstrated twenty-two years before would, supposedly, be repeated - in even more dramatic terms (and images) - in *The Phantom Menace*. Indeed, much of the intense marketing around the film dealt with the brilliant special effects and computer technologies which were supposedly used to create a "visually up-to-date" version of the Seventies' phenomenon. While the new movie represents a particular form of nostalgia for some, for others it is simply a "bigger-than-average" blockbuster[92] which appeals to the investment of an younger generation in the evolving popular-culture landscape.[93]

In other forms, the "nostalgia film" may be set in a particular historical period while also referring metonymically to earlier epochs in film and television history. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981), for example, is set in the early part of the Twentieth Century, but the look, feel and style of the adventure story belong to that period in ways which contemporary viewers can only perceive in terms of *representations* of that historical time in other films and images. Furthermore, the hyperbolic action, adventure and fantasy elements which are foregrounded as spectacle in both *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* are usually compared with the "fantasy" elements which typified 1950s B-movies. The relocation of these types of spectacles may therefore be seen as another element of the "nostalgia film". Perhaps the most interesting of the nostalgia modes is another, more ambiguous technique whereby an as yet unknown period in time becomes a recycling point is but a starting point for the recollection of a variety of alternative periods and styles.

Another distinct example of pastiche conspiring to create an ambiguous nostalgic mode is Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, which is interesting because it is set in the future (unlike *Star Wars*, which assures us that it occurs "A long, long time ago, in a galaxy far away...") but recalls "the past" in a number of ways. The film acts as a three-way "historic" reference system: a dystopian future and a metonymically referenced cinematic "past", connected within a contemporary film (made in 1982). The most

notable link with the past, occurs through its stylistic recycling of the "mood", "tone" and look of 1940s *film noir*[94] movies, particularly in terms of the cynical and morally ambiguous atmosphere, and the thematic handling of the nature of human existence. In *Blade Runner* the past is recalled not only through the construction of a cityscape which recalls earlier cinema worlds such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and numerous *film noir* productions (parts of sets of James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart movies are actually used in *Blade Runner*), but the film is also a richly eclectic mix of other historic modes. The architecture and design of the future world of New Los Angeles (it is the year 2019) cross-references human history and relocates multiple pasts (and cultures) within the claustrophobic here-and-now of the cinematic dystopia suggesting a "...nightmarish city-scape in which everyone's humanity is at risk" (Mulhall, undated). These visual elements function as surface details which highlight the film's overt narrative concerns with "memory" and the nature of "humanity".

The remnants of past periods which clash and blend within Scott's neon-lit, sunless city suggest, however, that the absorption of the past has effectively eradicated history: "memory" no longer exists, since the past is recalled through artificial monuments and tokens which signify history. The cityscape references such diverse architectural sources as the now extinct civilisations of Egypt and South America (the Mayans and the Aztecs), which are represented by the immense pyramid-like Tyrell Corporation buildings, for example. Inside Tyrell headquarters, the viewer encounters the vault-like minimalism of these ancient palatial structures, replete with a spectacularly simulated sunset and a scene in which a genetically engineered owl flies across the room (the owl once again suggesting an association with Egyptian religion and death (another theme), perhaps). Simultaneously, however, Los Angeles is cluttered with buildings which recall a range of Twentieth Century architectural styles, particularly the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. It is in these decaying buildings that those inhabitants existing on the lower social rungs now live. Further architectural "complications" occur through the inclusion of remnants of a range of other styles, including bits of classical Greek and Roman columns, art deco facades, and pillars suggesting familiar Soviet settings (this eclecticism refers directly and indirectly to postmodern architecture). Eastern civilisations are referenced through the proliferation of architectural and design elements which recall the crowded streets of "typically" oriental cities. While neon dragon insignias and Chinese fast-food outlets refer to the modernisation of Eastern cultural traditions, the Tyrell Headquarters is decorated with another classical reference to oriental culture; the bonsai tree. Scott's

vision of the future is both bleak and ominous, yet one suspects that this has nothing to do with the extent to which "history" and "culture" have been assimilated within New Los Angeles, but with the human failure to acknowledge or tend to these by-products of human existence (at least not in the way that the immaculate bonsai has been tended).

Scott's "inter-periodisation as pastiche" is not restricted to architectural and design elements, however. The synthesised music throughout the film suggests a distinct attempt to engage with a yet-to-be-encountered future while alluding to the nostalgic neo-classicism of "some past". This point is most clearly suggested in a scene where the central protagonist, Deckard (Harrison Ford), allows his fingers to linger over the keys of a "traditional" ("non-synthetic") piano suggesting that he has forgotten how to play this instrument which has now become an antique. The piano now has the significance of a museum piece which recalls the past just as the anonymous photographs which are stacked upon it are intended to recall the memory of individuals, relationships and, perhaps, love. The effect of Deckard's tuneless tinkering at the piano is highlighted by the contrast of these hollow sounds against the electronic strains of Vangelis' soundtrack, which Joseph Gelmis (1994:262) describes as an "…eerie, evocative score…[blending]…resonating thunder, lingering electronic chords, and tinkly underwater vibrato". The contrast also draws attention to power of various recording technologies to sustain the memory of cultural artefacts such as those produced by an electronic instrument. The recorded soundtrack – like the film itself - becomes a "living museum" of artificial memories. The actual playing of a piano, however, relies on human memory, human creativity and, ultimately, human experience. Yet, even this notion of "memory" as an element of "humanity" is questioned by another scene in the film where a replicant (artificial person) plays the same piano ("…beautifully", according to Deckard), and admits that although she remembers the piano lessons, she is uncertain whether these memories are her own.

The film also continuously suggests the arbitrariness of nostalgic and historic images by reminding us that even photographs need not necessarily refer to any "truth" or "reality". In the futuristic world of *Blade Runner*, photographs are used to help simulate memories for replicants (androids) who do not realise that they have no history. In many ways, the entire world which is simulated in *Blade Runner* is a living, breathing museum in which the past, present, and future, co-exist in a pastiche of style, atmosphere, and narrative modes. Within this museum, are characters who also

recall a other periods and cinematic styles. Deckard is a detective whose sombre, depressed mood, trench-coat detective outfit, and use of somewhat traditional investigative techniques[95], all recall the brooding personalities of *film noir* detectives and other "heroes". Rachael (Sean Young) similarly recalls the *femme fatale* figures of the same cinematic era, not only through her physical beauty and stylish dress, but also with regards to her role as a seductress with a potentially underhand agenda.

During a particularly memorable scene in *Pulp Fiction*, the likeable, fallible, middle-aged gangster, Vincent Vega (John Travolta), actually refers to the garishly decorated restaurant, "Jack Rabbit Slims", as "a wax museum with a pulse", inadvertently recalling Jameson's notion of the "living museum". The irony is that, until his appearance in *Pulp Fiction*, Travolta himself had all but become a museum-like exhibit recalling only the memory of the massive public appeal which he generated with several popular motion pictures of the 1970s. The reference to Travolta's own career is highlighted when he joins Uma Thurman's Mia Wallace as her partner in the stylistically confused twist contest in which they "...make like the cool cats in Quentin's favourite Godard movie, *Band à Part*" (Bernard, 1995:226). Amidst the simulations of American (specifically Hollywood) cultural history, Vincent and Mia act out a (possibly parodic) tribute to the dance films which made Travolta a star during the late-1970s and early 1980s. Travolta's tremendous earlier career prospects and image are simultaneously recalled and ridiculed as his character appears to parody the foregrounded spectacles of dancing in *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977), and its sequel, *Staying Alive* (Sylvester Stallone, 1983). These were films in which Travolta embodied the concept of a popular star. Plumper, greasier and noticeably middle-aged, the Nineties' Vincent is particularly sluggish on the dance-floor having succumbed to the heroin which he had earlier injected into his system. In the 1990s, it seems, Travolta is forced to takes his cues from the younger and "hipper" Mia who has only moments before snorted a great deal of cocaine in the restaurant's restroom. In *Pulp Fiction* the dance scene serves not only as an allusion to Travolta's most memorable roles, but as a satiric commentary on the changing face of cinema. Here, nostalgia, parody and pastiche co-exist as an exotic twist on the viewer's knowledge of cinema history and culture.

Tarantino's more literal wax museum represented by Jack Rabbit Slims itself, refers to the cult of celebrity of hyperreal image and satirises the American / Hollywood / Western fascination with dead and living legends, particularly film and other pop

cultural stars. As if in a perpetual celebration of a past which insists on asserting itself in the present, Jack Rabbit Slims "exhibits" dead celebrities in the form of waitering staff whose talent (as evidenced by the poor serving skills of Steve Buscemi's Buddy Holly simulation) lies more in the imitation of an image (of the original star) than in the actual taking of orders and bringing of food. Buscemi's portrayal of Buddy Holly as an impatient cynic, however, comments on the artificial system of icon veneration which produces stars and celebrities whose image is worshipped, but who are not really *known* to their adoring fans.[96]

Such links with the past offers the viewer nostalgic simulations of a bygone era, and the layers of such simulacra occur throughout the film. While the diner setting, the walking-talking simulated replicas of dead legends, the recorded music, and even the star – John Travolta – all contribute to the nostalgic tone of this particular sequence, the individual elements simultaneously offer a sense of the present. Uma Thurman may wear a wig straight out of the wardrobe of a *film noir* seductress (or *femme fatale*), but she remains "Uma Thurman", who is an established and recognised Nineties' star. Jack Rabbit Slims may remind the viewer of an earlier time in American history, but the over-the-top neon lighting and the cost of a milkshake (Vincent comments rather pointedly on the ridiculous cost of Mia's five-dollar shake) in this particular establishment clearly place the action in a time which is nearer our own than the "nostalgic atmosphere" or "retro mode" might suggest. The scene explodes all attempts at placing itself in any single, specific time, era or cultural epoch. In this way, the film is a reflection of postmodern existence which may be described an experience of endless synchronicity; our present "…plunders the past for its images and in using them denies their historicity and makes them into a kind of eternal present" (Sarup, 1993:165). This "present", it appears, is both artificial and elusive, a revolution against both *meaning* and *representation*.

In *Pulp Fiction*, Bruce Willis's portrayal of the tough romantic hero, Butch, is an intertextual reference to both the character of Mike Hammer in Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) and the physical "look" of Aldo Ray, who performed in Jacques Tourneur's *Nightfall* (1956). For a 1990s audience, however, Butch is a more direct reference to numerous other films featuring Bruce Willis in various roles. In this way, the viewer's knowledge of Willis's hyperreal image adds to (or interferes with) the way in which Butch is viewed. One scene, for example, depicts Willis changing into his tough-guy white vest (in which he frequently appears in the *Die Hard* action-thriller

movies[97]) as he prepares to enter a particularly violent segment of the film. The vest economically signifies a "genre shift" at this point in the movie, as *Pulp Fiction* moves from a particularly romantic sequence (Willis has played the romantic lead in more "adult" thrillers such as *The Color of Night* (Richard Rush, 1994)) into an action-packed segment of the film (during which Butch shoots Vince; Butch and Marcellus have a bloody fight; Butch is knocked unconscious with a rifle butt; Butch and Marcellus are bound-and-gagged S&M-style; Marcellus is raped; and Butch saves Marcellus using a Samurai sword). While there is some narrative explanation for Butch's diversion into this particularly violent part of the movie (to retrieve his father's gold watch), three artificial reasons for this "plot deviation" also emerge. In the first instance, Willis is more readily associated with playing an action hero than a bedroom romantic – his transformation at this point may be seen as hyperreal character fulfilment. In the second instance, Butch is supposedly a boxer who has not been given an on-screen opportunity to demonstrate his ability to fight. When he encounters Marcellus Wallace during this part of the movie, romantic Butch finally demonstrates that he can match up to the hyperreal image generally projected by Willis himself. In the third instance, both Butch (the character) and Bruce Willis (the film star) must "become" heroes because this is what the viewer expects (particularly based on the "*Die Hard*" stereotype established by Willis in his earlier action movies). Of course, Willis must first experience near-death during several violent encounters before he can "become" the hero who escapes Los Angeles on a motorbike. Indeed, during the course of Butch/Willis's "heroisation", he is placed in a number of situations which simulate the experiences of other famous film figures. An example of this occurs during the scene in which Butch, while waiting at a red robot, comes face-to-face with Marcellus Wallace, the crime boss from whom he is on the run. Marcellus walks across the street in much the same manner as Marian Crane's employer in Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The visual allusion to the earlier film constitutes a hyperreal connection for the viewer who will take greater pleasure in the "coincidental" moment if he or she recognises the Hitchcock reference.

One of the subtlest examples of the film's fusion of narrative with the influence of the hyperreal, occurs during the first meeting between Travolta's Vincent Vega and Willis' Butch Coolidge. The immediate and inexplicable dislike which these two characters have for one another serves not only to hint at later action (Vincent is sent to kill Butch, and Butch "accidentally" kills Vincent), but may also be related to the status of the two actors as Hollywood celebrities. Willis is a Nineties' icon; a hyperreal

simulation of the "unbeatable action hero" who has been made particularly popular thanks to the *Die Hard* movies in which he plays John McClane, a character described by Larry Gross (1995:6) as "...the laconic hero..." who is threatened "...only to win in the end" (note that Butch eventually assumes this role in *Pulp Fiction*). His position as one of the major stars in contemporary American cinema is an undisputed fact. Travolta represents the past: a symbol of "Seventies' suave" (an image he earned and retained from his cult disco movies) which had all but faded by the time *Pulp Fiction* was made. Both of these "stars" have achieved a similar position within Hollywood, yet, at the time of their meeting in *Pulp Fiction*, it could be said that they had occupied these positions at different points in history.

The (chance) meetings of Willis and Travolta in the film – and the mutual feeling of tension which this evokes in both instances – suggest the antagonism of two periods in (cinema) history towards one another. Their meetings also highlight and accentuate the elements of pastiche, intertextuality and referencing of the past which are celebrated in Tarantino's films. It is interesting that when Butch kills Vincent almost by chance, it is a Nineties superstar killing a Seventies' superstar. Although Travolta has gone on to achieve stardom in an unprecedented number of movies since *Pulp Fiction*, his character's death in that film may be seen as the result of his being in the "wrong film at the wrong time" (the fact that Vincent dies while on the toilet reading a pulp novel, certainly indicates that he is in the "wrong place at the wrong time"). While Travolta's character in *Pulp Fiction* is resurrected thanks to the rearrangement of chronological time, his career as a superstar has also been resurrected, with Travolta becoming one of the biggest stars of the Nineties. This particular interpretation of Tarantino's casting does not really generate "meaning" in the traditional sense, but it does suggest how "meaning" may be generated from the surface of a film text. "Meaning" is not confined to the surface of *Pulp Fiction*, but spreads "horizontally" (across the hyperreal landscape) and "vertically" (to past cinema eras and productions) to access countless other films, directors, screen performers and modes of address. His films are linked not only to existing forms, but to a postmodern world which is simultaneously a celebration of the here-and-now, and a "museum" of history.

Screaming with laughter : the film at play

If movies highlight your cultural obsessions, movie parodies turn a telescope on them (Stables, 2000e:5).

Obviously you can't get away with making the same old dumb-arsed '80s-teens-get-minced slasher movies any more, so what's a master of the genre to do? (Green, 1997:81).

Two specific "types" of film parody have recently been identified by Wes D. Gehring (Stables, 2000e:5). The first of these has been termed "the traditional puncturing parody" which works to highlight the broad comic potential of a genre which relies on specific conventions of narrative and representation. Such parodies (exemplified by Mel Brooks films such as *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *Spaceballs* (1987), for example) draw attention to well-established images from a particular genre or cycle within filmmaking in order to rework these as sites for expansive humour which may range in tone from admiration to gross attack. The second parodic type is the more recently established "parody of reaffirmation" which works by acknowledging and privileging the viewer's generic knowledge. The form is most clearly articulated in the highly successful *Scream* trilogy (Wes Craven, 1996, 1997, 2000), which works by humorously drawing attention to its own generic features. Films in this mould may be seen as poking fun at themselves, addressing the audience on two levels which simultaneously evoke laughter through recognition as well as the thrills which the parodied genre aims to induce. Newman (2000o:56) notes, however, that genre cycles inevitably turn to "spoof", which may be understood as a category of the "traditional puncturing parody" which often works to undermine the credibility of a genre (or individual film) by mocking it through a series of lampoons. Of course, the various categories of parody are difficult to distinguish since there is a great deal of overlap between them and since the boundary between homage and mockery is almost impossible to gauge with any accuracy.

Newman (2000k:16; 2000o:56) suggests that *Scary Movie* (Keenan Ivory Wayans, 2000), which makes fun of the *Scream* franchise, may be the most commercially successful spoof ever released. More than this, the film was released only months after the release of the final chapter of the trilogy which it parodies. However, despite enjoying the overwhelming commercial success of having "...the largest ever opening for an R-rated movie..." (Newman, 2000k:16), the film has been criticised because "...it seems to have been made by people who didn't especially care for *Scream*, which

was humorously intended in the first place" (Newman, 2000o:56). Accordingly, *Scary Movie* is forced "...to yank in bits from other films not so much for parodic affect as for the shock of recognition..." leading to "...limp variations on sequences from *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Matrix*..." (Newman, 2000o:56). While the film attempts to incorporate subversive allusions to scenes from a broad range of contemporary (and therefore highly recognisable) films from a variety of genres, it also suffers because it lacks a cohesive style:

> The air of desperation is emphasised by the insistence on padding out horror-movie gags with crude Farrelly-style humour: a hairy-chinned gym mistress with dangling testicles, a penis-through-the-brain murder that mimics a moment in *Scream 2* and an ejaculation that splatters Cindy against the ceiling in a rare nod to pre-*Scream* horror (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*) (Newman, 2000o:56).

Thus, while *Scream* and its sequels function as parodies focused on the excesses and peculiarities of a clearly-delineated genre, *Scary Movie* attempts to debase its source "model" in a broad comic swipe at contemporary cinema.

Scream (1996) was, in a number of ways, an extension of a particular cycle in the horror film genre, namely, the "teens-get-minced slasher movies" which became popular during the 1980s.[98] Ironically, the parodic reworking of this genre during the 1990s (by one of its most prolific auteurs, Wes Craven) actually widened the appeal and popularity of slasher movies, setting new standards at the box-office. *Scream* was, in many respects, the horror film genre's answer to itself, a reworking of the codes and excesses of an established formula for an audience which was increasingly cine-literate and aware of trends within popular-culture in general. The characters in the Kevin Williamson-scripted neo-horror movie exist in a world which is, quite comically and cleverly, constructed by the "rules of horror movies". Throughout the film, these rules are discussed, joked about and employed intratextually - both to fuel the narrative and to provide an ironic and parodic twist on a familiar genre. Ultimately, the film embraces the sado-masochistic thrills provided by the slasher genre even as it appears to subverts them. The "rules of the genre" are updated and satirized even as they are played out for the viewer's simultaneous amusement and fright-induced excitement. Thus, while the characters actually discuss the type of film in which they find themselves, *Scream* inevitably turns to the generic disruption of "...the cause and effect patterns of such classical devices as shot/countershot, continuity and reverse field editing..." (Elsaesser, 1998:195) in order to achieve the desired sense of suspense, surprise and, ultimately, horror. In one scene, the sense of

suspense is actually heightened by the fact that a group of characters are watching a video of a "classic" slasher-horror movie while, elsewhere in the same house, other characters are being stalked and slashed to death. Craven uses the cutting between the two scenes (each of which comments on the other) to increase the viewer's experience of tension even as the video-watching scene informs us of the inevitable.

Scream, and its two sequels, *Scream 2* (1997) and *Scream 3* (2000), are distinctly postmodern, constructed as knowingly self-conscious displays of self-parody, pastiche, inter- and intratextuality, and self-reflexivity. The fascination with in-jokes, self-commentary and genre-deconstruction is in evidence in some of Craven's earlier films, including *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), which can be described as a classic teenage slasher movie, one of the defining works within the genre which is "reinvented" in *Scream*:

> In the first *Nightmare* film, Johnny Depp said quite a few things like, "Oh, don't go out there...", and I had...Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* [1982] on the television in one scene. But that's just preliminary to the full expansion of the concept in *Scream*. In this case the characters are part of the generation that grew up on this sort of stuff. It's also a great device. These movies all deal with the anticipation of the audience: you're trying, as a film-maker, to guess what the anticipation is. So to have characters actually talking about the patterns and clichés and rules was fun, because then, of course, you can subvert them (Craven in Green, 1997:83).

While the possibilities for self-deconstruction were suggested in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Craven created what Kim Newman (1998:55) calls "...the ultimate post-modern sequel..." when he made *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994, also known as *Nightmare on Elm Street 7*) which examines the "meaning" of the "*Nightmare* film franchise". However, while *New Nightmare* fictionalises the filmmaking context as a device for the self-conscious unravelling of the relationship between "real" life and cinematic "reality", *Scream* is a film which demonstrates a heightened awareness of its own artificiality. *Scream* makes no assumptions about its authenticity, but rather reminds the viewer that it is a horror film and constantly foregrounds its cinematic qualities. Such features are emphasised by the presence of a character who is a "film buff" (who also works part-time in a video store) whose function it is to articulate the rules by which the movie's "reality" is motivated. The film encourages the viewer to "have fun" rather than concern itself with the consistency of a "reality" which is so obviously artificial. While self-reflexivity is nothing new to the horror genre, *Scream* and its two sequels celebrate the film text as a site for playfulness which is motivated by artificiality rather than the impression of "reality".

In *Scream 2* the original postmodern devices are taken a step further, reuniting Craven and Williamson in a sequel which self-reflexively examines the effects of media-violence (or at least parodies the "effects" debate itself) in an ironic format which "...calls into question the whole issue of performance" (Newman, 1998:56). While the film attempts to "look back" at the "effects" and significance of the original *Scream*, it incorporates numerous references to itself and its own socio-cultural "meaning". In one scene, a group of students actually discuss sequels during a film studies class, while the entire plot revolves around the release of a movie entitled *Stab*, which depicts the events of the first *Scream* movie. During the opening scene of *Scream 2*, two black students discuss the significance of the horror genre – particularly regarding its treatment of black characters – while they stand in a queue for a preview screening of the aforementioned *Stab*. Having specifically discussed the socio-cultural implications of the absence of black figures from horror cinema history, the young couple become the first two victims in *Scream 2*. The irony of their early exit from the film lies not only in their explicit discussion of black characters in horror movies, but also in the marketing of *Scream 2*, which drew sufficient attention to these performers to suggest that they would play a more significance or prominent role in the film. The film's paratextual conceit serves to undermine the spectator's "prior knowledge" of how cinema functions, while also contributing to the sense of shock and surprise which is the genre's primary concern.[99]

A film which makes significant use of pastiche elements while covertly harbouring a parodic intention is *The Faculty* (Robert Rodriguez, 1998), which was also scripted by Kevin Williamson. The film uses various self-reflexive devices so that its "re-invention" of the science-fiction-horror film is a form of comedy which pretends to take itself seriously:

> ...*The Faculty* becomes a blatant mixture of affectionate teen satire and sci-fi cliché that enjoyably reinforces how much you know about movies (Freer, 1999:17).

According to Peter Matthews (1999b:41), the film "...isn't the least bit scary..." and not "particularly involving", but he claims that this failure to draw the viewer into the narrative "...seems to be the point". Rather than inviting the viewer into the narrative, the film demands that spectators toy with the cinematic references which connect the surface details alluding to genre and style:

> One advantage of the movie's elaborate gamesmanship is it demands interactive participation; audience and film-makers enter into a gleeful, knowing complicity. Rodriguez and Williamson assume young viewers these

days have racked up considerable expertise in the rules of genre, and *The Faculty* is among other things a nifty meditation on genre mixing (Matthews, 1999b:42).

Matthews sees the film as a synthesis of various elements "lifted" from other films, including references and plot-devices from the more standout precursors such as *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), *Scream*, *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) and *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979). In terms of its narrative, *The Faculty* is all about self-reflection and intertextual game-playing:

> At once you recognise the strange country you're in: it's 90s pastiche-land, where the citizens are all trash archetypes and the most prominent local custom is tireless self-referentiality (Matthews, 1999b:41).

Williamson's screenplay includes wilful pilfering from his "source material", including the lifting of one of the key lines from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*: "It is so much better. There is no fear or pain".

Matthews points out that the references to older movies lose their subtextual significance when transferred to a film which thrives on parodic irreverence. Whereas the cultural anxieties of the times were metaphorically embodied in the pulpy, trashy world of films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Faculty* is too aware of its own cleverness to be concerned with expressing any existential crisis. The film taps into the collective cinematic knowledge of a generation of movie-goers and rather that using its generic roots as a foil for deeper significant concerns, appeals to a purely cinematic sensibility:

> [Rodriguez and Williamson's] version of pop cinema cheerfully dispenses with subtext. There's not the faintest pretence that *The Faculty* is about anything but its own sly nudging and winking at the viewer. You aren't seriously meant to care whether these kids succeed in resolving their varieties of teen angst; you're mainly supposed to twig their parodic resemblance to the gang in *The Breakfast Club* (Matthews, 1999b:41).

This "parodic resemblance" to filmic characters may extend beyond the cinematic paradigm, however, and into the auditorium itself. Do these hyperreal character constructions not, ultimately, refer to audience members themselves?

> ...the film takes as its emblem the cut-and-paste hero Zeke: part nihilist hipster and part brilliant boy-scientist. The script specifies him as a "contradiction", and indeed the character makes no sense until one realises that his whole purpose is to be a witty bricolage (Matthews, 1999b:42).

The indeterminacy of Zeke's character is, of course, also related to the central plot concern of the film which is about aliens attempting to take over the world by

occupying the bodies of students and teachers at a small-town high school. Each of the occupied humans bodies necessarily becomes a not-so-"witty bricolage" (these aliens-in-disguise are extremely lethal) of human appearances and superhuman ability. Just as the contemporary mainstream film attempts to combine as many points of contact with a highly fragmented audience as possible (blending genres and themes in various eclectic combinations), so the characters are designed to appeal to a fragmented (perhaps schizophrenic) audience. In a sense, Zeke is constructed in the image of the postmodern subject who is described by Jameson as "schizophrenic", a "no one" with "...no personal identity" (Sarup, 1993:147).

Elsaesser (1998:200) has noted that the often-radical disruption of the classical notion of "character consistency" within post-classical cinema frequently results in schizophrenic readings of postmodern characters. These characters may, as is represented by Zeke in *The Faculty*, be seen to embody a variety of distinctly opposing personality traits. Similarly, as in the case of the humans inhabited by aliens ("alienated" characters, perhaps), they may embody characteristics which make them difficult (or impossible) to identify as either human or non-human. Post-classical cinema, rather than relying on consistency of characters, "...confronts the viewer with shape-shifting serial killers, voraciously vigorous vampires or time-travelling terminators, while still trying to negotiate the concepts of identity, person, agency" (Elsaesser, 1998:200). Zeke and the "alienated" characters have no need to follow the rules of "character consistency", for their function is to ebb and flow between various states according to which part of the fragmented narrative they find themselves at any particular time. Such schizophrenic characters may be seen as hyperbolic reflections of the postmodern spectator who is essentially constructed in terms of the images and media influences which he or she has consumed.

Like *Scream*, *The Faculty* signals a variation on a horror film sub-genre which delights in its own B-movie roots, enjoying a self-conscious position which promotes the "sort of ruptures in realism" (Elsaesser, 1998:195) that "...destabilize the primacy of the diegetic story world over the extra-diegetic or non-diegetic world" (Elsaesser, 1998:196). These films blend the subversive strategies of parody with the imitative borrowing of pastiche, thereby confusing the mode of address and foregrounding the mechanics of spectatorship. Perhaps it is at this level that the key to the success of a more uninhibitedly comic lampoon like *Scary Movie* can be deduced. The film encourages viewers to laugh not only at an institution within filmmaking (an

established genre parody formula) but also at the ease with which we can be induced to laugh at that for which we have a fondness. *Scary Movie* shares with *Scream* and *The Faculty* a heightened sense of the arbitrary manner in which systems of audience address and representation function in the postmodern era. Ultimately, spoof, parody and pastiche – no matter how intelligently or "abusively" they are employed – may each be used to engage playfully with the contemporary spectator, turning the "telescope" on a popular cultural obsession only to reflect the audience to which it appeals.

Pure cinema: the art of screaming "art"

The modern cinema could not exist without [A bout de souffle]. Godard's first feature, it influenced an entire generation of filmmakers and permanently changed existing notions of what films had to look like (Vogel, 1974:94).[100]

...every foot of film [Godard] has ever shot is defined by the extraordinary treatment of reality as a volatile mixture of the subjective and the objective, fact and fiction, logic and improbability, plausibility and actuality. Godard's characters often read "real" newspapers aloud on the screen, and what they read from the uninflected journalism of their time is infinitely more bizarre than anything Godard could invent. Truth was stranger than fiction, and history was hysterical. This was Godard's narrative aesthetic... (Sarris, 1994:88).

French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard's first film, *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1959), "...stands as the ultimate homage to the American crime film [and] it also heralds a new, more self-conscious age for the gangster movie" (Bruzzi, 1995:26). More than this, according to Newman (2000h:70), "...this is at once a homage to the American gangster film, and an attack on the very ideas of Americans, gangsters and films". Rejecting the formal "conventions" of Hollywood studio productions, *Breathless* not only earned Godard an important place in the history and theory of cinema, but ultimately changed the future of filmmaking.[101] Ironically, Godard's most obvious source of inspiration is Hollywood (to which he pays homage, while engaging in various forms of parody), and more specifically, "...the gangster film - *film noir* – romantic thriller, that complex of statements, gestures, attitudes, characters, and camera placements that epitomized the high forties and early fifties in Hollywood" (Kolker, 1983:173). While often described as a "gangster movie", *Breathless* ultimately defies generic definition because in its combination of diverse cinematic elements and breaking of established norms, it refers to a variety of styles and genres[102]. Rather, Godard reconstructs the gangster genre "...as an ironic adventure"

(Bruzzi, 1995:26). Overt intertextual allusions (*The Harder They Fall* [Mark Robson, 1956] and *Ten Seconds to Hell* [Robert Aldrich, 1959], for example) are playfully incorporated as a shorthand which calls up easily recognisable narrative traditions, but these are reorganised within a stylistically experimental framework in a way which defies narrative expectations. The film snubs Hollywood conventions of narrative, editing, and performance, sharing certain elements of neo-realism. The result is a product which frequently confuses "reality" with fiction while alluding to the hyperreal condition which affects both:

> ...Godard's narrative style was 'disjointed', restless, electrifying; it 'jumped' time and space, cut together different locales or events without a single dissolve, and telescoped action by showing only its most important segments. Together with an almost constant use of a mobile camera, these methods seemed stylistically to incorporate the syncopated, explosive rhythms of modern life, the philosophical underpinnings of a universe now recognized as relative (Vogel, 1974:95).

Breathless frequently reminds the contemporary viewer of amateur footage (and, more recently, home video), and in this way undermines the conventionality of Hollywood techniques most significantly. Godard's film clearly asserts that there are alternatives to Hollywood's linear narrative construction and formal techniques which attempt to deny the presence of the mediating tool, the camera. Godard, in fact, constantly reminds the viewer that he or she is watching a work of art rather than a slice of life. Furthermore, Godard does not employ spatial and temporal jumps in order to reveal "truth" as the avant-gardists attempted to do, but rather in an attempt to change the perceived limitations of the medium as a commercial form. In this sense, *Breathless* functions as a form of *metacinema* which constantly refers to itself and to the filmmaking process and industry. *Breathless* includes scenes of intrigue, sex, passion, violence, betrayal, petty crime, and murder, while referring and deferring endlessly to the major producer of such cinematic spectacles: the popular Hollywood feature film. While the plot is thin, even "simple" (Paris, 1993:31), it is also irrelevant because Godard's storyline is merely a framework around which to use the film as a *discourse on film*. After all, the "gangster film" mould can only serve as the basis for a combination of a certain number of narrative elements. The purpose of Godard's film is to reinvent the style of a well-established "story", thereby allowing those foregoing narratives to mix and collide with his own.

The film opens (unlike any typical Hollywood film of the time, which would first establish environment) with a shot of a newspaper advertisement depicting a lingerie-clad woman.[103] As Kolker (1983:176) suggests, this disorienting shot serves to divert

the viewer's attention, despite the fact that there is nothing from which it can be diverted. Instead, one may argue that attention is diverted from the *expected* opening shot which Hollywood had established as indicative of a feature film's opening scene. The central character, Michel Poiccard (alias Laszlo Kovacs, played by Jean-Paul Belmondo), is soon established as

> ...the perfect image of a movie tough, and in case we miss the codes of dress and stance, he removes the cigarette from his mouth and rubs his lip with his thumb, a gesture that Bogart occasionally used, thereby signaling [*sic*] to us the forties and one of its premier tough guys (Kolker, 1983:176).

During what appears to be the start of an extremely personal road movie, Poiccard addresses the hand-held camera (and the audience) directly. In this way, Godard breaks the convention of the viewer as an outside observer, and draws us into the action. The viewer is made to understand in quite straightforward terms that this character is our "hero" and he tells us directly that we "can go to hell" if we disagree with him. Godard consciously shatters the illusion of "reality" which Hollywood consistently attempted to establish. The viewer, who most likely shares some knowledge of the *film noir* genre and recognises the references to Bogart, for example, soon realises that this is no ordinary Hollywood film. Consequently, audiences are forced to look beyond their pre-established expectations in order to discover new ways of making sense of what is on the screen.

One of the most revealing images in the film (recalling Kolker's remarks above) is that of Poiccard admiring a movie poster picture of his hero, Humphrey Bogart, on whom he models himself. This scene, which occurs outside a Champs-Elysées theatre, signals Godard's intention to draw attention to the simultaneously imitative and subversive aspects of the film. Belmondo consciously adopts characteristics of Bogart's screen persona and his own character becomes something of a meta-performance: he is a French actor playing a French character who plays an American icon. Poiccard may be seen as a type of artificial image, a (consciously) imperfect simulation of Bogart. However, Poiccard's "Bogart" is different from the "original" because of a conscious desire to draw a distinction between himself and Bogart's image, which is already-artificial, existing only as part of the hyperreal. Poiccard's overt attempts to "model" himself on poster replicas of Bogart (in look, dress, and in action) compel the viewer to seek and acknowledge differences between the Frenchman and the American.[104]

Just as Poiccard is a self-consciously weak imitation of his Hollywood hero (his first

line, "I'm a cunt, okay?", is addressed to the audience), so Godard's film playfully refers to other aspects of American cinema and breaks down many of the conventions which were so rigidly accepted as the norm. Godard's technique forced the viewer to acknowledge the presence of the director as a creative influence and contemplate the fact that the film does not simply "...materialize miraculously on the screen..." (Sarris, 1994:88). The film is certainly as much concerned with exploring new ways of communicating with the audience as it is with commenting on established norms. Similarly, the film "recreates" (simulates) and "comments" on sequences from existing films. This form of visual referencing has become a feature of contemporary postmodern cinema:

> The police on Michel's trail are...pale shadows of their predecessors in American films; they are bumbling, somewhat comical figures. The character of Patricia, and her portrayal by [Jean] Seberg, refers to the role Seberg played in Otto Preminger's *Bonjour Tristesse* [1958]. There are also scenes constructed to "quote" sequences from American films. In Patricia's bedroom, Michel looks at her through a rolled up poster. The camera zooms through the poster tube, followed by a cut to a close-up of Michel and Patricia kissing. These shots mimic a scene from Samuel Fuller's *Forty Guns* [1957] (with a rifle barrel instead of a poster) described by Godard in a review of the film as a moment of *pure cinema* (White, 1994:3, my emphasis).

This notion of "pure cinema" may be understood to be a form of cinema which self-consciously refers to itself, unashamedly spectacularising its own visual inventiveness. As Hari Kunzru (1996:107) notes,

> ...Jean-Luc Godard jumps and shuffles images, dislocating them from the comfortable linearity to which Hollywood has accustomed us. Godard's films scream 'art', because his artifice is not the same as we're used to in 'normal' films. Who said close-ups and tracking shots were 'natural', anyway? (Kunzru, 1996:107).

"Pure cinema" represents a cinema which highlights the act of *viewing* through the primary process of *showing*. It is a "pure" form of the medium which accepts and acknowledges its status as art, as artifice, as artificial:

> [Godard] never said that this was life, but that it was life as filtered through the camera. This acceptance of responsibility was the ultimate source of Godard's personal brand of realism (Sarris, 1994:88).

It may be said that this form of "realism" is, in fact, the *hyperartificialisation* of cinema, the foregrounding of the filmic process of distanciation. Newman (2000h:70) notes that, before the end of the 1960s, "...the jump-cuts and dizzying camerawork of this movie had percolated into the gene pool of Hollywood, eventually becoming the stuff of TV adverts and pop videos that [the film's] makers would despise". The self-consciousness of Godard's first film has become the self-consciousness of a culture

which is obsessed with the "reality" of images.

Celebrating the hyperreal image

Like so many movies starring Madonna, The Next Best Thing *[2000] fetishises her wearily iconic body. When Abbie, the yoga instructor that she plays in director John Schlesinger's romantic comedy, stands semi-naked in her bedroom, her drooling boyfriend Kevin pays homage to her "fantastic body". Then, soon after, Abbie's best friend Robert (Rupert Everett) tells her, "You are the most beautiful woman I know!" During the many yoga scenes which feature throughout, the camera lingers over Madonna's contorted frame, beguiled by her entwined, self-enfolded limbs. The cumulative effect is that, as in the historical musical* Evita *[Alan Parker, 1996], the erotic thriller* Body of Evidence *[Ulrich Edel, 1993] and even the baseball movie* A League of their Own *[Penny Marshall, 1992], Madonna remains resolutely 'Madonna' (Maher, 2000c:53).*

During the climax of Kevin Smith's black comedy, *Dogma* (1999), pop superstar Alanis Morrissette appears in the role of God. In what is an irreverent, yet spiritual, film which imaginatively reworks and recreates religious mythologies for a contemporary audience, the casting of Morrissette is an inspired irony. Ironic because, although Morrissette is a music icon made popular because of her talent as a vocal artist, her character does not speak. In fact, God has an angel (Metatron, "the voice of God", played by Alan Rickman) who does her talking for her. God, however, can use her vocal power – in the form of a massive (synthesised) growl – to destroy the wicked, and this she does when she opens her mouth to blast off the head of misbehaving angel, Bartleby (Ben Affleck). Morrissette's role is even more ironic, however, because to millions of fans, she is venerated as a cultural icon, or "god". Potentially idolised by millions of (young) fans the world over, Morrissette is a more visible, more *believable* "god" than the character whom she plays with such youthful energy in the film.

Madonna, whom Kevin Maher (2000c:53) refers to as "...a protean vessel into which the pop-cultural anxieties of the past two decades have been poured...", symbolically represents a contemporary manifestation of an image which can conceal "nothing at all". A living legend whose popularity as a leading international music icon has endured almost two decades, Madonna has constantly reworked and updated her image as a reflection of the changing cultural climate. Yet, as Maher argues, Madonna has remained "Madonna", a celebrity who – like the Madonna of Christian mythology – has survived the changing tastes and desires (and identities) of the adoring fans to whom she appeals. It is therefore not surprising that her iconic image fails to be

concealed by a screen performance which demands the presence of a "Madonna", an image of womanhood with an "ideal" body. A typically postmodern simulacrum, Madonna can only be presented to the world in terms of the image in which she exists. She can only *be* "Madonna", just as her earlier representations of womanhood (in the erotic thriller, *Body of Evidence*, for example) served as simulacra of her embodiment of the "whore" image.

It is a symptom of postmodern culture that stars and celebrities (contemporary idols) are known to the world in terms of an "image" which is projected onto the mass consciousness as part of our postmodern hyperreality. These images are created by the media, by the participation of these idols in media "events" (such as television programmes or films), and by a mass perception on the part of viewers (fans, hero-worshippers, consumers). These "contemporary gods" elicit the attention and interest (admiration or disgust) of countless millions, and exist – for those hypothetical millions – primarily as an image, to the extent that this hyperreal "personality" is far more "*real*" than who they "really" are. For the people who metaphorically worship these images, these celebrities and stars exist in the shadow of their own public persona which is synonymous with the artificial nature of Western "media-directed culture" today. It is in this sense that Baudrillard argues that "...the real is no longer possible" (Baudrillard, 1992a:177), since it is impossible to retard the omnipotence of the image which absorbs "the real".

Woody Allen deals with this notion of mediated image-construction in his black-and-white film, *Celebrity* (1998), which satirises the notion of public "image" or celebrity (referring to hyperreal image). The targets of Allen's satire are those individuals made famous (and popular) through image-generating mechanisms such as television and cinema. Perhaps more than this, Allen parodies the viewer who is an unwitting but completely willing accomplice in the entire system of image veneration. According to Andrew Worsdale (1999d:12), "*Celebrity* is a rude assault on the culture of empty fame, a phenomenon that is growing like a plague in the US". In *Celebrity*, authors, religious figures, film stars, talk show hosts, models, sports heroes, artists, and even plastic surgeons, are depicted as "ordinary" people whose "celebrity" status is the result of the artificial status which they achieve through constant media-veneration. These hyperreal "images" are accepted and worshipped by a mass audience which associates representations with "reality". Thus, in an irreverent attack on this artificial "reality", the film even includes satiric simulations of Woody Allen's own idiosyncratic

performance style. At the centre of the film, is an aspirant screenwriter/novelist, Lee Simon (Kenneth Branagh), who "...takes on all the *kvetches* and mannerisms akin to Allen" (Worsdale, 1999d:12), yet, according to Lesley Felperin (1999a:39) "...it's more a top-grade impersonation than a performance". Branagh's "performance" is, in this sense, a simulation of the "Woody Allen" which is known to the world through his own film roles and celebrity status.

The film suggests that celebrity status results from a degree of desire or fascination on the part of those who are caught up in a culture of watching, looking and seeing (cinema-goers, television viewers, for example) without active involvement. This point is highlighted by Simon's own desire to have sex with the numerous beautiful women (celebrities) whom he encounters in his work as a journalist. Allen satirises these superficial desires, however, by stripping away the outer layers which disguise these characters, thereby revealing these women to be artificial. When a supermodel (played by Charlize Theron, who was herself once a model), for example, causes Simon to have a minor car crash because of her active sexual teasing, she quickly flees the scene of the accident in order to avoid any negative tabloid publicity. In a scene where Simon interviews a major Hollywood actress (Melanie Griffith, who *is* a major Hollywood actress), she tells him that her body belongs to her husband and therefore she cannot have intercourse with him. Her coy veneer is stripped away, however, when she quickly adds that what she does with her neck up is her own business, and then proceeds to undo his trousers. This represents an instance where the celebrity in question not only wears her façade in public, but is similarly artificial even behind closed doors.

Much of the criticism against *Celebrity* has been concerned with the "obvious" hypocrisy represented by Allen's own fame/celebrity, as well as his use of a "constellation" of notable film stars. As one critic notes, for example, Charlize Theron takes on the role of a super-hedonistic, super-ambitious, super-artificial, supermodel, but in "reality" the actress may not necessarily be that far removed from the "type" that she portrays (Botma, 1999b:4). Another related irony is the exploitation of Hollywood "teen-icon"/idol, Leonardo DiCaprio, to sell the movie, despite the fact that he appears in the film for a relatively short time. Such economic ironies highlight the point that the film is attempting to make - that Leonardo DiCaprio fans may well see the film simply because he is in it. DiCaprio's character in the film appears to be a rather nasty extension of his own hyperreal persona. A perverse, egotistical film star,

DiCaprio's character abuses his girlfriend, destroys hotel furniture, has a quick, violent temper, drinks, gambles, wastes money, snorts cocaine, and engages in permissive sexual acts, all under the guise of superstardom. He is also extremely popular and sought after. In one unsubtle moment, after his character is almost arrested, one of the would-be arresting police officers quietly hands the star a pen and paper, and then asks for his autograph. DiCaprio's character ultimately cannot escape the image which is brought to the character by "DiCaprio" himself. Just as characters played by Madonna cannot escape her iconic presence, so DiCaprio and the character that he plays are unavoidably linked.

"A whiny despair that the talentless usually rise to the top and that people become famous for the flimsiest of reasons…" (Felperin, 1999a:39), *Celebrity* is also a "…critique of a mindless, hedonistic, success-obsessed culture" (Worsdale, 1999d:12), and yet it is impossible to enjoy or appreciate this "critique" without being at least slightly involved with that culture. In a scene staged at an art exhibition opening, an artist pretentiously announces that "it's all about image", and then angrily insists that he abhors having his paintings sold to people who only want to be "in". Allen makes it very clear, however, that the entire crowd attending the art exhibition belong to a social "elite" – they are the "glamour set" or the "in" crowd. At one point in the movie, an extremely popular "television priest" is asked by one of his "fans": "Who is more popular: Elvis or God?" Indeed, the priest needs time to mull over the question which highlights the suggestion that in postmodern societies the celebration of observable images has replaced blind devotion to faith in an invisible referent. Allen's film satirises the media's production and maintenance of celebrities, but he simultaneously parodies the audience which has come to watch these celebrities. Allen's film refers to anyone who has ever shown the slightest interest in any tabloid article. Like the iconolaters, the fans of superstar celebrities are willing to worship their "gods" at one remove, forever content to accept the images which are offered by the media. For, behind these images, exist mere mortals, just as *Dogma's* "God" is played by a human being. During a scene in *Celebrity* depicting the premiere of a major Hollywood movie, the director of the film tells a television reporter that the movie and its effects are "better than the real thing". It is this question of the relationship between the entire system of cinema and the "real" world which is obsessively examined in *Celebrity*. It is essentially a film about itself.

Plagiarism, pure artificiality and pop regurgitation

...Tarantino is the regurgitator, devouring cinematic history, then hawking it out in a new form on-screen.... You don't have to be a genius - only a film buff or a friend of one - to see that Tarantino's work is highly referential, with old movies providing many of the elements (Christie, 1994:236).

Tarantino can, to some extent, be considered a Godard for the Nineties, introducing a form of "pure cinema" which Tom Whalen (1995:4) argues is chiefly concerned with its own artificiality. It is in this sense that Tarantino's films (and those of his poseurs) do not really refer to "reality", but to the world of movies. Cinema (for these "purists") has become its own self-referential world, its own "reality", or indeed, its own artificiality. Tarantino's use of his favourite film moments, cinematic styles and pop-cultural twists serves to produce an entertainment form is at once fresh and familiar. Much of the pleasure to be had from his films lies in the recognition of his genre clichés, intertextual "quotations" and handy allusionism. Tarantino's preference is clearly the wilful pilfering of what he knows and admires. His "creativity" lies in his personal brand of pastiche – his ability to manipulate, deconstruct and assimilate familiar elements while imparting a unique style:

> An admitted Godard enthusiast, Tarantino writes scripts that recall the French auteur's work pre-1967 - in style, if not in politics (his are the children of Godard and Coca-Cola). *Reservoir Dogs* not only riffs on Kubrick's curves in *The Killing* [1956], but in its linear kinkiness, casual nihilism and playful self-consciousness echoes Godard films such as *Band of Outsiders* [*Bande à part*, 1964]..., *Alphaville* [*Alphaville, une étrange áventure de Lemmy Caution*, 1965] and *Pierrot le fou* [1965]. *Pulp Fiction* too has a playful structure, with three bridged stories framed by a prologue and epilogue. Although the title refers to the hardboiled writing of the past, the story and characters are straight out of the pop culture storehouse (Dargis, 1994a:8).

The unavoidable side-effect of this form of intertextual cross-referencing is a type of artificiality. Tarantino's films are located within self-consciously artificial worlds where plasticity and artificiality are acceptable because they do not "pretend" to be anything other than plagiarised references to other films. Tarantino appropriates references to other films (and to television, pop stars[105], advertising images[106], and film stars) because that is the "reality" (hyperreality) which he and his viewers are familiar with. Foregrounding the primary process of the medium in which Tarantino communicates, his films do not offer "meaning" but the postmodern opportunity to construct "meaning". It is in this sense that Whalen (1995:4) suggests his confusion over *Pulp Fiction'* overt concern with simulation: "I'm not sure what [it] is about except for its own artificiality".

For some critics, the result of such "artificiality" has been a proliferation of "artistically bankrupt" films, many of which have been attributed directly to Tarantino's appropriation of clichés, pop-cultural references and comic twists on nostalgic spectacles:

> When [Quentin Tarantino] made *Reservoir Dogs*, then *Pulp Fiction*, he spawned a host of poseurs soundly convinced that pop references, lots of profanity and giddy gunmen are the ingredients for great film-making (Graham, 1999:5).

In a sense, Tarantino and his poseurs[107] have developed a cinema of ironic distance which presents a vision of the world as "pure" artifice. Not all of these "ironic" films have been as successful or well-received as *Pulp Fiction*, however. Danny Leigh (2000b), for example, has identified the "new British gangster movie" as a genre which has emerged in recent years (presumably in the footsteps of Tarantino's first two films) and which has been defined by the consistent failure of its films to "connect with reality":

> Pop culture has pursued a consistent, ardent love affair with the myths of gangsterism ever since the popularisation of hip hop and gangsta rap in the mid 80s. Pimp, whore, junkie and criminal lowlife have been dominant rag-trade inspirations fuelled by 70s nostalgia for the outlandish styles of blaxploitation movies. And, of course, alongside that we have the reconfiguration of the crime movie as flip pulp fiction by Quentin Tarantino and his acolytes. Given the rise of new lad consumer pleasures, the rise of the new Brit gangster film can be seen as an inevitable counterpart to the success of such UK men's magazines as *Loaded* and *FHM* [*For Him Magazine*] (Leigh, 2000b).

Leigh's primary criticisms with this new wave of films concern their inability to seriously consider the "realities" of British crime and the "...frantic, careless rummage of intertextuality adorning [them] like so many lapel badges..." (Leigh, 2000b). These films, he believes, fail to engage with their subject matter on any level other than the via the artificiality of "mass-market entertainment values" which inevitably distorts "reality" in favour of the wilful abandonment of "authenticity" (Leigh, 2000b). Of course, there is nothing new or innovative about Leigh's argument, and it is widely understood that "[t]he myth of the gangster [has been] largely built up and embellished in American and French films, twin cinematic traditions liberally and imaginatively scavenging from one another" (Bruzzi, 1995:26). British films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998) draw on this cinematic tradition while attempting "...to reconcile thuggery with broad, crowd-pleasing comedy, to play the Tarantino cool card wherein black humour removes the need to engage fully with what's going on" (Leigh, 2000b). Andrew Collins suggests that the film maintains a stylishness which resonates throughout the intelligently humorous

narrative to the point where "reality" is effectively subverted:

> ...the magic of the film is not in any of its parts, it lies in the cohesive whole: stylish, vivacious, witty, smart, energetic to the point of seizure. A circular tale of amateur gangsters mixed up with professionals (the plot's too tangled to be précis), it paints a vulgar yet loveable picture of London villainy that doesn't simply use humour to offset brutality or vice versa, it keeps both spinning away like plates and rarely lets one wobble....Ritchie's exuberant technique employs freeze-frame and slo-mo meaningfully while the elegant sepia look simultaneously disguises the limited locations and muddies the period, adding a fantasy feel (Collins, 1999:116).

Reid (2001:71) refers to the film as "a Britfilm archetype" which is successful because it is "artificial" and "stagey" and plot-wise, little more than an updating of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*, "...whereby a bunch of crims do a job and then end up killing each other for the money". The film's virtue lies clearly in its "cool" treatment of the crime genre, in its conflation of violence and comedy, criminality and style, action and artfulness. Leigh (2000b) argues that this recent trend in "cool" gangster films is to eschew such "rational" notions of characterisation in favour of conjuring up "...wholesome, commercially palatable nice guys", yet he fails to note the significance of the "fantasy" quality with which such films are embedded. Indeed, Tarantino (in Christie, 1994:236) himself admits that "...what really intrigues him about the exploitation films of the '60s and '70s is their moral ambiguity, the way the characters' 'aberrant behaviour is presented as nonconformity'". The contemporary films which foreground "cool" gangster types are not designed to evoke social "reality". Rather, they are self-reflexive films constructed to toy with stereotypes and established perceptions which films and television programmes have helped establish.

Michael Atkinson (1995:58-59) argues that while Tarantino's films highlight our love of "pulp fiction", his movies are too self-aware to be placed in the same category as those films which constitute "true pulp": "...most often badly conceived, crudely executed [with] little to recommend it beyond the allure of juvenile lust and the smell of ripe cheese". In discussing several contemporary road movies, however, Atkinson (1994:17) argues that some films are "...so reflexive there's simply no *there* there, only a trunkload of undigested images from older movies". This appears to be a defining aspect of postmodern cultural production, however, and Baudrillard insists that postmodernism is unavoidably concerned with "playing" with the fragments of the past. Postmodern culture "toys" with the ruins of history and it is a culture of the present made from fragments of the past. Recycling and regurgitating are, by this standard, unavoidable. Like many film critics and writers, however, it would seem that

Baudrillard is himself ambivalent about these cultural developments. On the one hand, he appears to celebrate this apparent playfulness within the arts, but he also suggests that postmodernism signals a form of cultural exhaustion: all that remains is endless cultural repetition. While such observations may be seen to be an indictment on the artistic potential of contemporary cinema, Atkinson does note certain critical distinctions which separate even the most reflexive films from one another. He argues, for example, that "metamovies" such as *True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1993) and *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) "...fuse the movie-soaked sensibilities of the filmmakers with those of the characters..." while a poorer example of the "on-the-run" genre, entitled *Kalifornia* (Dominic Sena, 1993), "...displays little more than a thorough knowledge of clichés..." (Atkinson, 1994:17). He further adds that "...the movie's hapless self-reflexivity derives from a deficit of truth and substance, not from some neo-Godardian introspection". Atkinson's observation suggests that while postmodern art may depend on a recycling of the past, there is still room for both quality and the insightful exploration of themes (a point which, for Jameson, seems to be entirely redundant).

Pure cinema: cool detachment from "reality"

Life in the 90s, Tarantino seems to be saying, is speedy and worthless. The people on the screen are, as [Pulp Fiction's] title makes plain, characters from trash novels. They are drug dealers, killers, crime lords, spoilt ladies, prize boxers, S&M rapists. Everyone is on the run, off their heads, or on the wrong side of the law. And yet in a way they could be us, too. If Tarantino has anything to say, it seems to be that there is no morality or justice in the patterns of life and death. Instead, the nihilist argument continues, there is trivia (Lipman, 1994:51).

Pickering (1997:82) argues that postmodernist discourse reduces "individuality" to "self-parody" while replacing "...the idea of honesty in self-expression..." with "...the self-bemused pose". As a result,

> All that's left us is some 'playful' shopping, some semio-consumerist dalliance, in the malls beneath the edifice of Cynicism, Inc. (Pickering, 1997:82).

Amanda Lipman's analysis of *Pulp Fiction* clearly echoes Pickering's argument and also introduces many of the problems which are typically associated with postmodern cinema. Tarantino's films (*Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and *Jackie Brown* (1997), for example) both mirror our times and situate themselves within distinctly cinematic worlds. As Lipman notes, his characters are outsiders, individuals who exists in the margins or shadows of "accepted" society. They refer, in a sense, not only to the

"trash novels" and B-movies from whence they come, but to an imaginary, intangible, alternative "reality" which exists outside of our own socially-constructed "reality". Rendered as an artificially constructed story (which loops time) which takes the viewers into the lives of "...drug dealers, killers, crime lords, spoilt ladies, prize boxers, [and] S&M rapists", *Pulp Fiction* offers a sense of an imaginative, and "mediated", "reality" which is largely familiar to us because of the films and television programmes which we have already seen. Yet, Lipman also observes that these characters "...could be us, too", suggesting that *Pulp Fiction* (despite its detachment from socially-constructed "reality") simultaneously refers to a world which we do, somehow, know and understand, or at least feel familiar with. More than this, Lipman suggests, it is a world which parallels and reflects our own "speedy and worthless" modernity, referring directly to "life in the 90s". Tom Whalen (1995:3) understands Tarantino's films as a mirroring of our times which is "...drained of value and effect...". Whalen (1995:3) sees this as a form of "mimesis" which is not "...a necessary function of art..." but which is "...more often...an excuse than an aesthetic". Noting that the *film noir* sensibility to which Tarantino refers, is "..to a large extent, a response to or reflection of a deep-laid pessimism in our lives...", Whalen (1995:3) finds it intriguing that the *noir* pessimism is being "...played out...[c]oolly, flatly, hiply, self-referentially, minimally [or] post-modernly..." in films such as *Pulp Fiction*.

A further argument that Tarantino's hyperrealism represents a form of nihilism, is taken up by the radical cultural theorist, bell hooks, who criticises his "cool" portrayal of the world:

> Well, as Tarantino's work lets us know, it's a sick, motherfucking world and we may as well get used to the fact, laugh at it, and go on our way, 'cause ain't nothing changing – and that's Hollywood, the place where white supremacist capitalist patriarchy can keep reinventing itself, no matter how many times the West is decentered (hooks, 1996:50).

hooks takes the position that *Pulp Fiction* constitutes a nihilistic reflection of the injustices of the Hollywood system in which it was produced. In recent decades, the trend towards a more permissive cinema has gone hand-in-hand with criticisms of a decaying social morality and the erosion of human decency and all sense of humanity. Tarantino, who is viewed as symptomatic of some of the developments in postmodern cinema and is pivotal to this discussion of contemporary cinema, has been widely criticised as a nihilist who, however brilliantly, shamelessly exploits the already-empty mass cultural sensibilities of the postmodern age. Fintan O'Toole (in Brooker and Brooker, 1997b:90), for example, has referred to Tarantino's use of cinematic

violence as "pornographic", while arguing that he "...has disavowed all moral or social intent and gone straight for the sadism". James Wood, in another critical discussion, describes Tarantino's "...'brilliant' films as symptoms of our *fin de siécle* 'hectic postmodern', a period of 'trivial' and 'vacant' mass media and of a 'vaguely prurient' interest in increasing violence" (in Brooker and Brooker, 1997b:89-90). In a similar vein, B. Ruby Rich describes Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* as the conflation of "...masculinity, violence and the underclass", arguing that such masculinity is "...deeply regressive, specifically rooted in the 70s mass culture of his own childhood" (Rich, 1992:4). Rich's observations link Tarantino's films directly to what is considered "wrong" with popular culture:

> ...what makes *Reservoir Dogs* such a 90s film is that it's about the return of what was repressed in the television version of 70s masculinity – a paranoid, homophobic fear of the other that explodes in hate speech, in kicks and blows, in bullets and blades (Rich, 1992:4).

It is in response to these forms of criticism that the importance and value of postmodern irony becomes significant. Read closely, many contemporary films may be interpreted in terms of their representation of postmodern concerns such as the "...breakdown of confidence in the 'grand narrative' surrounding masculinity and patriarchal authority..." which may be noted in the changing portrayal of men in mainstream cinema in recent years (Hill, 2000:98). Tarantino's films, like those of numerous other postmodern filmmakers, are self-conscious works of pastiche which not only parody the impact of popular (or "mass") culture but suggest the extent to which society is conscious of this impact. Rich actually notes that "[w]hen the undercover cop checks his costume in the mirror, he's Robert Blake in *Baretta*" (Rich, 1992:4), reflecting (literally and metaphorically) the film's conscious regard for image, media culture and simulation. Indeed, the moment when Tim Roth's Mr Orange recognises (in a mirror) that he is a character from a television series from another era is but one of many instances when the film acknowledges that it is a *reflection* of human culture. Rich misses the irony which hovers at the very surface of the film by attempting to discover "meaning" where it does not necessarily exist. The film acknowledges that our "reality" exists as surface, image, simulation. Rich apparently fails to recognise that the film's transgressions are reflections of human society which demand contemplation on the part of the viewer (in a sense, then, by evoking Rich's critical analysis, the film achieves its goal). Just as Mr Orange turns to the mirror in order to contemplate his change of "character" before going undercover (entering a different "reality", in a sense), so the viewer is offered the film as a space within which to contemplate a cultural "reality" which has been replaced by it own mirror

image. It is in this sense, that *Pulp Fiction* is "a film about film", and Mark Kermode (in Brooker and Brooker, 1997b:90) has noted that "...the entertainment value of watching it is entirely cinematic". Tarantino does not attempt to represent "reality", but instead presents images from an already-simulated universe of media cut-ups and popular culture fragments. Yet, as Tarantino brings these elements together for our observation and entertainment, he surely also offers a mirror in which our culture is reflected.

Echoing bell hooks and Amanda Lipman's understanding of Tarantino's films as "nihilistic", Wood's cynical pronouncement is that Tarantino's

> ...final triumph...is to empty the artwork of all content, thus voiding its capacity to do anything except helplessly *represent* our agonies (rather than to complain or comprehend) (Wood in Brooker and Brooker, 1997b:90).

However, Tarantino's films serve to "*represent* our agonies" in the hope that the spectator will recognise and experience these from an autonomous point-of-view. To instruct or preach to the viewer is to fail to acknowledge his or her potential for autonomous action. Tarantino's "humanising space" exists outside the film itself, and rests with the viewer. Within this contemplatory space, exists the potential for the humanising experience of engaging in autonomous choice. Indeed, Brooker and Brooker (1997b:91) argue that "*Pulp Fiction*'s postmodernism does not produce a *hermetic* self-mirroring intertextualism nor administer *only* to male narcissism and a subordinated female gaze...". Instead, they argue, the film is

> ...more affirmative, less vacuous and nihilistic than [certain] critics...believe and less self-enclosed than Kermode accepts; that in keeping with its own revaluative inflection of a postmodern aesthetic it offers a 'life style' – otherwise so cheap a phrase of the end of the century – which redeems and recasts the pulp of the postmodern in the very style and structure of its fictional narrative (Brooker and Brooker, 1997b:92).

Indeed, in a world where "reality" and fiction have become indistinguishable, *Pulp Fiction* articulates its own knowingly reflective nature rather powerfully. Critics tend to recognise in postmodern films a tendency towards the "insular" transgressions of violence, racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia, for example, but fail to acknowledge the relevance of such issues to contemporary life. Rich argues that

> *Reservoir Dogs* is an extremely insular film – women get no more than thirty seconds of screen time, people of colour get zero – yet not a minute goes by without a reference to coons and jungle bunnies, to jailhouse rape (black semen shooting up white asses), to the castration threat of "phallic" women like Madonna or that 70s icon Pam Grier (Rich, 1992:4).

However, what Rich ignores is that such "insularity" is a direct response to the

traditional treatment of the gangster genre. Tarantino's film accentuates issues of race and gender in ways which draw attention to the ways in which notions of race and gender have traditionally been constructed in media representations. Similarly, the violence which has been so central to discussions of Tarantino's films is not simply about violence. Instead, it is about the depiction of violence in our media and in our popular culture (see chapter five for further discussion of Tarantino's use of violence).

Bert Olivier further notes that Tarantino has tapped into the dominant postmodern ethos:

> No wonder *Pulp Fiction* won the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes in 1994, ahead of what seemed like the obvious choice – [Krzysztov] Kieslowski's *Red*, and has raked in rave reviews all the way. Tarantino, himself a cinematographer-prodigy spawned by Baudrillard's image-universe or hyperreality – since childhood he has, by his own testimony, immersed himself in the world of movies – has managed, even better than in *Reservoir Dogs*, to capture the prevailing collective "postmodern" sensibility in *Pulp Fiction* (Olivier, 1996:181).

Peter Matthews (1998:10) argues that "...[Tarantino] is a hyperkinetic sensualist who wants to knock the audience flat" and he achieves this with "...busy but seemingly random plotting, sudden leaps from comedy to carnage, 'humanised' criminals who discuss the merits of consumer items, and non-stop references to movies...". Yet, as José Arroyo argues, these are the unexpected connections with the "hyperreality" of which we, as postmodern subjects, are very much a part:

> I think some of us feel a great connection to Quentin Tarantino's films because he creates characters we don't want to meet, who speak like people we know, about the pop culture we live in and who inhabit the soundtrack of our childhood. *Pulp Fiction* is hip, hyper-realism from a television nerd that pulps the boundary between high and mass fictions and in so doing elicits the nervous kind of recognition and laughter so typical of post-modern works (Arroyo, 1995:12).

Such "recognition", rather than being the triumph of nihilism, is a function of the film's "connection" with humanity. What Tarantino has brought to contemporary cinema is what Amy Taubin calls "a version of Warholian cool in which an image of splattered brains is an image of splattered brains is an image of splattered brains" (Taubin, 1995:10). The viewer is situated in the privileged position of rendering such an image "meaningful".

Pickering (1997:82) argues that "...within postmodernist discourse any concern with authenticity, however problematically conceived, is redundant..."; instead of the "authentic", there exists only "interfusion", while the "certainties" of the past are now

"fragmented [and] disjointed...". As Davis (1999:328-329) reminds us, the postmodern condition suggests a "...nihilistic free fall...", while "...postmodernists tell us that the 'master narratives' that once organized the story of modern civilization into stable categories of knowledge and identity have now spent their force without achieving their goals". Blind acceptance of a single, determinable "reality" serves to maintain some semblance of normality and stability in the actual world, but it is precisely this "stable" world that is without change or the possibility of transformation.[108] By asserting its artificiality through a foregrounding of surface impulses, the postmodern cinema destabilises beliefs in a single underlying "reality" (i.e. by demonstrating *how* "reality" is itself artificially constructed through superficial notions of "truth"):

> ...the West's canons of cultural authority and its "logocentric" discourses of truth and knowledge are little more than strategies of power, provisional and problematic, if not actually tyrannical. In their place, postmodernists offer up a decentered world of endless fragmentation, a field where human identity becomes a moving target and history dissolves into a pandemoniac play of signs and simulacra (Davis, 1999:329).

It is within this "pandemonium", that contemporary filmmakers attempt to find ways of entertaining audiences who seek both an escape from the everyday and a connection with some sense of their own "humanity".

According to Olivier (1996:181), in Tarantino's films only "...the 'surface'-actions and the accompanying cliché-like phrases..." are of any significance, while his characters "...do not fit into the typological mold of gangsters or robbers" but rather dwell in "...a filmic microcosm of a fluid, 'pulpy' society in which high culture and low culture no longer exist separately, but where everything is mixed together in a postmodern 'soup' of sorts". However, as Sarup points out, there is a positive understanding of this form of destabilised subjective characterisation and interpretation:

> Some critics believe that these films suggest the instability of subjectivity. If subjectivity is less fixed, then space is left for the construction of identities which deviate from the norm. That is, space is left for 'difference'. This is one way, perhaps, in which postmodernism can be seen as supportive of a left politics rooted in principles of pluralism and difference (Sarup, 1993:176).

Postmodern cinema forces the viewer to question the nature of "reality" by always ambiguously assuming some distance from any "accepted" or "acceptable" view of the world. By placing the viewing subject *at a distance*, in a position of uncertainty and therefore instability, postmodern films encourage similar questioning of the actual world.

Tarantino has been called a cult hero of the Nineties because his films have been considered vivid demonstrations of contemporary Western culture. His films embody the spirit of postmodernism which "...is associated with a playful acceptance of surfaces and superficial styles, self-conscious quotation and parody...and a celebration of the ironic, the transient, and the glitzy" (Blackburn, 1996:294). Equally, his films are criticised by those who see his work as indicative of the nihilism which dominates the contemporary age. His films offer no solution, respite, or refuge, from that which is reprehensible in our world; indeed, they focus on many of our fears and anxieties. Yet, Tarantino works to detach us from these sources of dread and anguish by foregrounding the nature of the cinematic apparatus. His "pure cinema" is constructed so as to connect us to the surface of other films, involving us in superficial "realities" through the act of spectatorship. The process of spectatorship, in turn, becomes the process whereby "reality" is demonstrated to be an artificial construction. In his attempts to take his viewers "to the moon" – to use the cinema as a microcosmic stand-in for our "ironic", "transient" and "glitzy" artificial world – Tarantino (like other postmodern filmmakers) disengages the nihilistic terrors of our world and confronts his viewers with their own "humanity".

Towards an artificial "reality"

This chapter has dealt with several notable trends in postmodern cinema that are presumed to be significant of the impact which contemporary films have on our experience of "reality". Several of these trends have long been associated with postmodernism and include various forms of self-reflexivity, irony, pastiche and parody. In this respect, contemporary films are frequently criticised for their inability to say anything new. Jameson, for example, understands postmodern pastiche and nostalgia "...as an expression of the eclipse of reality and historicity" (Brooker and Brooker, 1997:5). However, it should be noted that in referring to existing works and recycling the ideas, narratives and images of the past, films necessarily refer to their own impact and significance as a representational medium. It may be useful to suggest that it is more appropriate to speak of a cinema which is beyond postmodernism, or at least one which runs along a separate track within postmodernism. Many of the films discussed here bear the stamp of an individual artistic style which is more closely associated with the modernist or auteur tradition.

Tarantino, for example, is clearly an individual artist whose films actively and purposefully reactivate conventions and narratives from the past, recycling images, characters and narratives for a mixed audience which is at once knowing and naïve.

Another concern for many critics has been the apparent trend towards a cinema which privileges visual spectacle at the expense of narrative and meaning. While many films do indeed emphasise visually seductive imagery, this is less a rejection of narrative than an affirmation of the primary function of the cinematic apparatus – to present moving images and inform through *showing*. This apparent disappearance of narrative within the contemporary (Hollywood) film is discussed in further detail in chapter four. A further major trend in contemporary cinema is the increasing popularity and acceptability of both "transgressive" and so-called lowbrow elements. These include the spectacularisation of graphic violence and explicit sexuality as well as the foregrounding of "vulgar" forms of humour and elements designed to shock and provoke. This development may be said to be indicative of the changes in the social construction of taste and levels of acceptability with regards to moving images. These elements are finding their way into all levels of filmmaking (and other moving image media) giving rise to various debates concerning the effects of such cultural developments on the spectator and the "social reality" outside the cinema. The issue of "transgressive" cinema is discussed in chapter five.

The films discussed in chapter six deal with the relationship between cinema and "mediated reality". It appears significant that various filmmakers continue to seek ways of achieving screen "realism", and chief amongst these appears to be the emulation of the film medium itself. "Realism" in this sense is no longer the attainment of imagery that closely resembles "reality", but rather imagery which simulates the already-mediated "reality" of home video and surveillance cameras. Still other films challenge the viewer's experience of mediated "reality" as truth by emphasising the ways in which history and "reality" are constructed in terms of both personal and collective memory. Chapter seven deals with a number of films that effectively ignore any distinction between "reality" and dreams, memories, fantasies or "mediated realities". These films ultimately suggest that each "reality" is as "virtual" as the next.

Four

The art of showing: illusions of narrative invisibility

Since 1981, the institutionalisation of the Big Loud Action Movie has proceeded apace. It has realigned the creative atmosphere in Hollywood, shaping the release slates of all the major studios and virtually crushing European art cinema. I don't think that it is either particularly necessary or particularly edifying to savage the worst of these movies. They tend to disappear from our minds and memories with merciful speed. Some of us are in the process of forgetting while still sitting in the theatre (Gross, 1995:10).

It's that moment, that set of images twinkling by at 24 frames a second, that spells instant desire. You want to be that character, you want to utter that perfect comeback, show that impeccable style, ooze that effortlessly sexy cool that divides the godlike from the plebs. Or it may be a stunt, a mind-blowing special effect or an extraordinary vision that captures the essence of absolute cool (Freer, Nathan and Westbrook, 1999:109).

Grounded in the principles of capitalist determination, based in a system of mass-production which serves to generate profits as much as it serves to fuel imagination and create new, increasingly mouth-watering moving images, "...the cinema is...[as Godard once told Colin MacCabe]...all money" (in Ray, 2000:12). And yet, for the millions of people around the world who lose themselves in the "extraordinary visions" created by filmmakers using increasingly advanced technologies, cinema transcends the "reality" of economics, transporting viewers into the dreamlike realm which Theodor Adorno once dismissively referred to as "...the crossroads of magic and positivism" (in Ray, 2000:12). Freer, Nathan and Westbrook suggest that "the essence of absolute cool" is captured by those cinematic moments which are somehow beyond "reality". One might even argue that the cinema is intrinsically "beyond reality". Moving images are somehow able to transport the spectator into a realm of imagination and wonder which is a mirror – not up to "reality", but up to the illusion of a "reality" which is the product of mediated human interaction and communication. Providing us with spectacular larger-than-life fantasies and illusions, cinema affords the spectator the opportunity to *see* the magical unfold before his or her eyes as though it were "real". However, there are those critics of spectacular cinema who argue that the excesses of the contemporary cinema – their indulgent squandering of spectacular imagery, effects and visions, such as those described by Freer, Nathan and Westbrook – have corrupted the artistic potential of the medium. These critics would argue that the big, loud, expensive "blockbusters" which dominate the global cinema industry have simultaneously robbed it of its potential for conveying meaning through the principles of narrative. Others might argue that cinema is, in fact, the art of showing; that the value of moving images lies in their ability to convey

meaning through powerful and often seductive visions.

Graeme Turner (1998:67) argues that "[f]eature films are narratives [because] they tell stories" and that both narrative and story-telling are universal, even if the ways in which stories are told are not necessarily similar in all societies. It is further argued that the world is presented to us in "the shape of stories", and that

> ...story provides us with an easy, unconscious, and involving way of constructing our world; narrative can be described as a means of 'making sense' of our social world, and sharing that 'sense' with others. Its universality underlines its intrinsic place in human communication (Turner, 1998:68).

Narrative is therefore a way of ordering, structuring and explaining the world. It is possibly from this perspective that the detractors of contemporary films which prioritise spectacle criticise what has been described as the devaluation of narrative in New Hollywood movie. In particular, it has been argued that the cause-effect narrative logic which encourages "sense-making" in "Old Hollywood" films has been replaced by a foregrounding of spectacle within self-contained sequences. Detractors of the New Hollywood insist that plot-lines now serve merely to link a series of action sequences, while "narrative complexity" has been "...sacrificed on the altar of spectacle" (Buckland, 1998:167). Indeed, the contemporary blockbuster is made at great cost, and must necessarily appeal to the largest possible audience. Corrigan has noted that the blockbuster (unlike "...the small-scale independent feature...") is defined according to its mode of address and is "...aimed at an undifferentiated popular audience rather than at any particular sector of the viewing population" (Buckland, 1998:166-167). Consequently, these large-budgeted features tend to combine genres, flatten characters, simplify plots and focus on the presentation of spectacular action, effects, screen personalities or other "attention-grabbing" devices (sumptuous scenic designs, popular songs and innovative editing techniques, for example).

It may be argued, however, that "classical" or "Old Hollywood" narrative techniques are not the only "legitimate" narrational option, and that contemporary trends in filmmaking actually privilege the spectatorial position by "opening up" the ways in which the viewer "constructs" the world (or "reality") of the film. Heath (1981:204) notes that narrative is not an essential part of cinema, but that the cinema "...has been developed and exploited as a narrative form..." which works "...*against* dispersion [and] *for* representation...". The flow of images in the narrative cinema may therefore be understood to be

...first and foremost the organization of a point of view...the laying out of an intelligibility, the conversion of seen into scene...(Heath, 1981:204).

Postmodern cinema (as has been discussed in chapters two and three) foregrounds cinematic elements other than the organisation of a coherent narrative, thereby involving the spectator in the act of *seeing*, drawing attention to the construction of a cinematic surface, rather than absorbing the viewer into the *scene*. The privileging of visual spectacles - of violence, sex, nudity, kinetic action, majestic scenery or even human performance, for example – may function as a device which holds the interest of the viewer at the surface of the film. A further technique which is a significant feature of contemporary cinema is the ironisation of its own status as cinema. As has already been discussed, such ironic treatment may occur through parody, but it may also involve techniques such as the combination and reworking of existing genres, which effectively serves to suggest the arbitrariness of the "meaning" produced by an organising principle such as genre.

According to Heath (in Neale, 1981:14), the positioning effect of cinematic narrative results in "...a ceaseless performance *of the subject in time for the reality given, of subject-time*". Narrative therefore works in the service of "logical" cause-and-effect mechanisms which rely on the presentation of "motivations" and "results" to establish a coherent "reality". Kristin Thompson (in Sconce, 1995:386) argues that when "motivation" ceases to be accorded the privileged position which narrative provides, "excess" emerges:

> [T]he minute the viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning.... Excess does not equal style, but the two are closely linked because they both involve the material aspects of the film (Thompson in Sconce, 1995:386).

Thompson describes "excess" as those moments of "self-conscious materiality" which interrupt an otherwise "non-excessive" film narrative (Sconce, 1995:387). The significance of such *excess* lies in Sconce's understanding that the very act of viewing a film establishes it as "artificial" – detached from the viewer's "reality" while somehow involving him or her in an experience which echoes "reality". Sconce identifies a political function in such *excess*, noting that the imagined "space" between that which the viewer identifies as "artificial" and that which is known to be "actual" in the world constitutes an ontological "space" in which the viewer actively contemplates his or her own perception of "reality".

Thompson (in Sconce, 1995:391) argues that this "politics of excess" is significant in the development of a "different way" of viewing a film. The inclusion of pure spectacle or other "excessive" elements in a filmic work removes from the process of viewing the emphasis on seeking "meaning" within the narrative:

> The viewer is no longer caught in the bind of mistaking the causal structure of the narrative for some sort of inevitable, true, or natural set of events which is beyond questioning or criticism...(Thompson in Sconce, 1995:391).

When a "narrative" is recognisably "arbitrary rather than logical", the spectator is free to engage with the film in terms of an individual perspective, rather than being coerced into the construction of a "rational story" from elements which are organised according to a particular cause-and-effect system. Thompson argues that cinematic excess allows the spectator to be disengaged from the "...conventions of reading to find meaning or theme within the work as the solution to a sort of puzzle which has a right answer" (in Sconce, 1995:391). Cinematic "excess" may be said to stimulate the spectator's involvement in the screen events by foregrounding the human experience of *seeing*. Narrative, in the contemporary Hollywood movie, is frequently understood as a convenient system within which the cinema achieves its original function of *showing*.

Close encounters of the narrative kind

You need good story-telling to offset the amount of...spectacle the audiences demand before they'll leave their television sets. And I think people will leave their television sets for a good story before anything else. Before fire and skyscrapers and floods, plane crashes, laser fire and spaceships, they want good stories (Spielberg in Buckland, 1998:170).

In a recent popular film magazine survey, a panel of writers describe the blockbuster as

> ...budget-heavy, intensively marketed box-office stormers [which] are the big boys on the studios' release slates. At best, they blow audiences away with a non-stop rush of A-List names, high-concept hooks and dazzling special effects. At worst, they leave you feeling deflated and slightly soiled, sold on a premise that failed to deliver (Cochrane *et al.*, 1999:54).[109]

Their analyses of some of the biggest grossing cinema productions[110] since the unprecedented success of *Jaws* in 1975, reveals that explosively new ideas, dazzling special or visual effects, big-name performers, high-profile directors, genre or theme pitches with an imaginative or exploitative angle, as well as massive marketing campaigns, are the basic ingredients for financially successful film entertainment.

Their top five blockbusters (based on quality, not box-office success) all contain elements of high adventure, fantasy and action. The top-placed film, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, is described as being "...a lovingly realised tribute to the Saturday morning serials which inspired the two Movie Brats [George Lucas and Spielberg] during their cinema-infatuated youth....Defiantly old-fashioned, [it is a] non-stop stunt show...only interrupted by moments of inspired comic improvisation" (Cochrane *et al.*, 1999:63). Having earned $242 million at the North American box-office, the film represents the type of cinema which has been drawing audiences most successfully over the last quarter of a century.

For many critics, the changes in the structural functioning of Hollywood have led to an associated decline in the quality of mainstream movies. It is frequently argued that Hollywood is committed to the production and marketing of "...big-budget, undemanding fare that can be released to multiple markets and delivery systems worldwide" because this is the most economically feasible and reliable way of profiting within the industry (Gross, 1999:57). However, Gross (1999:57) points out that this so-called "decline" in quality has been attributed to a number of additional factors besides the impact of "global capitalism" and its privileging of "an undifferentiated popular audience". One theory posits that "...the insane dollars generated by the success..." of the largely special-effects-driven "bubblegum" films made by Spielberg and Lucas (notably *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, and the *Indiana Jones* trilogy), have "hypnotised" the studio executives into sharing a single-minded belief regarding what type of cinema can make money. Accordingly, the theory goes, "[w]ell-crafted eye candy[111] has chased more complex and demanding fare out of the market" (Gross, 1999:57). Like small-screen commercials, Hollywood films are increasingly described as attempts to "...aspire to a total 'look' and seem more designed than directed..." (Schatz, 1993:32):

> ...now that movies are more likely to be seen on a VCR than a theater screen, cinematic technique is adjusted accordingly, conforming with the small screen's "most hypnotic images," its ads. Visual and spatial scale are downsized, action is repetitiously foregrounded and centered, pace and transitions are quicker, music and montage are more prevalent, and slick production values and special effects abound (Schatz, 1993:32).

A third "theory" can be attributed to the nostalgic ascent of "debased" adolescent values (Bracewell, 2000:13) and the infantilisation of culture, supposedly evident in television, literature, art, videogames and, of course, cinema:

> *Modern civilization has gone brain-dead.* Mysteriously, two decades or so ago

screenwriters ceased to be able to write, partly because TV, MTV, and now cyberculture have saturated everyone with optical sensations that have dulled or even annihilated audiences' capacity to pay attention or respond to narrative and characterization in films (Gross, 1999:57).

Gross accords each of these theories with a degree of "truth", but argues further that "...if Hollywood studio product has in fact deteriorated in the past twenty years, it's not just because crap has done well [but because throughout] the history of Hollywood, crap has never *not* done well" (Gross, 1999:57). Instead, he argues that changes in studio filmmaking resulted from the box-office failure, during the mid- to late-'70s, of films which were extremely costly and combined both "...the highest-caliber talent and the finest aspirations..."[112] (Gross, 1999:57). As Elsaesser (1998:192) notes, this period represented "...roller-coaster years of box-office failure for costly auteur projects...", but ultimately in the wake of *Jaws* it was the commercial productions that were able to earn record profits.

The enormous financial success of films such as *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, however, had set the trend and had established the direction which the industry would follow over the next two decades. These films had set a pattern for the production of "...hyperbolic simulations of Hollywood B-movies..." (Hoberman in Smith, 1998:12). Hollywood maintained a fairly mixed attitude towards the backing of film projects with a tendency by the major companies to oscillate "...between giving new talent a chance and backing more conservative ventures"[113] (Elsaesser, 1998:192). Smith (1998:12), however, refers to the new major blockbuster films exemplified by *Jaws* as "neoclassical 'event' movies" and writes that many of the features which define this type of material "...are borne out of the horizontal integration now existing between film producers and other entertainment companies, in which films are 'designed with the multimedia marketplace and franchise status in mind'". Balio similarly links the emergence of "ultra-high-budget" films to saturation booking and the ease of distribution which this represents. Saturation booking - the simultaneous release of a new film "...in every market of the country accompanied by a massive national advertising campaign..." (Balio, 1998:59) - inevitably ensures that a film becomes an event. This is because of the simultaneous build-up to a particular moment, coupled with television, print media, Internet and in-cinema hype which is used to market the film. The (Wasserman-generated) saturation booking concept initiated with the release of *Jaws* saw the cost of film prints and marketing campaigns rise to an average of $12 million per film during the 1980s. During the 1990s, studios spent $35 million and even more in their outrageous (and effective) attempts to promote new

releases. The strategy has been exceedingly effective, however, generating what Balio (1998:59) refers to as "'ultra-high' grosses". Six 1989 releases grossed in excess of $100 million in the USA alone. These included *Batman* ($250 million), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg, $195 million), *Lethal Weapon 2* (Richard Donner, $147 million) and *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (Joe Johnston, $130 million).

An empirical and sociological study of the success of one of cinema's most celebrated blockbusters, *Star Wars*, suggests that there are further market-driven reasons why Hollywood studios have relied so heavily on the "blockbuster formula". Scott Bukatman (1998:248) suggests that the *contemporary* blockbuster "exploded" into existence with the release of *Star Wars*, which he describes as "a cinematic object" that "...is less a movie than an extended multimedia universe". The film, he argues, "...redefined space, displaced narrative, and moved cinema into a revived realm of spectacular excess". More than this, however, *Star Wars* was an economic marvel: while $27 million was invested in the production, it had generated in excess of $500 million by 1980, thereby showing a 1855% profit during the first three years of the ongoing "lifespan" of the film (Corrigan, 1998:47). The film not only signalled the economic significance of the blockbuster, but also contributed significantly to the very idea of "cinema":

> ...*Star Wars* exploded the frame of narrative cinema, referring back to early cinematic and precinematic spectacles and pointing forward to later forms of hypercinematic entertainments such as simulator theaters and IMAX films (Bukatman, 1998:248).

Star Wars came to exemplify and define the way in which the Hollywood film industry was to function during the postmodern age and, more specifically, during the prolonged blockbuster cycle. Combining "...old-fashioned romantic swashbuckling..." with newly developed camera-effects (which were computer-driven), the larger-than-life spectacle "...proved irresistible to older and younger audiences, while its innate gentleness was acceptable to mainstream audiences of both genders" (Bukatman, 1998:249). Although Bukatman (1998:249) argues that the film echoes the "narrative conservatism" of numerous previous Hollywood films which employed inventive "technical wizardry", it should be reiterated that its inspiration lay firmly rooted in early B-movies which relied less on narrative consistency than on the effective positioning of thrills and spectacles. *Star Wars* did, however, take the "technical wizardry" of both Hollywood and low-budget B-movies to a new, unprecedented level. In this sense, the film insisted that it be experienced in equally "new" and "unprecedented" ways by its 1970s audience.

Many critics argue that the blockbuster is dominated by artifice and surface, with little or no penetrable "depth". In order to sustain the economic ideology which drives the New Hollywood, "[n]arration is geared solely to the effective presentation of expensive effects" (Buckland, 1998:167). This view, of course, suggests a marked distinction between cinema as a "high" art and as an entertainment form which appeals to mass cultural interests. Warren Buckland (1998:167), however, calls for deeper analysis of the Hollywood blockbuster, arguing that films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* display the "...aesthetic possibilities of what is in effect an episodic narrative form...". Such New Hollywood narrative forms, he argues, should be understood in terms of the "...highly mediated systems..." (Buckland, 1998:168) which determine the popularity of a film at a particular period of time:

> Here, the film is seen, not merely as a manifestation of universal rules, but in terms of its individuality, including its response to its historical moment, in which style and composition respond to the historical questions posed in the culture in which the film is made (Buckland, 1998:169).

The blockbuster – with its emphasis on elements such as stunts, action and impressively adventurous feats of heroism – may thus be read in terms of those social and cultural practices which, at the time of its production, result in the need for particular types of visual drama. In this sense, the foregrounding of technology in many of today's blockbusters and "event" films may be associated with an ongoing social interest in, and concern with, the development of human technology.

Peter Biskind argues that the Spielberg-Lucas blockbusters which attempted to restore traditional or classical narration instead had the unintended opposite effect of annihilating story through the centralisation of spectacle:

> The attempt to escape television by creating outsized spectacle backfired, and led to television's presentational aesthetic (Biskind in Buckland, 1998:171).

Biskind (in Buckland, 1998:170-171) argues that while Spielberg and Lucas had intended to re-institute the principles of traditional narrative (i.e. causality and linearity) within the context of the New Hollywood, "...their attempts backfired, because they each tended to over-emphasize the plastic, formal and sensual qualities of sound and image". Buckland, however, maintains that Spielberg remains committed to narrative, which is emphasised through the story-telling approach to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. What is commonly identified as the disappearance of narrative through the play of spectacle and special effects in the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster, Buckland (1998:175) argues, would be better defined as the effective deployment of "...narrative condensation and narrative economy...". He also

notes that the use of supposedly "simple" shots is frequently "...designed to engage the spectator in the narrative in as many different ways as is possible" (Buckland, 1998:174).[114]

Such "engagement" frequently extends beyond the frame of the film itself, however, and it may be argued that the blockbuster is predominantly significant in terms of its "meaning" as a social and cultural product. Thomas Schatz (1993:10-11) argues that big-budget, mainstream successes are invariably also those films in which big-name stars, popular genres and cinematic innovations are established, "...where the 'grammar' of cinema is most likely to be refined, and where the essential qualities of the medium – its popular and commercial character – are most evident". The New Hollywood is most markedly represented to the world by such blockbuster hits, and these films "...are the necessary starting point for any analysis of contemporary American cinema" (Schatz, 1993:11). While such "exercises in profit-making" are "...central to the output of modern Hollywood" (Buckland, 1998:166), they are equally important in terms of their ability to engage the interest and attention of audiences through the primary process: *showing*. Accordingly, detractors of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters tend to identify in them a lack of "...psychologically motivated cause-effect narrative logic..." which effectively results in "visual experiences" dominated by "...loosely linked, self-sustaining action sequences often built around spectacular stunts, stars and special effects" (Buckland, 1998:167). These films, it should be emphasised, may be understood within the context of a global market as consistent endeavours at "packaging" various elements within a big-budget "concept". It is therefore not surprising that the 1970s blockbuster phenomenon gave rise to the so-called "high-concept movies" which dominated mainstream cinema during the 1980s and 1990s.

High concept, cool consumption

> In a postmodern world...high concept is the 'rational' conclusion of those processes of capitalism which tend towards the abstraction and fetishization of the image, and top the increasingly rapid movements of fashion and style (Wyatt and Rutsky in Corrigan, 1998:48).

Hollywood producer Don Simpson (in Levy, 1999) argued that "[a] powerful *idea* is the heart of any successful movie" and that "[t]he movie is the auteur", because good ideas stimulate desire which, in turn, stimulates profits. This understanding of this

"basic" approach to filmmaking effectively defines the logic of the contemporary blockbuster, and Simpson can be said to be the inventor of the "modern blockbuster" (Levy, 1999). During the late 1970s, Simpson drafted what Levy (1999) refers to as "...the most influential statement of purpose in recent Hollywood history, a document that validated the sort of film-making which sets the André Bazins of the world gnashing their teeth but which lines up the civilians outside the multiplexes from Tulsa to San Remo to Rangoon". Simpson declared that

> The pursuit of making money is the only reason to make movies....We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. Our obligation is to make money....To make money, it may be important to win the Academy Award, for it might mean another ten million dollars at the box office (in Levy, 1999).

Simpson was responsible for the production of some of the key blockbuster films of the 1980s/1990s – movies which are often best remembered for their high-concept premise, memorable heroic protagonists, popular theme tunes and predictable outcome. According to Levy (1999), "Simpson's oeuvre reads like a litany of the worst sort of Hollywood drek", and yet the impact of the formula according to which his movies were created can still be felt in mainstream, popular filmmaking. Simpson can be thought of as having

> ...led the counter-revolutionary charge against the Coppolas, Friedkins, Bogdanoviches and Scorceses of this world, revoking their licences to create costly, personal works of art with corporate dollars and reasserting the pre-eminence of conceptualisation, departmentalisation and marketing all traditional purviews of the producer and the studio (Levy, 1999).

The billions made by his films at the box-office put an end to the most indulgent decade in the history of the film industry.

As co-producer of *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983), *Thief of Hearts* (Douglas Day, 1984), *Beverley Hills Cop* (Martin Brest, 1984), *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986), *Beverley Hills Cop 2* (Tony Scott, 1987), *Days of Thunder* (Tony Scott, 1990), *Bad Boys* (Michael Bay, 1995), *Crimson Tide* (Tony Scott, 1995), *Dangerous Minds* (John N. Smith, 1995) and *The Rock* (Michael Bay, 1996), Simpson codified what Levy (1999) refers to as "his mini-genre" which comprised films that are "...a riot of motion and noise...". Simpson produced a standard for money-making Hollywood fare that routinely "...focused on a comely young star, [was] crammed with trendy music and fashions, and [was] built around an underdog-makes-good-story – with a few setbacks thrown in to stretch the drama out to the optimal 100 minutes" (Levy, 1999). Simpson's high-concept revolved around a powerful idea which would be what

was to draw audiences to the product – and to the cinema so that money could be made. Market success, according to Simpson, was the single most significant aspect of any studio product. In this understanding of the significance of cinema, "[t]he concept…is the medium, not the cast, not the script and certainly not the director" (Levy, 1999). From a basic concept, a script would be fashioned and subjected to multiple rewrites and then coupled with "…some inexpensive young faces (Eddie Murphy, Tom Cruise, Jennifer Beals, Will Smith), [and] a malleable young director, preferably from television or advertising (Tony Scott, Michael Bay, Adrian Lyne)…" (Levy, 1999). The end-result would be something that could be sold as an "idea" that the studios already knew was in demand – a product to satisfy a mass audience. In many ways, Simpson's view of cinema as a practice of primarily "vulgar" aesthetic sensibilities is an honest one, fuelled by his capacity to "…see in money-making the greater good and in arty self-expression a betrayal of mass desire" (Levy, 1999). According to Simpson, "[t]he movie is the auteur. It tells us what it needs to be. We're here to serve the movie as mistress" (in Levy, 1999).

Levy (1999) notes that Simpson's formula "…only worked if it was implemented on a grand, gross scale", and the result of his big-budget concepts is evident in the formidable returns which these blockbusters achieved at the box-office. *Top Gun*, which epitomised his methods, grossed a total of $344 million worldwide, for example. Financial returns of this nature quite clearly also required huge financial investment and it is this initial economic responsibility which determines the extent to which the film must be ensured of attracting and engaging as wide a potential audience as possible. Corrigan (1998:47) argues that this "…meant appealing to and aiming at not just the largest possible audience (the more modest strategy of classical films or the alternative art-house audiences of early auteur film culture) but *all* audiences". The blockbuster strategy is thus concerned with selling its product to an "undifferentiated" audience rather than targeting the desires and interests of specific groups of audiences (Corrigan, 1998:47; Buckland, 1998:166-167). This targeting of mass audiences is directly connected to the primary interest of the Hollywood system, which is profit:

> With blockbusters, what begins as an attempt to target the teenage audience quickly becomes an attempt to absorb as many other groups as possible within that mass; it becomes the only methodology that makes sense to a conglomerate's bottom line (Corrigan, 1998:47).

To many critics, the blockbuster strategy of marketing a product to a mass audience within a global context inevitably results in the "infantilisation" of narrative. Similarly,

the increased spending-power of the youth (exemplified by the so-called "yuppie" generation which attained social prominence during the 1980s) has become a significant factor in determining the development of films which aim at providing relaxation and entertainment rather than "edification" or "education" (Gronemeyer, 1999:156-157).

According to Ray Carney (2000a), who writes from a humanist point-of-view, the types of narratives that have become the staple of American cinema "...are an extension of the business ethos that causes most of the problems in our culture in the first place". Films built around the "...main character's decisions and choices, plans and goals (as virtually every Hollywood movie does)...skim the surface of life" and it is for this reason that the "...solution most movies urge is a continuation of the sickness they depict" (Carney, 2000a). Simpson's blockbuster concept was, according to Levy (1999), "...a mind-blowing rejection of every ounce of Hollywood treacle and cant about higher purposes and the public good, a naked embrace of the marketplace as the *raîson d'ètre* of the studio system" and "[i]t was a concept that imposed itself on the whole of Hollywood movie-making". Carney (2000a) argues that audiences have become used to these types of films because, essentially, the majority of Hollywood directors are more like businessmen than artists, and "[a] producer's cinema reflects a producer's values". It is in this sense that Carney (2000a) refers even to some of the contemporary masters of cinema – including Spielberg, Oliver Stone and Ang Lee - as "hustlers" who are incapable of imagining making an "alternative" kind of film. In his analysis of contemporary cinema, most filmmakers are out of touch with the "truth" and are inspired instead by conventions which have been established to effectively reduce the artfulness of Hollywood cinema:

> Cinematic clichés are everywhere. Any hack can create loneliness with a long shot and a little music. Danger with a hand-held, point-of-view shot. Fear with key-lighting. Surprise with an editorial jump (Carney, 2000a).

Instead, Carney (2000a) urges that filmmakers should "[l]eave the tricks to the magicians" because tricks "...are not life" but rather "...a routine, a formula, a shortcut for understanding". Of course, this analysis implies that it is the duty of filmmakers to allow the viewer to discover "truth" through their successful capture of "life" on film.

According to James Bernardoni, the "New Hollywood" is "...the product of...misinterpreting the virtues of classical cinema and resulting in the collapse of significance and the violation of film's obligation to convey a sense of credible reality"

(Maltby, 1998:22). In another sense, the contemporary Hollywood film has been interpreted it terms of the simple collapse of narrative depth and complexity in favour of a "concept" which suggests significant potential as a box-office drawcard. Levy (1999) argues that the 1980s "...were dominated by the sort of static, three-act storytelling exemplified by *Top Gun*". Screenwriter Scott Frank describes the work of a "new breed" of screenwriters in terms which allude to the flattening of characters and the undermining of narrative depth:

> ...you start with a concept, then you think about how you're going to shoot it, but it's about nothing. Movies have become totally conceptual: they're all about this blowing up or that blowing up or these guys stealing this. Basically you hire a screenwriter to make quips; you no longer have characters, you have attitude. You have screenwriters who are 20 years old trying to write a scientist in NASA. We couldn't make *Taxi Driver* [Martin Scorsese, 1976] today (in Felperin, 1998:12).

In this respect, Jenkins refers to Justin Wyatt's notion of a "high concept" filmmaking style that focuses on the "surface iconography" and "spectacle" of a film rather than on depth or complexity of narrative (Jenkins, 1995:116). Corrigan (1998:48) refers to "the postmodern 'high-concept film'" as the "...most obvious result of [the] new corporate mind-set..." and, according to Maltby, these "high concept" products tend to be Hollywood's consistent profit-makers. Criticism of such films is commonly linked to what is seen as mainstream cinema's devotion to sequences "...of emptily expensive, aesthetically impoverished spectacles, literally and metaphorically restricted within the 'safe action area' required by the small screens of multiplexes, video and pay-TV" (Maltby, 1998:22):

> In a contemporary version of the eternal conflict between art and commerce for the soul of cinema, the economic opportunities provided by globalization and the new technologies of distribution are seen as aesthetic contractions requiring the application of a formula to 'make it simple and keep it moving' (Maltby, 1998:22).

It is no surprise, therefore, that the term "high-concept" can be traced to the made-for-television movies of the 1970s, "...which needed stories that could be promoted and summarised by a thirty-second television spot" (Maltby, 1998:37). Such stories are straight-forward, easy to pitch, and readily comprehended by a vast potential audience.

Although high-concept films are generally sold as having a unique central idea or thesis, such "uniqueness" is frequently recognisable as one of a number of forms of pastiche which relies heavily "...on the replication and combination of previously successful narratives: *RoboCop* is *Terminator* [James Cameron, 1984] meets *Dirty*

Harry [Don Siegel, 1971]", for example (Maltby, 1998:37). These films afford "...striking icons, images and snappy plot descriptions as marketing 'hooks'" (Smith, 1998:12). According to Wyatt, high concept may be viewed as "...the central development within post-classical Hollywood, as a style of 'post-generic' filmmaking based on the simplification of character and narrative, and a strong match between image and music track throughout the film" (Maltby, 1998:38). Corrigan (1998:48) elaborates that such films "...become advertisements that can be abstracted to easily assimable images and regenerated through multiple viewings and the ancillary sales of various tie-ins". Furthermore, it is quite clear that the economic politics of the "new corporate conglomerates", which control the cinema industry, require the "...cross-promotion and exploitation of story properties across multiple media" (Jenkins, 1995:116). Such cross-pollination of ideas is exemplified by the regular collaboration between cinema and video game "narratives" and, even more directly, between film soundtracks and the music industry.

Levy (1999) notes that Simpson is credited as being one of the first producers to "...recognise the power of MTV, not only as a marketing tool but as a font of new aesthetic ideas". Extended portions of high concept films frequently assume the character and style and rhythm of music videos in the form of "extended montages" which are easily replicated or rearranged for other purposes (actual music videos and trailer segments, for example):

> [Simpson] realised that his films could include wholly self-contained music videos that would then air on the cable music network as, in effect, free advertising. And he was sensitive to the fact that an audience that had grown accustomed to a steady diet of briskly cut three-minute pop promos would demand similarly hectic pacing from movies (Levy, 1999).

Murray Smith (1998:12) points out that these "...music videos often rework aspects of the film in order to promote both the film and the music" thereby extending the economic significance of the song, the film and the video. Levy (1999) points out that *Top Gun*, for example, "...actually opens with a music video: a montage of aircraft carrier action shots choreographed to Kenny Loggins' infernal song 'Danger Zone', one of the two hits digested whole by the film".

During the late 1990s, the title songs of two major Hollywood high concept films, *Men in Black* (1997) and *Wild Wild West* (1999; both directed by Barry Sonnenfeld), exemplified both the significance of cinema theme songs and the interaction between the film, television and music industries. The films are particularly significant because

the title songs are performed by Will Smith, who co-stars in both films. As a result, both films' music videos (which were played excessively on the MTV channel) came to function advertising for the movies and the soundtrack albums which were released in conjunction with the films. By maintaining the aesthetic of the films, the music videos further contributed to viewers' expectations of the films themselves, highlighting the presence of the pop and movie star (Smith) in each of the movies. Smith, his songs and the narrative, aesthetic and concept conveyed through both the music and the music videos functioned as a cue to potential audiences that these were the types of big-budget high concept blockbusters which they wanted to see. The Hollywood marketing mechanism thus endeavoured to make Smith the box-office drawcard in two spectacularly expensive motion pictures. In this way, the cultural boundary between cinema, contemporary music and made-for-television music videos becomes blurred and ultimately indistinguishable, just as the personality of Smith becomes indistinguishable from the roles which he undertakes in each of the two Sonnenfeld films. Such mixing and blending of cultural forms and identities is symptomatic of the shifts which are recognisable in the postmodern age:

> ...one of the most convincing descriptions of postmodernism is of a shift, prompted and enabled by social, economic and technological change, into the heteroglossia of inter-cultural exchange, as idioms, discourse across the arts and academy, and across these and popular or mass forms, are montaged, blended or blurred together (Brooker, 1998:20).

Concept and marketability, it would seem, become the dominant features within contemporary cultural production, ultimately influencing and dominating certain narrative forms.

One of the most important features of the high concept "package", is the foregrounding of an established, bankable or potentially marketable star. High concept films frequently revolve around characters who are defined by a particular "physical attribute" or "personality type", and performers are frequently used for their trademark attributes or compatibility with a particular type. Levy (1999) notes that, "...in the Simpson formula..." casting "...is a form of narrative" contributing to an overwhelming consistency of characterisation which is established through the "...audience's expectation of what [the] stars are like". Equally, certain stars may be understood to carry certain traits with them from one film to another, thereby contributing to the "meaning" of each film in a superficial, or intertextual, way. It is in this context that high concept films are described as having replaced sustained "character development" and identifiably "complex character traits" with one-

dimensional stereotypes. Arnold Schwarzenegger (formally a body-builder), for example, was one of the biggest box-office drawcards during the 1980s and 1990s and it can be argued that his consistent casting was related primarily to his iconic personality, to his popularity as the superstar, "Arnold Schwarzenegger". In many ways, his popularity can be associated simply with his image as a "movie mega-star", an image which may be reiterated and built upon with each successive blockbuster in which he appears. Rather than being involved in characterisation, stars such as Schwarzenegger inevitably serve to represent a "type" which brings an "...'ironic' distancing..." to the film narrative brought about "...by the investment in a star persona – a 'walking, talking brand-name' like Schwarzenegger..." (Maltby, 1998:38).

According to Patrick McGilligan (in Dyer, 1992:625) "certain circumstances" may determine that a performer has as much influence on a film as the director, writers and producers, and in some instances, "...there are certain rare few performers whose acting capabilities and screen personas are so powerful that they embody and define the very essence of their films". To the extent that certain stars may serve as central loci for the establishment of "meaning" in their movies, it "...is accurate surely to refer to the actor as a semi-passive icon, a symbol that is manipulated by writers and directors"[115] (Dyer, 192:625). Of course, the investment in "personalities" as sites of meaning is centred around their status and image at any point in time. However, just as narrative systems and modes of address change with the times, so the popularity of human stars and their influence within a particular movie may fluctuate according to any number of factors. Schwarzenegger, for example, may be a wholly bankable star attraction who is considered "...modern cinema's most iconic action hero"[116] (Nathan, 2000a:96), but his last film of the Twentieth Century, *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999), "flopped" at the US box-office despite its high-concept formula, "millennial tag" and the presence of a Hollywood superstar. Mark Kermode (2000:46) describes the effects-laden film as an "...abysmally lumpen cross between *The Omen* (1976) and *Lethal Weapon* [Richard Donner, 1987]..." which is "...dreadful enough to make most viewers consider gouging out their eyes in order to avoid seeing a second time the spectacle of the world's most wooden actor pretending to undergo a spiritual crisis".[117]

While *End of Days* has been heavily criticised for factors other than Schwarzenegger's implausible performance, the film does serve as an indication that the "mega-star" has ceased to shine quite so brightly. Chris Petrikin (1999:62) argues that "...the

action heroes who dominated the box office in the '80s and early '90s..." have grown older while audiences are now "younger than ever". Thus, "[w]hile [Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Van Damme and Steven Seagal] were hitting middle age, box-office success has come to be dictated by the *Scream* generation". While *End of Days* was targeted at the young adults who were his fans as children and teenagers, the market itself has realigned itself and thereby perhaps marginalized potential Schwarzenegger devotees. The financial disappointment of *End of Days* may be an indication that "Schwarzenegger" was indeed a "20th century phenomenon" (Kermode, 2000:46) suggesting the limited shelf life of even the biggest of Hollywood's "human effects".[118] Petrikin (1999:64-68) argues that "muscle-bound heroes" are being replaced by computer-generated special effects, while action movies such as *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) make use of ensemble casts and rely "...more on drama and [special effects] than a save-the-day action star". Furthermore, it seems that actors whose ability as performers (rather than mere icons) has already been proven in more "substantial" roles are now crossing over to the action genre with greater success (Tom Cruise, Wesley Snipes, Nicholas Cage and Will Smith being prime examples). As one anonymous studio executive noted (in Petrikin, 1999:68): "Let's be honest. What killed Van Damme and Seagal's careers is simple: stupid, one-dimensional scripts and an abhorrent lack of acting talent".

In an article on the "mercurial career" of Tom Cruise, Manohla Dargis (2000) argues that "[t]he star persona depends on coherence, a neat fit between who we think the star is and the roles he or she assumes". Dargis notes that in *Mission: Impossible 2* (John Woo, 2000), much was made in the press of the fact the Cruise performed many of his own stunts. The result, according to Dargis (2000), is a "...shivery thrill of recognition..." from audiences "...that it's the star himself...hanging off the edge, risking his death for our delight". Cruise's "bravery" effectively serves to counteract the advances made in digital effects technology by presenting us with an "authentic hero" rather that one created by computer imaging:

> In the age of the digital, this sort of flamboyant stuntwork might seem anachronistic, even foolish, one more instance of star vanity run luridly amok. But Cruise's physical daring is necessary precisely because digital effects have become so persuasive. In the age of virtual reproduction, the star body has become the test bed of authenticity, the last stand of the real (Dargis, 2000).

According to Dargis (2000), Schwarzenegger's failure lay in letting "...the mask of authenticity slip too far" in the action-comedy *The Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, 1993), because the film made "...fun of his own he-man iconography..." and forced the

action hero to join "...in on the joke he himself had become...". In contrast, "...Cruise's career has been rife with contradictions from the start, and it is arguable that, more than that of any other contemporary movie star, his on-screen persona depends more on contradiction that coherence" (Dargis, 2000). His roles have been diverse and over nearly twenty years of filmmaking he has demonstrated incredible range and versatility. Cruise is thus a bankable star, not because his roles are so routinely similar, but because he is a *star* whose contradictory roles make his star persona elusive. He becomes, in Dargis' (2000) words "...the remotest of stars" whose identity cannot be pinned down because he is more than simply the accumulation of film roles. It is possible, however, that perhaps this "strategy of stardom" has filtered into the thinking of other Hollywood icons. In 1993, before the release of *Last Action Hero*, Schwarzenegger announced that "I will not change...Because when you are successful and you change, you are an idiot" (in Dargis, 2000). Ironically, prior to the release of one of Schwarzenegger's more recent potential blockbusters, *The 6th Day* (2000), director Roger Spottiswoode (in Hanly, 2000) commented that the actor "...likes to reinvent himself".

The high concept filmmaking strategy discussed above has been distinguished from "classical" Hollywood forms by a combination of stylistic excess, the intrusion of star personalities within the narrative, and the constant rearticulation of existing genres. Wyatt argues that the high-concept film can be understood as being be centred around "the modular aesthetic" which emphasises "style and 'stylishness'" (Smith, 1998:12). According to Wyatt (in Maltby, 1998:38), the viewer becomes distanced from the "...traditional task of reading the film's narrative" because of the "...modularity of the films' units..." and the added effect of "...the one-dimensional quality of the characters...". The spectator consequently "...becomes sewn into the 'surface' of the film, contemplating the style of the narrative and the production" creating an awareness of "excess" elements such "...as the production design, stars, music, and promotional apparatus..." (Wyatt in Maltby, 1998:38). Maltby (1998:38) suggests that in respect of this increased awareness and appreciation of the surface qualities of the film, high concept filmmaking may be linked to the notion of "cool" consumption, related to McLuhan's understanding of "hot" and "cool" media environments. High concept cinema is designed to function "coolly" in both of these environments, given the fact that contemporary (Hollywood) cinema is "[d]esigned to accommodate multiple acts of viewing across different formats..." (Maltby, 1998:39). Films are designed to enhance the viewing experience in the cinema theatre and in

the "private cinema" of the living-room. Narrative, he argues, is now secondary to the cinematic excesses, the extra-cinematic pleasures and the economic spin-offs offered by high concept films. High concept cinema tends to provide less information (thereby assuming the "cool" medium status of television) while involving the viewer in a range of extra-cinematic activities which extend from the "cool" surface of the film.

This "surface" or "visible artificiality" also extends outwards, however, away from the film itself and into various sectors of the "real" world. From a Baudrillardian perspective, the high concept film becomes indicative of the highly mediated contemporary world which is saturated with "cool" images of a "reality" which appears "more real than real", and is therefore described as "hyperreal". If the hyperreal can be described in terms of its "play of surfaces", then contemporary (notably high concept) cinema can be judged as a *hyperartificial* reflection of the "real" world. According to Maltby (1998:38) , the apparent superficiality of these films forces a state of "...'cool' consumption – incorporating an element of detached viewing [which] pervades the culture of the primary audience group targeted by these products...". The superficial treatment of the high concept film attains a degree of coolness through "...the detached imperial certainty..." on the part of the viewer that he or she will (almost certainly) never have to deal with the situations presented on screen. This "detachment" is related to the Baudrillardian notion that the world is no longer "real" but constructed from a proliferation of images which tend to visually hypothesise a "reality" to the point where these signs are no longer attached to any particular referent. Put another way, high concept filmmaking may be seen as a postmodern "...retreat into aestheticism which recycles the last century's decadence, and which can only deny this charge on the grounds that it (or the postmodern world) has done away with old distinctions like 'art and life' (or signifier and signified)" (Brooker, 1998:20).

Multimedia sales pitches

Writing in the Atlantic Monthly, *Mark Crispin Miller reports that the 1989 James Bond entry, License to Kill [John Glen], featured a scene in which 007 ostentatiously smokes Larks - a magical moment for which Philip Morris paid $350,000. In the Michael Keaton comedy* **Mr. Mom** *([Stan Dragoti,] 1983), Miller identified plugs for McDonald's, Domino's Pizza, Terminix exterminators, Folger's coffee, Lite beer, Jack Daniel's, Van Camp's chili, Ban deodorant, Windex, Tide, Spray 'n Wash, Borax, Clorox 2, and Downy fabric softener (Medved, 1992:251-252).*

"Product placement" - a strategy whereby a branded product will be used or displayed in a film for the (sole) purpose of promoting that product - is one of the noticeable aspects of contemporary filmmaking which is used to help offset production costs. Some analysts suggest that the practice serves to undermine the narrative development and consistency of cinematic structure within high-budget films. Potentially, however, many of these films could not conceivably be made if it were not for the inclusion of such "advertising moments" which are considered "highly effective" by "corporate marketing experts". Research has indicated that the "...association between a familiar brand and a glamorous star will make a measurable difference in future sales" of that brand, even if the product name is only registered in an "unconscious manner" (Medved, 1992:252). According to Maltby (1998:26-27), "[a]lmost every ultra-high budget movie produced in contemporary Hollywood is, among other things, an advertising space for the placement of consumer products, defended not only as a budgetary instrument but as a form of capitalist realism...". Recognisably "real" products from the "real" world help make a film appear more convincing, and brand names (or logos) are recognisably a part of our capitalistic "reality".[119]

"Product placement" may also occur ironically within a film. In *Blade Runner*, for example, certain powerful corporations are "still" advertised on the enormous neon billboards which appear in abundance throughout the futuristic city of New Los Angeles. Coca-cola will, apparently, still be "adding life" well into the twenty-first century.[120] Tarantino has his characters engage in comic discussions of commercial enterprises (like McDonalds and Burger King) in a lengthy scene in *Pulp Fiction*, but when products are shown or actually used, they have deliberately anonymous or fictitious brand names (such as "Apples" cigarettes and "Big Kahuna Burger"). Tarantino's use of *faux*-"product placement" may be read as a parody of more subtle occurrences of the "subliminal"-but-naturalistic consumer-exploitation technique as it

occurs in most mainstream blockbuster films. Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* parodies its own market exploitation potential by including scenes set in a souvenir shop which stocks the same (or similar) products to those which *will* be sold in ancillary markets around the world. In *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) which is discussed in further detail in chapter six, television product placement is parodied as characters regularly turn to the camera in moments of trite advertising excess.

Hollywood blockbusters may also be thought of as feature-length advertisements in themselves, sparking potential interest in a collection of sequels and "...any number of multimedia reiterations" (Schatz, 1993:33). Multimedia spin-offs from successful Hollywood features include television series, comic books, video and computer games, and even attractions at theme parks (Disney World, for example) or interactive cinema "rides" (such as those found at Universal Studios, for example). The "textual boundaries" of a movie, Schatz (1993:33) argues, are being redefined by the "dynamic" interplay between film and audience which creates a "...commercial intertext that is more process than product". Richard Schickel (in Schatz, 1993:33) has argued that "[i]n the best of all possible marketing worlds the movie will inspire some simple summarizing graphic treatment, adaptable to all media, by which it can be instantly recognized the world over, even by subliterates".

Schickel and other critics have accordingly suggested that this foregrounding of style over content signifies the end of cinematic "narrative" in New Hollywood films. Whereas the "classical" Hollywood was deeply concerned with refining elements of narrative comprising "...exposition, complication, and resolution", contemporary Hollywood has, for Schickel, "...abandoned the art of narrative...". He argues that the New Hollywood is concerned primarily with "concepts" and "gimmicks" which increase a film's entertainment potential while simultaneously making the marketing process that much easier. Schickel's observations, which posit a cinema that is fragmented "along generational lines", are not entirely unfounded, and Schatz recognises that younger viewers "...are far more likely to be active multimedia players, consumers, and semioticians, and thus to gauge a movie in intertextual terms and to appreciate in it a richness and complexity that may well be lost on middle-aged movie critics" (Schatz, 1993:33-34). The nature of the rapidly evolving popular culture environment has ensured that younger viewers have grown up with an increasingly prolific matrix of information and entertainment technologies which have fed into a rapidly evolving system of audience expectations and desires. Schatz (1993:34) sees today's younger

– and certainly more media-literate – viewers as most likely to "...encounter a movie in an already-activated narrative process" because movies are pre-sold using other popular culture commodities such as music videos, television series[121], behind-the-scenes or "making-of" documentaries, and comic books, for example.

The extremes of such "exploitation" are often reached with children's animated films and television programming. The worst case reality is best evidenced in the marketing of animated features and children's product lines by the Walt Disney Studios. More often than not, Disney's animated films evolve as predetermined multi-product packages in which the characters, marketing hype, soundtrack and animation all serve to enhance the viability of selling toys, clothing, video games and other merchandising to children who are lured by the sheer lack of children's movies in the market. The annual release of a Disney feature therefore represents an "event". Stephen C. Kline (1997:154) refers to the 1992 Disney "mega-hit", *Aladdin* (John Musker and Ron Clements) as "..the prime entrée to the children's market" and notes how the film is representative of an existing tale being "resurrected" in order to attract young viewers to an "advertisement" which assumes the form of feature-length entertainment. *Aladdin* became "...the first animated movie to take more than $200 million at the US box-office" (Falk, 1993:13).[122]

Nowhere has the paratextual nature of contemporary cinema narrative better demonstrated than with the recent release of the big-budget spectacle, *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. Heralded as the greatest movie *event* in human history, this prequel finally arrived some twenty-two years after the release of the first film in the immensely popular science-fiction film series, and spawned world-wide excitement that was inspired by both nostalgia and staggering media hype:

> Never has a movie been so intensely anticipated. Never has the media hype-machine been so well-greased for such an expectant public. Never has a film received a fanfare as loud as the one that's hailed *The Phantom Menace*....True, it's hard for anyone to truly go in 'cold', what with all the coverage and pre-release merchandise that's already over here (Jolin, 1999:84).

The *Star Wars* hype-machine has, essentially, been active since the release of the first film, enjoying not only the success of the two sequels, *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) and *Star Wars: Episode VI - Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983), but a number of re-releases, video releases, cable- and network-television broadcasts, and the release of digitally remastered versions of all three movies. Along with this prolonged relationship between the movies

themselves and a changing film-viewership over twenty-two years, *Star Wars* has also generated extra-cinematic products ranging from board games, sticker albums and comic books, to Darth Vader bubble bath, the R2-D2 telephone and C-3PO soap. And one cannot forget the seemingly endless proliferation of extra-cinematic products carrying the *Episode I* insignia; everything from Kellogg's Coco Pops[123] to highly detailed books covering the "science" behind the movie have been co-opted to rake in the extra millions in revenue which goes unchecked at the box-office cash register. The original *Star Wars* trilogy has also inspired other productions, including the Mel Brooks spoof, *Spaceballs*, and numerous science-fiction films which have attempted to emulate the box-office impact of a high-adventure tale set in unknown worlds. It is evident, according to Schatz (1993:34), that "...the movie itself scarcely begins or ends the textual cycle", and even *The Phantom Menace* itself must be seen as a commercial for the two remaining episodes of the saga set for release in 2002 and 2005. By the third quarter of 2000, film magazines such as *Empire* and *Film Threat* had already begun to carry "exclusive first official *Episode II* pictures" as well as articles dealing with production developments.[124] Clearly, market strategists are always in the process of predicting and planning the next "greatest-ever" cinema thrill-ride.

Giant comic book theme-park rides

The Emperor of this teeming, hugely profitable world [i.e. Lucas] can hear the occasional renegade whisper below his palace balcony. "Critics say the problem with George and Steven [Spielberg] is that they've created these well-made megamovies that are basically B-movies," Lucas observes. "Jaws, they say, was just a big horror movie. Star Wars is just a big sci-fi film. That our films are not like The Exorcist, The Godfather and the great films of the '70s. Well, they were B-movies too. And Gone With the Wind [Victor Fleming, 1939] was just a soap opera" (Corliss, 1999a:47).

In a discussion of the successful action movie, *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994), Richard Dyer suggests that the film "...gets its rush from a sheer squandering of sensational situations" (Dyer, 1994:7). In fact, Dyer proposes that, in comparison with numerous other - even classical Hollywood films - *Speed* is surprisingly reluctant to deliver either the intensity of thrills one might imagine, or the "gross-out factor" and "gore" which it "teasingly" promises the viewer (Dyer, 1994:7). Instead, Dyer argues, the film offers sufficient action - or what he calls "variations on velocity" (1994:7) - to put most other movies to shame:

Speed is like Sylvester Stallone dangling over the ravine at the start of

Cliffhanger [Renny Harlin, 1993] plus the office explosion in *Lethal Weapon 3* [Richard Donner, 1992] plus the train crash in *The Fugitive* [Andrew Davis, 1993] plus the chase along the sunken canal in *Terminator 2*, all put end to end with no boring bits in between. No dodgy politics. No naff attempts at psychologising the villain: he's a nutcase. No mushy buddiness: the film barely pauses when Keanu's partner is blown to bits through his (Keanu's) lack of foresight. No elaborate excuses to get the camera to linger on the star's muscles: Keanu's not that kind of boy. And no love interest to send the kids into frenzies of squabbling and going to the loo: there is a girl (Sandra Bullock on fine form) and Keanu does get her, but it's all done on the run with only a quick clinch at the end. This is the movie as rollercoaster: all action and next to no plot (Dyer, 1994:7).

Dyer's analysis, it may be argued, is significant in that it demonstrates an understanding of cinema as a medium for "...showing and creating the sensation of movement" (Dyer, 1994:7). From the Lumières' *Arrival of a Train* (1895) to *Speed* to the 1999 blockbusters *The Matrix* and *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*, films have celebrated and thrived on the simulation of the *sensation* of movement. In this lineage of cinema which visually simulates or re-enact "movement", Dyer includes such technologically evolved cinematic forms as the super-large Imax films and the Showscan Dynamic Motion Simulator which, he notes (1994:7), "...promises to deliver 'the ultimate fantasy: Reality'". Thus, according to Dyer (1994:7), "[t]he celebration of sensational movement, that we respond to in some still unclear sense 'as if real', for many people *is* the movies":

> The triumph of the word 'movie' over the more static 'pictures' or evocative 'flicks' is not just a product of US cultural imperialism; it also catches something of the sensation we expect when we go to the cinema (Dyer, 1994:7).

Accordingly, while "stasis" in the films of certain filmmakers does not render their works less cinematic than their more movement-oriented contemporaries, the expectations of popular cinema audiences tend to rest with films which offer the thrills associated with the experience of "genuine" movement, "...stillness and contemplation are rare in popular cinema" (Dyer, 1994:7).

The thrill of movement is clearly evident in contemporary blockbusters which find their "classical" reference point in an alternative "...strain of the legacy of studio era Hollywood...", namely the serial B-film (Smith, 1998:12). Screenwriter Larry Gross (1995:6) refers to such films as "...the movie-as-Theme-Park, the movie-as-Giant-Comic-Book, the movie-as-Ride...". In the 1990s, the trend started by *Jaws*, *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* continues in the form of fantasy and adventure as stories are retold, reinvented and frequently pieced together with an ever-increasing emphasis on visual effects and computer graphics that are designed to heighten the

degree of spectacle, "fantastic realism" and experience of visceral thrills. A recent reinvention of the Hollywood B-movie is Universal Studio's *The Mummy* (1999), directed by Stephen Sommers. The film, which is a phantasmagoric concoction of special effects and non-stop action, borrows freely and unashamedly from a long history of predecessors, the most "original" being Karl Freund's *The Mummy* (1933).[125] That classic version was itself a rather obvious rewriting of *Dracula*, but the contemporary version resituates the frequently-copied narrative "...as a *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-style period adventure" (Newman, 1999c:50). The film is a pure high concept attempt to collide various cinematic and historic reference points in the hope of luring audiences with a wide array of stylistic and generic elements, including high adventure, romance, comedy, action, supernatural horror, mystery, suspense, and even melodrama.

Newman (1999c:50) describes *The Mummy* as "...a mostly entertaining series of theme-park rides...", but argues that the film "...sorely misses out on magic, with its cardboard villains, fundamentally unlikeable heroes, and endless irritating comic bits". As if it were intended to be a reworking of recognisably older plots and style, the film plays out as a remarkably superficial show-reel of effects and stereotypes. In this respect, the film is highlighted by postmodern spectacle with visual effects that overwhelm the storyline as the narrative relentlessly advances towards a heavy-handed climactic show-down between good and evil. Without a plot to call its own, the film is a mix-and-match of set-pieces (including the prologue's tongue-cutting scene which is precisely cribbed from Terence Fisher's *The Mummy* (1959), and a scene involving a short-sighted victim's torment at the hands of a blurry mummy which is lifted from Hammer's *The Mummy's Shroud* (John Gilling, 1967)) arranged only in terms of chronological sequence. However, while the high concept adventure relinquishes any evident concern with coherent narrative, it repeatedly delivers spectacular surface thrills:

> ...Sommers...doesn't skimp on ingredients, but over-eggs the pudding....So we have a grinning Brendan Fraser and a fetchingly distressed Rachel Weisz facing a non-stop series of perils: marauding tribesmen, creepy crawlies, living sandstorms, rivers of blood, brainwashed Cairo hordes, a cadre of zombie warriors who take us briefly into Ray Harryhausen territory, and a self-burying city lifted from Howard Hawkes' *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955). A side effect of all this business is that the plot darts all over North Africa rather casually...deploying vast disasters – the plagues of Egypt are tossed in with amazing disregard for logic, history, and the discrete myth bodies of Egypt and the Israelites – that threaten the end of the world. With all this going on, there's sadly little time for the atmosphere, mystery and romance that make

the Freund movie such an enduring gem (Newman, 1999c:50).

It may well be that while *The Mummy* has its roots firmly planted in the soil of "genuine" B-movies, such rich allusionism serves merely as a device in which to position the "true function" of the film: the *showing* of spectacular imagery and the generation of primal pleasures.

Gross (1995:9) argues that this type of "...elaborate and expensively produced elevation of B Movie genre plots...that fuelled countless bad 50s sci-fi films..." remains an "...inferior basis for movies...", resulting in a "...reduction of Narrative Complexity..." and the development of the "comic-book narrative". More recently, Richard Schickel (in Smith, 1998:13) has argued that "...Hollywood seems to have lost or abandoned the art of narrative..." and that cinema now offers no more than "...a succession of undifferentiated sensations, lucky or unlucky accidents, that have little or nothing to do with whatever went before or is about to come next". However, as Murray Smith points out, cynical assessments such as these tend to be drawn from vague speculations and generalisations based on few pertinent examples. Spectacle may even serve the interests of "narrative" in certain films:

> There may be less attention to detailed character motivation, greater emphasis on spectacle – the kinds of features that Thomas Schatz stresses – and even straightforward narrative sloppiness, but narrative has certainly not disappeared under a cloud of special effects. In action films, the plot advances *through* spectacle; the spectacular elements are, generally speaking, as 'narrativized' as are the less ostentatious spaces of other genres (Smith, 1998:13).

In *The Matrix*, for example, while elaborate effects, computer engineered movements and spectacular fight scenes appear to dominate, the filmmakers insist that they were particularly concerned that their film should engage audiences at an intellectual level, and that even the fight scenes (which are particularly spectacular) should involve the audience at the story level. It is for this reason that the film's action sequences seek to emulate the style of Hong Kong action films which, they believe, "...actually bring narrative arcs into the fights, and tell a little story within the fighting" (Larry Wachowski in Probst, 1999:34).

In order to draw the viewer "into" the violence and action, sophisticated camera techniques were used, notably "bullet time" (which effectively creates a form of "hyper-slow-motion") which enables the viewer to effortlessly take in action which would normally occur at very high speeds. While the attention to detail within such

visual effects conveys an impression of overwhelming concern with spectacle, which appears to be foregrounded over the narrative, the effect is rather to inject meaning into the scenes of "pure action". According to Larry Wachowski:

> We...tried to detail the action in a way that isn't really done in Hollywood anymore....There are many incredible and beautiful images in violence, and I think that violence can be a great storytelling tool. [Filmmakers] have come up with an incredible language for violence. For example, what John Woo...does with his sort of hyper-violence is brilliant. He pushes violent imagery to another level. We tried to do that with *The Matrix* as well (Wachowski in Probst, 1999:35).

Indeed, according to the directors, their primary intention with the film was "...to make an intellectual action movie" (Larry Wachowski in Probst, 1999:33). Motivated by an irritation with Hollywood's "...assembly-line action movies that are devoid of any intellectual content", the Wachowski's sought to fill their film with "ideas" while presenting images "...that people haven't ever seen before". So "complicated" is the film's concept, in fact, that the script "languished in limbo" (Probst, 1999:33) for several years "...because many in Hollywood couldn't grasp the tale's highly complex narrative and extravagant visual elements". The film combines a range of cinematic influences, most notably action and kung-fu movies, as well as comic books and Japanese animation of which the Wachowski's are admitted fans. Equally, the film acknowledges a tradition of science-fiction cinema because "...that's what we have for a living mythology these days..." (Richard Schickel, 1999:64):

> Almost an entire movie of exposition, it gives the impression of actually being about something, but while making William Gibson novels look like reading primers it's really just a relentless barrage of style and visual effects splattered across a basic good vs evil story complete with the formula showdown. A bit like a cinematic black hole, it's sucked in elements of film, philosophy and literature wholesale, put them in a blender and spewed them out in one almighty splurge. There's the slo mo balletic battles of John Woo and other Hong Kong martial arts movies (especially those of Yuen Wo-Ping who choreographed the action here) with combatants flying through the air, there's anime influence, Skywalker, *Alice in Wonderland* references, the X-Men, Gap commercials, Philip K. Dick, *Terminator*, *Dark City* [Alex Proyas, 1998], *Strange Days* [Kathryn Bigelow, 1995], Tetsuo [referring to the Shinya Tsukamoto films *Tetsuo* (aka *The Ironman*, 1988) and *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1992)], mysticism, mythology, Christian imagery, and, if you're looking to play arty name dropper, Jean Cocteau (Davies, 1999:76).

The Matrix is a true postmodern fantasy, combining elements of popular escapist entertainment with complex philosophical theories in a package which plays out as pure spectacle.[126] Indeed, the Wachowski brothers make no apology for their conscious attention to stylistic innovation and spectacular effects, with the result that even the more advanced philosophical concerns are dealt with in visual terms that are

more likely to appeal to the mass market. Newman (1999b:9) notes that many of the scenes are included "...just because it's cooler that way", even when this leaves glaring holes in the narrative. In this respect, their vision becomes an elaborate integration of profound ideas and effects which is increasingly becoming a dominant feature of New Hollywood blockbusters:

> The Wachowski Brothers...pulling off something like a million masterstrokes all at once. Taking the imprimatur of the video game, they meld the grungy noir of *Blade Runner*, the hyperkinetic energies of chopsocky, John Woo hardware and grandiose spiritual overtones into William Gibson's cyberpunk ethos to produce a new aesthetic for the millennium powered to the thudding beat of techno (Nathan, 1999:17).

This "new aesthetic" is the convergence of advanced technology and intelligent narrative which is believed to be setting new standards for big-budget cinema.

According to Schatz, the New Hollywood blockbuster movies differ from classical Hollywood films because of "...their emphasis on 'visceral, kinetic and fast-paced' plotting at the expense of character..." Smith (1998:12). Such criticisms abound in reviews of big-budget action, adventure, horror and science-fiction movies, but it may well be that the foregrounding of "character" in the cinema is simply a manifestation of conservative storytelling techniques. In the cinema, the viewer can quite easily "become" engaged in the visceral thrills simply by being absorbed by the action itself. Whatever criticism or praise is launched at the various "event movies" which capture audience imaginations each year, it should be noted that these films share in the history of an artform which, amongst other things, wishes to engage the spectator's capacity to be moved because of the act of *seeing*. Thus, while some films wish to "move" the viewer by appealing to the emotions, most successful blockbusters aim simply to give the viewer the experience (or sensation) of *movement*. Actions, thrills and spills may not amount to "narrative complexity", but they certainly appeal to automatic human drives. And therein lies a very *human* pleasure.

Hyperspectacle: the politics of pleasure

Gladiators are in our blood. Our rude forefathers, from Caerleon to Corbridge, were thrilled by the spectacle of men chopping and skewering each other to bits in an amphitheatre. Criminals among our grandfathers even ended up providing the blood, rather than enjoying it vicariously (Howard, 2000:9).

From its opening frames of hand-to-hand butchery and unblinking conflict, Gladiator *simply grabs you by the balls and never lets go (Goldman, 2000:80).*

Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) is widely celebrated as a film which "...marks a departure from what came before, a change in the conventions of movie gunfire..." occurring at the end of a decade which "...ushered in a greater realism in the depictions of death and injury" (Jacobs, 1995:38). Indeed, the film marks a turning point in the spectacularisation of screen violence:

> Its opening and closing gun-battles paid attention to the detail of bullet impacts in a sustained and stylistic manner rarely seen before. Death was no longer simply about Right shooting Wrong, Good triumphing over Bad: in *The Wild Bunch* it is spectacular, empty and nihilistic. Everyone loses. The pleasure is in witnessing the process of losing (Jacobs, 1995:38).

Indeed, "witnessing" is most certainly the primary "pleasure" provided by the cinematic apparatus. More than this, such "primary pleasures" are maximised during the cinematic foregrounding of spectacle. After the release of *The Wild Bunch*, its depiction of violence was to become symptomatic of the way in which violent spectacles have been used to offer cinema audiences pleasures which are "...both more visceral and out of control...", and thereby also more "realistic" (Jacobs, 1995:38). The famous final sequence of *The Wild Bunch*, for example, achieves its success and notoriety because of the sheer diversity of cinematic techniques. Rapid editing is used to splice together a plethora of shots depicting close-ups of squirting blood, screaming gun-shot victims, out-of-control machines guns, leaping men and every manner of bloodied wound, to convey the gritty realism of an actual gun battle. Thus, while the shoot-out is mediated and represented in terms of camera set ups and editing, the effect is to suggest that "...the reality of gunfire [is] an excessive and bloody confusion, in which it is increasingly unclear who is shooting at whom and where the bullets are coming from" (Jacobs, 1995:38). The "*active mediation*" through Peckinpah's choices with regards to shots and montage (the construction of the scene), is what conveys the "painfully nihilistic" significance of this particular sequence (Jacobs, 1995:38-39).

Peckinpah's exploitation of violent spectacle is significant in terms of the position which *The Wild Bunch* assumes in Hollywood cinema. As has already been discussed, the post-classical era in American cinema has been associate with a turn towards spectacle at the expense of narrative. Jacobs sees the shootout sequence in Peckinpah's western as

> ...an early example of the gradual transformation of modern Hollywood cinema into a pure thrill machine, offering sensation before story, the cause-effect narrative engine becoming (at significant points, in various ways and to varying degrees) subordinate to the spectacle. Seduction by spectacle, providing sensuous and visceral pleasures, is now considered characteristic of many contemporary Hollywood films (though some critics regard it as an infantile characteristic) (Jacobs, 1995:39).

While some critics (and moral crusaders) view spectacles of violence as a harmful trend within the broader culture of infantilisation, it should also be noted that such spectacles have "significant meaning in the real world" (Jacobs, 1995:39). While screen violence is frequently compared with certain forms of sexual pleasure (such as gunfire relating to male orgasm, or acts of violence signifying the sexual dichotomies of control and its loss), violent spectacles also carry narrative impact in terms of their "meaning" for the viewer as "...genuine dramas of mastery and loss" are played out on screen (Jacobs, 1995:40). In any act of violence, each observable detail - the identities of the victim and the perpetrator, the appearance of the hero and the villain, even the intensity of each attack and redness of each drop of blood - contributes to the meaning of the "mini-narrative" which is read by the spectator. In a world where social "realities" (fed to us via the mass media) suggest our vulnerability and our inability to "make a difference", spectacles serve as "narratives" of hope and possibility. They act as visual representations of defiance, outrage and active control. In the sense that action is at least a more positive response to one's situation than passivity. Spectacles of action - even violent ones - reflect "...our recognition of our vulnerability and our desire to fight back" (Jacobs, 1995:40). In the case of the Peckinpah sequence which employs formal techniques to accentuate the horrors, pain and anguish of violent battle, spectacle certainly serves as a "meaningful" (if detached) reflection of our experience of the "reality" which comes to us already mediated in the form of television news, for example.

Marketed as a blockbuster "sword-and-sandal" or "toga-and-javelin" epic, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*[127] (2000) relies heavily and unashamedly on a range of spectacles including bloody battle scenes, splendid architectural settings (recreated using elaborate CGI) and imaginative gladiatorial combat sequences. Indeed, Ian Nathan

notes that *Gladiator* marks the return of a genre which has little regard for subtlety:

> *Ben-Hur* [William Wyler, 1959], *Spartacus* [Stanley Kubrick, 1960], *Quo Vadis* [Mervyn LeRoy, 1951] – that was when they made movies as big as cities, proper, meaty, swallow-an-afternoon films. [...] Ridley Scott...has enriched the legacy of sandals, swords and leather wrist thingees to create a magnificent epic. Hammering on all the touchstones of yore while utilising all the tricks the modern filmmaker has to hand, this is hardly subtle, buts its impact is absolute, its performances loud and clear and its ambition all up there on the screen (Nathan, 2000d:46).

Gladiator's "...closest screen relative..." is Kubrick's *Spartacus* which similarly follows one man's epic heroism and showmanship as he "...battles man and beast for the entertainment of the Roman masses" (Goldman, 2000:80). *Gladiator* also has roots in the 1964 film, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Anthony Mann), which was one of the popular "...biblical and Roman epics of the 50s and 60s [which] were spectacles tooled to lure back the crowds with their historically justified bloodbaths and widescreen scale after television had begun to erode cinema's audience" (Felperin, 2000b). Almost four decades later, *Gladiator*'s violent action sequences are just as likely to be what draws contemporary audiences into cinemas. Indeed, as Steven Goldman (2000:80) notes, "[Ridley Scott] takes a genre which was on life support for 40-odd years and pounds it back into glorious existence". Such "pounding", one may confidently argue, is achieved through the sheer foregrounding of massively successful, powerfully resonant spectacles of violent combat both in the gladiatorial arena and on the battlefield. These spectacles of violence, while not entirely necessary for the unfolding narrative, do serve as "mini-events" which determine the degree of heroism and intrepidity with which the central character, Maximus (Russell Crowe), is imbued. This is, after all, an exercise in "mythic storytelling" which focuses on "...Maximus' path from hero, to slave, to gladiator, to de facto revolutionary..." and thereby presents "...a stoic empowered as much by his own inner strength as his skills in the arena" (Goldman, 2000:81). While the cruel and merciless manner in which a variety of victims are dispatched makes for compulsive and compelling viewing, these scenes communicate ideas related to the function of violence in both historical and contemporary times.

Philip Howard (2000:9) notes that in AD 108, Rome played host to a festival of violence which lasted 117 days and involved 10000 gladiators and the killing of 11000 animals. Furthermore, "[n]astier things happened in the arena than we could stomach today. Women convicted of sexual offences were raped to death by bulls after being smeared with the secretions emitted by cows when on heat". In many ways, the

spectacles of outrageous sex, violence and sexual violence which pervade the explicit version of *Caligula* (Tinto Brass and Bob Guccione, 1980), which has achieved an extraordinary reputation for having crossed boundaries of taste, is a more honest, if socially-unacceptable, cinematic depiction of Roman history - particularly with regards to its decadence and moral ambivalence. Scott's *Gladiator*, on the other hand, "...can only be described as a gloriously entertaining thrill-packer of truly epic proportions" which places it comfortably within the mould of a Hollywood "blockbuster" (Goldman, 2000:81):

> In answer to anyone who argues that the blood, the tigers, the severed limbs and the smashed skulls are all too gruesome, it's still but a mere fragment of what's recorded in records passed down from the pinnacle of Rome's glory. For while much of our perception is Hollywood-created fiction, some facts still remain, and they make for interesting reading. Take, for example, the life of Commodus, who became emperor at 18, was murdered at 30 by a retired gladiator, and had harems containing 300 women and 300 boys. "He was supposed to be a god," explains Scott. "So he would sit in the Colosseum, painted in gold leaf, then jump over stark naked and kill someone in the arena who was already half hacked to death. If I'd shown it like it really was, it would have had to be cut out..." (Pearce, 2000:55).

Blockbuster entertainment involves the "acceptable" packaging of spectacles which enthral but do not offend. Transgressing the boundaries of moral and ethical propriety - as they have been established in terms of Western "reality" - constitutes the unacceptable (which generally does not attract major Hollywood funding outside the comedy genre). The principles of studio economics oblige big-budget filmmakers to create entertainment spectaculars that attract "mass audiences" and remain within the limits of social acceptability (which, in turn, translates into a reasonable certification which ensures higher box office returns).

However, the spectacle that is *Gladiator* is transformed in (artificial) ways into a very different spectacle than the Romans of almost two thousand years ago were likely to have enjoyed. Besides the elaborate costumes and finely perfected sets, cinema allows for sumptuous attention to detail which the camera is able to achieve as it captures every intricately choreographed battle movement (or at least those which Scott has chosen for us):

> This is visceral filmmaking at its finest, painted on the grandest of canvases, and yet, one which maintains the finest eye for detail (Goldman, 2000:80).

The camera transforms mere spectacle into *hyperspectacle*, enhancing and focussing the viewer's attention so that the original (simulated) event is made more spectacular than that which it simulates. *Gladiator* immerses the viewer in moments of intense

violence and graphic bloodshed which impart the narrative with moments of "pure" entertainment while often giving the fight scenes "...a tangible realism that crashes out of the screen" (Nathan, 2000d:46).

Scott's film is very much *about* the function, role and nature of spectacle in human societies. While the cinema spectator watches actors and stunt performers engaged in the simulation of various combat sequences which appear distanced from our "reality" through the period costumes and sets, there is nothing alien or foreign or unusual about the contemporary Western world's love of spectacles of this sort. Indeed, the thousands of cheering "Roman spectators" (referred to by the city's leadership as "the mob") are represented today by fans of contemporary spectacles such as sporting events, "mock" wrestling matches (such as the massively popular *Wrestlemania*) and, of course, blockbuster cinema "events". The similarities between spectacles of violence and sporting events were explored in a futuristic setting in Norman Jewison's *Rollerball* (1975), in which a violent spectator sport is developed simply to keep the masses entertained, distracted and - ultimately - passive. In *Gladiator*, the new and rather unpopular emperor, Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), calls for 150 days of entertainment – featuring gladiatorial spectacles and the like - in order to distract the "mob" from disturbing political events. In this regard, Felperin notes quite specific analogies between the politics of contemporary United States and Rome as it is represented in the film, while the gladiatorial spectacles ironically criticise contemporary cultural preferences:

> While serving up dollops of exquisitely choreographed violence, *Gladiator* the movie is nonetheless implicitly critical of the present-day culture which spawns television shows like, well, *Gladiators* - the spandex-clad mock-heroic gameshow - and makes modern emperors of sportspeople and entertainers. When Commodus' sister Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) tries to persuade Maximus to help her overthrow her brother, he complains, "I have the power only to amuse the mob." To which she replies, "That is power" (Felperin, 2000b).

Nathan (2000d:46) refers to this as "...an interesting if token commentary on the use of violent entertainment to subvert the masses", but the film clearly makes the point that the provision of pleasure and the satisfaction of desire on a mass scale is indeed powerful. This is particularly true of events which divert attention away from "reality" and towards spectacle itself.

Spectacle in contemporary cinema – like artificially-created spectacles throughout history - serves to take the viewer away from "reality":

> This is big-screen spectacle to rival the gory exhibitions of the Roman circus in all their wasteful extravagance. [...] The battles are *breath-taking*; the recreation of ancient Rome is amazing. [...] The whole is hugely *enjoyable*, in the way that only a movie existing purely in the realm of myth rather than reality could be (de Waal, 2000f:11, my emphasis).

Providing "breath-taking enjoyment" is precisely the function of spectacle. While detractors of the high-concept Hollywood blockbuster argue that spectacle detracts from narrative and meaning, it may be noted that the desire for spectacle is natural. Meaningful or not, visuals which enthral purely as a form of superficial entertainment are rendered "meaningful" through their relative success at the cinema box-office. It is the power of these images to engage the viewer at a visceral or emotional level which makes them significant cultural artefacts. The relative impact of various cinematic spectacles on the mass consciousness - the response which they elicit from viewers - signifies something about that viewership. Hollywood blockbusters, after all, use increasingly spectacular, fantastical and elaborate frameworks within which to present the same old ideas:

> ...the hottest ticket in [London] is *Gladiator*, the film everybody has been to, wants to go to and has views about. [... One] reason is that the Roman epic has replaced the Western, once Hollywood's finest genre; it is no longer politically acceptable to show Redskins biting the dust. But something in human - macho? - nature still wants sensational fiction spattered with buckets of blood, in which the good guys win, the Black Hats get their just deserts, and girl gets boy at the end, if only on his deathbed. That is what Hollywood fiction means (Howard, 2000:9).

Indeed, *Gladiator* in many ways epitomises contemporary blockbuster cinema. The film won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 2000 and was cited as one of ten AFI movies of the year. The film was described by the AFI (2001) as "...a kind of spectacle for the new millennium", an updating of the traditional American costume epic, achieved through "cutting-edge technology". It is a film that balances the expectations which accompany particular genres with the phenomenal visual spectacle that can be achieved through contemporary developments in technology and, ultimately, creative vision.