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Final Exam

04/23/2015

2. Jean Baudrillard's "Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion"

Jean Baudrillard argues in the article "Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion" that high definition technology and its goal in reaching the perfect image, is only doing the opposite effect and in the end killing that perfection of illusion. "Images are no longer the mirror of reality; they have invested the heart of reality and transformed it into hyperreality where, from screen to screen, the only aim of the image is the image" (Baudrillard 120). He explains that filmmakers like Wenders, Antonioni, Godard and Warhol contribute to the insignificance of the world and the emptiness of the image by adding a real or hyperreal illusion. Unfortunately many recent filmmakers only fill that emptiness of the image with high-tech machinery which only contributes to a disillusion of the imagination.

It's difficult to see the conceptual breaks in *Jurassic Park* probably because Spielberg subtly transitioned from analog models and digital effects without making it way too obvious. Since CGI was still at the time a very new aesthetic, Spielberg restrained from overloading the frame with too much of it. He seemed to flawlessly blend the analog effects and digital effects together seamlessly, so when seeing the animatronics of the Triceratops, it created a hyperreality giving an illusion that isn't much different from the CGI Tyrannosaurus Rex. The approach to

the special effects in *The Matrix* (1999) was completely different. The Wachowski Brothers were much more confident with the tools of the digital, and like Baudrillard stated, many of the images seemed to be filled with high-tech virtual reality like machinery which no longer transcended hyperreality. “The image can no longer imagine the real because it is the real; it can no longer transcend reality, transfigure it or dream it, since images are virtual reality. In virtual reality, it is as if things had swallowed their mirror” (Baudrillard 120).

When viewing an earlier film like *Jurassic Park*, the film seems to give the impression that the spectator is watching digital special effects being incorporated into the real world. When viewing a later film like *The Matrix*, that film gives the impression that the world is the digital effect, and the people are virtually incorporated into the digital world. *The Matrix* is a perfect cinematic analogy for Baudrillard’s explorations on hyperreality and virtual reality. The story itself questions similar philosophical themes and even takes from Descartes and Plato. How our minds interpret special effects, either as reality or an illusion, is just as much of a sense as touching, hearing, tasting or seeing.

Plato’s famous analogy of *The Cave* which tells the story of prisoners living in a cave is a depiction of a human beings intellectual journey of grasping forms that we believe is real. In the story of *The Matrix*, we are like the prisoners in the cave and the physical world is hyperreality. If we can see beyond that, that is what can enlighten us because we are finally taking off our blinders and seeing the truth. When Neo is unplugged by the Matrix he asks Morpheus why his eyes hurt and Morpheus tells him it’s because he never used them before. In the story of *The Cave* the prisoners believe the illusion of the shadows they make are real, and in the film the people believe the illusion of the Matrix construct is real. Because of that they become prisoners

of their own senses, and to leave the Matrix is the same as the prisoners leaving the shadows behind in the cave.

I believe it's quite foolish to say that digital effects represent the end of cinema because many cinema theorists stated such similar outlandish claims in the past whenever cinema made a sudden transition into another form. Many of the great filmmakers and theorists of the silent era believed the artistic sophistication of the cinema was dead when sound got integrated with film. The same claim was again stated decades later when color became the standard viewing, because many filmmakers and theorists believed black and white was the only effective way in emphasizing the artistic detail and contrast within the cinema art-form. With the sudden emergence and popularity of CGI and 3D digital effects, I'm not a necessarily a fan of it, but I will never condone it. Movie-making is a continuing evolving art-form and I for one welcome all various upcoming technological experiments with the medium.

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3. Linda William's "Melodrama, Horror and Pornography as Body Genre"

In the article "Film Bodies: Gender" Linda Williams explores three specific film texts which are able to manipulate some form of physical reaction within the spectators. She explains that all three texts over-stimulate our sensations and emotions and we can feel manipulated by them, not just mentally but physically, mostly through bodily excesses. The first is Melodrama which is fraudulent or overly sentimental emotions, mainly devised to cheaply manipulate its audience. Melodrama mostly consists of the 'woman's film' which can range from the soapy weepies of *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Dark Victory* (1939), to the artsy melodramas of Douglas Sirk.

The second is Pornography, which presented in films like *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), is usually looked at as gratuitous or unnecessary; as most of the explicit sex and nudity is presented cruelly to simply exploit the female gender. And finally there is violence which presents a misogynistic perversion to voyeurism, fetishism and sadism, mainly upon defenseless female characters. The visual aesthetics of violence has constantly changed and altered itself all throughout the decades, it's gory roots beginning mostly from the 'splatter movies' of the 1980's, most famously with the *Friday the 13th* franchise, and slowly

refining itself into ‘torture porn’, obviously with the glossy and highly profitable *Saw* series. “For if, as it seems, sex, violence, and emotional are fundamental elements of the sensational effects of these three types of films, the designation ‘gratuitous’ is itself gratuitous” (Williams 3).

When watching John Carpenter’s *The Thing*, the shocking and horrifying analog effects immediately over stimulate the spectator’s cinematic senses. The gory effects become a full-frontal assault on our bodily excesses, mostly through our emotions, sensations and fears. We watch in shock as audiences take in graphic images such as faces and rib-cages splitting apart, torn apart arms, legs and limbs, burned alive corpses, snake-like tentacles extruding out of a deceased body, a pair of crab legs growing from a decapitated head and tentacles latching themselves on several other animals while slowly sucking the organic life out of them. To watch these metamorphic transformations occur all throughout *The Thing* it gives audiences bodies a physical jolt and emotional sensation that has no real purpose other than to disgust, excite and disturb.

This is the reason why a film like *The Thing* is looked at more as a ‘body genre’ experience, rather than a special effects extravaganza like Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993). The way the digital effects are approached in *Jurassic Park* is highly similar to a thrilling amusement park ride. The digital effects are big, loud, fun, and sometimes scary but always entertaining and an experience that you find yourself continuing to come back to. Body genre films like *The Thing*, *the Fly* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are disturbing science fiction horror stories which examine the dark mysteries and scientific failure of the human body. They also tend to explore themes like disease, infections, biological deformities and the various anxieties and political fears that we as a society constantly panic about. To witness explicit images like gore and ooze squirt out within twisted and structural deformed bones, organs, dead

tissue and intestines, would make any audience member wince, recoil or physically gag in horror.

“Is it simply the unseemly gratuitous presence of the sexually ecstatic woman, the tortured woman, the weeping woman...and the accompanying presence of the sexual fluids, the blood and the tears that flow from her body and which are presumably mimicked by spectators” (Williams 6). The visceral effects used in the body genre are used specifically to over-stimulate our body excesses and to create some form of physical reaction. The digital effects used in *Jurassic Park* are used specifically to show off its technology and special effects with a sense of awe, excitement and wonder. *Jurassic Park* was made in the same spirit as many of the early pioneers of 'Actualities' and 'The Cinema of Attractions' filmmakers made movies; purely for spectacle and escapism. The practical effects in body genre films are much more visceral, messy and imperfect, presenting rough effects which give off a much more gritty, raw and emotional physical reaction in how we see the cinematic world. I don't get this emotional physical reaction to digital effects, as they appear much too symmetrical and smooth, and way too flawless and perfect in nature to exist in the imperfect world of the cinema.