

**SEEING THE SPELL: BAROQUE, DECADENCE, AND A CINEMA OF DIGITAL-  
ANIMATED LIBERATION**

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**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO**

**JANUARY 2016**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation draws on the artistic traditions of seventeenth-century Baroque and nineteenth-century Decadence in seeking to formulate an analytical vocabulary for the aesthetics of digitally-animated spectacle in contemporary cinema. The dissertation seeks to critique binary antinomies of “narrative vs. spectacle,” and instead propose a concept of “narrativized spectacle” whereby digital visual effects have brought about a profound liberation in cinema’s capacity to envision narrative story-worlds, and depict their workings. It takes the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster as its chief subject for this inquiry, insofar as this is the filmmaking idiom most given to the embrace and deployment of digitally-liberated spectacle, and one which is frequently assumed to be largely bereft of formal and narrative sophistication. This dissertation argues, on the contrary, that the Hollywood blockbuster’s spectacular nature in fact bears complex utopian implications, and that the crudities which occasionally mar the form in practice are more the result of not being imaginatively hyperbolic enough, rather than being too much so. The dissertation’s invocation of Baroque and Decadent aesthetics provides a conceptual apparatus for describing this contemporary cinematic idiom of digitized blockbuster spectacle. It identifies a Baroque aesthetic in such stylistic traits as verticality, profusion, and the sublime, as well as narrative themes of transgression of limits, reverence before imposing scale and grandeur, and refusal to ennoble passivity and martyrdom. Likewise, it identifies Decadent aesthetics in stylistics which privilege the gaze, the enclosed and aestheticized space, and formal ritual, as well as narratives ordered around principles of perversity, self-consciousness, and interconnectedness. The ultimate intervention which this dissertation seeks to make, however, is to demonstrate the centrality – rather than marginality – of animation to cinema, insofar as cel animation has always possessed the graphic freedom to realize any imaginative vision, which digital effects have only recently extended to live-action cinema. All of the aesthetics of Baroque and Decadent blockbuster spectacle that the dissertation traces could be – and, the dissertation seeks to show, were – deployed in the animated feature years in advance of the liberation of representation that digital effects would bring to live-action.

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## Introduction

Cinema is an art, first and foremost. It is also, of course, a business, a mode of propaganda, a form of media address and, to many, a virtual religion; but cinema's most basic nature nonetheless remains as an art form – it remediates and transforms reality in accordance with the impulses and needs of the human imagination. As such, the beauties and splendours of cinema as an art can never be wholly reducible to ideological formulae, economic rationales, or scholarly taxonomies. Its visual and affective dimension will always elude and confound such logocentric and schematic approaches.

In nonetheless attempting, however, to offer some scholarly account of cinematic art, this dissertation's approach is unapologetically stodgy – emphasizing cinema's nature as an art in the longstanding classical sense of the word. I do not seek to exalt the conceptual and intellectual joys of experimental or *avant-garde* cinema; nor do I emphasize a subversive or emancipating aspect in “good-bad” exploitation fare, or camp, or any other kind of “para-cinema” culture; nor do I find a humanist aspect in the kind of low-budget “indie” or “mumblecore” cinema which has often characterized film festivals and other non-mainstream distribution outlets. Rather, this dissertation seeks to emphasize the artistic vitality and creativity of the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster mainstream: the form which – because of the total, liberating, freedom of visual representation granted by digital animation – has the potential to monumentalize onscreen virtually any imaginative vision.

In doing so, this dissertation seeks to look at Hollywood blockbuster films as aesthetic objects, and reflect on what they actually *show*, rather than merely reducing them to grist for an ideological or theoretical agenda. It seeks to appreciate them as containing deep aesthetic implications, which resonate profoundly with older traditions in the arts. As Camille Paglia once observed, behind the trashiest nineteenth-century representational canvas may lie complex Romantic assumptions about nature and society (Paglia 1990, 490). This is an observation wholly in keeping with the spirit of this dissertation, which seeks to critique the – essentially Modernist – anti-mimetic, anti-illusionist assumptions which often underlie so much of Cinema Studies. The terms “cinema” and “modernity” have been juxtaposed with each other with overwhelming frequency in academic publications over the past generation, in the service of a disciplinary premise whereby cinema is essentially a media technology rather than an art form – another

innovation of the nineteenth-century surge of modernity that produced photography, the telegraph, the telephone, the broadcast radio, and recorded music. This age of modernity – of exponential increase in media technology – was, incidentally, also the era which produced Modernism in the arts. The two developments are often taken as almost ineluctably intertwined, and indissociable, in academic Cinema Studies. There is, of course, an undeniable logic to this. Coming at the conclusion of the century that had seen the development of the train and the automobile as well as the aforementioned media technologies, cinema was very much a part of the physical and conceptual shrinking of the world, as well as the immense increase in kinesis. Many of the cinema's earliest practices, therefore – such as actuality documentaries of exotic, far-away places, the *Hales Tours* train simulations, short films such as D.W. Griffith's *The Lonely Villa* (1909) and *The Girl and Her Trust* (1912) that emphasized the telephone and telegraph, and adventure serial such as *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) and *The Hazards of Helen* (1914) which emphasized ceaseless thrills of speed and mobility – embodied and reflected the changed world of which cinema was part. The historiographical impulse to situate cinema in modernity, therefore, is valid, and may still have much to teach us today, as the digital era continues to conceptually shrink the world. The problem, however – which this dissertation will seek to critique – is the degree to which a valid modernity paradigm for cinema has, in tandem with Modernism in the arts, often seemed to become the dominant, default, *only* paradigm for understanding cinema. As a result, Cinema Studies has inherited much of Modernism's self-serving present-ism: the sense that all the numerous centuries of art before its self-declared conceptual enlightenment are now of little more than antiquarian interest, implicitly understandable simply as generalized “classicism” or “pre-modernism.”

This dissertation, however, insists upon the far longer history of aesthetics which make up the Western canon, and understands cinema as a present-day avatar of it. This is no mere personal eccentricity, but a counter-history of the medium which has been ignored. It is no accident that in Italy – one of the swiftest countries to embrace the cinema as a genuine art, rather than a commercial amusement – cinema was promptly put to use creating films reimagining the Roman past; nor is it surprising that in virtually every society, cinema soon began to be used to produce films with religious themes. The newest medium of art was readily pressed into service to re-tell human cultures' oldest and most foundational stories and myths, using its miraculous new imaging powers to draw on the great art of the past, and to make the past live again. To view a

film such as Rossellini's *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1950) is not to gain a look into what Ben Singer has called "the condition of modernity," but to see a sincere imaginative evocation of medieval sanctity. All this still holds true even in the wholly unselfconscious products of the Hollywood mainstream. To see a film such as *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid* (Dwight Little, 2004) fluently, and presumably completely unintentionally, redeploy the crucial "snake eats life-granting flower" device from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* – the Mesopotamian epic poem from four thousand years earlier, often regarded as the oldest surviving work of literature – is to have a profound moment of revelation about historical continuity, rather than modern(ist) rupture in art. Reading Vivian Sobchack comparing James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and Francois Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564), and declaring "So, it seems, the more things change, the more they stay the same," is one of Cinema Studies' great redemptive moments in this regard (Sobchack 2000, 150).

In this spirit, this dissertation will draw upon the twin traditions of seventeenth-century Baroque painting and sculpture, and nineteenth-century Decadent literature to formulate a conceptual apparatus, and explanatory paradigm, for the workings of Hollywood-style spectacle of the early twenty-first century. It does so, moreover, not in any postmodern sense – whereby history is considered arbitrary, and all aesthetic and epistemological idioms from the great reservoir of the past are fair game for appropriation and juxtaposition – but with a humble sense that the social and cultural contexts which produced these two aesthetic modes had little to nothing in common with the consumerist West of the early twenty-first century. That the aesthetic devices, images, and archetypes they drew upon nonetheless reappear so vividly in the spectacles of cinema, therefore, is possibly grounds for suspecting that postmodernism's terminal verdict upon *grand récits* was premature, and that art can yet provide one of the great unifying factors across history. Although postmodern discourses upon the cinema are not this dissertation's main object of critique – relative to modernist ones – there will nonetheless remain a consistent sense, throughout what follows, that aesthetic recurrences across the centuries are more than mere coincidence. They show, rather, that even in the most commercialized and digitized realm of pop culture, cultural continuity rather than rupture or dissolution is the norm. And as such, these two traditions in art – Baroque and Decadent – offer insights into the Hollywood blockbuster mainstream of the latter 2000s and early 2010s for two very different reasons. The seventeenth-century Baroque was, among other things, the absorbing,

spectacularizing, and popularizing, of the representative gains made by the more austere and restrained stylistics of Renaissance art. Renaissance art was revolutionary insofar as it was defined by the rediscovery of Cartesian perspective, and a vastly-increased understanding of human anatomy – the latter fact best-known from Leonardo da Vinci’s dabbling in the subject. In all this, therefore, Renaissance art was marked by a certain scientific and pedagogical aspect, which made it most accessible to a scholarly mindset trained to value order and coherence. As Kenneth Clark put it, “Baroque was a popular art. The art of the Renaissance had appealed through intellectual means – geometry, perspective, knowledge of antiquity – to a small group of humanists” (Clark 1970, 182). Baroque art, however, would take up the Renaissance innovations in realism, and redeploy them in an aggressively spectacular and emotive fashion – one far more calculated to rouse the passions of the non-scholarly mass. One of the best-known crystallizations of this paradigm shift is the difference between Michelangelo’s *David* sculpture (1501-1504) and Bernini’s (1623-1624). The former seems to stand at serene, contemplative repose; while the latter seems suddenly frozen in a moment of violent motion, his body twisted in the middle of the act of throwing his sling, his face intensely and aggressively focused on the result (Clark 1970, 182). The result of this shift from the serene to the spectacular – from the subtle to the sublime – historically, was that the Baroque style, like the Gothic before it, would spread all across Europe in a way that the Renaissance style never did (Clark 1970, 182).

This historical narrative offers readily-apparent parallels with the rise of digital animation in cinema. The idea of conjuring actual, pictorial images on a computer, rather than simply using it as a machine for mathematical calculation – which may or may not have some form of visual interface – had existed since the 1960s. One sees some of the key milestones in realizing the idea in John Whitney’s “films” *Experiments in Motion Graphics* (1968), *Permutations* (1968), *Matrix* (1971), and *Arabesque* (1975). To view these delicate novelties today is to see an entirely new technological and artistic horizon, the applications of which were far from clear yet. It was in no way clear that digitally-rendered images would ultimately see their most iconic use become that of expanding the spectacular-imaginative palette of Hollywood blockbuster cinema. And yet, three decades later, so it would prove. In the same way that many cultural theorists of the early twentieth century bemoaned the path cinema had taken in practice – as a means to the visual telling of narratives, with the visible signatures of its technological artifice hidden as far as possible – digital animation would ultimately find its technological specificity sublimated to a

wider imaginative agenda. It would be valued, less for its own sake, than for the degree to which it enabled the narrativized presentation of photorealistic spectacles of the fantastic. This ability to realistically show the fantastic, in turn, would unlock profound new depths in the nature and meaning of the Hollywood blockbuster. Its affinity with the spectacles of the seventeenth-century Baroque would become straightforwardly self-evident in matters of composition, rather than any manner of rhetorical flourish or interpretive metaphor.

Regarding nineteenth-century Decadent literary art, however, the insights are very different. As is well-known, “decadent” and “decadence” – as they are used in common parlance – are words with uneasy connotations of decay, perversion, maladjustment, and the bringing on of a cultural, moral, and/or intellectual degeneration. In the original nineteenth-century context, these epithets certainly were thrown, and with great frequency, by culturally conservative critics at authors of a certain jaded and irreverent aesthetic stamp. The same dynamic exists, in only somewhat different form, today, as cultural critics who wish the messages and substance or art to be exactly in accord with certain social, political, or moral ideals are forever inveighing against the supposed depravities, crudities, and iniquities of Hollywood and its products. And yet just as the work of the nineteenth-century Decadents has outlasted the complaints of their critics, the cinematic art of Hollywood will outlast its civic-minded critics. The key determining factor is imagination. Reading a work of nineteenth-century Decadence such as Catulle Mendès’s *Méphistophéla* (1890) – in which one chapter depicts a society of Satan-worshipping lesbians celebrating a blood rite involving the feeding of the severed penises of male infants to savage pigs – one certainly does not see art used for socializing effect, nor is one inspired with any strengthened sense of civic virtue. Nineteenth-century Decadent authors themselves would have been the first to admit this. One is, however, struck with sheer force of aesthetic imagination, with Mendès’s fiercely determined evocation of ritual, of alterity, and of naturalization. In a work such as this, he is, by sheer force of imagination, making real a physical and emotional ambience totally foreign to the lived experience of himself or any of his readers. Nineteenth-century Decadence was the crucible of ideas of “art for art’s sake” – whereby an imaginative vision’s social or moral qualities are largely irrelevant compared to its aesthetic qualities. Formal beauty, the Decadent line of thought went, was its own legitimation, and the most progressive or therapeutic text in the world could never be a great work of art if it lacked aesthetic and imaginative beauty. The cinematic nature of imaginative spectacle will be treated at greater

length in a following chapter, but for now it is sufficient to say that, at their best, the Decadent narratives produced by Hollywood are ones in which all pretence at narrative having a civic, socializing function is salutarily dropped, and ideals of beauty and virtuosity are thematically privileged above all else. Viewing a spectacle such as Olivia Wilde's performance as the beautiful computer program Quorra in *TRON: Legacy* (Joseph Kosinski, 2010), one is made part of a cinematic diegesis where cool elegance and *savoir faire* are made into their own narrative legitimation, with pure aesthetics having self-consciously replaced traditional "character development" – without, however, the overall patina of classical narrative being dropped.<sup>1</sup> Decadent logics such as these could, to a certain degree, stand as a uniquely contemporary distillation of the ideals of cinema which criticisms of Hollywood have long sought to resist and break down. As such, the latter are worth casting an introductory glance over.

In 1984, Fredric Jameson wrote that the appeal of beautiful and exciting storytelling is a fundamental problem in getting to grips with cinema, and that "nothing can be more satisfying to a Marxist teacher than to 'break' this fascination for students" (Ray 1998, 74). This rhetoric of "breaking the spell" is a strikingly common one in academic writing on popular culture, and generally takes a tone of moralistic concern in the face of self-interested manipulation. "One can achieve glory through deception," as Jack Zipes articulated the sentiment, continuing that "it is through the artful use of images that one can sway audiences and gain their favour. ... As long as one controls the images (and machines) one can reign supreme..." (Zipes 1995, 33). Zipes's concern with "breaking the spell" is typical of such sentiments, relying as it does on a vocabulary of "seduction," and the "imposition" of "a sense of wholeness, seamless totality, and harmony," which in turn contributes to the self-aggrandising celebration of "the technician and his means" (Zipes 1995, 39-40). Under the influence of "the spell," Zipes further claims, "private reading pleasure" is replaced by an impersonal "viewing pleasure" which has no higher goal than diversion and *divertissement*. The only thing for it, Zipes concludes, is to break the spell, and reclaim a *cinophile* practice which will foster "the development of community" (Zipes 1995, 40).

In a similar but distinct vein from Zipes, Christina Hoff Sommers describes, in her 1994 book *Who Stole Feminism?*, sitting in on Lee Edelman's Tufts University class on Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935). In this class, students were insistently told to scrutinize every work of cultural production for inscriptions of sex bias, whereby "love is a social construct, first and foremost a political weapon," which the "oppressor culture" uses to maintain its hegemony

(Sommers 1994, 105). By the end of the class, Sommers observes, students may have learned a great deal about Hitchcock's use of sexual themes, but could explain nothing about "why Hitchcock is considered a great filmmaker" or his famous "mastery in building suspense," nor "why *The 39 Steps* had set a new style for cinematic dialogue" (Sommers 1994, 106). These students, Sommers concludes, "were being taught to 'see through' Hitchcock's films before they had learned to look *at* them in the first place" (Sommers 1994, 106, italics Sommers's). This idea of "seeing through" films, like that of "breaking the spell," is a ubiquitous one in both academia and non-academic film criticism. It was explicitly articulated by Mark Crispin Miller, in the title of a 1990 anthology *Seeing Through Movies*. "Over and over," he asserts in his introductory segment, "what would have seemed intolerable just a few years ago has now become familiar, in part because the movies now are made deliberately to show us nothing, but to sell us everything" (Miller 1990, 12-13). It is only by "seeing through" this conceit, Miller implicitly declares, that viewers can gain the sophistication to appreciate "how Hollywood's seeming progress away from dated styles, genres, and techniques and toward a new hipness has actually represented a vast regression" (Miller 1990, back cover).

Positions such as Jameson's, Zipes's, and Miller's give an inordinate amount of credit to the political efficacy of cinematic spectacle – its capacity to seduce, and potentially delude and deceive, audiences through the beguilements of its narrativized artifice. This "spell," as so many critics have called it, can only be broken, supposedly, by a Marcuse-ian "great refusal" to allow cinematic spectacle on its own terms. One must indoctrinate students and/or readers to view the narrative schema and techniques of Hollywood-style films as "not benign," and to "see through" them to the reactionary ideological underpinnings which, supposedly, are always to be found at their innermost core. To positions such as these – and especially to the Edelman Tufts University class which Sommers witnessed – this dissertation replies with Robin Wood's words:

Why should we take Hitchcock seriously? It is a pity the question has to be raised... if we were able yet to *see* films instead of mentally reducing them to literature – it would be unnecessary. (Wood 1969, 7, italics Wood's)

Rather than "seeing through movies" or "breaking the spell," I would argue for a "seeing the spell" – an insistence upon treating "the appeal of beautiful and exciting storytelling" of which Jameson speaks as an aesthetic value to be respected, rather than a spell to be "broken." Acknowledgement that the former is not free of ideological ballast does not necessarily mandate the latter.

For example: certainly, when watching a film such as Walden Media and Walt Disney Studios' *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, 2005), one is indubitably viewing certain religious and sexual ideologies play out, but the film incorporates no self-consciousness of its own ideological artifice, no admission of its own illusionism, and no give-away of its own hyper-constructed nature. In light of facts such as these, it is perhaps unsurprising that previous generations of film theorists have elevated all of the aforementioned devices – which *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* lacks – into high criteria of value for “materialist” film practices, and deemed Hollywood-style spectacle to be fundamentally crude and/or retrograde for rejecting them. Absent from this, however, is any acknowledgment that Hollywood spectacles such *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* have other aesthetic dimensions to reveal – ones which are not wholly reducible to the ideological import of its illusionist narrative. A close reading of its visual spectacle aspect, in short, can rapidly reveal some redeeming features which are, simultaneously, within the camp of Hollywood-style illusionism, and yet not wholly reducible to ideology. The film's treatment of Lewis's lion-god Aslan, for instance, is a triumph of realistic digital animation, existing on a totally different aesthetic plane from the stiff, fluffy puppet used in the 1988 TV mini-series. As voiced by Liam Neeson, moreover, the character fully embodies divine strength and nobility as intended. One need only reflect here that, had the same digital character been utilized for a different script – one not built upon bigoted religious reaction – his ultimate inspirational value could be genuinely immense, rather than just a lost opportunity as here. Furthermore, but in marked contrast, the film's villainess – Tilda Swinton's White Witch – represents not a lost opportunity but an entirely successful beguiling screen presence. Her imperious Decadent cool and femininity stand as a walking rebuke to Lewis's misogynist Christian worldview, in a way the character never approached in his book; in turn making her death at the end a matter of sheer, unconvincing convention in a way that is wholly original to the film. Unlike Aslan, there is no need to opine that her character *could* have been effective if only deployed in a different film – the sequence in which she delivers Aslan's Christ-like martyrdom is an unquestionable highlight of this one. The camera bathes her imperious countenance in fiery orange and red light, and she unsheathes her sword with arch hieratic ritualism. The film's cutting-on-action editing, moreover, shapes and frames her actions to make them even more tersely forceful. In this, one sees that the same tradition in religiously-themed art which defined Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* – the

sense of the Devil being more charismatic, and hence more admirable, than God – is still very much in operation in Hollywood. And at an even closer level of formal reading, one is struck by the image of the film’s four child-heroes first arriving in Narnia. Their entrance is conveyed by an ennobling camera dolly across a long shot of them standing atop a huge, snow-covered rock arch, their backs to the camera, facing out towards Narnia’s wintery landscape. The composition vividly evokes Caspar David Friedrich’s famous 1818 *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* painting. Moments of visual beauty and cinematic spectacle such as these – which are largely irreducible to logocentric discourses – can make even deeply ideological, and ideologically-problematic, films intermittently recuperable and worth watching.

This kind of detailed sequence analysis – and its potential for nuancing ideological understandings of narrative film – will be this dissertation’s *modus operandi*. It represents an attempt to recapture, and bring into the contemporary moment, an older tradition in film criticism: the sort of attentive and affective close reading practiced by 1940s critics such as James Agee, Manny Farber, and Parker Tyler – critics whose work pioneered in taking the cinema seriously as an art form, rather than simply as a social or ideological phenomenon, to be understood in psychoanalytical or pedagogical terms. Their writing championed cinema in terms of its sophisticated use of formal and stylistic minutia to create subtle aesthetic implications – often via a purely graphic logic which owed nothing to dialogue, and little to dramaturgies derived from the novel or the stage. Again, these premises are this dissertation’s own. Writing enthusiastically about these critics, David Bordwell declared that:

Just as the New Critics punctured gas-filled generalizations about poetry by exposing the nuances of syntax and metaphor, Agee, Farber, and Tyler provide, in a roundabout way, an answer to the critics of mass culture. Through their precision of observation and the contagious enthusiasm of their rhetoric, they showed that blanket denunciations of entertainment missed areas of vitality and creativity, tendencies toward expressive form and emotional force. (Bordwell 2014b)

These critics “burrow[ed] into the fine grain of American films to an unprecedented degree,” Bordwell declares, and “their sensitivity to nuance and detail carried a force that we seldom find in Frankfurt School writers” (Bordwell 2014b). Bordwell is careful, however, to situate these critics’ achievements in the socio-historical context of America in the 1940s – a time when serious engagement with Hollywood films was a far more radical gesture than in later generations. Re-reading Agee, Farber, and Tyler’s reviews today, they seem relatively uncontroversial, for the reasons that, firstly, the serious discussion of popular culture has now

become a fixture of intellectual life; and secondly, because the kinds of Hollywood films about which they wrote – films such as *National Velvet* (Clarence Brown, 1944), *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (John Huston, 1948), *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941), and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946) – have now been largely purged of their original connotations of lowbrow “mass culture,” and have become acknowledged classics of American art-making. To apply this same close-reading scrutiny to the blockbuster films, liberated by digital animation, of Hollywood in the 2000s and 2010s, however, remains a radical gesture. This is because many critics, and even academic film historians, have effectively come to view the films of the Agee/Farber/Tyler corpus and era as those of the “real” Hollywood, and those of the current, actually existing Hollywood as a usurping profanation or bad simulacrum.

In this, Cinema Studies has finally found its classicist-chauvinist side – the equivalent of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien imposing a new English syllabus at Oxford which banned works published later than 1830 (Miller 2008, 157). There are milder forms of this discourse, to be sure. For instance, when Ruth Vasey, in a 2008 article, presumes to discuss, apparently in the present tense, the issue of the Hollywood majors’ efforts at courting critical respectability, she nonetheless cites only *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (F.W. Murnau, 1927), *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928), and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (William Dieterle, 1935). Or there is a book such as John Wesley Fawell’s *The Hidden Art of Hollywood: In Defence of the Studio Era Film* (2008), which endeavours to explain and justify the continuing relevance of the 1930s Golden Age of the Hollywood studio system, against protests from students and non-*cinephiles* alike that such films are dated and unrealistic. In two hundred pages, however, there is not a single reference to any contemporary Hollywood films, or any systematic comparison or contrasting of aesthetics then and now. This classicist-chauvinism can also take the form of simply declining to stay current, or mention topical films while purporting to discuss topical issues in filmmaking. Scott Bukatman’s work offers a “good” example of this, insofar as in his foundational work throughout the 1990s, he frequently claimed to write about contemporary cinema, but did so without actually discussing any films less than a decade old – largely drawing his entire paradigm from the period, between the late 1960s and early 1980s, when Douglas Trumbull was active in Hollywood. In a more frank mode, moreover, Roger Warren Beebe declared, in a footnote to a 2000 article – one on the supposedly very topical and fast-evolving subject of “the posthuman

cinema” – that his filmography “is limited to 1995 to avoid the necessity of continually updating it to include the latest blockbusters” (Beebe 2000, 178-79, n.40).

There are also, however, more aggressive iterations – usually reducible to the assertion that, at a fundamental level of substance and quality, “something has changed” (Lavik 2008, 174). Mark Crispin Miller’s earlier remarks are representative here. At the conclusion of his introduction to the *Seeing Through Movies* anthology, he purports to anticipate the question “But hasn’t it always been like?”, which he dismisses as “usually intended not to illuminate the issue but to shut down all debate about it” (Miller 1990, 12). “We don’t look back to any golden age,” he declares, but refuses to acknowledge that rejecting the idea of a past golden age must necessarily mean allowing a certain nuance to colour one’s excoriating of present norms (Miller 1990, 12). This, however, Miller will not do. He instead rhapsodizes about a past golden age “when the movies held a certain promise, since denied,” in which the aesthetics of the moment would have seemed “intolerable;” and how once “the movies sold a vision of utopia, allowing... the impulse to escape into another place” and “this vision often made the movies memorable,” whereas “today’s movies offer no utopia, since everything you’d ever want, they say, is here on sale” (Miller 1990, 12/244-45). Another vociferous mouthpiece for this position has been Thomas Schatz. “Somehow,” Schatz once declared, “the classical Hollywood” held a number of competing and contradictory economic and artistic forces in balance, such that it “worked, and it worked well,” and “the New Hollywood and commercial television indicate only too clearly what happens when that balance is lost” (Schatz 2004, 656).

In all this, one often reads it treated as received wisdom that the digitally-liberated blockbusters of the present moment are effectively interchangeable commodities, and that detailed attention to their *mise-en-scene*, editing rhythms, performances, and atmospheric tone is simply so much time and effort wasted. This mindset, moreover, becomes self-reinforcing, as an art form deemed unworthy of serious critical attention will, in turn, receive none, thus perpetuating a dismissive attitude. Why, the thinking goes, expend thought on these films, when they’re so obviously generic trash whose only goal is to stifle thought? David Denby, film critic for *The New Yorker*, comes very close to spelling this out literally in his 2012 book *Do the Movies Have a Future?*, declaring that film critics “don’t, as a rule, flip over special effects and sheer movement” (Denby 2012, 14). As a result, he simply allows himself blanket excoriations of the state of the cinematic art, and jeeringly dismisses his “friends” – who “think that our current

situation is normal” and would see him as a “naïve blowhard” – as being themselves the naïve ones (Denby 2012, 12). The only mild qualification he offers is “please understand that I do not hate all over-scaled digital work,” as though hatred of a certain large quotient of “over-scaled digital work” were simply the natural condition for *cinephiles* (Denby 2012, 5). Although within the mainstream of academia, language is usually more measured and civil, the sentiments at work are, often enough, not fundamentally different. When Thomas Elsaesser refers unproblematically to how “the revival of Hollywood since the 1980s around the re-invention of special effects” has been “interpreted as a breaking away from the classical cinema’s form of narrative-realism-illusionism, with its psychologically motivated characters and single diegesis anchored in time-space verisimilitude,” he is bestowing on this interpretation a legitimacy it does not deserve (Elsaesser 2004, 81). This “classical” form of “narrative-realism-illusionism,” we will see, remains very much alive, well, and normalized in post-1980s Hollywood. For all that many film theorists formed in the context of 1970s modernism may view this normalization as undesirable, the fetish that Hollywood has fundamentally changed still persists, as does the largely unexamined presupposition that films made in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are fundamentally different, in their formal and narrative construction, than the *National Velvet/Treasure of the Sierra Madre/Little Foxes/Postman Always Rings Twice* constellation of seven decades prior.

Beyond aesthetic disdain and theoretical ideology, another factor contributing to the lack of critical and academic interest in the actual substance and texture of the spectacles of Hollywood is hyper-politicization – the almost-unquestioned received wisdom that all Hollywood films are essentially imperialistic, racist, misogynist, etc. in nature. When starting from a premise such as this, burrowing into the fine grain of Hollywood spectacles in search of nuance and detail which indicate aesthetic vitality and creativity seems largely beside the point, if not wilfully naïve. The perceivedly more important question is what the film’s ultimate political import is, minutia of form and style aside. Such a critical position as this, however, can badly coarsen the reading of films. Bristol University professor Matthew Alford’s 2010 book *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* is representative here, insofar as he declares that:

When analysing the films, the book examines the representations of US government, foreigners, and the effectiveness of US power in creating positive resolutions to fictional and non-fictional world events. Without examining these three aspects together we can only attain a partial understanding. (Alford 2010, 34)

This broad methodological approach of “examining the representation” amounts, in practice, to mere plot summary, garnished with trivia and quotations from the actors, directors, or screenwriters involved in the films. Any interpretative attention to formal matters is strictly avoided as obfuscatory. James Cameron’s 2009 mega-spectacle *Avatar*, we learn:

...hides its politics behind the veneer of science fiction – even more so since it used state-of-the-art special effects and positioned audiences to the 3-D glasses much more than its political content. (Alford 2010, 120)

Alford is here saying much more about his own obsessions than he is about *Avatar* or its spectators. He is repeating, in effect, the constant frustration and anxiety of narrowly politicized film critics that cinema’s essential nature lies in its visual-spectacle aspect, which is of necessity difficult to elucidate in logocentric terms, and is not readily reducible to pat political dictums. “This simple fact causes many intellectuals to lose patience,” declares Nicholas Mirzoeff, discoursing upon how “there is still a strong suspicion of visual pleasure in intellectual circles,” which would wish in vain to reduce television simply “radio with pictures” (Mirzoeff 1999, 10).

To take this tendency in film scholarship/criticism to its *reductio ad absurdum*, one need only think of the last years of Stalin’s reign over the Soviet Union, when film production had ground almost completely to a halt, due not only to the insistence upon “one-dimensional political messages” – absolutely guaranteed to be free of any intimation of reactionary sentiment – but also to what was called “the iron scenario” – the absolute primacy of the word over the image, so as to further eliminate any possibility of erroneous political thought (Kenez 1996, 397). With his imprecations against how films such as *Avatar* “hide their political content” in visual pleasure, Alford displays much the same kind of dogmatism and incuriosity towards the subtleties of aesthetics. Robert Hyland’s concluding remark, in a scholarly essay also about *Avatar*, is extreme but, unfortunately, likewise representative. The film, he declares:

...has simply translocated conservative American ideology into a new, 3D, otherworldly forum and has transposed white culture and white male mastery onto the Na’vi population while inculcating them into patriarchal hegemony. (Hyland 2010, 17)

In this, one again sees the banishment of any concern with the intricacies of visual style, or any intellectual curiosity regarding narrative affect or implication. It is a “guilty with no chance of being proven innocent” attitude towards any film produced by the capitalist mainstream for the general audience, who are thus, implicitly, posited as injudicious and easily-duped mass, in need of intellectual guidance by film scholars and critics.

This is a caricature, to be sure, but not as complete a one as might be hoped. The same sense of alienation from one's own cinematic *zeitgeist* is well-caught in Wheeler Winston Dixon's 1998 book *The Transparency of Spectacle: Meditations on the Moving Image*. Of the film *Chain Reaction* (Andrew Davis, 1996), Dixon declares that:

In the opening scene, [Keanu] Reeves escapes on a motorcycle from the confines of an exploding manufacturing plant; it is a thing of bits and pieces, none real, all synthetic, with the two-dimensional non-solidity of computer-generated wreckage strewn about the screen with careless, heedless abandon. None of it holds or engages our attention for a nanosecond. *Independence Day*, *Twister*, *The Frighteners* – the list goes on, a procession of empty pantomimes which both eviscerate and scorn individual imagination and talent, in pursuit of a crushing, all-consuming surplus of spectacular production. (Dixon 1998, 182)

Those words, however, show up another wilful blind spot in discourses critical of the modern blockbuster mainstream: an indifference to cinematic aesthetics so profound that questions of stylistic evolution are simply not admitted of, or taken with any seriousness. Published in 1998, the above excerpt shows Dixon seemingly expending all of his hyperbole at a point when Hollywood's aesthetic of Baroque, digitally-liberated spectacle still had its main evolution ahead of it. Put otherwise, the "pursuit" of the "crushing surplus of spectacle" which Dixon excoriates was still in its early stages. But in his rush to condemn and dismiss such spectacles as devoid of any aesthetic properties whatsoever, Dixon rendered himself willfully blind to such dynamics of evolution. Because *Chain Reaction*, along with the "procession" of other such films Dixon cites, seemed to stand as a rebuke to his deeply-held non-mainstream, classicist-chauvinist criteria, he could only deem them to represent an already fully-achieved, and thus presumably static, anti-aesthetic. To allow that they were a new and evolving popular art form in their own right, with their own internal dynamics and momentum, was wholly incompatible with critical rhetoric such as this, and as a result Dixon's meditations on the moving image have dated very poorly.

Revisited a decade later, and contrasted with a concertedly Baroque and Decadent spectacle such as *Constantine* (Francis Lawrence, 2005) – which incidentally reunited Reeves and Rachel Weisz from the earlier film – Reeves's motorcycle-escape sequence in *Chain Reaction* now appears unremarkable, and Dixon's apocalyptic rhetoric risibly misplaced. His complaints about the film do not hold up to even cursory scrutiny. The early scene which he refers to contains an impressive blue-white digitally-rendered blast, to be sure, followed by violent, photorealistic shock wave which the motorcycle-mounted Reeves must escape in a

brilliant bit of purely visual graphic logic. But it is self-evident to anyone not blind that the effects sequence was a hybrid one, with digital animation being used in tandem with real stunt work and pyrotechnics, especially as flaming debris lands on the solid ground. To simply refer to everything in the sequence as “none real, all synthetic,” and possessing a generalized “two-dimensional non-solidity” suggests that Dixon’s contempt for such films is so complete that he considers himself exempt from even the most basic scholarly standards in discussing them. Furthermore, he appears innocent of the fact that, after this spectacular early sequence, the majority of *Chain Reaction* would revert to conventionally-edited chase sequences, staged with old-school pugilism rather than any intricate, digitally aestheticized choreography. At the very least, this would seem to problematize his remarks about the “pursuit of a crushing, all-consuming surplus of spectacular production,” but again, he gives no indication that he notices or cares about anything of the sort. Evidently the film did not, indeed, “hold or engage his attention for a nanosecond.” Dixon’s pronouncements upon cinematic “imagination and talent,” it will be readily apparent, can safely be ignored. Much more interesting, however, is the fact that – as will be seen in subsequent chapters – the sort of de-aestheticized pugilism which characterized the bulk of *Chain Reaction*’s running time would, by a decade later, be banished almost completely from the stylistics of Hollywood spectacle; while the film’s highly digitally-aestheticized early moments would become paradigmatic of the Baroque and Decadent spectacles of later years.

Dixon’s book was published the same year in which Peter Biskind would speak of “when the future appears darkest, when a picture like the ridiculous *Titanic* has apparently legitimized the studios’ free-spending habits...” (Biskind 1998, 435). Again, it will be seen that this is a critical judgment which has proved remarkably un-prescient. Rather than marking any kind of culmination or conclusion, James Cameron’s 1997 epic *Titanic* was more the curtain-raiser on a bold new era of Baroque and Decadent Hollywood blockbuster spectacles. Treating it in reified fashion, as a rhetorical placeholder for all that he despised about contemporary Hollywood, entailed an unacceptable coarsening of sensibilities on Biskind’s part. And, indeed, upon its re-release in 2012, it could be appreciated that *Titanic*’s visual qualities as sheer spectacle had been resoundingly superseded by subsequent blockbusters. It retains its iconic status, however, because of its vivid, resonant emotional drama – another of the qualities that scholars such as Dixon and critics such as Biskind are so intent to deny to Hollywood blockbusters.

The more one reads of cantankerous critics such as Denby and Biskind; or hostile scholars such as Miller, Zipes, Schatz, Alford, Hyland, and Dixon; or even more moderate voices, such as Jameson and Elsaesser, who nonetheless work from a certain ideological and theoretical standpoint; the more cinema's constitutive nature as an art form seems occluded by doctrinal negativities. The above survey, however, will hopefully suffice to give one a sense of the kind of intervention entailed in insisting upon cinema's aesthetic aspect, and emphasizing the application of textual close reading to the spectacles of the blockbuster mainstream. The fact that digital animation has made it possible to photorealistically show, in moving images, absolutely any imaginative vision is a development that has profoundly utopian implications for art, and this fact should not be obscured by the resentments of *cinephiles* rooted in a classicist-chauvinist mode. The film *47 Ronin* (Carl Rinsch, 2013), for instance, vividly dramatizes its famous eighteenth-century subject, but simultaneously uses digital animation to take up the visual tone of Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1964), elevating it to previously-unimaginable levels of spectacle. In the process of this, it also pays homage to Studio Ghibli's *Princess Mononoke* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1997) and *Spirited Away* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2001), with a mounted chase-fight with a *kirin*, and a witch who can take *ryuu*/dragon form. And on top of all this, the film still finds imaginative scope to work in an unforgettable digital *kitsune*, spider demon, and *tengu*. The visual imagination is expanded and enriched immeasurably by being given cinematic baselines such as this. Mainstream critics, however, proved largely unmoved by, or oblivious to, all this. David Ehrlich of *Film.com* issued a hysterical denunciation of the film, deeming all the aforementioned cinematic artistry to simply constitute the "adding generic flourishes of magic to the story" (Ehrlich 2013). Writing in *The New York Times*, meanwhile, Nicolas Rapold was simply dismissive, referring to the film's visual richness variously as "flourishes" which "can be diverting;" as "dutifully arranged action building blocks... ploddingly punctuated by landscape shots;" and as "the shadowboxing of computer-aided filmmaking" (Rapold 2013). A more complimentary, though still somewhat ambivalent, Peter Debruge wrote in *Variety* simply that "anything that might look cool when rendered by the industry's finest effects houses is fair game" (Debruge 2013). And writing in *The Village Voice*, Alan Scherstuhl's chief observation was to complain about the Japanese actors' "seem[ing] not to have mastered English l's and r's," before adding that "That isn't a complaint, really," since "the quirks of ESL at least offer a touch of humanity to this shopworn spectacle" (Scherstuhl 2013). In all this, one again sees the

classicist-chauvinist mentality – an allegiance so complete to what Elsaesser called “the classical cinema’s form of narrative-realism-illusionism, with its psychologically motivated characters and single diegesis anchored in time-space verisimilitude” that it generates a sense that the digital age’s great imaginative, imagistic spectacles are illegitimate, because they go beyond what should supposedly be possible under this aesthetic. Indeed, reviewing *47 Ronin* for the *Los Angeles Times*, Mark Olsen came astonishingly close to spelling this out literally, disparagingly referring to director Carl Rinsch as displaying “the shortcoming of someone coming from the image-based world of commercials and advertising” – as though cinema were not itself an inherently image-based medium (Olsen 2013). Olsen describes the film’s immense visual achievements as being “hung up on creating a fantasy-world version of Japanese feudal life,” apparently under the baffling impression that this will connote negatively; and declares, furthermore, that “There are moments of genuine beauty and a few terrifically eye-popping effects, but no feel yet for storytelling” – in the evident expectation that this must automatically convey a negative balance, to the film’s discredit (Olsen 2013). It was left to Kim Newman, writing on the opposite side of the Atlantic in *Empire* magazine, to give the film its due, praising its “Harryhausen-cum-Kurosawa fantasy scenes,” and ultimately deeming it “a decent, colourful samurai spectacle with a classical look” (Newman 2014).

Newman’s offhand reference to the film’s “classical look,” incidentally, is crucial, insofar as it contains a truth that runs contrary to one of modernism’s key terms of value, and thus a potent criterion of much film theory and criticism over the years: the placing of an inordinate emphasis on originality, novelty, and the unprecedented. This emphasis, however, denies the historical fact that art has always been an interlocking, intertwined, and interconnected field of reciprocal influence and contradiction. Within these terms, producing a new work of art simply meant producing a new iteration or variation on these grand traditions – its worth to be judged on the basis of its skill and imagination as such. Modernism, however, rejected this logic and made an absolute criterion of originality; the sense that, in the words of Stanley Cavell, it was no longer enough “to produce another instance of art” – one had, rather, to produce “a new medium within it” (qtd. in Krauss 2005, 102-103). This aesthetic assumption is still powerfully visible in much of Cinema Studies, where – it will be seen in future chapters – there is often an explicit theoretical assertion that cinema only becomes of interest when it ceases to be cinema, as traditionally understood, and becomes a variant media experience supposedly possessed of more

originality. This dissertation, however, rejects this overvaluation of originality, and seeks instead to emphasize the more classical value of virtuosity – an aesthetic criteria far better suited to understanding the virtues of the digitally-liberated spectacles of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters. It is this concern with formal virtuosity, moreover, that underlies this dissertation’s commitment to close sequence analysis in the Agee/Farber/Tyler mode – to demonstrating the protean intricacy of cinema’s meaning-generating capacity. In this, I am influenced by the ideas of the German idealist philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, who declared that works of visual art are not mere pleasurable decoration, but can function as philosophical texts in their own right. A painting such as Raphael’s *School of Athens* fresco (1509-1511), Schelling declared, was more than mere sublime visual stimulation – it was a complex proposition of a worldview in its own right. This dissertation undertakes to discuss the Baroque and Decadent blockbuster spectacles of the Hollywood mainstream of the 2000s and 2010s in the same spirit.

To discuss films in terms such as this is necessarily to problematize Tom Gunning’s highly-influential “Cinema of Attractions” thesis. That thesis had the disadvantage of only going back as far, in history, as was necessary to evoke a sense of the modern fairground and carnival culture, and their humble, folk traditions of spectacle. Without wishing to deny these ancestral roots of the cinema, this dissertation is nonetheless seeks to emphasize that an exclusive focus upon this ontology of attractions – to the exclusion of other, more visually and conceptually challenging aesthetic traditions – makes for an aesthetic paradigm that has little room for the truly grandiose and imperious in art. The overawing scale and sublimity of seventeenth-century Baroque art, and the arch-worldly jadedness of nineteenth-century Decadent art – the criteria which this dissertation seeks to re-emphasize, in short – find precious few analogues in the fairground/carnival aesthetic which Gunning theorized as constituting early cinema’s chief ontology. This, in turn, tends to perpetuate a potentially problematic distinction between the concepts of entertainment, spectacle, and art, which emphasizes separation rather than synthesis. The profound influence of Gunning’s paradigm, therefore, makes it possible for one of the more widely-cited works on the digital in cinema – Andrew Darley’s *Digital Visual Spectacle: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (2000) – to unproblematically begin its intellectual chronology at “the end of the eighteenth century,” when “the traditional rural or ‘folk’ forms and genres,” such as “juggling, clowning, and acrobatics,” began to be “rapidly supplanted by commercial forms of popular entertainment” (Darley 2000, 39). Darley assumes a supposedly

high-cultural disdain for mere popular entertainment, and poses the rhetorical question of “Is ornamentation, style, spectacle, giddiness really aesthetically inferior, or just different (other) to established notions of literary, classical, modernist art?” (Darley 2000, 6). The unexamined assumption that “spectacle” is synonymous with “entertainment,” and that both will be initially understood as antithetical to “art,” however, seems problematic. In re-emphasizing the sixteenth-century Baroque and nineteenth-century Decadent traditions that Darley’s book does not – traditions in no way comprehensible in terms of rural or folk genres such as juggling, clowning, and acrobatics – this dissertation seeks to offer a reminder that aesthetic values such as ornamentation, style, spectacle, etc., can take on immense visual and conceptual sophistication, so as to seem inherent to “art,” rather than “other” than it. As will be seen in a subsequent chapter, there is an intermittent discourse, in modernist-minded film theory, which values the supposedly humanizing element of imperfectly hand-made special effects more highly than the illusionism of photorealistic digital animation. The implicitly condescending valuation of “ingenuity” in a discourse such as this is the same as that at work in any discourse which seeks to posit cinema’s origins *only* in the rustic fairground, and ignores aesthetic criteria – such as the exultant, the grandiose, the imperious, the jaded, etc. – which might visually and conceptually awe or challenge spectators, rather than simply amusing or diverting them. Indeed, as we will see in the following chapter, the spectacles of Hollywood blockbuster films – rendered with the graphic freedom of digital animation – are a nexus of art-making which benefits greatly from such terms of analysis, revealing aesthetic and ideological sophistication and protean-ness often overlooked by standard critical discourses.

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<sup>1</sup> This last qualification – regarding the patina of classically narrative ultimately being retained – is, we will see in later chapters, a crucial one to understanding the distinction between Decadent and modernist aesthetics upon which many scholars have dwelt. It is the difference between an aesthetic that ultimately retains an idiom of classical narrative, despite investing it to the last degree with self-consciousness; and an aesthetic that wilfully breaks with classical narrative transitivity, for the sake of producing more self-referential, overtly metaphorical, or provocatively cryptic aesthetic effects.

## **Chapter One – Cinema and the “State of the Art”**

The following chapter will seek to map out the aesthetic nature and contours of the contemporary cinema into which Baroque and Decadent stylistics have penetrated to such great effect. It does so in full awareness that the “digitally-liberated” cinema with which this dissertation is concerned is a development wholly of the early twenty-first century. While digital visual effects existed and were used in blockbuster films of the 1980s and ’90s, they were not yet a constitutive liberation. This is because – still being far more expensive, and not yet wholly normalized to audiences’ eyes – they often imposed as many creative constraints as they removed, requiring aesthetic foregrounding to justify their cost and, in turn, mandating that a film be sufficiently mainstream-friendly to recoup such a budget. It was only with the loosening of these constraints as the 2000s wore on that digital truly became liberating. It is in recognition of this that the following chapter, like this dissertation as a whole, will keep the contemporary rigorously in sight, and avoid assumptions that films from the 1980s or ’90s still possess any significant explanatory value today.

This dissertation’s explanatory parameters for contemporary cinema are fourfold. Firstly, there is the sheer fact of spectacle – the realization that the artifices of cinema allow for the visibly moving, audible, onscreen realization of a filmmaker’s imaginative vision. In this fact inhere utopian and emancipatory potentials for spectators, who are able, in effect, to peer through a window into the narrative functioning of another world – one different from their own, and ideally one more imaginatively stimulating and emotionally fulfilling. In essence, escapism in the very best, most liberating, sense of the word – although, as will be seen, there is an intermittent modernist discourse in Cinema Studies which deems such escapism to in fact signify the very opposite. This basic fact of cinema’s nature as spectacle can be, and is, used for many diverse purposes, however. The second of this dissertation’s explanatory parameters for current cinema lies in the emphasis of its single most popular, most widely-seen form: the spectacular blockbuster film. While many modes of “experimental” and “art” cinema are defined by a principled refusal of the medium’s spectacular aspect – or the repurposing of it for different, non-photorealist narrative purposes – the blockbuster, in Hollywood and around the world, is defined by its total embrace of it, and the constant pushing of it to new heights. Over the past decade-and-a-half, however, this has become even more the case than hitherto, because of the third

explanatory parameter for current cinema: the normalization of photorealistic digital visual effects (hereafter DVFX). This has liberated Hollywood blockbuster productions – from the very first blank page of the screenplay – from having to take any thought over what imaginative spectacles, at a fundamental theoretical level, can or cannot be shown. As the expertise becomes more and more diffused, and the technology becomes simultaneously cheaper and more advanced, an entire industry of DVFX “houses” have emerged to enable filmmakers to realize their visions with greater imaginative fealty. Screenwriters and directors are now, in effect, limited only by their imaginations, not just at the blockbuster level, but all the way down to low-budget art house and independent productions.

This, in turn, brings one ineluctably to this dissertation’s fourth and penultimate explanatory parameter for current cinema: the fact that this state of affairs is in fact not new, but rather has existed all along throughout cinema’s history, in the form of animation. Historically marginalized, in practice, to the realm of the ephemeral cartoon and/or children’s entertainment, animation nonetheless always possessed, in theory, the same graphic freedom that photorealistic DVFX have now normalized for the rest of cinema. Drawn cel animation offered, in essence, the possibility of what I will call the “imaginative transcribing” of any spectacular narrative vision, with no necessary presumption of a child audience. For various reasons, this possibility was never exploited as widely as possible within the blockbuster mainstream. As we shall see, however, from the blossoming of the “Disney Renaissance” in the latter 1980s onward, cel animation came extremely close, in a certain corpus of films, to normalizing the notion of such an imaginatively-transcribed blockbuster for the general audience. This last fact, incidentally, will necessitate this dissertation’s only qualification on rigorous contemporaneity. The Baroque stylistics which would come to define Hollywood’s “live action” spectacles of the 2000s and 2010s were, in essence, already manifesting themselves in what I will call “Disney-style” films – films not necessarily released by the Walt Disney Studio itself, but executed in the very much the same cel-animation-as-simulacrum style – two decades in advance. Moreover, it will be seen that while my Introduction made frequent reference to “digital animation,” and the above parameters have referred, on the one hand, to DVFX; and on the other, to cel animation; it will become clear as we go on that there was, over this whole period, considerable – indeed enabling and constitutive – overlap between the two. This hybrid synthesis of cel and digital, in turn, made the Disney-style corpus of the late 1980s to early 2000s wholly distinct from cel-animated films of

past generations, as well as from wholly digitally-animated films of the generation since. The spectacles they offer, thus, form a unique island in film history, and are deserving of more substantive discussion than they have yet received – from a perspective that accepts the intrinsic nature of spectacle to cinematic art.

“Spectacle” – this dissertation’s first and most primary explanatory parameter – must be understood as an aesthetic act of imaginative *showing*. In cinema, as with painting before it, appreciating spectacle entails an insistence, in the Romantic vein, upon evaluating works of art not on the basis of their fidelity to our immediately-familiar empirical surroundings, or “reality,” but on the basis of their fidelity to the visionary potential of the imagination. Caspar David Friedrich, for instance, never saw the jagged mountains of polar glacier ice depicted in his *Sea of Ice* canvas (1823-1824), but rather declared that “The painter should not just paint what he sees in front of him, but also what he sees within himself” (Paglia 2013, 86). DVFX have enabled this same mentality to inhere, as never before, in cinema as well as painting. In short, a cinematic aesthetics of spectacle is one which exalts the power of imaginative illusion, and hence the legitimacy of illusionism. From the very start, thus, this situates spectacle in a contrary position to theories of film influenced by radical modernism – articulated by theorists such as Colin McCabe, Noel Burch, Peter Wollen, Stephen Heath, and D.N. Rodowick, among many others – which hold that the proper function of art-making and criticism is the critique and undermining of illusion.

This dissertation’s definition of spectacle, however, also breaks with some previous avenues of positively theorizing the term, insofar as gender and sexuality do not play a significant part. This, in turn, is a recognition of how the liberation of cinematic aesthetics afforded by DVFX has fundamentally altered certain assumptions about filmmaking practice. In previous generations, there was a persistent masculinist understanding of cinema’s ontology whereby “spectacle” was, to a certain degree, inherently libidinal. In short, an onscreen female presence, in whatever degree of sexualisation, was virtually indispensable to creating a work of cinematic spectacle. Jean-Luc Godard once famously declared “all you need to make a film is a girl and a gun.” Years before him, Charlie Chaplin had likewise declared “all I need to make a comedy is a park, a policeman and a pretty girl.” The classical Hollywood musical – most blatantly with a film such as *Dames* (Ray Enright & Busby Berkeley, 1934) – would virtually always have the spectacle of female performance as its chief attraction. And this is to say nothing of films such as

...*And God Created Woman* (Roger Vadim, 1956) or *BUtterfield 8* (Daniel Mann, 1960), which existed chiefly to showcase the luxuriating forms of Brigitte Bardot and Elizabeth Taylor.

In light of all this, and due to the immense impact of Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" – in which she declared that "woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle" and "the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film" – what theorizing has been done around the concept of "spectacle" in Cinema Studies has tended to emphasize issues of gender and sexuality (Mulvey 1975, 11). In the wake of Mulvey's essay one sees this in works such as Lea Jacobs and Richard Cordova's "Spectacle and Narrative Theory" (1982), which analyzed the figure of Marlene Dietrich in *The Scarlet Empress* (Josef von Sternberg, 1934) at length; Dana Polan's "'Above All Else to Make You See': Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle" (1982); and Steve Neale's "Masculinity and Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema" (1983). The same tendency can still be seen in recent years, as with Tom Brown's 2008 *Screen* essay "Spectacle/Gender/History: The Case of *Gone with the Wind*." On the one hand, all this is entirely unsurprising and legitimate. As outlined above, the spectacle of the sexualized female form has long been understood to be one of the key components of cinema as a popular commercial art – one joined in the 1980s, as per Susan Jeffords's *Hard Bodies* (1993), by the spectacle of the hyper-masculinized male form. On the other hand, however, an unwillingness or inability to take theorizing of spectacle beyond the limits of the human form creates some blind spots in Cinema Studies' consciousness of its subject – blind spots that only grow larger with the ever-increasing normalization of digitally-liberated spectacle. With the rise to ubiquity of DVFX which can create any entity or environment, a fundamentally libidinal logic of spectacle is no longer so dominant in cinema. Against the few moments of Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf* (2007) which use DVFX to create the titillating spectacle of a sensually nude, golden Angelina Jolie, the entirety of the film has DVFX used to create spectacular environments, creatures, and action sequences which seem largely inassimilable to the tradition of film theory quoted above. The persistence of a libidinal understanding of spectacle was grounded in the assumption that cinema could not fundamentally transcend the human scale, and that the visceral, beatific presence of the human form must therefore be the medium's primary mode of spectacle. DVFX, however, have made such transcendence not merely possible, but normalized.

The same year that *Young Sherlock Holmes* (Barry Levinson, 1985) introduced large numbers of moviegoers to their first narratively-integrated digital effect – in the spectacle of the “Stained Glass Knight” – Paul Schrader’s film *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985) tellingly evoked this problematic. A sequence depicting the famous Japanese writer-megalomaniac’s trip up to extreme altitude in a combat fighter is set to the following narrational prose poem:

The vast upper atmosphere, where there is no oxygen, is surrounded with death. To survive in this atmosphere man, like an actor, must wear a mask. Flying at 45,000 feet, the silver phallus of the fuselage floated in the sunlight. My mind was at ease, my thought process lively. No movement, no sound, no memories. The closed cockpit and outer space were like the spirit and body of the same being. Here I saw the outcome of my final action. In this stillness was a beauty beyond words. No more body or spirit, pen or sword, male or female. Then I saw a giant circle coiled around the Earth. A ring that resolved all contradictions, a ring vaster than death, more fragrant than any scent I have ever known. Here was the moment I had always been seeking.

As Schrader/Mishima’s reference to “the silver phallus of the fuselage” make clear – and the connotations of the “giant,” “coiled,” “fragrant” ring make tantalizing ambiguous – this moment in *Mishima* does not reject notions of a sexualized aesthetic of spectacle. Rather, it incorporates them, and then imaginatively goes further – into the realm of vast environments that dwarf the human form and its gender signifiers. This spectacular image – of a great refraction of light in the upper atmosphere, which seems to encircle the entire curvature of the Earth – is obviously one which transcends the conceptual and aesthetic limits of the merely human. Any academic discourse on “spectacle,” therefore, which stops at the gendered human form, and offers no way of accounting for images such as this, is clearly an inadequate one. And again, this inadequacy becomes more self-evident by the year. Twenty years after Schrader’s *Mishima*, for example, the same image of a world-bestrident circle of light would be redeployed in a far less cerebral and aestheticized, more pulpy and popular way, in the film *Stealth* (Rob Cohen, 2005). Here, a giant zeppelin-like fuel tanker, cruising at a great altitude, has its drogue hose shot off by EDI – a computer-controlled plane which, shades of HAL 9000, has gone murderously rogue. The drogue hose begins spraying fuel into the sky, in a haphazard circle around the plane flown by the film’s hero, at which point EDI fires into the shower. The resulting conflagration is so massive that the film cuts out to a shot of the Earth from high orbit to fully encompass it. Again, this is a moment of undeniable spectacle, but one which is not couched in terms of gender and sexuality, or their social situation. Rather, the inhuman scale and scope of spectacles such as these is such as to

seemingly daunt the spectator into passivity – a state in which, as Richard Dyer put in a 1994 essay:

To go into an action film is to sink back in the seat and say, ‘show me a good time.’ Maybe we also cringe, shield our eyes, convulse our bodies ... but mentally we abandon ourselves to the illusion. (Dyer 2000, 20)

This is a fact which has aroused great resistance in some currents of film theory and criticism; which Dyer, in turn, would dissect with a wry eye to their gendered and sexual overtones. There is often a discernible note of male heterosexual panic in resistance to vast, digitally-liberated spectacles, he insouciantly points out, grounded in the terror of appearing passive, and thus feminized, before the cinematic address – “a libidinal fear of passivity itself” (Dyer 2000, 20). Observing that “modern discussion of cultural pleasures” tends to take sexuality as its primary interpretive metaphor, Dyer observes that “a phantasm of sex as assault has haunted the minds of heterosexual male intellectuals. As result, when they have imagined passivity in sex they have imagined something terrifying” (Dyer 2000, 20-21). The same ultimate instinct seems to have governed theoretical understanding of the film-viewing experience:

The worst thing imaginable is to go to the cinema and lie back and enjoy it. Which suggests another terror, lurking beneath the fear of being like, and being treated like, a woman. For what kind of man is it who lies back and enjoys it? A queer, of course. Queers of every sex know that passivity need not be alarming, but then that’s queers for you, not a palatable message for chaps hell-bent on being straight. (Dyer 2000, 21)

Ultimately, thus, Dyer declares that there inheres in Hollywood’s most archetypal action spectacles – the tradition in which *Stealth* was an honourable, if flawed, new entry – a delicious paradox. On the one hand, these films “promote an active engagement with the world” in the traditional hetero-masculinist mould, but on the other hand, “enjoyment of them means allowing them to come to you, take you over, do you” (Dyer 2000, 21). “For the male viewer,” Dyer concludes, viewings of action spectacle films ultimately “have a lot in common with being fellated,” a situation in which, for whatever reason, “men cherish the illusion that their masculinity is not compromised” (Dyer 2000, 21). This is a delicious paradox indeed, and one that, we will see, provocatively problematizes much of the radical modernist tradition in film theory.

Moving on from the sexualized aspects spectacle, and the intellectual reactions it provokes, however, Dyer’s chief importance to this dissertation lies in the (at least somewhat more) gender-neutral schema suggested in his 1977 article “Entertainment and Utopia.” Here,

Dyer formulated a cogent defence of cinematic spectacle which hinged on the fact that, in a society where poverty, ugliness, and seemingly unaccountable authority are the dissatisfying norms of day-to-day existence, entertainment fosters to real needs in keeping alive the utopian imaginative possibility of something better:

Two of the taken-for-granted descriptions of entertainment, as ‘escape,’ and as ‘wish-fulfillment,’ point to its central thrust, namely, utopianism. Entertainment offers the image of ‘something better’ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized. (Dyer 1993, 273)

Whereas the reality of life may be scarcity and inequality, entertainment – particularly the most popular, supposedly vacuous and lowbrow forms of entertainment, such as Hollywood musicals and variety revues – will unselfconsciously proffer spectacles of abundance and equality for the individual and others (Dyer 1993, 277). In place of exhausting and alienating separation of work and pleasure, Dyer declares, entertainment will offer visions of real engagement in living – of lifestyles in which work and play are meaningfully harmonized (Dyer 1993, 278). Current cinematic spectacles such as the *Fast & the Furious* series – in which adrenaline-pumping automotive hijinks are both beloved hobby and lucrative criminal profession – bear him out strikingly in this.

“The advantage of this analysis,” Dyer continues, “is that it does offer some sense of how entertainment *works*,” insofar as it emphasizes how, whatever else it may do, entertainment responds to “real needs *created by society*” (Dyer 1993, 278 italics Dyer’s). An entertainment that “simply reproduce[d] unproblematically patriarchal capitalist ideology” would be no entertainment at all, he emphasizes, because it would satisfy the utopian imaginative longings of nobody except the very few who benefit from the existing world order, and wish to be reassured of its perpetuity (Dyer 1993, 273). There is a deeper reason than the incidental industrial workings of Hollywood that the recent Ayn Rand trilogy of *Atlas Shrugged: Part I* (Paul Johansson, 2011), *Atlas Shrugged II: The Strike* (John Putsch, 2012), and *Atlas Shrugged: Who is John Galt* (James Manera, 2014) were ephemeral curiosities rather than mainstream blockbusters. The system of modern corporate capitalism instills too many vexations, dissatisfactions, and unmet needs to be openly celebrated, and even though Hollywood is very much part of this system, the actual spectacles it produces must nonetheless seek to redress these needs, rather than praise the system that produces them. In this, as Dyer puts it, the spectacles of entertainment

forms are deeply contradictory. They aim, on the one hand, to evoke the world in all its real imperfection, as the audience is familiar with it; while on the other hand, they also seek to conjure a spectacular ur-reality whose chief aim is “pointing to how things could be better” – a balancing act which “is, ideologically speaking, playing with fire” (Dyer 1993, 279). It is entirely possible for a Hollywood blockbuster costing untold millions of dollars – which logically ought to have nothing of the anti-capitalist about it, and may indeed seem overtly apolitical to the last degree – to nonetheless create an imaginative zone for the spectator where, in contrast with the pleasures of the digitally-enabled spectacles onscreen, the squalid real-world vexations of capitalism seem all the more contemptible and unjust. One can derive this effect from films as varied as monster spectacles such as *Godzilla* (Gareth Edwards, 2014), complex science fiction visions such as *Star Trek Into Darkness* (J.J. Abrams, 2011), or young adult fantasies in the *Percy Jackson/Mortal Instruments* vein. What all these films could be said to have in common is the offering of spectacles that show up the reified “reality” of modern corporate capitalism as pathetically insignificant by contrast – and so stoke aggravation at still being subject to them. In keeping with this, Dyer quotes Hans Magnus Enzensberger to assert that the forms of mass entertainment and popular culture will bespeak “the elemental power of deep social needs” as long as there persist frustrations with inequality and lack of opportunity that invite a utopian response (Dyer 1993, 277).

A film such as *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island* (Brad Peyton, 2012) demonstrates all this fluently. The film follows a young man named Sean (Josh Hutcherson) and his stepfather Hank (Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson) down to Palau, where they charter a plane into the open Pacific, are knocked out of the sky by a dauntingly intense digitally-rendered hurricane cycle, and regain consciousness on the beach of the titular *Mysterious Island*. From here, the film goes on to offer a litany of digitally-rendered spectacles, in which familiar scale is gloriously thrown out the window. The characters interact with condor-sized butterflies, cat-sized elephants, whale-sized lizards, and fly atop buffalo-sized bumblebees, while evading the even more massive birds that would like to eat their mounts. Their quest eventually takes them to the centre of the island, where lies the lost city of Atlantis, and within that the tomb of Captain Nemo. The characters then realize, however, that the island is about to sink – destabilized by a central volcano that erupts with molten gold. They make their way to the sunken harbour where the *Nautilus* is moored and, evading a giant electric eel, commandeer it and escape through the island’s

volcanically-disintegrating bowels. All this, moreover, is in the course of a film that, relative to comparable blockbuster fare throughout 2012, was not even appreciably more spectacular than the norm. Throughout it all, however, Dyer's theses on entertainment's utopian-escapist aspects remain a vivid constant. The film's narrative has it that while Sean simply wishes to find his missing grandfather (ultimately played by Michael Caine); their pilot's daughter (Vanessa Hudgens) faces the vexation of not being able to afford to go to college. This obstacle is resolved, in the film's narrative, by the recovered *Nautilus* now providing a lucrative tourist attraction, but any viewer in modern North America will recognize the wish-fulfilment aspect here. Contemplating the horrific reality of student debt in today's increasingly-corporatized university system, one understands that such a wonderfully convenient solution to an all-too-real problem is only possible in such a different reality, where all the other aforementioned wonders are also possible. The strategic indignation at such keeps the utopian imagination alive, however.

It is certainly not as if utopianism has never figured in discourses on popular spectacle before the digitally-liberated present. It is simply that much writing about the subject has, historically, treated it as axiomatic that the spectacles of Hollywood are a betrayal of utopian possibility rather than a fulfillment of it. Indeed, this is intellectual terrain where Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's "Culture Industry" thesis is adhered to in virtually unaltered form: the pervasive sense that all spectators bring the desire for utopian escapism and transcendence – which Hollywood-style spectacle promises – with them to the movie theatre, but Hollywood spectacles then perversely and sadistically do not deliver. As Adorno and Horkheimer put it:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. (Adorno and Horkheimer 1982, 139)

And:

The paradise offered by the culture industry is the same old drudgery. Both escape and elopement are pre-designed to lead back to the starting point. Pleasure promotes the resignation which it ought to help to forget. (Adorno and Horkheimer 1982, 142)

One can see the same sentiment expressed without modification in Peter Wollen's declaration that "The world of the spectacle is an imaginary world, offering transient and illusory satisfactions, while thereby denying access through the signifier to cure or truth" (Wollen 1995, 9). Or in Jack Zipes's declaration that modern Hollywood spectacle stands guilty of "transfix[ing]

audiences and divert[ing] their potential utopian dreams and hopes through the false promises of the images... cast upon the screen” (Zipes 1995, 22). These assertions can stand for many more like them. Thus, Dyer’s assertion that the images cast upon a movie screen may actually constitute a legitimate incarnation of the audience’s utopian hopes and dreams, rather than an insidious diverting and neutralizing of them, constitutes a radical dissent from the Frankfurt School rhetoric which Wollen’s and Zipes’s assertions descend from. Such denunciations of Hollywood-style spectacle’s utopian potential are, in turn, very much of a piece with a certain discursive tradition of radical modernism in Cinema Studies. From Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni’s schema of “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” (1969), and Wollen’s article on the “counter-cinema” of the Godard of *Vent d’Est* (1972), it has been one of the foundational doctrines of this tradition that Hollywood-style illusionism must be critiqued and broken down, and its vaunted visual and narrative pleasures and ideological recuperations replaced with more ideologically disruptive – and thus supposedly more honest, transparent, intellectually stimulating – aesthetics of narrative dissonance and unpleasure.

Underlying much of this radical modernist tradition’s antipathy towards Hollywood-style spectacle is a distrust of what Geoff King described – in his 2000 book *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* – as the “dominant strain in the history of Hollywood cinema,” involving “the attempt to create an ‘invisible’ style that does not draw attention to its own process” (King 2000, 51). This is self-evidently incompatible with D.N. Rodowick’s declaration – in his 1988 book *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* – that “the aim of modernist film practice is considered to be a refutation of the transparency of conventional film technique through the full exploration of the material properties of cinematic expression” (Rodowick 1988, 5). Modernism and its attendant ideologies generally demand the foregrounding of process – the visible demystification of the mechanisms of style. What it is that a film actually depicts and dramatizes, and how, is held to be less important than the sheer fact *that* it does so, which is the first thing to be lost sight of in the “invisible style” which historically dominates the Hollywood cinema. At one point, King rhetorically asks:

What of the direct relation between the viewer and the spectacle? ... Are we pulled into the narrative space of the text – the ‘diegetic’ universe of the world on screen – or do we sit back at a greater distance, enjoying the spectacle in its own right? It is not easy to answer this question in any definitive manner. (King 2000, 44)

The radical modernist discourses that Rodowick traces, however, were deeply committed to the ideal that the answer should be the latter – that the film-viewing experience should be a more distanced and self-conscious one, totally at odds with Dyer’s evocation of sinking back in one’s seat and abandoning oneself to the narrative diegesis. The spectacles of spectacular illusionist cinema – the radical modernist mindset goes – are not benign, and so must not be embraced.

Indeed, there has long been a pervasive sense, in much (pseudo-)politicized cultural criticism and theory, that modernist, experimental, or *avant-garde* are the primary – indeed the only – terms of ideological praise, and that a work which seeks to unproblematically show or reveal can only be affirmed by being shoehorned into these terms of value. This is demonstrated with remarkable clarity in Michael Sicinski’s review, in *Cineaste*, of *The Duchess of Langeais* (Jacques Rivette, 2007) – an adaptation of Honoré de Balzac’s 1834 novella. Sicinski declares, with no qualification, that Rivette and his crew “have constructed *The Duchess of Langeais* with a formal precision practically reminiscent of the structural films of the avant-garde,” especially evoking “the predetermined compositional shell of a Michael Snow or Hollis Frampton film” (Sicinski 2008, 58). Rivette’s film was a sententious and unsatisfying one – largely for these reasons – but Sicinski’s remark here is astonishing in and of itself, simply because of what it reveals about the resilience of modernist assumptions in film theory and criticism. Balzac is widely understood as the paradigmatic figure for the classicist-realist novel mode. As Rick Altman wrote in 1992, Roland Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) “had set up Balzac as the official representative of mythically pure ‘straight’ narration” – as “the perfect ‘classic’ in opposition to which the ‘modern’ might be better defined” (Altman 1992, 14/18). As Stephen Heath put it, language “is taken-for-granted in Balzac’s project,” is thought of “as being self-effacing in the process of the representation of things,” and is “not source of the real, but instrument of its representation” (qtd. in Rodowick 1988, 17). These characterizations of Balzac’s texts – so vividly resonant with the illusionism of Hollywood spectacles – have generally stuck, and so absolute has been the politicized sense that not to be “modernist” is to be reactionary that, in turn:

...critics, in reaction to the typing of Balzac as a ‘straight’ or ‘transparent’ narrator, went out of their way demonstrate the eminently discursive nature of Balzac’s narration. Within the classical novelist the seeds of modernity could be seen sprouting. (Altman 1992, 18-19)

To praise Balzac for the genuine virtues of his classical-realist virtuosity in opening imaginative windows onto other social worlds – the same aesthetic function that defines Hollywood-style spectacle – was, evidently, unthinkable. In Sicinski’s remark about Rivette’s film – in the very fact of feeling able to make such an assertion of an adaptation of a Balzac text without dismay; or, indeed, to implicitly approve of the conceptual and aesthetic vandalism entailed – we see that this radical modernist spirit retains potency in film criticism to this day. As a result of this animus towards Balzac-ian representational realism, Hollywood-style spectacle still tends not to be aesthetically valued at the level it deserves.

Another reason for this, however, are such spectacles’ perceivedly formulaic nature. As we have seen, one of modernism’s great ancestral fetishes is the high value it places on originality. This was chiefly because modernism originated as a reaction to the perceived hegemony of classical norms in an overweening European canon – at a time in history when these traditions seemed to speak less and less to people’s real material and spiritual experience of the world. The innovations in visual spectacle of Expressionism, Cubism, Dada and Surrealism, etc. were all, in some measure, concerted efforts to recapture the idea of an art practice that would speak to the experience of living in a world which, in the 1913 words of French author Charles Peguy, had “changed less since the time of Jesus Christ than it has in the last 30 years” (Kamiya 2001). Indeed, the invention of the cinema was a product of this same historical moment and, as we have seen, certain practices in cinema’s early years – such as the frequent interpenetration of cameras and trains to display themes of mobility, or the synthesis of media technology as both form and content – displayed a vivid self-awareness of the fact. Cinema’s eventual usage as a mass art of popular spectacle, however, would end up militating against modernism’s ideals. “One of the particular challenges of movie criticism,” Laura Miller wrote in a 2006 column, “is that it compels the critic to explain how a film can be delightful without being original, to a modernist culture in which originality had become the *sine qua non* of ‘art’” (Miller 2006). Otis Ferguson showed remarkable acumen in 1935 in this regard when, in a review of the new Carole Lombard vehicle *Hands Across the Table* (Mitchell Leisen, 1935), he declared that:

The plot here is Group A, Subtype 11-C: (A) he falls for her at the start yet remains in a state of falling all through the picture, suspended in midair like the floating-hat trick; (11-C) he is a rich young scion and she is a poor young shoot. Add complications AX2 and BOP: he has to marry the society page, she is loved by kingly gent with a million, who would take her under the wing of his yacht for life. Originally a story by Viña Delmar. (Ferguson 2006, 119)

“But the film people,” Ferguson continues, “have somehow beveled and canted and trued it up at just the right places until it is a natural, airy structure, mostly well founded. ... Without plugging sentiment too hard... it is able to wind up still doing nothing in particular, very plausibly” (Ferguson 2006, 119). Films such as this, Ferguson declares – films which make no pretence at being other than routine studio product – can nonetheless stand as “first-rate” cultural works, due to their successful “management” of keeping all their thematic and stylistic facets in sync (Ferguson 2006, 120). This is an aesthetic achievement in its own right, Ferguson insisted, and one that should not to be undervalued. Indeed, one might add, this is the same tradition which produced masterpieces such as John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939) – its very unconsciousness of its own artistry its enabling condition – and which the classicist-chauvinist strain in film criticism now excoriates contemporary Hollywood for betraying the legacy of. Ferguson, furthermore, makes explicit reference to how what he calls “Eisensteining” is “often confused with intelligent and true exploitation of the medium,” and contrarily declares that “anything which is delightful is never old in any real sense of the term, because delight is a fragile and immediate thing, and new always” (Ferguson 2006, 120). One not only hears Dyer here, four decades in advance, but one also reads a cogent defence of Hollywood’s long-standing genre traditions of spectacle. These, in turn, offer an implicit riposte to modernism’s premises, insofar as they demonstrate that the same dramaturgies can work across decades and generations, because their basic function – utilizing the arts of narrative and spectacle in order to elicit certain familiar, well-known kinds of emotional affect from their spectators – is eternal, and not subject to criticisms of outdatedness. Despite being separated by seven decades, World War II tank films such as *Sahara* (Zoltan Korda, 1943) and *Fury* (David Ayer, 2014) elicit much the same martial stirrings and automotive brio in their spectators. And a thriller such as *The Sentinel* (Clark Johnson, 2006), likewise, generates suspense for exactly the same reasons of compromised appearances and transferred guilt that Hitchcock thrillers such as *The 39 Steps*, *Saboteur* (1942), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), or *North by Northwest* (1959) did in decades past. Andrew O’Hehir meant it as a criticism when he wrote of *The Water Diviner* (Russell Crowe, 2014) that “It could have been made in 1985, or even 1965, with no more than a few technical adjustments,” but he is in fact simply stating a basic fact about film genre and its workings (O’Hehir 2015). Modernism’s systemic dedication to originality, and the sense of crossing a new threshold in artistic expression that will relativize or

obviate everything that came before, is consistently refuted by this aspect of Hollywood-style spectacle.

Indeed, modernism's making an absolute fetish out of "originality" was an untenable paradigm in the long run, insofar as all the previous centuries of human culture had shown that originality was not necessarily a precondition for art-making. Throughout the Western canon, illustrating scenes from Scripture or classical mythology was a near-universal testing ground for an artist's talent – the same repository of mythic imagery providing a common visual vocabulary and bastion of narrative inspiration. This provided a context in which the content and style of a painting could matter far more than in any art-making done within a modernist paradigm, where abstract concern with the means of execution inevitably trumps concern with the subject which is being executed. Caravaggio's paintings, for instance, were considered vulgar by many Romans not just because of their unprecedentedly naturalistic style, but because Caravaggio had applied this visual style to episodes from Scripture whose visual spectacle was indissociably bound up with holy narrative significance. The death of the Virgin Mary, the inspiration of Saint Matthew, and the conversion of Saint Paul on the way to Damascus, for instance, were all well-understood narrative events from the Bible. For Caravaggio to depict them with the level of earthiness that he did was considered, by some, to be tantamount to profanation and sacrilege. Caravaggio's work has outlived these seventeenth-century criticisms, of course, but the precondition that drove them – figurative visual spectacles being underpinned by narrative signification – is one that is largely banished from modernist art. While it may be possible to speak of work within modernism's various movements – Abstract Expressionism, Minimalist sculpture, earthworks, etc. – in terms of "spectacle," the profound difference is that there is no analogous narrative situation underlying their spectacles. Switching Baroque masters, to look at one of Rubens's representations of the Crucifixion, for instance, is to see a spectacle whose narrative situation and importance are universally understood, and lends greater visceral weight to its visual composition – even for spectators who do not inhabit the same religious cosmology which it was painted in. This narrativization, however, is alien to modernism – the foregrounding of technique creating an effect of deliberate cryptic-ness, rather than of revelation. This, in turn, cut modernism off from the imaginative sublimity to be had by opening a window into a story-world. It would be for the spectacles of the cinema, thus, to reclaim this value. In this, they would provide a test case in

classical continuity again trumping modernist rupture, even in an art form supposedly inherently bound up with “modernity.”

When Rachel Kearney says of the spectacles of the Hollywood blockbuster, for instance, that they offer “an escape from the quotidian through the omnipotent freedom which nature bestows,” she hits very near the heart of the matter (Kearney 2006, 6). The doctrines of radical modernism, however, tend to militate against notions such as these. The tendencies towards cryptic self-referentiality and conceptualism entailed in its rejection of narrativization, I would suggest, function as a kind of obscurantism which disallows easy identification of “the quotidian,” and thus any readily embrace-able escape from it. Indeed it could even be said to reinforce the quotidian. To derive aesthetic gratification from the Minimalist sculptures of Carl Andre, for instance, it is necessary to be privy to all manner of arch-modernist codes and conventions, and to possess no inherent preference for narrativized representation. To the lay viewer lacking these prerequisites, however, they may appear to be no more than so many bricks laid out on flat surfaces – a depressingly quotidian betrayal/refusal of the kind of utopian story-world imagination evoked by an Old Master canvas or a Hollywood spectacle. At a somewhat more accessible cinematic level, moreover, a film such as Peggy Ahwesh’s *She Puppet* (2001) deliberately and self-consciously directs this refusal at the spectacles of popular culture, taking an immediately-appreciable vehicle of imaginative escapism – the spectacles afforded by the video game *Tomb Raider* – and willfully sabotaging and negating them. *She Puppet* consists of footage from *Tomb Raider* in which the game is being played not with an attempt to win – and so appreciate the spectacular environments and choreography that have been narratively programmed for the gamer – but rather to deliberately show up the seams and borders of the game’s environments and narrative, and focus on what happens when the gamer deliberately refuses to observe the implications of the gameplay. One sees anti-spectacles such as Lara Croft being torn apart by buzzards because Ahwesh declines to have her evade or shoot them, as well as Lara’s bodily form becoming fragmented and pixelated because Ahwesh tweaks the game’s virtual camera angles in non-optimal ways. In its insularity and refusal of the imaginative and narrative expansiveness of the *Tomb Raider* games – in which Lara visits every corner of the globe and sees marvels and monsters no other living mortal has – however, the film ultimately becomes quotidian in the extreme. In an interview, Ahwesh would describe the film as a

meditation on death – in which there are “a lot of ecstatic death moments... But the protagonist always pops back alive” – and declares that:

I like a horror movie where you go to have an experience of hyper-violence and uncanny death. It's like an amusement park ride; you don't really want to *die*; you want to feel some totally hyper-real, bizarre fantasy of near-death that allows you to live your normal life in a way that's less stressful and less neurotic. (MacDonald 2003)

But the film's ultimate impact has nothing of these spectacular qualities to it. This is because it cannot, because a spectacle of “hyper-violence,” rendered in an idiom of hyperreal bizarre-ist fantasy, is one which evokes the illusionism of Hollywood narrative – a mode which, in due modernist form, Ahwesh dislikes. She declares that she finds the expectation of narrative resolution constraining, relative to the free-form abstraction of evoking mercurial emotional states (MacDonald 2003). And elsewhere, she writes with frank derision about being brought “crashing back to the banality of normal spatial perspective, mortal bodies, and linear movie-time” by the mainstream Hollywood spectacle idiom which the *Tomb Raider* franchise is couched in (Ahwesh 2001, 77). The ultimate inference a viewer of *She Puppet* draws is of Debord-ian condescension on Ahwesh's part.

*She Puppet*, however, would be resoundingly answered the same year by the Hollywood blockbuster *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West, 2001), and again two years later by its sequel *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (Jan de Bont, 2003). These two films bring us to the second of this dissertation's explanatory parameters: the Hollywood blockbuster. While spectacle can inhere in all kinds of different filmmaking forms – even ones constructed along modernist lines – the Hollywood blockbuster is the form which most unproblematically adopts it as an organizing principle. Rather than focusing upon the very existence of limitations and constructed borders to experience – put there by the baleful fact of narrative – the Hollywood blockbuster simply sutures into its very narrative fabric the urge to challenge and transcend limitations. At their best, Hollywood blockbusters achieve an exuberance – an ability to dream on the largest possible canvas, and in the most visually pleasurable idiom possible – that stimulates the utopian imagination in a way that gnomic works such as *She Puppet* not merely do not, but consciously reject the possibility of. Both of the Hollywood *Tomb Raider* blockbusters are works of relentless boundary-breaking energy and motion. Even an only moderately-scaled action scene from the first has Lara attached to a pair of bungee cords – with which she rappels up, down, around, and between the walls of her mansion's vast inner hall, while engaged in a gun battle with a number

of hostile agents in paramilitary gear. In the second, likewise, the digitally-enabled spectacle of Lara base-jumping of the top of a Hong Kong skyscraper, opening up a wingsuit to soar out over Kowloon Bay, and finally landing on a friendly junk, is not even treated as any kind of climactic or cathartic spectacle. Films in this blockbuster mode solicit their spectator's identification with a protagonist and world in which limitations of gravity, geography, and mortality do not apply as they do in our own, and in which virtuosity, dexterity, indomitability, and animal magnetism are the structuring principles of existence. They are the logical formal mode for Dyer's principles of spectacle with which we began. Contrary to what theorists in the Heath, Rodowick, Wollen, et. al. vein may declare, mastery of this aesthetic of pleasure is no trivial matter, and its utopian implications are profound. Rather than seeking to de-legitimize them in favour of an all-modernist, anti-mimetic cinematic aesthetic, it might be more productive to recall the degree to which the Hollywood blockbuster mainstream has, throughout its history, dextrously adopted and assimilated certain devices from modernist *avant-garde* works. *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929), for instance, has seen its surreal imagery and logic appropriated for many Hollywood spectacles over the past few decades. Just a cursory sampling would include the fetishism of the death's head moth in *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991); horrific violence to an eyeball as an opening image in *Star Trek: First Contact* (Jonathan Frakes, 1997); one's mouth melted shut into a single flap of chin in *The Matrix* (Andy & Lana Wachowski, 1999); or the device, in *Thor: The Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013), of an object (a box of bourgeois apparel, a set of car keys) thrown off a ledge in one location, only to have it incongruously reappear in a totally different one later in the film. Modernist aesthetics, it must be stressed, are not necessarily inherently or axiomatically antagonistic to Hollywood-style illusionism, and filmmakers such as Ahwesh show their own limitations by implying that this is the case.

Beyond the energy and motion mentioned above, however, the Hollywood blockbuster is fundamentally a monumentalizing aesthetic mode – one which works on a grandiose imaginative scale that punishes myopia. It is, in effect, the contemporary equivalent of what Camille Paglia has posited about Ancient Roman aesthetics:

For its own propaganda, Rome made Greek style monolithic. Gracious human scale yielded to officialism, government overstatement. Kouros became colossus. ... Rome imitated not the plain, vigorous Doric pillar of the Parthenon nor the sleek, elegant Ionic pillar of the Erechtheum and Propylaea but the gigantic, frilly Corinthian pillar of the temple of Zeus on the plain below the Acropolis. (Paglia 1990, 125)

This same monumentalizing tendency – overstatement, colossal-ism, giganticism – defines the relationship between the blockbuster heights of the Hollywood mainstream and the nebulous realm of smaller-scale, independent, foreign, and/or “art house” fare – a realm more amenable to “gracious human scale,” in Paglia’s words. When, in the contemporary film industry, anyone or anything makes a splash in the latter realm, however, it is a virtual certitude that they/it will soon be monumentalized in the language of Hollywood blockbuster spectacle. A vivid example is provided by the career of Noomi Rapace. Her performances as Lisbeth Salander, in the Swedish adaptations of Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* novels – *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009), *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (Daniel Alfredson, 2009), and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest* (Daniel Alfredson, 2009) – were seen only by relatively small audiences in the United States. The three films together grossed just under \$23 million – slightly less than *Faster* (George Tillman Jr., 2010), a routine action film starring Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, and barely half that of *Saw 3D* (Kevin Greutert, 2010). Their cultural impact with critics, *cinephiles*, and industry figures, however, proved vastly greater than this. Not only was a Hollywood remake of the trilogy soon in the works, but Rapace herself was swiftly headlining Hollywood blockbusters such as *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (Guy Ritchie, 2011) and *Prometheus* (Ridley Scott, 2012) in her own right. Likewise, Gina Carano had no sooner made a vivid impression in Steven Soderbergh’s modestly-scaled action thriller *Haywire* (2011) than she was cast in the much more outlandish *Fast & Furious 6* (Justin Lin, 2013). Her character was essentially the same – as a martial-arts master with an inscrutable personality and mercurial loyalties – but the cinematic canvas which she was now inhabiting was vastly more spectacular, entailing epic car chases through central London, tanks tearing up Spanish highways, and a cargo plane explosively crashing back down onto the runway. An even more diverse test case can be found in the film *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011). The film includes in its cast firstly, Noomi Rapace’s *Millennium* trilogy co-star Michael Nyqvist; secondly, Anil Kapoor, recently noted for his role in *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008) as the irrepressibly sleazy host of India’s *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*; and thirdly, Jeremy Renner, now a newly-minted A-list star after *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2009).

And finally, there is the contrast which *Winter’s Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010) and *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) – the former a low-budget independent film shot on location in the backwoods of Missouri with a largely non-professional cast; the latter a big-budget

Hollywood blockbuster showcasing all the capacities of DVFX – offer, in terms of their deployment of the narrative arts of dramatic storytelling. In tandem, they offer a provocative rebuttal to critical paradigms which would dismiss the Hollywood blockbuster as mere prefabricated entertainments devoid of genuine narrative interest. The protagonists of both films – Ree Dolly in *Winter's Bone* and Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* – both played by Jennifer Lawrence, are virtually identical. Both are fiercely independent young women left to care for their younger sibling(s) on their own after their fathers have died/vanished and their mothers have succumbed to mental frailty. In meeting the challenge of feeding their family, both Ree and Katniss draw upon a considerable skill in the arts of hunting and woodcraft. The burden, however, has left both with a rather terse and defensive personality, and a seeming complete lack of interest in love or sex. In terms of character development, thus, *Winter's Bone* and *The Hunger Games* are closely comparable. The difference between the two films, however, is that whereas this characterization of the heroine provided virtually the entire substance of *Winter's Bone's* narrative, *The Hunger Game* relies on it simply as the grounding precondition for its spectacular teenage-death-tournament narrative. It provides Katniss's narrative motivation to survive and return home, rather than the entire crux of the film's drama. From this precondition, the spectator is treated to spectacles such as the futuristic metropolis of "the Capitol" coming into view from inside a bullet train, Katniss dodging viscerally realistic digitally-rendered fireballs, as well as enduring the effects of hallucinogenic venom, before finally, along with her fellow survivor Peeta (Josh Hutcherson), having to evade genetically-engineered monster-dogs programmed to rip them apart. At yet all these spectacles nonetheless derive their drama, and the film its ultimate affect, from the storytelling premises sketched above. Whereas many film scholars and theorists have asserted that narrative and special-effects-enabled spectacle are antithetical – as with Andrew Darley's dramatic assertion that spectacle is "the antithesis of narrative... effectively halt[ing] motivated movement" and, "in its purer state... exist[ing] only for itself, consisting of images whose main drive is to dazzle and stimulate the eye" – blockbusters such as *The Hunger Games* provide a stringent riposte (qtd. in Wood 2002, 371). The spectacular perils which Katniss goes through, for the sake of surviving to get back to her family, are simply the vastly inflated-in-scale equivalents of Ree getting hot coffee thrown in her face or assaulted with a crowbar in her quest to keep her home and small siblings safe. The Hollywood blockbuster has not repudiated or

contradicted the arts of character drama, but simply drawn upon its larger, more spectacularized, canvas to monumentalize them.

The same year that Paglia's remarks about Ancient Rome's monumentalization of the Greek tradition were published, Vivian Sobchack produced an article which began with the declaration that:

The Hollywood historical epic has been despised, if not completely ignored by most "serious" scholars of American cinema and historiography. Its aesthetic extravagances seen as essentially in bad taste and its historical depiction as essentially anachronistic, the genre is generally regarded as a suspect form of both *cinematic* and *historical* representation. Indeed, for those who have been culturally trained to value asceticism, caution, and logic, there is something uncomfortably embarrassing about the historical epic's visual and aural excessiveness... and its spectatorial invitation to indulge in wantonly expensive, hyperbolic, even hysterical acts of cinema. (Sobchack 1990, 24, italics Sobchack's)

In the intervening two and a half decades, the situation Sobchack describes has of course changed, but her rhetoric still speaks to a certain reticence among film scholars who would rather analyze experiments in media form in the *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor & Verena Paravel, 2012) mould, or ruminate on difficult products of *avant-garde*-ist traditions, than examine the blockbuster films of the Hollywood mainstream – historical epics or otherwise. A mindset "culturally trained to value asceticism, caution, and logic," as Sobchack puts it, may need reminding that monumentality and scale are not inherently inimical to aesthetic sophistication, but simply bring with them a different set of aesthetic assumptions – entailing overstatement, colossal-ism, gigantism, etc. – which Hollywood blockbusters have historically shown great dexterity in popularizing for a mass audience. Indeed, it is unlikely a coincidence that Hollywood and Ancient Rome have so often been paralleled in popular discourse, and Hollywood has frequently taken Rome as a subject for cinematic spectacles. These are truths, however, that many critics, scholars, and theorists resist to the point of dogmatism. For instance, when a noted scholar and theorist of genre such as Thomas Schatz grouses that "the major studios [are] in an altogether different business than their indie-subsidary counterparts, and one that seems increasingly indifferent to quality filmmaking by traditional Hollywood standards," he is in fact betraying his own indifference to a great amount of what cinema's appeal – and indeed Hollywood's traditional standards – have always been (Schatz 2009, 29). In the long view of Hollywood history, it is films such as *Fast & Furious 6*, *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol*, and *The Hunger Games* which represent continuity, and the output of what Schatz calls the "indie-

subsidiary counterparts” which mark a recent and anomalous rupture. The films of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise would be immediately familiar and pleasurable to audiences steeped in *Captain Blood* (Michael Curtiz, 1935), *The Black Swan* (Henry King, 1942), and *The Crimson Pirate* (Robert Siodmak, 1952), not least because the former are self-evidently the direct lineal aesthetic descendants of the latter. Likewise, a film such as *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (Kerry Conran, 2004) is profoundly influenced by such Classical Studio Era works as the programmer adventure serials, *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936), and *Lost Horizon* (Frank Capra, 1937). The exotic fantasy of *Lost Horizon* is, incidentally, also evoked – along with the classic Universal Studios horror tradition – by *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (Rob Cohen, 2008). And a film such as *San Andreas* (Brad Peyton, 2015) is immediately recognizable as a remake of *San Francisco* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1936), simply updated as DVFX and Baroque stylistics warrant. Spectacle and excitement have, in fact, always been a key component of the “traditional Hollywood standards” that Schatz alludes to. Hollywood’s output – in the Classical Studio Era just as now – is diverse, encompassing many different genres and aesthetic modalities. Schatz’s valuation of the Classical era, however, betrays a suspicious implication that only serious, respectable character dramas in the *Dodsworth* (William Wyler, 1936) and *Holiday* (George Cukor, 1938) mould should really be counted, and the portions of the studio system’s output given over to spectacle – or singing and dancing, or madcap slapstick, for that matter – need not be dwelt upon. This is an entirely untenable foundation on which to draw commonalities between Classical Studio Hollywood and the “indie-subsidiary” sector of today. The mumblecore films of the latter, which Schatz exalts as “quality filmmaking by traditional Hollywood standards” would, more likely, actually have gotten their makers banned from the lot by the old moguls. When he ironically quips about “such antiquated qualities as character development and human drama,” Schatz seems oblivious to the fact that those qualities emphatically exist and are honoured in the blockbuster spectacles of today, just as they existed and were honoured in the spectacles of the Classical Studio Era mentioned above (Schatz 2009, 32).

Schatz further posits the existence of “a new breed of blockbusters whose narrative, stylistic, technological, and industrial conventions have coalesced into a veritable set of rules governing the creation and marketing” of mainstream cinema (Schatz 2009, 32). And here, again, one sees the bad-faith attempt by a hostile scholarly voice to demonstrate that “Hollywood’s

‘major motion pictures’” of today are somehow devoid of aesthetic content or worth, and that it is therefore legitimate to dismissively regard them as interchangeable corporate product (Schatz 2009, 32). Schatz’s attempt to schematize and taxonomize this “veritable set of rules” into a set of twenty creative dictums, moreover, reveals the depth of his lack of feeling or familiarity with the aesthetic mode he presumes to discuss – an mode he seemingly cannot discuss with lapsing into rhetoric about “formulaic fantasies and infantile spectacles designed and dumbed down for an all-too-receptive worldwide audience” (Schatz 2012, 214). Among the flawed “rules” that Schatz attributes to the contemporary blockbuster, one is particularly telling in showing up his inadequacy on the form: his assertion that the big blockbuster of today “should provide dazzling computer graphics and effects-driven action scenes at regular intervals” (Schatz 2009, 33). What he fails to realize, or resists realizing, however, is that this is no longer the rare and distinctive trait of a select slate of mega-budgeted blockbusters. The technology and expertise to conjure spectacular DVFX became, over the 2000s, sufficiently diffused down the filmmaking food chain that even small independent productions – the very sector that Schatz naively clings to as the last hold-out of “quality filmmaking” – can now draw upon the same, and do. Indeed, Schatz’s aversion to discussing films’ visual aesthetics or *mise-en-scene* is such that he cannot or will not make the observation that one of the chief distinguishers between the big-budget mainstream and the “independent” sector – the ability to digitally conjure imaginatively-liberated spectacle onscreen – is eroding fast. To get a sense of this, one need only think of Gareth Edwards’s 2010 independent film *Monsters* – an inordinately atmospheric science-fiction film set in a not-too-distant future where the Mexican-American border region has been sealed off as a bio-quarantine zone due to incursions by mysterious alien life forms. A young man and woman, desperate to re-enter the US, however, decide to cross the Infected Zone nonetheless. On their way through, they see such spectacles as demolished buildings, crashed jet fighters, and the vast concrete barrier of the wall around the Zone, before having a climactic encounter with two of the alien creatures, whom they observe mating and realize are not their enemy. All these photorealistic spectacles are rendered with professional-standard DVFX, which Edwards frankly admits to creating on his laptop with off-the-shelf software, declaring that “you can go in the shop now and you can buy a laptop that’s faster than the computers they made *Jurassic Park* on” (IMDb). *Monsters*, in the event, would prove such a success that Edwards would, on the strength of it, land the job of directing Hollywood’s blockbuster \$160,000,000 reboot of *Godzilla* – a film which he then

proceeded to direct in a style similar to *Monsters*, albeit with its *mise-en-scene* on a incalculably larger scale. Again, one sees here the monumentalizing tendency in the Hollywood blockbuster. The cross-pollination, however – not merely of technology, but of genre subject matter and cinematic style – between the blockbuster mainstream and the low-budget independent sector, is a development that Schatz’s paradigm has no place for, because it reveals the modern blockbuster as being other than calculated commercial product.

In his 2005 book *The Big Picture: The New Logic of Money and Power in Hollywood*, investigative journalist Edward Jay Epstein acknowledges, as Schatz does not, that plenty of big Hollywood films do not follow what Epstein calls the “Midas formula,” but rather reflect the “less visible but surprisingly powerful noneconomic logic of Hollywood” (Epstein 2005, 241). And one of the most vital manifestations of this parallel noneconomic logic, I would suggest, is what might be called the fanboy/girl factor. This is the recognition of the fact that, now more than ever, most Hollywood blockbusters are not made from original screenplays, but rather are adaptations of popular novels, comic books, television shows, or remakes of earlier or foreign films. These sources, in turn, will bring with them their own fan base, with which a Hollywood blockbuster adaptation must reckon and contend. This, in turn, brings the blockbuster film’s monumentalizing aesthetic tendency into play again, in how every such film walks a delicate aesthetic tightrope. Pauline Kael once observed that “the emotions and actions recorded by novelists and historians might insult American tastes and mores,” and so must be censored or sanitized for film adaptations (Kael 2011, 3). Exactly the same holds true for more specialized niches in popular culture. Throughout the twentieth century, much of the sharpest and most vivid innovation in popular culture has taken place outside the realm of Hollywood movie-making, in novels and comic books, and as Scott Bukatman has pointed out, the reason for this was very simple:

Science fiction novels or comics only need to sell only a few thousand copies to recoup their costs, so experimentalism is not discouraged, but the Hollywood blockbuster must find (or forge) a mass audience. (Bukatman 1997, 9)

The quest for this “mass audience,” however, often necessarily entails steamrolling out the very “experimentalism” that made the source material interesting in the first place. This is a risk inherent in the Hollywood blockbuster’s monumentalizing aesthetic: in the quest to make a property impressive to the widest possible audience, it is often necessary, as per Kael, to suppress any “emotions and actions” which “might insult American tastes and mores.” Thus, whenever it

is announced that a Hollywood blockbuster adaptation of a favourite property is in the works, enthusiasm among fan boys and girls is always leavened by anxiety. Series of novels, comics, or television shows – with mythologies, codes, and in-jokes that can evolve and develop over years – are able to establish a far denser rapport with their reader/viewership than a single two-hour film can. The latter is under market pressure to be a completely self-contained “event,” requiring no prior knowledge of the property beforehand, and seeming to bring narrative closure to it at the end. Under these conditions, the tentativeness and sense of infinite possibility that marks wider popular culture universes – the sense that no narrative avenue is ever truly closed off, because it can always be reactivated in a later issue/episode/installment/spin-off/reboot, is impossible.

A vivid crystallization of these dynamics is provided by the case of Judge Dredd, the most popular and long-running character from the British comic *2000 AD* (1977-present). In an August 1995 piece in *Sight & Sound*, Martin Barker and Kate Brooks spend almost an entire close-printed page discussing the details, nuances and implications of the *Dredd* comics’ future world of “Megacity One.” It is, we learn, “a claustrophobic, teeming, urban nightmare,” reminiscent of “Metropolis rendered by Gaudi;” it is the realization of “the *Daily Mail*’s recurring nightmare of an urban future of multi-pop-cultural street anarchy,” where there are “an infinity of stories waiting to break through” – “crumbling, bizarre lives in this most postmodern world” – all underlain by a pervasive sense, among fans, that the whole thing was “a secret satire” (Barker & Brooks 2000, 92). They then close with the semi-rhetorical question of “How on earth do you translate that to film?” (Barker & Brooks 2000, 92). And in the event, when *Judge Dredd* (Danny Cannon, 1995) was finally brought to the screen, there was an immediate consensus that it largely hadn’t been – that if not nothing, then at least very little, of all this multi-faceted significance had survived, and that the Hollywood blockbuster’s monumentalizing tendency had crushed the deep-seated irony and ambivalence of its source material. Of the run-up to the release of the film, however, Barker and Brooks make the extremely significant remark that although fans were grudgingly resigned to the casting of Sylvester Stallone, to the prospect of seeing Dredd’s face – in the comic it was an inviolable convention that Dredd never removes his visor helmet – and even to the prospect, “inconceivable in the original comic,” of a romantic subplot between Dredd and a female colleague; they nonetheless powerfully wanted it to succeed (Barker & Brooks 2000, 90-91). A key reason for this, Barker and Brooks observe, had to do simply with the chance of “see[ing] the ‘sheer epicness’ of the story enacted in the medium for which it was

surely intended” (Barker & Brooks 2000, 90-91). A great deal of the nature and implications of the Hollywood blockbuster, and modern popular culture, are contained in this one suggestion. It gets right to the root of the blockbuster’s nature as monumental spectacle. *Judge Dredd* is only one of innumerable pop cultural instances where the authors/artists working in one medium were actually imagining in blockbuster-cinematic terms, and their audience and/or readership knew it. Popular novels which conjure up monumental, spectacular visions must rely completely on the imagination; while graphic novels can only show their images on a small and static scale, with an aural dimension suggested by speech bubbles and onomatopoeia. The same may be true of television shows or foreign film franchises, which – despite working in a moving-image idiom – still cannot quite *show* on the scale that their material might suggest. A Hollywood blockbuster, however, can transcend these limitations, and offer the possibility of a far more total audio-visual realization of these pop cultural texts’ visions. For fans, this can excuse a multitude of sins. As with the case of *Judge Dredd*, Trekkies, Batman fans, devotees of the pulp fiction of Robert E. Howard, and Godzilla fans may all ultimately have been disappointed, or even downright disgusted, with *Star Trek: Generations* (David Carson, 1994), *Batman & Robin* (Joel Schumacher, 1997), *Kull the Conqueror* (John Nicolella, 1997), and *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998), but they nonetheless went to see these films anyway – and for the same reason.

This situation, however, is seemingly in the midst of fundamental change as the twenty-first century wears on, thanks to the blurring of the boundaries between the mainstream blockbuster and the “independent” sector that filmmakers such as Gareth Edwards have made so unmistakable. Again, this development is driven by the increasing economic viability of DVFX. Digitally-rendered spectacles that, in the 1990s, would have been either impossible or out of reach to all but the most lavish of blockbusters are, by the 2010s, within the reach of relatively obscure and low-budget productions. This diffusion of DVFX means that the monumentalizing aesthetics of the Hollywood blockbuster has now taken on the status of an “effect” which a canny filmmaker can produce even if their film was, in fact, made on a budget considerably less than a typical Hollywood A-list summer release. Joss Whedon’s 2005 film *Serenity* – made on a modest (by Hollywood standards) budget of \$39 million – offers a powerful test case here, for instance, and the same dynamic has only intensified over the decade since. What cases such as these demonstrate is, yet again, the degree to which it is now appreciable that the 1990s were in fact still the very earliest phases of the blockbuster’s digital liberation, and not – as many scholars and

critics in the Wheeler Winston Dixon mode were so eager to claim – its culmination. The ability of modern DVFX to produce Hollywood-blockbuster-monumentality as an effect – one which does not actually require a prohibitive nine-figure budget – in turn allows cinematic spectacles to be produced now which could never have been made as recently as the 1990s or early 2000s. This development is crystallized in the fact that, seventeen years after Danny Cannon’s film resoundingly flopped, Pete Travis’s film *Dredd* (2012) – made for only slightly more than half what Cannon’s was, and less when one accounts for inflation – would revisit the source material and, in the process of making an even greater visual spectacle, correct virtually all of the earlier film’s errors. Sylvester Stallone is replaced with the much more chameleonic Karl Urban, who vanishes completely into the character; Dredd keeps his helmet on throughout; and his relationship with his female protégé remains strictly professional throughout. Even more important than this, however, is the fact that, unlike Cannon’s effort, Travis makes no pretence at giving Dredd a character arc in traditional sense – he remains exactly the same implacably stoic mechanism at the end as the beginning – nor, again unlike its predecessor, does it deal with the fate of Megacity One as a whole. The new film, rather, is structurally committed to honouring its source material’s sense of “an infinity of stories waiting to break through,” of which the current story – playing out over the course of only a single day, in a single huge apartment block – is only one very specific one. It is a narrative organization impeccably appropriate for a long-running comic book with a complex mythological world, and one that no Hollywood blockbuster of the 1990s would ever have attempted.

This new state of affairs – whereby if a monumental blockbuster cannot get its subject right, then a smaller film can and will, and without even losing much in terms of spectacular visuals – has been an entirely salutary development for blockbuster cinema. The liberation of representation which it bespeaks, however, is not a purely aesthetic and pop cultural matter. It can also have profound ideological ramifications. In an age when DVFX have now given the Hollywood blockbuster, as never before, the freedom to realize absolutely any imaginative vision, any politicized worldview can now likewise be realized – and naturalized – onscreen with an appearance of documentary actuality. One need only look at the opening sequence of *Robocop* (José Padilha, 2014) to get a sense of the implications of this. The first moments of the film – which is supposedly set in the not-too-distant-future – show the city of Tehran under American occupation. This occupation is not maintained by actual “boots on the ground,” however, but by

giant heavily-armoured robots toting substantial firepower. In addition to saving men and money, this is meant to deter potential insurgents by denying them a live target to shoot at, and assuring them of devastating return fire. Under these conditions, a fatuous TV journalist crew assures their viewers, order and peace among the subjugated populace are absolutely assured. This is then shown, of course, to be disastrously wrong, as some resistance fighters attack one of the symbolically-hated things anyway, causing a conflagration of chaos and carnage to be broadcast live.

In addition to rhyming the politically impish and insouciant satire of Paul Verhoeven's 1987 original – as well as his subsequent *Starship Troopers* (1997) – Padilha's digitally-enabled update of *Robocop* shows that the exponentially-increased realism, which DVFX have allowed the Hollywood blockbuster, has also made geopolitical fantasizing far more potent and immediate, by stripping away the historically distancing artifices of film style. A similar sequence to *Robocop*'s opening could have been shot a generation ago in any generic urban area, and the spectator simply cued to understand that it is supposed to be "Tehran" by a subtitle. There would have been considerably less visceral emotion to it, however, because most spectators would likely understand that's what had been done. Padilha's *Robocop*, however, is the product of a new era of blockbuster filmmaking when, simply as a matter of course, DVFX are used to composite together genuine images of Tehran. One actually sees the Milad Tower dominating the skyline, and the Alborz Mountains looming above it all in the background. The film does not need to "shoot around" any location contrivances – due to DVFX, it can include panoramic aerial shots to cover the ensuing action spectacle that much more spectacularly. And as a result, the sequence's nature as an ideological Rorschach test for audiences only works more vividly.

All this speaks to Leo Braudy's declaration, in 1998, that:

Too much current interpretation, whether from the Left or the Right, assumes that popular films are only a crude handy searchlight by which to read political and social conflicts... Such analysis continues to subordinate (and reduce) the products of popular culture to rationally determinable (and thereby superior) political or social meanings. (Braudy 1998, 279)

Ignored in all this, however, Braudy felt, is the idea that there is a "constant interplay" in spectators' "minds and attitudes" between the realm of the imagination and what we hear and know of the real world. Short of being "the by-products of more explicit and self-conscious political formulations," blockbuster cinematic imaginings may be better understood as the

reflections of “deeper disquiets that cut across an entire cultural landscape,” to which there may be no readily-apparent resolution available in the realm of existing formal politics (Braudy 1998, 279). In a context such as this, he continues, imaginative filmic narratives may offer “an alternative way of comprehending” the political “cultural antagonisms” of the moment, “through imagery and stories” which are, paradoxically, “far more precise and self-aware than they are in their overly political and social guises” (Braudy 1998, 301). Cinema, Braudy suggests:

...can take the measure of cultural issues with perhaps more insight than do journalists or politicians. But they rarely resolve, on the level of reason, action, or political program, the conflicts they have mythically resolved on the level of story or character. (Braudy 1998, 302)

As demonstrated in the opening of scenes of *Robocop*, this gets to the root of what Charles Acland, among others, has described as the systemic “ideological incoherence” in many Hollywood blockbuster spectacles. As Acland points out, it is one of the defining features of the Hollywood blockbuster today that, in seeking to reach the maximum global audience, it is now deemed necessary to incorporate enough geographical, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, as well as ideological incoherence, into a film to make it seem a potentially globalized text, rather than one which speaks only for and to American audiences. Or, as Scott Forsyth puts it, “blatant American triumphalism will become a hard ideological sell,” and “explicitly didactic Reagan-Bushite films are unlikely to be common” as Hollywood becomes increasingly globalized at the same time as American global hegemony continues to decline (Forsyth 2005, 120). In short, parochialism has been banished by economic logic, from which incalculable aesthetic benefits have flown. As Kristen Whissel has observed, Hollywood blockbuster films:

...feature mythological characters, breathtaking visual terrains, and forms of embodiment – all of them more or less detached from any referent in the real world – onto which international audiences can map their conflicting identifications and emotional affiliations. (Whissel 2006, 25)

Sentiments such as these not only recall Dyer’s defence of escapism, but further suggest China Miéville’s supposition – made from a like-minded Marxist position – about escapism: that it only becomes a negative or infantilizing tendency when it is diluted and limited, rather than carried through to its logical conclusion: the frank embrace of “sheer utopian exuberance” (Miéville 2007, 254). Discussing, in a 2007 article, the literary/scientific tradition – eminently of a piece with modern blockbuster spectacle – of imagining entire cities that float and sail on the ocean waves, Miéville insisted that:

Floating cities are dreamed because *how cool is that?* – an entirely legitimate, even admirable, reason. What criticisms follow are not some left-moralist injunction to be “realistic”: the archives of seasteading are irresistible reading, the best of the utopias awesome, floating-city imaginings in themselves a delightful mental game. The problem, rather, is precisely the crippling of that tradition by stunted free-market vulgarians. (Miéville 2007, 254)

Miéville’s final point is in reference to various American libertarian economic groups who have, over the years, hypothesized about building a seafaring community in international waters to function as a great tax shelter. “The libertarian seasteaders are the inheritors of th[e] visionary tradition, but they betray their class politics by degrading it,” Miéville declares, evoking “the crippling of the utopian imagination” that occurs when it is refracted through the “plaintive daydreams of a frightened petite bourgeoisie” who wish not to banish and transcend suburban banality, in the name of some grandiose utopian alternative, but rather simply to scrupulously recreate it on the open sea (Miéville 2007, 254-55). In this, Miéville continues, you have the reduction of imagined utopia to the reassuringly familiar terms of shopping malls, mid-range hotels, “hexagonal neighbourhoods of square apartments, tiny coiffed parks and tastefully featureless marinas” right out a Florida suburb – “nostalgic not even for a mythic glorious past but for the anonymous sanctimony of an invented Fifties” (Miéville 2007, 255). Against this, Miéville declares, “their radical critic” feels almost “nostalgic for more grandiose enemy dreams. The uncompromising monoliths of fascist and Stalinist architecture [at least] expressed their paymasters’ monstrous, massive ambitions” (Miéville 2007, 254-55). It is in contrast to all this that Miéville goes on to jubilantly describe architect Eugene Tsui’s vision of a giant floating city called “Nexus” – “a five-mile-long self-propelling mountainous island shaped like a horseshoe crab. Its sheer beautiful preposterousness should n[ot] be an embarrassment: it is the point of the dream... and that is no criticism” (Miéville 2007, 254). The spirit that Tsui’s “Nexus” here evokes is the same as that of the Hollywood blockbuster at its best. One thinks of truly imaginatively resonant visions of utopian primitivism, such as Pandora in *Avatar*, or Atlantis in *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (Gary Trousdale & Kirk Wise, 2001); or – in *The Time Machine* (Simon Wells, 2002) – that of the gondola colony that, in the year 802,701, floats on the canyon canals that run through the wilderness which was once New York City. Miéville mixes into these remarks the observation that “It is a measure of how disastrous a film *Waterworld* was that its floating homesteads manage not to hold our attention,” and his point is well-taken (Miéville 2007, 254). Hollywood blockbusters which are more invested, as *Waterworld* (Kevin Reynolds,

1995) was, in the mere kinesis of seadoos racing about and crashing into things, betray the more profound utopian imaginative potentials of the form – its ability to revel in the creation of fantastical other worlds on the simple rationale of “how cool is that?”

In Miéville’s remarks about “the uncompromising monoliths of fascist and Stalinist architecture,” moreover, one can anticipate and rebut the obvious objection to much of the above: that often, in practice, Hollywood blockbusters are ideologically reactionary in their politics. Beyond the importance of distinguishing “in practice” from “in theory,” however, even Hollywood blockbusters such as these may often retain sufficient utopian imaginative evocative-ness – implicit within occasional shots and moments – to offer some redoubts against narratives which seem to channel pure, repressive ideology. As was seen at the very start, with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Hollywood blockbuster – as a form inherently dedicated to spectacular showing – cannot, by its nature, become totally ideologically censorious towards aesthetic, imaginative, utopian implication. The problem with reactionary films in the Hollywood blockbuster mode, rather, is perhaps a failure/refusal to follow through with their own utopian aesthetic logic.

A great part of this utopian logic consists not simply of a film’s screenplay taking a more progressive line on social questions of class, gender, racial, or sexual issues – simply writ larger on a more spectacular cinematic canvass – but in demonstrating the cinema’s ability to resituate the spectator so as to emphasize the breadth and diversity of the universe – a breadth and diversity that can contain, and relativize, all opposites and antinomies. Blockbuster spectacles can, in a scrupulously photoreal aesthetic, take their spectators virtually anywhere, from the South Pole in the midst of a furious blizzard in *Whiteout* (Dominic Sena, 2009), to unexplored subterranean caves in the South Pacific in *Sanctum* (Alister Grierson, 2011), or to the summit of Mount Everest in *Everest* (Baltasar Kormákur, 2015). Although the narratives of these films may not touch on politics or ideology in any programmatic sense, they nonetheless bear great utopian potentials because of their de-reifying aspect – the degree to which they remind spectators that there is a vastly wider world out there – governed by a Nature that cares nothing for the ideological repressions and injustices of our current, existing society. Its imaginative sublimity is open to all. Understood even for their educational value as such – and, scrupulously grounded in real Earthly geography and climatology as they are, films such as these might be said to offer a narrative-fiction analogue to BBC documentaries such as *Planet Earth* (2006) and *Life* (2009) –

the likes of *Whiteout*, *Sanctum*, or *Everest* could be said to offer another legitimating avenue for the Hollywood blockbuster than the art-historical one this dissertation pursues. Appreciated for their aestheticized escapism, however, they also provide a thin end of the interpretive wedge for other Hollywood blockbusters that honour a realist aesthetic, in spite of depicting often outlandishly fantastic subject matter. A “hard” science-fiction film such as *The Martian* (Ridley Scott, 2015) might seem a logical enough extrapolation from an aesthetic such as this, but even a film such as *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015) can be understood as offering realistic images so long as one recognizes that it provides narrative rationales for all of its high-flying absurdities, and does not “cheat” on real physics in terms that break those of its own world. These it retains, for purposes of suspense – which would be lost if the film broke with realist aesthetics so completely as to make all narrative developments arbitrary.

The one unifying factor between films such as *Whiteout/Sanctum/Everest* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* is that they could not exist at all without the enabling technology of photorealistic DVFX – the third of this dissertation’s explanatory parameters for the cinema of today. All across the spectrum, Hollywood blockbusters display the degree to which DVFX have become totally normalized in the cinema of today, having reached a stage whereby their novelty value has dissipated completely, and the attendant anxieties which they aroused in film theory have had time to moderate somewhat. In Cinema Studies, the governing concept for comprehending DVFX’s introduction into filmmaking – and the root of much of the aforementioned theoretical anxiety – has been “the index.” One of Charles Sanders Peirce’s terms – along with “the icon” and “the symbol” – in a tripartite philosophical schema for organizing perception of the tangible world; “the index” would, as the 1990s gave way to the 2000s, take on a fetish value in academic discourses, as supposedly representing the irreplaceable guarantee of photographic film’s documentary-realist aspect. This was the same aspect, in turn, which the medium of cinema seemed to be heedlessly casting aside without a second thought. Unlike the icon, which is defined as a realistic rendering of an object of perception; and the symbol, which is defined as a more-or-less arbitrary signifier which is simply understood to denote the object of perception, the index is defined as an actual tangible trace of the object of perception, gleaned from real physical contact with it. The camera lens catches light, which is then refracted onto raw film stock, the chemical emulsions on which are then catalyzed and, upon being printed, produces an exact visual replica of what was in the light before the camera lens at the start. As such, photography possesses – at

least in an abstract theoretical and philosophical sense – a total indexical, and thus documentary, veracity, because human interpretation is supposedly absent from the process. This same documentary veracity, however, is supposedly lost when photochemical film is replaced by images conjured purely from digital pixels, instilling a profound sense of intellectual discomfit in many theorists – a sense that a philosophical guarantor of truth value in the image has been lost, perhaps irrevocably, and that cinema as we know it has potentially been lost with it.

Critiques of this “end of cinema” position were not slow in coming. Particularly lucid is Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener’s suggestion that to dwell chiefly upon the digital turn in terms of a new form of cinematic recording – as Lev Manovich famously did – is to emphasize only “the reverse side of its strengths, obvious when one moves from recording and storage to presentation and display” (Elsaesser & Hagener 2010, 173). There is, Elsaesser and Hagener, assert, a “new malleability of the cinematic image when approached not from the basis of code, but rather from the perspective of the spectator’s experience.” This spectatorial experience, in turn, is of cinema as an “attractive” “popular spectacle” rather than a display of photochemical emulsions, making the switch to digital a remarkably un-traumatic step (Elsaesser & Hagener 2010, 174-75). This was due, in turn, to audiences’ awareness of what DVFX were, and what they could do – an awareness well-caught in François Brunet’s 2008 essay “‘A Better Example is a Photograph’: On the Exemplary Value of Signs in C.S. Peirce’s Reflection on Signs.” Brunet would invoke Peirce’s term “collateral knowledge” to refer to what he called “a central tenet of Peircean pragmatism... that of a communitarian definition of truth” – “the definition of truth as relative to a chain of ‘interpretants,’ or, more broadly speaking, in terms of social interaction” (Brunet 2008, 44-45). Since the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, and throughout much of the twentieth century, Brunet continues, Peirce’s confident declaration that there was “a kind of common knowledge of photographic technology” – grounded in the fact that there was really only one way of creating photographic images – basically held good (Brunet 2008, 45). It was only with the arrival of the digital ability to create photorealistic images which, in fact, have no indexical photographic referent, that such “common knowledge” would be voided – replaced instead with a sort of “collateral doubt” (Brunet 2008, 45). And yet this new collateral doubt, Brunet suggests, is its own new form of collateral knowledge. If it is no longer the case that everybody knows that photographic images “are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent,” as Peirce put it, it has likewise become the case, Brunet declares, that

everybody knows that DVFX can do virtually anything in tweaking the photographic image. A new point of collateral knowledge has replaced the old, as a new “communitarian definition of truth” has emerged (Brunet 2008, 45). The age of DVFX has, Brunet continues:

...validated an epistemological shift from a kind of semio-technological essentialism to a kind of cultural or pragmatic relativism that, in turn, reverberates on the whole history of photography; what Peirce can contribute to the discussion is not indexicality but, definitively, his thesis on the inescapability of collateral knowledge in the interpretation of signs. (Brunet 2008, 45)

The application of Brunet’s ideas on Peircean collateral knowledge to digitization in current blockbuster cinema is amusingly suggested by a moment in Quentin Tarantino’s 2007 film *Death Proof*. The homicidal Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell) introduces an ingenuous young woman named Pam (Rose McGowan) to his old-school movie stunt car – designed to withstand any collision, however lethal-seeming, without killing the stunt driver inside. He asks Pam “Have you ever seen one of those car crashes in a movie that there’s no way anyone’s walking away from? Well how do you think they did that?” to which Pam pertly replies simply “CGI?” To this, Mike can only embarrassedly waffle and declare “Well I’m afraid more often than not today, you’d be right, but...” before explaining his car’s real significance. This speaks to trends in film theory in two ways. Firstly, obsessive interest in the question of “how they did it” is, it will be seen in a later chapter, a concern which many film theorists have attributed to putative film spectators over the years. Secondly, however, it is a concern which the rise to ubiquity of DVFX has made effectively redundant. As Pam demonstrates, there is now the catch-all three-letter acronym of “CGI” to answer all such questions, enabled by the collateral knowledge that, nowadays, DVFX can conjure up any imaginative vision photorealistically. The same year as *Death Proof*, the film *Ocean’s Thirteen* (Steven Soderbergh, 2007) featured a scene in which the envisioned casino heist runs into a snag when it turns out that the Chinese martial arts expert likely cannot perform the maneuver required of him. Upon protests that he had apparently performed it onscreen in a film, he merely replies “that was CGI.” These examples, and numerous others like them, testify to the degree that, by the late 2000s, Hollywood spectacle had become entirely self-conscious about its digitally-derived ontology, and trusted spectators, in turn, to possess the requisite collateral knowledge to appreciate this self-consciousness. Film theorists making an intellectual fetish of indexicality and cinema’s ontological status may, paradoxically, be the last moviegoers to achieve this wry serenity and media literacy. Indeed, the same kind of sophisticated irony seen

in *Death Proof* and *Ocean's Thirteen* – the same presumption of collateral knowledge about the index, on the spectator's part – can even be seen in contemporary films aimed primarily at younger audiences. At one point in DreamWorks Animation's 2013 film *The Croods* (Chris Sander & Kirk DeMicco), Neanderthal patriarch Grug (voiced by Nicholas Cage) claims to have made cave painting obsolete by inventing “the snapshot” – demonstrating which, he smears pale mud on his son's face, then hits him very hard with a slab of rock. The impact distributes and pressurizes the mud into the slab so as to form a rudimentary monochrome impression. This is, essentially, Peirce's photograph-as-index taken to its most humorously extreme reduction. The scene is further amusingly ironic, however, insofar as *The Croods* is an entirely digitally-animated film, on which an estimated \$135,000,000 was spent employing over two hundred animators and visual effects technicians, the fruit of whose labours would showcase not a single indexical impression, even one as rudimentary as Grug's slab-snapshot. This sort of paradox recalls D.N. Rodowick's declaration, in his 2007 book *The Virtual Life of Film*, that if “film” in the photochemical and indexical sense has been definitively killed off in the age of the digital image, then there is at least a countervailing entity called “cinema” that is very much alive and well.

While Rodowick's conceptual dichotomy is valid, the elegiac note that his book uses it to sound is perhaps misplaced. For in addition to the wry self-consciousness of films such as *Death Proof*, *Ocean's Thirteen*, and *The Croods*, another facet of DVFX in current filmmaking is the degree to which they may also sublimate themselves, so as to present the absolute minimum obtrusion of their non-indexical nature. It is in this spirit that they are often used to unobtrusively shape and naturalize screen environments – “painting out” details which might disrupt the story world's integrity, or invisibly compositing in elements which would be impossible to film in strictly indexical live action. We have already seen how a film such as José Padilha's *Robocop* remake could use subtle DVFX to better situate spectacular ones – creating a real Tehran for America's robotic occupation to terrorize. When such unobtrusive DVFX are used simply on their own, and not in tandem with spectacular ones, however, they become truly invisible. In *The Tourist* (Florian Henckel von Donnesmark, 2010), for example, for the sake of versatility and repeat takes, the impact, on the villains, of police sniper bullets were rendered with DVFX rather than traditional blood-pack squibs. Likewise, in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (Tomas Alfredson, 2011) the British intelligence agency “the Circus” is operated from a squat steel bunker building,

which is hidden in the interior courtyard of a beautiful Edwardian Baroque building of pinkish-red Portland stone. This building – called “Blythe House” and located in West Kensington – was filmed for real but, lacking an ugly steel bunker in its inner courtyard, the latter was added digitally. No spectator not already aware of these effects’ presence would pick them out unprompted, nor is there any narrative reason why they should. They are present purely for the sake of narrative naturalism, and the preservation of an appearance of indexical integrity.

Such instances as these, not even the most ardent believers in hard and fast “narrative vs. spectacle” dichotomies can declare to be meant to disrupt what Elsaesser called “narrative-realism-illusionism” built around “psychologically motivated characters” and diegeses rooted in “space-time verisimilitude” (Elsaesser 2004, 81). Dan North – who, we shall see in a later chapter, is a fanatic *par excellence* in this regard – can only declare that “Films might contain more truly invisible moments,” before continuing that:

The distinctions between these two approaches ... show up how deliberately certain types of spectacular display will be pushed to the fore for spectatorial inspection and consumption... (North 2008, 5-6)

The notion among many film scholars and theorists that the widespread use of DVFX is somehow, inherently, a symptom of a “post-classical” aesthetics in Hollywood is one, however, that may owe more to changing strategies of self-promotion on the studios’ part than any ultimate reality of film history. The type of invisible artifice described above, in *The Tourist* and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, in fact had strong antecedents in the Classical Studio Era, where techniques such as model work, painted backdrops, double exposures, and other innovative forms of optical compositing techniques, such as the Schufftan process, were more common than was generally realized. As Stephen Prince has pointed out:

If we have a bias in our thinking about cinema that emphasizes live action, this is consistent with the way that the industry itself operated for many decades. Studio chiefs and filmmakers during the [classical studio] Hollywood period regarded visual effects as a form of trick photography, as something that had to be hidden from the awareness of viewers. (Prince 2012, 155)

The reason for this, as Norman O. Dawn put it, was that the great moguls of the Classical Studio era:

...didn’t believe in telling anybody about effects. ... They considered anything that was a drawing or a glass shot a fake. So they didn’t want to let the exhibitors know that this was a cheap picture full of fakes. They kept all that quiet...no matter if it was nothing more than an ordinary double exposure. (qtd. in Prince 2012, 155)

As a result of this reticence on the part of the old moguls, DVFX may seem, today, more novel than they really are – understood as a profound change when, in fact, a case could be made that they also represent a form of continuity.

Speaking to this same sentiment, but from a very different perspective, John Belton declared, in a 2002 *Film Quarterly* essay, that digital cinema constituted a “false revolution” – one not in any way commensurate with the introduction of synchronized sound, colour, or widescreen to filmmaking. The baffling thing about Belton’s essay, however, is that actual digitally-conjured illusions are virtually an afterthought, with nearly all of his inquiring energies directed at the emergent technologies of digital sound, digital editing, shooting on digital video, and digital projection. He does declare, in passing, that “digital technology has transformed the photographic image into a truly ‘plastic’ object that can be moulded and remoulded into whatever shape is desired,” and that “computer-generated graphics have enabled filmmakers to realize fantasy in a way that was only dreamed of a few years ago,” but seems to feel that these facts do not, in themselves, constitute a revolution (Belton 2002, 100). His conclusion is that, unlike the previous revolutions wrought by sound, colour, and widescreen on the film-viewing experience, these new technologies seem specifically designed to be imperceptible – to totally sublimate themselves so as not to alter the traditional film-viewing experience to which the spectator is accustomed. As Elsaesser would point out elsewhere, the use of DVFX has not altered the basic narrative nature of the traditional feature film – “still the one ‘killer application’ for many of the new developments” – nor altered the audience’s basic aesthetic assumptions about cinematic reception (Elsaesser 1998, 203). It has simply offered a new, more efficient, means of meeting these expectations. While there is doubtless some truth in Elsaesser’s assertion, Belton’s basic premises, in echoing it, seem untenable with only a few years’ hindsight. He commits a familiar lapse of logic in treating DVFX-driven films as synonymous with the genre of science-fiction, even going so far as to declare that “the danger is that an all-digital cinema might very well lead to an all-fantasy cinema – to essentially one genre” (Belton 2002, 106). This danger has not, needless to say, come to pass. This can best be appreciated by going beyond the simple diversity of different kinds of digitally-enabled films released today, and examining the aesthetic heterogeneity within the films themselves – even, or perhaps especially, where they might seem most vulnerable to charges of genre homogenization. The sizeable constellation of superhero blockbusters released under the imprimatur of Marvel Comics since 2000, for instance, might

seem to bear out Belton's forebodings about "an all-fantasy cinema," but this would be to ignore the immense heterogeneity of these films themselves. The *X-Men* franchise, for instance, has consistently been a font not simply of digitally-enabled fantasy, but also of the use of DVFX to re-create the theatre of political history. *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (Gavin Hood, 2009), for instance, shows Hugh Jackman and Liev Schreiber fighting in every American war from the Civil War to Vietnam; while *X-Men: First Class* (Matthew Vaughn, 2011) has Michael Fassbender's Magneto nearly destroying the American armada from the Cuban Missile Crisis by magnetically turning its own ordinance back against it. *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014), in turn, has him attacking the Nixon White House by magnetically wrenching the circular superstructure of Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium aloft, then dropping it over the grounds of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., encircling and trapping the White House inside. Beyond all of these, however, *The Wolverine* (James Mangold, 2013) opens with the utterly terrifying spectacle of DVFX being used to vividly recreate the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, from a perspective of visceral on-the-ground immediacy, rather than the aerial perspective from a safe distance familiar from documentary footage. While all these films' narratives indeed conjure fantastical visions, they are also powerfully imaginatively situated in the real world, and use the graphic potentials of DVFX to marry the two with a photorealism that would have been impossible in previous generations. The same thing can be observed in the *Avengers* franchise when – in *Thor: The Dark World* – one sees the climactic battle amidst an interdimensional cataclysm take place on the grounds of National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London. DVFX's capabilities are shown off to far better advantage when they are used to (re)create something specific and real, as with here, rather than general, as with the generically glacial Jötunheimr in the original 2011 film.

Furthermore, Belton declares the new "creative flexibility" offered by DVFX to be the purview of only "a handful of very important Hollywood filmmakers like Lucas, Cameron, and others," while more critically-feted filmmakers such as Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, Stephen Frears, Paul Schrader, and Mike Leigh "make films about more or less realistically conceived characters in more or less realistic settings" (Belton 2002, 110/105-06). This has also been contradicted by the course of film history. Not only would nearly all of these supposedly virtuously non-commercial artists avail themselves of digital technologies over the years to come; but increasingly often, comparable *auteurist* talents to the ones Belton mentions –

such as Bill Condon, Christopher Nolan, Alfonso Cuarón, and Darren Aronofsky – would even sign on to direct DVFX-enabled blockbusters themselves.

The *auteurist* potentials of DVFX, moreover, highlight the degree to which they have, in imaginative terms, brought cinema closer to literature. The imaginative freedom to conjure an imaginative world, and populate it with whatever peoples one wishes, has always existed in literature, but it takes on a more potentially problematic hue when transposed to cinema in an idiom of photorealistic DVFX. This is because, simply, it can allow the photoreal naturalizing of the more retrograde tendencies of the narrative imagination – such as the tendency to think in crude binary terms about ethnic Others, real or imagined. One vividly sees this tendency at work in a film such as *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009), whereby the two designated “good” alien prawns are given larger, more expressive eyes than their undifferentiated brethren, as well as more subtly human-like body proportions and facial features. One sees here the same imaginative impulse as when, over three centuries before, Aphra Behn’s novel *Oroonoko, the Royal Slave* (1688), described its titular African prince thus:

His face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony or polished jet. ... His nose was rising and Roman instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest shaped that could be seen, far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole proportion and air of his face was so noble and exactly formed that, bating his colour, there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome. (Behn 2003, 15)

Whereas in the past, this sort of literary portrait would have been virtually impossible to adapt to film, DVFX have now made it a matter almost of routine. As with *District 9* 321 years later, the effect is to imaginatively deny to the broad mass of the Other the empathy the reader is allowed for the few designated “good” Others. As with literature, DVFX now offer cinema totally free reign for the imagination, whether for good or ill. The compensation for this, however, is the existence of films which possess this same imaginative freedom, and make very deliberate progressive use of it. *Avatar*, for instance, would refuse to visually differentiate Neytiri from the rest of the Na’avi – as though in some kind of vulgarized treatment of the Pocahontas myth as filtered through *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956). One instead sees her hunting, fighting, and navigating the forests of Pandora in exactly the same fashion as her kin, thus visually underscoring the degree to which Jake is assimilating to an entire race and culture, not just pairing off with her individually. The sequence of the *ilkran* rookery in the Hallelujah Mountains – with its numerous long shots of Jake as just one sublimated member of a group of

young Na'avi hunters, while Neytiri flies referee – further emphasizes this insistence on using DVFX to award spectatorial empathy to the Na'avi as an entire people, not just a few favoured individuals among them who are rendered more anthropomorphically.

The immense spectacle of Cameron's auteurist vision in *Avatar*, furthermore, brings one to another fact about DVFX: that they have levelled out the ratio between imaginative ideal and achievable reality. Throughout the medium's history, it has been common for a film to possess narrative premises, or visual aesthetics, which suggest an imaginative spectacle that may not admit of actual audio-visual realization onscreen. This was long simply accepted by many moviegoers – what critic Gregory Solman called “the audience's acceptance of a certain degree of artifice, and even a little innocence” (Solman 1992, 32). Over the past decade and a half, however, the normalization of spectacular DVFX has fundamentally changed this state of affairs. Hollywood DVFX now routinely provide apparently photographic representations of things which, in generations past, would have been purely the terrain of the imagination, only able to be imperfectly intimated and hinted at in drawing, painting, or writing. In light of this, one appreciates Andrew Darley's declaration that the spectacular images realized by DVFX:

...are spectacular as much for their sheer transparency – the convincing way in which they render images of such fantastic events – as the events themselves. They simulate photography of the fantastic, offering us the semblance of a moving photographic image of the impossible. In other words, these digitally rendered images seem real, they appear to have the same indexical qualities as the images of the live action characters and sets with which they are integrated. (Darley 2000, 110)

This means, in effect, that Bazin-ian realism can now encompass even the totally fantastical. Because of photorealistic DVFX, there are no longer any give-away matte lines, discernible compositing work, tell-tale editing conventions, visible wires, obviously false prosthetics or makeup, or other seams and signatures of artifice which make it clear that one is not seeing the kind of profilmic indexical reality Bazin thought so strongly in terms of. As will be seen in a following chapter, many film theorists cling desperately to such seams and signatures – as sources of aesthetic pleasure in their own right, or as ethical guarantors of the ultimate Bazin-ian integrity of the image – and either excoriate DVFX for obviating them, or attempt to deny the reality of the change. Darley can at least bring himself to admit of it, although he insists on deeming it just another effect – a spectacular novelty of sorts. What his book, published in 2000, did not quite accede to, however, is the fact that the novelty must soon wear off, leaving only the

blunt fact of a vastly expanded photorealist canvas, to be used for simple narrative purposes. In his 2003 book *Contemporary US Cinema*, Michael Allen nails this point by declaring that:

...the situation where ‘anything is possible’ normalises the presence and potential of the digital. If anything is possible, the power of new images – known as ‘impact aesthetics,’ each new image having to top the effect of the previous one – gets progressively weakened, giving the films in which they appear less potential advantage over competitors in the marketplace. Every effects film becomes rather too much like every other one. In such an environment, other factors come into play as the element which will give one film an advantage over its rivals: for instance, a strong and gripping story, or emotionally affecting acting. In a perverse way, the perfecting of digital effects, seen as having been so responsible for the dumbing down of American cinema over the past ten years or so, might be responsible for the return of story and acting skill to future American cinema. (Allen 2003, 211)

More than a decade has passed since Allen wrote those words, and subsequent developments in American cinema have borne him out verbatim. It is for this reason that so much of Hollywood’s blockbuster spectacle filmmaking of the previous generation – from the 1980s, especially, but into the 1990s as well – has dated poorly, and why films such as *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Rupert Wyatt, 2011) achieve a narrative sophistication that their predecessors could/would never have striven for. Simply put, to whatever degree they ever did in the first place, digitally-conjured spectacles no longer instill awe simply by virtue of existing. Audiences possessed of the collateral knowledge that DVFX can do anything are now liberated to be that much more exacting in terms of how digital spectacle signifies in narrative and dramatic terms, and Hollywood’s filmmaking practice has evolved accordingly.

It is almost impossible to overstate the degree of rupture which the introduction of DVFX has had on the writing of histories of cinematic spectacle. Before this development, it was possible for Alfred J. La Valley, in 1985, to still feel comfortable writing of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) almost in the present tense, and declare virtually everything since *Forbidden Planet* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) to be a species of awkward new mongrel texts, which seem to bespeak “a yearning for the real to disappear and for the imaginary to become the real,” whereby audiences are “asking cinema to strain at its limits of illusion while ignoring its more critical implications for society and human psychology” (La Valley 1985, 157). To read these words today is to look back across a historical gulf, from which they seem astonishingly naïve. The very texts which La Valley sees as straining the limits of illusionism, to the point of dehumanization, are ones that many critics now may nostalgically look back upon as

the products of a more innocent time, when cinema still was still defined by an automatic assumption of indexical photographic realism, rather than the collateral knowledge that DVFX can and will simulate any imaginative vision. The anthology in which La Valley's essay appeared, for instance, opened with editors George Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin declaring that:

Cinema from its beginnings has operated under a paradox. For if film is the most mimetic of artistic media – copying what is there and documenting its reality in the act of presenting it – through these same images film also presents what is not there, visualizes (and hence realizes) other or future worlds, gives us what has not yet been seen. (Slusser & Rabkin 1985, vii)

Again, however, the rise to omnipresence of DVFX has obviated this paradox, insofar as “film” no longer copies what is there or documents reality. Pixels simply conjure what the filmmakers wish to show.<sup>2</sup> Five years before this, even, in 1980, it was possible for Peter Gidal to take strong issue with Christian Metz over issues of whether “optical effects” were in fact “photographic inscriptions,” what degree of credence one ought to extend the “given object” of photography, and whether questions of the diegetic or extradiegetic nature of optical effects, such as transitions, were applicable to the avant-garde or only to the narrative mainstream (Gidal 1980, 158). Again, such theoretical questions are simply no longer productive in the age of DVFX, where the same pixels are used by both avant-garde and mainstream filmmakers – only in different ways. Even in the earliest years of the new millennium, a veteran avant-garde filmmaker such as Michael Snow could experiment with digital graphics and effects in a film such as *\*Corpus Callosum* (2002), while the Hollywood mainstream could release a film such as *Scooby-Doo* (Rajah Gosnell, 2002). Both, in their own very different ways, used DVFX to reshape visual environments and relativize the indexically-real human figure, and both used the same ultimate medium of the pixel to do it – a fact that would have been readily comprehensible to any viewer of either film. Treasured antinomies such as Gidal's had simply been superseded. And finally, also in 1980, Vivian Sobchack would attempt to formulate a conceptual schema whereby the spectacles of science fiction are distinct from the spectacles of fantasy films by virtue of “striv[ing] primarily for our belief, not our suspension of disbelief” (Sobchack 1987, 88). The spectacular idiom of science fiction, she declared, attempts “to pictorialize the unfamiliar, the nonexistent, the strange and the totally alien... with a verisimilitude which is, at times, documentary in its flavor and style,” while fantasy films – such as *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (Nathan Juran, 1958) or *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963) – “feel no obligation to

make [themselves] credible in relation to the world outside the film” (Sobchack 1987, 88-89). Again, even if one credits Sobchack’s point with regards to cinema in 1980, DVFX have again fundamentally changed this state of affairs by liberating the spectacular idioms of both genres such that they can draw closer together. Seeing Ed Speleers ride a digitally-rendered dragon in the fantasy film *Eragon* (Stefen Fangmeier, 2006) operates in exactly the same register of belief as seeing Ewan MacGregor ride a digitally-rendered lizard/bird creature called a “varactyl” in the science fiction film *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (George Lucas, 2005).

In this, one sees that the “yearning for the real to disappear and for the imaginary to become the real” which La Valley posited has come fully to pass. DVFX have levelled and homogenized the visual idiom of cinematic spectacle and imagination, such that wonder at the mere *possibility* of illusion has virtually vanished. There is no longer a governing presumption of an indexical “real” against which to juxtapose “the imaginary,” because the digital logic of the simulacra has become pervasive. To take up Sobchack’s phrase and examples, fantastical films are still under “no obligation to make [themselves] credible” to the world outside the film, but most do so anyway simply because DVFX make it so eminently feasible. Under these circumstances, it is – as Michael Allen observed – the content and substance of illusions, rather than their nature and existence, which has become all-important. In *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (Sam Wanamaker, 1977), for instance, Ray Harryhausen’s attempt to render a sabre-toothed cat with his signature stop-motion animation was an abject failure because – unlike enchanted statues or giant troll-creatures with mottled skin – approximating the supple movements of musculature and fur of a familiar-seeming feline organism was beyond his technique. No spectator was ever going to identify with it as a real specimen of charismatic megafauna, whose potential death would carry genuine emotive meaning. Under these circumstances, thus, it was relatively unimportant that the sabre-toothed cat was posited by the narrative as a generic “monster” to be killed by the heroes. Three decades later, however, this state of affairs had changed considerably. Viewing a film such as *10,000 B.C.* (Roland Emmerich, 2008), it is immediately understood by the audience, as a matter of collateral knowledge, that DVFX can render a sabre-toothed cat with the nigh-documentary verisimilitude that Sobchack attributed to science-fiction films, and so – again as per Allen – its narrative signification becomes far more important than the mere possibility of its representation. It is in light of this, thus, that *10,000 B.C.* diametrically reverses narrative modes – from monstrosity to

nobility – and treats the big feline simulacrum exactly as it would a real figure of charismatic megafauna, like the tigers in *Two Brothers* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2004). This state of affairs – with digital simulacra “characters” now sufficiently normalized as to reliably draw spectatorial empathy – mandates, in turn, the theoretical rehabilitation of animation, simply as a matter of comprehending how filmmaking practice has changed. The affect inspired by the sabre-toothed cat Diego (voiced by Dennis Leary) from the *Ice Age* series, relative to that in the aforementioned *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger*, allows one to appreciate the scale of the shift which DVFX have brought about.

The older perspectives surveyed above were marked, to an even greater degree than contemporary ones, by wilful blindness to animated cinema – this dissertation’s fourth and penultimate explanatory parameter, which DVFX’s nature as “digital animation” has at last forced upon theorists’ attention. DVFX have imported into the realm of the photorealistic the same graphic freedom to realize any vision which had existed in cel animation for generations past. In 1994, James Cameron said, of his new digital effects company Digital Domain, that “anything you can imagine can be done. If you can draw it, if you can describe it, we can do it” (Klein 2004, 282). This was to prove prescient in more ways than one. While, as we have seen, DVFX mean that filmmakers are now limited only by their imaginations, numerous scholars and theorists have also pointed out how the rise to omnipresence of DVFX has made cinema at least as much akin to painting as to photography. This reorientation towards graphic arts such as drawing and painting has rendered the medium, in Stephen Prince’s words, more a matter of “painting with digital light” than photochemically transcribing the index. The tools furnished by digital compositing, Prince declares, “have enabled filmmakers to actually become painters; the metaphor is no longer a poetic fancy” (Prince 2012, 63). This fact has profound implications for the imaginative capacities of the medium and, if nothing else, means that animation – historically the mode of cinema most imaginatively unshackled from the index, often literally relying on painting to do so – can no longer be treated as an ephemeral aspect of cinema. Indeed, *pace* Manovich’s assertion that digital “New Media” have only now elevated animation to conceptual centrality, this fact prompts one to retroactively rethink cinema’s nature all along – to address what Tom Gunning rightly called “one of the great scandals of film theory... an aporia resulting from the dominance of a photographic understanding of cinema: the marginalization of animation” (Gunning 2007, 38). “Again and again,” Gunning continues, “film theorists have

made broad proclamations about the nature of cinema, and then quickly added, ‘excluding, of course, animation’” (Gunning 2007, 38). An understanding of cinema that emphasizes kinesthesia rather than indexicality – or cinema’s moving, animated, nature rather than its photographic one – Gunning declares, might be better placed to redress this scandal (Gunning 2007, 38-39). Again, the rise of the DVFX has simply forced this issue on the attention of film theory as never before, offering a reminder to theorists that, as Gunning puts it: “far from being a product of new media, animation has always been part of cinema” (Gunning 2007, 38). The same years of the late 1960s and early 1970s when Cinema Studies was coalescing as an academic discipline, with its distinct radical modernist ideas about the ideology of the cinematographic apparatus and photographic realism, were the same years in which Disney’s cel-animated films *The Jungle Book* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1967), *The Aristocats* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1970), and *Robin Hood* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1973) were already providing ready-made problematizations of them.

Furthermore, to look at films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), Fritz Lang’s *Indian Tomb* and *Tiger of Eschnapur* (1959) diptych, *Fantastic Voyage* (Richard Fleischer, 1966), or Cameron’s *Aliens* (1986), in terms of documentary indexicality and materialist filmmaking practice is almost certainly to miss their point. Filmmaking such as this is defined by a wish to transcend and violate the indexical reality which the camera photochemically imprints upon film, not to honour it and maintain its purity. As Dudley Andrew put it:

Films exhibit tension between the human (imagination, intention) and the recalcitrant chunks of recorded reality; the type or quality of that tension defines the styles, genres, and periods of film history. (Andrew 2010, 30)

Animation, whether of its historical cel-drawn variant, or its now-omnipresent digitally-rendered kind, is distinguished chiefly by its ability to obviate this “tension.” It provides a mode of showing that, in theory, can directly transcribe the imaginative intention, with no need to be bogged down by “the recalcitrant chunks of recorded reality.” The reasons why cel animation was not more commonly used in this spirit of imaginative transcribing in the West, as opposed to in a culture such as Japan, is one of the great global-theoretical questions of film history. For now, though, it is simply worth recalling the elusive, but redeeming, tradition of exceptions to the rule: films such as *Fantastic Planet* (René Laloux, 1973), *The Lord of the Rings* (Ralph Bakshi, 1978), *Heavy Metal* (Gerald Potterton, 1981), *The Plague Dogs* (Martin Rosen, 1982), and *Fire*

*and Ice* (Ralph Bakshi, 1983), which functioned simply as narrative works of imaginative transcribing. Films such as these – which used cel animation to tell spectacular stories which would not have admitted of filming in live action before the advent of DVFX – refused reified notions that animated features are inherently “cartoons,” that they must be “for children,” and that they must deal with some kind of fairy tale or folkloric subject, possibly involving anthropomorphized animals. They were also, furthermore, the predecessors to a development in filmmaking that cannot be emphasized strongly enough: the fact that, from the latter 1980s on, DVFX and cel animation were not distinct, but overlapped consistently and significantly. This trend would culminate with films such as *Titan A.E.* (Don Bluth & Gary Goldman, 2000), which used cel animation in tandem with DVFX to create imaginative story-worlds unlike any seen before in even the most advanced digitally-enabled live-action blockbusters. The utopian potentials of such synthesizing of DVFX with cel animation – combining their respective graphic freedoms to transcend indexical reality that much more completely – were well caught in a 2006 article by Thomas Lamarre, who declared that:

The ballroom scene in *Beauty and the Beast* is frequently cited as a key moment in pushing cel animation to new heights and announcing the wonders of digital animation for films produced for mass audiences. Depth had never looked so endlessly, volumetrically deep, and viewing position had never appeared so mobile and lively. Digital animation promised to renew our sense of wonder, not only for animation but also for cinema, and digital media promised to produce amazing new worlds, things never before seen. As in the early days of cinema, anything produced in this new media appeared to dazzle and beguile audiences. (Lamarre 2006, 131)

Roger Ebert struck the same note in his admiring review of DreamWorks Animation’s *The Prince of Egypt* (Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner & Simon Wells, 1998) – a film wholly enabled by this synthesis of cel animation and DVFX – declaring that:

What it proves above all is that animation frees the imagination from the shackles of gravity and reality, and allows a story to soar as it will. If de Mille had seen this film, he would have gone back to the drawing board. (Ebert 1998)

With this remark, Ebert concisely encapsulates the logic, and utopian possibility, of animation-as-simulacrum. Indeed, one of the directors of *The Prince of Egypt*, Simon Wells, could be taken as a symbolic *auteur*-figure for this kind of cinema. Wells has received director credit on the films *An American Tail: Fievel Goes West* (1991), *We’re Back: A Dinosaur’s Story* (1993), *Balto* (1995), *The Prince of Egypt*, *The Time Machine*, and *Mars Needs Moms* (2011). Of these films – all of them vivid works of spectacle – the first two are wholly cel-animated, with some discrete

assistance from digital technologies. The third, *Balto*, is the same, except for a live-action bracketing device which explicitly acknowledges the simulacra capacity in which animation is being used. In *The Prince of Egypt*, cel and digital animation are, if not yet at parity, at least visibly co-existing with the same text. With *The Time Machine*, live-action provides the overall template, but virtually the entirety of the film's spectacular interest comes from images conjured with digital animation. And finally, Wells's sixth and last film to date – the critical and commercial debacle *Mars Needs Moms* – was a product of the newly-ascendant technology of motion-capture, where digital animation and live-action interpenetrate to an unprecedented degree, with digitally-animated character designs overlaid onto live-action performances from real actors, and then situated into a wholly digitally-conjured diegetic world.

These six films, in tandem, constitute a tradition in cinema wholly at odds with the idea that film art must, of necessity, have some form of indexical, real-world referent. Three of the films in question do in fact possess such – *Balto*'s framing device, *The Time Machine*'s basic ontology, and *Mars Needs Moms*'s “synthespian” performances – but this very status of parity with wholly animated diegeses demonstrates the non-essential status of any real-world, indexical referent to the creation of cinematic illusions. Wells's six films are symbolic of the tendency in contemporary film art to give absolute priority to the imaginative simulacra, with any ontological link to the world of sensate reality being entirely optional, if not, indeed, an outright inhibition. It was in this utopian spirit that animation background artist Paul Lasaine once declared that:

I've worked on live-action films: everything is limited by what it's possible to build. As the designs get bigger, they cost more. In animation, you don't have any limits on size – if you can draw it, you can have it in the film. (Solomon 1998, 163)

It is no accident that Lasaine's remark is uncannily reminiscent of James Cameron's assertion that “if you can draw it... we can do it.” DVFX and cel animation, historically, are united by their theoretically complete graphic freedom: the freedom to realize any imaginative vision in moving images onscreen. This freedom of imaginative realization, however, is one that presupposes certain basic realist and representational assumptions. If, after all, one only wishes to conjure up abstract patterns of colour and geometry onscreen, then the liberation which Cameron and Lasaine evoke is largely meaningless. Not being intended to realize imaginative visions in any literal sense of the term – but rather intended to bypass conscious vision and elicit the unconscious – these have no hard-and-fast criteria of similitude which they can be judged by. Unlike, for instance, imagining the design and texture of the walls and fortifications of a great

fantasy-world city or fortress, non-representational *avant-gardist* visions are characterized by the absence of any such literal concerns. In *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* (Patrick Gilmore & Tim Johnson, 2003), for instance, one sees a mythical Syracuse laid out atop vertically-steep hills – reminiscent of South-East Asian landscapes such as Thailand’s Andaman Sea coast or Vietnam’s Ha Long Bay, but creating an overall image unmistakably derived from the Metéora monastery complex in Greece – and designed with a very deliberate fusion of Islamic and Greco-Roman architecture, with the distinctive onion domes, columns, and arches of both co-existing side by side: the building facades using the pointed horseshoe arches familiar from Islamic architecture; the aqueduct bridges linking the hilltops being Romanesque in their design. Such literal detail is alien to the non-representational *avant-garde* tradition in animation – whatever satisfactions one derives from watching a film such as Harry Smith’s *Heaven and Earth Magic* (1962), they are empathically not these ones. In this tradition, thus, cel animation’s utopian potential recedes dramatically, since the most liberating aspect of its imaginative-transcribing function is taken off the table.

All this matters profoundly because the modernist animus directed against live-action spectacle, in film theory and criticism, is as nothing compared to that directed against animated spectacle. In his 1970 book *Art in Movement: New Directions in Animation*, John Halas was perfectly representative, with his declaration that “the factory production associated with the Disney studios,” with its intricate division of labour among very large numbers of animators, deterred individual animators from experimenting with new ideas (Halas 1970, 108). The majority of films produced according to the Disney “conveyor-belt” system, he continued, “suffered from over-emphasis on ‘realism,’ resulting in smooth, life-like movement and behaviour of characters, and repetition of the same actions and situations” (Halas 1970, 108). This “repetition of the same actions and situations” could in fact be understood as a criticism of Hollywood genre filmmaking *in toto*, but here reification comes into play. Modernist-minded critics and theorists of animation – who make a fetish of individuality and originality of technique – rarely seem to consider their medium to be “cinema” in the same sense that live-action genre films are, and thus implicitly reject any idea of equivalent criteria. In good modernist fashion, rather, originality is Halas’s chief concern:

The main emphasis today is on work with individuality – individual inspiration in search of new forms in graphic design and the exploration of new techniques, as opposed to using a hard and fast system with subdivided responsibilities. (Halas 1970, 108)

The logical objection that an individual animator cannot create lengthy works of complex narrative spectacle is simply not admitted in Halas's paradigm. The minimalism and simplicity which would necessarily be enforced by working individually are transformed into positive values:

...the characters appear to be highly simplified, but are more expressive because of this, more in tune with the concept of design and stylized humour in the stories, and better integrated with their equally stylized backgrounds. (Halas 1970, 108)

That the realistic can also be “expressive,” or that “smooth, life-like movement and behaviour” could very easily be considered an aesthetic value, are likewise disallowed from Halas's paradigm. This vehemently oppositional rhetoric is simply a more specialized subset of the radical modernist sensibility that has been present in Cinema Studies since the 1970s. The difference, however, is that whereas with reference to live-action cinema, 1970s radical-modernist discourses have – at least somewhat – petered out or moderated with time, Halas's anti-realist discourse regarding animation has remained for much longer.

Such writing, however, is too reductive. Far from being “a misuse of the potentialities of the medium,” as Halas also declares, the hyperreal style of cel animation – of imaginative transcribing – offers a fascinating mode of expression (Halas 1970, 108). It represents the possibility of creating a simulacrum of reality, but one un beholden to reality's physical laws. Valuing of this Disney-style tradition in animation, however, is regrettably rare in both academic and non-academic writing on animation. Far more common are remarks such as Paul Wells's declaration that the foundation of this aesthetic, in the 1930s, represented Walt Disney having “coerced the animated film into a neo-realist practice,” and “misrepresented the form's more distinctive characteristics” (Wells 1998, 23-23). The idea that the natural form of animation is necessarily and inherently abstract and anti-mimetic is one that dies very hard, and in it, one discerns the extent to which modernist ideals have influenced not merely Cinema Studies discourses, but discourses of artistic practice as well. For instance, at the beginning of his 2014 film *Is the Man Who is Tall Happy?* – a cinematic record of his series of conversations with Noam Chomsky – Michel Gondry offers the following explanation for why he chose to realize the film in deliberately rudimentary, abstract animation, rather than offering indexical footage of himself and Chomsky.

Film and video are both, by their nature, manipulative. The editor or director proposes an assembly of carefully selected segments that he/she has in mind. In other words, the context becomes more important than the content. And, as a result, the voice that appears to come from the subject is actually coming from the filmmaker. That is why I find the process manipulative. The human brain forgets the cut, a faculty specifically human that, I will learn, Noam calls psychic continuity. The brain absorbs a constructed continuity as a reality and consequently gets convinced to witness a fair representation of the subject. [sic] On the other hand, animation that I decided to use for this film is clearly the interpretation of its author. If messages or even propaganda can be delivered, the audience is constantly reminded that they are not watching reality, so it's up to them to decide if they are convinced or not.

Nowhere here – or throughout the rest of the film – does Gondry acknowledge that his use of deliberately flat, crude animation drawings constitutes a definite embrace of one aesthetic stratagem over another. The existence of the Disney style – and with it, the fact that animation can possess the same “psychic continuity” power to naturalize itself – simply seems not to occur to him. Within moments of watching any of Disney’s great cel-animated features, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand et. al., 1937) to *Brother Bear* (Aaron Blaise & Robert Walker, 2003), however, the spectator’s brain has – just as completely as with a live-action film – “absorb[ed] a constructed continuity as a reality,” and begun focusing on the film purely on a level of narrative rather than ontology. The Disney style’s long tradition of aesthetic brilliance is inherent in this fact: its ambitious attempt to finesse and resolve the grand contradiction of using animation to tell stories in a live-action idiom – to essentially make audiences forget, on some level, that they’re watching a mere “cartoon,” and invest in the narrative drama with the same intensity they would in a live-action film. Every child who ever wept at the death of Bambi’s mother testifies to the aesthetic depths revealed by this endeavour. If the Disney style has never fully resolved its foundational contradiction – and, indeed, on a basic commonsensical level it never can – the results nonetheless evoke the words of Anthony Hopkins’s Ptolemy in *Alexander* (Oliver Stone, 2004): its failure towers above the successes of other aesthetic endeavours.

Throughout the history of this Disney-style hyperrealist-simulacrum animation – which Halas finds so provocatively abhorrent, Wells views as fundamentally illegitimate, and Gondry simply disdains to notice – there has, however, been a frequent self-assertive tendency to aesthetically counterattack against more avant-garde or modernist styles. This is often done in the spirit of what Gunning called the “tamed attractions” of narrative film – whereby hyperrealist-simulacra animated films will often “tame” and “domesticate” anti-mimetic alternatives by

integrating them into films in a narratively-subsumed capacity, as dreams, hallucinations, or other skewed sensory experiences. This has the ultimate aesthetic effect that, when the character “awakes” from such a modernist-animated spell, the normalizing “reality” of the hyperreal simulacra animated diegesis is reaffirmed all the more completely. To see a particularly vivid example of this, and scholarly reaction to it, it is worth going back a full seven decades in film history – to the “Pink Elephants on Parade” sequence in Disney’s *Dumbo* (Ben Sharpsteen et. al., 1941) This sequence – in which Dumbo, having mistakenly drunk some water spiked with the circus clowns’ hooch, begins to drunkenly hallucinate all manner of bizarre images, including the titular coloured pachyderms – was the most anomalously, and non-mimetically, experimental yet seen in a Disney feature, and so has predictably attracted much attention from scholars and theorists of animation over the years.

The “Pink Elephants on Parade” sequence, Mark Langer declared in a 1990 *Film History* article, is one which represents the beginning of a “move away from the seamless narrative and uniform visual style of the earlier features,” insofar as at least there is now at least “a stylistic dialectic” at work within the film’s diegesis (Langer 1990, 312). In earlier segments of *Dumbo*, Langer observes – such as the sequence of the circus employees and elephants working in tandem to raise the great tent – the hyperrealist simulacra style was very much in evidence:

Here mimesis is stressed through extensive use of movement within the frame, and through the use of modeling and highlighting to produce a three-dimensional effect. Naturalistic replication of the human figure, an emphasis on mass, and detailed rain and lightning effects also achieve this end. (Langer 1990, 314)

In the “Pink Elephants” sequence, however, “movement is two-dimensional, largely from left to right. Modeling and highlighting are absent, emphasizing the flatness of the image” (Langer 1990, 314). The titular pink elephants, Langer continues, “are more obviously drawings – the image of the initial pink elephant retains the lines of the pencil roughs,” making the segment “extremely self-conscious of the image *as an image*, as demonstrated by the pink elephants who march around the border of the frame” (Langer 1990, 316, italics Langer’s). In all this, Langer makes clear his essential sympathy with this modernist violation of the Disney animation’s simulacra tendency – what he refers to as the more anti-mimetic “New York style,” as opposed to the “West Coast style” of animators rigorously trained in hyperrealism. He endeavours to couch this in a narrative interpretation of *Dumbo*, whereby:

As the film progresses, it becomes clear that Dumbo belongs to the West Coast style, but is prevented from succeeding within that world by his “cartoony” features. As a stylized character, Dumbo is excluded from the company of the more mimetic elephants. (Langer 1990, 315)

Eventually, for Langer, “Dumbo’s talent” for using his oversized ears for flight is “recoup[ed] into the West Coast style,” but only after he first manifested it during the hallucinatory “Pink Elephants” sequence done in the “New York style.” Langer declares that this “pos[es] an internal contradiction to the central thrust of the narrative” (Langer 1990, 317). What it certainly crystallizes, however, is the fact that – like so many other critics, scholars, theorists, and practitioners of animation – Langer is here incapable of seeing anti-mimetic, modernist-derived style as other than progressive and emancipatory, and hyperrealist, simulacrum style as somehow repressive and limiting. The fact that it is the latter which opens up a window onto imaginative story-worlds in three dimensions, while the latter seeks to close them with obfuscatory, purely self-referential technique in two dimensions, is simply not admitted of. As a film, however, *Dumbo* represents Disney’s institutional “West Coast style” of hyperrealism striking back.

Langer allows that “*Dumbo* has many of the hallmarks of West Coast style,” and that at the film’s climax, “The New York solution presented by the Pink Elephants sequence is normalized by the West Coast ending,” but he resists embracing the ultimate implication of this (Langer 1990, 312/318). Namely, that this recuperation constitutes an explicit aesthetic rebuke to the “New York style” – a self-conscious relegation of modernist aesthetics to a subordinate place in a film’s worldview, from which the spectator is implicitly meant to emerge with relief, back into the aesthetic “normality” of hyperrealist simulacra. When Langer refers to “the nightmarish quality” of the “Pink Elephants” sequence, and its suggestions that its “elephants are made of rubber and have no feelings,” but rather are only “bendable, stretchable bubbles without psychological characteristics,” who “float through the air in a ballet of mutilation and metamorphosis,” he essentially hits the heart of the matter in spite of himself (Langer 1990, 317).

In all this, one sees the West Coast-trained animators at Disney staking out a different, more distant, relationship with one of animation’s most constitutive aspects: the art of caricature. As Stephen Prince has pointed out, caricature – entailing, as it does, an intimate understanding of form and motion, and their distillation through strategic exaggeration and distortion – was always integral to the Disney artists’ training. Indeed, with practice, they found that through “the stretch and squash principle,” they could imbue even the most seemingly-inexpressive objects, like a

half-filled flour sack, with identifiable emotions and personality (Prince 2012, 107). It is in this use of caricature that the very art of cartooning lies. The cartoonal graphic freedoms of exaggeration and whimsy which caricature offered, however, could also militate against animation's potential for hyperrealist imaginative transcribing. And this, Langer observes, was the one thing that Disney's West Coast institutional ethos was not willing to accede to. Even though *Dumbo* is still animated according to principles of caricature, one sees the film – with its ambivalent situation of the more totally-caricatured, modernist, “Pink Elephants” sequence – nonetheless keeping the hyperrealist goal in sight, to resurface more fully in *Bambi* (David Hand et. al., 1942) the following year.

*Dumbo*'s anti-modernist stratagem, however, was still ultimately rather modest, reflecting its status as product of the early 1940s – a time when the feature-length cel-animated film was relatively new to the Hollywood mainstream. As we will see in a later chapter, however, by the end of the form's life cycle in the late 1990s and early 2000s – its Late Decadent phase as it was definitively overtaken by the digitally-animated feature – this sort of thing would become much more aggressive. For now, however, it is worth pointing out that one of the reasons *The Lion King* (Roger Allers & Rob Minkoff, 1994) stands as the crowning achievement of Disney's hyperrealist aesthetic is that it would take this dynamic to an even further extreme, but in a positive rather than negative spirit. The Disney animators – fully cognizant of caricature – here make a conscious decision to minimize it as far as possible, and work, instead, according to a principle of hyperrealist imaginative transcribing. The opening four and a half minutes of the film – devoted to the sublime pre-title sequence set to Elton John's “Circle of Life” number – represent perhaps the most photorealistic animation ever undertaken in the cel technique. Whereas throughout the film proper, the animals/characters must speak and interact with each other in a way that requires them to be at least somewhat anthropomorphized – the animators have very strategically cheated on biology to give the lions a subtle approximation of opposable thumbs, for instance<sup>3</sup> – the pre-title sequence is free of dialogue, relying only on the Elton John's lyrics to guide the sequence's graphic logic. As a result, the animators were free to take hyperrealism further than it had ever been taken before.

After the iconic opening shot of the golden sun slowly rising into the orange-red morning sky of the African savannah, the film shows a brief montage of animals mystically registering a call to make their pilgrimage to Pride Rock for the presentation/coronation of the newborn

Simba. The film first shows the spectator a rhinoceros raising its head to look out of frame to the right; then a trio of impala raising theirs in the same direction; then a cheetah striding to the top of a hill to gaze off into the distance frame right; and finally a trio of marabou storks looking up, then taking flight out of frame right. All of these animals are rendered with stunning hyperrealism – at a level beyond anything Disney had ever achieved before, or would be seen again after the end of *The Lion King*'s pre-title sequence. Recalling *Bambi*, a Disney animator once declared that “He might as well have gone out and taken pictures of real deer, that was the quality he was aiming for in the animation” (Schickel 1997, 201). Working five decades later, on a film which, among many other things, serves as an overt and grandiose homage to the studio's earlier classic, a new generation of Disney animators would take up this sentiment anew, in a resoundingly positive spirit, and go even further with it. *The Lion King*'s pre-title sequence serves as a high-photorealistic prism through which the spectator will understand everything else they see throughout the remainder of the film, cueing them to treat the film that much more seriously – as epic drama rather than a stereotypical “cartoon.”

This becomes especially acute when it becomes a matter of recuperating the more cartoonish, caricatured elements which, in spite of everything, the film nonetheless contains. The clearest give-away of the pre-title sequence's aesthetically distinct nature lies in the third shot of its initial “animals reacting” montage – in between the impala and the cheetah – when a group of six meerkats rise to attention, gazing off to frame right. This is because while there will be no more rhinos, impala, cheetahs, or storks in the rest of *The Lion King*, the meerkat Timon (voiced by Nathan Lane) – one of the film's comic sidekick characters – would, along with his warthog buddy Pumbaa (voiced by Ernie Sabella), go on to become one of Disney's most beloved characters. His difference from the meerkats in the opening sequence is thus particularly telling. The *suricata* at the beginning look and move entirely differently than Timon later in the film. Whereas Timon's character design would, through caricature, be subtly anthropomorphized like the rest of the film's cast – he walks bipedally virtually all the time, gestures with his forearms, and his face is designed to elicit human empathy – the meerkats in this early shot possess an utterly documentary realism. They scurry into frame horizontally and stand up on their hind legs with visible effort, all of them holding their forepaws downward in the same balancing stance. Furthermore, their bodies are more elongated than Timon's will be – more in keeping with the proportions of real meerkats, rather than the needs of anthropomorphization. Most importantly,

during the brief seconds they are onscreen, the viewer nonetheless finds no human pathos or empathy in their facial expressions, any more than with the rhino and impala before them, or the cheetah or storks after. Like the other animals, they simply gaze frame right with the blankly unreadable countenances of real animals. This denial is deliberate on Disney's part. Again, the maximization of hyperrealist simulacra – into the realm of virtual documentary realism – allows for an aesthetic and conceptual prism effect, whereby the ultimate speaking and interacting of the film's leonine characters becomes that much more striking. There is no remotely comparable affect in watching classic Disney cartoon characters like Mickey, Donald, Goofy, and Pluto interact, because the animation of their cartoon shorts never aspired to the level of hyperrealism of even *The Lion King's* main running time, to say nothing of its four-and-a-half-minute pre-title sequence.

The level of realistic illusionism in this animation – and the remarkable paucity of much like it throughout Hollywood's history – is the historical phenomenon that Kristin Thompson took up and analyzed in a 1980 essay entitled "Implications of the Cel Animation Technique." Hollywood, she declared, "defined the cartoon by its difference from live-action films," and further argued that cel animation possessed "disruptive properties" that the Hollywood industry felt a need to defend itself against (Thompson 1980, 108). This defence was necessary because, long before the arrival of DVFX, cel animation, with its simulacra capabilities, was already understood as having the potential to liberate filmmakers to realize any imaginative vision – to do, in the words of Paul Wells, what "may be termed 'magical' within or impossible within the concept of a real world served by physiological, gravitational, or functionalist norms" (Wells 1999, 201). Recreating vanished historical locations, conjuring massed armies, playing impossible games with scale, and bringing fantastic creatures to life – all of these things, done imperfectly through live-action, bear the imprimatur of "movie magic." Conjuring such spectacular subjects via hyperrealist cel animation, however – such that they appear wholly seamless, and perfectly integrated into their overall filmic diegesis – would obviate any such "magic," and leave only their narrative signification to be evaluated. This is a prospect, Thompson suggests, which the Hollywood industrial wisdom was, for a long time, unenthusiastic about, and this ensured the general marginalization of animation throughout Hollywood's classical period. In all this, one can discern the mirror image of the concern with shielding audiences from awareness of fakery that Stephen Prince identified in the moguls of the Classical

Studio era. In the former case, the Hollywood institutional wisdom was that live-action, and supposedly wholly indexical, diegeses should never appear to be violated or disrupted – tainted with “fakery,” in other words. With cel animation, however, Thompson suggests that the opposite was the case, and that at an institutional level, Hollywood positively wished for the integrity of the animated diegesis to be shown up and punctured whenever possible, so as to forestall the emergence of a wholly organic, alternative visual register for narrative spectacle. The difference, however, is that with cel animation, Hollywood never outgrew this reticence. The use of special effects would become common knowledge in the era of the modern blockbuster, with entire fanzines devoted to the latest developments.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgment that cel animation could be used, as simulacrum, towards the same imaginative-realist ends as “live action,” however, would historically have a much tougher time gaining traction in Hollywood, and, indeed, go into eclipse in the early 2000s without the issue ever being definitively resolved.

The Holy Grail of such a cel-animation-as-simulacrum mindset would, presumably, be that posited by Manovich: to make an animated feature which drew on all the graphic freedom of animation, but was structured as a simulacrum of live-action film language, with similar, but more liberated, editing rhythms and camera movements. In this way, an animated film could, theoretically, create a live-action-style spectacle that was more spectacular than anything which could be done in actual live-action. “In principle,” Lamarre quotes Manovich:

“Given enough time and money, one can create what will be the ultimate digital cinema: ninety minutes of 129,600 frames completely painted by hand from scratch, but indistinguishable from live photography.” ... In other words, the ultimate digital cinema aims to produce the look and feel of ‘live action cinema’ but without live photography. (Lamarre 2006, 132)

Even if this ideal of *total* animation-as-simulacra remains impossible, it is worth keeping in mind when engaging with actually-existing animated features. What is needed in Cinema Studies is a greater level of comfort with discussing the animated feature in the same context, and with the same vocabulary, as the live-action feature. Gregory Solman set an example in this regard as early as 1992, with his declaration that:

Just as the lighting models of the shadowy hospital scene of *Gone with the Wind* seem reflected in Disney’s *Pinocchio* a year later, the climactic transfiguration in *Beauty and the Beast* – wherein the spellbound Prince is caught up in a rapture of glowing electromagnetic wind – seems influenced by ILM. Prototypical pre-ILM Disney differs: When *Cinderella* (’50) is transformed into her princessly essence, the pixie dust of the Fairy Godmother’s wand spirals up from below and drips down upon the dress like icing,

the sparkles – more static than animated – not so much a gust as a gentle breeze. (Solman 1992, 35)

This comparing of live-action and cel-animated diegesis – *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, George Cukor & Sam Wood, 1939) with *Pinocchio* (Ben Sharpsteen, Hamilton Luske et. al., 1940), and *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale & Kirk Wise, 1991) with such Industrial Light & Magic spectacles as *Cocoon* (Ron Howard, 1985) – in simple, lucid terms of lighting and *mise-en-scene* is still regrettably rare, however. There remains too great a fetishism of the concept of the “cartoon” – a form which is putatively inherently comic and not meant to be realistic, because aimed primarily, or exclusively, at children. Although this may often enough be the case in practice, it should, again, not be elevated into an axiomatic truth in theory.

In thinking of live-action and cel animation on such an equal footing, the film *Balto* is invaluable. More than any other film which I am aware of, *Balto* literalizes a cel-animation-as-simulacrum discourse by way of a framing device whereby the animated story is presented as a historical recollection from the present, which is filmed in live-action. An elderly woman escorts her granddaughter through New York’s Central Park, and they come to the statue of the real historical sled dog “Balto,” which commemorates his role in the medicine run which saved Nome, Alaska from an outbreak of diphtheria in 1925. Having established the film’s historical subject thus, the film transitions back to the Nome of 1925 and its fictionalized story of Balto’s exploits – all realized in a fluently hyperrealist-simulacrum style of cel animation. Something like this device had been used in other majority-animated films throughout history, such as *The Phantom Tollbooth* (Chuck Jones, 1970) and *The Pagemaster* (Maurice Hunt & Joe Johnston, 1994), but those films were both fairy-tale/fantastical stories, and moreover, subtly cued the spectator from the start that their animated worlds were not wholly of a piece with the “real,” live-action world (“I’m a cartoon!” the hero of *The Phantom Tollbooth* exclaims upon looking at his hands). *Balto*’s logic is different, insofar as it explicitly presents its grand animated flashback as historical fact (on the film’s terms, at least), leaving the spectator with the implication that its animated nature is simply incidental – that such an epic tale could not be done justice with live-action.

*Balto*’s simulacrum nature is further emphasized by the first sequence in its animated diegesis, which depicts a dogsled race across an Alaskan plain to a tight mountain pass. The sequence is significant in that it is edited exactly as though it were shot in live action. It lasts only

one minute and eighteen seconds, but contains thirty-nine shots, for an average shot length of two seconds. When one further considers that some establishing shots skew this ratio on the long side somewhat, one is confronted with the fact that the most kinetic and suspenseful parts of the sequence are edited at the same pitched intensity that characterizes the rapid-fire rhythms of Hollywood's most hyperkinetic live-action spectacles – films which display what David Bordwell has called “intensified continuity editing.” And yet the very fact that this film is an animated feature would suggest that, unlike many live-action films, this is not the result of overreliance on the editing room to cover up poorly-chosen on-set camera angles and shooting decisions, but rather that the sequence was consciously and deliberately envisioned as being edited at this tempo. This in turn problematizes many hostile critical judgments of such editing rhythms in Hollywood today. Such is just one of the ways that cel-animation-as-simulacra can throw supposedly-normative live-action cinema into relief.

Finally, the figure of Don Bluth is relevant here because, in addition to being one of the animated feature form's few genuine *auteurs*, his films routinely represent some of the purest test cases of the distinction between “cartoon” animation, and animation as hyperreal simulacra. This distinction is a crucial one, and is never more acutely appreciable than when the two styles are made to share the same frame, creating an unmissable montage effect, or aesthetic dissonance – one suggesting a mere failure of realist aesthetics rather than a productive and provocative instance of sublimated modernist aesthetics. Bluth's film *An American Tail* (1986) often had its cartoon mice acting before a looming background of hyperrealistic humans, while *Thumbelina* (Don Bluth & Gary Goldman, 1994) had the hyperrealistic heroine juxtaposed with all manner of fantastically cartoonish animals, but the effect is seen most acutely in *Anastasia* (Don Bluth & Gary Goldman, 1997). In that film, the heroine and hero, Anastasia and Dimitri, are among the most-hyperrealistically drawn human figures yet seen in the Hollywood mainstream – convincing simulacra for Meg Ryan and John Cusack, who provide their voices. Both are made to do scenes, however, with other characters who are not merely drawn as cartoons, but somewhat crude cartoons at that. A mean old orphanage matron named Phlegmenkoff and an implausibly kind-hearted ex-aristocrat named Vladimir are defined, respectively, by a cartoonishly exaggerated scowling countenance and crooked buck teeth; and by a cartoonishly exaggerated smiling countenance and fluffy beard. One sees the same problem, writ smaller, in the film's characterization of the Dowager Empress Marie on the one hand and Rasputin on the other. The

former, as voiced by Angela Lansbury, is drawn with such hyperrealistic dignity and nobility as to seem appropriate for a White Army propaganda film; while the latter, voiced by Christopher Lloyd, is almost too outlandish for a Tex Avery short. One of the reasons for *Anastasia*'s ultimate failure as a film, thus, is that it is not so much hybridized as mongrelized in its visual style. Unlike *Dumbo*'s implicitly self-conscious invocation of the more modernist, experimental "New York style" of animation – invoked in order to exalt and confirm the hyperrealist "West Coast style" all the more strongly – *Anastasia* ends up besmirching the best of Disney-style hyperrealism with the worst of cartoonish-ness, to no discernible purpose.

In contrast to Halas and his modernist peers' insistence that such Disney-style hyperrealism was a stunted, unimaginative path of least resistance in animation, the truth was that pursuing a hyperrealist aesthetic was an overwhelmingly exacting aesthetic undertaking. Historically, cel animation's theoretical capacity to realize and show any imaginative vision via the simulacra of drawings was long limited in practice by the mechanics of the medium. "Those simple little story sketches that appear so innocent on the surface," Bluth recollects, "often become engineering nightmares in the production process" (Bluth 2004, 58). For instance, as the twenty-third chapter of Robert C. O'Brien's book *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1971) gives way the twenty-fourth, the field-mouse heroine has been captured by a family of humans and put in a cage as a pet, dangerously stalling her immediate mission to warn the rats about some arriving exterminators, and her longer-term quest to save her family from the coming tractor-ploughing. There is thus considerable narrative urgency for her to escape. In seeking to transfer this to the screen for the film *The Secret of NIMH* (Don Bluth, 1982), Bluth and his production team envisioned, among others, a high-angled shot which would show Mrs. Frisby (or "Brisby" in the film) attempting to force the cage door open with her water cup. While the initial sketch art did indeed appear innocuous enough, the execution of this shot on film required seven levels of animation. "The background level and the first level were straightforward," Bluth recounts:

...but levels 2, 3, 4, and 5 were all pieces of a birdcage model shot as live action. ... the water cup had to be traced off onto its own level to be called level 2, while for level 4, the water cup had to be cut out with an x-acto knife. Still showing between the front bars on the level 4 prints would, of course, be the back of the cage as shown in level 1. This was simply eliminated using white-out before copying level 4 onto cels. Fun, huh? (Bluth 2004, 58)

"Nowadays, this kind of matting out can be done so easily on a computer," Bluth declares, vividly encapsulating, at the most basically practical level, the level of liberation afforded by the

rise of DVFX, and the degree to which this rise created a historical gulf between before it and after it. “Seeing *The Secret of NIMH* nowadays just bothers me,” he continues elsewhere, “because we could have done so much more with the tractor sequence, especially with what we have now in CGI technology” (Bluth 2004, 50). Indeed, with this same digital technology now having largely supplanted the cel technique – at least within the Hollywood mainstream – the same philosophical and aesthetic issues about the desirability of mimesis, imaginative transcribing, and animation-as-simulacra which characterized cel animation for so long have, in the early twenty-first century, been inherited by pure digital animation.

If there has been a single entity in Hollywood history which has served to bring all four of this dissertation’s explanatory parameters into harmony, it would be Lucasfilm and its *Star Wars* universe. This imaginative universe is one wholly conceived in terms of grandiose imaginative spectacle; one which has, from the very beginning, couched its imaginative spectacles in the pop cultural idiom of the Hollywood blockbuster; one which has aggressively used, and innovated, digital technologies and DVFX as the means to realize these blockbuster imaginative spectacles; and one which, in tandem with this use of DVFX, pioneered in normalizing the ideal of animation-as-simulacra. For whereas the canonical original trilogy of *Star Wars* films – *Episode IV – A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977), *Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980), and *Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983) – were conventionally live-action affairs, the “Expanded Universe” of novels, comics, and television apocrypha which it would spawn has served as an expansive testament to the simulacra nature of drawings and paintings, and done inordinate amounts to de-reify ideas about “the cartoon” or the extreme specificity of animation. It is a widespread truism in *Star Wars* fan circles, for instance, that the much-reviled television movie *Star Wars Holiday Special* (1978) had its chief redeeming feature in the one segment realized with cel animation, which introduces Boba Fett and depicts an ocean planet named Panna. This utilization of animation as imaginative transcribing – to create a waterworld and sci-fi metropolis more ambitious than anything seen in the original film – was a far more radical gesture in the late 1970s than today, and the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe would stick with it for a further generation of graphic novels and lavishly illustrated books.

The ultimate triumph of this simulacra logic, however, would come with the re-starting, in the late 1990s, of the *Star Wars* universe’s moving image side – a side which has continued cultural production, more or less uninterrupted, up to the present day. George Lucas’s famously

DVFX-heavy “prequel” trilogy of *Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (2005) are of course potent works of cinema constructed by a logic of simulacra, but an even more total example is the 2008 “interquel” film *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (David Filoni). Building on the 25-episode cel animation TV series *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, which aired from 2003 to 2005, and released to provide the launching point of a second such series executed in digital animation (2008-2014), *The Clone Wars* finally displayed on movie screens the logical conclusion to which the *Star Wars* universe had been building for some time: the animated feature. In her 2007 book *Digital Encounters*, Aylish Wood found it unproblematic to write the phrase “As in conventional organizations of character-based animation, in mainstream cinema character too remains a key frame of reference for viewer interaction” (Wood 2007, 46). The implicit assumption here – that the “conventional” animated feature is somehow not a part of the cinematic mainstream, and that any similarities in compositional norms are therefore a remarkable fact – is the same assumption that the simulacra logic of the *Star Wars* universe has spent a generation breaking down.

It is a conclusion, furthermore, for which the aesthetic rationale have existed for centuries. *The Clone Wars*’ imaginative ambitions for its blockbuster spectacle are too vertiginous, detailed, and grandiose – after the fashion of the seventeenth-century Baroque – to be realizable in terms of Andrew’s “recalcitrant chunks of recorded reality,” and therefore the latter are simply dispensed with. A visual register of digital animation is adopted instead, on the grounds that it is better to transcribe the imaginative vision, in scrupulously realist simulacrum, than to be unable to realize it, as imagined, in photography – to have to compromise its Baroque scope for the sake of what Wells called “physiological, gravitational, or functionalist norms.” Underlying this, moreover, is the assumption – quite congruent with nineteenth-century Decadence – that such a trade-off is eminently worthwhile, because the real-world index is worth little, relative to the realization of the aesthetic impulse. The supposed humanism and humility of sticking with the real, as opposed to embracing pure pixels, counts for nothing under this Decadent mindset, when the latter can produce greater painterly beauty. This is the same dual aesthetic principle to which Hollywood audiences were first introduced at the dawn of the 2000s, with the great commercial martyrdom of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (Hironobu Sakaguchi & Motonori Sakakibara, 2001).

If, in channeling this dual aesthetic logic, *The Clone Wars*'s style of animation is not as scrupulously photorealistic as *Final Fantasy*'s was – doubtless for budgetary reasons as much as anything – then the very fact that it seems unremarkable today goes to show how much the earlier film's failed experiment had been recuperated and rehabilitated as the 2000s wore on. *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* remains, of course, an extreme case of these aesthetic dynamics. In the rest of cinema today, however, the same Baroque and Decadent assumptions are likewise observable, just writ smaller. The following chapters will explain how, exactly.

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<sup>1</sup> Titles include *Cinefex* (1980-present), *Cinefantastique* (1967-2006), *Starlog* (1976-2009), *Starburst* (1977-present), *SFX* (1995-present), *Sci-Fi Universe* (?-1999), *Cinemagic*, *Cinescape*, and *Photon*. Many of these publications are obscure and forgotten today as – even beyond the vagaries of the publishing industry – the rate of attrition in the digital age has been high. In tandem, however, publications such as these represent what Michele Pierson calls a concern “with developing an aesthetic (and to a lesser extent critical) vocabulary for describing computer-generated images,” and a response to “the growing demand for information about computer-generated effects in the 1990s” (Pierson 2002, 56/58).

<sup>2</sup> This, however, may be said to have created new paradoxes, insofar as DVFX are now also put to uses of scrupulous historical re-creation, which could be said to be their own kind of “documenting reality,” or imagistically capturing what *was* there. Examples include the recreation of 1970s San Francisco in *Zodiac* (David Fincher, 2007) and 1920s Los Angeles in *Changeling* (Clint Eastwood, 2009). Unlike the science-fiction and fantasy spectacles discussed by Slusser and Rabkin, moreover, these DVFX are sublimated rather than spectacular, functioning on an almost entirely subliminal level, which likewise problematizes La Valley's remarks about “the imaginary” and “the real.”

<sup>3</sup> The extent to which caricature was minimized, in animating *The Lion King*'s leonine characters, can be discerned by comparing the film to Disney's cartoon short *Lambert the Sheepish Lion* (Jack Hannah, 1952) from 42 years earlier – a film which seems also to anticipate the design of Pride Rock.

## Chapter Two – Baroque and Decadent: A New *Lingua Franca* of Digital Spectacle in the Modern Blockbuster

In her landmark 1990 book *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, Camille Paglia declared that:

Decadent art makes hostile claims on the viewer. Its style is pagan spectacle and pagan flaunting. Behind the trashiest Decadent painting are complex Romantic assumptions about nature and society overlooked by textbook accounts of nineteenth-century art. Modernist culture-heroes like Cezanne are overemphasized. Cezanne's plainness and 'honesty,' homely Protestant values, are in the Rousseauist-Wordsworth line. Decadent art, like Counter-Reformation Baroque, tells big lies. (Paglia 1990, 490)

All of these observations, as Paglia herself would readily and enthusiastically acknowledge, are equally applicable to the spectacles of Hollywood. It has already been seen that many critics and theorists of the cinema vehemently reject the illusionism of cinematic spectacle in the name of modernist values, seeing in the beguilements of Hollywood a fundamental dishonesty, as opposed to the supposed "honesty" of a figure such as Cezanne. It is likewise the case that critics who complain of feeling assaulted and overawed by the spectacles of the modern Hollywood blockbuster are, in their own way, accurately describing the "hostile claims on the viewer" that such films make. What is lacking in such discourses, however, is any acknowledgment of the sublime artistry that inheres in such spectacles nonetheless, and an effort to reconceptualize their telling of "big lies" in positive terms. It is such a reconceptualization that this chapter endeavours to formulate a visual-aesthetic basis for, and it is Paglia's dual invocation of "Counter-Reformation Baroque" alongside "Decadent art" that provides the substance of this visual aesthetic.

The emphasis upon the works of Camille Paglia may raise some initial ambivalence in the reader, so a clarification is perhaps in order. This dissertation invokes Paglia purely in scholarly terms, as the author of the 700-page academic survey *Sexual Personae*, and as the Yale PhD and Harold Bloom protégé who distinguishes herself from her mentor in terms of how:

My appreciation of glamour and aristocratic style (anti-bourgeois and anti-liberal, as in Baudelaire and Wilde) is [a] point of divergence from Bloom. We belong to different Western traditions. Bloom, who prefers the Bible to Homer, is Judeo-Christian. His consciousness is completely literary, an orchestral dynasty of the word. I am Greco-Roman, ruled by visual images and formal theatrics, in art, sport, politics, and war. (Paglia 1992, 123)

This paradigm makes Paglia's thought an invaluable prism through which to interpret the workings of the cinema. Her prominence in what follows is due to her alignment with the pagan spectacle aspect of the Western canon – through which the rise of modernist abstraction is chiefly appreciable as a point of rupture, whereby the fine arts began a long process towards obsolescence, and their emotive place in culture and society at large was taken up by the spectacles of popular culture. “High culture made itself obsolete through modernism's neurotic nihilism,” as she puts it, while “popular culture is the great heir of the western past” (Paglia 1990, 31).

Consequently, and indubitably fascinating though the subject is, this dissertation does not seek to channel Paglia's early 1990s reputation as an arch-provocateur culture critic – a fixture of television debates and mass market periodicals. It seeks to foreground the author of scholarly assertions such as “Poe's spiritual father was the Coleridge of the mystery poems. Thus Coleridge, coming through Poe to Baudelaire, daemonizes Gautier, with his Byronic breeziness,” and “French Decadence, we saw, was hastened along by Coleridge coming through Byron to Delacroix, Balzac and Gautier and by Coleridge coming through Poe to Baudelaire” (Paglia 1990, 421/572). It is learned schema such as these – remodulating Bloom's ideas about influence through a pagan-Decadent worldview rather than a Judeo-Christian-humanist one – that lie at the root of this dissertation's channeling of Paglia, rather than her famously provocative assertions (wrenched from their proper context, it must be stressed) such as “If civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts;” or the words, directed at the more censorious wing of American feminists, “Let them suck raw eggs and *eat my dust!*” (Paglia 1990, 38; Paglia 1994, 249, italics Paglia's). Aside from Bloom, among Paglia's other scholarly influences is the great Anglo-Scottish art historian Kenneth Clark. In a short 1994 essay, she described Clark's 1956 book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* as a work of “broad learning, cultivation, emotional engagement, and passion for detail” – a book whose “interpretive style is simultaneously deeply sensual and crisply intellectual” (Paglia 1994, 339-340). In intellectual virtues such as these, one again hears the qualities David Bordwell attributed to film critics such as Agee, Tyler, and Farber, and in this spirit, this dissertation's articulation of Baroque art begins with Clark's famous television documentary series *Civilisation* (1969).

In the seventh episode of *Civilisation*, Clark declares that the remarkable thing about the Counter-Reformation Baroque is how much it has in common with the cinema of the twentieth

century. Baroque art, he declares, displayed “a means of communication that reminds one of the films.” Caravaggio’s *The Calling of St. Matthew* (1598-1600), for instance, experiments “with violent contrasts of light and shade that were popular in highbrow films of the 1920s.” One can readily see the parallels with *Caligari* or *Nosferatu* here. “And later Baroque artists, like Bernini,” Clark continues, showing *The Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* (1674), “delighted in the emotive close-up. The tears, and open lips and restless movement – all these devices that were to be rediscovered in the movies.” Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) stands out as an unmissable analogy here, but among innumerable other possible examples, one might also think of Katharine Hepburn at the emotive climax of *Woman of the Year* (George Stevens, 1942).

Although Clark – old Edwardian Tory that he was – immediately attempted to censor himself by cutting from these observations to a monologue of himself declaring that “in a way, it’s a frivolous comparison, because however much one may enjoy the films, one must admit that they are often vulgar, always ephemeral,” a further four and a half decades have only made his remarks more apposite. At the time that he made them, the liberation wrought by DVFX was still nowhere in sight, and so his parallels between Baroque art of bronze and marble and Baroque art of celluloid could only extend to matters of lighting, staging and framing. With the rise to hegemony of DVFX, however, the analogy becomes far closer. While examining Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-25), for instance, Clark declares that:

The *Apollo and Daphne* is an even more extraordinary example of how marble can be made into something fluid and fleeting, because it represents the moment when Daphne, crying for help to her father, is changed into a laurel tree. Her fingers are becoming leaves already. It’s just beginning to dawn on Apollo that he’s lost her. And if he could look down, he could see that her beautiful legs are already turning into a tree trunk. And her toes are becoming roots and tendrils.

At the time, in 1969, a worthy cinematic treatment of *Apollo and Daphne* would have been impossible except in cel animation. The sculpture’s subject, however, could easily be recreated today, when digital “morphing” has become an entirely unremarkable part of cinematic aesthetics. *Pace* Clark’s basic conservatism, thus, the comparison between Baroque art and cinema has become far less frivolous. As will be seen in the next chapter, digital morphing was initially, in the 1990s, seized upon by modernist-minded critics as a new and innovative development in filmmaking – a new horizon of cinematic representation that could potentially help unseat the supposed formulaic hegemony of Hollywood illusionism. That these DVFX were instead quickly incorporated into a new, popular *lingua franca* of digitally-liberated visual

spectacle – driven by a vocabulary of familiar aesthetic devices and archetypes, the same way that Bernini’s Baroque tradition was – stands as a testament to the limitation of Cinema Studies’ compulsive emphasis on “modernity” and modernism, and the value of revisiting older traditions of spectacle in Western art. Clark was emphatically correct in that, despite using the two-dimensional mediums of canvas painting and ceiling fresco, and the crushingly heavy one of marble sculpture, the Baroque managed to create astonishingly three-dimensional and weightless spectacles. Its static works frequently seem almost imbued with animation – its profuse and densely packed image schemas soliciting the imagination in an almost cinematic manner akin to the modern blockbuster.

The analogy is further productive insofar as Baroque art, being a few crucial centuries removed from “the rise of modernity,” had nothing to do with modernist prescriptions that art must undermine or critique its own illusionism. Quite the contrary: “There’s a snapshot quality to Baroque representations of figures in action, which look scarily realistic,” Bordwell once noted (Bordwell 2014a). Baroque art was indissociable from a realist preoccupation totally alien to modernist emphases upon the foregrounding of technique, in the name of critiquing illusionism. The realist tendencies in Baroque art, however, were different from those nineteenth-century ones which Modernism was in reaction against. Allegory played a far greater role, insofar as, unlike the Realist and Naturalist impulses of the nineteenth century, the goal was not to pierce through illusion and mystification but, rather, to further naturalize those things. “We shall gain only a one-sided and distorted view of the Baroque if we confuse the realism of the seventeenth century with that of the nineteenth,” John Rupert Martin declared, insofar as nineteenth-century realism – in literature, in particular – was primarily keen to present the world as people actually experienced it (Martin 1991, 119). This can be seen especially acutely in Decadent literature’s frequent lengthy digressions on a chamber’s design and decoration, or a character’s subjective reaction to an environment or event, however seemingly insignificant. Seventeenth-century Baroque art, on the other hand, used the Renaissance advances in realism of painting technique – the rediscovery of perspective, advances in the understanding of anatomy, etc. – to depict the mythic and supernatural in a visual idiom that simply corresponded more closely with people’s real experience of the world. The fantastical would, paradoxically, be made more viscerally and immediately powerful by appearing less fantastical. In this, it is vividly congruent with the cinematic spectacles which have become omnipresent since the medium’s liberation by DVFX.

Beyond such representational concerns as this, Baroque art shares a powerful affinity with the monumentalizing aspect of the modern Hollywood blockbuster. This is that the seventeenth-century Baroque was, in a very real sense, the world's first truly global style of art. That it spread all across Europe in the same fashion as medieval Gothic three centuries prior is well-known. What had changed in the interval, however, was that – because of the early European voyages of discovery – the known world had gotten considerably larger. This would mean, on the one hand, that as Europe brought its culture with it around the world, instances of Baroque art would soon appear in the Americas and Asia as well as Europe; and on the other hand, that this consciousness of a much larger and more diverse world would begin to figure in the designs and visual schemas of Baroque aesthetics. The Bernini-designed *Fountain of the Four Rivers* (1651), which symbolically encompasses and unifies the Nile, the Danube, the Ganges, and the Rio de la Plata – four major rivers of four different continents – is an immediately comprehensible example of this globalizing tendency in Baroque art. Even more vividly resonant, however, is the great ceiling of the Jesuit church of S. Ignazio, Andrea Pozzo's *The Glory of Saint Ignatius Loyola and the Missionary Work of the Jesuit Order* (1691-94) – a work that symbolically envisions all the known realms of the globe having been converted to Christianity, and their peoples ascending heavenward as one. Works such as this possessed an exultant imaginative scope and exhilarating emotive grandiosity that was unprecedented in Western art.

Since Romanticism, there has been a discourse in Western society to equate exultation and exhilaration of the senses with some sort of spiritual liberation from social constraints. This idea was a real, living force in the 1960s counter-culture – so vividly evoked by the spectacle of *Woodstock* (Michael Wadleigh, 1970) – and it is with difficulty that many writers can fully abandon the concept. The seventeenth-century Baroque, however – being largely bound up with the Catholic Church's Counter-Reformation – provides a sterling reminder that the exultation and exhilaration of the senses are perfectly compatible with the establishmentarian ideology. Critics and scholars who reflexively dismiss Hollywood blockbusters as conservative are, in this respect at least, not fundamentally wrong, although they do reveal an oppressively narrow range of aesthetic curiosity. Writing of the interior of Weltenburg Abbey, for instance, Martin declares that “it is a gorgeous spectacle, and one that is calculated to raise the religious passions of the worshiper to new heights of ardour and excitement” (Martin 1991, 118). This phrase captures both the inestimable virtues of, and the misgivings aroused by, the splendours of Baroque art.

These same achievements and ambivalences are at work in the Hollywood blockbuster spectacles of today.

The misgivings and ambivalences aroused by current blockbusters have, indeed, led some critics to use the term “decadent” in referring to them. And *Decadence*, Liz Constable, Matthew Potolsky, and Dennis Denisoff tell us, has a “traditional association with... a cult of morbidity, artificiality, exoticism, or sexual nonconformity” – a dedication to transgression that militates against well-adjusted socialization (Constable, Potolsky and Denisoff 1999, 2). For these reasons, it has often been moralistically shunned by scholars and critics, and the very term itself has been allowed to accumulate negative connotations – even in academic discourses – which make it a presumed term of disparagement and abuse for a disliked cinematic form such as the blockbuster. Such connotations and preconceptions, however, are mistaken. It was one of the overriding priorities of Paglia’s *Sexual Personae* to demonstrate that – for exactly the aforementioned reasons – *Decadence*’s place in Western aesthetics, especially since Romanticism, is one of centrality rather than marginality. This is a priority which this dissertation emphatically takes up in turn. Paglia points out that we are still very much living in the age of Romanticism, inasmuch as “new” and “free” remain two of our society’s most exalted words – Hollywood very much included (Paglia 1990, 358). The *Decadence* which underlies much of our art, however, represents “a Mannerist convolution of High Romanticism,” in which Romanticism’s “overexpanded superself” submits to a chastening discipline of aesthetic limits (Paglia 1990, 231). *Decadence* “is inherent in Romanticism” Paglia further claims, arguing that “as the historical rhythm of Romanticism moves forward, the organic logic of artistic style takes over,” and “art supplants nature” (Paglia 1990, 260/389). Pantheistic reverence before the vastness of nature, so visible in Wordsworth, turns back inwards, inventing “harsh new limits, psychosexual and artistic,” and “lock[ing] self and eye in pagan cultism” towards the *objet d’art* (Paglia 1990, 389). Or, to put it in more vividly cinematic terms, Snow White will always eventually grow up to become the evil Witch Queen. Innocent gambolling out in the meadows, picking flowers among the animals, cannot last forever. The very aesthetic impulse which led to such behaviour in the first place will eventually grow more exacting and imperious – more demanding of absolute perfection in the ambience and details of one’s surroundings – such that one retreats from the meadow into a sanctum, cloister, or bower where one can exert such total control.

Of this amoral aesthetic dynamic, Paglia continues that “Decadence is the juxtaposition of primitivism with sophistication” (Paglia 1990, 137). It is:

...a complex historical mode, a thrilling, sensationalistic late phase of culture dominated by themes of sex and violence. In decadence, the major revival is of the primitive, which is juxtaposed with the supersophisticated. We see this pattern in Nero’s cruel banquets, in Swinburne’s poetry, and in the recent popularity of sadomasochistic regalia and tribal body-piercing. (Paglia 1994, 343)

Indeed, as A.E. Carter has pointed out, in his invaluable 1958 book *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830-1900*, Nero held a special place in the heart of the French Decadents, as well as the whole *zeitgeist* of corruption and sexual depravity that pagan Rome was supposed to represent. In this, aesthetes and Decadents of *fin-de-siècle* Paris and London were looking back through history at Western civilization’s great example of a culture of urban/e sophistication. This marks a frank refusal of the guilty conscience which Eurocentric culture is supposed to feel about itself. As Leo Braudy once put it, in an essay about films such as *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (Hugh Hudson, 1984), *The Emerald Forest* (John Boorman, 1985), *The Mission* (Roland Joffé, 1986), and *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (Ridley Scott, 1992) – all works which envision an innocent and morally purifying realm of Nature, inhabited by peoples uncorrupted by “civilization”:

Looking to revitalize civilization has been a constant urge in Western culture since Rome created the first self-conscious (and therefore defensive) urban culture in the last century B.C. A whole genre of Roman poetry, called pastoral and deriving from a handful of Greek precedents, featured jaded city-people in the guise of shepherds celebrating the virtues of the countryside. (Braudy 1998, 281)

Nineteenth-century Decadent art represented the mirror-image of this tendency in Western culture. Its exponents would have been the first and most vehement opponents of Roman pastoral, unapologetically aligning themselves with the “jaded city-people,” and feeling no guilty urge to celebrate the virtues of the countryside, or condemn the supposed corruption of civilization. It is because of facts such as this that, by the *fin-de-siècle* period of the late nineteenth century, “Decadence” as a literary movement had taken on connotations of deviance and immorality among the respectable *bourgeoisie*, becoming popularly associated with the idea of degeneration.

In light of this, nineteenth-century Decadence is usually treated today as an aesthetic phenomenon indissociable from the *fin-de-siècle* period. This is too narrow and specialized a

definition, however. In formulating a broader and more profitable understanding of the aesthetic, Paglia dates the beginning of Decadence as a discernible aesthetic around 1830, which she frankly admits is “unusually early,” but in this she is not alone (Paglia 1990, 231). In the preface to his book, Carter reminisces that his initial instinct was to look for the beginning of French literature’s Decadence in the late 1860s. Upon examining the period, however, he found that its literature said nothing that had not been said previously by authors of a previous generation (Carter 1958, vii). The 1860s, he found, constituted “more a mid-point than a beginning; it merely sums up an idea very generally entertained from 1830 on...” (Carter 1958, vii). Of the essence for Carter, then, became making the distinction between “when Decadence ceased to be a literary pose and became a serious preoccupation” (Carter 1958, viii). This dissertation accepts Carter’s distinction and, following Paglia, simply treats the “literary pose” phase – from 1830 on – as equally deserving of the Decadent designation as the fully self-conscious literary movement which coalesced towards the *fin-de-siècle*. This position has the virtue of enabling one to seek out the Decadent tendencies in artists who were emphatically not *fin-de-siècle* figures. Edgar Allan Poe and Honoré de Balzac, it will be seen below, are valuable figures to the history of Decadent aesthetics, in spite of having died in 1849 and 1850, respectively. Furthermore, the insistence upon treating Decadence simply as a discernible aesthetic sensibility, rather than a self-consciously defined literary movement, facilitates this dissertation’s goal: of appreciating the elements of this aesthetic sensibility discernible in cinema today. Decadence was both a creative tendency in art-making and a critical tendency in art appreciation, and a number of key figures in the history of Decadence contributed foundational work to both, often within the same text.

Théophile Gautier, for instance, used his 1835 novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* to essentially found the Decadent discourse of “art for art’s sake,” insisting that aesthetics and social morality are incompatible. The novel itself – a work of Late Romanticism dealing with the joys unmarried conjugal love, aesthetic dilettantism, transvestism, unrequited love, and immensely frank sexuality, both heterosexual and lesbian – embodies all these principles implicitly. Gautier, however, also attached a preface to the novel which would articulate them explicitly – one in which he came out swinging with the words “One of the most ridiculous things in the glorious epoch in which we live is the rehabilitation of virtue” (Gautier 1981, 19). One will look far in vain for many contemporary Hollywood spectacles that channel the explicitness of Gautier’s preface, as the self-conscious *fin-de-siècle* Decadents did. A considerable amount of modern

cinema spectacle has however, as we will see, absorbed the implicit aesthetic principles of Decadence inherent in Gautier's novel. Coming later than Gautier, a better-known Decadent figure – who embodied this same ambidextrousness of aesthetic creation and criticism – was Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire's collection of poems *The Flowers of Evil* would constitute one of the seminal milestones in Decadent literature. It was in response to them that Gautier would pen a famous preface/review which “bates critics and other prudish members of French society,” Denisoff put it, “by using vivid images and references to hallucination, mental illness and immorality to celebrate a decadent style” (Denisoff 2007, 33). Beyond his famous poetry, however, Baudelaire was also an essayist and critic of aesthetics – one whose writings on painting and sketches still speak directly to notions of animation as imaginative transcribing. Neither of these figures were precisely “Decadents” in the self-consciously defined *fin-se-siècle* sense. Rather, they were part of the literary generation that first formulated Decadence as an aesthetic system – what Carter called the “literary pose” phase. As Harold Bloom put it: “Gautier and Baudelaire created their sensibility out Delacroix, Poe, and their own complex natures” (Bloom 1970, ix).

Moving to the opposite side of the Channel, another seminal figure of both the Decadent literary canon and the literature of Decadent aesthetics is Walter Pater. Pater is remembered, on the one hand, for the “Conclusion” to his 1893 book *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* – a species of Decadent manifesto in which he laid out a philosophy of cerebral passivity before the sublimity of art; and on the other hand, for his 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*, which imaginatively recreated the twilight of pagan Rome before the rise of Christianity. Throughout his “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, Pater consistently deploys a vocabulary of dissipation, dissolution and evaporation to emphasize the transitory and fleeting nature of moments of aesthetic sublimity, whereby at:

...every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood or passion or insight or intellectual experiment is irresistibly real and attractive to us, – but for that moment only. (Pater 1961, 222)

“While all melts under our feet,” he declares, “we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment” (Pater 1961, 222). In this, Pater can be read as offering a profound refutation, some seventy-five years in advance, of Guy Debord's remarks about “the society of the spectacle.” Debord's horror of how “everything solid melts into thin air” under the baleful influence of “the spectacle” has

been anticipated and celebrated by Pater as simply the natural condition of aesthetic appreciation. Like Gautier and Baudelaire before him, Pater's Decadent paradigm is determinedly apolitical, in the spirit of art for art's sake – the Gautier-coined rallying cry of so much of nineteenth-century Decadence. He declares in his "Conclusion" that:

The theory or idea or system which requires of us sacrifice of any part of this [aesthetic] experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us. (Pater 1961, 223)

Translated into twentieth and twenty-first century terms, this might mean that the moment one's Marxist commitment requires one to repudiate a film or book one admires, it is the Marxism which must go, rather than the work of art.

One thing which Decadent aesthetics unquestionably do have in common with Marxist and Leftist impulses, moreover, is a profound ambivalence towards orthodox religion. And not just "religion" in general but, specifically, the Abrahamic tradition founded on iconoclasm and the rejection of graven images. This would often, in practice, lead to the explicit imaginative rejection of Christianity, and re-embrace of the values of pagan Antiquity, insofar as the latter embraced imagistic sublimity rather than excoriating it. Examples include Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870), the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne, Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À Rebours* ("Against Nature," 1884), Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus* (1884), and Pater's own *Marius the Epicurean*, among many others. Also at work in all of this was a self-conscious moral perversity which appreciated pagan polytheism's recognition and acceptance of human atavism and cruelty – and creating of a moral cosmology to channel and control it, rather than simply wishing to banish and deny it after the fashion of the New Testament. It was in this spirit that Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* (1891) would revisit the Biblical story of John the Baptist and diametrically reverse its moral meaning, elevating Herod II's dancing daughter into one of Western art's greatest *femme fatales*. This refusal of religious absolutism, on the part of the nineteenth-century Decadents, has lost none of its relevance today.

Transposed to North America, this anti-iconoclastic tendency is even more significant. Discussing such canonical figures of American literature as Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Whitman, James, and Dickinson, one of Paglia's fundamental theses was that much of canonical American literature from the mid-nineteenth century onwards is in fact profoundly appreciable as "Decadent Late Romanticism, in the French manner" (Paglia 1990, 231). The works of

Hawthorne in particular, she claims, evince “a fascism of the eye,” every bit as perverse in their “visual eroticism as anything in Decadent Paris” (Paglia 1990, 582). Literary art such as this, she declares, makes clear how:

The bareness of Puritan plain style and the absence of inherited art works starved the American eye and aggravated the dangerous power of the visual when it arrived via Romanticism. Asceticism, fearing the eye, actually sharpens it. (Paglia 1990, 583)

This is most vividly demonstrated, she continues, in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which “can be read for plot only if one ignores huge emotional and sexual gaps” (Paglia 1990, 583). The novel’s real significance, she declares, is as an archetypal vision of the voyeuristic power of the eye, concentrated a thousandfold on the novel’s persecuted heroine – “the Catholic Madonna drummed out of Protestantism,” who “will defeat Hawthorne’s despotic” Puritan forebears (Paglia 1990, 580-81). This remark, in turn, speaks to one of the most foundational structuring parameters of Paglia’s thought: that Italian Catholicism, having “added pagan sex and violence to the ascetic Palestinian creed” – in total contrast to the later starkness of Puritan Protestantism – became “the emotionally most complete cosmology in religious history,” encompassing all aspects of the human condition, profane as well as sacred (Paglia 1990, 33). “And so to Hollywood, the modern Rome,” she continues, declaring that this same pagan sex and violence:

...have flowered so vividly in our mass media. The camera has unbound daemonic western imagination. Cinema is *sexual showing*, a pagan flaunting. Plot and dialogue are obsolete word-baggage. Cinema, the most eye-intense of genres, has restored pagan antiquity’s cultic exhibitionism. Spectacle is a pagan cult of the eye. (Paglia 1990, 33, italics Paglia’s)

This assertion lies at the root of the understanding of the Baroque and Decadent cinematic stylistics offered below. These stylistics, it will be seen – being, as Paglia’s rhetoric suggests, outside of language – do not readily lend themselves to logocentric discourses of political utility. While images may of course bear ideological implications as well as words, their interpretive remit is far wider – the ultimate meaning, or implication, of an image is vastly more elusive and difficult to pin down than the meaning of a written sentence. This, therefore, lends images a quality which is provocative to, and subversive of, any discourse or zeitgeist which demands absolutely one-dimensional clarity of meaning – a fact which lends them a certain emancipatory potential. One thinks again of the “iron scenario” of the Stalin-era Soviet Union here, and how the sensually non-verbal quality of even the simplest picture will not conform to demands for total ideological clarity. As Roland Barthes has observed, even a language which endeavours to

scrupulously account for an image's visual composition and layout – what he called the “studium” – will always nonetheless miss some ineffable quality – the “punctum,” as he called it – which ultimately gives the image its elusive character. And as Nicholas Mirzoeff has observed, this may render images frustrating to theorists and critics steeped in logocentric assumptions. To axiomatically deem a language of images to be inherently reactionary, however – as radical political modernism has done on occasion – is too reductive. Paglia's reference to the “daemonic western imagination” and “pagan cultic exhibitionism” implies a rueful acceptance that the impulse towards exultation of images can lead in any direction, and need not necessarily be liberating or utopian in a positive way, but that its long-standing centrality in Western aesthetics means that any attempt to ideologically censor it is mere folly. A more open-minded engagement with images' protean ability to aesthetically evoke implications, rather than programmatically convey set-in-stone meanings, is what the rest of this chapter's discussion of Baroque and Decadent stylistics in modern blockbusters seeks to point the way towards.

The specific poetics and implications of the Baroque and Decadent stylistics of cinema today will be examined, point by point, in detail below. First, however, it worth remembering that they are, as often as not, a cumulative style – an aesthetic helix which interconnects as often as it diverges. This has created a degree of stylistic uniformity among many cinematic spectacles of today that causes consternation among some modernist-minded theorists, insofar as it, again, constitutes a rebuke to the modernist privileging of originality. Thomas Lamarre, for example, reminds his readers of Lev Manovich's anxiety that new media “will lose their experimental edge, their openness, and will be put only in the service of producing stable, systematic, closed-off story worlds,” which bespeak “a thoroughly formalised, stabilised form of representation or expression” (Lamarre 2006, 135). In familiar modernist style, Lamarre automatically assumes such a prospect to be monstrous, and axiomatically reactionary ideologically. Such a state, however, is necessary to sustain the synthesis of Baroque and Decadent aesthetics that will be described below – one in which aesthetics may be characterized in terms of *lingua franca*, formalization, and ritual, rather than novelty and experiment. In other words, to create a state of affairs where, as Michael Allen points out, the formal preconditions of digitally-liberated spectacular display – where absolutely any imaginative vision can be shown – are universally understood, enabling, in turn, the content and implication of these visually-emancipated spectacles to become more sophisticated. “To a certain extent, we're jading an audience,” Allen

quotes a visual effects supervisor at Tippet Studio as declaring (Allen 2003, 211). And, in aesthetic terms, this is an entirely salutary development, “jadedness” being one of the absolute prerequisites for the Decadent subjectivity. And likewise, it can be an impetus to filmmakers to imagine ever-greater Baroque spectacles in attempting to still impress this jaded audience. These facts bear certain utopian implications, insofar as it offers the possibility of filmmakers being able to present dramatic images and narratives to spectators with progressively less reticence about what level of aestheticization they can pursue before provoking incredulous rejection in their audience. A film such as *Flatliners* (Joel Schumacher, 1990), for instance, appears remarkably imaginatively circumscribed by contemporary standards. This likely because, in attempting to answer one of the biggest of all imaginative questions – what might life after death look or feel like? – it was limited not only by available visual effects but, perhaps more importantly, by what audiences were habituated to as a matter of convention. Almost two decades later, however, the unprecedentedly jaded audience that the Tippet Studio crew have created is prepared to go far further – into the realm of a Baroque spectacle such as *The Lovely Bones* (Peter Jackson, 2009). It is to the nature of Baroque spectacles such as these that we now turn.

It must be emphasized from the very start that I am not seeking to posit contemporary cinematic spectacle as a literal, self-conscious refluorescence of Baroque art as it existed in the seventeenth century. The use of the term is meant evocatively, as denoting commonalities in scale and tone of conception, and the kinds of affect elicited in the spectator. Angela Ndalians has pointed out that there was indeed a moment in Hollywood’s silent era where Baroque art was taken up as a literal structuring principle for many films – such as *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916), *Don Juan* (Alan Crosland, 1926), *Queen Kelly* (Erich von Stroheim, 1929), and *The Scarlet Empress* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1934) – and Baroque art became a paradigm through which much of Hollywood’s production could be understood (Ndalians 2004, 11). This moment was fleeting, however, and eight decades later, in the age of omnipresent DVFX, there are no immediately evident signs that it has returned to underlie the Baroque stylistics which I describe in contemporary filmmaking.

This assertion can be made so confidently because of the existence of one film which can be understood as the exception which proves the rule: Ron Howard’s *Angels & Demons* (2009). If ever a renaissance of explicitly and self-consciously neo-Baroque filmmaking were to arrive in Hollywood, *Angels & Demons* might be paradigmatic of the results. The narrative takes place in

the Vatican, amongst the great sculptural and frescoed splendours of the Baroque, and revises history so as to dangle the tantalizing possibility of Bernini really having been a proto-Enlightenment secularist, involved in papal intrigue against the Inquisition. Key moments of self-immolating drama take place in front of Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1647-52) and St. Peter's baldachin (1623-34), while the climactic spectacle has a cardinal ascend in a helicopter to dizzying heights above the courtyard of St. Peter's basilica, while countless worshippers look on below, before the night sky is brilliantly lit up with the multi-coloured energies of an anti-matter explosion. This sky-filling spectacle might evoke those of the great Vatican ceiling frescoes. It also, as will be seen below, offers a virtually programmatic test case of the wider Baroque visual aesthetic at work in cinema today. The total emphasis placed upon flight, the sky, and celestial sights at the end of *Angels & Demons* is not an aesthetic coincidence, in a film that merely happens to be steeped in the Counter-Reformation Baroque. On the contrary, the great works of Baroque art were remarkable in their determination to create a sense of dramatic weightlessness – even in sculpture, despite working with crushingly heavy weights of stone, marble and bronze. Moreover, even beyond this, the seventeenth century was also the century which saw the flowering of opera as an art form, in which flying figures – hoisted up and suspended by stage machinery – figured prominently. This, in turn, fed back into the great Baroque paintings and ceilings of the age, encouraging them to become still more weightless in their compositions (Ndalianis 2004, 91).

Baroque verticality is again vividly displayed in Giovanni Lanfranco's 1620 painting *The Ecstasy of St. Margaret of Cortona*, in which Christ appears to the titular nun aloft on a cloud, surrounded by three cherubs, with two more having already descended to flank her. The composition is stunning in its total naturalization of weightlessness, with the parallelism of the upper left segment of the composition, devoted to Christ in the air, and the lower right, with St. Margaret on the ground. Gravity has simply been obviated in the space between. Guercino's *Aurora* (1621), likewise, shows the Roman god of the dawn aerially racing his chariot above the dark mass of cloud which hangs above the humble rural homestead. The image gains additional weightless kinesis by the fact of his horses being posed to leap off even the graphic base of the cloud, while a garland-bearing cherub seems to keep pace with his chariot in mid-air, and a flock of birds flies alongside him, as though in his slipstream. Such naturalization of weightlessness is a constantly recurring one in Baroque art. Even beyond the epochal ceiling frescoes, more modest

works such as Rubens's *The Triumph of Truth* (1621-25) are remarkable for the studied mundaneness of their hoverings and levitations. The emphasis is upon the overall narrative event taking place, of which the supernatural aspect is only a part.

One of the most valuable theorizations of this kind of Baroque aesthetic in cinema today has been Kristen Whissel's 2006 *Film Quarterly* article "Tales of Upward Mobility: The New Verticality and Digital Special Effects." In this, Whissel describes how with the normalization of DVFX, "recent blockbusters... create breathtaking imaginary worlds defined by extreme heights and plunging depths," giving "dynamic, hyperkinetic expression to power and the individual's relation to it – defiant, transcendent, or subordinate" (Whissel 2006, 23). Furthermore, "because the new verticality vastly expands the terrain upon which (and with which) the cinema compels its protagonists to struggle," she continues, "it logically favours the epic" (Whissel 2006, 24). In this, one readily hears the inherent grandiosity of Baroque art, and its insistent refusal of gravity. These observations lucidly account for the distinctive nature of an inordinate amount of cinematic spectacle today. One need only reflect on the likely impossibility of filming the Quidditch sequences in the *Harry Potter* films a decade earlier; or the contrast between Superman's flight as Christopher Reeve, and as Brandon Routh or Henry Cavill; or the images of the Earth's crust breaking open beneath the hero, down to its molten mantle, in *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009) and *Conan the Barbarian* (Marcus Nispel, 2011), to appreciate the justice of Whissel's remarks.

Furthermore, Whissel suggests:

Upward mobility gives dynamic expression to feelings of soaring hope, joy, unbridled desire, and aspiration; it implies lightness, vitality, freedom, transcendence, defiance, and lofty ideals. In turn, falling and sinking give expression to dread, doom, and terror and are linked to heavy burdens, inertia, subordination, loss, and the void. (Whissel 2006, 24)

All this is to say, Whissel contends, that "digitally enhanced verticality" represents "a mode of cinematic representation designed to exploit to an unprecedented degree the visual pleasures of power and powerlessness" (Whissel 2006, 23). Again, this comports vividly with the "big lies" that Paglia attributes to Baroque aesthetics, and their commitment to envisioning the world in the most dramatic and hyperbolic terms. Indeed, the extent to which Whissel's observations about the aesthetics of verticality in the modern blockbuster are entirely correct can be judged by the degree to which, since her article's publication in 2006, the continued evolution of the form has only borne her out further. From the current historical moment, some of the test cases with which she illustrates her observations – the centrepiece sinking in *Titanic* and the climax atop the Statue

of Liberty in *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000), for example – now seem almost quaintly restrained. To follow on from these two examples in particular, Cameron’s follow-up to *Titanic*, *Avatar*, would of course seem to represent an almost un-surpassable watershed; but in their own way, the smaller, humbler advances in verticality in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, *X-Men: First Class*, *The Wolverine*, and *X-Men: Days of Future Past* testify more cohesively to the way in which the general baseline of Hollywood’s Baroque aesthetic keeps rising to ever-more vertiginous heights.

One of the parameters of this evolution, Whissel observes, is that “Struggles between protagonists and antagonists hinge upon the degree to which each is able to defy or master the laws of physics” (Whissel 2006, 26). This not only makes “extreme vertical settings – skyscrapers, deep chasms, mountain peaks – pervasive and imperative,” these sort of spectacles also render imperative the development of a visual graphic logic – one whereby the audience cannot be allowed to expect that the terms and mechanics of this defiance or mastery of the laws of physics will be articulated explicitly via dialogue, thus bogging down the visual spectacle. Josh Trank’s 2012 film *Chronicle* offers an excellent contemporary example of these aesthetic dynamics, but perhaps the foundational text in bringing this graphic logic of Baroque verticality to Hollywood was Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). This film represented one of the most vivid examples, since the heyday of European art cinema and *nouvelle vagues* of the 1950s and 60s, of the direction of the Hollywood mainstream being fundamentally altered by the aesthetics of non-American film. The film proceeds simply as an excellent character drama for its first fifteen minutes. After this, however, its significance as visual spectacle is revealed in no uncertain terms with a rooftop chase sequence.

One sees a mysterious black-garbed thief – actually the film’s young anti-heroine Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) – enter an aristocratic household with remarkably weightless ease, ascending a corner wall by pushing off from one side to another with her feet. It is only when she comes across the house superintendent “Bo,” however, that she truly begins to reveal to the extent of her emancipation from gravity – vaulting clear above and across him to escape onto the household rooftops, across which she glides virtually weightlessly. Likewise, it is only when she encounters the film’s elder heroine, Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh), that the sequence’s action truly begins in earnest. One sees astonishing tracking shots of Jen and Shu Lien pursuing each other across a neighbourhood of densely-packed roofs, propelling themselves through the air from one light touch-down to the next – seeming only to need the briefest of traction to stay airborne. The effect

is of seeing sheer conceptual adrenaline at work, totally divorced from the limitations of real bodily weight. All this is done with purely graphic logic – the workings of which, however, also show that Jen is somewhat better at this than Shu Lien. One notices that the latter has to pump her legs in a running motion to stay aloft, while the latter simply glides through the air. At one point, moreover, Shu Lien misses her footing and descends to street level, and has to simply run along the ground briefly before propelling herself upwards again by launching off walls. When Jen descends to street level, in contrast, she is able to bounce back up to the rooftops weightlessly. Shu Lien, we see, cannot match the feat, and has to run again to find a suitable vaulting point. Eventually, this graphic logic having become apparent to Shu Lien herself as well as the spectator, we see what Whissel describes as:

Shu Lien counter[ing] each of Jen’s vertical ascents: she knocks Jen out of the air by throwing bales of hay and pieces of brick at her; she steps on Jen’s feet as Jen pushes off the ground to fly away; grabs her clothes before she soars out of reach; and scrambles up a wall to cut off Jen’s ascent, demanding that she “Get down here!” (Whissel 2006, 30)

In all this, one is reminded of the following words from Gautier’s 1832 story *Onuphrius Wphly, or the Fantastic Vexations of an Admirer of Hoffman*:

I had to hold myself back as I felt a marvellous sense of airy lightness. I tried my best to cling to the ground, but a powerful force was drawing me upwards: it was just as if I had been harnessed to a balloon. The earth sank away beneath my feet, and I only touched it with the tips of my toes. (Gautier 2008, 73-74)

This is the same impression one gets from seeing Jen in motion. The sequence climaxes in a very large open courtyard; one which, as before, Jen simply glides into in virtual flight, but Shu Lien has had to tactilely scramble up a wall to get into, then laterally run down the wall on the other side. Shu Lien’s running squirrel-like across vertical surfaces – as opposed to Jen’s ability to simply push off from them as though underwater – figures prominently into the intense martial arts battle in the courtyard. As long as the fight stays in the centre of the courtyard, Jen and Shu Lien seem equally matched – indeed, Shu Lien seems even to have the advantage. The fight (and sequence) ends, however, when Jen is backed up against the wall again, and makes an especial lunge off it. This carries her across the courtyard to the opposite wall, which she immediately surmounts to escape.

Another chase sequence later in the film takes place over the same neighbourhood terrain, but features a different pair of characters – with Jen now finding herself pursued by Master Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat) – and a very different graphic logic. Whissel observes that “whereas in the

first fight scene Jen seems far more weightless than Shu Lien, in this scene Li Mu Bai floats and balances with far greater ease” (Whissel 2006, 30). Whereas Jen’s flight still had the aggressive kinesis of gliding through the air, Mu Bai seems to be genuinely levitating. Again, this graphic logic is nowhere explained in the film’s dialogue. The savvy viewer must simply intuit that it is because of the difference in the characters’ levels of skill and enlightenment. As Whissel puts it: “if gravity represents the force of tradition and the past, then Li Mu Bai’s more powerful verticality derives in part from his connection to the traditions, training, and duties of Wudan” (Whissel 2006, 30). These are the reading protocols which the graphic logic of Baroque verticality implicitly compels every spectator to learn. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*’s intense verticality and visual energy, all organized by pure graphic logic, were not remotely unique or unprecedented in East Asian cinemas. What was unprecedented about the film, however, was its success in exposing mainstream Hollywood audiences to these aesthetic values. Once the film had grossed \$128 million at the American box office, the ground had been laid for the aesthetic of Baroque verticality that would mature – abetted by the maturation of DVFX – throughout the 2000s. Exactly like the original seventeenth-century Baroque, it is an aesthetic that speaks to one of our deepest-seated human fantasies: the ability to fly.

Pursuant to the matter of cinematic aesthetics and deep-seated human fantasies, Shilo T. McClean has observed that, relative to the actual capacities of robotics and genetic engineering, the anxiety-laden dystopian scenarios that we routinely see in science-fiction films – whereby the very nature of humanity is under threat from androids, clones, cyborgs, etc. – seem highly premature. She correctly observes, however, that while:

...our developments in robotics and cyborgian technologies are ... small in the face of the ways these futures are represented in films. Our hopes and fears concerning these developments, however, are light-years ahead of our actual achievements and are well-expressed in our storycraft. (McClean 2007, 214)

The cinematic imagination allows us to jump directly to the end game, or final implications, of scenarios that are at least remotely theoretically possible. This same imaginative tendency, moreover, can work in a positive sense as well, and apply to issues which are purely aesthetic, with no immediate social implications. One sees this exactly in the vertiginous aspect of Baroque spectacle. Skydiving, base jumping, hang gliding, parasailing, paragliding, and the flying of small open cockpit planes all give humans today some sense of flight under their own power, but these are all necessarily imperfect and limited approximations of this experience. Baroque cinematic

spectacle, however, answers this imaginative need far more vividly and completely, and extends well beyond the subgenre of superhero films.

A vivid summation of this is the way that, throughout the first two acts of *John Carter* (Andrew Stanton, 2012), there are moments in which the Martian people called the “Tharks” emphatically declare that “Tharks do not fly!” In a straightforwardly realist context, this statement would seem almost anomalously commonsensical. One can, after all, readily see that the Tharks do not have wings. Within the *lingua franca* of the spectacular Baroque Hollywood blockbuster, however, this constitutes a serious limitation, which must be overcome in the third act. Verticality is so much a part of the Baroque Hollywood blockbuster aesthetic that groundedness is virtually synonymous with primitivism. In addition to the titular hero’s awesome leaping powers in Mars’s lower gravity, *John Carter* features a daunting array of hovercraft, gliders, and other aerial vehicles in its non-Thark sequences, and a substantial part of the drama, in the great battle sequence of the film’s third act, derives from John Carter finally convincing the Tharks to make use of these. “It is good to fly!” declares Samantha Morton’s Thark character, Sola, in the aftermath of this sequence’s spectacular aerial drama. Her people have finally taken their place in the Baroque order of upward mobility.

Sequences such as *John Carter*’s climactic assault on Zodanga – in which the Tharks learn to appreciate flight – are, moreover, characterized by their intense profusion of distinct visual elements. At any given second in such a sequence of Baroque blockbuster spectacle, there are within the frame dozens, if not hundreds, of different points of visual reference, many of them moving hyper-kinetically fast or winking in and out of existence only briefly. Many of the visual elements within such complex sequences serve less to be noticed in their own specific right, than to assist in cumulatively creating a more generalized visual sense of spectacle – one characterized by a hyper-profusion of detail, both in how individual panoramic wide shots are composed, and in how sequences are edited.

One valuable interpretation of this tendency towards Baroque profusion of visual elements, in digitally-liberated spectacle aesthetics, is Whissel’s theorizing of what she calls “the digital multitude.” By this, she means the use of “motion capture, 3D animation simulation programs... digital split-screen techniques, crowd simulation engines, motion trees and motion libraries, and particle animation programs” to create “massive CG armies, swarms, armadas, and hordes composed of as many as hundreds of thousands of digital beings” (Whissel 2010, 91). As

examples of this digital multitude, Whissel calls to mind the vast hordes of orcs and Uruk-hai in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the various Egyptian plagues of *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers, 1999), the arachnid swarms in *Starship Troopers*, the armies of clones in *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, of robots in *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004), of Persians in *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007), of Agent Smiths in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Andy & Lana Wachowski, 2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Andy & Lana Wachowski, 2003), and the armadas of Greek ships and alien spacecraft in *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004) and *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996). Drawing on all these examples, Whissel posits that “the multitude is inseparable from vast spaces,” and:

...its terrifying and even sublime expansiveness finds expression through its near complete occupation of the visible space. When displayed to astonished spectators (textual and theatrical), the digital multitude’s spatial composition within the frame often amounts to the cinematic figuration of temporal or historical concepts such as “infinite,” the “historical threshold,” and “apocalypse.” (Whissel 2010, 97)

In this vocabulary of the sublime, the infinite, and the apocalyptic, one certainly hears the grandeur of Baroque aesthetics – the sense that cinematic art should be limited only by the imagination, not by the indexical constraints of the real. Describing the famous zoom-out reveal of the Trojan War’s “thousand ships” in *Troy*, for example, Whissel declares that:

...both digital camera movement and the composition of the frame are central to the multitude’s visualization of history and spatial infinitude: as the camera continues to pull back, it ultimately reveals an impossibly large armada that stretches far into deep space, beyond all four sides of the frame. (Whissel 2010, 101)

Furthermore, she declares in a parenthetical aside, “because the ships fade into the distant horizon, we know that we are seeing only a small portion of the fleet” (Whissel 2010, 101-102). In this, she shows an awareness of film aesthetics’ capacities for narrative situation and suggestion – a subject that will be returned to in a future chapter.

It is the narrative archetypes Whissel favours in articulating her idea of the digital multitude, however – armies, swarms, armadas, hordes, etc. – that make her formulation only incompletely applicable to the aesthetics of Baroque profusion we see today. It is important that, although published in 2010, her essay relies chiefly on films from the early 2000s and the latter 1990s. The mid-2000s, however – as will become progressively clearer – were a crucial period in the evolution of the digitally-liberated Baroque aesthetics of today, such that although foundational texts from the latter 1990s and early 2000s are undeniably important, their topical

explanatory value has receded considerably. This is chiefly appreciable in the total homogeneity of the “digital multitudes” in the films Whissel cites. As she herself acknowledges, these archetypes of armies, swarms, hordes, and so forth usually serve a villainous function in the films, foregrounding “the dark side of collectivity (i.e., extreme uniformity and submission to a single, authoritarian power),” against which the film’s heroes – individuated in traditional Hollywood fashion – must define themselves (Whissel 2010, 108). In this, the digital multitudes that Whissel posits fit firmly into the tradition of such milestones in DVFX as the Stained Glass Knight in *Young Sherlock Holmes*, the T-1000 in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, and the T-Rex and velociraptors in *Jurassic Park*. These were all indubitably charismatic visual attractions, but their very novelty was potentially disconcerting for spectators, and so the films cautiously relegated them to roles either explicitly villainous, or at very least ambivalent.

As with all those previous digital attractions, however, the digital multitude’s novelty would soon wear off, allowing it – as a visual device – to be put to a wider range of uses. Its basic technical premise – that DVFX can be used to multiply identical, or similar, visual elements unto infinity, and composite them into any manner of screen space – has wider aesthetic applications than simply telling stories about the triumph of individuality over collectivity. This is especially true since the homogeneity of past multitudes was as much due to technological limitations as lack of narrative imagination. Again, such storytelling concerns will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter. For now, however, it is sufficient to say that the digital profusion one sees in films today is perhaps understandable as the successor-aesthetic to the digital multitude Whissel posited – the technology has become more widely available, and the novelty has worn off sufficiently that theatrical spectators are no longer astonished by the mere site of such visual profusion. It can now signify in humorous or positive terms as well as menacing or ambivalent ones. One thinks, for example, of *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (Eric Darnell & Tom McGrath, 2008), in which the zoo-bred zebra Marty (voiced by Chris Rock) meets a wild herd for the first time, and finds to his consternation that they all look and speak exactly like him; or of the assembly of the Green Lantern corps in *Green Lantern* (Martin Campbell, 2011), with one Lantern for every populated world in the universe – such that the massed corps seems to extend off to nigh-infinity, each individual representing a different alien species.

These examples, however – like many of Whissel’s “digital multitude” case studies – simply dwell on the composition of individual wide shots. These may possess keen affinities with

Baroque paintings or frescoes, but the Baroque profusion at work in cinema today is also intimately bound up with editing, in a way it rarely was with Whissel's multitude. With the digital revolution now in full stride, the diverse visual elements in a moment of Baroque profusion no longer need to be presented in conservative tableau fashion, but can be sutured into the familiar tempo of what Bordwell has called "intensified continuity editing" (ICE), with average shot lengths of barely a second imposing strenuous demands on the spectator's eye. Under these conditions, the unprecedented realism of seventeenth-century Baroque aesthetics' bombast and grandeur takes on a specifically cinematic idiom, as more complex intercutting and reframing in a scene of the spectacular or fantastic makes it seem that much more familiarly real, in cinematic terms. In this abandoning of mere tableau, and suturing digital spectacle more tightly into the familiar rapid editing rhythms of Hollywood action, one sees the equivalent of Baroque painting's becoming more awe-inspiring by situating the spectacular divine squarely within the enhanced realism of Renaissance perspective. It is, again, congruent with Paglia's remarks on how Baroque art "makes hostile claims on the viewer," in the service of telling gloriously "big lies."

The revolution this kind of Baroque aesthetic has wrought upon Hollywood spectacle, over a decade and a half, can be appreciated in the contrast between the aesthetic handling of the same narrative development in the films *Air Force One* (Wolfgang Peterson, 1997) and *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013). Both films contain a scene in which the hull of *Air Force One* is ruptured, causing many people to be sucked out into the open air, to fall thousands of feet to their deaths. In *Air Force One*, the event is left at that, with only a few seconds' cut-away to the exterior to show the lucky few, chiefly a full-figured African-American woman, who had parachutes. In *Iron Man 3*, by contrast, there ensues a frenetic two-minute sequence in the air over Miami, in which Tony Stark jets out of the plane just before it violently explodes, flies downward to catch up with the falling people, grabs them, and links them to each other in an improvised skydiving formation, before using his suit's rockets to arrest their fatal plunge into Biscayne Bay – the surface of which is, by now, only a few metres away. "Barrel of monkeys at 18,000 feet," Stark insouciantly calls it. Again, roughly a decade and half has been sufficient to produce a paradigm shift in how digitally-liberated spectacle works. This aerial sequence is so dazzlingly complex and spectacular that a theoretical discourse such as Kristin Thompson's concept of "cinematic excess" might deem it a first-class exemplar. And yet within the cinematic language of the

contemporary blockbuster, it is not particularly “excessive” in any sense which implies atypicality or aberrance. Certainly it does not represent any sort of stand-out or highlight setpiece within *Iron Man 3* itself – there are multiple sequences within the film which are equally, if not more, complex and spectacular.

These Baroque aesthetics of verticality and profusion-into-impossibility are vividly encapsulated in a 90-second sequence from *Super 8* (J.J. Abrams, 2011) – a sequence which, again, is not really a stand-out or showcase moment relative to the rest of the film. This sequence – in which the film’s cast of tween heroes are shooting an amateur film on a railway depot platform late at night – begins with a passing freight train colliding with a truck a short distance down the tracks from the depot. Through the auspices of DVFX, however, this collision results not simply in a quotidian derailment and tortuous, grinding halt, but in a full-bore fantasia of aerial insanity, as freight cars are launched off the track at all angles, with subsequent collisions between them rocketing other cars off into seemingly-impossibly high parabolas, to come crashing down to immense explosive effect. The sequence packs an astonishing 44 shots into its 90-second running time, for an average shot length of slightly over two seconds, but even this is to under-represent the sequence’s visual intensity, as it is bookended by some slightly more sedate shots devoted to the characters’ reactions to it all. The most visceral mid-point of the sequence, however, provides a test case for the punitive claims on the spectatorial eye made by Baroque cinematic aesthetics. A single glance away from the screen, or relaxation of visual acuity, will leave the spectator cut off and adrift from the rhythm of the spectacle playing out before them. Although a laborious shot-by-shot analysis will reveal that every development in the sequence is, in fact, rationally appreciable as logical outgrowth of the preceding one, there is no pretence at editing the action at such a speed as to make this self-evident to the first-time viewer. Without the benefit of a DVD player’s pause and slow-motion functions, even the sharpest-eyed spectator can never hope to retain every nuance of the sequence’s construction. The experience of the sequence, rather, is meant to be a humbling one of sensory overload, leaving the spectator reeling from the intensity of what they’ve seen. Like Baroque art, the experience impresses upon them an awareness of their own limitation in the face of the sublime infinitude to which art can allusively grant access. Moreover, in narrative terms, the sequence has an appreciable sadistic side – treating its young heroes in the Shakespearean spirit of playthings to capricious gods, as one freight car after another crashes explosively down in front of, behind, or beside them. No

sooner are we allowed to believe that they have reached safety than another conflagration is dropped upon them.

Such a description as the one given above might suggest that the workings of Baroque spectacle are inherently pernicious, and that Foucauldian-derived analyses which seek to stigmatize them as the mere exercise of power – as when Norman Klein declares that they fool the audience on behalf of those in power – are substantially sound (Klein 2004, 8). This would be in error, however, because a sequence like the one from *Super 8* above simultaneously testifies that an achieved work of Baroque aesthetics, at their best, is a triumph over limitations rather than a repressive imposition of them. Upon close sequence analysis, one sees that throughout these moments of screen time, *Super 8* is palpably straining against the limits of traditional cinematic grammar in order to yield the maximum of visceral spectacle. The famous “180° rule” is tested at least once, as the camera abruptly re-frames from down the tracks and to the right, to up the tracks and on the left. Seemingly unbroken tracking shots are “cheated” to mask cut-ins to much closer framings. The familiar Spielberg-ian device of the heroine gazing soulfully out of frame is deployed, but without a reverse-angle shot showing the object of her gaze, leaving the image apparently with little narrative motivation, but deeply and provocatively affective nonetheless. All this has the ultimate effect that the spectator is not rendered supine, as though duped and narcotized, but potentially elated and ecstatic as nowhere else in contemporary cinema. As Dyer observed, having settled back into their seat for a good time, spectators may “cringe, shield our eyes, convulse our bodies,” but this is all simply part of the unique pleasures offered by such spectacles. A romantic comedy such as *Friends with Benefits* (Will Gluck, 2011), released just the month after *Super 8*, offers its own indubitable pleasures, but makes no comparable demands upon the spectatorial eye. As we will see with Decadent aesthetics below, moreover, the gaze of the reposing spectator is a potent force in its own right, and films such as *Super 8* simply seek to draw out its full acumen in a way that other films do not.

The fact that vertiginous and profuse Baroque spectacles such as *Super 8* demand a very dextrously mobilized eye of their spectators should not be taken to imply that affect and emotion have been drained from the cinematic experience. Quite the contrary – the vast figurative canvases which Baroque spectacles afford themselves can allow for greater emotive expression than spare abstract ones. This, as we have seen, is one their fundamental incompatibilities with modernism. The profusion of ever-greater amounts of detail create a verisimilitude which can

affectively draw the spectator in all the deeper. This is as true of Baroque cinema today as it was for Baroque painting four centuries ago. Describing Rubens's *The Miracles of St. Francis Xavier* (1616-1617), for instance, Martin writes that:

The wave of emotion built up by the surging crowd serves only to intensify the feelings of terror, amazement, hope and joy that may be read in the faces and actions of the sufferers and onlookers. Dominating over this scene of turmoil is the serene and commanding figure of Francis Xavier, whose divine powers are made manifest by the celestial apparition above his head. (Martin 1991, 85)

In typical Baroque fashion, Rubens's composition features over two dozen human forms, earthly and divine, reacting to Francis Xavier; two architectural layers, what with St. Francis Xavier's podium in the foreground at right, and a palace in the background at left; Francis Xavier himself dominating the composition at the right of the frame; while everything, in turn, is dominated by the heavenly manifestations of angels above Francis Xavier, floating up in the top right of the composition, with the easy, natural weightlessness so familiar from so much Baroque art. The effect of all this visual density, however, is not to muddle and confuse the spectator, but to emotionally draw them in deeper to the painting's sublime drama.

The sublime is a concept in aesthetics that has gone through many different permutations throughout history, from its initial articulation in Antiquity – as entailing a dichotomy between the beautiful and the terrifying – by Longinus, to its eighteenth-century recuperation by Burke – in turn given a more subjective aspect by Kant – down to Hume and Schiller, to more modern and postmodern engagements by theorists such as Adorno, Derrida, and Lyotard. In keeping with its engagements with older aesthetic traditions, however, this dissertation veers to the earlier side of the spectrum, taking up the Burke-ian tradition of the sublime. Ironically, Burke's eighteenth-century remarks are useful to an inquiry into the art of cinematic spectacle, insofar as he seems to uncannily anticipate these aesthetics. The sublime, for Burke, was more daunting than picturesque. In a passage such as that where he declares:

This noble capital, the pride of England and of Europe, I believe no man is so strangely wicked as to wish to see destroyed by a conflagration or an earthquake, though he should be removed himself to the greatest distance from the danger. But suppose such a fatal accident to have happened, what number from all parts would crowd [sic] to behold the ruins, and amongst them many who would have been content never to have seen London in its glory? (Burke 1998, 94)

...one can almost see the imagery of a Hollywood disaster spectacle in the *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998) or *2012* mode. All this is thus very congruent with this dissertation's sense that the

Baroque and Decadent aesthetics of contemporary spectacle are in no way designed to reassure the spectator, but to elevate him/her through the testing of conceptual and ethical limits.

It is of the essence to Baroque aesthetics that the scale and complexity of a sequence is often surplus to strict narrative requirements – a less grandiose spectacle could convey approximately the same narrative information in less time, but the larger spectacle is employed nonetheless, for the sake of sheer sublimity. In a 2008 article, Greg Tuck would take up the case of *King Kong* (Peter Jackson, 2005) to analyse issues of the spectacular and the sublime in cinematic aesthetics. In doing so, however, he posits an absolute binary between the two – in the process betraying a deep distrust of mimetic representation, and thus revealing how modernist theses of Brecht-ian estrangement, in spite of possessing dubious explanatory value for this kind of filmmaking, nonetheless persist. Tuck equates “the sublime” with the unrepresentable, and the most complex and ambitious endeavours, in the modern blockbuster, towards representation, he rather dismisses as mere “spectacle.” The possibility – inherent to this dissertation’s argument – that there can be meaningful overlap between spectacle and sublimity is not admitted into his discussion. The Kant-ian sublime – in its distinction between “the mathematical” and “the dynamic” sublime – also entailed its own quantitative vs. qualitative dialectic but, being derived from Burke, Kant still allowed a certain daunting pleasure to flow from the fact of being visually or conceptually overwhelmed. Like Burke, Kant’s thought still included Nature, in the same sense that Hollywood spectacle is so attuned to natural disasters. Tuck, however, writing from a de-Natured, post-Frankfurt School, post-Debordian idiom, can only deem such overawing experience to be pernicious “spectacle,” distinct from the true sublime, which he associates with ideals of modernist ideals of abstract, or self-reflexively imperfect, aesthetics. Tuck discusses at some length the sequence in which “we see Kong save Ann Darrow from not one, but *three* Tyrannosaurus Rexes,” and declares that by the end of it, “we have had so much spectacle” that a concluding moment of pathos “has far less impact than in the original film” (Tuck 2008, 260-61). The insistent multiplication of visual elements and spatial dimensions, and the profusion of action, conflict, and kinesis, all combine, Tuck declares, to drain the sublime from representations, by virtue of overwhelming the sublime conception with spectacular manifestations: “beyond the sublime conceptual notion of a ‘pure’ battle between giant ape and dinosaur,” he declares, the scene has sacrificed “sublime quality” for “spectacular quantity” (Tuck 2008, 261). Its magnitude ceases to please, he continues, because it overwhelms out of all

proportion to “our lived scale of human existence” (Tuck 2008, 261). He concludes that “the problem is not that these images are not visually impressive,” but that “they are too visually impressive and remain trapped within a logic of visual quantification” (Tuck 2008, 264).

Again, like many film theorists writing in a Frankfurt School/radical modernist mode, Tuck’s remarks evince a deep distrust of representation, and a consequent faith in the purity of the abstract and conceptual. To attempt to represent the conceptual, he asserts, is always to lose or debase something of it. Likewise, he retains the fixation with abstraction-unto-contemplation that underlies much Brecht-ian theorizing:

...as Naomi Watts’ Ann is thrown from hand to foot, from cliff to ravine, escaping snapping jaw after snapping jaw, the experiential and spectacular elements of the display before us do not allow for contemplation. (Tuck 2008, 263)

The very basis of the Baroque sublime in contemporary cinematic spectacle lies in a rejection of Tuck’s logic here, and the embrace of a conception of the sublime that dwarfs “our scale of lived human experience.” Tuck rejects the aesthetic of spectacle at work in the Tyrannosaurus battle in *King Kong*, for instance, because he feels it highlights a quantitative logic whereby “the image is *never* as big as it could be” (Tuck 2008, 262, italics Tuck’s). In this, he is certainly correct, but his subsequent reasoning – that it would be better for cinema to turn backwards to more understated aesthetics, where the conceptual is unambiguously elevated over the actually-represented – is simply untenable, and has of course been refuted by the state of the art. The fundamental, animating force of the Baroque spectacle aesthetic at work in today’s digitally-liberated Hollywood consists of testing the limits of how big the image can be made, and how then be made to work dramatically. This is the aesthetic challenge that filmmakers face, and apply their creativity to. Indeed, Tuck’s error is to assume that what he calls “the conceptual” is necessarily, eternally static – that artists will never come up with new ideas or new imaginative treatments in the face of expanded representative possibilities. The conceptual can expand as well, not merely the spectacle which seeks to realize it.

Prior to his remarks about Jackson’s *King Kong*, Tuck also mentions Roland Emmerich’s much-reviled *Godzilla*. Here again, he declares that:

CGI allows the film to achieve a high degree of visual believability in the look and movement of ... the giant lizard’s interactions with its surroundings, but the very same massiveness removed it from the perceptually human scale. (Tuck 2008, 258)

Leaving aside the basic textual dubiousness of this claim, Tuck shows himself wilfully blind to some sublime aesthetic effects here. The Baroque aesthetic at work in Gareth Edwards's *Godzilla*, circa 2014, for instance, very deliberately strives to elicit this kind of massive removal. In the sequence where he makes landfall in Honolulu, *Godzilla* is revealed only incrementally. First, in an extreme-long bird's-eye-view shot above an aircraft carrier, establishing that his size is such that he is able to swim under the massive vessel like an alligator beneath a canoe. His approach to the beachfront, in turn, creates a tsunami effect. The city's power grid having blacked out, citizens on hotel rooftops can only watch as military personnel fire red flares into the air, which illuminate a small portion of the behemoth walking past them – the building roofs only coming up to his waist. *Pace* Tuck, the deliberate violation of “our scale of lived human experience” is exactly the point here, and the images achieve their sublimity because of it, not in spite of it.

In evaluating Hollywood spectacle of the current moment, critics frequently cite ICE – rapid-fire, supposedly staccato and incoherent, editing – as evidence of creative decline. And certainly, as has been seen, the profusion element of Baroque aesthetics represents digitally-conjured illusions having made their peace with this aspect of Hollywood spectacle. It is undoubtedly a contributing factor to Tuck's disdain for Jackson's *King Kong*, as opposed to the 1933 original, that the T-Rex fight is edited at such an ICE tempo. This formal tendency in spectacle today, however, co-exists with a diametrically-opposed counter-imperative: the need to keep the frame steady enough, and takes just long enough, for the film's sublime digital illusions to be appreciated as such. In other words, for the full scale and grandiosity of what is being shown to be fully captured in frame and appreciated by the spectator. Although it is undeniable that the editing in many modern Hollywood films will penalize the spectator for glancing away for so much as a second, there is an underlying method to the madness that belies cultural pessimists such as Roger Ebert, who declared that:

There is a lazy editing style in action movies these days that assumes nothing need make any sense visually. ...the frame is filled with flashes and explosions and shots so brief that nothing makes sense. ... Generations of filmmakers devoted their lives to perfecting techniques that a director like Jonathan Liebesman is either ignorant of, or indifferent to. (Ebert 2011)

The film at issue here, *Battle Los Angeles* (Jonathan Liebesman, 2011), however, was one in which this extremely chaotic aesthetic was undoubtedly intentional – an attempt to viscerally

situate the spectator alongside the US Marines in street-level infantry combat against an alien invasion army. To take, in effect, the kind of studied chaos that Steven Spielberg and editor Michael Kahn achieved on *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and give it the additional boost of intensity aesthetically appropriate to the shift from fighting against 1940s *Wehrmacht* weaponry to fighting against technologically-superior alien weaponry. Furthermore, the film's visual confusion has additional narrative motivation in that it is deliberately conceived as an inversely gritty, inglorious, street-level version of *Independence Day* – the soaring, majestic long takes of F-18 squadrons in Emmerich's film giving place to the fracas and confusion of infantry combat in the streets. And, again, the aforementioned Baroque counter-imperative – to keep the frame steady enough for long enough for digitally-conjured spectacles to register – remains in operation. The film's most chaotically-edited sections are in the second act, when the heroes are receiving the worst of it, whereas in the third act – which depicts the digitally-enabled spectacle of the aliens' hovering command post, guarded by sorties of fighter drones – the film strategically lengthens its takes. It does not do this to such a degree as to egregiously break with its overall ICE tempo, but enough for a sympathetic viewer to satisfy themselves that Ebert's vituperations against director Liebesman's intelligence were unnecessarily harsh. This is not least because Liebesman's next Baroque spectacle, *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), used a very different editing tempo, but one equally appropriate to its subject matter, which was infused far more deeply with the sublime. Dealing with the subject of heroic Greek mythology rather than desperate infantry combat, *Wrath of the Titans* deployed a visual aesthetic that was more lapidary than visceral, relying more on long takes of tracking shots than frenetic cutting. The amount of time Liebesman devotes to a single shot of the sublime image of Perseus, mounted on Pegasus, flying towards a volcanically-exploding Mount Olympus, might have sufficed for three or four shots in *Battle Los Angeles*. All this, ultimately, shows that the Baroque aesthetics of spectacle at work in Hollywood today have not killed off instincts regarding form and style. The genres in which Baroque spectacle thrives most fully may displease many critics, but it does not follow that cinema art itself has been terminally vitiated.

Indeed the sublime, in the Baroque aesthetics of Hollywood spectacle today, also bears a historical affinity with seventeenth-century Baroque's use of large canvases – or the vast flat spaces accorded by ceilings – to create expansive and detailed images which are meant to overawe the spectator's eye as a whole. The staggerings and juxtaposings of montage which

would underlie much of modernist aesthetics did not figure on the Baroque horizon, and in this, they bear another affinity with the Burke-ian sublime in contemporary cinema: a resistance to sanitizing a sublime view, even if terrible, through incrementalism or occlusion. The liberated afforded by DVFX has now allowed modern blockbusters to embrace grand wide shots as never before, because “shooting around” imperfect illusions is no longer an urgent imperative. Whatever film grammar of occlusions – such as cut-ins to point-of-view or close-up shots that do not show everything, for example – are included in the observance of ICE norms must always be balanced by shots which offer the sublime spectacle of *everything* in frame at once, so as to elicit amoral awe from the spectator. Whereas an ancestral Hollywood blockbuster such as *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) would keep its shark attack horrors largely off-screen, and convey them by brief shots and cut-aways to reactions, its next-generation descendants – such as *Deep Blue Sea* (Renny Harlin, 2000) – would use digital effects to show the amoral majesty of the sharks and their grisly feedings with full, pitiless clarity. The DVFX-enabled Baroque aesthetic in blockbusters today is one that flaunts the freedom from having to imply and suggest, via editing, that marked cinematic spectacles of earlier generations, enabling them to visually daunt the spectator more comprehensively. Paglia has suggested that “Burke’s locutions clearly demonstrate the passive self-subordination of male devotees of the sublime” (Paglia 1990, 269). Certainly, the increase in the cinema’s sublimity has progressed in tandem with its ability to make what she calls its “hostile claims” upon the spectator with greater virtuosity.

Intriguingly, there has also been reticence among mainstream film critics toward this sublime all-showing aspect of modern Baroque spectacle – the same as towards its profuse ICE aspect. Regarding the spectacle of James Cameron’s *Titanic*, for instance, Geoff King would point out that:

The camera lingers on the vessel on numerous occasions, providing spectacle that goes beyond the requirement of the story. The extent of this spectacular ‘surplus’ was emphasized by many critics through a comparison with the treatment of the ship in *A Night to Remember* (1958), a version of the story customarily admired for its ‘restraint’... (King 2000, 49)

In this critical fixation upon “restraint,” or understatement, one sees a determined aesthetic centrist, or middle-brow, tendency among film critics – one resistant to both ICE-enabled Baroque profusion and the longer takes of grandiose visual canvases entailed in the Baroque sublime. As David Denby put it, critics such as himself are often basically literary and

logocentric in their outlook, and therefore unmoved by cinema's purely visual aspect – preferring the minimum amount of spectacle to the maximum. Coming from an academic rather than critical background, Tuck's remarks on *King Kong* make much the same point. This is a mindset, however, which is not merely wholly inimical to Baroque aesthetics, but cinema's basic capacity for imaginative showing – the same capacity which the visual Baroque aesthetics of today have exalted to unprecedented levels.

A Baroque sublime aesthetic is one which draws fully upon the cinema's capacity to astound and overawe, rather than seeking to cultivate the virtues of human proportion and scale. Consequently, for all that a more humanistic spectacle might be more clearly comprehensible in terms of film grammar, it still leaves a less Baroque impression than a gigantically outsized spectacle which embraces the inhumanly-scaled in the name of dazzlement. This aesthetic paradox recalls Siegfried Kracauer's declaration that the hyperkinetic chase, along with dancing and "nascent motion," was one of the most inherently cinematic of subjects, because it was so oriented towards photogenic motion. These subjects were "naturals for the screen," Kracauer wrote, declaring that "It is as if the medium were predestined (and eager) to exhibit them" (Kracauer 1960, 41). The sublime aspect of the Baroque, however, challenges this notion that subjects of movement are more inherently cinematic than subjects of massive, grandiose slowness or stasis. In a blockbuster film which dually employs a Baroque sublime aesthetic, as well as featuring some hyperkinetic movement along Kracauer's lines, the disjunction becomes readily appreciable. This is vividly demonstrated by the inadequacies of *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*. The film showcases a big chase sequence through the streets of 1940s Shanghai, which would seem to vividly embody a Kracauer-ian conception of cinema whereby kinetic movement should be the organizing principle. And yet the sequence is singularly unfulfilling, even by the usual standards of such Hollywood spectacles. This is because it went against the film's own organizing logic – as a Baroque blockbuster spectacle of the late 2000s. The film's real cinematic interest, such as it was, lay in its use of the Baroque sublime, as in a sequence when the human cast reach the top of a Himalayan ridge and discover the mythic kingdom of Shangri-La. This is a moment when, *pace* Kracauer, there is no foregrounding of movement or motion, but rather the sublime vastness of the digitally-conjured vista of Shangri-La – an ocean of lush, verdant green bathed in golden sunshine, in the midst of a story-world realm otherwise defined by cold blue light falling on barren snow-covered rock. There is enough subtle

movement within the grand vista, and in the play of the light falling on it, to satisfy the viewer that they are not seeing a simple still photograph, but beyond this, film is basically being run to capture stillness – the same way the montage of monochrome images in *The Motorcycle Diaries* (Walter Salles, 2004) did. And as such, the moment feels more authentic to the true style of *Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* – a film which, from the very first, has couched its visual aesthetic in the kind of Baroque multitude and infinitude posited by Whissel and Tuck. Under an aesthetic regime such as this, the emphasis upon the frenetic spatial bickering of two tiny individual nodes in such a vast sublime canvas seems inherently petty and unsatisfactory – a betrayal and refusal of Baroque aesthetics somewhat akin to retreating into a corner of the Palazzo Barberini to play marbles or jacks rather than gazing up at Pietro da Cortona’s epochal *Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power* ceiling (1633-1639). One certainly sees more kinetic movement in the former than in the latter, but the sublime is hopelessly lost.

In his 1975 book *The Romantic Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel wrote that “to please us, the sublime must now be abridged, reduced, and parodied as the grotesque, somehow hedged with irony to assure us that we are not imaginative adolescents” (qtd. in Bukatman 1995, 281). These words, however, were ironically published the same year as *Jaws*, and only two years before *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*. Right on the cusp of the dawn of the modern blockbuster, in other words, such that in another two generations, the form’s evolution would leave this scholarly assertion profoundly historically problematized. In our age of digitally-liberated Baroque spectacle, the sublime is, at its best, less abridged, reduced, or parodied than at any previous point in history, and – in an even more perverse irony – Hollywood achieves this by virtue of marketing its spectacles chiefly to “imaginative adolescents.” The connotations of juvenile inexperience and fatuousness which Weiskel’s use of this term evoked have also been banished from the visual language of Hollywood spectacle today. In their place – and forming the opposite half of the stylistic helix which makes up the contemporary digitally-liberated blockbuster – there is a discernible Decadent *lingua franca* at work which determinedly codes the values of aesthetic connoisseurship and worldly experience into the spectator’s experience of a film.

One of the most vivid delineations ever penned of the Decadent aesthetic underlying the cinema of the modern Hollywood mainstream is found in a 1999 essay by Marc A. Weiner. Weiner invites us to “imagine the following scene,” and goes on to describe at some length the image of:

A young man, endowed with unusual aesthetic sensibility and great intellectual promise, attempts to communicate to those less sensitive the singular nature of an operatic air. He goes to great pains to explain the seductive realm that its sounds are intended to convey, especially the drama that the music accompanies. As his disquisition continues, his audience becomes increasingly aware of the physical strain that his enthusiasm, bordering on rapture, causes. His excitement grows to such intensity that those with whom he speaks begin to fear for his safety, for as he becomes ever more impassioned in his desire to persuade, the limits of his physical capacity to endure such passion come to the fore. His light complexion, usually bordering on a sickly pallor, is transformed by the carmine blush of his emotions, his eyes stare wildly in a troubling, introverted gaze of ecstasy, and his slight build seems scarcely able to sustain the power of his excitement evinced by the nervous character of his gesticulations and by the intoxicated swoon, bordering on sexual release, with which his rhapsody climaxes. Finally, it becomes clear that the musical-dramatic vision evoked by the young man is directly linked to his feverish and erotic state, as if the music had acted as a powerful drug, vouchsafing the initiated individual a glimpse into an imaginary realm available only to a few but experienced at a horrible price. (Weiner 1999, 119)

The tone here, more literary than scholarly, is likely deliberate, in an effort to unify subject and medium – describing an instance of Decadent aesthetics in language which is itself reminiscent of nineteenth-century Decadent literature. If asked to assign a source to this scene, Weiner suggests, “I can imagine most of us would choose a moment from the age of decadence,” with its well-known connotations of “privileged singularity, sexual excess, moral abandon, and disease and psychological decay. ... One could imagine such a scene,” he continues, “in any number of literary settings from Huysmans, Proust, D’Annunzio” (Weiner 1999, 119). And yet, Weiner finally reveals, the scene he has just described is in fact from Jonathan Demme’s 1993 film *Philadelphia*. Weiner’s literary description of the scene offers an effective rhyme to Bordwell’s evocation of the Agee/Farber/Tyler school of criticism. Reviewing Agee’s writings, Bordwell declared that his criticism embodied “the congenital Romantic” who is forever “pushing against the limits of language, always approximating, trying to capture hard outlines by lightning sketching,” trying to convey the “untapped but felt energies” of an aesthetic experience, “usually in vain” (Bordwell 2014c). This hyper-sensitivity to the aesthetic experience is fundamental to Decadent aesthetics. Although the following observations on cinematic Decadence will be dealing with facets of the Hollywood mainstream very different from *Philadelphia* – Demme’s film, after all, is a classically-constructed character drama which features no moments of grandiose spectacle, and no DVFX in realizing them – the spirit that Weiner demonstrates here nonetheless guides my inquiry.

The intensity of imaginative vision evoked in Weiner's remarks, and the intense scrutiny of cinematic images they imply, provides a valuable starting point for discussing the workings of ocularity – the mobilization of the eye and the gaze for dramatic purposes – in the Hollywood mainstream. In cinema, as in no other medium, to look is to do, for characters even more than spectators. As Laura Mulvey observed, film language, in its mobilization of the character's gaze, in tandem with the camera's "gaze," in tandem with the spectatorial gaze, can make looking into a very definite form of aggressive – and for her, gendered – action. As Paglia puts it, in the spirit, if not the letter, of Mulvey's theorizing of the male gaze, "phallic aggression and projection are intrinsic to western conceptualization... the blazing lightbeam of the movie projector is our modern path of Apollonian transcendence" (Paglia 1990, 31). This comes back to her assertion that even "the trashiest Decadent painting" contains "complex Romantic assumptions about Nature and society," insofar as even films which scholars and critics tend to credit with no narrative sophistication whatsoever, nonetheless deploy the logic of the gaze in vivid, sophisticated ways (Paglia 1990, 490). A good example is John Woo's 2000 film *Mission: Impossible II*. In spite of boasting a screenplay by Robert Towne, the film is remarkable in the way it reduces dialogue to a virtual minimum, and conveys character development largely by the expressive potential of eyes and gazes. The film makes Tom Cruise's hero, Ethan Hunt, and Thandie Newton's heroine, Nyah Nordoff-Hall, first beguile each other simply by exchanging highly aestheticized gazes across a room and between spinning cars. The film's plot, recalling Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), then requires Nyah to re-seduce her old flame Sean Ambrose (Dougray Scott) – the film's villain, bent on blackmailing his way into billions with an apocalyptic virus. Sean's first reception of Nyah is conveyed entirely with intense, lusty gazes at her. Ethan's concern for her safety, meanwhile, is conveyed simply by him gazing pensively into the laptop hooked up to a spy satellite. Sean's reaction upon learning that he has been deceived, likewise, is simply a furious glare caught in a full-frontal close-up. And as Ethan's initial attempt to find and destroy Sean's virus has him going in alone, his emotional states must be conveyed purely through Cruise's eyes.

Reviews of *Mission: Impossible II* tended towards the dismissive, but the film was a massive box office success nonetheless. At least in part, this is attributable to the vividness with which it tapped into one of cinematic aesthetics' deep wells of meaning. Both film theory, and scholarship on Decadence, often undervalue the importance of sheer ocularity to aesthetics – the

obsessive emphasis upon the amoral, weaponized aspect of the gaze, of mastery through seeing. It has already been observed that pagan Antiquity's total lack of inhibition about glorifying the visual – indeed, graven – image was archly and self-consciously resurrected in nineteenth-century Decadent art, with its frequent rejection of Christianity. This spirit is well-caught in Théophile Gautier's novel *Fortunio* (1836), when he writes of his heroine Musidora that:

She sought within her arsenal for the most murderous glance, the most amorously victorious smile to address to him and pierce his heart. Until the moment came for a deadly blow she kept watching Fortunio with deep attention concealed under an appearance of trifling. She observed his every motion, she surrounded him with lines of circumvallation, and tried to enclose him within a network of coquetry. (Gautier 1906a, 40)

One reads here the same intense imaginative vision, and evocation of visual scrutiny, that was heard in Weiner. Much analysis of Decadent literature has focused on its assumptions regarding gender roles, and the implications of these in their historical context. To parse a passage such as this on the grounds of its (potentially misogynistic) representation of women in terms of guile and smiling coquetry, however, is to miss the fundamental source of its energy. The Decadent gaze, in its arch, penetrating, fixity, is key to the aesthetic's understanding of gender – and almost everything else – and is available equally to woman and men. In the course of her discussion of the subject, Paglia declares that “Decadence is an Apollonian raid on the Dionysian, the aggressive eye pinning and freezing nature's roiling objects” (Paglia 1990, 389). This image – of the spectatorial eye pinning and freezing the bumptious chaos of natural motion – was originated in the scholarly, critical, and theoretical discussion of nineteenth-century literary texts, but it has since emerged as an entirely literal paradigm for much of contemporary Hollywood spectacle. The camera's “gaze,” acting on behalf of the spectator's, slows the onscreen action to near-full-stop, or absolute stasis, in an evocation of the pinning Decadent gaze. If this is attributed to the spectator on the one hand, on the other, it is just as much a mark of the character's arch, Decadent, self-consciousness. The camera's “pinning and freezing of nature's roiling objects” makes both spectator and character complicit in the same acute, piercing ocular aggression.

Unquestionably, the watershed film for this Decadent aesthetic was the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999). Like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, with its ground-breaking Baroque verticality, *The Matrix* was a *fin-de-siècle* text which positively ensured that the aesthetics of blockbuster spectacle in the 2000s would be very different from those of the 1990s. *The Matrix*

also drew upon verticality, but did so for diametrically opposed purposes. Whissel observes that the film “does not use verticality simply for the sake of spectacle. Rather, verticality is the dynamic articulation of a desire to change the course of history, to precipitate a new future” (Whissel 2006, 32). This is true, but even more important than the Wachowskis’ use of verticality to change the future was its use in freezing the present. What Whissel refers to as “the spectacle of Trinity suspended in the air as she kicks her way out of a trap” is, in fact, a ground-breaking moment in Decadent ocularity (Whissel 2006, 32). The spectator has seen Carrie-Ann Moss initially leap up into the air with the same hyperbolic speed with which she has already snatched up the arm of the cop attempting to cuff her, broken it with a short, sharp jab, and then knocked him reeling backwards with another sharp blow to the solar plexus. One is thus primed to see her deliver a *coup-de-grace* with a jump kick, but it is here that the Wachowskis give us the first of the film’s famous “bullet time” sequences. Instead of that jump kick being presented with the same kinetic intensity as the previous seconds, reality abruptly slows down to absolute stasis, as the frame simply lingers on her arch pose in mid-air. Bodily adrenaline has suddenly been drained from the proceedings, with the eye now privileged above all else. The spectator’s eye, via the camera-eye, ocularly pinions Trinity in the midst of her implacable aerial attack on the luckless cop, and simply invites the spectator to savour the amoral cool of it. Moreover, one senses that this is not simply the camera and spectatorial eye reducing Trinity to such stasis, but that she herself is likewise wholly self-conscious of her ability to reduce time to a virtual standstill, and so be able to precipitate her moves against the cops with total, ruthless impunity. As with numerous similar scenes throughout the course of the film, the moment is amoral Decadence crystallized.

Over a decade later, this same aesthetic can be seen matured in a film such as *Dredd*. This film actually incorporates this idea of arch ocular pinioning into its narrative on a literal level. The film imagines a new narcotic called “Slo-Mo,” which slows down the user’s perception of time to one-hundredth of the reality. They thus see the world in a state of virtual stasis, deriving a narcotic high from their ability to appreciate every single nuance and minutia of a movement, no matter how infinitesimal. The viewer first sees the hallucinogenic effects of the drug in some shots from the point-of-view of the film’s villain, Ma-Ma (Lena Headey), while under its influence. Having raised her arm while luxuriating in a bath, one sees all the droplets of water seem simply to hang in mid-air, almost motionless. Moments after this, she orders an underling

who has displeased her to be thrown off the 200-storey drop down the inner courtyard of the tenement building she controls. Before he is thrown over the rail, her subordinates dose him with Slo-Mo, so as to sadistically make him subjectively experience the drop as terrifyingly, interminably prolonged. The spectator shares the first moments of this via a point-of-view shot. Ma-Ma herself suffers the same fate at the film's climax, but this time it is shot objectively. The spectator sees Ma-Ma approach the ground in a medium-long shot, moving with tortuously, ocularly-pinioned, slowness. The gruesomely doomed Ma-Ma at the climax of *Dredd* represents the absolute polar inverse of the triumphantly invincible Trinity at the beginning of *The Matrix*, but the aesthetic of Decadent ocular pinioning in both scenes is exactly the same.

The degree to which *The Matrix* would, in this regard, profoundly influence the direction of Hollywood spectacle can be gleaned from a quote in *The Matrix Reloaded* – the first of its 2003 back-to-back sequels. An early scene in the film has Neo, after dispatching three agents, taking to the air with the new powers of flight he possess as “the One.” “He’s doing his Superman thing,” fellow Resistance soldier Link (Harold Perrineau) puts it. In the original context of *The Matrix Reloaded*, this was merely a bit of off-hand humour. Three years later, however, it would be resoundingly literalized with Bryan Singer’s *Superman Returns* (2006), one of Hollywood’s most vividly Decadent blockbuster spectacles of the 2000s. As an icon of American popular culture, Superman has long been virtually synonymous with a determinedly non-aestheticized sensibility: the kind of bluff, bumptious, earnest, ingenuous refusal of affectation so strongly identified with the Middle American heartland. Although the actual, existing *Superman* comic books had long been nuancing and darkening this conception of the character, it still loomed large in popular culture due to the continuing canonical status of Richard Donner’s 1978 film. Bryan Singer’s Decadent intervention was thus especially profound.

One of the most widely remarked things about Singer’s film was the fact that it cast a complete unknown as Superman/Clark Kent, Brandon Routh’s most notable work before this having been roles in single episodes of *Gilmore Girls* and *Will & Grace*. The rationale was readily apparent, however: that the character be completely dominant, and bring not even the slightest “star persona” baggage with it. This also, however, contained an implicit Decadent rationale – that the starring character is slightly dehumanized, and exists more as a cinematic *objet d’art* than a real human being. It is upon this basis that the film’s aesthetic of Decadent ocularity builds so strongly. Because he has no star persona connotations beyond his character,

the film's Clark Kent is solely defined by his glasses. The film establishes Clark Kent's character, history, and relationships with ocular graphic logic, having him gazing out from beneath his glasses – an especially photogenic pair of spare black horn-rimmed frames, incidentally – re-adjusting them, pushing them back on his nose, etc. This initial emphasis on Clark Kent's humble, ineffectual ocularity, however, sets up the totally omnipotent ocularity of Superman. One of the film's organizing images, for instance, is of him floating high above the Earth, using his super-senses to encompass the whole planet with a proprietorial air. It is an image strongly congruent with the kind of amoral mastery-through-ocularity evoked by Paglia above, but this sort of Decadent ocularity is older than modern popular culture. Gautier's Onuphrius Wphly is, again, almost uncanny in how exactly, 174 years beforehand, it evoked the aesthetics of a modern cinematic spectacle – this time the this Decadent ocular aspect of *Superman Returns* rather than the Baroque verticality of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. In a dream sequence within the story, the titular protagonist – alive and conscious within an outwardly dead body, after the fashion of Poe's *Loss of Breath* (1832) – finds himself on a dissecting room table. At the sight of the surgical instruments about to be used upon him, his spirit “leap[s] from its earthly fetters,” and begins to move about as a disembodied and weightless intelligence (Gautier 2008, 73). From here, Gautier's literary virtuosity begins in earnest, as the reader is told how:

Getting used to my mode of transportation, I soared fearlessly into the upper air, flying above the layer of thin fog and gazing down from this dizzy elevation onto the huge expanse of rooftops below. It looked rather like a tempestuous sea that had suddenly frozen over, a wild confusion of chimneys, spires, domes, and gable-ends, bathed in a haze of smoke and early-morning mist, so beautiful and picturesque that I could not really regret the loss of my body. (Gautier 2008, 74)

The evocation of verticality here is not one that thrills in flight as a buffeting, tactile experience. In this, it again anticipates *Superman Returns*, in that the film regularly drains Superman's flight of energy and intensity – to such a degree that it often has virtually nothing to do with Baroque verticality as evoked by Whissel. Rather, both sequences are organized around Decadent ocularity. Onuphrius is here, as no Decadent protagonist can possibly help doing, casting an appraising gaze over a vast cityscape spread out beneath him, and affecting an air of conceptual and intellectual mastery. The only difference between Onuphrius and Superman is that the former stakes his sensory claim to ownership in purely aesthetic terms, while a patina of social

responsibility is thrown over Superman's. In the context of the brilliantly aestheticized image of him hovering effortlessly above his dominion, however, it seems only marginally convincing.

It is only once he returns to Earth, however, that *Superman Returns* fully reveals itself as one of the supreme instances of Decadent ocularity in modern Hollywood, switching to a register of Decadent ocular pinioning more elaborate than anything done by *The Matrix* before or *Dredd* after, and with a perversity fully comparable to anything in Gautier, Baudelaire, or Huysmans. In a digitally-enabled dolly shot, lasting eighteen seconds – but covering perhaps a single second of real time – one sees a stream of bullets issue forth from the muzzle of a Gatling gun wielded by some bank robbers, and begin their journey towards a pair of security guards. As the camera pans alongside the trajectory of the first few bullets, one sees Superman fly into the background at speed and overtake the bullets. The dolly shot ends with the frame coming to rest on Superman's iconic chest shield, against which the bullets impact uselessly. After a few chaotic cut-backs to the robbers' escape helicopter, which is now being strafed by the ricochets, the film cuts out to a succession of longer shots of Superman simply walking nonchalantly towards the Gatling gun – the large caliber bullets slamming into his chest proving no more discomfiting than pollen seeds or dust specks. These shots of Superman looking so utterly unruffled are intercut with close-ups of increasingly angry, testosterone-fuelled gunman, incredulously furious at his vast weapon's impotence. The Gatling gun finally exhausting its ammunition as Superman arrives right in front of its muzzle – which is now glowing orange from such sustained use – the gunman lunges forward, pulls a handgun, and points it at Superman's face at point blank range. He fires and – in another six-second shot of absolute slow-motion, this time in extreme-close-up – the film shows the bullet emerge from the robber's gun, traverse the few centimetres to Superman's eyeball, strike it, and flatten uselessly against his cornea, not a single muscle in Superman's face reacting. A cut to an extreme-low-angle shot shows the flattened round fall to the ground, both men looking down after it. The sequence ends with an exchange of close-ups – the robber's face expressing gobsmacked incredulity, Superman's simply registering a perverse smirk.

A sequence such as this is Decadent because of its aestheticized absolutism – the degree to which it has totally thrown of all concerns with the “relatable” and “realistic” which bedevilled many 1990s blockbusters. While Superman's invincibility and invulnerability to normal human weapons has always been a conceptual given, other iterations of the character – such as Warner Bros' animated series (1996-2000) before this, and Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* after – have

equivocated on it slightly, in the name of such imaginative concerns as the relatable/realistic, and basic suspense. With *Superman Returns*, however, Bryan Singer did the opposite, and elevated Superman's invincibility to the status of virtual fetish object. In viewing this sort of blockbuster film – one that draws fully on digitally-liberated spectacle, but censors out a surprising amount of Hollywood-style action and kinesis in favour of Decadent ocularity – one recalls Hollis Frampton's remark that his film *Critical Mass* (1971) was itself “a process of training the spectator to watch the film” (qtd. in Thompson 2010, 144).

Frampton is also, but very differently, relevant as a point of introduction to the second formal characteristic of Decadent visual style – what I call “embowerment,” or the evocation of an environment which I term “the Decadent bower.” In his 1968 piece of performance art *Lecture*, Frampton declared that the maximum amount of cinematic showing was achieved when a projector is turned on, but no film run through, such that it simply projects a rectangle of white light against the screen. Such a film, Frampton declared “is, from an aesthetic point of view, incomparably superior to a large proportion of all films that have ever been made,” and to intercede into its non-imagery – even to the extent of turning white to red, or inserting the silhouette of a pipe cleaner – is necessarily to reduce and subtract from its majesty.

With this in mind, it is interesting to recall, among many possible examples, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (Guy Ritchie, 2011). Very early in the film, Guy Ritchie orchestrates a three-minute sequence which begins with the image of the ceiling of an extremely upscale London restaurant, circa 1891. One sees a crystalline chandelier descending from an ornate coffered ceiling inlaid in dark shades of burgundy and green, with the border of the ceiling an equally dark tone of gold. It is immediately apparent that this interior is a lush example of Beaux-Arts architecture, as descending from the border down the walls are golden-brown pilaster pillars topped with green-silver capitals. Between these, the patterns of Romanesque arches are inlaid into the walls, between which portraits hang. As the camera tilt-pans down from the ceiling, one likewise sees an extremely elaborate cartouche set above the golden, Roman-arched doorway. As the camera descends further towards the ground, we see that the first crystalline chandelier we saw was merely the grand central one, and that a number of others are laid out hanging at a lower level, just slightly above the quintet lamps which stand up from the centres of the curtained quartet dividers laid out on the restaurant's floor. The camera finally descending to floor level, we see the anti-heroine of the original 2009 film, Irene Adler (Rachel McAdams),

come and take a seat at one of these tables – which is separated by a divider curtain from its neighbour. The camera immediately cuts to her point of view as she sits, and the frame pans across the tabletop in extreme close-up, visually emphasizing the various elegant objects with which it is covered: a spotless white table cloth, laid with a raised salver, covered with a doily and laden with dainty coloured pastries and grapes, a small little vase containing some exotic flowers, and an exquisite porcelain and silver tea service.

As Irene orders a fresh pot of tea – which, upon arriving, is poured in the same kind of close-up with which the table settings were introduced – we see her framed against the divider curtain. We initially have no idea what, or who, is behind it, except for a hand jotting away with a pen. A dialogue begins with this unseen presence, during which we ascertain that Irene – evidently fearful of her personal safety – has insisted on having this meeting in a crowded public place. A few shots later, however, a rough-looking character sitting nearby strikes his spoon against the side of an exquisitely crystalline glass – an action emphasized in yet another extreme close-up. Following this, the camera cuts up to an overhead shot of the entire restaurant floor, and we see the entire clientele get up and leave. Only then do we see the hand draw back the dividing curtain, and Professor Moriarty (for it is he) lean towards Irene. A few moments of dialogue ensue in which he informs her that, due her emotional involvement, she has become an unreliable agent against Holmes, and that her services will no longer be required. Getting up and leaving without a word, Irene walks out of a close two-shot and the frame cuts to a wider shot of her walking across the restaurant floor towards the frame. We see her falter unsteadily in her stride, and grab the side of a table for support. The frame then cuts back to Moriarty. He takes a sip of his own tea as we hear Irene, off-screen, collapse to the ground due to the effects of the now-obvious poison in hers, and expire with a gruesome-sounding gasp.

There is an inordinate amount to unpack in this brief sequence, but one is immediately struck by the sheer density of its *mise-en-scene* – an aesthetic which constitutes a rebuke to the avant-garde spirit of transparency, openness, and refusal of formal rules that Frampton sought to evoke in *Lecture*. Visual ornamentation, Guy Ritchie seems here to be insisting, is *additive*, not subtractive, and aesthetic rules sharpen the appreciative sensibility rather than impede it. The above summary does not even come close to conveying the full density of the sequence's use of costume and props to create a potently tangible atmosphere. As with the workings of Decadent ocularity, however, the Decadent embowerment of this sequence's neutron-star-dense *mise-en-*

*scene* evokes an atmosphere of rigid rules and protocols. Moriarty's complex, pre-arranged choreography for Irene's death is drained of all affect, suspense, or horror, and simply signifies as a clinically formal exercise in technique. One is simply seeing an envisioned set of aestheticized rules being carried out to the letter. Highly ordered aesthetic logics are, *pace* Frampton, always stimulating and provocative, but are emphatically not always affectively humane. The sequence establishes Moriarty as the film's villain, but in very different terms than seeing Jabba the Hutt feed Oola to the rancor. The sequence's totally aestheticized atmosphere is of the most exquisitely artificial and de-Natured kind. One sees nothing in its insular settings besides rarefied and expensive *objets d'art*, the aestheticized valuation of which is an uncanny match for the sequence's overall amorality. In all this, it is a fluent moment of the aesthetics of the Decadent bower – an enclosed, de-Natured space where the artifice and illusionism of art can be made into the entire organizing principle of the environment.

As against Frampton's blank white screen and empty projector, and even in defiance of many "classical" compositional norms, the aesthetics of Decadent embowerment – in their own mirror-image variant of the Baroque sublime – insist upon treating the entire frame as a canvas. Rather than simply offering a single discreet object of attention at the very centre of the frame, the background surroundings of which are essentially unimportant, the Decadent visual aesthetic will, in yet another "hostile claim upon the viewer," densely utilize every square centimetre of the frame to create an overwhelming sense of atmosphere. As will be seen in a later chapter, this problematizes certain assertions about what Aylish Wood calls "seamless," as opposed to "inscribed" animated interfaces. For now, however, it is sufficient to point out that in Decadent visual aesthetics, the background settings, and environments surrounding the characters' forms, are *never* unimportant, or even of secondary importance. Enclosure, embowerment, and compulsion to control one's aesthetic environment, surrounding oneself with *objets d'art* is – besides the acute sensibility of the eye and the power of the gaze – one of the defining aspects of the Decadent sensibility.

The Decadent bower may, for a film's purpose, be virtually anything. An ordinary apartment, an entire mansion, an out-of-the-way loft or backroom, a secret enclave within the walls of a building, the interior of a space capsule, a secluded cave or cavern deep underground or atop a mountain, even a purely subjective environment created by telepathic imagination – all of these are valid visual templates. The only absolute criteria are that Nature be excluded or

subjugated, and function subsumed to aesthetics. In the history of this device, Edgar Allan Poe looms even larger than in other aspects of Decadent aesthetics, however Paglia declares that Poe's "attempts at aristocratic environments filled with objects d'art usually fizzle," due to the impoverishment of American culture at his time (Paglia 1990, 578). Unlike Balzac and Gautier, for instance, he had no opportunities of being exposed to aesthetic objects, environments, and discourses on a routine basis, and as a result, Paglia continues, "His gilded style of décor is like that of William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon, a muddle of priceless but incongruous objects" (Paglia 1990, 578).

Paglia, however, may be too harsh. One of Poe's last stories, *The Domain of Arnheim* (1847), vividly illustrates the de-Natured aspect of the Decadent bower in a way that looks forward to such pointedly artificial cinematic environments as Willy Wonka's factory in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Tim Burton, 2005), Dr. Manhattan's glass clockworks on Mars and Ozymandias's Antarctic "Karnak" retreat in *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009), and Kevin Flynn's white-lit bunker within the computer realm of *TRON: Legacy* – all of them custom-built hideaways that self-consciously have nothing to do with the world that the ordinary run of humanity lives in. The story tells of a young man named Ellison, who comes into a long-accruing inheritance which leaves him the richest man in the world – so phenomenally wealthy as to leave "bewildered all who thought on the subject" of what he was to do with it all, such that "the usual track of supposition was broken up. Men knew not what to imagine" (Poe 2002, 538). In the event, rather than attempting to use his mind-boggling fortune to change the existing world for the better, Ellison elects to withdraw from normative reality, and devote his means to fashioning his own, entirely different, nexus of existence. The new Domain that Ellison chooses to fashion for himself will be a reflection of his faith "that the creation of the landscape-garden offered to the proper Muse the most magnificent of opportunities," and that:

Here, indeed, was the faintest field for the display of imagination in the endless combining of forms of novel beauty; the elements to enter into combination being, by vast superiority, the most glorious which the earth could afford. (Poe 2002, 538)

Aiming to remedy what the story's narrator calls "an enigma... that no such combination of scenery exists in nature as the painter of genius may produce," Ellison spends years traversing the globe, scouting locations, obtaining specimens, drawing inspiration, and finally constructing his Domain (Poe 2002, 540). The eventual result – a sublime realm, situated in a geographical basin, which endures after Ellison's death as a lasting monument to aesthetic ideals – is one which Poe,

in a fashion which was eventually to be imitated by Lovecraft, cannot bring himself to describe in itself. He instead uses extensive verbiage giving the reader a sense of the advance, via canoe, through a winding canal cut through a gorge, at end of which one comes to “a gigantic gate or rather door of burnished gold, elaborately carved and fretted” (Poe 2002, 546). Of what lies beyond this – when “the whole Paradise of Arnheim bursts upon the view” – Poe can only evoke “entrancing melody,” “a dream-like intermingling to the eye” of all different kinds of flora from the world over, “long intertangled lines of silver streamlets,” and:

...uprising confusedly from amid all, a mass of semi-Gothic, semi-Saracenic architecture, sustaining itself by miracle in mid-air; glittering in the red sunlight with a hundred oriels, minarets, and pinnacles; and seeming the phantom handiwork, conjointly, of the Sylphs, of the Fairies, of the Genii, and of the Gnomes. (Poe 2002, 546)

In this, one sees the last gasp of the Romantic idealization of the openness and vitality of Nature, as it gives way to the Decadent ideals of enclosure, and the inanimate beauties of Art. Fifty three years after this, when the *fin-de-siècle* period had rendered Decadence a fully thought-out and self-conscious literary form, the final paradigm-setting masterpiece of the Decadent bower would be sketched by Joris-Karl Huysmans’s 1884 novel *À Rebours*. Often referred to as the “Bible of Decadence,” the novel deals with a jaded and hereditarily-debauched aristocratic scion named Rene Des Esseintes who – having grown fully disenchanted with life in society – elects to take a humble set of rooms in the ramshackle outskirts of Paris, and retire into seclusion with all his books, paintings, and precious *objets d’art*. From this premise, *À Rebours* becomes a Decadent novel in the same tradition as Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* the following year: plot is almost wholly marginal, and the entire text is simply an extended succession of Des Esseintes’s aesthetic appreciations and musings inside his Decadent bower.

Anticipating the totally amoral lethality seen in *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, there was a considerably greater emphasis on outright cruelty – rather than mere diffidence, as with Poe’s *Ellison* – as Decadence moved further and further into its *fin-de-siècle* phase. One sees this most sharply in *À Rebours*, when one reads that Des Esseintes has decorated his boudoir walls “covered with bright red tapestry and all around the room he had hung ebony-framed prints” by the Dutch engraver Jan Luyken, which are executed in a style of “lugubrious fantasy and ferocious cruelty” (Huysmans 1959, 70).

...his *Religious Persecutions*, a collection of appalling plates displaying all the tortures which religious fanaticism has invented, revealing all the agonizing varieties of human suffering – bodies roasted over braziers, heads scalped with swords, trepanned with nails,

lacerated with saws, bowels taken out of the belly and wound onto bobbins, finger-nails slowly removed with pincers, eyes put out, eyelids pinned back, limbs dislocated and carefully broken, bones laid bare and scraped for hours with knives. (Huysmans 1959, 70-71)

Again, one hears the total amorality of the pinioning Decadent gaze here. “Decadence is a disease of the western eye,” says Paglia of all this – “an intensification of the voyeurism latent in all art,” its pinioning mobilizations of the spectatorial gaze “coerce[ing] the eye and mak[ing] the reader a connoisseur, forced to assist in a despiritualization of reality” (Paglia 1990, 419). The trade-off to this coercion of the spectatorial eye into amorality, however, is the disciplining of it to extremes of sharpness and acuity. This can be seen in how, over the past decade-and-a-half of spectacle, ocular pinioning and voyeuristic connoisseurship have been elevated, as never before, into supreme aesthetic organizing principles. Like Ellison, Des Esseintes’s determined isolationism from the broad mass of the human race is a fluent fit with the governing mentality of the Decadent bower. It is a determined turning inwards to achieve something unique and deeply personally meaningful – something which, *a priori*, cannot be universally appreciable to people whose lives have not been dedicated overwhelmingly to aesthetic meditations.

By far the best-known cinematic instance of the Decadent bower in the 2000s or 2010s, however, is an attempt to do just this. The “Shadow Gallery” in *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005) – the secret hideaway-lair of the film’s terrorist-hero – is at once a fluent iteration of the ideals of the Decadent bower and a launching-base for radical revolutionary action. The Shadow Gallery is an intensely claustrophobic underground cloister of brown stone, designed in a pattern of pillars and low vaulted ceilings that exactly evokes a medieval monastery. This deeply historical aesthetic setting is, in turn, filled with all manner of *objets d’art* after the exact fashion of Poe and Huysmans. Indeed, it may not be coincidence that after *V for Vendetta*, director James McTeigue’s second-to-next project, *The Raven* (2012), was literally about Poe.

The spectator is introduced to the Shadow Gallery totally through the figure of Natalie Portman’s heroine, Evey Hammond. At twenty-six minutes into the film, she awakens from a blow to the head, and finds herself in the bedroom of what we will learn is the Shadow Gallery. The bedroom, we see, doubles as the library, and is filled with books stacked from floor to ceiling and covering every horizontal surface. All kinds of books, one notices – from dignifiedly-bound old library editions to brightly-coloured mass market hardcovers and fraying paperbacks, and everything in between. Picking herself up from the bed, Evey exits the bedroom, through an old

arched wooden door totally appropriate to a medieval monastery. She begins to come down a hallway towards frame, and it is through cut-backs to her point-of-view that the spectator is introduced to the décor of the Shadow Gallery. The first thing one sees as she comes to another doorway in the hall is an old medieval suit of armour standing at attention on the left side of the corridor. Moving on, she then looks up to her left, and sees William Blake's *Elohim Creating Adam* (1795) and Andrea Mantegna's *St. Sebastian of Vienna* (1456-59) hanging on the wall.

Exiting the corridor into an atrium area, we see, from her point of view, a long wide shot of a space so densely packed with different *objets d'art* that no individual ones can readily be picked out, save for a set of vivid red curtains hanging from the arch at the opposite end of the atrium, framing the entry into another section of the Gallery. Cutting back to her, the film then follows Evey into the atrium area. One of Alberto Giacometti's famous stick-figure sculptures is briefly visible behind her as she steps forward. The frame, via her gaze, then begins to pass over the various assembled *objets d'art* in close-up. We see an antique wooden bureau covered with small pieces of statuary from different cultures – a large Buddha's head flanked by a smaller Egyptian sphinx head and a Classical Greek head, with some full-body miniatures from still other cultures parked behind them. Above this hang some black-and-white prints. Evey turning from her left to her right, we see opposite this a glass shelf adorned with exotic drinking vessels, beneath which is a rock fragment of an archeological ruin. Behind these, some vintage comics hang framed on the wall.

Entering the main atrium area, the spectator, via Evey, now looks off into an enclave to the right and sees a glass table topped with an antique chess set, around which are laid out some more odd bits of sculpture, ranging from historical artifacts to postmodern. On the walls hang posters for *Mildred Peirce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) and *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949), and some 35mm film canisters are visible on the floor. Turning back to the main atrium area, we see that it is dominated by a piano in the centre of the room, while the edges of the room are bedecked with another suit of armour, antique vases from various cultures, and more sculptures. The walls, meanwhile, are covered with more masterpiece paintings. The sharp-eyed aesthete will readily pick out Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1522-23), John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* (1888), Edvard Munch's *Puberty* (1894-95), Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), and John Singleton Copley's *The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781* (1783). Somewhat more indistinct are Velasquez's *The Toilet of Venus* (1647-1651), which has been

stood up vertically on its side, and Caravaggio's *Young Sick Bacchus* (1593). Passing all these, Evey approaches a vintage jukebox, whose playing of Julie London's singing "Cry Me a River" has been drawing her in this direction. Above and behind this jukebox, we see a lepidopterist's display – five boxes of exquisite pin-mounted butterflies – hanging on the wall. It is as Evey is gazing down into the beautifully garish fluorescent light of the jukebox that V approaches behind her, and our purely ocular introduction to the Shadow Gallery comes to an end. In the ensuing dialogue sequence, we learn that V has obtained this plenitude of *objets d'art* "here and there, much of it the vaults of the Ministry of Objectionable Materials." From the very first, thus, *V for Vendetta*'s iteration of the Decadent bower is couched in politicized terms of anti-censorship. This earnest attempt to politicize the trope in a Leftist direction will continue throughout the rest of the film. Indeed, even before this, the spectator has already heard the film's Hitler/Big-Brother-style dictator-villain High Chancellor Adam Sutler (John Hurt) explicitly use the word "decadent" in a negative sense, in a transparent attempt by the film to throw spectator sympathy behind the concept.

Throughout the rest of *V for Vendetta*, the spectator will see much more of the Shadow Gallery, but no future scene will match the pure aestheticism of the eighty seconds or so devoted to Evey's initial ocular survey of the place. The deployment of the trope of the Decadent bower in cinema is intrinsically bound up with the trope of Decadent ocularity – one must have a vivid sense of a character acutely *gazing* upon the various *objets d'art* assembled in the space. Reduce it to simple tableaux, and the aestheticizing force will largely be lost. A masterpiece moment of such Decadent concern with ocularity and the aesthetic enclave can be seen early in the film *The International* (Tom Tykwer, 2009), in a sequence set in Berlin's Old National Gallery – a repository of Neoclassical and Romantic art. The spectator first sees Armin Mueller-Stahl, playing a former Stasi colonel named Wilhelm Wexler, glancing out a car window at the impressive facades and colonnades of the Gallery exterior. Cutting inside, a dolly shot follows Wexler out of one exhibition room and into another, where a lone man sits on a bench facing a wall of paintings. Wexler heads over to join him, the camera continuing to follow him, finally coming to rest as he sits down next to the man on the bench, the painting before them now dominating the frame. This dollying shot lasts a full 39 seconds, the film declining any unseemly haste in such an august Decadent bower setting. The painting which will ultimately define the action – emphasized far more strongly than any of V's – is Arnold Böcklin's *The Deposition*

(1874), a Symbolist representation of Christ's body being shrouded for entombment. The man gazing so intently at *The Deposition* is identified only as "the Consultant" by the film, and upon being queried by Wexler about his interest in the painting ("this canvas appeals to you?"), he declares "I like the look of agony. ... Because I know it's true." This is rapidly established to be a character note for the Consultant, who is of course a paid assassin for the film's malevolent banking conglomerate. This moment, however, also speaks strongly to Decadent aesthetics in broader terms. Finding aesthetic pleasure in the representation of pain and cruelty is a well-known trope of Decadence – the conviction that art is so important that it should hurt; and the supreme cultivation of aesthetic sensibility going hand-in-hand with a lack of concern with the human(e) and social.

When Wexler sits down next to the Consultant, he does so in profile, gazing laterally off-screen towards *The Deposition*. When the film cuts to the Consultant, it is initially a mirroring composition, except that the Consultant then turns his head towards the camera/frame/spectator, showing the full cold steeliness of his eyes. This is then followed by a cut back to the previous profile shot of Wexler, except that it is framed much closer now – coded as a shot from the Consultant's POV. *The International* is here taking full advantage of the cinematic logic of the Decadent gaze, with the Consultant's gaze ruthlessly pinioning Wexler simply as a matter of course. This point is underlined by the film then cutting to close-ups of some details from *The Deposition* – Christ's lifeless head lolling backwards into Nicodemus's arms, followed by Mary's look of agonized grief. This brief moment in *The International* is, ultimately, truer to Decadent aesthetic logic than the Shadow Gallery in *V for Vendetta*. It is inordinately to the latter film's credit that it tries so earnestly to press Decadence into the service of Left-wing activism, but ultimately it is mistaking Decadent aestheticism's real, lasting political value – which is not so much to directly challenge capitalism as simply to remain stubbornly, totally inassimilable to it. The terms of corporatized reification that Wexler brings with him into the Old National Gallery are swiftly shown up within this Decadent bower. The scene vividly cues us, early on, that the Consultant may work for the corporation, but he is, ultimately, not truly of it.

This issue of Decadent aestheticism as inassimilable to establishmentarian reification brings us to the third formal characteristic of Decadent visual stylistics: the concern with form above all else. "Pater, as was notorious, studied the nostalgias of religion only in terms of form and ceremony," observed Harold Bloom (Bloom 1970, xvi). Indeed, Pater went so far as to

sincerely plan to be ordained as an Anglican minister simply for the sake of the aesthetic hieraticism of it all, while frankly not believing a word of the Church's theology. Again, this apolitical devotion to aesthetics for their own sake – rather than as a searchlight by which to read political and social conflicts, as Leo Braudy put it – is a key tenet of the Decadent sensibility, and one that could profitably be deployed more often in Cinema Studies. One sees it vividly caught in a film such as *Bridge to Terabithia* (Gabor Csupo, 2007), for instance, when the secular-minded young heroine goes to church simply for novelty value, and is struck – in a beautifully aestheticized subjective point-of-view shot – by the visual beauty of a stained-glass window catching the sun. As was alluded to with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (incidentally produced by the same company as *Terabithia*) – and as will be seen again in chapters to come – no amount of conservative narrative can completely undo the emancipatory aspect of a film that treats its spectacle and imaginative vision seriously. Philistinism, and contempt for cinema's spectacular capacities, is the only totally unrecuperable kind of reaction.

A readily-apparent difficulty with interpreting Hollywood spectacle in light of Decadent aesthetics is that, whereas the seventeenth-century Baroque was indissociable from larger-than-life grandiosity – something that comports well with Hollywood tradition – Decadence as a literary movement was predicated on the censoring and minimizing of action. To the Decadent eye – at attentive ocular repose in its aestheticized bower – Kryptonian vistas are far more interesting when they are simply standing, in all their cold crystalline stasis, than when they are being ripped asunder by planet-destroying seismic activity. To disrupt aesthetic stasis and repose with frenetic action is to vandalize and destroy a Decadent aesthetic. Remy de Gourmont's 1894 story *On the Threshold* catches this tone well, with its description of an elderly aristocrat, the Marquis de la Hogue – “a man who has never acted, never lifted a finger to accomplish a desire or a duty... the lake that the wind has never rippled, the forest that has never rustled, a sky free from the clouds of action” (de Gourmont 1998. 957). He has “elaborated a whole philosophy of nothingness,” whereby all direct, sensate human experience is to be shunned, and imagination and desires made one's whole world (de Gourmont 1998. 957). This philosophy is summed up by the phrase “You must remain on the threshold,” and he has, the Marquis declares: “plunged with determination into the shadows of inaction” (de Gourmont 1998. 957). Again, this aesthetic mentality of total languor and restraint would seem to stand at odds with the Baroque nature of

contemporary Hollywood spectacle, and yet the very diametric-ness of its opposition to the Baroque *lingua franca* of verticality and profusion renders it a productive dialectic.

As we saw with the case of Trinity jump-kicking the policeman at beginning of *The Matrix*, or Mama plunging to her doom at the end of *Dredd*, there is a distinct visual aesthetic, with intriguing thematic implications, to be derived from filming the movement of great masses at extreme speed with stately slowness. The inertia of energy and inertia at work are so great that, onscreen, they come to resemble their opposite, without the actual facts of the matter being quite lost. One sees a defining instance of this, for instance, at the climax of Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* (2007), in which, directly above the sun, protagonist Robert Capa (Cillian Murphy) must leap from the airlock of the film's space craft to reach the entry port behind the already-detached solar shield which is drawing away. The film cuts to an extreme-long lateral shot of him traversing the distance through space, which seems to progress in extreme slow-motion, even as the spectator is simultaneously aware that the masses and speeds at work – the solar shield is the size of Manhattan Island, while the sun's corona billows in the background – are dauntingly immense. Closer to the mainstream, one sees a similar kind of aesthetic effect in *The Last Airbender* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2010), in which the climactic spectacle sequence – involving the intensely kinetic spectacles of duelling psychic energies and the onset of a vast tsunami – is nonetheless filmed with an eye towards the same visual stasis. This aesthetic becomes even more readily discernible when character subjectivity is more openly added to the equation. One thinks, for instance, of the moment in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, in which Magneto (Ian McKellen) – his eyes focused in intense concentration – uses his magnetic powers to levitate himself high into the air, then magnetically heft up the cast's VTOL aircraft, and mentally fling it towards the oncoming swarm of anti-Mutant sentinel drones, where it impacts to great explosive effect. All this is shot with a portentous gravity, whereby the sheer impassiveness and lack of bodily movement on Magneto's part visually underscores the immense physical impact he can have, through sheer ocular subjectivity, on his physical surroundings. This same aesthetic was used with an even greater Decadent perversity – emphasizing self-destruction rather than martial action – at the conclusion of *Wanted* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2008). We see, in extreme slow-motion, Angelina Jolie's anti-heroine Fox “bending” a bullet at a 360° angle, causing it to killingly pass through the craniums of all of her (former) comrades standing in a circle. The final moments of the image show Fox – through her preternaturally acute reflexes – deliberately lining

her own head up to be last in the line of fire. In all this, one sees spectacles which might logically lend themselves to an aesthetic of frenetic speed and kinesis, being instead handled with a jaded and cerebral detachment and slowness, the better to Decadently dwell upon the aesthetic substance of them.

This becomes most acutely evident when the idea is applied to animation, supposedly the most kinetic, spastic, and hyperactively movement-oriented form of cinema. In his editor's introduction to the 1991 anthology *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation* – the first full-length study of animation published in Anglophone academia – Alan Cholodenko declared that “two major definitions bedevil animation: endowing it with *life* ... and endowing it with *movement*” (Cholodenko 1991, 15, italics Cholodenko's). Life, Cholodenko insists, is not synonymous with movement, just as movement does not, in itself, imbue life. This dichotomy speaks profoundly to Decadent aesthetics, and the incompatibility animation might seem to evince with them. By its very nature, cel animation supposedly emphasized incessant movement, thereby supposedly bringing its creations to “life.” The Decadent values of spectatorial repose, and voyeuristic or intellectual poise, would thus seem to run contrary to the very nature of cel animation as a form. And yet, as with so much else about animation – its supposed natural form as the “cartoon” short, its supposed appropriateness for children, its supposed inimicality to naturalism and realism, for example – this is a point of practice, not an absolute principle of theory. The deliberate, aestheticized violation of these suppositions can in fact yield a fascinating aesthetic dialectic – one far richer than simply observing and obeying the platitudinous truisms about animation's supposed nature. The Israeli-French-German co-production *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2007) for instance, certainly does not stint on using animation's kinetic side. There are repeated scenes of a nightmare vision of a devastated Beirut, in which the narrator-protagonist – an autobiographical figuration of director Folman himself – is pursued by demonic stray dogs. In addition to this, hyperreal animation's simulacra nature is drawn upon to create some terrifyingly vivid, almost documentary-style, reminiscences of the 1982 Lebanon War. And yet much of this, however, is narratively framed as flash-back recollections, arising from a sequence where Folman visits an old army comrade who now lives in an old farmhouse in the Dutch countryside. The sequence's wide establishing shots of the house – an isolated dot in the stark white expanses of the snow-covered fields – mute the kinetic side of animation to the furthest possible degree. And cutting inside, the conversation between Folman and his friend is conveyed

by the two of them simply sitting opposite each other, barely moving, but their eyes conveying haunted depths of both knowledge and uncertainty. The intensely ocular nature of the sequence is used to intensely convey the weight of memory both men carry of the senseless destruction and widespread civilian death that accompanied their presence in Lebanon. This theme of historical weight is, in turn, heightened by their aesthetic environment – by the sense of mature age and experience which inheres in the farmhouse and its furniture. Decadent ocularity and embowerment are used to underscore a sense of form which gives greater meaning and resonance to kinetic Baroque spectacle.

The cinematic Baroque, we have seen, is all about the expansive depiction of dramatic spectacles of action. Decadent cinematic aesthetics, in contrast, are hyper-conscious of the distinct kind of spectacle which spaces and figures can offer when at repose, meaning that the very slightest movement – or violation of repose – becomes freighted with extremes of meaning. Far greater heights of self-consciousness are inherently coded into an image of action when a film has established a Decadent aesthetic, relative to one that has simply emphasized movement and action with little to no variation. Critical to the essence of true Decadence, Paglia declares, is that it should never entail the actual loss of self (Paglia 1990, 130-31). An action, and its image, must always be weighted with a self-consciousness of its being performed, in violation of pure conceptual repose. Joséphin Péladan's 1888 story *The Ritual of Love* is also relevant here, in describing its Decadent aristocratic protagonist Nebo as “a Platonist condemned to an orgy of the flesh, a metaphysician devoted to paroxysms” (Péladan 1998, 853). Unable to manifest genuine, animal passion in his love affairs, he seeks to compensate by becoming ever more obsessive about their formal and ritualistic aspect. “He prepared his sexual entry just as an Italian podesta prepares his entry into a town that has just surrendered,” Péladan informs us, “and could hardly breath until he had proved to himself that he was committing a debauchery worth of a Mardouck-Baladan or a Toutmes” (Péladan 1998, 853). If it *must* be committed, then action at least must always be understood as the performance that it is – and a higher intellectual plateau of aesthetic sensitivity is reached by this understanding. This gets right to core of the Decadent aesthetics in Hollywood spectacle of today, and the profound historical significance of their unprecedented appearance.

One gets a sense of this significance from Georg Lukács's 1920 book *The Theory of the Novel*, which posited a dialectic, in literary art, between what Lukács called “abstract idealism,”

and “the romance of disillusionment.” In essence, these two tendencies represented diametrically opposed perspectives on narrative figuration: the former denoting total exteriority, the latter denoting total interiority. The one signified a refusal of characterological nuance, reflection, sensitivity, or transcendence; the other represented the complete surrender to those things. In the current context, a dialectic such as this is extremely instructive regarding the new presence of Decadence in Hollywood spectacle. In abstract idealism, Lukács wrote:

...the hero is rightly conscious of the superiority of the opposing outside world; yet despite this innermost modesty he can triumph in the end because his lesser strength is guided to victory by the highest power in the world; the forces of the imaginary and the real correspond to one another... (Lukács 1971, 98)

Likewise:

The hero’s soul is at rest, rounded and complete within itself like a work of art or a divinity; but this mode of being can only express itself in the outside world by means of inadequate adventures which contain no counter-force within them precisely because the hero is so maniacally imprisoned in himself... (Lukács 1971, 100)

Lukács posited this tendency in art as existing most fully in the Ancient Greek epics, and having been lost to the Christian era, only reappearing in mutated form in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. Several decades later, however, it would also catch the tone of much 1980s and early ’90s Hollywood action spectacle – in the Schwarzenegger/Stallone/Van Damme hard-bodied mode – very well. The hero in such films must always face overwhelming, seemingly insuperable, odds, but will nonetheless *always* win out because the construction of these films is governed by an authorial logic which simply cannot countenance the hero being overmatched or at a loss. The heroes of these films were, as a rule, so devoid of introspection or nuance of character that martially and pugilistically triumphing against external odds was the only character note they could sustain. In light of all this, thus, it becomes all the more notable to see the forms of Hollywood spectacle today being couched in terms of the other side of the dialectic: the romance of disillusionment.

Under the romance of disillusionment, Lukács declared, “interiority is like a cosmos, it is self-sufficient, at rest within itself” (Lukács 1971, 112). Action-packed narrative disintegrates into “a nebulous and unstructured sequence of moods and reflections about moods, the replacement of a sensuously meaningful story by psychological analysis” (Lukács 1971, 113). This elevation of interiority, Lukács declares, bespeaks a fundamentally pessimistic view about the possibility of “reali[zing] the soul in the outside world, a struggle which is seen as *a priori*

hopeless and merely humiliating” (Lukács 1971, 114). As contemplation replaces action, “the romanticism becomes sceptical, disappointed and cruel towards itself and the world” (Lukács 1971, 119). Lukács posited Flaubert’s *The Sentimental Education* (1869) as the supreme embodiment of this aesthetic – a selection which, not coincidentally, is agreed by many scholars to be an advance avatar/forerunner of late nineteenth-century Decadence as a fully-worked-out aesthetic philosophy. All this is strikingly congruent with Paglia’s remarks about the organic rhythm of art, and speaks powerfully to a surprising amount of Hollywood spectacle over the past decade and some.

The emergence of this intensely interiorized concern with form – and the self-conscious emphasis on the visualization of form – had an important milestone in a scene from *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003). At just past the 90-minute mark of this 154-minute film, there comes a scene in which Tom Cruise’s hero, Cpt. Nathan Algren, walking through the streets of Tokyo – circa. 1877 – at night, finds himself surrounded by sword-wielding assassins emerging stealthily from the shadows. For the entire second act of the film before this, Algren has lived in a remote mountain village, initially as a prisoner of war, and eventually as a form of guest. There, he has devoted himself to learning the ways of the samurai – to achieving a totality of focus and awareness of one’s surroundings that enables one to perform seemingly superhuman feats of dexterity. In this sequence, accordingly, a seven-second medium frontal shot has Algren initially react to the assassin’s emergence by reaching into his jacket for a gun which he doesn’t have, but then checking himself. Realization of what he should really be doing plays across his face, and there then comes a succession of close-ups of his hands slowly dropping to his side, his heel drawing back, and the intensely focused gaze in his eyes. The film is establishing, by sheer graphic logic, the all-importance of his own subjectivity, and his mental conceptualization of the layout of the situation and the action to come. This sort of interiority, it goes without saying, has historically been very rare in mainstream Hollywood spectacles, which tended to come down very much on the abstract idealist side of the dialectic which Lukács posited. Indeed, as Stephen Prince has observed, this latter may actually be closer to the real, historical ethos of the samurai, which emphasized more of an extroversion of total selflessness (Prince 1999). An occlusion such as this, however, simply further testifies to the degree to which Decadent thematics were diffusing into Hollywood aesthetics.

In the event, however, Algren abruptly lunges sideways – out of shot, and into a rapid succession of action shots, as the thundering of kettle drums strike up on the soundtrack. A mere moment later, all the assassins seemingly lie dead around him. Forty-five seconds of build-up are paid off by only thirteen seconds of action – a virtual inversion of the dynamics of Hollywood spectacle in decades past. Moreover, these thirteen seconds of action are edited so blindingly fast that it is impossible to tell what is going on. It must be emphasized, moreover, that – in the case of *The Last Samurai* – this assertion must be understood entirely literally, rather than as hyperbole from conservative critics who pine for the more sedate editing rhythms of classical studio Hollywood filmmaking. These thirteen seconds worth of intensified kinesis simply affirm that the action has duly taken place according to Algren’s samurai-trained conceptualization of it.

The sequence does not end here, however, but provides one last Decadent turn of the screw. At the conclusion of the thirteen seconds worth of invisibly fast carnage, the image finally comes to rest again on the same frontal medium-close-up of Algren’s face, and intense eyes, which ordered the leading up to the action. The film holds on this image for five seconds – long enough to provide an effective mental break from the preceding action, in which no shot lasted so much as a single second. The viewer is able to appreciate how much more haggard and dishevelled Algren appears after the rapid and deadly events of the last few seconds, making his gaze into the camera seem all the more potent. And it is from this shot that the film then begins to cut back to the events of the previous seconds, and replay them in desaturated, slow-motion shots. The frontal shot of Algren’s gaze, so familiar by now, is clearly understood to be at last taking us inside the intense subjectivity he was displaying in the lead-up to the action. Whereas the externalized semblance of abstract idealism which made up the earlier sequence was cut so fast as to be impossible to follow, here, in Algren’s interiorized re-cap, the preceding action is broken down with a positively chilly clinical-ness. Every sword slash, kill, block, parry, and dodge is given its own discreet shot, in between which we cut back to the frontal master image of Algren’s intense gaze into the camera – an image which thus becomes increasingly loaded with aesthetic suggestion and implication. Again, this second sequence of acute mentalization of action lasts forty seconds, relative to the intense-but-perfunctory thirteen seconds of the action itself. The Decadent sensibility, we again see, finds the detached, aestheticized contemplation of the form of a work, event, or experience preferable to boisterous immersion in it. The final payoff to all this is that Algren’s mental re-cap of the action reveals that, in the intensity of the melee, he

missed delivering a killing blow to one of the assassins. A cut to behind him, meanwhile, reveals that one struggling back to his feet. With a few final cuts back to his gaze, and into his subjectivity, Algren swiftly rises and disarms the last assassin. Again, this action itself is the matter of a mere two seconds, whereas the ensuing standoff between Algren and the disarmed assassin – who definitely jeers that “the samurai are finished!” – lasts a full eleven seconds before Algren beheads him with a final stroke.

This sequence from *The Last Samurai* is chiefly remarkable for its total, diametric reversal of one of the most famous moments in modern blockbuster Hollywood: the shooting-the-swordsman moment in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981). This latter moment – actually an on-set improvisation by a dysentery-raddled Harrison Ford – represented a triumph of unsentimental American practicality and philistinism, the aesthetic qualities of technique and skill in swordsmanship counting for nothing in the face of working revolver. It is against this that the opening of the *Last Samurai* sequence – Algren reaching for a gun like Indy, checking himself, and instead drawing upon the mental discipline, physical poise, and skill with sword that the samurai have taught him – signifies so radically. It represents a repudiation of the parochial American philistinism in *Raiders*, and gestures strongly towards the aesthetic sublime. And yet the sequence is still one of action, culminating with half-a-dozen swordsmen dead instead of just one – the last of them finished off while disarmed and on his knees, no less. At once more refined than the moment in *Raiders* and more barbarous, this sequence in *The Last Samurai* vividly demonstrated the Decadent formalism which was making its way, largely unremarked, into the Hollywood spectacle aesthetic of the twenty-first century.

In addition to Lukács’s dialectic of abstract idealism and the romance of disillusion, the logic of Decadent form in current cinematic aesthetics might be further understood by drawing on the Heidegger-ian notion of “being in the world” – the idea of “a rooted, socially-situated, *knowing* human being” (Ward 2006, 127, italics Ward’s). Paul Ward, in 2006, posited this concept as a way of understanding the idea of the animated documentary, and the same year, Whissel would also utilize the term “cinematic being-in-the-world” in her essay on verticality (Whissel 2006, 25). The notion of a cinematic being-in-the-world – connoting simply the lingering emphasis upon the human form in the frame, in such a manner as to aesthetically bespeak profound self-possession and psychological depth – might, however, be profitably applied to Decadent cinematic style more generally. The opening credits sequence of *Tinker*

*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* offers a vivid example of such an aesthetic. The sequence begins a little more than seven and a half minutes into the film. By this point, however, the spectator has already seen a tense late-night summit between Mark Strong and John Hurt; a suspenseful spy meet in a Budapest café patio, which goes bad and leaves Strong's character splayed out in the street with a bullet in his back; and the denouement of an office coup in MI6 headquarters, with Hurt's Control forced out, while his deputy – Gary Oldman's protagonist Smiley – sits by silently and impassively. After all these charged dialogue sequences, however, all dialogue stops for a five-minute stretch, and Smiley is introduced to the audience purely on the strength of Oldman's mute screen presence – a virtuoso example of the “cinematic being in the world” that Ward and Whissel propose.

The sequence begins with a succession of shots of Control and Smiley walking through MI6 headquarters – “the Circus,” in John le Carré's lexicon – on their way to forced retirement. Crucially, Smiley is walking dutifully behind Control, evidently loyal to the end. These shots are a marvel of *mise-en-scene*, insofar as on the main floor of operations at the Circus, the spectator is shown a vast, densely packed environment full of now-archaic analogue technologies. Desks and work stations are laden with typewriters, magnetic tape machines, mimeograph machines, and radio equipment, and entire walls are given over to filing drawers, and every other vertical and horizontal surface is covered with papers and maps. Beyond this spark of novelty, however, as Control and Smiley move on, the omnipresent impression is one of determined drabness and dowdiness – a pervasive palette of greys and cool, muted darks. *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is a film that will go on to present a vivid picture of 1970s Britain as a different, colder, harsher, world, and the film exits the gate strongly here. As Control and Smiley move through the Circus together, one sees that the drabness of the environment is reflected in their own physical countenances. Both men look haggard, wrinkled, and grey-haired beyond their years, with their dowdy beige overcoats not helping a bit. Exiting the outer gate of the Circus into the street, they exchange a silent gaze for a moment, and then Control walks away frame left, leaving Smiley looking after him. This last shot lasts a significant seventeen seconds, with Smiley's gaze after Control shifting, as he turns away toward the frame, into a private moment of interiority. Dramatically, we understand, the film is now his.

The credits, set to Alberto Iglesias's score, continue over a montage of images showing that life continues at the Circus, while Smiley endeavours to adjust to retirement. We see him

swimming in an outdoor bathing hole – a bone-chilling relic of a past Britain which will become a visual recurrence in the film – and then walking past it again in profile, as phlegmatic and dowdily dressed as ever. This shot is interrupted mid-way through by one of Control having died in hospital. Almost four minutes into the sequence, we see Smiley in an optometrist's shop, and then an extreme close-up of his eyes looking into frame through a phoropter. Exiting the shop, the character at last fully emerges, as we see Smiley adjusting his new pair of glasses. Instead of the amber-gold pair of horn-rimmed glasses we have seen him wearing hitherto, he is now sporting a much more intense-looking pair of black browline glasses. Wearing these, we then see him walking across a snow-covered public park, then along an Islington residential street. In each of these shots, he is facing and moving toward the frame, rather than along in profile as before, such that his image inherently projects greater self-possession. For the entire remainder of the film, the mere fact of Smiley gazing, sphinx-like, out from beneath those intense, owlsh black browlines will be a constant, vivid spectacle – one that netted Gary Oldman his first ever Oscar nomination. The film gives Smiley no dialogue in this opening credit sequence simply to cede more formal place to this silent ocular spectacle. Indeed, Smiley's first scenes were apparently originally shot as a more traditional character screenplay piece, but his lines were cut in the editing room once the extent of his ocular screen presence became apparent ([davidbordwell.net/blog](http://davidbordwell.net/blog), 2/20/2012). That this was not a mere fortunate accident, however, is testified to by the fact that Oldman apparently tried on hundreds of different pairs of glasses before discovering the specific set of frames that enabled him to nail Smiley's character (*24 Frames*, 12/15/2011). *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* takes the basic characterization of Clark Kent in *Superman Returns* – defined by reserve and a pair of glasses – and loads it with far more implicit meaning, making it incalculably more Decadent. This demonstrates, again, that even stasis can be visually striking, if judiciously aesthetically handled. The cinematic-Heidegger-ian sense of being in the world need only convey a sufficiently intense sense of self-consciousness and self-possession.

One sees this same spirit of intense self-consciousness and self-possession captured in Decadent cinematic aesthetics' strong sense of the perfunctory. In another intriguing break with the hard-bodied action spectacles of Hollywood's relatively recent past, in many of today's digitally-liberated blockbusters, it is treated as supremely unimportant for a spectacle to be emotionally exultant or cathartic. The simple visual, formal virtuosity of the vision is more

important. Viewers who nonetheless become emotionally involved do so more in spite of the film's dramatic diegesis than because of it. One sees this readily throughout *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. In a far more outlandishly Hollywood-style register, however, one need only think of the fantastical sequences in Zack Snyder's 2011 film *Sucker Punch* – in which Emily Browning's young heroine, Babydoll, is successively attacked first, by huge samurai automata wielding giant *naginata*, bazookas, and Gatling guns; then by an army of steampunk-inspired automata of World War I German soldiers; then by an army of orcs and a giant-fire breathing dragon; and finally by a troop of anonymous, stormtrooper-style robots. These sequences – filmed largely in slow-motion and in stable long takes, rather than with rapid-staccato editing and exaggerated kinesis on the characters' part – are designed and staged according to a video-game aesthetic whereby, unless she is directly shot or slashed, Babydoll cannot be hurt or wounded, and seemingly possesses limitless, effortless agility and dexterity. The result is that throughout it all, Browning is able to maintain a seemingly indifferent and *blasé* demeanour, and the spectator, in turn, is made complicit in the same sensibility. Director Zack Snyder has very deliberately designed these sequences to be virtually devoid of traditional suspense or empathy, and therefore consciously makes jaded formalists of all his audience. This Decadent concern with form, as with Decadent ocularity, had a watershed moment in *The Matrix*, with the moment at the climax where Neo – at last revealed as the One – shows himself now able to diffidently and unconcernedly hold off Agent Smith's savage attack with only arm, and a seeming minimum of exertion.

When taken to its absolutely logical conclusion, Decadent art finds an immaculately laid out corpse more beautiful than a living human form. The latter is prone to the agonies and inconveniences of the animate flesh, whereas the former can be appreciated purely as an *objet d'art*. This tendency surfaces in Poe on certain occasions, as with his 1842 story *The Oval Portrait*, in which a painter, “having already a bride in Art,” mystically drains all colour and animation from his innocent young wife – “a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee; all light and smiles, and frolicsome as a young fawn; loving and cherishing all things” – in the course of painting her portrait (Poe 2002, 248). Having produced a portrait that is “a mighty marvel” – a work of art so admirable that it could be mistaken for a real person – the artist finally tears his gaze away from his work, only to find that his bride is dead (Poe 2002, 248). The supposed infectious beauty of the young woman's joy in living is, in the Decadent schema, no match for the inanimate beauty of the canvas. The sentiment can be seen in even

greater purity in Gautier's 1858 novel *The Romance of a Mummy*, in which we read of the mummy of an Ancient Egyptian queen, named Tahoser, being exhumed an Egyptologist named Dr. Rumphius, and a young English aristocrat named Lord Evandale:

The last wrapping taken off, the young woman showed in the chaste nudity of her lovely form, preserving, in spite of so many centuries that had passed away, the fullness of her contours, and the easy grace of her pure lines. Her pose, an infrequent one in the case of mummies, was that of the Venus of Medici, as if the embalmers had wished to save this beautiful body from the set attitude of death and to soften the inflexible rigidity of the cadaver. (Gautier 1906b, 60)

Upon seeing this, Evandale is immediately thunderstruck. "Never did a Greek or Roman statue present a more beautiful appearance," we hear, and Gautier – via Evandale – proceeds to rhapsodize over Tahoser's beauty at great length. Her form, we learn, "was still childish in its gracefulness, yet possessing already all the perfections of a woman" (Gautier 1906b, 61). Her skin is "the golden tint of a new Florentine bronze, the amber, warm tone which is admired in the paintings of Giorgione and Titian" (Gautier 1906b, 62). Her mouth has "that tender and resigned smile which pouts so prettily the lips of the adorable heads which surmount the Canopean vases in the Louvre" (Gautier 1906b, 62). In all this, one readily sees that Gautier is treating Tahoser more as an inanimate *objet d'art* than the body of a human being who was once alive. This is not reducible to "objectification," in contemporary feminist terminology, however. Decadent aesthetics treat the male body the same way. Being adjudged aesthetically pleasing, in a dehumanized sense, is the Decadent sensibility's highest mark of honour, and the terms of romance with which it is most comfortable. In this spirit, the bulk of Gautier's novel takes the form of the translation of a papyrus scroll entombed with Tahoser. The scroll ostensibly tells of her romantic travails in life, but ultimately, Gautier uses it more to describe, at immense length, the beauties and splendours – artistic, architectural, and human, on the same empathetic footing – of the Ancient Egyptian world she lived in. At the end of it all, a very brief coda informs us that:

As for Lord Evandale, he never married, although he was the last of his race. His young countrywomen cannot understand his coldness towards their sex. But it would never occur to them that Lord Evandale is retrospectively in love with Tahoser... who died three thousand five hundred years ago. (Gautier 1906b, 295)

In Gautier's 1858 imagining, as with Poe's *Domain of Arnheim*, there is still some vestigial Romanticism to his Decadent love of inanimate beauty. By 1884, however, the trope has reached a far franker cruelty. At the climax of Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus*, the Decadent anti-heroine,

Raoule de Vénérande, has had the body of her dead lover – a cherubically androgynous young man named Jacques Silvert – recreated as “a wax figure covered with transparent rubber” – “an anatomical masterpiece,” with “enameled eyes [which] have an adorable look” (Rachilde 1998, 366). This replica, furthermore, is adorned with “the red hair, the fair eyelashes, and gold hair of the chest,” from the original, while “the teeth that are in the mouth, and the nails on the hands and feet, have been torn from a corpse” (Rachilde 1998, 366). Every night, the anti-heroine comes to this blasphemous shrine and bestows a kiss on the waxen statue’s mouth, the inanimate simulacrum serving in the place of the all-too-mortal original. Jacques, however, is only dead in the first place because of a duel with the aristocrat-soldier who was Raoule’s frustrated would-be lover – which, in turn, was the product of the sophisticated sexual mind games Raoule has been instigating throughout the whole novel. In Rachilde’s Decadent universe, ingenuous, beautiful young lives are predestined to become mere roadkill beneath the jaded Decadent sensibility, so an inanimate facsimile will eventually have to do. As we have seen with Tahoser, moreover, to the Decadent mindset, the difference is often negligible anyway.

By the 2010s, this interest in the beguilingly inanimate had made its way into the Hollywood mainstream. One sees it brilliantly caught in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Rupert Sanders, 2012). The entire film strikes a more arch, aestheticized tone than would have been normal for any mainstream Hollywood star vehicle a generation ago, but all this crystallizes most profoundly at the 92-minute mark, when Snow White is at last laid under her famous sleeping-curse of living death, in a snow-shrouded forest clearing. The development has no sooner taken place than this film’s iteration of “the Prince,” named William (Sam Claflin), along with the titular Huntsman (Chris Hemsworth), rush up to her. There follows an extended moment of William weepingly cradling Snow White in his arms, and kissing her cold lips, but to no avail. After this, Snow White’s body is taken back to the last free castle of her father’s kingdom, where there ensues a great moment of public spectacle as she is paraded through the courtyard – laid out on a litter covered with a white fur over green leaves, cleaned up to a state of immaculate beauty, and her gray and dark khaki travelling clothes made as neat as possible. At the 97-minute mark, in turn, the film cuts to an overhead shot of her now lying on a ceremonial dais inside the castle, on top of more furs, surrounded by candelabra, and having been changed into a beautiful, spotless white gown. It is to her, thus – as a mute audience, but one constantly emphasized by the cinematography – that the Huntsman pours out his heart in a long, drunken monologue,

describing the sorrows of his past life, his fallen status as a widower, and the beacon of redemptive beauty and nobility that Snow White had presented to him. At the end of this, he kisses her lifeless lips and departs the chamber. As William's did not, this kiss awakens her from her curse.

This scene, like so much else in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, does honour to Gautier and the other nineteenth-century Decadents. Inanimate, purely formal, beauty has become the absolute and overriding concern, with the trappings of the traditional Hollywood heterosexual romance reduced to the last possible degree (the film ends with it ambiguous which of the two men, if either, Snow White is ultimately destined to be with). *Snow White and the Huntsman*, like *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, follows on from *Superman Returns* and *V for Vendetta* in demonstrating the degree to which Decadence has metastasized in the Hollywood blockbuster since *The Matrix*. The greater heights of aestheticism that it forces on the spectator, with its stylistic language, in turn make the Baroque spectacles offered by such films resonate all the more powerfully. Purely Baroque spectacles, such as Michael Bay's *Transformers* franchise, fail to stimulate the imagination as greatly as films such as these because they contain virtually no such self-conscious reverence for the aesthetic in general, rather than simply the spectacular in particular. Purely Decadent spectacles, in contrast, such as *The Tourist* and *The American* (Anton Corbijn, 2010), will become so aesthetically formalized and insular as to offer almost no Hollywood-style spectacle at all. The Baroque and Decadent visual aesthetics surveyed above are thus not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they interconnect in any number of aesthetically fascinating and provocative ways.

The few seconds devoted to an alien vulture creature in the opening moments of *Riddick* (David Twohy, 2013) encapsulate a combined Baroque and Decadent visual aesthetic nicely. The scavenger bird jumps from its perch – on a high jagged rock in the middle of a barren desert – to descend to where Vin Diesel's titular character lies buried beneath a pile of rock. The camera follows the digitally-rendered creature down in a vertiginous dolly shot, occasionally slowing for a slip-second to stay with it as it adjusts for buoying updrafts. Alighting on the ground, the camera immediately cuts to an extreme close-up on the scavenger's eyes, as it gazes intently and purposefully at its intended prey. Riddick, however, then bursts out from beneath the rocks, still very much alive. The camera in turn cuts to an extreme close-up of his eyes, as he gazes out upon the strange alien desert he's become marooned in. In addition to displaying Baroque verticality

and Decadent ocularity with a striking purity, this short moment also speaks to the profoundly contemporary, digital, nature of these stylistics. The alien vulture would likely have been merely a bit of grotesque ephemera, realized with puppetry, a generation ago. Today, however, it is given a brief but vivid moment of its own subjectivity in flying down toward Riddick. The supple detail of this moment, however, is not lingered over for long enough to coddle an inattentive spectator. Digital spectacle has now reached such a mature level that it proceeds at the same pace, and with the same unstated assumption, that superior live-action diegeses historically have: that some, or even much, of its detail must register subconsciously with the spectator, rather than consciously. As will be seen in the following chapter, this is a development that has aroused tremendous resistance from film theorists over the past decade and a half, but it is no less true for that.

Beyond this brief moment at the start of *Riddick*, however, the Baroque emphasis on sublimity and the Decadent emphasis on form have, in tandem, brought about fundamental changes in how Hollywood spectacle handles “action,” in its most broadly defined sense. In a 2000 book on Hong Kong cinema, Bordwell described how American viewers seem predisposed to think of screen action in terms of “realistic messiness” and “awkwardness and fatigue” in contrast to the acrobatic, almost balletic, precision of Hong Kong action (Bordwell 2000, 218-220). In doing so, however, he touched on a deeper truth about Hollywood genre spectacle, for most of its history: its basically pugilistic rejection of aesthetics. Hollywood action-spectacle films have, historically – from the 1990s back – been constructed along “meat-and-potatoes” aesthetic lines of workmanlike shot/counter-shot editing, tautly percussive musical scoring, and choreography that, as per Bordwell, emphasizes the unglamorously physical and supposedly “realistic.” Grandiosely intricate camera moves, such as those in *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990), *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992), or most anything by Brian De Palma, were seemingly considered more appropriate to that sort of auteur-ishly aestheticized films than straight-up genre spectacle. It is this broad, basic aesthetic predilection, however, that has changed most markedly in the new millennium. The synthesis of Baroque and Decadent aesthetics at work in cinematic spectacle of today operates by a fundamentally different logic than this aesthetic of pugilism, and would produce a considerable shift in the look and feel of Hollywood films in little more than a decade.

If there could be said to be a single moment in the 2000s which most vividly encapsulated the extent to which Baroque and Decadent aesthetics were drawing together, it might be mid-way

through the first act of Sam Raimi's 2004 film *Spider-Man 2*. It is a sequence which, on paper, might seem like entirely standard action genre fare: Peter Parker is ingenuously on his way to Mary Jane Watson's play, when a car chase and firefight between some generic criminals and a fleet of police cruisers catches his attention. Swiftly changing into Spider-Man to intervene, he successfully captures the crooks and saves some endangered bystanders, but at the cost of being too late to make the play's opening curtain. Thus described, the sequence may sound formulaic, but Raimi's execution of it in the final film demonstrates how much Baroque and Decadent aesthetics had gained at the expense of traditional Hollywood assumptions about spectacle.

This sequence, even though it deals with a car chase and gunfight, has substantially drained any adrenaline-pumping aspect from it, and turned Spider-Man's intervention into a weightless and acrobatic affair. He catches up with the crooks' speeding convertible by swooping elegantly through the narrow gap between a cargo truck's container and cab, and alighting gracefully on the car's trunk. He then neutralizes the shotgun-wielding crooks not by any pugilistic violence, but by deftly firing tendrils of web at each of their weapons. Looping the two tendrils together and casting them up over a passing streetlight, he causes the crooks to be lifted out of their seats, and suspended bobbing like rag-dolls in mid-air. Previously to this, he has also stopped a police cruiser from caroming out of control and crushing a number of pedestrians on the sidewalk. The moment had seemed to begin in a familiar action-film register of chaotic intensity, with the car smashing over a line of parked vehicles and looming in mid-air over people, who are violently shrieking and scrambling to get away... only for this to abruptly be replaced with stasis, the cruiser seeming to stop and hover in mid-air. A slight camera track reveals the web Spider-Man has rapidly spun into place – invisible previously, but its delicate strands now catching the light. Again, frenetic speed gives way to uncanny stasis; the famous bumptious energy of Hollywood action reaches its Late Decadent phase.

This is thematically rhymed with the cut-away to Mary Jane's play, which is none other than Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) – one of the penultimate landmarks of nineteenth-century Decadence. *Spider-Man 2* marked a dual Baroque and Decadent raid on the earnest action-hero conventions of superheroics which comports perfectly with Wilde's banishing of traditional morality and gender roles from his play's universe, and his reduction of everything to terms of wit and formal elegance. Indeed, this Baroque/Decadent aesthetic of anti-pugilism reaches a hilariously complete apotheosis in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010). The film's third act

contains a sequence where Natasha Romanov, a.k.a. Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) and Happy Hogan, Tony Stark's loyal assistant (played by director Jon Favreau himself), have to fight their way into the villain's headquarters. Hogan – a heavysset, powerfully-built, middle-aged man – initially presumes that the imminent violence will be his responsibility rather than Natasha's, lightweight young woman that she is. Barging into the building ahead of her, he promptly finds himself in fisticuffs with a security guard within a few paces of the door – and remains there for the rest of the roughly ninety-second sequence, while Natasha, going into Black Widow mode, proceeds to seemingly effortlessly demolish eleven men as she penetrates deep inside the building.

The sheer scope of the contrast here – along the lines of reluctant awkwardness vs. balletic precision that Bordwell described – is very self-consciously emphasized and exaggerated. Hogan and the first security guard essentially just exchange telegraphed punches to each other's heads and bodies, along the same axis of action, totally held down by their own weight, with their centre of gravity in the soles of their feet, and their feet covering the same small space of ground over and over again. Black Widow, on the other hand, is constantly moving forward and, without breaking her momentum, dropping into kneeling slides, or vaulting up into flips or leaps. All of these carry her past or around other security guards, whom she dextrously incapacitates in mid-motion with a combination of martial arts expertise and hi-tech gadgetry, both of which benefit from her preternaturally exact reflexes. Unlike Hogan, she has no fixed centre of gravity whatsoever, spending at least a split-second throughout the sequence oriented in virtually every low, high, horizontal, diagonal, or upside-down position possible, and at the end of it all not seeming the slightest bit ruffled or sweaty. Again, the film makes an impish visual contrast with Hogan here who, by the end of the sequence, has finally succeeded – partially by dint of fighting dirty and biting – in subduing the first security guard with a left and right to the body, then a finishing uppercut with his right. Exhausted and visibly sweaty, he proudly declares “I got him!” before looking on and seeing the corridor full of incapacitated guards Black Widow has left in her wake. A final reaction shot has him looking visibly deflated.

What this sequence from *Iron Man 2* most visibly demonstrates is that the new aesthetic of kinesis which was still cohering in the early 2000s had, by the dawn of the 2010s, become more or less fully worked-out and self-conscious. The Decadent concern with form – with aestheticized values of beauty, grace, and precision which have not historically been aligned with

pugilistic action spectacle – have formed an aesthetic symbiosis with Baroque values of verticality and profusion to create a new *lingua franca* of visual spectacle in Hollywood. If any were used, DVFX are not readily appreciable in this sequence with Hogan and Black Widow, but the sequence’s aesthetic fits perfectly organically into the larger film as a whole, with its epic digital set pieces of Iron Man swooping low across cityscapes, dogfighting with numerous hostile drones. Beyond these matters of (super)heroic action and pugilism, however, lies the question of Baroque and Decadent visual aesthetics’ wider implications. Crafting a Baroque-Decadent synthesis which allows for a sense of sublime rapture alongside a sense of jaded aestheticism is not impossible; however it does represent an indubitably complex aesthetic balancing act. The innocence of shots of “looking up” at the sublime – such as those in Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial* (1982) – must be daemonized, and a graphic logic of knowing ocular mastery created, but the grand wonderment of the sublime not be subsumed completely. A key sequence in Ridley Scott’s *Prometheus* (2012) is exemplary in this regard. The android David – played with indescribable Decadent reserve and *savoir faire* by Michael Fassbender – enters the bridge of an alien ship: a large circular platform in the centre of spherical chamber, which is an exact replica of the one which the crew of the *Nostramo* discovered in Scott’s original 1979 film. Whereas that bridge was simply a dead, dark ruin, however, DVFX have now enabled the environment to be brought to life far more fully. David presses some buttons next to a command chair, which activates the white holographic playback of some manner of ship’s log, badly pixelated and distorted with centuries of age. He sees a holographic record of the captain in the command chair, before the main circular platform of the bridge, activating some further green holographic interfaces – which are still sharp in their resolution – and these, in turn, seem to activate others. Cut-backs reveal David gazing on all this in rapt fascination. Finally, the centre of the circular platform abruptly lights up brilliant blue-white light, displaying a three-dimensional, spherical holographic star map. In another second, the entire spherical bridge is filled with such blue-white cartography. David steps forward, inside the main map-sphere, as the complex display begins to rotate. The long shot of this is already sublime in the extreme, but becomes even more so when it cuts in to a medium shot of David, seemingly unsteady on his feet with intellectual wonderment as he gazes up at this spectacle – turning this way and that with his arms held up horizontally. He notices one holographic sphere in particular and, reaching up, plucks it down from its hovering position above him. He gazes

profoundly at it, and a cut-in reveals what the graphic logic of the scene has already suggested: it is Earth. We see the continent of Africa glowing in brilliant blue and white light before the holo-sphere ascends from David's grasp and resumes its original place in the map display. A cut-out to an extreme long shot shows David continuing to luxuriate in the awe-inspiring spectacle of this holo-map, but it then abruptly vanishes. A cut to a tracking shot around the edge of the circular platform, however, reveals that the holo-sphere of Earth still exists for a few seconds more before fading away. Another cut to his face shows David again gazing profoundly out of frame, but now his sublime awe is leavened with fearful trepidation.

The Baroque verticality, profusion, and sublimity of the holographic map are immediately self-evident; as is the Baroque conceptual expansiveness of entire galaxies being mapped out before one. The sequence's colour palette is significant, however. In pure Baroque aesthetics, both in the seventeenth century and in cinema today, these values usually evoke – and are couched in – warm to hot colours such as red, orange, and yellow. This makes for a palette of crimson, gold, coral, etc. which will lend a warmth to any black in the frame. This sequence in *Prometheus*, however, is wholly defined by blue and white, creating an ultimate effect of cold cyan. The Baroque style is still present, but the heat and vigour traditionally associated with it has been coldly, Decadently, muted. Furthermore, it is essential to appreciating this scene from *Prometheus* to recall that David is an android. Indeed, as a film with deep religious themes, *Prometheus* has repeatedly emphasized that David is a being created by man in his own image, and “has no soul.” To see this sequence, thus – in which David emphatically shows more soul than any of the film's other characters, as the knowledge of the vastness of the cosmos unfolds before his eyes – is to glean the suggestion that the possession of a soul is unnecessary for the experience of intellectual and aesthetic sublimity. This, in turn, is an entirely Decadent idea, as is David's relative dazed passivity before all that he sees. Decadent visual aesthetics, emphasizing ocular repose – with aesthetic appreciation of environment and form privileged over action – are in fact highly conducive to the sublime awe of Baroque aesthetics. If looking is made into an action in itself, and characters are neither required nor expected to make any physical engagement with what is before them, then the scale of the Baroque spectacles they behold can be increased exponentially. As Greg Tuck remarked, magnitude can be increased out of all proportion to “our lived scale of human existence,” since – as with the Marquis de la Hogue's “on the threshold” mindset – Decadence does not much value concerted human activity. Gareth

Edwards's *Godzilla* is again relevant here, insofar as its human protagonist, Ford Brody (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), has absolutely no effect whatsoever on the 200-metre titular star. He is the film's "hero" only insofar as he provides a narrative figure of identification, not because he influences events.

The point is demonstrated even more vividly when this Baroque/Decadent anti-pugilist aesthetic is showcased at the conclusion of *The A-Team* (Joe Carnahan, 2010). Unlike such representative-but-superior Hollywood blockbusters as *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* – which have just enough hints of drama and complexity for critics to delude themselves that they're watching something else – *The A-Team* never remotely pretends to be anything other than the crude spectacle-dump, aimed at teenage boys, which it is. As such, it is not merely representative, but representative-but-inferior. As such, then, it's doubly significant that the aesthetics of anti-pugilism have penetrated even here. The film's climactic action sequence takes place at a port in Frankfurt, and involves a lot of masculinized business with motorcycles and rocket-propelled grenades, all of which is done in a very pugilistic style of loud bangs and intense-but-routine cuts-on-action. In the sequence's biggest "money shot," however, all this stops, and we instead see one of the heroes dashing across the top of a mountain of cargo containers, which are exploding beneath him in a pyrotechnics display of truly Baroque-sublime proportions. Like so much of the film before it, plausibility is not really at issue here. The trope of impossibly "outrunning explosions" has been an action-movie staple for years, but here it has been amplified to such an extent that this pier seems to be reliving the great Halifax Explosion of 1917. These shots are framed from extreme long distance, and are filmed in the kind of extreme slow-motion familiar from Decadent aesthetics. We see the cargo containers being buffeted into the air like Tupperware containers as the explosions slowly billow into their full violence, while our hero's flight away from their fury proceeds at an equally sedate pace. The laws of action-movie pugilism have momentarily been suspended, and the spectator put in the position of simply aesthetically appreciating, on the one hand, the absurd scale of the immolating apocalypse, and on the other, the sheer mannered attention to form with which such a familiar action-movie trope has been staged here. Baroque and Decadent synthesize again even at the most degraded level of modern blockbuster spectacle.

All of the above analysis has been about the Baroque and Decadent as stylistic tendencies in current cinematic spectacle – discernible in certain modes of composition, staging, and editing.

These constitute the formal preconditions – an aesthetic-conceptual apparatus, in short – necessary to appreciate the narrative and thematic Baroque and Decadent at work in cinema today. The impetus of the original seventeenth-century Baroque – to astound and overawe more than to humanize – and the original nineteenth-century Decadent – to crystallize the aesthetic experience above all else – find vivid reflection in the unresolved contradictions of Hollywood’s spectacular narratives today. These narrative contradictions will be discussed in detail in a subsequent chapter, but for now it is sufficient to suggest that Baroque and Decadent narratives represent a style of filmmaking which draws fully upon the liberation of the imagination wrought by DVFX, and anoint themselves with the freedom to realize any vision, however dissociated from the “reality” of lived daily experience. Films such as these, it will be seen, paradoxically normalize the “beyond.”

Before this narrative aesthetic of normalizing the imaginative “beyond” can be inquired into, however, it is first necessary to engage with and critique some of the obfuscations regarding digitally-liberated spectacular filmmaking thrown up by theorists deeply imbricated in (post)modernist paradigms. As will be seen throughout the next chapter, many modernist-inclined theorists are so ideologically committed to the idea that a film must foreground its technique – self-referentially announce its own act of showing, and the means by which it performs it – that the actual content of what is being shown recedes into insignificance. All concern with the imaginative “beyond” becomes impossible due to the obsessive emphasis upon what is immediately “before” one, namely the processes of cinematic illusion, which arouse ideological anxiety in the modernist sensibility. It will also be seen in the next chapter that, due to the pervasive influence of postmodern ideas, the very idea of treating cinema as a distinct object of inquiry has been dismissed by some theorists. Generalities about multimedia sensory experiences and multi-platform pop cultural spectacle have been seized upon by some postmodernist-inclined writers to assert that treating narrative film as a discreet medium of aesthetic expression is outmoded and obsolete. Since many DVFX-heavy blockbusters are accompanied by novelizations, graphic novelizations, tie-in music videos, tie-in theme park attractions, spin-off TV shows, etc. – this line of thought goes – shouldn’t such blockbuster films be considered diffuse constellations of meaning rather than realist texts in the classical-realist novelistic mode? Some theorists, it will be seen, even go so far as to say that cinema itself is less cinematic than some other moving image experiences, such as ride films, simulator theatres, or

other such “scripted spaces.” What is lost in all this, however, is any concern whatsoever with cinema’s narrative-imaginative aspect. Spectacular cinematic story-worlds appeal to the imagination, and bear meanings beyond their initial surface visual display – provoking the spectator to reflect on wider dramatic and moral implications, and the possibilities of other, different worlds and modes of being. The various media Apocrypha which may accompany such films, however, mostly do not. As a rule, they simply connote what they signify, and no more. These two theoretical tendencies – the modernist censoring of the imaginative “beyond;” and the postmodernist dismissal of the cinematic imagination – are fundamentally inimical to the Baroque and Decadent aesthetic logics which increasingly govern the workings of Hollywood spectacle today, and as a result, they are singularly ill-equipped to contribute to Cinema Studies’ understanding of its subject. The following chapter, in subjecting them to more substantive critique, aims to show exactly how and why.

### Chapter Three – Theorizing unto Oblivion: (Post)modernist Resistances to Narrative, Spectacle, and Cinema

The Baroque and Decadent visual aesthetics traced in the previous chapter – the dual idiom which, as Camille Paglia put it, “makes hostile claims on the viewer” in the service of telling “big lies” – are part of a cinematic language of spectacular illusionism. Paglia’s terms might sound negative in their connotation but, as we have seen, the Baroque and Decadent synthesis of spectacle at work in cinema today is a complex and vital mode of communication – one that draws upon long-standing aesthetic traditions in the Western canon. In his 2010 book *What Cinema Is!*, thus, Dudley Andrew makes an assertion that, in this spirit, I would hasten to correct. He declares that our current moment in film history is marked by “a cinema of manipulation” which “rework[s] the world until it conforms not only to our conditions of viewing but to our convenience and pleasure” – as opposed to what he calls the Bazin-ian “*Cahiers* line” of thought in filmmaking, which “asks us to accommodate our vision to the conditions of visibility given by the world” (Andrew 2010, 42). The problem here, however, is that the “hostile claims” made on the spectator by Baroque and Decadent visual aesthetics do indeed ask – nay demand, require – of their spectator that s/he accommodate his/her vision to the terms of these films’ hyperbolic cinematic diegeses. Andrew is, essentially, proffering a new iteration of the critical and theoretical standby that a mainstream entertainment cannot do other than cosset and reassure the uncultivated eye and sensibility, and that it is only against more self-consciously difficult modernist or avant-gardist cinematic aesthetics that a sharper visual acumen may be developed. Such a stance is unlikely to survive a trip to the contemporary multiplex. When, as will be seen below, many film theorists declare the spectacles of contemporary blockbuster spectacles to be too beguilingly photorealistic to be made sense of as art – and therefore conclude that they must constitute a fundamental change in the nature of the medium, or some deeper ideological chicanery at work – they are in fact demonstrating the profound limitations of Andrew’s assertions about the *Cahiers* line.

Richard Allen once observed that “the idea of illusion has played a central part in sustaining the negative characterization of mass culture against high art,” a conflict that film theory has often sought to recast as “an opposition between an ideological mass culture and an emancipatory modernism.” Visual effects, this line of thought goes, create illusions, and cinema’s

provision of illusions has long been seen as ideologically suspect (qtd. in Prince 2012, 221). The idea of an “emancipatory modernism,” as we have seen, does indeed have a discernible history in Cinema Studies. At its most fundamental, it could be seen as speaking to a deep-seated fear and hostility towards representation – the persistent issue of iconoclasm that lies deep in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The fetishism of the special/visual effects image which will be seen in so much of what follows is, to a great degree, appreciable as a resistance, on theorists’ part, to the pagan naturalization of illusionism which so many films offer. Within the context of today’s aesthetic horizon of aestheticized Baroque and Decadent spectacle, such a resistance is, I will seek to show, largely misguided and beside the point. Its pervasive influence, however, is not in doubt.

In a 1985 essay on the workings of cinematic spectacle, Alfred J. La Valley declared that:

We see something we know cannot happen, we know it is a lie and a trick, but we delight in the illusion, even giving it some credence – certainly within the narrative. But finally, we give as much or more wonder to the machine which can produce this illusion and of which we are highly conscious. (La Valley 1985, 147)

We “transfer our wonder ultimately to the machine,” La Valley continues, reminding us that “the apparatus always makes the imaginary seem real on some deep level. Indeed, the illusion of realism in film is hard to dislodge” (La Valley 1985, 147). And yet, this tradition in film theory goes, dislodged such illusions must be, because otherwise modernist-minded theorists can see no value in them. These words were published in 1985, and there remain many film and cultural theorists who will still swear to their fundamental rightness. This notion of cinematic special effects as illusions which are *supposed* to be noticed – what Andrew Darley calls “the contradiction – ever present in special effects – between knowing one is being tricked and still submitting to the illusory effect” – holds a pervasive fetish value in Cinema Studies today (Darley 2000, 113). In using this term, I follow Warren Buckland, who observed that many “critics and theorists of contemporary Hollywood ... are fetishizing digital special effects” – divorcing them from their narrative project of “articulation of a possible world” in order to shoehorn them into a paradigm where digital spectacle is mere presentational ephemera in the cinema of attractions mould (Buckland 1999, 178). Such fetishism, in turn, can readily be construed as a defence against having to acknowledge cinema’s narrative capacities for imaginative evocation beyond what actually appears onscreen – its implicit rebuke to film

theory's modernist and postmodernist emphases upon the filmmaking apparatus and the coded, arbitrary nature of representation.

The families of discourses which make up academic modernism and postmodernism are, of course, very different, but one of the constitutive elements they tend to share is an ideologically-driven hostility toward the integrity, and singularity, of classical visual and narrative cinematic diegeses. The rationales offered for this may be different – underlain by aesthetic or theoretical concerns, as the case may be; and taking a more or less punitive or censorious line on cinematic spectacle in general – but the result is generally the same: an insistence upon a theory of spectatorship and reception which stresses the need to refuse the mentality of “sit back and show me a good time” that Dyer posited, and denies that the pleasures of cinema are especially distinctive ones. Furthermore, in this spirit, the constructed nature of a film's illusionism must always be kept in mind, along with the fact that no film is ever *sui generis*, or produced without influence from other texts or influences. While a certain basic validity for these interpretive parameters is not in doubt, critical discourses which emphasize them to the virtual exclusion of other formal or stylistic values rapidly take on the character of a distinctive ideology. Accordingly, what follows will use the neologism “(post)modern” to denote instances when these critical tendencies are in operation to such a degree that their relative modernist or postmodernist ontology seems barely relevant, relative to the depth of ideological feeling that unifies them. This (post)modern attitude towards cinematic spectacle can be inferred from Peter Wollen's declaration, in the introduction to a 1995 anthology, that:

Display, however, when its flow is arrested, can still have a revelatory power, provided it is seen, not in terms of the image, but in terms of the symptom. In fact, it is only through display that truth is revealed – not, of course, directly, but obliquely and *en travesti*. It is through modes of display that regimes of all sorts reveal the truths they mean to conceal. (Wollen 1995, 9-10)

In this, one reads a refusal to concede that the “spell” of cinema, or indeed visual address of any kind, has anything of value to reveal on its own terms. Again, one sees the received assumption that the spell must be “broken,” by “its flow” being “arrested,” at which point it will be possible for the spectator to recollect their wits and bring their critical faculties to bear. This, on the one hand, suggests that the putative average spectator is a wholly guileless cipher – unable to maintain any intellectual autonomy while a diegesis of visual spectacle unfolds before their eyes. And on the other hand, it exhorts a striking paranoia, censoriousness, and incuriosity upon this

putative spectator: the idea that one should never view an image as an image, but always as some manner of coded symptom, which has been ideologically disguised. Under a mindset such as Wollen suggests, the cultural context at work is always to be considered a hostile one, in which some malign ideology is invariably being concealed, the better to be propagated subliminally. It will immediately be seen that, to quote historian Jon Solomon, “This is no way to watch a movie” (Solomon 2007, 86).

One of the most common symptoms of this hostility, in film theory, towards spectacle is a lack of interest in the actual narrative substance of the films at issue. Since, as per Wollen, cinematic illusion is to be understood only in disempowering terms of “display,” and Debord-ian “spectacle,” such discourses expend little thought over the narratives these malign displays are situated in. In his 1995 essay “The Artificial Infinite: On Special Effects and the Sublime,” for example, Scott Bukatman declares that:

The stock scripts and relatively wooden performances of science fiction cinema shouldn’t distract one from the articulations of meaning located in the *mise-en-scène* as well as the state-of-the-art technological spectacle on display. (Bukatman 1995, 256)

And likewise, in his 1998 essay “Zooming Out: The End of Offscreen Space,” he declares that:

...although the narratives are conservative, and they almost always are, the delirious technological excesses of these films and their spectacular effects may ‘speak’ some other meaning entirely. Often, the most significant ‘meanings’ of science fiction films are found in their visual organization and their emphasis on human perception – this is the importance of special effects. (Bukatman 1998, 254)

In addition to which, he declares that:

To me, this reduction, combined with the emphasis on effects-centered films, speaks to an anxiety about the very status of narrative as an explanatory system. Narrative implies history, depth, purpose. So, while Hollywood cinema continued to revel in the sensational, sensual realm of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic effects, the devaluation of narrative was hidden within a desperate overvaluation of overly explicit storytelling; a denial of its own undeniable supersession. (Bukatman 1998, 265)

In statements such as these, Bukatman seemingly regards narrative drama as merely a distraction from the supposedly more salient aspects of cinematic address. In doing so, moreover – dismissively reducing “science fiction cinema” to “stock scripts” and “wooden performances” – he awards himself a rhetorical justification for not making even a pretense at engaging with his supposed subject. Likewise, when he continues to make the very significant assertions that most science fiction narratives remain “unflaggingly conservative in [their] language and

iconography,” and “often [speak] to militaristic male fantasies” of “sexuality and power” and “the mythology of the frontier,” and furthermore offer a basic function of “recontainments and reassurances,” he does not offer any substantiation or examples (Bukatman 1995, 281, 287-88). His favoured test cases – which include *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Robert Wise, 1979) – are discussed solely in terms of Douglas Trumbull’s special effects sequences, with the narrative situation of these sequences treated as a matter of no importance. Bukatman’s emphasis upon spectacle and the sublime certainly makes his work relevant to discussions of the cinematic Baroque, but the insistence upon swerving away from one of cinema’s best-known workings in mainstream practice – the imaginative conjuring of impressive narrative story-worlds – means that it cannot be an entirely viable template for understanding cinematic spectacle.

Andrew Darley, in his 2000 book *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*, offers a somewhat more intriguing variation on this mindset than Bukatman’s blanket characterization of spectacular Hollywood narratives as almost invariably “conservative.” Darley, having invoked Kristin Thompson’s definition of cinematic excess, goes on to suggest that the increasing omnipresence of DVFX in Hollywood films of the late 1990s might signal “the emergence and promotion of new developments in mass entertainment forms” – new developments that might be bringing about shifts in how movies were both made and understood, insofar as they could be said to be “displacing traditional concentration on narrative form and understanding” (Darley 2000, 114). He continued that:

The growth of spectacle, and the fascination with image as image, in the sense both of visual excitation and technological density (artifice), is one indication that attention to formal facets – means and pure perceptual play – are finding a place within mass entertainment forms. One might then wonder – strange though this may seem – whether popular films such as the ones under discussion here, thereby share something in common with experimental or avant-gardist films that also downplay or even oppose narrative. (Darley 2000, 114)

Here, however, as with Bukatman, Darley’s writing is problematic because of his apparent inability or unwillingness to credit the story-world dramas of DVFX-heavy blockbusters with any legitimate narrative interest. The imaginative showing which films such as *Terminator 2*, *The Mask* (Chuck Russell, 1994), *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994), *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994), *Independence Day*, *Titanic*, or *Starship Troopers* – his main examples – undertake is of no apparent interest to him, and therefore he can only see their potential importance as downplaying,

or even opposing, narrative; and thus bringing an avant-gardist reading protocol to mainstream audiences (Darley 2000, 103). Darley is not unique in this, however. This preference for “experimental or avant-gardist films” is a common one within academic Cinema Studies today, and provides an intellectual context for paradigms such as Bukatman’s and Darley’s, which view narrative – or the concern with *what* is being shown – as somehow a limiting, constraining imposition, distracting from the supposedly more salient aspects of cinematic address – such as the fact *that* illusionistic showing is taking place, according to certain formal and stylistic patterns and not others. Thus, for theorists who think largely in terms of non-narrative experimental or avant-garde films – whose chief concern, in effect, is to recall to spectators’ minds the *fact* of illusionistic showing, rather than the content, import, implications, or evocations of the show – there is often an insuperable language barrier when addressing the products of the Hollywood mainstream; one where digitally-conjured spectacles are not accorded aesthetic legitimacy unless they can be interpreted as existing in an adversarial, subversive relationship to narrative diegeses. There have been voices who have noticed the problematics in all this, of course. Speaking to the issue, Nicholas Mirzoeff declares that “Reality exists, but has the viewer’s desire superimposed over it,” such that we “casually accept film and photography as ‘realistic,’ while being fully aware of their conventionality” (Mirzoeff 1999, 163). Even as we attentively scan the constructed image on screen for some detail of staging, he continues, the search “does not disrupt the film’s illusion but rather is part of our active suspension of disbelief. A key part of everyday looking consists in this ability to keep two incompatible approaches in play at once” (Mirzoeff 1999, 163). Again, however, this is a conclusion which many theorists have resisted.

The denial of the narrative aspect of today’s Baroque and Decadent blockbusters – in favour of emphasis of the mere *fact* of illusionistic visual display or address – grows more untenable every year, however, as DVFX in cinema become more and more naturalized and taken-for-granted. As will be seen below, therefore, a certain amount of film theory over the past decade-and-a-half has, however circuitously, made its way back around to noting and discussing some of the Baroque and Decadent trends traced in the previous chapter. It is to this body of work, and its various modernist and postmodernist premises and assumptions, that we now turn.

In his 1993 survey *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Martin Jay speaks of “the postmodernist rediscovery of the baroque,” thus

aligning the Baroque with an intellectual tradition notoriously resistant to notions of historical narrative and questions of deep aesthetic affect, and occasionally given to politicization in presentist terms (Jay 1993, 428). This rediscovery of the Baroque in postmodern terms, however, would take definite hold in Cinema Studies. Angela Ndaljian's book *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Sean Cubitt's *The Cinema Effect*, and Norman M. Klein's *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* – all published in 2004 – would collectively, and vividly, demonstrate these postmodern problematics.

Angela Ndaljian's *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* – the culmination of a series of essays and conference papers over the previous half decade – is the most accessible of the three books at issue. Furthermore, hers is the most straightforward in its efforts to demonstrate literal, empirical affinities between seventeenth-century Baroque art and cinematic spectacle of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Like Kenneth Clark before her, she does not use the term as a mere rhetorical flourish. Her book, however, is also marked by the postmodern tendency towards refusing all aesthetic and epistemological categorizations and fixities. The idea that any art work, or form, can in any way be discrete or coherent within itself is inadmissible within Ndaljian's paradigm, with the result that her theorizing of cinema and Baroque sculpture and painting is oriented toward demonstrating the idea that all art forms and media figurations are interconnected; and thus, implicitly, that ascribing deep affect to any one work of a single form is erroneous. Although Ndaljian concedes that *Jurassic Park* “can be experienced and interpreted” without also playing the Sony PlayStation game of it, or going on “The Jurassic Park” ride in Orlando's Universal Studios, “much can be lost by doing so, for these narratives belong to multiple networks of parallel stories that are all intimately interwoven. Each ‘tale’ remains a fragment of a complex and expanding whole” (Ndaljian 2004, 2). This ultimately impedes her engagement with modern cinematic spectacle, even as her contributions to the discourse on the cinematic Baroque are very real.

Discussing Pietro da Cortona's ceiling painting *The Glorification of Urban VIII* in the Palazzo Barberini, for instance, Ndaljian affirms that it “overwhelms the spectator with the scope and dimensions of its spectacle and iconographic program” (Ndaljian 2004, 84). Such characterizations solidly demonstrate the affinity between Baroque art and contemporary Hollywood spectacle. Soon, however, Ndaljian is asserting that:

Cortona's self-conscious allusion to the Farnese Ceiling reveals two integral features of the baroque: a self-reflexive attitude to stretching the limits of the border or rules that

previously constituted the illusionistic painting tradition, and virtuosity. (Ndalianis 2004, 91-92)

She continues that “the work has no obvious beginnings and endings; instead, it is possible to enter the work at any of its multiple ‘narrative’ points,” and that “once ‘inside,’ the viewer travels along paths that provide multiple choices” – aesthetic facets which she refers to “polycentrism” and “seriality” (Ndalianis 2004, 84). “Despite the centrality of the Divine Providence scene,” she continues, “the combinations and choices of paths that lead to and from the centre are limitless, and any singularly linear direction implied by one-directional reading is denied” (Ndalianis 2004, 86). This supposed impossibility of assigning any coherently linear understanding to a polycentric and serial text – such as the Cortona ceiling – however, will become Ndalianis’s symptomatic theoretical justification for dismissing concern with narrative in general, even in works of Baroque cinema where it seems to remain very much discernible.

In theorizing the Baroque aesthetic at work in cinema today, Ndalianis speaks of an “architecture of vision” structured around principles of “the infinite” and “the labyrinth” (Ndalianis 2003, 362). In practice, she finds these in digitally-conjured images from the early moments of two science fiction films from 1997: Robert Zemeckis’s *Contact* and Paul W.S. Anderson’s *Event Horizon*. Of the former, she declares that:

The opening scene of *Contact* (Zemeckis, 1997) literally (at least in visual terms) makes the spectator become “lost in space.” Computer effects create the illusion of the longest zoom-out shot in the history of cinema as the camera appears to travel ever outwards through infinite space, continually relocating its center, from planet to planet, solar system to solar system. We are confronted by an infinite vision, one that ultimately deceives us as it shifts from outer space to inner space – while placing equal emphasis on the infinite. (Ndalianis 2003, 362)

Of the latter, meanwhile, she declares that:

*Event Horizon* (Anderson, 1997) again plunges the audience’s vision into an infinite zoom-out. In one sequence, the camera (or the computer effect mimicking a camera motion) centers on the view of a figure through a window. The figure appears to be hanging upside down but, as the camera pulls out it also rotates and recenters the spectator’s view to one that encompasses a larger view of a space station which includes further figures seen through windows situated at different angles to the original figure. Again, the camera zooms out and, as it rotates, provides an ever longer shot of the station. So it continues, until this dizzying ‘architecture of vision’ reveals the massive polycentric and labyrinthine structure that is the space station, which is itself situated within a boundless space. All the while, the spectator’s vision becomes the locus for multi-centered viewpoints. (Ndalianis 2003, 362)

There is, Ndalianis says, “a neo-baroque logic” that “pervades both scenes” – one that “emphasizes kinetic motion,” and indeed both these sequences discernibly display the Baroque aesthetics of verticality, profusion (Ndalianis 2003, 362). Ndalianis immediately continues, however, that these two virtuoso digital zooms represent “the frame illusionistically collaps[ing],” whereby:

...traditional perspective, which relies on the frame and a static viewpoint also collapses. An illusion of infinity itself is placed before the spectator and an invitation is extended to engage with the spectacle in spatially and architecturally disorienting terms. (Ndalianis 2003, 362-63)

As with a great deal of (post)modernist theory, one sees, in rhetoric such as this, the fact of cinema as a narrative, character, and theme-driven medium used as a great stalking horse. When measured against the actual phenomenological experience of watching a film – either in the late 1990s or today – Ndalianis’s references to the “collapse of the frame” and the static viewpoint, as well as her impulse to “engage with the spectacle in spatially and architecturally disorienting terms” seem more prescriptive than descriptive. She makes no acknowledgment of the fact that the two spectacle shots which she cites from *Contact* and *Event Horizon* are simply brief visual moments in much longer feature films – running 150 minutes and 96 minutes, respectively – nor the all-important fact that they were both placed at the very beginning of the film to serve a narrative-affective purpose of establishing character, rather than inviting the spectator to understand the frame as disorientingly collapsing.

The “ultimate deception” which Ndalianis attributes to the opening image in *Contact* – the “shift from outer space to inner space” – takes the form of the frame, having finally passed beyond the limits of the known universe, continuing to zoom out from the eye of the film’s heroine, Eleanor Arroway, here played as a 12-year old child by Jena Malone. The blackness of infinite space smoothly digitally transitions to the blackness of Ellie’s pupil, and the image creates a spectacularly unforgettable character note, indicating the boundless range of curiosity and intellectual ambition her character will exhibit throughout the rest of the film, when played as an adult by Jodie Foster. Likewise, “the figure” she refers to in the early image from *Event Horizon* is the figure of Sam Neil’s character, Dr. William Weir. Awakening from a nightmare, he – and by proxy, the spectator – is disconcerted and apparently unsure of his reality. The film then proceeds to establish this for the spectator, with its spectacular digitally-enabled pull-out, showing that Weir’s reality – of living and working on an orbiting space station whose artificial

gravity makes up and down arbitrary – is as baroquely spectacular as any dream. Ndalians, however, offers no acknowledgment of these facts.

Ndalians's positing of *Contact* and *Event Horizon* as exemplars of a new Baroque logic of spectacle, however, was ultimately prescient in a way she could not have foreseen. As we have seen, the 1990s were an epoch in which genuinely digital-liberated spectacle was in its relative infancy in Hollywood. Kristen Whissel's digitally-enabled "verticality" had yet to come to full fruition, and there was a seeming lingering humanist reticence – on filmmakers' part – about narratively normalizing a wholly digital discourse. It was not coincidental that both *Contact* and *Event Horizon*, after the initial digital spectacles of their opening pull-out shots, settled back into a more classically traditional humanist idiom for the rest of their running time. In *Contact*, this was in the service of a character drama that would eventually culminate with some more philosophically profound, less digitally showy, visual spectacles at its climax; while in *Event Horizon*, it took the exploitation-movie form of appropriating the space-travellers-as-average-Joes device from *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), and telling a routine mad-scientist/haunted-house story set on a ghost (space)ship. The filmmakers behind these films, however, would be in the front rank of directors who would keep pace with the steadily-expanding Baroque capacities of DVFX over the 2000s. In Zemeckis's case, this would take the form of his three increasingly elaborate mo-cap films *The Polar Express* (2004), *Beowulf* (2007), and *A Christmas Carol* (2009); with Anderson, it would be most traceable in the stylistic evolution of the *Resident Evil* franchise, from the 2002 original across its sequels in 2004, 2007, 2010, and 2012. All of these films vividly demonstrate the Baroque cinematic stylistics of digitally-liberated verticality, profusion, and sublimity which have so dramatically expanded the *lingua franca* of cinematic spectacle.

Ultimately, however, Ndalians's paradigm of Baroque spectacle is one which does not value cinema on these terms. As a postmodern project, her work would see cinema abolished as a discreet medium, in favour of some more generalized form of media address. In an earlier iteration of her observations, she would frankly declare that:

The classical paradigm associated with pre-'60's Hollywood cinema, and its associations with narrativity and the "passive" spectator (a model that persists to this day in film theory), no longer seems viable given new entertainment experiences concerned with spectacle, multimedia formations, and active audience address and participation. Spectacle engulfs the audience in invasive, spatial, and theatrical terms, producing a

participatory, thrilling experience that makes our very being quiver with exhilaration. (Ndalianis, 2000b).

In this justifying this outlook, however, her invocation of seventeenth-century Baroque art is a selective and limited one. She makes no acknowledgment of the degree to which traditional canvass painting – in all its affinities with the modern cinema screen frame – figured as a Baroque form, and her description of the polycentral and serial significance of Baroque ceilings, such as Cortona’s *Glorification of Urban VIII*, may ultimately be as much prescriptive and descriptive. All this is most apparent when one turns to her invocation of Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. She asserts that it “merges a variety of media” into a composition “that perceptually spills into the church space” (Ndalianis 2004, 216). Different materials “fold fluidly into each other,” she declares, creating a “polycentric” effect that highlights “the movement between media” (Ndalianis 2004, 216). Ndalianis endeavours to present the work as one whose ultimate effect, and affect, is derived from “shift[s] between media forms” rather than the privileging of any one – a work in which “the viewpoint leaps from medium to medium” via a polycentric logic (Ndalianis 2004, 217). The gold gilt, stucco, paint, and architectural inlaying are, for her, every bit as important as the actual sculpted marble of Saint Teresa herself. This, in turn, allows the Baroque to seemingly conform – three centuries in advance – to postmodern ideologies of abolishing all frames and specificities in the conceptualization of media. The difficulty, however, is that the deep aesthetic affect of what is actually represented gets lost along the way, and other idioms that seek to recall such affect are not tolerated.

One here thinks of Kenneth Clark again, and how, in 1969, he anticipated Ndalianis’s basic sentiment with his recollection of how, in addition to sculpture and architecture, Bernini also occasionally staged operas, which incorporated so great a three-dimensional, interactive, element that “people in the front row often ran away, fearing that they would be drenched by water or burnt by fire, so powerful was the illusion he created” (Clark 1970, 188). He continues that:

Of this theatrical element in Bernini a sublime example is the Cornaro Chapel... To begin with, Bernini has represented the Cornaro family on either side of the chapel looking as if they were in boxes waiting for the curtain to go up. And when we come to the drama itself, it is presented exactly as if it were on a small stage, with a spotlight falling on the protagonists. But at this point the theatrical parallel must be dropped because what we see, the *Ecstasy of St Teresa*, is one of the most deeply moving works in Western art. Bernini’s gift of sympathetic imagination, of entering into the emotions of others ... is

used to convey the rarest and most precious of all states, that of religious ecstasy. (Clark 1970, 191)

Even for those who do not place a comparably high valuation on religious ecstasy, Clark's words move one with their deep, intuitive sympathy for aesthetic affect in a way that Ndaliansis's does not. As with her invocation of *Contact* and *Event Horizon*, values and dimensions not having to do with the voiding of narrative signification and representational fixities are never admitted of. There is never a point, for Ndaliansis, at which "the theatrical parallel must be dropped" in favour of the nuanced affect of the main subject itself, because her ideology of denying and banishing all fixities of singular media forms – in favour of the polycentric shifting of them all together as one – is seemingly her sole, overriding interest. As we have seen, the spectacles of Baroque painting – especially those of Caravaggio, for instance – were, in their proto-cinematic way, indissociable from the narrative incidents from Scripture or classical mythology which they represented. The appreciation of them, thus, required the kind of acknowledgment of, and sympathy for, classical narrative that Ndaliansis's postmodern ideology seeks to de-legitimize as "no longer viable." The spectacles of the Baroque represent, for her, not a uniquely visually exuberant and emotionally exultant way of utilizing the frame or screen with narrative signification, but an intellectual rationale for banishing such matters from consideration.

Ndaliansis's ideological priorities were echoed the same year by Thomas Elsaesser, who declared that "films now tend to be part of a culture of 'experiences' and an economy of spectacle, where neither individual authors nor individual films are placed at the centre," but that rather:

Directors have become small-scale or large-scale image entrepreneurs, image-engineers of films as 'multi-media' concepts and total environments, with auteurist oeuvres replaced by fantasy worlds and cosmologies (*Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Kill Bill*). (Elsaesser 2004, 91-92)

Again, this assertion bears the implication that aesthetic attention to directorial *oeuvres* or individual filmic texts is unnecessary, because such inquiries no longer offer any explanatory value into the real state of affairs in modern media culture. The persistent facts that, firstly, making films is, ultimately, an aesthetic endeavour – one which requires the guiding intelligence of some form of creative agency – and, secondly, that the films so produced do in fact possess unique and distinctive aesthetic properties, however finely distinguishable, are ones which this tendency in film theory must perforce resist. Elsaesser's rhyming of Ndaliansis's postmodern

paradigm, however, still shares a commitment to at least acknowledging the existence of the consumer popular culture horizon as it exists today, and as it is experienced and understood by moviegoers. This means that writing such as theirs possesses at least some legitimate explanatory value, because even when it offers little insight into the affect of individual films, or evinces a problematic understanding of cinema as a still-distinct, and resolutely narrative, medium – and Elsaesser’s work, over the years, has often avoided these pitfalls – it nonetheless retains an awareness that their subject is one which possesses popular appeal. Turning to the second of 2004’s three formulations of a cinematic Baroque, however, even this is denied. The ninth chapter of Sean Cubitt’s *The Cinema Effect* makes reference to popular mainstream Hollywood films, but theorizes more “with” them than “about” them. As with his taking up the subject again in a 2009 essay, Cubitt’s real interest in the Baroque is highly abstracted and theoretical, with references to actual films and cinematic spectacle serving more as grist for the rhetorical mill than his real subject. Furthermore, unlike Ndaliansis, Cubitt makes no pretence at grounding his theorizing of a cinematic neobaroque in the literal history and aesthetics of the seventeenth-century Baroque. For him, the word “neobaroque” is more a term of convenience to give some sense of his elaborate confluence of theoretical meditations.

In the same spirit that Ndaliansis, discussing Cortona’s *Glorification of Urban VIII* ceiling, declared that “the combinations and choices of paths that lead to and from the centre are limitless, and any singularly linear direction implied by one-directional reading is denied,” Cubitt’s formulation of a cinematic neobaroque also relies upon rhetorical images of paths, tracks, etc. He evokes this idea as an explanatory paradigm for the films *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995) and *Snake Eyes* (Brian de Palma, 1998) – two of the most hyperbolically mobile-framed films to come out of 1990s Hollywood, opening with inordinately long tracking shots of such complexity that they required extensive technological experimentation, in addition to digital cheating of cuts, to achieve. In tandem for Cubitt, they can be said to represent an aesthetic in which incessant camera movement has become “so fundamental to the Hollywood baroque” that:

...the occasional descent into more formally classical structures, such as the shot-reverse-shot dialogue scenes that punctuate *Snake Eyes*, seem flat, talky, and crude. The regression to classical cutting appears symptomatic of uncertainty rather than austerity, lack of vision rather than clarity, indeterminacy rather than symmetry. (Cubitt 2004, 224)

Cubitt’s point – that *Snake Eyes*’s opening virtuoso twenty-minute tracking shot through a sports stadium, establishing all the rest of the film’s subplots *en route*, sets a standard that the rest of the

film cannot live up to – was one which was also generally made by critics upon the film’s release. For Cubitt, however, this was not simply an individual failure of a single film, but a privileged look into a whole new filmmaking tradition in Hollywood. In contrast to Ndaliansis’s postmodernist language – whereby aesthetic and academic limitations, borders, rules, etc., because seemingly constricting and repressive, will be abolished – Cubitt’s neobaroque paradigm is far more radically abstract in its ideas. The Hollywood neobaroque, he argues, is the response to “a felt need for a cultural form that excluded subjectivity, and that placed truth outside the human, in closed, rule-governed worlds” (Cubitt 2004, 237-38). Allowing for other influences, it is also heir to “the advance of minimalism in the 1960s and ’70s,” whereby artists would endeavour to “strip the human out of art” (Cubitt 2004, 237). For Cubitt, a film such as *Snake Eyes* or *Strange Days* ultimately evokes such images as “a braided web,” with embroidery “abstract as a Bach fugue” or “a knot garden,” and whose “specific attraction” is “its reorganization of time as space” (Cubitt 2004, 223). These films create worlds in which their protagonists are not meant to possess any real agency or humanity in the classical-realist sense, but simply go through their paces of betrayal and deception until they reach their preordained end. Cubitt emphasizes that this Hollywood neobaroque aesthetic is one where there is no such thing as an offhand, unimportant detail, either in narrative, dialogue, *mise-en-scène*, or cinematography. Every single narrative detail must always be recuperated and followed up, because it will always lead to some new point of deception, then revelation. Truth and enlightenment, Cubitt declares time and again, are always “immanent” in neobaroque cinema, but are never actually arrived at.

The problematics of all this can readily be discerned by examining a different moment of cinematic spectacle that speaks to Cubitt’s remarks: a 128-second sequence of digital virtuosity in Peter Berg’s 2012 blockbuster *Battleship*. Filmed as one big, digitally-enabled, dollying shot, the sequence follows the film’s heroes – Lt. Alex Hopper (Taylor Kitsch), Capt. Yugi Nagata (Tadanobu Asano), and Petty Officer Cora Raikes (Rihanna) – as they seek to escape from the destroyer which is being torn asunder by the alien invaders’ boring weapons. The moving camera is able to work in perfectly-choreographed sync with such spectacles as a coms tower violently crashing down just behind Alex and Yugi, or alien borer-weapons exploding out of the ship’s hull just as the camera tracks across the right section of it. Furthermore, in a moment reminiscent of Mikhail Kalatozov’s *I am Cuba* (1964), the camera is able to come unstuck from the ship’s very

structure, and follow Cora as she jumps overboard, swims underwater for a few seconds, then surfaces alongside a life raft which she then pulls herself aboard. During these few seconds, moreover, in the foreground, one sees other sailors crashing into the water with explosions of bubbles; while in the background, great molten chunks of the destroyer's hull are visible breaking off and sinking into the dark depths. Moreover – in a display of Baroque verticality that dwarfs that of *Titanic* fifteen years before – one sees Alex and Yugi scrambling up the now-vertical bow of the sinking vessel towards the stern, while the camera frame circles around, below, and above them, with seemingly-total three-dimensional omniscience. The sequence concludes when this omniscient camera has pulled far enough up into the air – above the sinking stern – to encompass the full spectacle of an alien borer weapon smashing up out of the exact centre of the stern. The ship is sundered in two equal halves, which explosively come apart and collapse/sink into the ocean. The last second or so of the composition is simply of flaming debris and shrapnel raining down upon the roiling waters.

At the very least, this sequence of digital virtuosity exposes the biases at work in Cubitt's discussion of the supposed neobaroque aesthetic in *Snake Eyes*. De Palma's film was a clinically hyper-constructed, (post)modernistic work in which the lengthy tracking shot functioned for purposes of narrative gamesmanship, rather than intense, visceral spectacle. The theoretical paradigm of neo-baroque film that Cubitt extrapolated from the former had precious little to say about the latter – which suggests that Cubitt's abstracted Theory paradigm simply has no room for the spectacular and visceral. He wishes only to discuss how “the qualities of vraisemblance and probability are suspended in favour of the construction of a transparently artificial script of algorithmic elegance” (Cubitt 2004, 222). Furthermore, because it switches between different lines of narrative information – emphasizing Alex and Yugi one moment, then Raikes at another, then showing the overall progression of the sinking – *Battleship*'s destroyer sequence problematizes Cubitt's assertion that Hollywood spectacle's escalating use of long and complex tracking/dollying shots have fundamentally changed the logic of film narrative. Cubitt envisions a mobile camera aesthetic in which there is no such thing as off-screen space or action, and there are “no loose ends,” because the mobile camera can “shift fluidly from panorama to point of view, between sharing and observing the illusory nature of [the protagonist's] experience” (Cubitt 2004, 222). Again, however, this is an observation that has application purely to a cinema of cerebral gamesmanship, and nothing to say about cinema in its more elemental, emotional aspects

– the same aspects, incidentally, that Baroque art appealed to so strongly. “Camera mobility and plotting are synonymous, both contrapuntally constructing elaborations on the motif of spectacle (boxing, policing, life) as illusion” Cubitt declares – never deigning to entertain the idea that most cinema does not seek to construct elaborations on the motif of spectacle as illusion, but simply to create spectacular illusions within a straightforward narrative framework (Cubitt 2004, 223). *Battleship* may not be a masterpiece of cinema by any stretch of the imagination, but – with its fiery, apocalyptic, Wagnerian spectacle – it is at least representative of its art, and honours it in a way Cubitt does not.

Elsewhere, Cubitt describes Baroque aesthetics as semiotically scattershot in nature – the multiplication of meanings and implications into such a chaotic diffusion that it’s impossible to fix or pin down any absolute meaning (Cubitt 2009, 50-51). Cubitt’s observations here are reminiscent of Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*. Lukács, in the course of formulating his ideas of “abstract idealism,” posited Ancient Greece as an exemplar of a civilization in which geographical, conceptual, and imaginative horizons were sufficiently in sync as to create an impression of a fundamentally ordered and knowable world. This socio-intellectual ideal, Lukács argues, just tentatively clung to life into the Middle Ages – due to the Church’s status as the sole arbiter of all knowledge and truth – but was then wholly lost with the Renaissance. The seventeenth-century Baroque, thus, was just one of the most vivid symptoms of the ensuing intellectual tumult, whereby the Church needed to retain its authority in spite of demonstrably no longer possessing a total monopoly on truth. In a certain sense, Cubitt is correct in this. The intellectual confusion which Lukács idealized Ancient Greece as being free of – a realm where the physical, conceptual, and imaginative boundaries of knowledge were supposedly in sync – has now become one of the defining features of the early twenty-first century. To a greater degree than ever before, nobody knows everything, because the digital age has simultaneously made everything knowable, and added another horizon of infinitude to what there potentially exists to know. The same digital technologies that make everything possible mean that nothing can be definitively mastered. The grandiose spectacles offered by today’s blockbuster films testify to this in much the same way that the first Baroque did four centuries ago. Cubitt’s theorizing is both an articulation of this and, at the same time, a further embodiment of it. Again, however, observations such as this take him far afield from any interpretive engagement with filmic texts in terms of seventeenth-century Baroque art.

Whereas “baroque” was, for Cubitt, simply a term of convenience for cinematic spectacle of today, with only the most tentative intellectual link to the great seventeenth-century movement in the arts, the third of 2004’s three books on the subject – Norman M. Klein’s *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* – swings to the opposite extreme. Even more than Ndaliansis, Klein both posits a literal, verifiable aesthetic continuity between the Baroque of the seventeenth century and of today. The title of his book “is not simply rhetorical,” Klein declares: “It refers mostly to a history that I have constructed, from about 1550 to 2003 – about special effects as an instrument and critique of ‘power’” (Klein 2004, 5). As such, he shows himself given to making declarations such as “when Baroque sculpture alludes to theatre – this can be equated with art direction in cinema. Bernini was, in effect, sculpting movies in 1640” (Klein 2004, 355). Or “special-effects films, for all their gaudiness, have become the portable cathedrals for this integrated, weirdly disengaged Electronic Baroque civilization” (Klein 2004, 282). Indeed, Klein shows no reticence whatsoever about conceptually leaping about in histories beyond the one he has constructed, rhetorically asking:

What would Hitler have done with computer graphics? Or the Roman Emperor Augustus? Imagine the computer in the hand of a powerful medieval pope like Gregory VII, who once forced the Holy Roman Emperor to walk barefoot in the snow for three days. As a literary effect, we zap Gregory back from the afterlife, let him stroll through a trade show on new software... (Klein 2004, 8-9)

Had the Popes had computers in Gregory’s day, Klein declares, “they would have rendered unto Caesar ... simply nothing” (Klein 2004, 9).

As its reference to “instrument and critique of ‘power’” suggests, however, beneath this rhetorical playfulness, *Vatican to Vegas* is arch-Foucauldian in its assumptions about Baroque spectacle – in a way that neither Ndaliansis nor Cubitt were. The affinity is so deeply ingrained that Klein does not even cite Foucault directly – the spirit of the latter’s writing simply permeates much of the book’s worldview. The aesthetic qualities of a Baroque spectacle are, for Klein, axiomatically less interesting and less relevant than the occluded workings of power which it suggests. Klein declares that “a special effect, by definition, ‘fools’ the audience. By fooling, it manipulates them, on behalf of whoever runs the game; let us say, on behalf of those ‘in power’” (Klein 2004, 8). He may immediately qualify this by declaring that “we all love to be tricked,” but he has established his unmistakable Foucauldian tone nonetheless (Klein 2004, 8).

Crucial to Klein's book is a certain disengagement from the film-viewing experience as traditionally understood. He emphasizes, rather, the concept of the "scripted space" in Baroque aesthetics, whereby "a walk-through or click-through environment" is "designed to *emphasize* the viewer's journey – the space between – rather than the gimmicks on the wall" (Klein 2004, 11). The principle here is mobility, either physical or virtual, and thus engagement with an immersive space. The stationary pinioning of a single object or façade with the eye is antithetical to this conception. As with Ndaliansis, his references to "the movie screen" and the specificity of cinematic aesthetics are relatively few and far in between, because they offer little possibility of true immersion. The fact that a great deal of Baroque art's great glory lay simply in traditional canvas paintings and altarpieces – two-dimensional screen works designed to be gazed upon for the sake of the narrative content and visual composition – is one that Klein, like Ndaliansis, resists acknowledging. As with Ndaliansis, his references are chiefly to the great Baroque ceiling frescoes, whose lingering two-dimensional, screen-like, aspect is again downplayed, relative to their scripted-space aspect.

To a greater degree than either Ndaliansis or Cubitt, Klein's contribution to what Jay called "the postmodernist rediscovery of the Baroque" also draws heavily upon the legacy of straight-up modernism. In this spirit, he singles out *2001: A Space Odyssey*, to the exclusion of almost any other works of cinematic spectacle. For Klein, "the Electronic Baroque" was born on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1965 – the first day of shooting on Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Clarke and Kubrick, he declares, were "envisioning a bridge between late Modernism and the Electronic Baroque," whereby "the universe was Modernist, but inside, like DNA monads, it was densely packed with Baroque labyrinths" (Klein 2004, 229-230). In extremely subjective, free-associative passages of novelistic film theory, Klein goes on to transform *2001* into an absolute modernist object – not merely one particularly influential science-fiction spectacle among many others, but some form of ineffable philosophical milestone against which no other films are particularly relevant. *2001*, Klein affirms, "remains the classic document about this transition" from a modernist *zeitgeist* of abstraction and blank space to one of "high-octane Baroque" (Klein 2004, 232). "After 1968," he continues, filmgoers entered a new era in which "we steadily witness the film industry filling this void of Modernist space with Baroque special effects" (Klein 2004, 235). Furthermore, he declares of *2001* that:

Increasingly, its emptiness reminds me of the city crowd in late-nineteenth century urban literature, more like Kafka or Musil floating in the North Sea. ... The machine erases nature entirely, like the last breath of Modernism in the cinema. (Klein 2004, 231)

“It is a spectacle as emptied as anything Beckett imagined, and just as comforting in its emptiness,” he declares at one point, before rhetorically asking “if a civilization were trying to die off, and its story were told as epic cinema – as *2001* – what blank points and voids would be needed?” (Klein 2004, 231). Modernist alienation and cerebral abstraction, in a pessimistic T.S. Eliot mode, is given full possession of the field here. One would never guess that this is the same year that saw the bumptious energy and naïve Americanism of *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968). For all his references back to Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Baroque, Klein is still chiefly dedicated to the presentism that underlay so much of modernism – a movement in the arts fundamentally inimical to the values of grandiose emotion, transcendent sublimity, and intense visual detailing that the Baroque embodied. For Klein, the ordering image of *2001* is not the transcendent, hallucinatory Stargate sequence that so dazzled the countercultural baby boomers – a spectacle quite readily recuperable to Baroque aesthetics – but the silent, austere cryptic image of the monolith, in all its untextured, angular, geometrical starkness, standing in for the spectacle of an alien civilization that we never get to see. In this, the monolith is a modernist work *par excellence*, in that it censors and represses representation rather than exalting it and straining at its limits, as Baroque art did.

Furthermore, Klein’s reckoning with the Baroque is inseparably bound up with the old modernist emphasis on self-reflexivity, and the idea that cinema must foreground its own technique and illusionism. In this vein, he waxes nostalgic for the long stretch of film history in which many special effects were possible “in camera, with very little postproduction” (Klein 2004, 222). Evoking these “atmospheric effects... made out of household remedies, miracles in candle wax,” he describes how:

A typhoon can be a twist of cotton sprinkled with coal dust. Oatmeal can look convincing as snow or lava, depending on whether it is cooked or left as flakes. Technical advice from the twenties is often not that different from the fifties. (Klein 2004, 222)

One reads here a determined valuation of ingenuity, whereby the very crudeness and imperfection of older special effects served to humanize them by making unmissable the human craftsmanship at work in them. This is not a mindset genuinely amenable to the great visual

splendours of the seventeenth-century Baroque, but Klein nevertheless claims that his admiration for Baroque is grounded in this tendency, both historically and currently:

For many film theorists like Bazin, special effects are the hoax that makes cinema feel artificial. The audience can all but smell the effects machinery just outside the frame. In Baroque theatre however, sensing the fake was considered a glory. Special effects were designed to suggest hoax; that enhanced their art. They were sculptural and painterly artifice invading the stage. (Klein 2004, 31)

The Baroque's consolidation of Renaissance art's rediscovery of perspective and advances in anatomical realism – or any other facet of it that would rebound to Baroque's representational or mimetic credentials – are not admitted into Klein's paradigm. In accordance with modernist ideology, all art of any interest must be interpreted in terms of self-referential artifice. Accordingly, Klein's book has difficulty accounting for Baroque aesthetics' affinities with the current moment of photorealistic digital spectacles.

Klein, at least, is readily forthcoming about the roots of these theoretical biases, however. "I don't see any fun in being an accomplice," he declares on the second page of his 2004 book, and continues: "this has occasionally led to research problems, when trying to enter the mindset that makes for special effects" (Klein 2004, 2). For Klein, an achieved illusion is not something complete in itself, to be appreciated, appraised, incorporated into a wider cosmology, and juxtaposed against other signifiers. Instead, it is an already-untenable feat of artifice, the construction of which must be deconstructed in order to be understood and appreciated. "I much prefer special effects when they are *ruined*," he says, emphasizing that being able to see the fissures in a grandiose Baroque edifice is, for him, far more liberating than drinking in the spectacle of it on its own terms (Klein 2004, 2, italics Klein's). "Our culture," he declares, "needs to unearth" the "power struggles, and levels of erasure" in special effects, "to concentrate on the cracks in the pyramid" (Klein 2004, 3). Candour such as Klein's, however, is relatively rare in grappling with the nature of the Baroque sublime in cinematic spectacle of today. More representative, rather, is a figure such as Greg Tuck, who – in his remarks on spectacle and the sublime in Peter Jackson's *King Kong* – makes assertions such as "the quantity of spectacle on display works against the [sublime] quality of the experience;" declares that the increased length of the film's spectacular digitally-conjured action sequences "becomes fatiguing rather than exciting" and that "the length of the set-pieces breeds a familiarity with the situation which lowers rather than increases the excitement;" and concludes with the rhetorical question of "why

is it that more spectacle reduces the capacity for sublime moments to register?” (Tuck 2008, 259-261). Tuck’s analysis focuses solely upon the T-Rex and bug canyon battles from the second act of Jackson’s film, so the vertiginous sublimity of the climax atop the Empire State Building is nowhere mentioned; but even in the former sequences, the Baroque profusion at work signifies only as mere visual chaos to him. Tuck’s understanding of the sublime is one which rejects the “hostile claims” that, per Paglia, Baroque and Decadent art make on the spectatorial eye, and instead, follows Klein in being poignantly nostalgic for the halting, limited stop-motion animation of the original 1933 *King Kong* – which was immediately discernible as hand-crafted artifice, and therefore imposed no such visual challenges.

It was seen in the previous chapter that the great works of Baroque art were wholly inassimilable to (post)modernist understandings of cinema which prize only self-referentiality, the defamiliarizing foregrounding of technique, and the evacuation of narrative and affect. Thus, theorists such as Klein and Cubitt chose to avoid discussing the actual composition and content of Baroque paintings and frescoes, and instead emphasized their nature as “scripted spaces,” or their highly abstracted theoretical implications. Only Ndalianis deigned to actually venture any formal observations on Baroque works in themselves, and even she did not venture beyond a postmodern vocabulary of intertextuality, multimedia, and their use in the breaking down of conceptual and aesthetic fixities and hierarchies. A more scholarly and critical intervention, which would articulate, in more empirical terms, the affinities between the grandiose spectacles of seventeenth-century Baroque art, and the grandiose spectacles of early twenty-first century cinema, has yet to be written. The visual *lingua franca* of verticality, profusion, and sublime awe common to both provides a starting place, but there are other avenues which could be profitably explored: the use of music to enhance these visual devices; the interpenetration of painting, sculpture and architecture to evoke greater narrative scope; the poetics of incarnation whereby the divine is represented alongside the temporal and physical; and, following on from this, the coexistence of pagan and Christian subject matter. All of these, however, are matters of representation, understanding of which requires that, like cinema, Baroque art be allowed to signify in terms of its actual content and composition, and in *non*-self-reflexive fashion. The “postmodernist rediscovery of the Baroque” which Jay identified, insofar as it has manifested itself in Cinema Studies, has thus far displayed little appetite for engaging with its subject on these formal grounds. However, with more and more cinematic spectacles making their affinities

with Baroque art increasingly inescapable, the rediscovery seems eminently likely to outlast its postmodern patina. This is all the more likely because the very word “baroque,” as used in everyday discourse about cinema, means approximately the same thing as its specific definition in art history. The same has not proved true, however, for Decadent art – the other strand of the helix of modern spectacle.

Unlike the Baroque, Decadence has not experienced any “postmodernist rediscovery” in academic discourses over the past generation. That is not to say, however, that it has languished in irrelevance, either. The systemic emphasis upon (radical) modernism in the academic humanities has often carried Decadence along in its slipstream, insofar as Decadence, being largely a *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon, can be seen as a direct predecessor to modernism, and therefore a valuable prism through which to view the early *avant-garde*, and search for new influences or insights. In this spirit, Barbara Spackman has declared that “decadence is more honest” than literary schools such as Realism and Naturalism, because “it emphasizes the artificiality inherent in any effort at representation” (qtd. in Denisoff 2007, 33). “This ‘true fake,’” she declares, “would be one that always retains the sign of its own artificiality, that announces itself as a copy and thereby remains dependant upon the thing copied, upon nature, or the real” (Denisoff 2007, 33). Discussing Wilde’s *Salomé*, meanwhile, Dennis Denisoff declares it “over-heated and stiltedly artificial, disallowing any wish a reader may have of suspending disbelief” (Denisoff 2007, 40). Again, illusionism and pretensions to mimesis exist only on the assumption that they must be critiqued. David Weir’s 1995 book *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* is wholly devoted to this thesis, while the 1999 scholarly anthology *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics & Politics of Decadence* declares Decadent art’s scholarly image to be that of “a merely parodic hiatus before the inception of Modernism” (Constable, Potolsky and Denisoff 1999, 1). In other words, Decadence only comes to be of any interest once it ceases to be recognizably itself, in its archly naturalized self-consciousness, and becomes a test case for modernist self-referentiality and reflexivity. Decadent aesthetics, however – both historically in the nineteenth century, and in the ascendant in cinema today – are defined by a concern with artifice, illusion, convention, falsity, etc. which seeks not to foreground, and hence supposedly critique, those things, but to naturalize them. The backdating of modernism into Decadence which scholar such as Spackman and Denisoff perform might better be envisioned in reverse. Camille Paglia, for instance, has proposed just this:

What is now needed is a revision of art history that would acknowledge how much avant-garde art really was Decadent Late Romantic: much Whistler and Manet, all of Toulouse-Lautrec, Munch, and Gaudí, and even Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*, with its Decadent immobility and claustrophobia. (Paglia 1990, 489-90)

The Decadent aesthetics emergent in blockbuster films over the past decade-and-a-half have made such a paradigm shift away from avant-gardist modernism increasingly inescapable. And this, we shall see below, is one reason why contemporary film theory – so given over to numerous (post)modern assumptions – has great difficulty accounting for the Decadent aesthetics at work in the digitally-liberated blockbusters of today.

Michele Pierson suggested, uncontroversially enough, in her 2002 book *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder*, that:

The reasons there has been so little scholarly writing on special effects up until this point, and why attempts to theorize reception figure so infrequently in what little writing we have from the past, have to do with the intellectual traditions that have shaped contemporary thinking about cinema spectatorship, on the one hand, and the analysis of culture industries, on the other. (Pierson 2002, 7)

Regarding the former factor – the intellectual traditions that have shaped contemporary thinking about spectatorship – Pierson quotes Leger Grindon's assertion, in 1994, that:

The usefulness of critique of illusion as a paradigm for thinking about the cinema is coming to a close. As critical concepts the broad range and ambiguous nature of spectacle and excess ha[ve] hindered precision in thinking about the cinema and especially studying the film image. (Pierson 2002, 7)

Grindon, furthermore, cautions against an over-reductive understanding of “the role of spectacle in the cinema” whereby “spectators experience visual display and illusion as something so overwhelming that they are completely at a loss to make critical or evaluative judgments” (Pierson 2002, 7). Treating this as “the end point of analysis” Pierson continues to quote Grindon, is to foreclose many more possibilities of understanding (Pierson 2002, 7). So far, we seem to be on genuinely Decadent ground, with Pierson aligning herself with a discourse that favours studying the film image in closer, more nuanced, more sincerely aesthetic terms, and moving beyond simple presumptions of “critique of illusion.” And yet, perversely, having followed Grindon thus far, mounting a critique of illusion is exactly what Pierson's book subsequently proceeds to undertake.

One of the overarching projects of Pierson's *Special Effects* was to critique the supposition implied in one review of Prince's *The Seduction of Reality*: that “although the digital

revolution is now fully matured, it still strives to be invisible,” and that: “So far, digital visual manipulations emulate photorealism and are considered successful to the extent that the audience wonders if there has been a change at all” (Wasser 2013, 385). This is a deeply historically flawed sentiment, insofar as it is only now – once the digital revolution has fully matured – that DVFX *can* consistently be invisible, and emulate photorealism. It was in the digital revolution’s earliest epoch – the latter 1980s and early-to-mid 1990s – that “striv[ing] to be invisible” was far more difficult, and often futile; meaning that different, more abstract and self-referential, digital aesthetics often had to be formulated to make a virtue of limitations. One saw this most vividly in Brett Leonard’s two films *The Lawnmower Man* and *Virtuosity* (1995), as well as in *Johnny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo, 1995). By the later 1990s and the 2000s, however, the technology of DVFX had advanced sufficiently to bring the ideal of invisible photorealism further and further within grasp, and so these alternative, abstract and self-referential digital aesthetics were allowed to fall by the wayside. Pierson, in 1999 *Screen* and *Wide Angle* articles and her 2002 book, however, would disinter these films from the graveyard of recent history and elevate them – under the collective title of “technofuturism” – into a high point of modernist aesthetics.

The term “technofuturism” was coined by Philip Hayward and Tana Wollen in their analysis of the production and marketing of new media and communications technologies. Pierson, however, would adopt the term to formulate an aesthetic discourse. In her 1999 *Screen* article, she insisted upon “the centrality of the computer-generated image,” which, in its earlier rudimentary forms, she credits with qualities such as “hyperreal chromism,” “dazzling luminosity,” and “playful plasticity” (Pierson 1999, 159). To dismiss the ground-breaking experimental DVFX in *TRON* (Steven Lisberger, 1982) and *The Last Starfighter* (Nick Castle, 1984), for instance – with their total lack of texturing, and colour schemes that skew well into the garish – is, Pierson insists, too reductive. They are not simply crude, but showcase a distinct new aesthetic that is only in its infancy. They signify, in short, a potentially utopian new field. Her overarching term for the affect of technofuturist imagery is “plastic beauty” – a term coined by the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot to refer to the visual dazzle afforded by mandalas which are simply the visualization of mathematical formulas. For Pierson, the “plastic beauty” of technofuturist imagery is that it “does not look ‘real,’” but “has a quality that is unlike anything else”:

Too bright and shiny by far, the hyper-chrominance and super-luminosity characteristic of the CGI effects produced over this period imbued the digital artefact with a special visual significance. (Pierson 1999, 173)

Regarding the appreciation of this plastic beauty, Pierson declares that:

Effects sequences featuring CGI commonly exhibit a mode of spectatorial address that – with its tableau-style framing, longer takes, and strategic intercutting between shots of the computer-generated object and reaction shots of characters – solicits a contemplative viewing of the computer generated image. (Pierson 1999, 169)

So far, thus, one reads a discourse which proffers unqualified aestheticism and formal appreciation. And indeed, Pierson emphasizes the concept of connoisseurship throughout her writing on digital spectacle. She declares, for instance, that “within a culture of connoisseurship, appreciation of an illusion” may lie less “in any desire for a natural object than in an appreciation of the illusion as aesthetic artifact” (Pierson 2002, 65). Or that “even some effects that are intended by filmmakers to be invisible may be apprehensible to the practiced eye of the connoisseur” (Pierson 2002, 106). The discourse of formal appreciation one reads here is so explicit as to make Pierson’s writings readily available to the Decadent mindset. Ultimately, however, Pierson’s fundamental anti-Decadence will become clear on a number of levels. The first and most notable of these, however, is the same as with Klein above: she does not acknowledge or allow the possibility of cinematic spectacle as a unified diegetic discourse – as an act of imaginative transcribing meant to be appreciated as such on its own terms, rather than valued in terms of whatever give-away fissures and imperfections it might possess. There is the same valuing of “ingenuity” as in Klein – the same condescending wish to congratulate special effects artists on techniques that, axiomatically, must never achieve successful representation, because this latter is in fact held to be undesirable. Likewise, she shares with many of the aforementioned theorists a generalized lack of interest or regard for narrative signification or implication. Like Bukatman, she frequently makes broad generalizations about Hollywood narratives – especially in the science-fiction genre – such as their being “decidedly more anxious than hopeful about... the technological futures conjured up,” and “with the lone exception of the *Star Trek* films, the science-fiction cinema of the past decade is still very much steeped in... a legacy of the dystopian” (Pierson 1999, 174-75). And more troubling still, she feels no compunction about making assertions such as:

What becomes important in the counter-narrative represented by this ‘show-stopping’ special-effects imagery, is not the power of special effects to represent the other-worldly

technologies of future societies and alien civilizations, but the power of special effects to present the awesome imaging capacities of special-effects technologies themselves. (Pierson 1999, 165)

The binary dichotomy that Pierson presents here is a false – and profoundly limiting – one, insofar as it makes no allowance for the immense aesthetic richness which does derive from cinema’s narrative/representational function – of “future societies and alien civilizations,” for instance. As a result, her paradigm allows no space for the creeping Decadent jadedness that would define Hollywood’s spectacles throughout the 2000s. *Everything* about a spectacular diegesis, she insists, must always be reducible to self-referential concern with the means of presentation. The result of this is that, when confronted with films which use DVFX in what she calls a purely “simulationist” fashion – to represent spectacular imaginative visions and/or story-worlds in a straightforwardly photorealist fashion – Pierson’s writing becomes rather hostile and dismissive.

Pierson’s lack of interest in narrative, and insistence upon the value of novelty and visible technique above all else, is inextricably linked to modernism’s historic exaltation of originality and novelty – again, what Cavell called the problem whereby artists are no longer expected “to produce another instance of art but a new medium within it” (qtd. in Krauss 2005, 102-103). She observes at one point that:

The discipline of art history takes it for granted that “the world of art is not a collection of autonomous objects, but a magnetic field of reciprocal influences and activations,” but attempts to apply this assumption to a historical analysis of computer-generated visual effects imagery remain rare. (Pierson 2002, 55)

One symptom of this rareness is, however, that what, in the realm of art history, she describes as “a magnetic field of reciprocal influences and activations,” Pierson dismissively refers to in the realm of popular film as the “recycling of images, plot lines, and themes from previous blockbusters... mak[ing] no real attempt to offer something new” (Pierson 2002, 55). A further difficulty with this diagnosis, moreover, is that Pierson’s own attempt – on behalf of modern-day fans and aficionados – to apply these art history assumptions to the field of DVFX imagery is hedged in by a great deal of limiting ideology. So much so, indeed, that it ends up right back in the same modernist problematic that Cavell identified: the sense that simply making a new work of art is illegitimate, so all-important is the “attempt to offer something new.” Indeed, Pierson is apparently so ideologically driven, on this point, that she feels confident in dismissing the DVFX

technicians on Steven Spielberg's *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997) as "ersatz wizard[s]" whose simulationist, narrative-illusionist discourse is "fatuous" and "self-congratulatory" (Pierson 2002, 123).

Having rejected both narrative and mimesis as parameters of value, Pierson's aesthetic paradigm veers in an increasingly anti-Decadent direction – encouraging an ocular and imaginative quiescence whereby the spectator, and their eye, should expect to be coddled. And in this, one sees another legacy of modernism. The densely detailed figurative canvases that had defined Western art for centuries prior were abandoned in favour of various kinds of non-representational schema which did not require any narrative sensibility or mimetic visual acumen – or rather, which displaced such concerns from the canvass itself to the imaginations of sympathetic spectators. The result was that the kind of "contemplation" suggested by works of Abstract Expressionism – a movement in art that would elevate Mark Rothko to the status of master, with lesser-known talents such as Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still following in his wake – was a very different kind of contemplation than that exacted by the kind of nineteenth-century representational canvases which the Decadents formed their aesthetic consciousness in terms of. The demand that a spectatorial eye be able to parse an extremely dense, and almost-photoreal, iconographic schema, of such detail that it could never all be retained, gave way to canvases of which it was often possible to take a mental photograph and mull over at leisure. The kind of visual acumen solicited by a canvas such as Gustave Doré's *The Triumph of Christianity Over Paganism* (1868?), for instance, is thus wholly different than that of the aforementioned modernists. Its intense (and ambiguous) religious vision is conveyed not by any studiously abstracted emptiness, but in minutely-detailed mimesis, in a composition that deploys the elemental emotional workings of height, scale, and light in representational, rather than abstracted, terms. It evokes the workings of seventeenth-century Baroque art, but in a context of nineteenth-century Decadence whereby the exultation of Christianity has been allowed to become ominously stentorian – its imperious monochrome, looming over the spectator, contrasting unsettlingly with the multi-coloured vitality of paganism, at eye-level.

Such emotive matters of reception are of course subjects for debate, but it is a debate which is premised on the legitimacy of actual representation of a narrative imaginative vision. Terms of value such as these are impossible in the flat, non-representational abstractions of modernism – the same ones which would reappear in the cyberspaces of Pierson's favoured films

such as *Lawnmower Man*, *Virtuosity*, and *Johnny Mnemonic* – and rather than allowing that anything at all may be lost by this, Pierson simply deems it a turning away from representational idioms which are “aesthetically moribund” (Pierson 2002, 163). In her rhetoric of praise about the dazzling, untextured chromism of these images, Pierson’s intellectual instinct – along with many other modernist-minded film theorists – was simply that DVFX should be used to finally bring cinema into the fold of modernist abstraction. The difficulty, however, is that, again the trend throughout the late 1990s and 2000s – towards photorealistic, simulationist DVFX – showed film history going in the opposite direction, after the fashion of Paglia’s subsuming of *avant-garde* modernism into Decadence. In trying to account for this, Pierson declares that “Sometimes, of course, the decision is made *not* to allow an effects image to distract from the narrative and/or action,” and cites visual effects supervisor Denis Muren’s discussion of the early underwater sequence in *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (Pierson 2002, 124). Regarding this sequence – in which Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Jar-Jar encounter, successively, the Opee sea killer, the Colo claw fish, and the Sando aqua monster – Muren declared that:

When we cut to the outside, we didn’t want to linger too long and make it an effects sequence. That way the audience is interested in ‘Are they ... going to get away or not?’ rather than how neat the creatures look. (Pierson 2002, 124)

In other words, the interest is on keeping the audience invested in the narrative diegesis. What is unstated but implicit in Muren’s remark, however, is that the audience has not been deprived of the chance to appreciate “how neat the creatures look” – it is simply that no allowance has been made for the inattentive spectatorial eye. A single failure of focus, a single wavering of the spectatorial gaze, and the chance for aesthetic gratification will have passed with this narrative moment. It is intrinsic to the hostile claims and coercions of the eye that Decadent aesthetics make upon the viewer that it does *not* coddle the eye by submitting its spectacles for prolonged attention. If the spectator’s eye is not dextrous enough to glean the import of a moment of spectacle in only a very short take, the narrative will not linger for them. In theatrical exhibition, a spectator’s only recourse would thus be to see the film again – a decision which will be made, in turn, on the basis of whether or not the film’s narrative qualities merit repeat business – whereas on video, one needs only back up and bring their eye to bear more keenly. It gets straight to the root of Pierson’s anti-Decadent theory of reception that she nonetheless considers this narrativized spectacle aesthetic to be inimical to connoisseurship. As far as she is concerned, it is impossible for a DVFX sequence to both “solicit an aesthetic appreciation of the visual effects

image as art and artifact” and be edited so as to create a taught and suspenseful narrative (Pierson 2002, 124). This is a highly limiting conception of cinema, and one which sets very strict limits as to what cinema art can do, and what degree of sophistication can be expected from the spectator. As such it is deeply anti-Decadent.

Pierson’s writings, in their insistence upon the alterity of digitally-rendered object within the filmic image, also bear other implications regarding the arts – most especially cinema’s affinities with canvass paintings. With the rise of photorealistic DVFX, Pierson pointed out, “filmmakers [have] actually become painters; the metaphor is no longer a poetic fancy.” But the basic premise of painting – whereby all aspects of an imaginative vision are created in exactly the same medium and idiom, and so are wholly unified as a visual diegesis/discourse – is one which Pierson sees as inferior and limiting in terms of the cinema. Of DVFX which are meant to wholly imitate photorealism – and so pass unnoticed and sublimated in the diegesis, assisting in the creation of a cumulative spectacular showing – Pierson declares that:

... instead of being drawn to reflect on the process, on the technique, skill, and even virtuosity involved in carrying illusion off, their emotional engagement with the film remains firmly rooted in the diegesis. (Pierson 2002, 105)

Again, one here reads not merely a modernist, anti-mimetic, stance, but also the kind of anti-Decadent one which – as with Klein’s nostalgia for cotton swabs and oatmeal flakes – values the ingenuity of readily-visible “technique” and “skill” against the prospect of formal and stylistic perfection which creates a unified diegesis. Although Pierson allows that, theoretically, “even visual effects images” produced in accordance with this “simulationist” logic “may still be appreciated as aesthetic objects,” she leaves no doubt that she finds “other types of visual effects imagery” to be “geared more strongly toward eliciting a specifically aesthetic appreciation of the image as art and artifact” (Pierson 2002, 65). Effects that are “perceived to have been designed for the express purpose of integrating the effect into the visual and narratological space of the cinematographic frame,” Pierson deems as “having no aesthetic function beyond that of maintaining focus on the action or drama and driving the narrative along,” as though these aims were not fundamental to cinema’s basic functioning (Pierson 2002, 106).

One of the most important aspects of Pierson’s critique of simulationist DVFX, of the kind seen in *The Phantom Menace*, is that, in the course of it, she excoriates “the Disney style of animation” as hopelessly “restrictive.” Doing so, she rhetorically asks:

Does the scope for the kind of transmutation of the visual field that might make an effect special even exist once a film begins to be made over in the mode of an animated feature? Do totally animated feature films even have special effects? (Pierson 2002, 152-53)

The answer to Pierson's supposedly rhetorical question, however, is in fact yes. Throughout the early years of DVFX which she focuses on, the same aesthetic processes of integration of DVFX into a non-digital diegesis were happening in even purer form in cel animation (Pierson 2002, 153). This made Disney animation the most complete crystallization of the use of DVFX to create a unified, painterly cinematic image. This will be the overarching subject of a later chapter, but for now it is sufficient to observe that the progress of the cel-animated feature, throughout the years of Pierson's technofuturist aesthetic, offered a uniquely pure crystallization of how, as Stephen Prince has pointed out: "Except in a limited sense, the era of special effects is over" (Prince 2012, 3).

The shift to digital modes ended the era in which visual effects were 'special,' that is, were allocated to a domain of trick photography regarded as being separate from and peripheral to the main stage of production. (Prince 2012, 56)

Special effects "were special," he continues, "because the joins were generally visible between the elements comprising the effect, and this made boundaries between live-action cinematography and composited shots clear" (Prince 2012, 4). It was this visibility and clarity, supposedly productive of "special-ness," that Pierson elevated to a supreme criterion of value, and so mourned the passing of, in favour of an era in which "digital effects are not solely a post-production endeavour, and... can blend seamlessly with live action so that clear boundaries between the domains often do not exist" (Prince 2012, 4). Again, Prince's words evoke the unified, painterly image – so resonant with the animated feature – which Pierson's technofuturist paradigm sought to present an alternative to.

Beyond her stances on diegesis, Pierson's work could also be construed as anti-Decadent due to its stance on reception and spectatorship – specifically, the degree to which it rejects Decadent ideals of "art for art's sake." Instead, Pierson situates herself in a discourse around DVFX that values "participation." Articulating this idea, Pierson declares – quoting Theodor Adorno – that "the buff's cultivation of technical knowledge about the production process" supposedly bespeaks a desire "to break away from the passive status of compulsory consumers' – to experience culture as if from the inside" (Pierson 2002, 8). Adorno himself saw this desire as utterly futile – simply another "work of ideology" on the part of the ruling capitalist order "to

reproduce more appreciative consumers without bringing them any closer to having ‘even the slightest influence’ on the production process” (Pierson 2002, 8). Nonetheless, however, with the rise of DVFX throughout the 1990s, this ideal – of a certain type of participatory viewing experience being granted by a certain type of DVFX-oriented science-fiction spectacle – gained a certain new lease on life, which Pierson’s book eagerly followed up on. “Current digital technologies,” Vivian Sobchack wrote in 2000:

...have effected an increasing convergence of theatre, film, and computergraphics [sic] so as to create an immersive and illusory environment in which “magic” is reversible with “method,” and in which audiences “act” as much as they “spectate.” (Sobchack 2000, xxi)

Likewise, the same year, Darley wrote that DVFX-enabled spectacles “throw into relief a peculiar form of reception, encouraging an engagement with illusionistic image texts that operates no longer solely through traditional modes of interpretation.” Instead, he continued, now “pleasure and gratification can... involve a different positioning” – one which involves “a knowing fascination with the play of intertextual reference,” whereby the spectacular image “offers itself for a kind of perceptual play with its own materiality and the artifice behind its fabrication” (Darley 2000, 112). Pierson’s own specific thesis on this was that the discourses of “genre film fandom, and especially science fiction fandom,” have “always attracted the amateur archivist and historian,” and have “always been articulate in [their] investment in the future of cinema, just as often seeing fans as genre cinema’s watchdogs” (Pierson 2002, 122). “Genre film magazines,” furthermore, supposedly established more of a dialogue between fans and practitioners – creating a public forum in which “the aesthetic concerns of special effects production were taken seriously” (Pierson 2002, 117). Pierson also declares, elsewhere, that “The idea that today’s fans of science-fiction cinema are its future filmmakers continues to be articulated in many science-fiction magazines” (Pierson 1999, 162 n. 13).

The ultimate, underlying problematic of such discourses of participation may be that their ingenuous, liberal valuation of a “participatory” experience of art is rooted in the idea that appreciating – and making – art can (or should) be therapeutic. Indeed, as we saw above, many of the theorists who espoused the supposed new “participatory” aspect of DVFX did so in a spirit whereby watching a film was now, in a sense, understood to be almost an act of art-making in itself, rather than one of passive consumption. Whether or not this was ever actually the case is perhaps less important than what such an idea indicates as a point of ideology. And in the event, such a conception runs totally counter to the nineteenth-century Decadent ideology of art – which

revered art's hieratic and imperious aspect too highly to see it as desirable for it be brought down to the same level as its spectator. Nor would the nineteenth-century Decadents have been overly sympathetic to ideas of the therapeutic in art – holding as they did the belief that art is beholden to no law or responsibility but itself, and is emphatically not beholden to succour or reassure its spectator by granting them a sense of participation, and thus validation and self-esteem. This is the same issue that art critic Robert Hughes referred to as “art and the therapeutic fallacy,” or the idea that aesthetics are not a legitimate end in themselves, but must be the means to some other beneficial end, either moral, spiritual, psychological, or politically progressive (Hughes 1994). This would have been news to Des Esseintes, contemplating his wall covered in Jan Luyken engravings. That a discernible strain of Decadent aesthetics would manifest itself in Hollywood spectacles throughout the 2000s – in stark contradiction of imputations of a “participatory” aspect to DVFX – again goes to show the limitations of (post)modern theorists' conceptions of cinema.

The vision of a participatory film culture Pierson evokes, and that theorists such as Sobchack and Darley would rhyme, is one, however, necessarily moderated by the practices of scholarly research and academic writing. Out on the fringes of film criticism, however, it can mushroom and grow to its most hyperbolically absurd pitch. This is exemplified by Jake Horsley's 2005 book *Dogville vs. Hollywood*, in which he declares that:

In the future, the ratio of doers to watchers – artists to audience members – will slowly (or perhaps rapidly) reverse. The many will create, and only the impoverished few will retain the dull luxury of passive observation, the luxury of movies. (Horsley 2005, 341)

The emphasis upon participation and interactivity which Pierson and other film theorists flirt with, and Horsley's messianic rhetoric takes to its ultimate conclusion, bespeaks a suspicion of – or outright hostility towards – aesthetics and representation which is the opposite of everything the Decadent sensibility stands for. It is again the idea that art should be therapeutic – that it is therapeutic to create, and that the mere savouring or appreciating of works of art as art is somehow antisocial or maladjusted. Any true Decadent aesthete would heartily agree, and eagerly continue doing so for exactly that reason.

Ultimately, Pierson's technofuturist aesthetic accorded a certain aesthetic worth to DVFX, and allowed that their arch injection of a new, more sophisticatedly inhuman, kind of beauty into cinema could be a positive, potentially utopian, development. Thus, for all her indifference to narrative implications, her rhetoric about “participatory” viewing experiences, and her hostility toward the aesthetically unified image, she nonetheless preserved the slightest, most tenuous,

connection with a Decadent aesthetic sensibility. Her response to the rise of cryptic, patently artificial, dehumanized images created on computers was not one of anxiety, but welcome – in the hope that their formal characteristics and “plastic beauty” could change cinema for the better. This at least does honour to the Decadent sensibility. There were other film theorists, however, who reacted to the same development simply by rejecting DVFX’s capacities out of hand, and declaring that all film aesthetics inhered in the photochemical and indexical – the glories of cel animation conveniently forgotten. Moreover, this essentially photochemical and indexical nature of film was not even best exemplified by slickly and professionally produced live-action films shot on 35mm film stock and edited in analogue fashion. Rather – such was the defensiveness aroused by the digital revolution in cinema – theorists of this stamp would insist that it was when the inherent imperfections, liabilities, and flaws in the process were most apparent that the humanizing, real-world indexical virtues of the old photochemical processes were most appreciable. A stance such as this is anti-Decadent insofar as it values aesthetic imperfection more than the possibility of rarefied aesthetic perfection. The evocation of the piercing, archly-aestheticized gaze, the determinedly enclosed aesthetic environment, and the privileging of perfectly-ordered aesthetic form, which one read in Poe, Gautier, and Pater, and which have migrated into much cinematic spectacle today, are replaced with an emphasis upon reassuring ugliness.

It was in this spirit that, in 2002, Jean-Pierre Geuens published an essay in *Film Quarterly* entitled “The Digital World Picture.” In it, he posited “a radical discontinuity at the core of the digital revolution, insofar as it has the power to shatter the long-standing arrangements that regulate how movies come into being” (Geuens 2002, 16). “I will... attack what I perceive to be the nihilistic tendencies of the new medium” Geuens declares with stunning frankness, and “conclude by bringing to light a different use of the technology – one that might take us back from the abyss” (Geuens 2002, 16). Animation, incidentally, figures nowhere in his sense of “how movies come into being.”

Geuens’s essay is as hyperbolic as his introduction suggests. His paradigm is aggressively and explicitly modernist – thoroughly imbued with the wish to demolish representation as it is commonly understood. Regarding Renaissance perspective, he declares that “the digital apparatus was made to subvert the conventional pictorial space that regulated painting for four centuries and has dominated film since its origin” (Geuens 2002, 24). He hails the experimental aspects of

*Time Regained* (Raúl Ruiz, 1999) as “as marvellously fresh as Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* must have been to its own audience in 1907,” and writes of how digital compositing could be used to make a film’s “individuated parts... comment on one other in the same manner as different voices and styles of speech combine to create the power of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (Geuens 2002, 24-25). Furthermore, he dismissively refers to “the visual world... reconstructed along the same specifications as the old one... so we end up with a nineteenth-century story dressed up in twenty-first century garb” (Geuens 2002, 25). Beyond this explicitly modernist paradigm, however, Geuens is anti-Decadent in being uncritically nostalgic for what he calls “the dumb opacity and the brute materiality of the medium” of film, whereby, for instance, “in the old cameras, operators could not be certain, until they saw the dailies a day later, that their framing and focusing had been up to par” (Geuens 2002, 18). So absolutist is Geuens on this point that he actually wistfully recalls the supposed good old days when “despite all preparations, a hair on the gate, a light leak in a magazine, or inexplicable mishaps at the lab can still destroy hours and hours of hard work” – indeed, he recalls “the despair of Andrei Tarkovsky and Sven Nykvist when their principle camera jammed during the shooting of the last, most important, and most expensive sequence in *The Sacrifice*” (Geuens 2002, 18). “Far from being perceived as flaws,” he goes on to state, “mishaps by actors and camera operates in fact heighten our involvement” in the event playing out before the camera (Geuens 2002, 24). Rather than seeing digital technologies as labour-saving devices that will dispense with these practical vexations and allow more freedom for creativity, Geuens opines that “digital technology pensions off these heroic features of film” (Geuens 2002, 18). All of this, meanwhile, is simply Geuens pronouncing on shooting on digital, with no mention of images that have been entirely conjured and rendered by DVFX. On these, he is downright fanatical.

His discussion of the “nihilistic tendencies” of DVFX, as he calls them, shows that Geuens has completely imbibed that classicist-chauvinist position whereby the cinema of generations past was indissociable from a virtuous documentary indexicality, and the current state of the medium is a debased and fallen one. He asserts that DVFX constitute “a redeployment away from the traditional source of the medium – the world of everyday life,” and that the images it creates “never existed as such” (Geuens 2002, 20). Yet again, one recalls Prince’s commonsensical observation that the films of Hollywood’s Classical Studio era routinely contained their own kind of fakery, in double exposures, painted backdrops, the Schufftan process, etc. Geuens, however,

makes no acknowledgment of this. Singling out George Lucas's *The Phantom Menace* for special abuse, he makes Pierson's discussion of it look adulatory by comparison. Unlike her, Geuens makes no reference to the film's awesome digitally-conjured imaginative spectacles – Otoh Gunga, Naboo's underwater world, the city of Theed, the pod racing, Coruscant, etc. – but rather makes a fetish of the film's use of new digital editing techniques which allow the actors' performances to be digitally tweaked and remodulated in post, as well as the digital backlot technologies that allow settings to be conjured, revised, and populated at will. "I believe a dangerous ethos permeates the entire *Phantom Menace* project," he declares, insofar as Lucas seeks to make himself "no longer embroiled in the complexity, the otherness, and the resistance of the everyday world," but rather "become truly omnipotent, [his] power absolute" (Geuens 2002, 23). Certainly, few *cinephiles* can be without a pang of sadness that, in the age of DVFX, nothing like the mad, chaotic, haphazard folly of Francis Ford Coppola's filming of *Apocalypse Now* in the Philippines – chronicled so memorably in Eleanor Coppola's *Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (1991) – is ever likely to happen again. Digital compositing and environment creation have simply reached such a high pitch as to make it easier and more logical for ambitious shots or sequences to be photorealistically simulated in a studio, rather than brutally and expensively gleaned on location. But Geuens's apocalyptic rhetoric nonetheless seems misplaced. Grandiose imaginative conceptions, of the kind that motivated Coppola, seem unlikely ever to go out of style in Hollywood; while new technological capacities invariably lead simply to new challenges – shooting performance-capture on location or underwater, rather than in a studio, for instance. Rather, in Geuens, one again hears Dudley Andrew's remarks about the recalcitrance of the real, but in a far less measured spirit.

Even more disconcerting is that, in his rhetoric about Lucas's will-to-power as an artist, Geuens makes no acknowledgment that this is not remotely new – a fact which will be known to those sympathetic to the Decadent impetus in art. It was in 1852 that Flaubert declared that "An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere." DVFX's ultimate significance is, simply, to have brought the possibility for this same imaginative megalomania to non-cel-animated cinema. This sentiment, and mentality towards art-making, however, lies outside of the history of modernism – in the classical realist line – and so Geuens can only stigmatize it, declaring its underlying sensibility to be:

...reminiscent of a similar labour performed by the less savory characters of the Marquis de Sade, who also made mincemeat of their victims' bodies, seeing in them but human matter to be played with as long as pleasure was attained. (Geuens 2002, 23)

And finally, in an utterly incredible moment of rhetorical bad taste, Geuens declares that “if Reinhard Heydrich were alive today and a filmmaker, he would not proceed any differently” (Geuens 2002, 23).

In all this, one again sees the insistence – familiar to so much modernist-minded film theory – that the spectator must possess a sense of absolute superiority to, and consequent sense of control over, the diegesis of illusion. Such spectators wish never, ever to feel overawed and dwarfed an aesthetic illusion. Geuens fundamentally seems to desire an aesthetically and imaginatively enfeebled cinema, whereby so much work is put into conjuring even the most imperfect and tentative of illusions that it would be absurd for the spectator to expect or demand anything more. To do so, he declares, would be a sinful act of pride – of wishing to “no longer consider people and other entities in nature as others, in their distinctness, but as objects made to serve us, material to be used at will” (Geuens 2002, 23). And this, ultimately, makes his aesthetic mindset a highly conservative, anti-Decadent one – one with no patience with any utopian impulse towards aesthetic perfection, especially not as offered by DVFX. Furthermore, Geuens's estimate of imagination seems likewise low. The Decadent potentialities for painterly perfection afforded by DVFX – for rendering aestheticized, otherworldly environments which can answer any need of the utopian imagination – are not admitted as terms of value in his thought. Like John Belton the same year, Geuens praises Mike Figgis's *Timecode* (2000) as showing a potential other way for DVFX – a “redemptive move,” he calls it, whereby “Figgis put himself in a situation where he had to trust his actors and crew to do the best they could... Sure things went wrong at times, but there were happy accidents as well” – but beyond this, his article is wholly defined by the modernist paradigm that representation needs subverting (Geuens 2002, 24).

Published the same year as Belton's “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution,” Geuens's essay had the same mitigating alibi for its failures of prescience: that the rise to omnipresence of DVFX was a new development, and the contours of the expanded cinematic landscape had not yet come into focus. His defensive retrenchment into exultation of the haphazard and imperfect in film is thus partially explicable in terms of grasping at continuity and the familiar, when so much seemed to be in a state of unpredictable flux. Twelve year later, however, with the digital revolution fully mature, a theorist such as Hugh S. Manon, with his essay “Beyond the Beyond:

CGI and the Anxiety of Overperfection,” can still put forth the same anti-Decadent line, almost unchanged. Manon’s only modulation on Geuens is that he has come round to using the word “perfect,” and its various conjugations, with regard to DVFX, but views this development in a wholly negative light. Writing from a Žižek-ian standpoint, Manon declares that the digitally-perfected image “fails to incorporate the gaps, stains, and ruptures upon which traditional analogue special effects flourished over much of the twentieth century” – in short, “*fails to fail*, and in doing so omits a crucial component of the subjective lure: the admission by the deceiver that a deception is in the offing” (Manon 2014, 185). In this fixation upon “gaps, stains, and ruptures,” one again hears Geuens’s anti-Decadent adulation of an aesthetically enfeebled cinema, along with Klein’s nostalgia for visibly imperfect analogue effects. “I want to view analog-era cinema as by definition a messy, phony, highly artificial medium whose limitations are self-evident and constantly on display,” Manon declares at one point, laying his cards clearly on the table (Manon 2014, 187). The Bordwell/Thompson line on the Classic Studio Era’s supposed seamlessness and invisibility, he continues, “betrays a naïve fantasy,” insofar as such things were never either possible or desirable (Manon 2014, 187). In this, he goes even further than Ndalians, who at least implicitly conceded that Bordwell and Thompson’s premises were valid prior to the 1960s or thereabouts. And moreover, to an even greater degree than other theorists discussed above, he is not shy about presuming to pronounce upon what all moviegoers wish to see, as with his declaration that “The assumptions made by the creators and consumers of digital CGI are opposite: that seamlessness is both possible and desirable” (Manon 2014, 187).

By way of legitimating these disconcerting assertions, Manon hearkens back to 1951, and describes a low-budget film called *The Man with My Face* (Edward Montagne), which apparently used very visibly imperfect compositing effects to make it appear that the same actor was playing two different characters, both visible in frame at the same time. Manon then feels free to use this film as a prism through which to view all pre-DVFX cinema, declaring it to be paradigmatic of how:

Analog cinema *wishes* it could achieve a kind of direct neural connection between the viewer and the film’s story-world, but in practice it can only deliver something else: a series of errors, flaws, and gaps that pointedly rupture the illusion of seamlessness in seductive ways. (Manon 2014, 187, italics Manon’s)

“Ultimately,” he goes on to say, “films such as *The Man with My Face* succeed by failing – by allowing the seams, gaps, and misalignments endemic to real-world production to become a

seductive part of the fiction” (Manon 2014, 192-93). The anti-Decadent sentiments at work here are even clearer than in Geuens. The perfected, painterly digital image is abhorrent to Manon, because he does not want successfully achieved aesthetics; but rather a cinema that proudly flaunts its crudity and incompetence. In this, Manon’s ideas are somewhat akin to Jeffrey Sconce’s on the subject of “paracinema.” For Sconce, ultra-low-budget spectacles which – if viewed according to criteria of seamless photorealism – appear indescribably cheap and unconvincing, in fact take on a kind of tragic profundity which is its own kind of compelling aesthetic. “Such moments of impoverished excess,” Sconce declares:

...are a means toward collapsing cinema’s fourth wall, allowing the profilmic and the extratextual to mesh with the diegetic drama. The ‘surface’ diegesis becomes precisely that, the thin and final veil that is the indexical mark of a more interesting drama, that of the film’s construction and sociohistorical context. (Sconce 1995, 391)

Manon’s Žižek-ian perspective on all this, however, leads him to draw on Lacanian notions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic to posit what he calls “the beyond” – the sense that there is always something we can imaginatively conceive of but cannot see, and that this is a fundamental ordering principle of human psychology. To remove it, Manon declares, is to invite anxiety and disequilibrium. For the human subject, he declares “mastery is impossible and perpetual dissatisfaction is constitutive” (Manon 2014, 190). It is in this spirit that he continues on to assert that: “Failures of realism are what makes cinema cinema, because without them the diegesis would lack any sense of a beyond” (Manon 2014, 186). One sees here the inherent peril of taking Žižek-via-Lacan as an end in and of himself, and using his theoretical writings as the arbiter of how cinema works, rather than any empirical understanding of cinema itself. As indubitably fascinating as Žižek’s writings on cinema – and his two meta-commentaries on the medium from within, *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (Sophie Fiennes, 2006) and *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (Sophie Fiennes, 2012) – are, Cinema Studies is not best served by simply adopting them as holy writ. It is this which leads Manon to deem the Lacanian “beyond” to be so self-evident that the utopian exuberance felt by millions of viewers worldwide for *Avatar*’s digitally-conjured ecosystem becomes inexplicable to him. The film’s vivid DVFX, he declares, “[lack] the imagined place beyond the veil – the very place at which our desire is targeted,” and this “lack of a beyond means that there can be no subjective lure,” because the “place beyond the lack has been filled to the point of overflowing” and presented to viewers with “a camera style that is almost sickeningly complaisant” (Manon 2014, 195-96). We have seen in previous chapters –

and will see again in the next – that the mere presence of fluently realistic DVFX do not in and of themselves make a film imaginatively liberating. The difference is made by the narrative use to which they are put, and it is this that – like many (post)modernist theorists – Manon resists acknowledging.

Of the photorealistic digital illusions which have now rendered his exultation of crudity and incompetence moot, Manon can only declare that “CG media sacrifices art on the altar of imago” (Manon 2014, 196). In other words, the Platonic ideal rears its head again. Manon is essentially admitting the fact that DVFX now make it possible for filmmakers to exactly realize their imaginative vision, but he declines to credit this development with any utopian potential, and instead describes it as an entirely negative development. “Such techniques, I believe, leave our psychology begging for a little *less* of a good thing,” he rather states (Manon 2014, 195). Like other theorists quoted above, Manon tends to extrapolate his own tastes onto the moviegoing public in general. “Poor technical execution does not explain why CGI creatures, settings, and actions often fail to impress,” he declares, but rather it is because modern DVFX are “*too* technically proficient, too clean, and thus out of sync with a human desire based on lack” (Manon 2014, 196, italics Manon’s). Manon offers no real acknowledgment of any legitimate appeal for today’s perfectible digitally-conjured spectacles, but rather simply posits all “human desire” as against them, and yearning instead for a cinematic art grounded in crudity and imperfection. The anti-Decadent can go no further.

The affinities with Sconce’s paracinema ideals which Manon hints at become more or less fully explicit in Dan North’s 2008 book *Performing Illusions: Cinema, Special Effects, and the Virtual Actor*. Here, along with such other films as *Voodoo Woman* (Edward L. Cahn, 1957), *The Undead* (Roger Corman, 1957), *The Brain Eaters* (Bruno VeSota, 1958), *Attack of the Giant Leeches* (Bernard L. Kowalski, 1959), and *The Angry Red Planet* (Ib Melchior, 1960), North declares of the film *Invasion of the Saucer Men* (Edward L. Cahn, 1957) that:

Rather than aspiring to the production values of a major cinematic release on a reduced budget with fewer star performers, films such as this proudly display the limitations of their resources. ... In a comic scene, one invader fights with a cow... there is enough tight editing to give the impression of action being created by montage... but the cutting is not so severe as to prevent the audience from clearly seeing the absurd, bulbous plastic head and tiny body of the alien. The effect is to hold up for ridicule the work of the special effects department, which cannot be dismissed as incompetence because it is deliberately makeshift. It is an anti-classical device shattering codes of realism and lambasting the credulity often lent to the popular myth of extraterrestrial visitors. It is a refusal of

attempts at credible illusion and, to risk an over-generous assessment, a (deliberate?) critique of the somber and conservative orthodox view of technology as a powerful ally to be dutifully respected and assiduously applied. (North 2008, 105-106)

North finds this sort of anti-aesthetic irresistibly subversive for the same reasons that Geuens and Manon praised the haphazardness and incompleteness of their privileged film spectacles. In good modernist fashion, it represents a refusal of Decadent ideals of aesthetic perfection, and offers its viewer only a spectacle that – again, if viewed through a photorealist lens – seems an abject failure. It is integral to North's (post)modern paradigm that he wishes to see this as a deliberate spurning of illusionism on these films' part, rather than an incidental failure to achieve it. Elsewhere in his book, moreover, North is simultaneously of a piece with Darley, in believing fully illusionistic DVFX to be impossible; and with Pierson, Geuens, and Manon, in believing the very attempt to conjure them to be erroneous.

In all these theoretical attempts to deny or discredit the digitally-liberated cinema of today's increasing embrace of decadently aestheticized visual perfection, one reads one consistent structured absence. This is any frank acknowledgment of the essentially painterly nature of cinematic images that DVFX have enabled, and naturalized as never before. To invoke Dudley Andrew and the "*Cahiers* line" once again, throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the highly-pleasurably, visually stylized, films of the "Cinema du Look" received much criticism (as well as much popular success) in France for being "film[s] of the visual," in which "each shot steps forward on its own, presenting itself like a consumer product on a billboard" (Andrew 2010, 18). "Such pictures," then-*Cahiers*-editor Serge Daney recriminated, were virtually "given as self-sufficient," making it difficult to imagine how they could "possibly connect to or imply neighbouring shots," since they were seemingly devoid of any "constituting absence" – any position beyond the image where an extra-cinematic "real" can be conceived of (Andrew 2010, 18). To take a more generous stance on such beautiful spectacles as *The Big Blue* (Luc Besson, 1988) and *The Bear* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1988), however, one can see in this basically painterly aesthetic – where the frame is treated at least as much like a canvas as a documentary camera frame – the embryo of the aesthetic which DVFX have hyperbolized and perfected today, and which would doubtless have mortified Daney had he lived to see it. Again, as Prince said, filmmakers have, in essence, become painters, making the medium of cinema much more organically of a piece with animation. The step from drawn storyboard to painterly frame in an animated film is potentially a very short one, and the painterly beauty afforded by

DVFX are only making it shorter for the rest of cinema as well, effacing historical distinctions between a student seeing a documentary record of the real world, and a Decadent aesthete scrutinizing a detailed figurative canvas.

One final, crucial implication of Decadent aesthetics' privileging of ocular, visual mastery is that they have no conceptual objection to flatness or frames – either of the painted canvas or the cinema screen. As has been seen above, much theorizing of contemporary cinematic spectacle has emphasized immersivity and three-dimensionality, in addition to the obsessive valuing, by many theorists, of a “participatory” viewing experience – or one that readily gives away its own humanizing falsity. At the root of this, however, lies an essentially populist assumption that is at odds with Decadence's hieraticism and elitism. Even when these values are encoded into a visual aesthetic intended for mass popular consumption, their underlying implications and assumptions remain. When a cinematic spectacle of today performs an abrupt slow-motion arrest of a grandiose spectacle, or emphasizes a character's gaze to acutely intense levels, or foregrounds an aesthetic object or environment to a greater degree than most stereotypical “mainstream entertainments,” they are deploying an aesthetic that does not readily lend itself to the value schema of transparency and community that underlies the populist theoretical paradigms above. They are instead deploying, either openly – as with the V's Shadow Gallery or the Consultant's gazing at Böcklin's *Deposition* – or subtly – as with innumerable more spectacles in the *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* mode – an aesthetic that positions the spectator as a solitary set of acutely-trained eyes, with a clearly defined field of ocular fire. The spectator is made into a connoisseur in the genuine, historical, Decadent sense, rather than in the diluted, contemporary, communal sense that Pierson and other theorists have proposed.

The basic phenomenological fact of the Baroque and Decadent aesthetics – and concomitant expansion of spectacular illusionism – emergent in cinema over the past two decades cannot be gainsaid. That this is genuinely, if implicitly, understood by many theorists is appreciable in the depth of their avoidance or rejection of the state of affairs. So deep runs Bukatman's ideological commitment to immersive, non-traditional cinematic experiences such as ridefilms and simulator theatres – as against the two-dimensional screen – for instance, that he at one point makes the provocative remark, about internet surfing, that:

The flatness of the screen is emphasized by that wonderful act of scrolling, which recalls nothing so much as the pre-electronic clunkiness of microfilm projectors (except perhaps unrolling paper towels or *bathroom tissue*). While IMAX films present an ‘unframed’

image, the Web (like GUI's – graphic user interfaces – in general) is all windows, frames, borders, and boundaries. (Bukatman 1998, 264-65, italics mine)

Although not as outrageous as Geuens's invocation of Reinhard Heydrich, this toilet metaphor nonetheless evinces the same dynamic of academic theorizing being used to legitimate a much deeper-held, essentially theological, worldview. In both cases, the worldview is essentially a kind of reductive Bazin-ism: with Geuens, it is that indexical photographic realism is so fundamental to cinema's essence that it must never be tampered with, even if the tampering does not fundamentally change a film's realist idiom; and with Bukatman, it is a fealty to Bazin's "myth of total cinema," whereby cinema will eventually transcend its circumscribed two-dimensionality, and offer a completely immersive sensory experience. Both of these ideals, we have seen, are flawed. Optical trickeries have always been part of live-action cinema, not to mention live-action cinema having always co-existed with animated cinema; and the two-dimensional, rectangular screen is as central to cinema's nature as the canvas is to painting's nature, rather than an incidental contrivance and inhibition that we shall soon be rid of. Baroque and Decadent aesthetics, in their frank embrace of illusionism, offer a better understanding of these realities than (post)modern traditions in film theory that attempt to wish them away.

## Chapter Four – Baroque and Decadent as “Narrativized Spectacle”

It was seen in the previous chapter that the (post)modernist discourses in Cinema Studies are profoundly at loggerheads with how the Baroque and Decadent digital spectacles of today work in practice. This is due to the dual problematic of, firstly, attempting to coerce such spectacles into the modernist ideal that art must critique illusionism by foregrounding its own processes of creation; and secondly, axiomatically dismissing the classical-realist narrative workings of the modern blockbuster. The Baroque and Decadent spectacles of contemporary, digitally-liberated cinema *do*, it must be constantly re-emphasized, work in classical narrative terms. This is a matter of basic aesthetic function. A spectacular image with no narrative contextualization is merely a visual abstraction. It gains the greater part of its actual spectacular affect by virtue of being situated in a classical narrative context.

Speaking in unwarrantedly abashed tone about this issue, Alan Ackerman once declared, in a 2011 book, that:

My approach to seeing things is naïve. I want to believe: that Michelangelo’s rebellious slave will burst his marble bands; that an open window’s radiant light inspires Caravaggio’s St Matthew; that Pixar’s pixelated toys break and repair. I like to think that when a person leaves the screen or stage he goes into another room or into a landscape glimpsed through a closing door, or when the camera cuts to a listener in a conversation that she is actually listening to what her partner said. (Ackerman 2011, 3)

Ackerman calls himself “naïve” as a professor of literature. In the realm of the cinema, however, his remarks are virtually commonsensical, insofar as the implicit presence of information, meaning, and implication beyond what is immediately onscreen is essential to a film’s narrative functioning. When one sees an image such as Caesar perched atop one of the great California redwoods, gazing back upon San Francisco at the climax of *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, for instance, the image gains incalculably in emotional resonance because the spectator appreciates it not simply as an isolated exercise in composition, but as a moment of graphic logic in the service of a classically-functioning narrative. The image emphasizes that Caesar and his primate army will soon be returning to San Francisco as conquerors, completing the poetic justice of the vindication and retribution of those who were kidnapped from their homeland to be used as test subjects in labs. Such an emphasis as this – on the centrality of a spectacular image’s content, narrative context, and the fact that it very much possesses an ultimate thematic resonance derived from that context – is central to what I will henceforth call “narrativized spectacle.”

For all that Andrew Darley's *Visual Digital Culture* was riven with (post)modernist assumptions about the nature of film spectacle and spectatorship, he did make the redeeming concession that:

I do not want to deny the other dimensions of these and like images, the way they represent and the questions of what they denote and connote. However, I am concerned to emphasize as the dominant aesthetic feature this *game with spectacular illusion* that is taking place in the films of the new spectacle cinema. (Darley 2000, 110-11, italics Darley's)

He concedes, in essence, that a paradigm of cinema as narrativized spectacle is a valid one, but simply not the one his own theoretical bent compels him toward. A more generous iteration still of this sentiment is found in Aylish Wood's declaration that ideas about "the many imaginative and intellectual possibilities of cinema" – and its capacity to take viewers "to all kinds of places, from romantic sunsets to the farthest-flung reaches of a galaxy" – are "important," but "take us directly into the story-world of the film," rather than the "interface" which is the subject of her current inquiry (Wood 2007, 12). She is correct about these ideas' importance, however, and "the story-world of the film," and its substance as narrativized spectacle, will be the subject of the following chapter.

In discussing cinema, terms such as "narrative" and "story-world" are implicitly indissociable from the basic idea of "content." Narrative and content, in tandem, stand for the actual substance of *what is shown* – something that has importance in and of itself, beyond concerns of *how it is shown*, or the fact that, indeed, *showing is taking place*. As was seen in the previous chapter, obsessively emphasizing the latter two concerns at the expense of the first has been a powerful force in many (post)modernist theoretical engagements with DVFX and cinematic spectacle. This tendency in Western art, however, goes back much further than the rise of digital spectacle, or even cinema itself. Narrative and content are basic foundations of representational art – the idea that style and address, while indubitably important, are nonetheless means to the end of showing something, rather than ends unto themselves. Basic representational assumptions such as this, however, were already beginning to be questioned in the unprecedentedly visual culture of the nineteenth century. In 1971, Wylie Sypher suggested that:

The nineteenth century was among the most visual periods of Western culture, the most given to ideals of precise observation – a spectator-view shared by novelists, painters, scientists and, to an extent, by poets... (qtd. in Jay 1993, 113)

While the profusion of digital images into almost every waking moment of people's lives would seem to suggest that the twenty-first century's visuality has self-evidently surpassed the nineteenth's, there is a certain sense in which Sypher is still indubitably correct. The nineteenth century may well stand as a high-water mark of straightforwardly representational art which has yet to be surpassed, and indeed may never be. It was, after all, being eroded even in its own time. Speaking of the Impressionists, Martin Jay says that:

...*what* was painted often seemed less important than *how* it was painted, as the experience of sight rather than persons, narratives, or natural objects became the subject of their art. As in the celebrated case of Monet's multiple versions of haystacks or the façade of the Rouen cathedral, the external model became little more than an occasion for the stimulus of the retinas. (Jay 1993, 154-55, italics Jay's)

This is a paradigm which, we have seen, would go on to command much support in the modernist discourses of Cinema Studies. Jay's talk of leaving "their brush strokes still evident, the contours of their forms blurred, their colors often juxtaposed rather than smoothly blended" speaks exactly to the conviction among radical modernist film theorists that it is the duty of film art to call attention to its own construction and processes of production (Jay 1993, 154). And indeed, under such a conception of film art, subject matter does indeed become virtually incidental – because if narrative is not allowed to be naturalized by virtue of being sublimated into illusionism, then its relative premises and content become virtually irrelevant. Seventeenth-century Baroque art is thus, again, useful to keep in mind here, as it predates all of this by two centuries, and recalls a time when subject matter was triumphally important, and was conveyed to the spectator in a visual idiom that brooked no challenge to its illusionism. Decadent painting and art criticism, however, is perhaps even more apposite to the point, because its situation in the nineteenth century made it one of the last, most fascinating movements in straightforward representation, before the modernist *avant-garde* would colonize the cultural horizon, and seek to abolish the ideal of narrativized spectacle.

Reading Baudelaire's sojourns through the 1845 Salon, one is confronted with an almost-alien aesthetic world: an entire new exhibition – dedicated to subject matter which not only represents anything at all, but literally what it appears to represent, and orders the manner of its presentation so as manage illusionism rather than deconstruct it – which bespeaks an aesthetic culture wholly defined by mimesis. The works of this nineteenth-century culture are done, in turn, in the name of presenting an image with narrative implications – a narrativized spectacle, in

essence. Baudelaire dedicated his primary attention to Delacroix's canvases *Madeleine of the Desert*, *Last Words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius*, *The Sultan of Morocco with His Entourage*, and the now-almost-totally-obscure *Sibyl with the Golden Bough*, but one also hears his impressions of Horace Vernet's *Capture of the Smala*, Théodore Chassériau's *The Caliph of Constantine and His Escort*, Eugène Deveria's *The Birth of Henry IV*, and Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot's *The Peasant Concert* and *Homer and the Beggars*. In all these, one gets images which are intended to charge the viewer's imagination with narrative looks into the spectacles of; on the one hand, the history and mythology Classical Antiquity; and, on the other, France's current military adventurism in North Africa. Painting here serves the same aesthetic function which has now migrated chiefly to cinema – the offering of a voyeuristic window upon the spectacle of another, more visually and imaginatively stimulating, world. One here sees an era in art history when one was allowed to see and savour the spell of visual narrative at work, rather than having it be censoriously disallowed. It is profoundly significant, thus, that Baudelaire excoriated the propagation of photography in such strong terms. He surmised – entirely correctly as it turned out – that the new device would fatally corrode the ability to appreciate the nuances of mimetic, representational painting, now that seemingly total mimesis was available by virtue of mere mechanism. Indeed, more than a century later, radical modernist commentary upon the arts had progressed, in some quarters, to such a point as to evince genuine hate for the nuances of mimetically representational art, and exalt photography and cinema's nature as mere mechanism for the same reason that Baudelaire had first denounced it.

As Roger Kimball observed in his 1990 book *Tenured Radicals*, the early years of the journal *October* were marked by an “obsession with photography and film,” insofar as the chief appeal of these media were that:

...their ‘mechanical reproducibility’ promises to demystify both the work of art as a uniquely valuable object and the artist as a uniquely talented, individual sensibility. In other words, one reason why photography and film are so highly touted by the *October* set is because they promise to reduce art and artistic creation to the status of an industrialized process. (Kimball 1990, 137-38)

In light of this, it is no surprise that exponents of radical modernist theory experienced such dismay at the rise of photorealistic DVFX. They promised, after all, to fundamentally change the state of affairs that Kimball describes, causing filmmakers to become far less reliant on mechanical reproducibility, and far more reliant on their own imaginations, since DVFX now

afforded them total discretion over what could be conjured and shown. The aesthetic world that Baudelaire's Salon sojourns evoked had always survived to a certain degree in cinema, but the new cinematic horizons opened up by DVFX would make their mimetic possibilities vastly greater.

Only two years after the publication of Kimball's remarks, Greg Solman declared, in a landmark *Film Comment* article, that "these days, effects commingle inextricably with narrative and are, in themselves, meaning-generating" (Solman 1992, 32). DVFX and the rise of specialized visual effects contracting houses, Solman continued, had brought the blockbuster filmmaker closer to "the freedom of the non-collective artist" (Solman 1992, 32). There was now the potential, he declared, for the mainstream commercial director to demonstrate the kind of "uniquely talented, individual sensibility" evoked by Kimball, insofar as he was freed from the limiting dependence on a set rota of basic, on-set, special effects techniques, such as Klein's nostalgia for homemade effects of cotton twists and oatmeal. "Now that they're better constructed," Solman declared in his concluding paragraph, "special effects await new stories and storytellers" (Solman 1992, 41). He declared – in flagrant, salutary contradiction of modernist discourse – that "today's crowd grows impatient with optical tricks, demanding... ones they can't see" (Solman 1992, 41). This insistence, on Solman's part, on the basic reality that spectacular DVFX remain subsumed to a narrative diegesis contradicts the insistent sense, among many film scholars and theorists, that Narrative and Spectacle are mutually exclusive, either/or concepts. Indeed, Tom Gunning's famous "cinema of attractions" versus "cinema of narrative integration" thesis has elevated this idea of Narrative and Spectacle as mutually exclusive to one of the dominant paradigms of Cinema Studies. One hears this, for instance, in Elizabeth Cowie making broad declarations that:

The foundational role of spectacle for cinematic pleasure was quickly disavowed, however. Instead, the pleasures of cinema have become defined as narrative and the standard account of film history is that the thrill of the spectacle of actuality in the new form of imaging gave way to the pleasure of narrative in the fiction film and its more successfully illusionistic world. (Cowie 1999, 26)

Again, one sees here the disciplinary difficulty, in Cinema Studies, of allowing or accounting for the fact of narrativized spectacle – the reality that digitally-rendered spectacle can be intrinsic to a "successfully illusionistic world," rather than inimical to it. The conveying of narrative, after all, is routinely done with cinematography that is itself a work of spectacle. One need only look at the

shot in *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Francis Lawrence, 2013) in which the VTOL craft takes off from the Capitol to ferry Katniss out to the arena to get a sense of this reality. On the one hand, it is an entirely unremarkable piece of classical film grammar, functioning simply as the cut-out to a wider shot signifying the end of one scene, and signalling a temporal and geographical transition to the beginning of the next. On the other hand, the way in which the image is composed – the digitally-conjured aircraft, which is framed in the foreground against the vast panoramic background of the Capitol and a mountain range – provides an emphatic moment of spectacle. Nonetheless, its visual spectacle notwithstanding, it remains subordinate to, and sutured into, the film’s narrative diegesis. It encapsulates the nature of “narrativized spectacle” in just a few seconds of screen time. Exactly the same observations could be made about countless hundreds of shots from films of recent years. The modernistic instinct that spectacle *must* mean calling attention to itself in and of itself, at the expense of the narrative diegesis, however, dies very hard.

A more profitable way of understanding the inherent unity of narrative and spectacle – in the Baroque and Decadent traditions of blockbuster spectacle – is, however, suggested by an image such as that in *Catching Fire*. Its unity as narrativized spectacle inheres in the fact that setting – the basis of the classical Aristotle-ian point of narrative that is “unity of place” – can, in today’s digitally-liberated blockbusters, function as a spectacle in its own right as never before. No longer mere evocative background, the settings and environments of the modern blockbuster can now create a fertile aesthetic dialectic with the human figures that inhabit them. In the course of articulating his ideas on “neobaroque film” in *The Cinema Effect*, Sean Cubitt would take this idea to a somewhat reductive extreme – making reference to the impressive, gothic-*noir* architectural environs of Gotham City in Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989), and declaring that spectacles such as this mean that the star persona has been completely superseded by the fictitious world: “the neobaroque moves away from the promotion of fantasy anchored in the star persona to situate it in the diegetic universe from which it springs – Gotham City” (Cubitt 2004, 218). Without necessarily endorsing such a sentiment – Burton’s original film, after all, was largely made by Jack Nicholson’s star persona as the Joker – it is noteworthy that, having written those words in advance of his book’s 2004 publication, Cubitt could not have anticipated the degree to which they would soon be borne out. 2004 was to be the year that would see the definitive emergence of the “digital backlot” as a mode of world filmmaking, with *Sky Captain*

*and the World of Tomorrow* (Kerry Conran, 2004), *Casshern* (Kazuaki Kiriya, 2004), and *Immortal AD Vitam* (Enki Bilal, 2004) emerging from the United States, Japan, and France, respectively, and all showing their makers able to digitally create entire functioning narrative worlds, purely on the basis of their own imaginative dexterity. And while these new digital narrative worlds were certainly not inimical to the deployment of star persona – *Sky Captain*, especially, boasted an all-star cast of Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Angelina Jolie, and a digitally-resurrected Laurence Olivier – they nonetheless possessed an unprecedented ability to elicit the spectator’s narrative curiosity in their own right.

More often than not, the spectator of a classical-realist narrative film – upon seeing a part or trace of a vast landscape, cityscape, or other spectacular vista, from above or afar – is likely to wonder what it might be like up close and in detail, and how the rest of the film’s narrative world signifies relative to it. And unlike *avant-garde* or experimental films – in which the image may be more self-referential and detached from narrative signification – this is a curiosity that the classical Hollywood aesthetic tends to encourage, as spectacular establishing shots provide a hook to draw spectators into the narratives which will subsequently unfold within these environments. As Jessica Aldred put it in a 2006 piece, “the elaborate digital cityscapes and deep space vistas of *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith* [sic] are so excruciatingly detailed they almost beg to be actively explored by the viewer” (Aldred 2006, 157). In practice, this is blockbuster spectacle’s method of establishing narrative verisimilitude – of creating such a palpable sense of milieu as to suggest a wider, functioning world with its own history and rhythms. That this is a narrative practice which intensified throughout the later twentieth century, and especially with the advent of DVFX, is especially appreciable in contrast with spectacular settings from past generations, where there was negligible effort in this regard – the sets seeming to announce their own recently-constructed, *sui generis* status, and neither showing nor suggesting anything further than what was immediately necessary for the purposes of the narrative. One need only think of the marketplace in *The Thief of Baghdad* (Raoul Walsh, 1924), or Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), where the freshly-lacquered sheen was virtually still visible, and there was no imaginative pretense that these were real locations, with a backstory before the film’s plot, and a future that would continue after.

A valuable definition of this parameter of cinematic narrative, ultimately, is provided by David Bordwell, who refers to it as “worldmaking.” Bordwell defines worldmaking as the

“offer[ing] of a rich, fully furnished ambience for the audience,” whereby the minutiae of detail incorporated into an onscreen setting or environment “accumulate into a kind of informational overload” which becomes itself generative of narrative meaning, insofar as one seems to be gazing into a real, functioning, other world rather than looking at a movie set (Bordwell 2006, 58). “One need only compare the airy and tidy sets of *Ben-Hur* to the minutiae-stuffed locales of *Gladiator*,” he suggests (Bordwell 2006, 59). In other words, to compare the environs which Roman consul Quintus Arrius (Jack Hawkins) moves in – fairly obvious “movie sets” in the *Thief of Baghdad* and *Wizard of Oz* mode – with the genuinely lived-in look of the throne room of Emperor Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) – packed with burning censers, his richly carved and inlaid wooden chair pulled up to a desk covered with documents of state, and the occasional handmaiden passing discreetly in the background – to grasp the significance of worldmaking as an aesthetic practice. The forty-one years between *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) and *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) had clearly seen a sea change in the nature of narrativized spectacle. Even *Gladiator*, however – its worldmaking feat of photorealistically recreating Ancient Rome largely enabled by DVFX – was to prove merely the tip of the iceberg.

Worldmaking bears profound narrative and thematic implications, because all of the above bespeaks an inordinately strengthened desire to understand, and depict, past or imaginary places as historically or imaginatively *real* – to banish any trivializing implication that might accrue to imagination or Other-ing on the principle of “make believe” or “let’s pretend.” In this, one thinks of Robin Wood’s remarks about Hollywood spectacle as it stood in the early 1980s, in which he discerned a strong wish on audiences’ part to be reconstructed as children:

The characteristic response to *E.T.* (heard, with variations, over and over again) was “Wasn’t it *wonderful?*” followed instantly by a nervously apologetic “But of course it’s pure fantasy.” In this way, the particular satisfactions the films offer – the lost breast repeatedly rediscovered – can be at once indulged and laughed off. (Wood 2003, 145, italics Wood’s)

Wood’s remarks here would indeed seem apply well to a generation of compromised fantasies such as *The Black Hole* (Gary Nelson, 1979), *The Last Starfighter*, and *Cocoon* (Ron Howard, 1985) – which were the descendants of *Wizard of Oz* insofar as they were uninterested in creating the fully-furnished ambience of a genuine Other world, but rather just creating a fun-house-mirror rumination upon the familiar existing one, which therefore need not be very detailed, or possessed of independent inner logics of its own. An aesthetic such as this – which treats “pure

fantasy” as synonymous with triviality, and allows the exercise of the imagination to be “laughed off” with the condescending epithet of “wonderful” – is a basically conservative one, insofar as it implies an anti-utopian incuriosity about other worlds and modes of being. The Baroque and Decadent worldmaking logics of modern blockbusters, however, have shifted Hollywood’s practices on this considerably. A new cinematic aesthetic – in which re-created or imagined Other worlds are granted their own convincing reality – is one which bespeaks a greater tentativeness regarding the normality of our own currently existing reality. As such, it is utopian in working to expand imaginative horizons rather than circumscribing them.

As we have seen, Baroque art was – in a very real sense – the world’s first imaginatively globalized art form. Worldmaking, therefore, is also readily apparent frame of reference for a Baroque narrative aesthetics of cinema. It should also be readily appreciable, however, that this spirit of working ever more visual detail into an image’s composition – such that the spectatorial eye is confronted with “a kind of informational overload” that taxes its ocular acumen – is one fully congruent with Decadent aesthetics. Douglas Trumbull once declared that “I like the idea of creating some crazy illusion that looks so great you can really hang on it like a big master shot of an epic landscape” – a declaration that likewise evokes worldmaking (Bukatman 1997, 25). Regarding Trumbull’s pursuit of this goal in creating the spectacle of “Los Angeles, November 2019” in *Blade Runner*, Bukatman wrote that:

The brilliance of *Blade Runner*, like *Alien* before it, is located in its visual density. Scott’s ‘layering’ effect produces an inexhaustible complexity, an infinity of surfaces to be encountered and explored, and unlike many contemporary films, *Blade Runner* refuses to explain itself. (Bukatman 1997, 8)

The refusal to explain itself that Bukatman evokes is a sentiment fully in accord with Baroque and Decadent aesthetics’ making hostile claims on the viewer, and telling “big lies,” as Paglia put it. Indeed, as will be seen below, worldmaking could be said to make up a vital component of a Baroque narrative aesthetics, insofar as the concept suggests the desire to *show* as much as possible – to achieve a truly all-encompassing imaginative vision that leaves nothing out of the film’s cosmogony. It is no coincidence, in this regard, that more and more films in the 2010s – as diverse as *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (Paul W.S. Anderson, 2010) and *Noah* (Darren Aronofsky, 2014) – utilise DVFX to create the effect of impossibly vast camera pull-outs from the intimate details of the Earth’s surface to an orbital position from which the whole planetary topography can be appreciated. Or alternatively, as with *I am Number Four* (D.J. Caruso, 2011), use equally

epic push-ins to create the reverse aesthetic effect – going from the vast whole to the minutely particular, and thus situating the film’s narrativized spectacle in the widest possible context.

These issues of worldmaking are concepts in aesthetics which are not usually applied to mainstream narrative spectacles, historically. Indeed, one of the great differences between the narrative feature film, and the experimental or *avant-garde* film, lies in the amount of “training” it imposes upon its spectator. As we have seen, Hollis Frampton said of his film *Critical Mass* that watching the film was itself a process of training the spectator to watch the film. Conversely, as Kristin Thompson put it:

Most spectators come to classical Hollywood films knowing how to watch them. A well-known repertoire of storytelling devices is drawn upon, and those devices are almost invariably designed to make following the narrative quite easy. Spatial continuity is maintained in order to keep the viewer oriented in relation to story space and time. (Thompson 2010, 144)

Thompson wrote these words in the course of remarking that the “lighting of the beacons” sequence in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (Peter Jackson, 2003) seemed to defy this logic, and “struck me as being like a little experimental film inserted into a story-driven blockbuster” (Thompson 2010, 144). One of the defining characteristics of spectacular narratives of today – and, as will be seen below, Decadent spectacular narratives, especially – is that they problematize the idea that “following the narrative” should be made “quite easy” for the viewer.

To put all this a different way, in 1976, Edward Hall posited a distinction between a “high-context culture,” which virtually everybody knows is governed by a complex rota of rules and conventions, and in which “cultural messages are often inexplicit;” and a “low-context culture, in which little can be taken for granted and all codes need to be spelled out” (Braudy 1998, 280). A key distinguishing feature of Baroque and Decadent narratives is that they seek to shift the narrativized spectacles of the Hollywood blockbuster’s place in such a schema, and raise them to the level of Hall’s “high-context culture,” where graphic logic can be relied on far more than expository dialogue. At stake in all this is acknowledgment of the fact that the narratives of blockbuster spectacle films of the early twenty-first century do not merely adhere to the dictates of classical storytelling, but often push the boundaries of them in the direction of complexity. Over the past decade-and-some, cinema’s lingua franca for matters such as avatar-control, energy transfer, superpower recharge, mutation, telepathy, telekinesis, etc., has become far more stable, with the result that film narratives increasingly disdain to give much, or even any, explanation for

their presence or workings. These are simply to be, at the very least, merely signalled towards by throw-away lines of dialogue; and at most, intuited purely through graphic logic. The opening of *Frozen* (Chris Buck & Jennifer Lee, 2013), for instance, is representative, insofar as Elsa's snow and ice powers are introduced into the film with total naturalization, and Anna's accident with them – she's recklessly leaping over high snow-mounds faster than Elsa can generate them with power-blasts from her hands – is likewise given no verbal explanation. These same graphic logics are now familiar enough from previous films as to be effectively naturalized for audiences. Likewise, *Chronicle* is again relevant here, insofar as it benefits from the convention of “exposure to space radiation gives you superpowers” being put forth so frequently in popular culture before. The same is true of the “mutant/alien bites you and you turn into one” trope that *District 9* spent very little time over. Likewise, films such as *Avatar*, *Surrogates* (Jonathan Mostow, 2009), and *Gamer* (Mark Neveldine & Brian Taylor, 2009) can take as read the workings of mentally operating an avatar from a remote location, because it has already suffused so much of the cultural of the digital age. Because so many such premises are now well-established for the *lingua franca* of the modern blockbuster narrative, films are correspondingly free to do far more in probing the workings and dramatizing the implications of them. All this is valuable to keep in mind, because – as Elsaesser blithely observed in 2004 – the widespread tendency in film theory over the past generation has been to claim that modern blockbuster narratives strain the limits of classical storytelling norms in an opposite, downward direction – testing how crude and feeble they can be made before becoming so beneath notice as to be deemed non-existent.

In the introduction to her 2007 book *Digital Storytelling: The Narrative Power of Visual Effects in Film*, Shilo T. McClean makes the observation that contemporary blockbuster spectacles are not devoid of narrative, nor has narrative even been radically circumscribed in favour of digitally-conjured spectacle. Academic theorists who attempt to present – as a legitimate point of theory – the idea that narrative has been all but abolished in the modern DVFX-heavy blockbuster are not, McClean's argument implies, actually writing film theory at all. Instead, they have, whether consciously or not, shifted into writing a particularly debased variety of film criticism – issuing a damning verdict on what they think of the *quality* of blockbuster narratives, relative to the spectacularly-rendered DVFX they are meant to showcase. The actual *existence* of blockbuster narratives, however, must always be kept in mind, she insists

– not least because they often show greater nuance and subtlety than such theoretical dismissals give them credit for. Geoff King’s *Spectacular Narratives* remains invaluable in this regard, even if its blockbuster test cases – and King’s observations of their implications – have been repeatedly superseded over the following decade and a half by the form’s continued evolution. McClean, writing the mid-2000s, singled out *Van Helsing* (Stephen Sommers, 2004) as an especially potent example of the dynamic whereby amazing DVFX are used to buoy up a screenplay which is not even fractionally as skillful or professional. The critical dismissals of the film she quotes show the tendency – even more common among popular critics than among academic theorists – to slide all too easily into broad generalizations that DVFX-heavy blockbusters have no plot, whereas the fact of the matter, McClean insists, is simply that the individual film *Van Helsing* happens to have an especially sloppy and lazily-written script. My own litany of its failings would include a hopelessly confused sense of whether or not the spectator is supposed to empathize with Dracula and his wives; a Vatican-based secret society, the “Knights of the Holy Order,” which is too fatuously transparent and cynical in its politically-correct evocation of multiculturalism and religious pluralism; and a “sunshine grenade” weapon that, in immediately and cleanly vaporizing an entire ballroom full of vampires pursuing the hero and heroine, offers one of the least satisfying *deus ex machina* escapes ever committed to film. These are flaws, however, which bespeak a poorly-written screenplay, rather than a film that was, somehow, mystically made with no screenplay at all. The distinction, McClean reminds us, is a simple one, but one that must never be lost sight of.

Coming almost a decade after McClean’s book, this dissertation, alas, has numerous more topical examples of the same impasse in narrativized spectacle to draw upon. Paul W.S. Anderson’s *Pompeii* (2014) offers a vivid example, with DVFX used to render the 79 AD eruption of Mount Vesuvius, and its immolation of the surrounding towns, in terrifyingly photorealistic detail. The Baroque spectacle of it, in terms of its digitally-liberated spectacle and verisimilitude, is as far beyond any of the numerous film and TV adaptations of Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) as *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur, 2007) is beyond *Queen Elizabeth* (Louis Mercanton, 1912). *Pompeii*’s narrative, however, is feeble beyond belief. The film was widely encapsulated by the mock-pitch summary of “*Titanic* meets *Gladiator*” – a fairly cynical high-concept premise, but one which at least had the virtue of stealing from the best. Sadly, the film cannot even deliver on this modest promise. The romance across class lines

– between Kit Harrington as Milo, the Briton slave, and Emily Browning as Cassia, the daughter of Pompeii’s wealthiest patrician – never really gels, and the film’s vision of Ancient Roman society feels like an unfortunate throwback to the Bible epics of the 1950s, in its one-dimensional caricaturing of Rome as bloodthirsty, venal, corrupt, evil, etc. (Morton 2014). It is simply treated as axiomatic that any promise or covenant made by “the Romans” will be broken or betrayed as a matter of course, and late in the film, the plot slides into the kind of domestic melodrama regarding an arranged/forced marriage that seems more appropriate to Bulwer-Lytton’s Victorian context than to today. The eruption of Vesuvius, thus, ultimately plays less like the tragic disaster which the film muddlingly tries to set it up as, and more like a sort of salutary cleansing from wrathful gods. Ultimately, the film channels the connotations which the word “decadence” has historically borne – and, as with Thomas Couture’s famous 1847 painting, was so often applied to Ancient Rome – rather than the aesthetic sense in which it is being used in this dissertation. It is as though *Gladiator* and *Rome* (2005-2007) had never happened at all, or *Pompeii*’s screenwriters had somehow contrived to be ignorant of them. Astoundingly, the screenplay – credited to Janet Scott Batchler, Lee Batchler, and Michael Robert Johnson – cannot even settle on whether or not the people of Pompeii *are* Romans themselves in their political allegiance and cultural makeup, as one scene after another contradicts itself. We continually hear Cassia declare her hatred for Rome and its ways, as though she herself were not an absolute and intrinsic product of the same society and culture.

Baroque and Decadent narratives are defined by their evacuating of these worst, most unimaginative and hypocritical tendencies in Hollywood storytelling. A tale of volcanic apocalypse should be unafraid to think big, on a vast Baroque canvas. Mick Jackson’s 1998 film *Volcano* may have ultimately been a creative failure, but the sheer audacity of its initial premise – that a new volcanic fissure has opened up beneath Los Angeles’s Wilshire Boulevard, deluging Hollywood’s luxurious Beverly Hills base with lava and ash – is a brilliant instance of Baroque “big lies” that *Pompeii* would have done well to channel, rather than fixating on domestic matrimonial matters. Likewise, an infusion of the Decadent aestheticizing sensibility of Gautier’s 1852 story *Arria Marcella* – in which a young Frenchman visits the ruins of Pompeii and falls in love with a long-dead and vanished young woman, such is the beauty of the mere bodily impression which she has left behind in the lava – would have gone an inestimable way towards redeeming Anderson’s film. In both cases, what is at stake is the degree to which filmmakers’

narrative sensibilities are open to more globalized, more transcendent creative visions, and this is not something that can be conferred only by more sophisticated visual effects. Rather, it entails a recognition that with the liberation afforded by DVFX, new auteurist talents are likely required to make best use of them. All throughout this dissertation, indeed, the talents that have loomed largest – Cameron, the Wachowskis, Jackson, Nolan, Abrams, etc. – are ones who have come into their own in tandem with, or since, the liberation afforded by DVFX, and whose cinematic imaginations are therefore habituated to them. Again, as Solman put it, “now that they’re better constructed, special effects await new stories and storytellers” (Solman 1992, 41). A film such as *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (Chris Columbus, 2010) is representative here. Its production values are fine, but if its overall worldview nonetheless feels more myopic than it might, it is likely due to having been directed by Chris Columbus – a talent formed in Hollywood of the late 1980s and early 1990s, with films such as *Adventures in Babysitting* (1987), *Home Alone* (1990), and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1992): films which fully embodied the myopic mentality that there is nothing beyond middle American suburbia. Indeed, this can be most fully appreciated when contrasting Columbus’s two *Harry Potter* films: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (2001) and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002) to the next installment in the series: Alfonso Cuarón’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004). Only three years younger than Columbus, the course of Cuarón’s development as a filmmaker – via independent production in Mexico, interspersed with innovative Hollywood products such as *A Little Princess* (1995) and *Great Expectations* (1998) – was nonetheless radically different. The result was that the sophistication of visual aesthetic and graphic logic made Cuarón’s *Harry Potter* film fully congruent with the emergent Baroque and Decadent logics of the 2000s in a way that Columbus’s film never approached. These logics, ultimately, are ones which fundamentally disallow works of cinematic art from being parochial, or myopic towards art and imagination, and instead offer far greater freedom to map out, and scrutinize the details of, entire new story-worlds.

Worldmaking is an integral part of Baroque narrative aesthetics, because its emphasis on adding breath, depth, and complexity to a film’s imaginative vision puts it at odds with Hollywood’s historical tendency towards parochialism. Indeed, a lamentable amount of Hollywood’s history of science-fiction/fantasy/action-spectacle narratives has been characterized by a kind of neo-Victorian attitude towards homogeneity – a survival of Eurocentric attitudes

born of the nineteenth century, when Great Britain had amassed the largest colonial empire the world had ever seen, and had seemingly normalized a situation whereby African and Asian nations and civilizations of millions could be controlled by only a few thousand white colonial administrators and troops. This situation inexorably created a mentality of radical asymmetry, whereby even the highest and mightiest among the colonial “Other” could be considered the equal or subordinate of any white Englishman, and differentiations among broad general populations seemed totally irrelevant. This colonial mentality, in turn, bred a popular literary tradition whose attitudes were neatly evoked by George Orwell, in his seminal 1940 essay “Boys Weeklies,” with the observation that:

Naturally the politics of the *Gem* and *Magnet* are Conservative, but in a completely pre-1914 style, with no Fascist tinge. In reality their basic political assumptions are two: nothing ever changes, and foreigners are funny. ... The assumption all along is not only that foreigners are comics who are put there for us to laugh at, but that they can be classified in much the same way as insects. ... In papers of this kind it occasionally happens that when the setting of a story is in a foreign country some attempt is made to describe the natives as individual human beings, but as a rule it is assumed that foreigners of any one race are all alike and will conform more or less exactly to [stereotyped] patterns... (Orwell 1957, 187-88)

The assumption that Orwell evokes here – that all foreigners or colonial Others are essentially a homogenous mass, and that individuality is the sole purview of middle-to-upper-class whites – is one that would, unfortunately, make the jump from popular British periodicals to popular Hollywood films almost without alteration. Eight years before Orwell’s essay, moviegoers were already being treated to the dubious pleasures of *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932), which – its Pre-Code salaciousness and the trappings of the horror genre aside – essentially invited spectators to recoil in disgust at the prospect of East Asian people taking control of their own national destiny; the implicit assumption being that grand geopolitical actions are only properly taken by white Western powers. Furthermore, inherent in the “nothing ever changes” assumption which Orwell notes is the idea that whites’ culture and socialization is monolithic and unchangeable, while what is presented as the “civilization” of the Other may be knocked awry almost by the mere sight of a blandly straight, white, middle-to-upper class Anglophone male – after the fashion of *Planet of the Apes* (Tim Burton, 2001). Any threat to the social order of the Anglophone whites must be recuperated so totally as to ultimately strengthen that society, while any stable or resilient social order not human, Anglophone, white, etc., is almost an axiomatic imaginative impossibility. Underlying all this is a sense that the world is essentially

small, tightly bounded, and therefore readily knowable. This is a conception which – after the fashion of Mark Crispin Miller’s assertion that “today’s movies offer no utopia, since everything you’d ever want, they say, is here on sale” – flatters the reader/spectator with the assumption that everything worth knowing about the workings of the world is already encapsulated in one’s narrow suburban range of experience, and that therefore one may safely be dismissive or derisive of anything and everything outside this narrow imaginative landscape (Miller 1990, 244-45).

As we saw with worldmaking, however, a key distinguishing criterion of the Baroque narratives of the past decade and some is the degree to which they refuse, reverse, and explode this dynamic. We have already seen how films such as *Super 8*, *Godzilla*, *Prometheus*, and *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* use such neo-Victorian premises simply as a straw man to be (often literally) blasted away. A film such as *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), however, is even more revealing. Whereas ten years before, Roland Emmerich’s *Godzilla* had featured a gigantic creature attacking Manhattan simply for the sake of having it be destroyed at the end of the film, and the existing social order reaffirmed – strengthened through having been tested – *Cloverfield* features the same kind of monstrous incursion, for the sake of imagining a total apocalypse. The film ends not with the creature destroyed by the yeoman efforts of the American military; these are repeatedly shown throughout the film as totally impotent. Nor are the characters themselves – rather unlikable Manhattan-ite yuppies – allowed much in the way of individual grace or redemption before they are all killed at the end. *Cloverfield* is very much in the line of what Paglia said of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: “The Mariner commits an obscure crime and become the focus of cosmic wrath” (Paglia 1990, 324). The film capriciously brings down devastation upon presumed “normality,” simply for the sake of showing up its feeble and transitory nature.

*Cloverfield*’s Baroque achievement here – its total suppression of parochialism, patriotism, even basic humanism, in the course of its apocalyptic narrative logic – stands in marked contrast to films which bear the taint of neo-Victorian narrative schema. A prize example of the latter may be found in Alex Proyas’s 2004 film *I, Robot* – a film which is reminiscent of *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), insofar as the neo-imperialist slave-holding impulse – whereby the supposedly normative human protagonists have every right to dominate a vast, largely-undifferentiated, “Other-ed,” underclass – is wholly upheld by film’s narrative. The only “good” robot *I, Robot* is the one who betrays his own kind and obediently fights for his slave-

masters, and at the end, the robots are re-relegated to their role as slaves – a fact which they apparently accept due to the opiate of religion. The film concludes with an ambiguous final shot of the token “good” robot standing on a hill before all the others, evoking the image of a messiah.

The extent of *I, Robot*'s anti-Baroque thematics are encapsulated in its attempt to present the word “revolution” as inherently hateful and negative. This is a failure of the Romantic imagination that Hollywood spectacles are only ever rarely guilty of. Although traditionally (or notoriously) uninterested in treating of politics in any systematic or programmatic sense, Hollywood spectacles tend nonetheless to be imbued with a powerful sense of the Romantic which values the grand and dramatic. Cubitt was, to this extent, correct when he declared *Purple Rain* (Albert Magnoli, 1984) to be a paradigmatic film of the “neobaroque cinema” – “a lynchpin moment of new American cinema” (Cubitt 2004, 217). Prince's character refers to his egomaniacal theatrics as “the revolution,” as a reflection of his desire to bring about fundamental change to pop music, making it even more viscerally emotionally transcendent than established bands or acts will allow. This is a fundamentally Romantic idea, in that it sees no value in keeping the *quo* in the *status*, and reflects a belief that concerted and determined creative action can make the world into a more culturally and imaginatively vital and fulfilling place.

In keeping with this theme of fundamental change, Baroque cinematic narrative is substantially defined by a concern with “going beyond” – with the idea that the normative limitations of the possible exist only to be defied, violated, or transcended. This is a reflection of the original seventeenth-century Baroque's central, animating concern with the exultant and the divine – the idea that nothing was impossible before the power of God and the Church. Even though the contemporary digitally-liberated blockbuster is an inherently secular form, these basic aesthetic values nonetheless define its worldview. In this spirit, the past decade of Hollywood filmmaking has seen cinematic spectacle progressively abandon all pretence at honouring the parochially familiar, “relatable,” and “realistic.” Baroque narratives, in contrast, require progressively more extreme variations on premises which enable total transcendence of the quotidian and corporeal. Increasingly often, in the spectacular imagination of cinema, the conceptual-aesthetic liminal space of “the limits of human experience or capability” is treated as a starting line rather than a border to be tested. Baroque cinematic narratives could, paraphrasing Scott Bukatman, be said “to *create* the boundless and infinite stuff of sublime experience, and

thus to produce a sense of transcendence beyond human finitudes” (Bukatman 1995, 267, italics Bukatman’s).

The emergence of the superhero film as a thriving genre throughout the 2000s provided innumerable formal opportunities for formulating this narrative aesthetic, not least in the matter of explaining the precise workings their superheroes’ powers. *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) offers a fluent early example, with Liam Neeson’s mentor-character explaining to the young Bruce Wayne: “You know how to fight six men. We can teach you how to engage six hundred. You know how to disappear. We can teach you how to become truly invisible.” The film is here, in effect, unequivocally making its declaration of independence from normative ideas of “plausibility” and “realism.” Whereas the previous *Batman* films of Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher rendered Batman invincible by virtue of gadgetry, and the ability to physically demolish any individual opponent, Nolan’s film is here reserving the right to make his powers of stealth and combat virtually limitless. Innumerable other films would follow over the following decade, with their narrative rationales becoming more and more specific and intricate. In *Hanna* (Joe Wright, 2011), for instance, we are told that the 14-year old girl who is our heroine possesses the physical power and dexterity to impassively demolish highly-trained CIA agents and escape top-secret ultra-secure facilities because she was not conceived and gestated in the traditional human fashion. Rather, her adoptive father tells her, she was:

...born in a research facility in rural Poland. Galinka. They took fertilized embryos and made changes to them to improve them. To reduce the capacity for fear, for pity, to increase muscle strength, heighten senses. Anything to make a better soldier, the perfect soldier. I recruited your mother at an abortion clinic. I recruited twenty women the same way.

One sees here a 1980s frivolity such as *Twins* (Ivan Reitman, 1988) brought fully into the realm of Baroque spectacle. Likewise, in *The Bourne Legacy*, Jeremy Renner’s Aaron Cross – a nigh-superhuman government agent from the same secret program that Jason Bourne belonged to – hears from Rachel Weisz’s scientist character, Dr. Marta Shearing, the following summary of how he was altered to be capable of the things he is:

So, let’s say you want to change the human body. You want to fix a mistake. You want to repair something, improve something. Well, if you’re going to reprogram human genetic material, you need a delivery system, and nothing works better than virus. It’s like a suitcase. You pack in genetic mutation, infect the body, and the vector unloads into the target cells.

By this *modus operandi*, Marta continues, scientists in the employ of America' intelligence apparatus were able to make:

...some very minor alterations... to two different chromosomes. The green side, the physical side, is nothing more than a 1.5% rise in your mitochondrial protein uptake. But with 1.5%, you see this immediate increase in your cellular tempo, muscle efficiency, oxygenation.

The alterations to the "blue side," in turn, yield "Intelligence, obviously, but it's more than that. It's neural regeneration and elasticity. Sensory function. Pain suppression." The upshot of all this, ultimately, is that Aaron is able to leap from one Alaskan mountain ridge to another, and wrestle wolves into submission, as well as also – like Hanna – being able to single-handedly demolish whole teams of highly-trained armed men. When Jason Bourne was first given abilities such as these in the original 2002 film, it was on the basis of the relatively feeble narrative premise of an intense and gruelling training regimen. As the series progressed, however, and its Baroque visions increased still further, such a premise no longer sufficed. A narrative legitimization was required that would allow of genuinely going beyond the physical limits of the human.

Moving from the physical realm to the intellectual one, *Limitless* (Neil Burger, 2011), draws on the well-worn point of medical trivia that we only a small fraction of our brains' theoretical potential. The film accordingly presents us with a wonder drug, designated "Nzt-48," which has the capacity to unlock the great remaining majority of the brain's function, giving the user a retroactive photographic memory and superhuman cognitive abilities. "A four digit IQ," as Bradley Cooper's protagonist puts it. *Lucy* (Luc Besson, 2014) takes this premise even further, with another wonder drug called "CPH4" giving Scarlett Johansson's heroine telepathic, telekinetic, and psychokinetic abilities, in addition to superhuman physical dexterity. The film's very title suggests the extreme registers that Baroque art works in, alluding to the famous *Australopithecus* skeleton which – at roughly 3.2 million years old – symbolizes the very earliest dawn of human evolution, in a film which otherwise evokes human evolution reaching its ultimate culmination.

Applying this same concern with "going beyond" to the technique of storytelling as well as narrative subject matter, Joss Whedon's 2012 film *The Avengers* represented a watershed for Baroque narrative schema. All too often, in blockbuster films which threaten some sort of apocalyptic invasion, the narrative tension derives from the race to stop it before it can begin, because the actual occurrence of the hypothetical invasion would be an unrepresentable

cataclysm. Just five years earlier, in the cinematic realm of Marvel Comics, *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007) put forth this logic, insofar as its narrative consisted of a quest to prevent the opening of a portal between worlds which would unleash a tumultuous onslaught of invading alien beings. Engagement with what this onslaught might actually look like, and what sort of visual spectacle it might offer, was ruled out as a matter of narrative discipline, insofar as Mark Steven Johnson dutifully stuck to the screenwriting convention that the threat of disruption to the narrative *status quo* must only be introduced in order to be resolved again, and the diegetic order of the film's beginning must be restored at its end only slightly altered. This is a convention, however, which Whedon blithely refused with *The Avengers* and, at the 102-minute mark of a 143-minute film, had this film's version of an inter-dimensional portal open successfully, and a slew of alien warriors and monsters descend upon Lower Manhattan. The ensuing battle sequence – a masterpiece of Baroque verticality and profusion, given that the hundreds of aliens all have flying mounts of some kind – lasts fully twenty-five minutes, and showcases the film's most grandiose, digitally-liberated spectacle. Other contemporary blockbusters could achieve the same level of visual complexity on a purely quantitative level, but *The Avengers*'s Baroque genius is to couch all this in a narrative schema that specifically flouts the familiar deadline-to-threatened-apocalypse device in Hollywood storytelling. The spectacle thus registers much more powerfully.

Likewise, one of the most vivid moments of Baroque sublime in recent years is the “Let it Go” sequence in *Frozen* – a sequence which derives much of its power from this same tendency in Baroque narrative. Exactly thirty-one minutes into a 102-minute film, the spectator has already seen coronation of heroine Elsa (voiced by Idina Menzel) as queen go horribly wrong, with her ice-and-snow-conjuring powers escaping her control, revealing themselves for all to see, and turning her kingdom of “Arendelle” into a frozen arctic. Having fled into the mountains, the song has Elsa now dramatically recalling that her whole life, hitherto, has been one long act of concealment for purposes of social harmony – “Conceal, don't feel/Don't let them know,” her lyric goes, before exclaiming “Well, now they know!” At this point she begins letting her powers loose to the fullest possible extent, building herself a vast palace of ice, which takes shape around her in dizzying low-angle shots. The governing sentiment in this sequence is essentially that the worst has already happened, damage done, and therefore nothing really matters anymore; one might as well give oneself over to the most outlandish spectacles one can imagine. This is the sort of development that more classically-constructed screenplays have generally eschewed. A

generation prior, it is easy to imagine *Frozen* having been written so that the main narrative arc was about the suspense of whether/when Elsa's sister Anna (voiced by Kristen Bell) and the people of Arendelle will find out about her winter powers, and what drama might result from such a revelation. Within the Baroque aesthetics of the 2010s, however, such a narrative arc would not allow for nearly the required amount of spectacle. Like so many other films from the earlier era, the narrative would essentially revolve around supposition and hypothesis, rather than actual spectacular incident – the imaginative evocation of a spectacle, rather than the actual showing of it.

These dynamics of Baroque narrative demonstrate the degree to which the Aristotelian logic of a closed narrative loop – whereby the end reaffirms the beginning – is one which the contemporary, DVFX-liberated Baroque blockbuster is singularly unwilling and unqualified to observe. Their narratives must necessarily be about dramatic, revolutionary change, because the representative potentials of modern DVFX would be underserved by anything less. “Not only has the scale of the vertical setting expanded exponentially with the development of CGI,” Whissel suggested in her remarks on verticality, “but so have the stakes,” with “narratives about apocalyptic threats to all human civilization becoming much more common” (Whissel 2006, 24). All this is entirely antithetical to the kind of neo-Victorian narrative assumptions outlined above, but ties in neatly with the Baroque narrative premise of “going beyond” – the narrative-imaginative tendency which Hugh S. Manon claimed that DVFX have somehow obviated. With the maturing of the digital revolution, however, greater and more epic spectacle cannot reliably come simply from a quantitatively greater *visual* scale and intensity. Rather, it must be a matter of narrative situation and schema.

The types of epic narrative situations and schema which Baroque narratives of today often deploy can begin to be gleaned from Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Here, Benjamin evoked the sheer, undisguised monotheism of *ancien regime* European absolute monarchy – the ideal of “the Sun King,” embodied in phrases such as “Whoever sets anyone besides him on the throne deserves to be stripped of crown and purple. There is one sun for the world and one prince for the kingdom” and “The heavens can tolerate only one sun. Two men may not enjoy the same throne or the same marriage bed” (Benjamin 2009, 67). Pearls of wisdom such as these certainly bear out Benjamin's assertion that “the comparison of the prince with the sun is repeated countless times in the literature of the epoch. The purpose of this is to

stress the exclusiveness of this ultimate authority” (Benjamin 2009, 67). And whereas, he continued, in the context of formal politics they may simply have been a matter of legitimizing and rationalizing “the juridical establishment of the ruler’s internal position,” in the aesthetic and cultural sphere, such rhetoric could readily mutate into “the extravagant ideal of world dominance, which corresponded as closely to the theocratic passion of the baroque as it was incompatible with its political wisdom” (Benjamin 2009, 67). In short, a political ideal of the stymieing of internal opposition becomes an imaginative ideal whereby there is merely the divinity of the crown, and the rest of the world yet to revere it. As Whissel observed in her remarks on verticality, Baroque aesthetics necessarily “seem to have the effect ... of evacuating previously available middle grounds” (Whissel 2006, 25).

Beyond this, though, Benjamin’s invocation of “the sun” in this connection is profoundly significant. Even though the Hollywood blockbuster is still a basically populist form, it has assimilated so much of Baroque aesthetics over the past decade-and-some that the terms of its populism have changed. Instead of de-privileging notions of “the monarch’s ultimate authority” and “the whole of nature as subservient to the crown,” it can be said to have democratized them instead, narratively aligning the spectator with this same absolutist divinity. *Man of Steel* catches this tone well, prominently featuring a monologue by Russell Crowe’s Jor-El, who intones that “you will give the people of Earth an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you. They will stumble. But in time, they will join you in the sun. In time, you will help them achieve wonders.” The spectator is here dramatically aligned with a universe cleanly divided between a virtually omnipotent “you,” and the entire mass of the rest of humanity – the ultimate terminus of Sun King divinity. Likewise, it is not coincidental that within the D.C. Comics mythos, Superman draws his power from the sun.

Beyond being appropriately grandiose and emotive, *Man of Steel*’s poetic invocation of communion “in the sun” is symptomatic of a wider trend whereby the greatest heights of Baroque sublimity are found in narratives which, to various degrees of explicitness and completeness, depend on themes of self-immolation. Having ascended together all the way to the sun, as this imagery goes, there is nothing more for the putative fellowship to do than be gloriously incinerated together at the last – the logical culmination of the Baroque theme of ennobling ascent. One sees this most vividly in semi-independent, slightly auxiliary-to-Hollywood spectacles such as Darren Aronofsky’s *The Fountain* (2006) and Danny Boyle’s *Sunshine*, with

Hugh Jackman and Cillian Murphy's protagonists both being literally, wilfully immolated in the fire of a star at the climax. The same happens to everyone on Earth in Alex Proyas's *Knowing* (2009), except those few children taken away on an alien arc to an ethereal new Eden on another world; and *2012* stages a drama of familial bonding against the backdrop of the total annihilation of the Earth's surface due to the (unapologetically absurd) premise that a surge in solar radiation is causing the planet's core to super-heat. Allowing for a slightly more metaphorical understanding, however, the same thematic is widely discernible in the deeper mainstream. A film such as *Iron Man 3*, for instance, offers the pyrotechnic spectacles of Gwyneth Paltrow's Pepper Potts being engulfed by a massive explosion and – she having survived this due to being imbricated with a super-regeneration serum – Tony Stark creating a giant fireworks show by setting all his Iron Man suits to self-destruct in mid-air. Furthermore, with its frequent rhetoric about “the sun,” and climactic sequence on an upper mountain plateau bathed in near-blinding light, *The Croods* draws on this theme even more strongly than most blockbusters, again problematizing the notion that animated features today are somehow distinct from live-action spectacles by virtue of supposedly being “for children.” Baroque blockbuster spectacle is simply an aesthetic mode in Hollywood today, and is discerned by visual and narrative stylistics, not ontology or target audience.

The Baroque equivalence between the sun and omnipotence which Benjamin posited – and its attendant implication of the nobility and grandeur of self-immolation, both literal and figurative – have deep roots in Western drama and thought. Their full, disconcerting import can be gleaned from the documentary *The Architecture of Doom* (Peter Cohen, 1989), which reminds viewers how:

Hitler saw doom as art's highest form of expression. Each time that he, in Bayreuth, had seen Wagner's *Gotterdammerung*, with its fiery collapse at the end, he would reach for Winifred Wagner's hand in the darkness of the box, and kiss it with devotion.

As with Caspar David Friedrich's paintings or the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, however, it would be mistaken to here dismiss Wagner's artistry as mere fascism simply because the Nazis approved. The reception of art always offers avenues for perversion, but sophisticated evocation and engagement with themes of mortality and transcendence do not, ultimately, admit of reduction to one political ideology or another. A final proof of this can be seen in the fluency with which, seven decades later, this same spirit of revelling in glorious self-immolation has migrated from the inner sanctum of Hitler's Reich to the popular culture of the Allied camp, to

underlie a great deal of Hollywood's Baroque blockbuster spectacle. The narrative themes of self-immolation so central to Wagner are likewise indissociably bound up with the centrality of awe to Baroque cinematic aesthetics. We have already seen how awe functions in a purely visual sense in these aesthetics. Ordering a film's narrative so as to foreground such a sense of awe, though, is a distinct subject in its own right, to which we shall now turn.

In the course of his discourse on the sublime in science fiction cinema, Bukatman declared that:

In Trumbull's effects sequences, the sublime is often elicited around a massive technological object or environment: the Stargate (*2001*), the mothership (*Close Encounters*), V'ger (*Star Trek*), and the city (*Blade Runner*). Inspiring the sensations characteristic of sublimity, technology alludes to the limits of human definition and comprehension. (Bukatman 1995, 256)

Even more to the point, he declares that:

The field of the sublime was comprised of the majestic, the awe-inspiring, and the literally overpowering: it spoke the language of excess and hyperbole to suggest realms beyond human articulation and comprehension. The sublime was constituted through the combined sensations of astonishment, terror, and awe that occur through the revelation of a greater power, by far, than the human. (Bukatman 1995, 266)

Once one looks past Bukatman's myopic emphasis upon Douglas Trumbull's effects sequences and technology, this statement comes to possess a compelling explanatory value for how sublime awe is elicited in Baroque narratives: the monolithic physical presence of a massive object, either animate or inanimate, sensate or insensate; or environment, either technological, celestial, metaphysical, or even biological. This narrative device – what I will call the “massive sublime” – is, we shall see, one that has become increasingly prevalent in blockbuster spectacles over the past two decades.

One of the foundational – indeed, by now ancient ancestral – texts in introducing this Baroque aesthetic of the massive sublime to the modern Hollywood mainstream was Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin's *Independence Day*. *Independence Day* (hereafter *ID4*) was initially intended as somewhat of an ironic, postmodern capstone to a past generation of Hollywood science-fiction filmmaking – as seen in its ironic invocations of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *E.T.*, and *2001*. Its most obvious ontology was as a remake of the 1953 classic *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin), as well as a modern version of *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (Fred F. Sears, 1956). It could likewise be read as a demonization of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

and *E.T.*, with an apocalyptic vision of genocidal malevolence replacing Spielberg's films' visions of recaptured childish innocence. In the event, however, from the perspective of the mid-2010s, the film stands far more as a beginning than an end. It provided a visual and narrative template for many of the Baroque spectacles which the imminent digital liberation would enable the making of. Films such as *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Scott Derrickson, 2008), *Avatar*, *Skyline* (Colin & Greg Strause, 2010), *Battle Los Angeles*, *Cowboys & Aliens* (Jon Favreau, 2011), *Battleship*, *Pacific Rim* (Guillermo del Toro, 2013), and *Oblivion* (Joseph Kosinski, 2013) – to give but a very incomplete list – would all, to various degrees, draw upon, refine, reformulate, or contradict the Baroque spectacle of the massive sublime offered by *ID4*. The film's dismissive critical reception notwithstanding, it would subsequently prove to be a paradigmatic master-text for the following generation of Hollywood spectacles.

Eleven minutes into *ID4*, there comes a twenty-one second take of vast, city-sized ships decoupling from the blackness of the still-unseen mothership and beginning to descend upon Earth. Arriving, they are sheathed in cloud and flame, taking on a look more reminiscent of a Biblical apocalypse event than a science fiction film in the mode of *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*. This is not incidental. It is, rather, another demonstration of the fact that the prominence of the "science fiction" genre is incidental to modern cinematic spectacle, rather than necessarily, philosophically, central. As per Bukatman, the sublime in Baroque spectacle is simply couched in terms of an incalculably massive object or environment which dwarfs the merely human on both a physical and a cognitive level. This can, we will see, be done in any genre. The alien ships, however – more than a dozen miles across, but hovering weightlessly above New York, Washington, and Los Angeles – indubitably perform this function vividly. They form the basis of *ID4*'s massive sublime aesthetic, of which the culmination is a three-minute sequence in the third act which – in 1996 – represented one of the most vivid feats of worldmaking yet seen in Hollywood film. In it, the film's heroes, Steve (Will Smith) and David (Jeff Goldblum), fly a captured alien fighter craft out of Earth's atmosphere and rendezvous with the alien mothership – a vast behemoth a quarter the size of the Moon.

The sequence begins with a pair of wide establishing shots emphasizing the sheer disparity in scale between their tiny captured fighter craft and the behemoth of the mothership. Steve and David's craft approaches the inverted-triangle entry port, before which they are a mere

tiny speck, but even the entry port itself is dwarfed by the vastness of the mothership's exterior – just a small crevice in the intricate patterning and texturing that plays across its moon-sized hull. As their small craft enters the mothership, the camera cuts to a reverse angle shot – Earth's reassuring presence now receding behind them – and pulls back before the craft as it enters through the triangular tunnel. Again, the passage's walls are intricately textured to an extreme degree, and inlaid with a parallel avenue of even finer detail lit up from within, emitting beams of green light into the passageway. Trucking through this, the frame is soon dominated by the vast strips of three-dimensional cityscape running down the passageway – still emitting beams of green light into the general blackness – and at the end of it all, by a latticework of vast, columnar building structures, criss-crossing each other in three dimensions. Behind these, nothing can be made out beyond a vast void of turquoise-coloured mist. After a succession of further shots of Steve and David gazing ahead in a state of awe, the film finally moves the spectator beyond this void, and into the main interior of the mothership. Framed from a vast distance away, we see the craft exit the triangular passageway at frame left, with the latticework of building columns – so immense-seeming a moment ago, now dwarfed by the scale of the inner chamber. As their craft moves into this, however, we see more of these structures, even larger and closer-up, allowing us to appreciate their design – a mixture of the geometrically, architecturally-rounded and mottled-organic in appearance. Moving past a final forest of these, Dave and Steve are finally exposed to the full, final spectacle of the mothership's interior: a vast inverted pyramid hanging downwards above a central pedestal platform large enough for millions-strong planetary armies to assemble on. Flying towards this, their ship passes a number of diversely-shaped other alien craft, which serve no explicit narrative purpose, but again powerfully enrich the worldmaking aesthetic posited by Bordwell.

As Steve and David fly towards, and finally directly up to, the central inverted pyramid, one is likewise struck by the astuteness of Aldred's phrase "so excruciatingly detailed they almost beg to be actively explored by the viewer." The virtuoso level of detail, simultaneous with scaling, on display utterly beggars verbal description. Hundreds of discrete terraces, overhangs, antennae, and light formations are visible across the pyramid's uncountable levels. As Steve and David's ship enters a docking bay, the shot is framed laterally, so it can be appreciated that dozens more docking bays like it extend off to the vanishing point. In all this, one is reminded of the similar worldmaking feat that George Lucas achieved with the second Death Star in *Return of*

*the Jedi*. With the first Death Star in *A New Hope*, the spectator was actually *shown* relatively little. The grand wide shots of the whole sphere floating in space would generally cut straight to stage-built interiors of the station. Even the climactic battle sequence – the fruit of cannibalizing thousands of battleship models – evokes more than it really shows. Its being set in an equatorial trench on the Death Star was not an arbitrary narrative decision. One was transitioned straight from the incomprehensibly huge to the human-scaled intimate, with no intermediate sense of what the texturing and dimensions of a planetoid-sized man-made space station might really feel like. With *Return of the Jedi*, however, a quantum leap had been made in special effects, and one does get just such a sense. The very fact that the second Death Star is still under construction allows the spectator to appreciate the countless thousands of individual levels and nodal points of the station. Furthermore, in the scene of Emperor Palpatine’s shuttle docking, one is given exactly the kind of middle-distance images of the station exterior that *A New Hope* denied its spectator, allowing them to appreciate the hundreds of T.I.E.s flying sortie, and the very specific point of the docking bay in the midst of the station’s vastness. These sorts of images are repeated as establishing shots throughout the rest of the film, whenever the narrative shifts to the Death Star. Coming thirteen years later, and with even more advanced effects technology to hand, the mothership sequence in *ID4* is wholly the beneficiary of Lucas’s worldmaking imagination.

The mothership sequence’s main problem, however, is that it demonstrates one of the ultimate implications of such worldmaking, and its use in an aesthetic of the massive sublime: that with curiosity and awe come a certain empathy. The same way Aldred observed of the cityscapes in *Revenge of the Sith*, the massive sublime spectacle of the alien mothership’s interior is so incredibly detailed as to draw the viewer’s imagination into a thousand potential avenues of exploration. This constitutes a form of winning empathy from the audience. Moreover, the scene is staged with such a strong sense of the sublime – certainly reflected on Steve and David’s faces – that it becomes profoundly problematic that the mothership interior is only shown to us in the narrative expectation that it’s all going to be nuked out of existence in a few minutes. Steve and David’s craft, you see, is carrying a (presumably *very* high-yield) nuclear missile. Because of the imaginative investment the viewer has put down in the mothership’s immensely detailed spectacle, however, we don’t necessarily want to see it all obliterated. There’s still too much to see and explore. All this shows up the limitations of a paradigm for the alien invasion film whereby, according to Noel Carroll:

...the dastardly space invaders, wielding their deadly Z-rays, evaporate thousands of law abiding earthlings without a blink of their eyes... Our hatred for these merciless marauders from galaxies far, far away is enough to enlist our sympathies for our fellow earth folk which, in turn, sparks the moral indignation we feel in response to the abuses to which they are subjected. (Carroll 2013, 103)

This is entirely inadequate. The viewer is stuck with Steve and David as their heroes and resigned to seeing the alien mothership destroyed purely as a matter of narrative convention. There is, however, absolutely no “hatred” or “moral indignation” towards the aliens, any more than there’s been overmuch sympathy for our “fellow earth folk.” The workings of cinematic spectacle simply militate against it. Terry Eagleton once wrote, in a preface to Dickens’s *Bleak House*, of:

...the familiar problem of how to make virtue artistically attractive. In a society for which goodness has come to mean thrift, prudence, meekness, self-denial and sexual propriety, the devil is bound to have all the best lines. (Eagleton 2003, vii)

With *ID4*, Emmerich and Devlin would solve this problem by cynically ignoring it, and allowing the spectator to admire the spectacle of the alien forces without giving the latter any corresponding narrative credit.

In subsequent years, however, it would readily become apparent, in the organic logic of artistic evolution, that Baroque aesthetics of the massive sublime, and their attendant worldmaking, simply do not work this way. Whatever else a film may do with it, a massive sublime spectacle cannot be trivialized or treated dismissively by a narrative. In this spirit, one of *Titan A.E.*’s great coups was to revisit and correct the mothership sequence, along with much else about *ID4*. Whereas the latter film simply posited space as an empty void, and conferred all the detail and texturing – and thus imaginative stimulus – on the exterior hull of the alien mothership, *Titan A.E.* reverses these terms, and positions the mothership of their malevolent alien race, the “Drej,” in the middle of a vast nebula of space gas, with various moons and planetoids in the near background, and further nebulae seemingly extending off into starry infinity. The gassy clouds in the foreground, moreover, are so distinctly textured as to have an almost crystalline look to them. In contrast to all this, the Drej mothership is a totally two-dimensional and untextured object, striking a harshly dissonant visual note in the midst of all this roiling natural splendour. In this, it immediately seems genuinely sinister in a way that the mothership in *ID4* did not. It evokes the massive sublime not at all. This impression is only reinforced when the film takes the viewer inside the ship. In contrast to the inordinate detail and worldmaking suggestion of the *ID4* mothership, the interior of the Drej mothership is totally spare, flat, and angular. Virtually no

surfaces are textured, and the only non-geometrical lines or shapes that we see are sudden, brutal bursts of lightning which spark, Tesla-coil-style, between surfaces. The overall effect is to create an environment far more visually alien and hostile than the simple profusion of Death-Star-style detailing in *ID4*'s mothership, which in fact aroused the spectator's curiosity and empathy. Moreover, thirteen years later, *Oblivion* would utilize this exact same visual aesthetic for characterizing the interior of its alien mothership, in the course of exactly restaging *ID4*'s dramaturgy of infiltrating it while bearing a nuclear weapon – the difference being, however, that *Oblivion* has the narrative courage to make this sequence the genuine suicide mission that *ID4* cowardly gave Steve and David an exemption on.

Beyond its wilful misreading of the workings of spectatorial empathy regarding the mothership – gratifyingly corrected by *Titan A.E.* and *Oblivion* in later years – however, *ID4* had one final, and even more fundamental, imaginative and narrative failing. This is the fact that, quite simply, it cheated unforgivably on its own narrative premises, degenerating from grandiose Baroque big lies, whereby all America's military might can be swiftly and totally humbled by an overwhelming extraterrestrial hegemon; to fatuous, parochial small lies, whereby American gumption and ingenuity can never be overcome. In other words, an aesthetic "cheat" is most objectionable when it is pettiest. *ID4*'s introduction, and initial treatment, of the vast, city-sized alien craft couches them in narrative terms of complete and total invincibility – an apocalyptic event descending upon Earth, no more to be successfully combatted or resisted than a force of Nature. The narrative logic all points to something along the lines of Poe's *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion* (1839) in which the last lines read:

For a moment there was a wild lurid light alone, visiting and penetrating all things. ... the whole incumbent mass of ether in which we existed, burst at once into a species of intense flame, for whose surpassing brilliancy and all-fervid heat even the angels in the high Heaven of pure knowledge have no name. Thus ended all. (Poe 2002, 397)

Or, even more succinctly, the iconic ending of *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842): "And darkness and decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (Poe 2002, 255). *Cloverfield*, we have seen, would do exactly this twelve years later, once Baroque narrative aesthetics had become more fully normalized. Back in 1996, however, the narrative potency of the massive sublime was not yet given sufficient credence, and Emmerich and Devlin felt obliged to give the film a "happy ending" where, thanks to the absurd *deus ex machina* of a computer virus which disables the alien ships' impenetrable energy shields, the world's air forces are able

to win the day and shoot them all down. The sheer scale and crudity of the shift in characterization of the alien invasion force – from invincible, apocalyptic massive sublime, to abased AM-RAM and Sidewinder fodder, in effect – is totally untenable in aesthetic terms, however. Consequently, more contemporary films which adopt *ID4*'s basic template of the massive sublime have found ways to narratively attenuate this kind of philistine cheat, and retain more of a Baroque narrative aesthetic.

Most notably, of course, there is *Skyline*, which largely reproduces *ID4*'s iconography of the massive sublime, but simply has it continue to the Poe-like apocalypse which *ID4* cringed from – ending with the vast city-besriding alien craft using a sapphire-sky-blue tractor beam to draw thousands of doomed Angelinos up into its vast maw, to be recycled as bio-matter for the conquering aliens. Few other films have dared go this far, however, and have rather sought to mitigate *ID4*'s cheat in less horrific ways. To this end, *Cowboys & Aliens* and *Battleship* would both reverse one of *ID4*'s key narrative premises – that the vast alien mothership was a generational starship, ferrying the aliens' entire civilization from one victim planet to another. Both films, rather, reconfigure their narratives so that the “alien invasion” is in fact only a token scouting or exploratory force, whose ultimate goal is to send a signal back to their homeworld in order to summon the full vastness of the aliens' armada, and Earth's salvation depends upon the heroes destroying the alien force in time to thwart this transmission. The narrative logic here is that there is simply no way that human civilization can be made to triumph – against an armada of warships from a civilization advanced enough for interstellar travel – without making nonsense of the massive sublime as *ID4* did. Against a fractionally small expeditionary force, however – whose ships are nonetheless still impressive enough to evoke the massive sublime – we might just stand a chance. *Cowboys & Aliens* was somewhat compelled to adopt this narrative logic due to the fact that its “human civilization” is not even our own contemporary one, but rather that of the American frontier in the nineteenth century; when the weapons at hand extended no further than the revolver and the repeating rifle. *Battleship*, set in the present day, however, adopted this logic for no reason other than narrative intelligence.

The failures of *ID4*'s massive sublime aesthetic, which so many other films would strive to correct, were not *sui generis*. Rather, *ID4*'s concluding spectacles were transparently modelled after the Death Star battles in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, and their failures represent a failure to match Lucas's narrative sophistication. What these texts shared, however, was the fact that

they were all, in their own time, essentially aesthetic beached whales. In 1977, 1983, and 1996, respectively, the science fiction spectacles which they conjured up were so far out of the ordinary run of film aesthetics that they could be reified as something special and unique. And it is here that James Cameron's *Avatar* becomes most important. When the film premiered in 2009, the relativeness uniqueness-value which *A New Hope*, *Return of the Jedi*, and *ID4* had enjoyed was emphatically no longer the case. Baroque aesthetics of spectacle had become so generalized in Hollywood that not only could smaller-scale films the same year – such as *District 9*, *Terminator: Salvation* (McG, 2009), and *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* (Patrick Tatoupolos, 2009) – hit many of the same thematic notes, but even a low-budget independent animated feature such as *Battle for Terra* (Aristomenis Tsirbas, 2009) could tell almost the same story in a similar spectacular visual idiom. This factor, at least as much as anything else, likely lies at the root of why *Avatar* is so much more ideologically progressive than the original *Star Wars* trilogy or *ID4*. Neither of those texts had a *simpatico* aesthetic *zeitgeist* to define themselves against. They were both, in essence, having to re-invent the wheel afresh, taking mainstream audiences into new visual and imaginative territory which they may not have inhabited for years. Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that Lucas and Emmerich/Devlin opted to play it safe in narrative terms, and couch their imaginative visions in very broad “good vs. evil” and “alien invasion” terms. *Avatar*, however, had to offer greater narrative sophistication to distinguish itself in a changed cinematic culture where the conventions of such spectacles had become much more familiar. In essence, this is the playing out of the evolution from Edward Hall's “low culture” to “high culture” mentioned earlier.

The climactic battles of *A New Hope* and *ID4* have almost identical spatial geographies. Both deal with the slow, ominous approach of the enemy's super-fortress (the Death Star; the city-sized alien cruiser) upon the embattled rebel base (the Yavin moon; Area 51), opposed only by a small squadron of heroic fighter pilots (the Rebel X-wings; the US Air Force's F-18s), which must sortie out to meet it. The enemy super-fortress intends to destroy the rebel base with its ultimate super-laser weapon, unless the hero fighters can fight through the enemy's ships (TIEs, flying-saucer fighter craft) to reach one weak point (the unshielded thermal exhaust port; the generating point of the super-laser) which will, if hit, destroy the entire super-fortress. *Avatar*'s climactic battle utilizes these same spatial-geographical tropes, but strategically reorganizes them to arrive at a radically different dramaturgy. The initial set-up has been altered

so that while there is still the ominous approach of the enemy super-fortress (Quaritch's Dragon gunship), flanked by swarms of fighters (Scorpion gunships) and bearing a super-weapon with it (the Valkyrie shuttle refitted as a bomber), the heroically outclassed squadron (the Na'avi mounted on *ilkran*) no longer flies out to meet them, but rather lie in wait for them. This seeming diminution in heroism on the Na'avi's part is because Cameron has fundamentally reversed one of the scenario's parameters: here, it is not the overweening enemy which has one all-important weak point, but the already-imperilled heroes (Soul Tree). Faced with a technologically superior enemy as well as an all-important point to preserve, the Na'avi can only adopt more survivalist guerrilla ambush tactics. Against all this, however – and fundamental to the film's success – is the fact that Cameron has brought the massive sublime into alignment with spectatorial empathy in the way that *ID4* so signally failed to do. *Avatar*'s great embodiment of the massive sublime is not Quaritch's ships – which are mere vulgar weapons – any more than it was the F-18s in *ID4*. Rather, it is the magnificent ecosphere of Pandora itself which is under threat.

Already, Cameron has given a more nuanced portrait of the stakes of conflict. Once the Baroquely vertiginous and profuse spectacle of *Avatar*'s climactic battle actually begins, however, he continues to show a greater concern with the mechanics of conflict. While the Na'avi's initial advantage of surprise does enable them to down several gunships before their firepower can be brought to bear, the tide soon turns. Having briefly allowed the spectator their surge of cathartic pleasure with the initial Na'avi attack, Cameron acknowledges – again, as *ID4* refused and cheated on – the implications of an alien imbalance in technology. The *ilkran* begin to be swiftly downed by the gunships' machine guns. Soon the heroic native uprising, with ominously familiar historical logic, seems to have ended in defeat. The shots devoted here to Jake, left helplessly soaring about alone on his mount, represent Cameron's rueful symbolic nod to reality before he invokes the prerogative of art – in the great Baroque tradition of “big lies” – and has the tide turn, with Pandora's entire ecosphere sentiently rising up as one in resistance to Quaritch's forces.

Again, this stress upon *ID4* and its progeny, with the massive sublime inhering in invading alien spacecraft and science fiction war scenarios, should not be taken to mean that science fiction is the only narrative genre in which this Baroque aesthetic inheres. Again it must be stressed that science fiction's early pre-eminence in Hollywood DVFX-driven blockbuster was incidental and incomplete, rather than a foreordained truth about the nature of digital spectacle.

Indeed, two other films released the same year as *ID4* showcased two other, very different, subjects for digitally-conjured spectacle, which the aesthetics of the massive sublime would likewise reiterate and refine in different films over the years to come. *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996) used DVFX to realize tornadoes onscreen with a Baroque scale and intensity never seen before, and *Dragonheart* (Rob Cohen, 1996) would show filmgoers their first ever digital dragon. These films are not equal in the degree to which they embraced the Baroque narrative assumptions of their subjects, but they nonetheless opened up new horizons in what could be represented onscreen, and how. The opening sequence of *Twister* depicts its heroine Jo as a child, and shows her lifelong obsession with tornados dawning when her family home is hit by one. As they take refuge in their storm shelter, it soon becomes clear that the M5 tornado's force is too great for the shelter's door. Her father desperately tries to hold it in place, but it is soon wrenched off by the force of the storm, and he is swept away to his death. The film now cuts to a close-up of the young Jo's face, gazing out into the storm, and we see that she is showing not horror, panic, or grief, but instead a sort of aesthetic rapture at the sight of Nature at its most cruelly spectacular. This brief bit of business sets the paradigm for the rest of the film's spectacle. It ensures that throughout the remainder of the film, for all that the spectator may feel narrative suspense over whether the adult Jo (Helen Hunt) and her fellow storm-chasers will escape the latest tornado, this is always offset by their admiration of the sheer massive sublime of the giant destructive cyclones. *Dragonheart*, in contrast, did not have a mute, faceless force of Nature for its iteration of the massive sublime. Its dragon character is given a name – Draco – and is voiced by Sean Connery, whose mannerisms likewise provided the basis of Draco's digitally-rendered "performance." It is this digital character, thus, that one sees overflying medieval villages and castles, blasting fire from his maw, and leading a peasant army to rebellion against the villainous king's castle. In the same way as we saw with sabre-toothed cats in an earlier chapter, the largely character-less "special effect" of a film such as *Dragonslayer* (Matthew Robbins, 1981) has been wholly superseded, allowing for a real embodiment and personification of the massive sublime.

As with other spectacles from the 1990s, *Twister* and *Dragonheart* represented the digitally-liberated Baroque in its absolute infancy. And as with *Judge Dredd*, *ID4*, and Emmerich's subsequent *Godzilla*, when measured against contemporary iterations of the same massive sublime subject matter, they show how far the aesthetic has evolved in the intervening decades. For digitally-rendered tornadoes, one now has a film such as *Into the Storm* (Steven

Quale, 2014), which escalates *Twister*'s still-somewhat-modest spectacles – such as barns and houses being torn apart, and all manner of debris, including a cow, becoming airborne – to the truly outlandish Baroque extremes of tornadoes sucking up exploding fuel tankers, and turning themselves into funnel columns of raging fire. Regarding dragons, likewise, one now has a film like Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (2013). Smaug is the next-generation improvement on *Dragonheart*'s Draco, in that in addition to being voiced by Benedict Cumberbatch, he is also “played” by Cumberbatch via motion-capture. Smaug represents an awesome living embodiment of the massive sublime to a degree that Draco never approached, charismatically dominating a palatial columned hall filled with mountains of gold and gems. He possesses a wholly serpentine look, but with an intimidating set of fangs and claws and a slinkiness appropriate to the menacing, sly, playfulness of a cat toying with its prey, as Kristin Thompson puts it (Thompson 2014). All this is underscored by a chin and jaw structure that seems to give him a perpetual sardonic grin. And yet, despite all this, *Desolation of Smaug* ultimately proves a crippling disappointment, creatively, insofar as – like *ID4* seventeen years earlier – Smaug's treatment by the film's narrative was a betrayal of the massive sublime spectacle he presents. If anything, *Desolation of Smaug* is even worse than *ID4* in this regard, in that Smaug's awesome sense of menace is undercut by making the constant butt of overlong sequences of almost-slapstick action from the film's cast of dwarves. This offers a reminder that the evolution of Baroque narrative stylistics is not a homogenized and monolithic process. Earlier, less visually Baroque spectacles featuring digital dragons, such as *Eragon*, had nonetheless managed to achieve a more respectful narrative tone towards their subject. This simply shows again that, *pace* critics and theorists who claim that narrative has been largely evacuated in the modern blockbuster, narrative acumen and sophistication nonetheless remain the make-or-break factor in such narrativized spectacles. The right narrative tone must always be found to do justice to the visual spectacles on offer.

In this spirit, it is worth observing that Kristen Whissel's remark about the grandiose verticality of Baroque cinematic aesthetics “evacuating previously available middle grounds” finds acute narrative resonance in yet another film dealing with dragons, released seven months after *Desolation of Smaug*. DreamWorks Animation's *How to Train Your Dragon 2* (Dean DeBlois, 2014) successfully bestows on its titular dragons the Baroque sense of the massive sublime that Jackson's film so failed at, but its narrative fails to build further on this because of a

perverse insistence upon maintaining a drama of “middle grounds.” The film is determinedly, and tediously, civically liberal in its worldview, with its hero Hiccup (voiced by Jay Baruchel) reacting to the approach of a one-dimensional, megalomaniacal warlord named Drago (voiced by Djimon Hounsou) in a far more naïvely conciliatory and ingenuous fashion than is remotely credible, especially for character who is a twenty-year old with a mastery of dragons, and in an animated feature that is pitching itself as more of a mature drama than a mere “cartoon.” Scene after scene which – under the Baroque aesthetics the film evokes – should play out according to an apocalyptic, immolatory logic, are instead hamstrung and thwarted by some form of narrative qualification or complication, such that the film never achieves Baroque lift-off. *How to Train Your Dragon 2* is a film shot through with the insistence – familiar from a long tradition of centrist-liberal melodramas such as *The Ox-Bow Incident* (William Wellman, 1943), *The China Syndrome* (James Bridges, 1979), and *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, 2007), among others – that the side of “good” should always receive the worst of things dramatically, in order to generate pathos, and emphasize its fundamental difference from bullying reactionary dogmatism. No matter that Hiccup and his clan have a vast fleet of fire-breathing dragon mounts to draw upon – the film’s narrative makes them so irresolutely stupid and conciliatory that they cannot bring their dragon armada’s force to bear against Drago. This might, narratively speaking, create some spurious hint of moral equivalence between them, and so the possibility is disallowed. And this, in turn, bespeaks a fundamentally anti-Baroque narrative schema – one totally inimical to the implications of the massive sublime.

As Whissel’s remarks on verticality correctly evoked, Baroque narratives of the massive sublime deal in polarized absolutes. In spite of its evocation of being dwarfed or overawed, the theme is not, ultimately, as disempowering to the ordinary human being as it might seem. Its countervailing theme is that of *acting upon* – a rejection of character passivity, and the successful exertion of the individual will upon others, or the world in general. This trait goes right back to the original Counter-Reformation Baroque of the seventeenth century, through which the Church sought to work aesthetic-emotive effects on the spectator to draw them back into the Catholic fold. As such, Baroque art is wholly antithetical to that strain of Christianity which values passivity and humility, and views worldly ambitions and triumphs as mere vanities, or sinful pride. This aspect of Christianity, however, is a fluent fit with much of modern liberalism, and so often seeps into civic melodramas such as *Ox-Bow Incident*, *China Syndrome*, and *Redacted*,

which dramatize passive liberal martyrdom to the invincible stupidity of mob mentality, corporate greed, military thuggishness, etc. To act more assertively and aggressively against these things, the implication goes, would be to lower oneself to the same level. Passive martyrdom, on the other hand, leaves one spiritually/morally/intellectually pure and free of reactionary taint. As we have seen, this mentality can even infiltrate, and cause narrative confusions, in big Hollywood spectacles such as *How to Train Your Dragon 2*. Even in apparently Baroque narratives of the massive sublime, elements of this other side of pseudo-Christian liberalism often manage to seep in.

Two vivid examples are offered by the films *Real Steel* (Shawn Levy, 2011) and *Elysium* (Neill Blomkamp, 2013). The narrative premises of these two films are fluently congruent with dramas of the massive sublime. In the former, it is roughly the year 2020, and the sport of boxing has changed from consisting of fights between two human opponents to between two ten-foot robotic avatars. This removing of the merely human from the equation has allowed the sport to become far bigger, louder, more kinetic, more bombastic, and – most of all – reliably to the “death” instead of to the mere knock-down or knockout. Hugh Jackman plays Charlie, a washout from the world of this new sport, who comes across a lost and forgotten boxer robot which may have untapped potential, offering him a way back in. In the latter, it is the year 2154, and the planet Earth has become a giant slum for “the 99%” of the human race, while an elite few have emigrated to a giant orbital space ring called “Elysium,” where futuristic climate control makes life a permanent utopian idyll, and futuristic medical technology guarantees virtual immortality to enjoy it. It goes without saying that revolution is brewing back on Earth, for which Matt Damon’s protagonist Max provides the catalyst, as – scorched by lethal levels of radiation – he needs to reach Elysium, and treatment, within a week or die.

Summarized thus, both films would seem like they offer grandiose Baroque narratives that deal in sublime absolutes. Such is ultimately not the case, however. *Real Steel* is obsessively concerned with Charlie’s insufferably cute son/partner (also named Max), and this, in turn, feeds the film’s determined infantilism. It fully embodies the pseudo-Christian tradition of passivity by constantly emphasizing Charlie and Max’s incompetence at the sport of robotic boxing. We see them successively lose fight after fight; and even when we are eventually shown them winning, it is always presaged by their bot taking an absurd amount of punishment, as though to assure the spectator that the film is not fully, genuinely breaking with its aesthetic of passivity and

martyrdom. *Elysium* is little better. The film's plot has its Max – upon falling in with some criminals and agreeing to be their point man in a data heist in exchange for passage to Elysium – being suited up with an impressive steel exoskeleton/battle chassis. The spectator used to the conventions of Hollywood spectacle assumes that this gear will make him virtually invincible, but the very first scene of its use instead has Max being shot and incapacitated, and having to limp away to seek help. Eventually getting to Elysium, he still fails to make any martial impression in his exoskeleton, and ultimately dies using the stolen data program to make all Earth's inhabitants official Elysian citizens. Again, there is the note of passive martyrdom rather than any exultation of successful action.

It is in contrast to this that one can appreciate how successful a Baroque narrative is offered by the *Hunger Games* franchise. The franchise's futuristic metropolis of the Capitol – and its annual Hunger Games staged in enormous, intricately-designed amphitheatres – offer a vivid, if more malign, example of the massive sublime. In Katniss Everdeen, however, there is none of the aforementioned cowering from assertive action, and obsession with the idea that the spectator must only sympathize with a hopelessly ineffectual underdog. Due to her obvious archery skills and defiant attitude, Katniss is tipped early in the first film to emerge victorious from the last-man-standing youth massacre, and emerge victorious she does, having mastered every situation she finds herself in along the way. Throughout the following installments, this tone is largely maintained, as she goes from arena sacrifice to veteran gladiator to iconic military figure. There is a Nietzschean will-to-power aspect to narratives such as these that may provoke uneasiness or ambivalence in viewers totally habituated to underdog stories, but the Nietzschean aspect is, ultimately, far more organic to the Baroque logic of modern blockbusters than the pseudo-Christian logic of films such as *Real Steel* and *Elysium*.

Underlying Baroque narrative schema such as the *Hunger Games* franchise's is the compulsion to totally evacuate the populist approach, flattering to the putative "everyman," which inhered in the earliest Lucas/Spielberg examples of the modern blockbuster. As Thomas Shone puts it, although "the blockbuster would eventually become synonymous with the effortless accomplishments of singular heroes":

...*Jaws*, from the outset, was an exercise in dramatic downsizing, attuned to the scruffy, low-slung heroism of ordinary men, engaging in pitched battle with just a single shark, which kills only four people in the entire movie... (Shone 2004, 32)

To take the specific example of Paul W.S. Anderson again, for all that his films over the 2000s and 2010s, especially the *Resident Evil* franchise, have charted the evolution of modern spectacle well, Anderson's most vivid evocation of this kind of Baroque valorization of power might be said to have come at the very dawn of his career. His first Hollywood feature, *Mortal Kombat* (1995) – a film now historically equidistant between *Jaws* and the present – was significant for the fact that, as a dramatic *leitmotif*, it would portentously emphasize the phrase “flawless victory,” familiar from the original Midway Games arcade game. At that time, this constituted a genuine intervention in the workings of Hollywood spectacle, insofar as it was still largely defined by de-aestheticized folksiness, and concerns with realism and relatability. This kind of highly-aestheticized absolutism, however – the sense that a visually elaborate “flawless victory” was much more aesthetically resonant than a close, barely-scraped-out victory in the passive pseudo-Christian mode – was a direct contradiction and rebuke to the kind “scruffy, low-slung heroism” that Shone evoked. And after this narrative-aesthetic threshold had been crossed, there would be no going back.

In this identification with, and exultation of, triumphant, successful action, one discerns a final, vital aspect of Baroque narrative: the fact that it draws fully upon the pleasure principle in creating its narratives of achievement and revolution. This is important, because it is a refutation of the high valuation which many contemporary, modernist-minded critics put upon narrative aesthetics of unpleasure. The critical culture which has elevated Michael Haneke to such esteem often strongly esteems the privileging of antagonistic rhetoric and the frustration of identification – in other words, giving the screen, for prolonged periods, to hateful characters who receive no refutation; and having the heroes consistently receive the worst of it in action scenes, or any other scene which depicts some form of endeavour. A little-seen film like *Snowpiercer* (2013), by Korean auteur Bong Joon-ho, demonstrates this aesthetic nicely. Bong's film constantly has its revolutionary army – with which it has solidly identified the viewer's empathy – fall into sadistically-conceived traps, be ambushed, and learn their supposed mentor was a manipulating traitor all along. When its lone-surviving leader (Chris Evans) ultimately comes face-to-face with Ed's Harris's villainous overlord character, moreover, the film pauses to let Harris blithely and unperturbedly discourse for some minutes – without contradiction – on the futility of the heroes' quest, their innate inferiority, and the necessity of his totalitarian order. *Snowpiercer* is a film that Haneke would have made, could he bring himself to embrace DVFX and genre conventions; and

not coincidentally, it received widespread praise from critics. Baroque narrative aesthetics are defined by their total rejection of these kinds of schema of unpleasure, which derive from modernism in deliberately violating, and thus implicitly showing up and critiquing, the pleasurable dynamics of identification and catharsis in Hollywood-style narrative.

Narrativized spectacles which censor action and achievement from their worldviews, however, do not have to derive their inspiration from modernism, and need not inherently entail the deliberate instilling of narrative frustration and unpleasure. It is in this regard that Decadent aesthetics offer a vital parallel tradition to the Baroque narrative schema discussed above. They offer a different lexicon of narrative schema, in which the exultation of successful agency seen in Baroque narratives is tacitly and implicitly allowed as a dramatic ideal, but often minimized out of a strong sense of aestheticized perversity. The histories of nineteenth-century Decadence and Hollywood drama are by no means as alien to each other as they might at first sound. “If I were inclined to believe in the theory of reincarnation”, Burton Rascoe once wrote, “I should say that Ben Hecht has inherited the soul which Joris-Karl Huysmans relinquished when he commended himself to the Trappists and to God” (Weir 2008, 220 n2). Ben Hecht – a writer on such revered Hollywood classics as *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933), *Viva Villa!* (Jack Conway et. al., 1934), *Wuthering Heights* (William Wyler, 1939), and *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), along with several Hitchcock films, including *Spellbound* (1945) and *Notorious* (1946) – had, David Weir reminds us, “started out as a newspaper man steeped in fin-de-siècle literature,” and like H.L. Mencken before him, had been “a protégé of James Huneker, whose journalism had already aided the entrance of decadence into American popular culture well before the younger generation of pressmen made the career shift to Hollywood” (Weir 2008, 193). Or, as Weir would more succinctly put it in an earlier book: “Huysmans to Huneker to Hecht to Hollywood” (Weir 1995, 189).

Once one accepts this premise, Weir continues, Decadent fingerprints on much of Hollywood’s Classical Studio Era become much more readily discernible. “A film does not,” he insists, “have to be written by someone like Hecht, whose links to decadence are clear, or based on a decadent novel to be grounded in the decadent tradition” (Weir 1995, 190). Indeed, Weir goes on to point out that Xanadu from *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) is in fact one of Hollywood’s great representations of the Decadent bower. As he puts it: “Charles Foster Kane becomes an extremely isolated figure, practicing a radical negation of life as he becomes

increasingly removed from any activity in society whatsoever” (Weir 1995, 191). Ultimately, thus, this aspect of *Citizen Kane* represents the Decadent imagination having reached its maximum possible temporal and geographical potential: “Reaching from antiquity to the twentieth century, from Flaubert’s Carthage to Hollywood’s ‘Xanadu,’ at the western edge of America the manifest destiny of decadence is finally fulfilled” (Weir 1995, 191).

The literary achievement with which Weir credits Hecht is attributable, in large part, to Hecht’s having fully assimilated the Decadent value of a sense of the perverse – the fundamental recognition that the workings of art not only have nothing to do with the moral workings of society, but often enough may be outright antithetical to them. In his 1845 story *The Imp of the Perverse*, Poe declared, of “the spirit of the *Perverse*,” that we often commit actions simply “because we feel that we should *not*” (Poe 2002, 213, italics Poe’s). Furthermore, he asserts, through the promptings of the perverse “we act, for the reason that we should *not*. In theory, no reason can be more unreasonable; but in fact, there is none more strong” (Poe 2002, 212). These ideas, which would go on to underlie so much of the nineteenth century’s Decadent art, are still every bit as relevant today, and pose profound problems for a popular, and populist, medium such as Hollywood cinema. Not only does the notion of the “happy ending” still hold wide sway, but there persists a pervasive popular sense that films ought to have some pretence of a socializing function – that the drama we consume ought somehow to reflect our better natures or higher ideals. Certainly this is an ideal which has underlain a great deal of pseudo-Leftist moralizing criticism and scholarship over the years. And yet such prescriptions are belied by the sheer dramatic indispensability of the perverse – the wish to deliberately violate moralistic prescriptions – the need to transgress. Hollywood’s long, great, tradition of irresistibly irrepressible con men, hucksters, hustlers, thieves, gangsters, lotharios, mashers, cads, and sundry other nonconformists and misfits shows that it is a need that has not gone unaddressed. A film such as *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), for instance, is a modern masterpiece in this regard, evangelizing the cathartic joys of senseless violence, wanton vandalism, and terrorism, simply for their own antisocial sake.

As we have seen, much of Hollywood spectacle over the generations has been imbued with a strong sense of Romanticism – with its highly individualized sensibility, and verve for the idea of expanding human happiness through the overthrow of social ranking and constraint, in the hope of some more soulful, humane, and transcendent justice prevailing. The Decadent perverse,

however, dates back to that crucial point around 1830 when Romanticism entered its late, daemonic, self-conscious phase. The opening act in the history of Decadence, A.E. Carter declares, “is the late Romantic phase... when the moody, introspective and fatal hero of 1830 adopts the cult of the artificial and the abnormal” (Carter 1958, 27). From 1830 on, he continues, “the cult of artificiality begins in the perversion of a Romantic legend,” whereby “distinct Romantic types” begin to become more ambivalent (Carter 1958, 27). Carter specifies “the nobleman forced to live as a bandit, the great-souled convict, the virtuous whore” as being among the iconic characters of Romanticism who would take on a more perverse aspect as the Decadent turn set in (Carter 1958, 27). Previously, melodramatic narrative premises had always been found to excuse these protagonists’ anti-social acts and attitudes – Hugo’s *Hernani* (1830) having been capriciously stripped of his estates by the King of Spain, for instance (Carter 1958, 28). Post-1830 Decadent literature, however, would dispense with any such vestigial respect for the social. “Amongst its protagonists,” Carter observes:

...we find dukes, princes, countesses, baronesses, all belonging to the best society and all well provided with cash. In such characters Romantic revolt has lost all justification, has soured, become spleen, boredom, *taedium vitae*, the result not of frustration but of surfeit. The decadent has passed beyond revolt. (Carter 1958, 28-29)

The result of all of this, again, is a powerful and pervasive sense of the perverse. In Huysmans’ *À Rebours*, for instance, Des Esseintes picks up a poor boy on the streets and takes him to an expensive upscale brothel. Having introduced him to pleasures far beyond his means, Des Esseintes then cuts him off again, in hopes that he will turn to crime for the sake of being able to continue to afford these sensual delights. As with *Fight Club* 115 years later, this is done for no particular reason beyond a perverse interest in mixing up the fabric of society a bit.

A functioning sense of the perverse is an indispensable prerequisite for any understanding of Decadent narrative aesthetics, and, therefore, a great deal of what Hollywood has produced over the decades. Many film scholars and theorists, however, signally fail to demonstrate this prerequisite. Noël Carroll’s remarks about “Movies, the Moral Emotions, and Sympathy” are especially representative. He speaks in unproblematic terms of the “widely distributed, ethical proclivity to cultivate moral allegiance with – or attraction toward – the prototypically weakest members of society,” and of how “our concern for the welfare of various characters... makes us sensitive to acts of aid, succor, benevolence, generosity, and helpfulness on the part of certain characters on behalf of other characters” (Carroll 2013, 94-95). This is a fairly straightforward

summary of kind of pseudo-Christian morality seen above, whereby charity and compassion are valued as the highest goods. The problem, however, is that very often cinematic art does not conform to these broad strokes. Indeed, too zealous an insistence upon such a Christian worldview will provoke, in the Decadent aesthete, a revulsion and backlash. One need only think of Oscar Wilde's famous quip that "one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing," and its stinging appositeness, to get a sense of this reality. Moral worth or depravity count for nothing in cinema unless they are couched in formal terms that will win admiration or scorn from the viewer, and the way that this is done has little to do with any real-world morality.

Carroll speaks of the "moral disgust" supposedly engendered by Michael Douglas's Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987) for instance, as well as the anger and negative regard supposedly instilled by Kirk Douglas's character Chuck Tatum in *Ace in the Hole* (Carroll 2013, 99-100). The latter, in particular, he refers to as "downright evil," insofar as he "not only arranges to have the rescue of the Indian curio dealer blocked, but who also, while doing so, seduces the man's wife" (Carroll 2013, 100). Carroll appears to forget the fact that Tatum is an irresistible character who resoundingly wins empathy from the audience by sheer force of aesthetic perversity. Carroll also seems oblivious to the fact that all Tatum's actions in *Ace in the Hole* are narratively relativized – indeed implicitly justified – by the sheer dowdiness and fatuousness of its New Mexico setting, which immediately attracts a crowd of spectators eager to relish the spectacle of the rescue; and who, in turn, turn the whole accident site into a carnival, complete with hot dog stands and a Ferris wheel. The man's wife, whom Carroll seems indignant on behalf of, is, meanwhile, eager to get on board with Tatum's scheme of profiteering off these rubes' ingenuousness. *Ace in the Hole* is in fact a classic of Decadent perversity, insofar as the mentality which it inculcates shows that a sin against this milieu isn't really a genuine sin. In film, like any other art, it is aesthetics, not morality, that truly govern.

The two anti-heroes whom Carroll names – Gekko as well as Tatum – are in fact the entire locus of their films' charisma, and in their ruthless, amorally charming way, attract the absolute lion's share of the audience's sympathy. The cinematically literate spectator is not, as Carroll seems to believe, poised "to take pleasure in the defeat of those who would harm the protagonists" with regard to these characters (Carroll 2013, 100). Their eventual downfall plays more to the masochistic side of spectatorial identification, in the Decadent equivalent of the

Baroque aesthetic's tendency toward exultant self-immolation. Furthermore, "moviemakers," Carroll declares, "can mobilize moral disgust against screen characters, like the Nazi commandant in *Schindler's List*, whose sadism audiences find repugnant" (Carroll 2013, 99). Again, this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the workings of film art of Carroll's part. As Steven Spielberg himself has pointed out, the repugnance instilled by Amon Goethe's character is not due to his sadism *per se*, but rather to his perpetually hung-over and shambolic demeanour, punctuated by the image of his distended gut. As John H. Richardson wrote in a *Premier* magazine feature on the production of the film:

To dilute the satanic charm of Goethe, for example, [Spielberg]'s had Fiennes play many of the scenes "behind dull, drink-shrouded eyes, because I didn't want him to become the Hannibal Lecter of the Holocaust genre," he says. (Richardson 2000, 162-63)

Unlike a filmmaker such as Stanley Kramer, Spielberg is skilful enough to know that successfully conveying moral meaning in a film has less to do with ultimate moral intention than with formal and stylistic matters of presentation. The "satanic charm" that Richardson refers to would presumably appear to Carroll as an oxymoron, as would Spielberg's reference to Hannibal Lecter – a cannibalistic serial killer whose urbanity and *savoir faire* would nonetheless cause him to become an well-known, and often perversely admired film character, along the same amoral lines as Gordon Gekko. This, again, offers a potent demonstration of the Decadent perverse aspect of cinema in action.

Carroll's denial of the perverse, and reduction of narrative interest to the humane "good," was exactly the tendency which Pauline Kael inveighed against, in her 1956 manifesto "Movies: The Desperate Art," declaring that:

Films must be big to draw the mass audience, but the heroes and heroines, conceived to flatter the 'ordinary,' 'little' persons who presumably make up the audience, must be inanities who will offend no one. (Kael 2011, 2)

She then continues to declare that "audiences rest easier when characters do only those things modern young men and women are supposed to do" (Kael 2011, 3). Whatever else Tatum, Gekko, Goethe, or Lecter may be, they are definitely not "inanities who will offend no one," nor do they "do only things that modern young men and women are supposed to do." This is very much at the root of their arch cinematic appeal. There is an understood audience appetite for such perverse representations, and the satisfying of them is one of the bases of Decadent narrative in cinema. Again, fundamental to this perverse tendency in Decadent narrative aesthetics is a

recognition and respect for transgression. A lack of such respect, in turn, signifies a slighting and rejection of the Decadent in movie narrative. David Wayne Thomas, in an article discussing the Decadent credentials of Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989), wryly evokes the dynamic at work by mentioning the occasions:

...when American formula dramas imply character progress into good wholesome values by, say, beginning with slick-haired financiers in Armani suits and converting them into denimed and plaid-flannelled common folk with superbly casual hair. (Thomas 1999, 108)

Carroll would presumably find a dynamic such as Thomas describes entirely in accord with his “moral sympathies.” Decadently-inclined viewers, however, would recoil, perceiving – quite rightly – a deliberately studied affront to the sensibility they appreciate cinema in terms of.

No discussion of Decadent perversity such as this – in narrativized spectacles of the 2000s and 2010s – can be complete without reference to the *Twilight* saga. The five film adaptations of Stephanie Meyer's phenomenally popular teen-vampire-romance novels – *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008), *New Moon* (Chris Weitz, 2009), *Eclipse* (David Slade, 2010), *Breaking Dawn: Part One* (Bill Condon, 2011), and *Breaking Dawn: Part Two* (Bill Condon, 2012) – would not only contain within themselves a greater engagement with narrative Decadence than almost anything which had been seen in the Hollywood mainstream before, but their immense commercial success would legitimize Decadent aesthetics for many other films. This does not mean that they succeed as Decadent narratives in the way intended, however. Rather, it is their convolutions, suppressions, and evasions of their own Decadent implications which are so perverse that ultimately, if read (or viewed) from a Decadent left-of-centre position, they have a bizarre facility for flushing out an inner conservative one may not have known existed. I might have been entirely sympathetic, at first, to the prospect of Bella choosing to turn her back on her family, background, and society, in order to fully become one with the lifeless cool of the super-rich Cullens. And yet Stephanie Meyer's cluelessness in articulating this narrative arc of Decadent perversity ultimately sabotages it. Her unwillingness to acknowledge the essentially Decadent appeal of the Cullen clan – instead choosing to emphasize their “family values,” such as playing baseball together, and Edward's insistence upon staying chaste until marriage – end up voiding their real narrative function. Under these circumstances, I ultimately find myself rooting for Bella to turn her back on the Cullens' Decadent bower of wealth and beauty, and simply settle down with Jake in the homely, humble-but-honest circumstances of the La Push reservation and

squeeze out some pups while getting to know her pack-neighbours – ideals I would *never* root for under normal circumstances. The perverse mishandling of one kind of narrative perversity can ineluctably elicit it in another form. Indeed, this would be the defining legacy of the *Twilight* saga's influence upon popular culture. In the same way that *Reefer Madness* (Louis J. Gasnier, 1936) would go on to become a stoner favourite, the *Twilight* novels – supposedly parables for teen abstinence – would inspire a diametrically-opposed appreciation in their fan culture by virtue of the sheer unconvincingness of this narrative self-censorship. The seething sensuality which the first three books leave unconsummated, for instance, spawned a whole universe of compensatory fan-fiction smut-writing, even inspiring one – *Fifty Shades of Grey* – which would achieve mainstream liftoff in popular culture in its own right. Likewise, the “Team Jacob” faction within this fan culture exists to reassert narrative-aesthetic logic, calling out the unconvincingness of the saga's official narrative resolution. The Decadent perverse has been part of the horror genre from the very first, as audiences have repeatedly gleaned aesthetic meanings and implications from films – such as Dracula really being a beguiling and seductive anti-hero, Frankenstein's creature really being a tragically misunderstood victim, *King Kong* really being a tragic love story, etc. – which little in the original text seemed to support, but which have since become the dominant understanding, and narrative framework for remakes. As with so much else about genre, thus, the *Twilight* saga simply shows that these aesthetic dynamics of perversity are still as much in operation as ever.

Beyond all this, however, that the *Twilight* saga has Decadently re-written the rules for the vampire film is irrefutable. Films made before it had often shown a maddening readiness to deny the inherent Decadent appeal of vampirism, in favour of a patently dramatically unconvincing humanist morality. The *Blade* trilogy was especially egregious here, but it was not unique. Whatever their ultimate aesthetic failures, however, the *Twilight* saga has nonetheless so naturalized the Decadent cool of the vampire persona that other films about vampires for a generation to come will have to come to some aesthetic accommodation with it – either of embracing and attempting to outdo it, or rejecting and attempting to rewrite it. Writ largest, however, this aesthetic fact can be observed in the life cycle of all genres, which Richard Dyer defined in 1981 as “divided into three periods: primitive, mature, and decadent” (Dyer 2002a, 60). The third, decadent, phase, Dyer suggested, was where “a reflexive self-consciousness about the genre itself” had set in. Under this narrative logic, one might see genres coming around full

circle, to signify the polar opposite of their original premises; or drifting into the grip of new and perverse thematic obsessions bearing little resemblance to their original meaning. The best-known example of this Decadent phenomenon would be the rise of the “revisionist” Hollywood western, in which the conquest of the American frontier is re-interpreted as a horrific tragedy of displacement and genocide of Native Americans, rather than its original mythology as the heroic conquest of a new Eden. Because the western had been such a central and canonical Hollywood genre for so long, however, this development in narrative Decadent originated well before the period of this dissertation – beginning in the early 1970s with films such as *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970), *Solider Blue* (Ralph Nelson, 1970), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971), etc., and evolving over the following two decades to such grandiose extremes as *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990). To a greater or lesser extent, however, the same tendency has been observable in other Hollywood genres. Dyer himself was discussing the classical Hollywood musical, and taking *Sweet Charity* (Bob Fosse, 1969) as his test case, but again, such Decadent mutations into perversity could be discerned in any genre.

The gangster thriller *Takers* (John Luessenhop, 2010), for instance, demonstrates this kind of perversity lucidly, insofar as it shows the moral premises of the genre having become totally and completely inverted. When going back to the most formative years of the Hollywood gangster film – the trinity of *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931), *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931), and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932) – one is struck by the relative paucity of images of the criminals actually triumphantly luxuriating in the spoils of their life of crime. Such images are of course not absent – there is Rico showing off his huge new house, Tom Powers’s setting up shop in fancy hotel suites, and Tony Camonte’s window view of “the world is yours.” Nonetheless, there remained a general insistence – even before the advent of the Production Code – upon framing their achievements only in vulgar terms; in other words, the refusal to grant their law-breaking antiheroes any real *savoir faire*. All this speaks to the totality of the Decadent inversion which is now possible in the Hollywood aesthetic of the 2010s. *Takers* gives its criminal cast inordinate *savoir faire* and Decadent devotion to sensually perfect lifestyles, very deliberately individuating them in terms of stylish clothes, cars, and clubbing habits. Seeing a long shot of Paul Walker’s character John Rahway – the night after a successful bank robbery – walking, with deliberate stateliness, out onto the terrace of his rooftop penthouse,

and into a pool where two gorgeous women await him, one sees the Decadent concern with aestheticized form operating at a high level indeed.

Even more importantly, however, the genres of spectacle with which the modern blockbuster established itself – science-fiction, fantasy, monster horror, action, superheroes, etc. – have begun to reach their Decadent phase over the past decade. *Prometheus*, *Man of Steel*, and *Godzilla* are all acutely relevant here, insofar as they all take a well-known pop cultural icon – already familiar from previous blockbuster spectacles – and re-present it in a way that seems less concerned with providing reassuring familiarity than with pursuing strange private obsessions which bear little resemblance to the icon’s original appeal. *Prometheus*, for example, notoriously declined to show the famous “xenomorph” aliens at all, perversely teasing the spectator throughout the whole film with the prospect of their appearance, but instead only foregrounding a succession of bizarre and grotesque creatures which are similar but distinct. *Man of Steel*, likewise, jettisons such familiar features of the Superman universe as Lex Luthor, Jimmy Olsen, and kryptonite – the last of which it replaces with the very different device of having Earth’s atmosphere and sensory environment itself be disorienting for Kryptonians. And *Godzilla* – for all that Edwards would restore all of Emmerich’s foolish excisions – nonetheless also had the big guy be virtually absent from his own film. It instead devoted inordinate amounts of screen time to the opposing monsters, the MUTOs (Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organisms) – bizarre insectoid creatures whose design suggests a synthesis between an alien queen, the arachnids from *Starship Troopers*, and the Gyaos from Shusuke Kaneko’s *Gamera* trilogy. This trend in Decadent narrative is obviously one that has every chance to thrive in the Hollywood of today, where – at least at the highest budgetary level of spectacle – sequels, re-makes, spin-offs and re-boots of all different kinds seem to outnumber original cinematic narratives. In this perverse zeroing in on the aberrant and the divergent – this seeming emphasis on the non-essential and ephemeral at the expense of the main theme or subject – one sees what Desire Nisard once called “the Decadent feast of scraps” with vivid clarity (Constable, Potolsky and Denisoff 1999, 381). It is of the essence of these films’ perversity, however, that all this is not accidental – the result of inexperience with, lack of comprehension of, or appreciation for, their subjects on the filmmakers’ part, for instance – but totally and self-consciously deliberate. Ridley Scott is, after all, the filmmaker who first originated the *Alien* universe. Zack Snyder had already revolutionized the “comic book adaptation” genre with *300* and *Watchmen* before arriving at *Man*

of *Steel*. And such was Gareth Edwards' devotion to honouring *Godzilla's* Japanese franchise heritage that he initially planned to have Akira Takarada feature in a small cameo role. All the perversities of these films, thus, must be laid at the feet of ultra-self-consciousness about propelling their subject matter into a Late Decadent stage.

Again, this aesthetic dimension of narrative is not new. In the preface to a 1970 edition of Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, Harold Bloom declared that:

Where Wordsworth and Keats, followed by Mill and Arnold, fought imaginatively against excessive self-consciousness, Pater welcomes it and, by this welcome, inaugurates for writers and readers in English the decadent phase of Romanticism, in which, when honest, we still find ourselves. (Bloom 1970, xiv-xv)

This arch self-consciousness is the sense that a film knows that the spectator possesses a working sense of the perverse, and understands that the spectator knows that the filmmakers know it of them. Decadent self-consciousness differs from outright modernist self-referentiality, insofar as Decadent narratives engage in elaborate meta-commentaries upon the workings of aesthetics – without, however, breaking a veneer of classical-realist narrative transitivity. Even if the spectator may have to grope to recall the narrative pretext or motivation for the current bit of hyper-aestheticized business, there is always one there within the classically transitive system. Unlike with modernist self-referentiality, the complicity that Decadent self-consciousness creates between filmmaker and spectator is one of shared narrative sophistication, not shared indifference or antipathy towards narrative.

In the same way that, as Whissel observed, Baroque narratives tend to evacuate available middle grounds, the acute self-consciousness of Decadent narratives tends to operate in extreme aesthetic registers. On the one hand, there are exquisitely refined highs of beauty and elegance; and on the other, there are insane orgiastic lows of degeneracy and squalor. The perpetual self-consciousness of Decadent narrative inheres in the sense that they are mutually intertwined and inseparable – one always inviting the other. This aestheticized self-consciousness is well-encapsulated in the first *Sherlock Holmes* film, in its device of “Holmes-a-vision”: a pair of cruelly one-sided fight scenes in which the film switches to a register of extreme-slow-motion, with the added refinement of voice-over narration. During these slow-motion scenes, Robert Downey Jr., as the titular sleuth, subjectively analyzes – shot-by-shot – his own actions in advance, predicts his opponent's reactions, and then plots his own reactions in turn, all in most minute and clinical of detail, including the likely timetable of recovery from the damage he's

inflicted. The actions and reactions that these sequences take considerable amounts of time taxonomizing in individuated shots are then revealed, in normal time, to be the work of only a few seconds in a single take or so. It's a foregrounding of intense self-consciousness on Holmes and the spectators' part, for the perverse sake of savouring the inflicting, and witnessing, of violence. The first of the two Holmes-a-vision scenes, taking place in the film's first sequence, is set in the dark corridors of a cavernous old building in the dead of night. Emerging from the shadows behind a corner, Holmes incapacitates the villain's sentry with a trio of blows to the ear, the liver, and the knee, as well as a choke-hold to silence him. We hear how:

Head cocked to the left. Partial deafness in ear. First point of attack. Two, throat. Paralyze vocal cords. Stop screaming. Three, got to be heavy drinker. Floating rib to the liver. Four, finally, dragging left foot. Fist to the patella. Summary prognosis, conscious in 90 seconds, martial efficacy, quarter of an hour at best. Full faculty recovery, unlikely.

Holmes's highly-self-conscious, subjective envisioning of all this takes up some twenty seconds of screen time, after which it plays out for real in barely five seconds. The device having thus been established, the second of the two scenes is even more formally ambitious, as well as more perverse. In a raucous, dirty underground bare-knuckles boxing establishment where he is apparently a regular contestant, a full forty-eight seconds is spent on Holmes's subjectively gaming out – shot by vividly-clear ultra-slow-motion shot – a devastating assault on his opponent in retaliation for a slight. We hear:

First, distract target. Then block his blind jab. Counter with cross to left cheek. Discombobulate. Dazed, he'll attempt wild haymaker. Employ elbow block, and body shot. Block feral left. Weaken right jaw. Now, fracture. Break cracked ribs. Traumatize solar plexus. Dislocate jaw entirely. Heel kick to diaphragm. In summary, ears ringing, jaw fractured, three ribs cracked, four broken, diaphragm hemorrhaging; physical recovery, six weeks; full psychological recovery, six months; capacity to spit at back of head... neutralized.

All this then takes only ten seconds to play out for real in the film's diegesis. The swift, sharp, brutality of reality offers a total contrast with the measured, self-conscious clarity of Holmes's mental ocularity. A spectator with any self-consciousness of their own reactions, furthermore, will readily understand that Holmes takes a perverse pleasure in these conceptual powers.

The contemporary roots of this Decadent dynamic can, like so many others, be vividly seen in *The Matrix* – in this case, in the shock-cuts involved in the first scenes where the characters inhabit the Matrix, with the spectator's conscious awareness of what it is. The first of these scenes features Cypher and Agent Smith. Inside the Matrix, the two sit in an exquisitely

appointed restaurant, and while Agent Smith has nothing before him, one sees Cypher enjoying a deliciously medium-rare steak, a snifter of cognac, and a fine cigar. Immediately after this, one sees the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* together for breakfast in the real world – which consists of a repulsive-looking protein shake concoction which resembles, in one character’s words, “a big bowl of snot.” The aesthetic gulf here is so self-consciously exaggerated that no spectator can possibly miss it, or help sympathizing with Cypher somewhat. The second scene is the first one in which the *Nebuchadnezzar*’s crew plugs into the Matrix together as a team. Again there is a self-consciously exaggerated aesthetic gulf – this time between the crews’ sartorial appearance in the real world, and once they virtually manifest themselves inside the Matrix. In reality, they are all wearing various cuts of ragged jumpsuits, which have been worn to a monochrome greyish colouration. Inside the Matrix, however, they are all sharply dressed in highly individualized fashion. Most of them wear different variations of sleek black, except for Switch, who for some reason goes all in white (possibly an allusion to the film’s guiding metaphor of Lewis Carroll’s “White Rabbit”?). Trinity sports the same almost S&M black leather outfit the audience has already seen in the opening sequence, while Neo’s slightly more dowdy look – his trench coat is less form-fitting than everyone else’s outfits – emphasizes his neophyte status as a Resistance fighter. All of them wear black shades, but of widely varying types – indeed, instead of traditional glasses of any kind, Morpheus sports a pince-nez.

In an intriguing piece of serendipity, the aesthetic and thematic contrast of these two scenes in *The Matrix* formed the basis of an entire other film the same year: *The Thirteenth Floor* (Josef Rusnak, 1999). In this latter film, a Los Angeles computer software magnate has developed a virtual reality system that functions along exactly the same lines as the Matrix – allowing the user to have a total sensory simulation of the City of Angels as it existed back in the year 1937. The film draws to the very fullest on this six decades of historical displacement, in order to evoke an older world – closer in history to the beautiful aesthetic environments of *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* than to the then-present – full of antique furniture and Edwardian *objets d’art*. It likewise emphasizes strongly the degree to which, upon exiting the virtual reality simulation, the Los Angeles of the present seems boorish and ugly by contrast. The film visually crystallizes this in the difference between ordering a martini then and now. In a 1937 nightclub, it is brought to you by a solicitous waiter on a silver plate, in an exquisitely delicate glass, containing a perfectly skewered olive on a wooden pick. In a 1999 bar, it will be

sloppily slammed down in front of you in basic tumbler glass by a rude bartender. This vision of the past is of course an idealized one, the film reminds us, but the Decadent aesthetic impulse behind it is very real.

At work in glaring, deliberately exaggerated, aesthetic contrasts such as this is a key point of self-consciousness underlying Decadent narratives: the knowledge that the perfectly beautiful, cultivated and rarefied is ultimately untenable – not just in the long term, but even in the short term. It requires too many unnatural impositions, suppressions, and repressions, which will ultimately make themselves felt by returning elsewhere, in perversely mutated form. Indeed, the entire ideology of many nineteenth-century Decadent narratives was that of aesthetic appreciation being defiantly valued in the face of social, moral, and physical decay. For example, Paul Verlaine, among others, explicitly affirmed that it was only:

Within a decaying civilization that a few individuals would have the wealth and privilege to create and experience this most intense of pleasures. At the expense of the majority, these few would know the most that beauty had to offer. (Denisoff 2007, 33)

Balzac caught this dialectic between refinement and degeneration vividly in his 1830 story *Gobseck*. In the face of his adulterous wife's conspiring against him, an aristocrat resolves upon suicide. He carries this out, however, not by any conventional means, but by a withdrawal into willful indolence and degeneracy, allowing an illness to claim him. "For two months," the reader learns, "the Count de Restaud, resigned to his fate, lay in bed, alone in his room," his "extreme apathy... imprinted on everything around him." Beautiful *objets d'art*, we hear, are now covered with dust and cobwebs, as "This previously elegant man, so fastidious in his refined tastes, was content now to fester in the sorry spectacle of that room" (Balzac 2014, 271). The immaculately-maintained Decadent bower of beautiful things, which had once been the Count's room, could only remain such when things were harmonious in his life. Having his domestic life knocked askew upon learning he has been betrayed by his wife, this enabling condition has been removed, and decay and degeneracy inversely proportional to the bower's prior beauty creeps in with ruthless speed.

In Decadent narratives, excesses of aestheticization invite vacillation to their polar opposite extreme. Of course, unlike with the Count de Restaud, this process is not always accidental or involuntary on characters' parts. Often enough, in Decadent art, one sees aristocratic or aesthete anti-heroes positively *seeking out* such returns of the repressed, as opportunities to cut loose and indulge their atavistically degenerate side. Writ large and

spectacularly, one sees this dynamic at work in a film such as Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* (2013) – a film which, among other things, draws on the Decadent potentialities of the digital to emphasize this theme in F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece more strongly than any of its previous adaptations ever could. The film's vision of Tom and Daisy's "East Egg" mansion is so ostentatiously aestheticized as to test the bounds of realism. Thanks to DVFX, it is able to self-evidently exist in no real historical 1920s, any more than East Egg did. It represents, essentially, *The Thirteenth Floor's* improbably beautiful vision of inter-war America scaled up a hundredfold. And it is against this, thus, that the film's depiction of Tom and Nick's day trip into Manhattan – to boozily carouse with Tom's mistress and some friends of hers – figures all the more strongly. The afternoon party itself draws strongly on Decadent ocularity, with Nick's filmic perception slowing down to virtual full stop as his companions cavort across sofas, coffee tables and chairs, and fling bottles and glasses through the air. Indeed the amount of debris and detritus flying through the air at any one moment shows that Luhrmann has fully understood the new, denser, compositional norms that digital compositing suggests, and he is determined not to let the sequence seem insufficiently Dionysian and degenerate in light of such. The film, with Nick, is again vividly self-conscious of how dramatic extremes of rarefied Apollonian purity and immaculacy will inevitably incur their own opposite. This aspect of Decadent self-consciousness reaches perhaps its penultimate point in the modern mainstream in a film such as *Surrogates*. The premise of this film is that, a few years hence, android-avatar bodies will hit the consumer market, and soon become such an omnipresent fact of life that virtually everybody will exist in society via their surrogate. The great majority of people will now never leave their homes, or, indeed the operating chairs of their surrogate – preferring instead to exist in society through the proxy of their immaculately quaffed, perfectly toned, and perpetually youthful surrogate body. The trade-off, however, is that as their real bodies never get washed or exercised, they degenerate to polar opposite extremes. While *Surrogates* is an even more vividly Decadent film than most, its basic dramatic self-consciousness is the same as the above examples. Again, new heights of artificially-contrived beauty and perfection bring about their own dialectic opposite, in the plumbing of unprecedented depths of squalor and degeneracy. This is a theme that *Avatar* fleetingly touched on the same year – with Jake's paraplegic human body never seeming more crippled than after a spell in his Na'avi avatar – but Mostow's darker, more emphatic, vision takes it far further into territory that would be familiar to Mendès, Lorrain, Rachilde, or any other

*fin-de-siècle* acolyte of the insular and perverse. Although nineteenth-century Decadence's formal political sympathies and commitments may have been all over the map – vacillating from militant monarchist to anarchist revolutionary – certain core aesthetic concerns never wavered, and in this, one sees a strong affinity with the modern Hollywood blockbuster (Hustvedt 1998, 14-15).

A final intriguing parameter of Decadent self-consciousness is suggested by Vivian Sobchack in a 1998 essay on the phenomenological spectacle of the documentary image. Here, Sobchack cites the little-known Belgian psychologist Jean-Pierre Meunier, who declared, in a 1969 book, that while viewing a “*film-souvenir*” such as a home movie, the spectator was in complete, authoritative possession of the image's meaning. Viewing a film such as this was more of an existential than a revelatory experience. A fiction film, on the other hand, left the spectator entirely at the mercy of the filmic diegesis for knowledge. “In the case of fiction, according to Meunier,” Sobchack declared, “we become increasingly screen dependent for specific knowledge of what we see, and we tend to bracket, rather than to posit, the ‘real’ existence of what we see there” (Sobchack 1999, 243). When we see a dog in a documentary image, for instance, we assume that the dog really existed and lived some time and somewhere. When we see Lassie onscreen, on the other hand, we know that she, the character, has no existence anywhere off the screen, to say nothing of a fantastical beast like a dragon. “In fictional consciousness,” thus, “the cinematic object is perceived as ‘irreal’ or ‘imaginary’ rather than ‘absent’ or ‘elsewhere’” (Sobchack 1999, 243). This basic fact about cinematic fiction makes for a profound affinity with Baroque and Decadent aesthetics based on telling big lies. When the spectator is presented with narrativized spectacles whose worldmaking aesthetic suggests complex backstory, there is an immediate self-consciousness that they do not necessarily know the narrative “rules of the game,” and will have to pick them up on the fly as best they can.

A vivid example of this is provided by the film *The Golden Compass* (Chris Weitz, 2007). The first installment in an envisioned franchise based on Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy of young adult novels – one which would have constituted New Line Cinema's follow-up to the success of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy – *The Golden Compass* features one of the most dauntingly complex story-worlds ever attempted by a mainstream Hollywood spectacle. Like its source novel, the film takes place in “a universe like ours, but different in many ways” (Pullman 2001, xii). In this other universe, all human beings are psychically and physically linked to an

animal-spirit projection which is called their “daemon.” In adults, the fixed animal form which one’s daemon takes is an index of one’s psychological profile or personality type, but prepubescent children’s daemons are protean, and can switch from one animal form to another freely. This process is enabled by a mysterious, ethereal cosmic substance simply called “Dust,” which, after the fashion of neutrino or beta particles in our own universe, passes through and suffuses all matter, and provides a conduit through all the universes in the Multiverse, back to some ultimate and unknowable Source. The link between a human being and their daemon is simply the most immediate and intimate manifestation of this great chain, and therefore the violation of it – either to foreclose its theological implications, or to harness its power – is a matter of the utmost gravity. The uncertainly-defined cast of heroes and villains of *The Golden Compass* seek to do both.

Obviously, in endeavouring to bring all this to the screen, director/screenwriter Weitz faced a difficult task in making this story-world comprehensible to a viewership unfamiliar with Pullman’s novels, while not killing off its imaginative complexity. There are of course some moments where the feat is not achieved. One sees this acutely, for instance, in a scene where the young heroine Lyra (Dakota Blue Richards) is reminded by her digitally-rendered daemon Pantalaimon (voiced by Freddie Highmore) that “remember, if you get hit, I hurt too!” – as though both of them would not already be entirely aware of this. For the most part, however, the film is remarkable in the degree to which it resists indulging in such explanation and exposition. To contrast with Pantalaimon’s line, there are also moments where Lyra says things such as “that’s worse than touching someone else’s daemon with your bare hands,” and Weitz simply trusts the context of the line and the conviction of Dakota Blue Richards’s delivery to convey its ultimate meaning. Furthermore, there are other parameters of the story-world – such as the existence of a distinct and matriarchal witch culture; or a race of talking polar bears whose culture revolves around suits of armour forged from otherworldly metal gleaned from meteorites – that are simply not explained, in familiar terms, at all. The spectator’s imagination must simply accept them or not, based on their presentation and naturalization. In all this, therefore, *The Golden Compass* is – in addition to being an impressive feat of worldmaking – a test case in the processes of Decadent self-consciousness modern spectators must bring to the multiplex.

Having dealt with perversity and self-consciousness, we now come to the issue of interconnectedness – the way in which Decadent narratives often present not one, but several,

discrete storylines; and operate in not one, but several, registers of reality. This, in turn, serves to drain empathy from any one of the individual storylines or worlds, and instill a more omniscient, jaded, and relativistic outlook in the spectator. Baroque aesthetics, as we saw with Sean Cubitt, have sometimes been defined by the endless proliferation of fragments. This is, however, also the criterion by which the French philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch defined a Decadent aesthetic. For Jankélévitch:

The decadent text is one that spawns mutants in... a ‘fever of proliferation.’ Decadence, he argues, begins in an excessive self-consciousness: ‘Once consciousness is aware of itself, it keeps splitting from itself like a cancer metastasizing, becoming ever more abstract, evanescent and subtly intelligent.’ (Constable, Potolsky and Denisoff 1999, 6)

Jankélévitch believed that proper artistic creation was defined by “focus, precision, and control” – qualities he deemed lacking in Decadent aesthetics, which instead seemed like “a form of unhealthy introversion and narcissism,” bedazzled with “the sterile and feverish delights of self-analysis” (Constable, Potolsky and Denisoff 1999, 6). As will be seen, this is indeed a potentially valid way of describing the interconnected Decadent narratives of contemporary films, excepting that their makers have interpreted these descriptors in resounding positive fashion. “Whereas creative genius,” Jankélévitch continued, finds “its harmonious moderation and law of temperance in the very progeny it brings into the world,” in contrast, “the ‘immoderate’ but sterile decadent does not know where to cease its unnatural reproduction, generating not artistic masterpieces but ‘new families of monsters’” (Constable, Potolsky and Denisoff 1999, 6). Harmonious moderation and temperance are, indeed, not virtues often associated with Hollywood spectacle, even before the digitally-liberated era. What Jankélévitch’s remarks prompt one to recall, however, is that certain trends in experimentation with cinematic narrative – involving non-linear continuity, diverse and divergent narrative strands, and the emphatic juxtaposition of different aesthetic registers – were, over the decade between the mid-2000s and mid-2010s, assimilated to the idiom of the spectacular Hollywood mainstream. These experiments began largely as the purview of “postmodern,” often independent, films such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), *Traffic* (Stephen Soderbergh, 2000), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), and *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003), but they would, over the mid-to-later 2000s, spectacularly hypertrophy into films such as *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), *Sucker Punch* (Zack Snyder, 2011), and *Cloud Atlas* (The Wachowskis & Tom Tykwer, 2012). It is one thing for Soderbergh or Iñárritu to cut from one

narrative strand to another, simply for the graphic match of it, when the different dramatic register is signified simply by a different lighting aesthetic and/or the presence of different actors. It is quite another for a similar narrative, in the blockbuster Decadent mode, to have the transition mean an abrupt cut from a zero-gravity martial arts battle to a winter warfare sequence involving steep forest hills and speeding snowmobiles; or, alternatively, a cut from an action scene above a futuristic megalopolis worthy of Coruscant, to a nineteenth-century seafaring epic worthy of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. The difference is compounded, moreover, by the fact that such films – in the spirit of modern Hollywood’s “intensified continuity” – intercut between these different registers more aggressively than Soderbergh or Iñárritu would ever have dared. Cinema such as this, though aesthetically irresistible, could certainly also be construed as doing justice to Jankélévitch’s rhetoric about cancerously metastasizing unto monstrosity.

In its narrative of descending levels of dream states – each of which brings further dissociation from normal time, as well as real-world laws of physics – *Inception* is a film so riven with perversity, self-consciousness, and interconnectedness that it is less about its ostensible narrative subject than the various aestheticized moments which its narrative circumlocutions enable. Narratives situate thrills, as Dyer pointed out, but they also situate non-thrilling moments of pure aestheticism whereby – in the tradition of Decadent self-consciousness, as opposed to modernist self-referentiality – the enabling narrative, without actually ceasing to exist or operate, has nonetheless become so convoluted, abstracted, and theoretical as to be almost irrelevant. Notionally, *Inception* is set in the not-too-distant-future, and deals with a technology of consciously entering other people’s dreams, developed by the United States military so that trainee soldiers could have the sensory experience of really killing and being killed without being put in actual waking mortal danger. The technology has now disseminated onto the civilian market, where it has become a popular tool for industrial espionage – “extracting” corporate strategies from executives’ subconscious. With a global conglomerate controlled by the Fischer family poised to achieve a total monopoly on the world’s energy market, however, the Japanese CEO Sato (Ken Watanabe), whose own corporation is the last market redoubt, must hire crack extractor Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his team to do the opposite. They must waylay the young Fischer heir (Cillian Murphy) on a long flight from Sydney to Los Angeles, get into his dreams, and bring about the “inception,” in his subconscious, of the idea to dissolve his father’s empire.

All this, however, is mere pretext. It is established in the film's narrative from the very first that dream environments are malleable on an infinite scale, such that one can get up from one's table at a Parisian cafe and, with a basic mental effort, physically *fold* the 7<sup>th</sup> arrondissement over onto the 15<sup>th</sup>. By the time one is two levels deep in the subconscious in *Inception* – seeing the Escher-esque “paradoxical architecture” of the “Penrose Stairs” in a hotel; and the perversions and obviations of gravity in the hotel setting brought on by the sliding and falling of the truck in the first layer of the subconscious, on the streets of Los Angeles – the spectator's mind could not be further from the question of what will ultimately happen to the hegemonic energy empire of the corporate heir lying asleep in a first-class 747 seat. The film's real concern, in the best Decadent tradition, is with sheer formal virtuosity – with the graphic contrasts of being able to cut from the spectacle of a forbidding piece of modernist architecture on a snow-covered, forested mountainside, to a summery beach above which loom vertiginous buildings resembling man-made cliffs, within which the urban design has one's biographically-significant homes lined up next to each other. In all this, *Inception* is vividly of a piece with the narcissistic introversion which Jankélévitch ascribed to Decadent aesthetics, and the film is wholly unapologetic about it. Indeed, it features a censoring of affect and pathos on a number of different levels, not least of which is that it goes further than most films in draining its action scenes of any sweaty pugilistic aspect. In a scene in which Cobb's partner Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) is locked in mortal combat with a hefty African-American man who is one of Fischer's subconsciously-manifested “bodyguards,” Arthur is virtually blank and deadpan throughout, simply going through his combative paces – and endeavouring to get hold of a loose gun with which to end things – as a matter of sheer mechanism and routine. Characters actually wield guns in other scenes with similar diffidence. The narrative device of “and then I woke up and it was all a dream” is, rightly, one of the most roundly abused storytelling cop-outs in fiction, insofar as it means that nothing in the preceding story has really taken place or mattered. With *Inception*, however, Christopher Nolan takes up the device with Decadent self-consciousness, and makes fascinating aesthetic application of it – giving himself licence to have his characters be nearly as jaded and blasé under fire as Superman was about getting shot in the eye.

This Decadent tendency – of the jaded and blasé being enhanced even further by narrative interconnectedness – is caught even more spectacularly in Zack Snyder's *Sucker Punch*. This is also a film that demonstrates, to an almost unprecedented degree, the Decadent refusal of pugilist

aesthetics that has increasingly come to characterize Hollywood spectacle. The film takes place across three levels of reality, but even this is somewhat misleading: its “real world” is indeterminate in period, and suggests the same heavily aestheticized vision of a mid-century American North-East that one sees in Tim Burton’s two *Batman* films. The young heroine, played by Emily Browning, is wrongly committed to a mental institution, called “Lennox House,” by her evil stepfather, and scheduled for a lobotomy. The second the steel spike is about to be hammered into her brainpan, however, the film cuts to the alternative level of reality where the majority of its running time will take place: an even more garishly aestheticized private brothel where young women are trained as personal courtesans for wealthy degenerates. Browning’s heroine is now re-situated as a new acquisition of the house, and is given the name “Babydoll.” Instructed to develop a personalized dance routine in order to please her eventual client, the supposedly shy, mousy, and virginal Babydoll unexpectedly demonstrates a routine that is supposedly more wantonly lascivious than anyone at the house has ever seen before.

Spectators never get to see Babydoll’s dance, however, because the four times she performs it in the film signal her elevation into *Sucker Punch*’s third, most outlandish, register of reality – a series of four fantasy sequences that exalt, and strain the limits of, digitally-liberated spectacle, and in which Babydoll symbolically meditates her escape. The first takes place in a beautiful old Japanese dojo, which is then totally destroyed in her battle with giant samurai-armour-wearing automata, armed with bazookas and Gatling guns on a scale to match. Wielding a *katana* herself, Browning displays a steely-eyed intensity in this scene which testifies to the degree that Tom Cruise’s swordplay in *The Last Samurai* had metastasized in the language of Hollywood Decadence. It exists, however, in tandem with same kind of blasé diffidence seen in *Inception*. After seeming totally un-disconcerted at being sent for a few epic sprawls by the first automaton’s giant *naginata*, Babydoll leaps into fighting mode and destroys her attackers with a jaded air of long experience. This sets the tone for the following sequences. The second takes place on a World War I battlefield, but the sequence’s scale and visual complexity are at a level worthy of one of *Star Wars*’ twenty-first-century digital simulacra texts. Low-flying World War I biplanes and zeppelins are digitally choreographed as dogfighting in the same profusion, and with the same kinetic intensity, as Republic, Separatist, and Imperial fighters and battle cruisers. Indeed, this is further confirmed by the Jedi-like invincibility of Babydoll and her fellow sex slaves – who have now imaginatively joined her on her quest to escape. The third fantasy

sequence switches a *Star Wars* influence for a *Lord of the Rings* one, and takes place in a pseudo-medieval castle besieged by orcs, and guarded by an immense fire-breathing dragon – the latter a massive sublime creation that demonstrates again what a criminally missed opportunity Smaug was. The fourth takes place on a futuristic bullet train guarded by robots, which is carrying a giant bomb towards a sci-fi megalopolis on a terraformed Titan. Saturn dominating the yellow sky above, Babydoll and her comrades must drop from a helicopter, wipe out the robots, deactivate, and remove the bomb.

It is in this last sequence that *Sucker Punch*'s Decadent interconnectedness truly comes to the fore. Hitherto, the fantasy sequences have simply been spectacular interludes in the narrative of escape playing out in the brothel register of reality. With the fourth sequence on the train, however, the two registers interpenetrate tragically. A frayed radio wire disrupts the music, and thus Babydoll's dance, allowing the porcine cook whom she is beguilingly distracting to realize that her comrades are stealing his carving knife. He belligerently asserts himself, takes the knife back, and stabs Babydoll's comrade Rocket (Jena Malone). Babydoll flinchingly turns her face away, shutting her eyes – at which point the film reverts back to the fantasy sequence, implying that Babydoll has regressed to it in desperation, to escape the horror of the sight before her. The fantasy sequence's narrative, however, now abruptly changes course, as one of the robots revives, slams Rocket into a wall, re-activates the bomb, and jams it in place. Their mission having failed, the girls can only escape, except for Rocket, whose jetpack was ruptured by its impact against the wall. Gazing soulfully back at the other girls, she is swiftly atomized along with the city when the bomb reaches its target and detonates. In the brothel-reality, meanwhile, she slowly expires from her knife wound. This sends the narrative into end-game, as Babydoll eventually sacrifices herself in brothel-reality so that Rocket's sister Sweat Pea (Abbie Cornish) can escape. Babydoll's taking an incapacitating blow to the face in brothel-reality, in turn, triggers the film's final descent back to the "real world" of Lennox House, the blow to her face corresponding with the lobotomy needle being hammered home into her brainpan. The digital spectacles which *Sucker Punch*'s four fantasy sequences create are of a piece with many other blockbuster films today, in that – *pace* (post)modernist assertions about spectacle – they are not meant to be "presentational" "attractions" which disrupt or work against narrative. They are, thematically, wholly a part of the larger narrative. Their ostentatious digital spectacles are a fluent match, in joyous, deliberately garish excess, with the sexualized costumes, décor, and personae of the

brothel-reality, and both are at a very deliberate imaginative polar extreme from the grim reality of Lennox House – with its dark concrete, steel bars, wire mesh cages, and the white tiles of the lobotomy room. In this, the film is essentially a meta-commentary on the imaginatively liberating aspect of the spectacles of the commercial Hollywood mainstream – a fact expressed amusingly literally when some of Sweet Pea’s first lines are “Don’t you get the point of this? It’s to turn people on. ... But what is this? Lobotomized vegetable?! How about something a little more commercial, for God’s sakes?”

Few films, if any, have thus far demonstrated Decadent interconnectivity more vividly than *Cloud Atlas*. It was only in its very climactic sequences that *Inception*’s story-world broadened to include five different levels of interconnected reality, and even there, the film only intercut between the four dream-state ones, the “real world” remaining a theoretical consideration. *Sucker Punch*, moreover, with the single exception of Rocket’s death, kept its brothel and fantasy levels of reality wholly discrete from each other; and only used its aestheticized “real world” as a bracketing device – rather akin to *Balto*’s live-action introduction and conclusion. In contrast to both of these, however, *Cloud Atlas* has *six* wholly distinct registrars of reality, and unlike *Inception*, is not reticent about intercutting between any and all of them throughout. Virtually any segment of the film’s 172-minute running time could be singled out as embodying a virtuoso exemplar of Decadent interconnectedness – of draining away the possibility of concerted, melodramatic pathos by constantly relativizing it in juxtaposition with other narrative strands; cutting away at moments of great drama, suspense, or catharsis as often as staying with them. The corollary to this, however, is that such narrative montage effects offer the possibility of creating a far grander, more thematically rich dramatic canvas than a single narrative in the Aristotelian mode might.

So consistent is *Cloud Atlas*’s interconnectedness that almost any sequence can be analyzed to demonstrate its effect. A segment slightly before the film’s half-way point, for instance, begins in an atrium area of a San Francisco nuclear power plant, circa 1973, whose operations may be dangerously unsafe and the object of a murderous cover-up. One sees investigative journalist Luisa Rey (Halle Berry) – the daughter of a crusading legend in this field – hearing a phone begin ringing inside a nearby office, and continue ringing, indicating that the office is evidently unoccupied. The camera pushes in first on the office door, then on her face, as she whispers to herself “Okay. What would dad do?” A scene that, in a typical film, would have

proceeded to have Luisa enter the office and look for evidence of malfeasance – thus eliciting suspense from the spectator as to whether she’s going to get caught – is here simply cut away from, however. Instead of generating suspense, *Cloud Atlas* shifts into another of its narrative strands, this one a contemporary (2012) one about a sexagenarian publisher named Timothy Cavendish (Jim Broadbent) who has found himself imprisoned in a dubiously-legal “retirement residence” named Aurora House. Having snuck out of bed after hours to illegally use an office phone, Timothy learns, to his horror, that it was in fact his brother Denholme (Hugh Grant) who conspired to get him imprisoned here. Denholme hangs up, leaving Timothy’s face a rigid, emotionally-shattered mask staring frame right. He then, however, turns to look up and to frame left, whereupon a reverse shot reveals that Timothy has been caught using the phone by the sadistic Nurse Noakes (a gender-crossing Hugo Weaving) – a fact which forebodes any amount of horror. Again, *Cloud Atlas* has created a moment of high melodramatic tension; and again, it promptly cuts away to a wholly different narrative strand, this one set in “Neo-Seoul” in the year 2144. This narrative strand is structured around a final interview, before her execution, of Somni 451 (Doona Bae), a “fabricant” – or genetically-engineered worker-clone – who has committed an as-yet-unspecified crime against the dystopian regime of “Unanimity.” She recalls listening to the heart of Hae-Joo Chang (an ethnicity-crossing Jim Sturgess) – the young man who has broken her free from her slave existence as a diner server – during the night they passed together in a hotel room. She recalls that human hearts beat much more slowly than fabricant hearts, and she found the sound comforting. This moment of tenderness and pathos, however, abruptly ends as the film cuts to another of its narrative strands – this one set in 1936, and about a young aspiring composer named Robert Frobisher (Ben Whishaw) who has inveigled his way into a job as the amanuensis of a once-great, but now withered, composer named Vivian Ayrns (Jim Broadbent again). Vivian bursts into Frobisher’s room at a late hour of the night, declaring that a violin melody has come to him in the midst of a dream about “a nightmarish café” filled with garish “glaring bright lights,” and where “the waitresses all had the same face.” The melody quickly slips away from Vivian’s conscious mind, but the spectator will appreciate that his dream was – through some cosmic alchemy – a vision of the Neo-Seoul diner where Somni 451 and her many identical fellow-fabricants worked, 208 years in the future. Vivian’s frustration, and Frobisher’s efforts to console him, produce a moment of confidence and candour that, Frobisher then declares in voice-over, “transcended language. It was music that poured from his eyes. That breathed from

his lips. Music as beautiful as any I have ever heard.” During the first sentences of this narration, the film cuts back to Luisa, now rummaging through a box of file folders in the office, while – the film shows us in a cut-away – someone ominously approaches the door. During the later sentences of Frobisher’s narration, in turn, we cut back to Somni 451 and Hae-Joo, as he awakens to find her listening to his heart.

At this point, some dramatic, suspense-building music strikes up *Cloud Atlas*’s soundtrack, as the film cuts from the office door opening on Luisa to reveal the bemused – but ultimately benign and friendly – nuclear technician Isaac Sacks (Tom Hanks), to the Neo-Seoul hotel room, in which Hae-Joo is alerted to the approach of – definitely non-benign and unfriendly – Unanimity security forces. Hae-Joo blasts a hole in the exterior wall of the building and extends a high-tech collapsible bridge across the gulf to the adjoining building. He and Somni scramble out across it while the Unanimity enforcers begin torch-cutting through the room’s steel door, and Somni gasps in fear and flings herself into a tight clutch of Hae-Joo after looking down at the thousand-foot drop beneath them. On this movement, the film again cuts away from a moment of emotive pathos to something totally different – a fifth narrative strand, this one set 1849 on a sailing ship in the Pacific Ocean, where a young lawyer named Adam Ewing (Jim Sturgess again) finds himself responsible for the fate of a runaway slave named Atua (David Gyasi). At the moment to which *Cloud Atlas* has now cut, Adam has revealed Atua’s presence to the captain and crew, leaving Atua compelled, on pain of death, to prove himself an able seaman capable of earning his passage. As he clammers up the mast and out onto the yard, Captain Molyneux (Jim Broadbent again) signals to his first mate Mr. Boerhaave (Martin Wuttke) that, to Adam’s shock, they’re simply going to shoot Atua down on general principles, and for sadistic sport. Upon this becoming clear, the film cuts back to Neo-Seoul, as the hotel door is blasted inwards and the Unanimity troops storm into the room. Out on the bridge between buildings, Hae-Joo pulls a laser pistol and fires at them, taking one down immediately. The troops begin to return fire, and Somni finds her situation at the terrifyingly high altitude now even more dangerous. Taking out a few more troopers, Hae-Joo picks her up and begins crossing the rest of the bridge at speed. A close-up of his feet immediately cuts, in graphic match, to a shot of Atua’s feet running out on the yard as he works at uncoupling the main topsail. Boerhaave finishes loading a rifle, raises it, and draws a bead on Atua. At this point – in another, thematic, match – the film cuts back to Neo-Seoul to show a *Star Wars*-style attack craft flying up beneath Hae-Joo and Somni’s bridge,

firing its laser cannons. Somni collapses, while Hae-Joo tries to return fire with his pistol. The ground beneath his feet being shot away, he loses his footing and falls into the abyss beneath them. The attack craft ascends vertically to draw level with Somni, its weapons now trained on her at point blank range. A close-up on her face, gazing out of frame with a look of horror and despair, shows that she knows she is caught and, presumably, doomed. Cutting back to 1849, the film shows a similar look of despair and horror on Adam's face until, abruptly, something within him snaps and she shoves Boerhaave's rifle aside just before he fires. A second later, Atua leaps off the yard with a rope in hand. Adam gets Boerhaave's rifle butt slammed into his stomach, but simultaneously, the crew witnesses the spectacle of the main topsail unfolding majestically, as Atua swings down from it on the rope, crossing and re-crossing the ship's deck before alighting on his feet. Having seen this, Molyneux decides to add him to the crew after all. This moment of moral redemption on Adam's part, however, is allowed no real emotional catharsis, as the film immediately cuts back to 1973. There is, however, another thematic match, with Isaac Sacks taking a spontaneous risk in declining to report Luisa's snooping to his villainous boss (a deliciously sinister Hugh Grant). They then begin a moment of confidence and trust-building on a balcony overlooking the Pacific in a beautiful golden sunset, which is soon interrupted by a cut back to Aurora House circa 2012. A single shot of Timothy behind a window, thumping uselessly at its locked and sealed frame, elicits his musing, in voice-over: "Freedom. The fatuous jingle of our civilization. But only those deprived of it have the barest inkling of what it really is." Halfway through this rumination, in yet another thematic parallel, the film cuts from the shot of Timothy through the window to one of Somni sitting in the corner of a prison cell, between two stark black walls.

All the above, again, takes up only ten minutes of screen time, but contains enough evocative suggestion and richly detailed worldmaking for several more normative films. Indeed, the above ten minutes – simply as a matter of coincidence – do not even contain any interconnections with *Cloud Atlas*'s sixth narrative strand: a post-apocalyptic vision of the year 2321 – referred to in the film as "106 Winters After The Fall" – and taking place on "Big Isle," which is discernibly Hawaii. This last is where the sheer breadth and scale of both the film's dystopian and utopian imagination shows through most clearly. It is made clear by graphic logic that climate change would eventually trigger a nuclear war, which has reduced the surviving remnants of humanity to either the barbarous shamanic society of the "Valleymen," or the savage

tribe the “Kona;” but also that the descendants of the eventually-emancipated fabricants, the “Prescients,” have preserved a technologically advanced oasis on a seafaring hovercraft. Before the apocalyptic war, moreover, humanity was at last striving into the stars, having built off-world colonies. The image of the Valleyman Zachry (Tom Hanks again) and Prescient Meronym (Halle Berry again) entering the remains of a spaceport outpost atop Mauna Kea, which is now littered with the semi-skeletal corpses of people who failed to escape the apocalypse, is one that instills profound reflection upon the weight and length of history – and the temporal parochialism of what we think of as “normality” or “reality.” Interconnecting and interlocking as they do, *Cloud Atlas*’s six different periods totally disallow any sense of present-ism, or the kind of suburban complacency which so many Hollywood non-spectacles in the 1980s mode embodied. Moreover, in this spirit, the film’s narrative aesthetic of interconnectedness allows for a more natural match between Decadence and progressive ideology than *V for Vendetta*’s invocation of the Decadent bower did. No sooner is Somni ensconced in her prison cell than she is visited by a high-ranking Unanimity official named Boardman Mephi (Hugo Weaving again), who tells her that she must be immediately and summarily executed, or “excised,” because “There is a natural order to this world, fabricant. And the truth is this order must be protected.” Couched in the idiom of science fiction spectacle, and given to an enforcer of a fictional totalitarian regime, this utterance may not initially seem to possess much philosophical profundity. It gains such powerfully, however, when in one of the film’s final scenes, it is reiterated in 1849 by Adam Ewing’s father-in-law Haskell Moore (also Weaving) – a man with great commercial interests in the slave trade – who declares, in defence of slavery and excoriation of the abolitionist movement, that “There is a natural order to this world, and those who try to upend it do not fare well.” With this, one sees the film venturing into deep ideological waters about hierarchies and “Other-ing.” To engage with issues such as these in an idiom of genre spectacle, with the fictional placed on equal footing with the historically true – to wholly eschew didactic moralizing, in favour of trusting in the implicitness of the aesthetics of cinematic spectacle, in short – is perhaps *Cloud Atlas*’s ultimate Decadent achievement. The film takes *Star Wars*-style spectacle seriously enough to imbue it with real meaning and historical resonance.

This is not, however, a development which radical modernist writing on cinema and spectacle is prepared to see or accept. Peter Wollen, for instance, once declared that “the main

effect of the modern spectacle, as Debord noted, is to efface history and historical understanding” (Wollen 1995, 10). He further continued that:

If today this technology threatens to overwhelm history, solace can be taken in the opportunity rhetoric always offers for decipherment and unmasking. The secret life of the spectacle can never be entirely occluded by its mesmeric force. We can learn how to approach it with skepticism, to locate it within history, to decipher its signs, to deflect its imaginary power. (Wollen 1995, 13)

Decadently interconnected narratives such as *Cloud Atlas*, however, by their very nature, evoke a powerful sense of history. The emotive and atmospheric sense of the vast historical tapestry which their spectacles offer would be impossible if history and historical understanding were actually effaced by spectacle, as Debord supposed.

These three traits of Decadent narrative – perversity, self-consciousness, and interconnectivity – can co-exist in interesting ways within the same text and, when applied to an entire *auteurist oeuvre*, flush out Decadence in potentially unexpected places. The career and work of Peter Jackson, over the past decade-and-a-half, is a fascinating case in point. If it is a fundamental part of Decadent narrative aesthetics to bring a genre round full circle, to a perverse realm of moral meaning totally opposite to its original premises, then the Peter Jackson of *King Kong* (2005) – fomenting real love between Kong and Ann, rather than mere tragic horror ultimately leavened with pity – is a true Decadent. If it is a fundamental part of narrative Decadence to be perpetually and acutely self-conscious about a film’s address – playing formal games whereby a film constructs meta-commentaries upon its own aesthetics without breaking with a seeming narrative naturalism, or descending into modernist Brecht-ian self-referentiality – then the Peter Jackson of the *Hobbit* trilogy is a true Decadent. Breaking with his source novel to bring back many of the same characters and actors, Jackson turns the prequels into an elaborate embedded text within the original *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as much as a trilogy of stand-alone films. Yet, in doing this, he never has resort to outright self-cancelling self-referentiality, as with the sort of popularized modernism where characters break the fourth wall and speak directly to the spectators, or stop the film to adjust events, or the camera comes unmoored from the diegesis and begins showing the production’s set and crew. And, finally, if narrative Decadence involves embracing interconnectivity, and the joyful violation of the Aristotelian unities, then the Jackson of *The Lovely Bones* – having his murdered young heroine watching and pontificating from Heaven while grief and recriminations play out back down on Earth – is a true Decadent. In all

this, one can see that although Jackson's name does not immediately suggest cinematic Decadence – in the same sense that the Wachowskis' does, for instance – he has nonetheless, as a purveyor of blockbuster spectacle in the 2000s and 2010s, assimilated many of the tenets of Decadent aesthetics. The degree to which Jackson may have done this almost in spite of himself – his original filmmaking mode, after all, tended more towards earthy, rambunctious satire, as with *Bad Taste* (1987), *Meet the Feebles* (1989), and *Dead Alive* (1992) – simply testifies to the degree to which certain Decadent assumptions have infiltrated and redefined the *lingua franca* of Hollywood narrativized spectacle.

Ultimately, it is an absolute precondition for the “big lies” of Baroque and Decadent narratives that they bear the least possible taint of what science fiction writer Brian Aldiss called “cozy catastrophes,” referring to the novels of Jon Wyndham. These are narratives in which the familiar world is momentarily menaced by some gigantic aberration – giant, genetically modified mangelwurzel, or an octopus a thousand times normal size, etc. – but the threat is inevitably weathered, and the stories typically “end with the surviving happy family stronger and happier than ever” (Sutherland 2007, 101). In narratives like these, there is a refusal of the epochal, fundamental change – underlain by a Decadent contempt for the familiar and the quotidian – that a truly Baroque narrative requires. The sensibility at work is one which does not really wish to see the existing order of things changed, and the narrative's spectacular threatening of it is merely a passing *frisson* rather than a concerted imaginative vision. Again, one is essentially getting piddling, small lies instead of big ones. For all their moments of Baroque visual spectacle, Roland Emmerich's films *ID4*, *Godzilla*, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and *2012* all fall with unfortunate exactness into this narrative schema of “coziness” in a way that a film like *Cloverfield* emphatically does not. As has been seen in the case of *ID4*, however, this self-censoring failed to entirely convince, and in doing so, set a template that many subsequent spectacles would revisit and re-engage with. And in the case of *Godzilla*, the contrast with Gareth Edwards's version sixteen years later simply serves to demonstrate how much more Baroque and Decadent Hollywood's aesthetic had become by the 2010s.

An early avatar of this Baroque/Decadent refusal of “coziness” – or reassurance of the familiar – in favour of “big lies” was seen in the opening sequence of *Reign of Fire* (Rob Bowman, 2002). The film began on a grey and overcast day in London, with a young boy, Quinn, in a primary school uniform, trudging dejectedly into a construction area. Taking the elevator

down deep underground to the subterranean work site, he meets his mother, who is one of the workers. We soon learn that the cause of Quinn's dejection is that he has received a letter rejecting his application for a scholarship to a good public school (perhaps Eton, although this is not specified). Coming from the working class circumstances that she does, Quinn's mother could never afford the school fees out of pocket, leaving his future educational and professional prospects appreciably darkened. At this moment, less than eight minutes into the film, the dramatic stage has been set with anxieties entirely realistic and familiar to our culture. One could easily imagine the remainder of the film being an uplifting social drama of Quinn repeating his last year of primary school and winning a scholarship this time. Instead, however, we are shown a digitally-rendered dragon abruptly bursting out of the rock walls around the work site and making its way up the elevator shaft, immolating Quinn's mother with its fire breath in the process.

*Reign of Fire* would not sustain this level of outlandish violation of the familiar beyond its opening sequence, but by the opposite end of the 2000s, one saw this aesthetic having matured in a film such as *Jumper* (Doug Liman, 2008). This film situates Hayden Christensen's teenage protagonist, David Rice, in a depressingly quotidian existence in suburban Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he is bullied at school and abused at home. Deliverance abruptly appears, however, with his discovery that he is a "jumper" – a being gifted with the ability to teleport at will to anywhere in the world. David immediately runs away from his grim Middle American suburban existence and establishes himself in New York, where he uses his powers to enter bank vaults and remove vast sums of cash. Now solvent enough to be beholden to nothing and no one, David proceeds to make his life into a kind of Decadent enterprise reminiscent of Huysmans, treating the entire world as simply a stock house of potential sensory experiences – surfing wherever the biggest waves are, frequenting elegant London bars, and exploring the parts of the Roman Coliseum not open to the public. Even beyond all this, however, the film's very first shot – and one of the film's defining high concept images – is of him perched at repose atop the Sphinx at the Giza necropolis, at one with the arch-hieratic elegance which defined both Ancient Egypt, and so much of nineteenth-century Decadence. *Jumper's* eventual narrative, however, has it moving vividly into the realm of the Baroque: David meets another jumper named Griffin (Jamie Bell), and they soon find themselves at odds with each other and pursued by the "Paladin," a mystical pseudo-police-force personified for the film by Samuel L. Jackson's

character Roland. The upshot is that the film's third act is largely devoted to chase and battle sequences which are totally divorced from normative physics and spatial continuity. David and Griffin use their jumper powers to hopscotch from location to location all across the world, in sequences edited to the intensified continuity tempo typical of modern Hollywood action. The overall impression *Jumper* leaves is of exactly the same sort of grandiosely controlled chaos that defined much Baroque art – the sense that gravity may be defied, and Earthly reality transcended. The difference, however, is that whereas Bernini, Pozzo, and Cortona were seeking by this to create an emotive delirium which would convey the infinite power and grace of God, *Jumper* insistently retains a detached, Decadent cool throughout the proceedings. David must perform the Baroque feat of pushing through earthly limits to defeat Griffin and Roland, but he gains no spiritual rapture from doing so – only the hope that his Decadent enterprise may have the chance to continue.

Alfonso Cuarón's acclaimed 2013 film *Gravity* – about the struggles of astronaut Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) to survive in space after her shuttle is destroyed by a freak meteor shower – is another, much more critically-lauded example of such Baroque and Decadent narrative synthesis. For all that the film contains many stunningly Baroque images – such as the terrifyingly photorealistic disintegration of the International Space Station beneath a hail of mini-asteroids, or the spectacle of a re-entry module straining its structural limits as it blazes down through the atmosphere – its narrative is still underlain by a Decadent refusal to indulge in any easy sentimentality. The death of Ryan's mission colleague Matt – played by George Clooney with typical wry charm – is less tragic than inevitable. A Decadent narrative aesthetic cannot tolerate the supposed “innocence” of his folksy and convivial characterization. Furthermore, the film makes much of the fact that Ryan did have a daughter, but that she died in an accident a few years ago. For much of the film's running time, thus, we are aligned with a protagonist who is now seemingly totally isolated and without human relationships, and adrift in the total solitude of freezing, airless space. It is depressingly easy to imagine how *Gravity*'s narrative could have been re-ordered into a “cozy catastrophe” which built towards Ryan's heterosexual union with Matt, and their re-uniting with her not-dead daughter, so as to end the film on a thematic note of the re-formation of the nuclear family. Such ideological imperatives have underlain a great deal of Hollywood's filmmaking over the years, but are totally antithetical to a Decadent narrative aesthetic. That a mainstream – and expensively technologically experimental – Hollywood

blockbuster such as *Gravity* will now come down so fluently on the latter's side is further proof that the form's aesthetic norms have evolved profoundly since the 1980s and '90s. Predictably, however, some critics – such as Scott Foundas and J. Hoberman – proved unable or unwilling to acknowledge this, and responded to *Gravity* by hailing it as a form of modernist or *avant-garde* filmmaking, somehow subtly other than, and apart from, the usual run of Hollywood spectacle (Thompson 2013b). Critical attitudes such as this are problematic at best, as they seem to perpetuate a logic whereby all Hollywood blockbuster spectacle is execrable and meretricious, and that therefore, if one encounters a film which is neither of those things, it must axiomatically not be Hollywood blockbuster spectacle. Some kind of achievement in modernism or *avant-gardism* then, as always, remains the default explanation for what it actually is. *Gravity*, however, is not a modernist or *avant-garde* text, but a transparent and transitive representational work in the classical-realist mode – its narrative actually showing what it seems to show, and meaning what it affects to mean. In this it is totally different from a film like Bong's much-praised *Snowpiercer*, which it is totally impossible to read in classical-realist fashion.

And, finally, critical attitudes such as those which would – in defiance of all evidence – hail *Gravity* as a modernist, *avant-gardist* work, tend also to fall into the familiar lapse identified by Gunning, whereby their paradigm for “cinema” really means cinema, “excluding, of course, animation” (Gunning 2007, 38). As such, DreamWorks Animation's film *Rise of the Guardians* (Peter Ramsey, 2012) offers a useful closing exhibit. The film is one of recent years' best syntheses of Baroque and Decadent aesthetics, and hopefully an indicator of things to come with the digital-animated feature – a form which has yet to recapture the Decadent tones and sensibilities achieved in the twilight years of the cel-animated feature. Its entire aesthetic idiom is given over to both the visual and narrative dynamics traced throughout the preceding chapters. The film's anti-hero Jack Frost (voiced by Chris Pine) moves and flies with an exponentially-more-spectacular version of the weightlessness seen in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, while Santa's sleigh provides yet another instance of *Star Wars*-style air-and-space spectacle having influenced Hollywood's visual idiom. This verticality, incidentally, also provides the aerial staging ground for the Baroque profusion of the film's innumerable swarms of miniature tooth fairies and storms of magical sand – the latter of which, in turn, are used to create dazzlingly enormous psychic projections of dreams and nightmares, in a vivid instance of Baroque sublimity. The film's narrative aesthetics, likewise, do honour to all of this. Its Baroque visuals

are used, among other things, to stage unapologetic battle sequences, where a graphic logic of magic and fairy power harmonizes with a real kinesis of forceful exertion. There is none of the pseudo-Christian sensibility sabotaging the logic of this film's story-world. Furthermore, and relatedly, the film is truly globalized in its Baroque vision – not least in how one of its governing images is the giant globe in Santa's workshop. A film such as *The Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause* (Michael Lembeck, 2006) – which dealt with much the same fairy-tale-guardians-of-childhood subject matter – has been totally left behind here. The latter film was one of those visually-cramped, TV-style non-spectacles which formally eschew any flourishes of cinematic style, and thematically treat Middle American suburbia as the be-all and end-all of human existence – somewhere as mundanely similar as “Canada” signifying in the narrative as incorrigibly foreign and exotic. *Rise of the Guardians*, in contrast, invokes a northeastern small-town locale only to connote mundane dowdiness – emphatically *not* exclusive normality. Throughout its running time, the film has its narrative action shift matter-of-factly from Moscow to the North Pole to Beijing to Manhattan to Antarctica, with much more globetrotting suggested along the way – pointedly reminding viewers that, so far from being circumscribed within them, the great majority of the world exists outside of America's geographical and imaginative borders. As with the best Baroque art, parochialism has no place in the DreamWorks animators' imaginative purview.

*Rise of the Guardians'* Baroque achievement, moreover, is matched by its Decadent one. It opens with a visual tone that would be remarkable in any Hollywood feature, animated or not. Roughly the first ten seconds of the film consist simply of a jet black screen and a silent soundtrack. The occlusion which blocks out the frame turns out, ultimately, to be the body of a young boy, floating upwards towards the ice-surface of a frozen lake. After a voice-over narration intones “Darkness. That's the first thing I remember,” the film cuts to an extreme-close-up of the boy's eyes opening – as his frozen corpse is reanimated, by mysterious celestial dispensation, as Jack Frost. The ice breaking away above him, an overhead shot shows him gazing upwards as he ascends into the cold, icy blue/white/black palette of a winter night, rising up into the air with the same Decadent, testosterone-free, style of flight we saw in *Superman Returns* via Gautier. In all this, one vividly sees the Decadent visual schema of arch ocularity and form at work, as well as the deeply jaded and solitary worldview which repudiates the humanistic value given to light, warmth, and togetherness in so much Hollywood fluff entertainment.

Likewise, the film's visions of its various mythical guardians' interior realms – Santa's workshop, the Easter Bunny's warren, the Tooth Fairy's grand palace of dentition, and the dark dungeon-realm of its boogeyman villain Pitch (voiced by Jude Law) – are all bafflingly detailed to a degree that does immense honour to Decadent embowerment. All this, furthermore, is in the service of a narrative which demands an inordinate intellectual dexterity of its spectators, in keeping up with a byzantinely interconnected story which freely jumps around across time, place, and theme – touching on dreams and nightmares, the nature of fear, Dark Age superstition versus modern imagination, a childhood in seventeenth-century Colonial America, baby teeth as receptacles of childhood memory, the psychology of conflicting egos, and fangirls swooning before a celebrity heartthrob. This last is particularly important, insofar as Jack Frost's insouciantly antisocial prankster-hero – and the reactions he provokes – is entirely self-consciously patterned after the kind of star personae embodied by Justin Bieber, Zac Efron, or Robert Pattinson. An even more apposite comparison, however, is with the Leonardo DiCaprio of *Titanic*. This is because – with its opening scene of Jack Frost's genesis as a frozen body in icy water on a frigid night – *Rise of the Guardians* has its story begin with the exact scenario where *Titanic's* ended. "Jack Frost" is thus just another way of saying "Jack Dawson," frozen dead, but still existing and charming nonetheless. With its pointed combination of morbidity, irreverence, and aestheticization, this is an inimitable example of Decadent narrative perversity.

The preceding chapters' insistent emphasis upon the literal and mimetic in representation is a necessary precondition for this dissertation's ultimate destination: the retroactive rehabilitation of cel animation as a mode of cinematic showing. A paradigm of cinema which sees film and animation as somehow distinct is one which cares more for the referent, and its ontology, than for the representation itself – the image. Imagination, in other words, is not appreciated. This dissertation's final chapter will focus centrally on the cel animation feature, in all its simulacra glory, as a filmmaking mode which demonstrated the degree to which it is possible to realize a grand imaginative vision without any sensate, real-world, indexical reference. The animation cel, worked upon with pen and ink, has always offered a means to transcribe imagination to the screen without any indexical concerns, and as such, has always been a standing rebuke to theories of film which see their subject in purely photographic, photochemical terms. Again, the rise to ubiquity of digital animation has simply forced Cinema Studies to finally take notice of this truth, whereas hitherto it was possible to ignore animation by

dint of its general ghettoization, in practice, as “cartoons for children.” In seeking to retroactively refute such reification, and problematize any similar ignoring of animation in future, the final chapter will show how the Baroque and Decadent aesthetics described hitherto were aesthetically anticipated, years in advance, in the films of the Walt Disney Studio from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, and in those of DreamWorks Pictures from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. In doing so, it will seek to present these films as aesthetic texts deserving of the same cultural respect afforded to live-action films aimed at the most discerning adult audiences. The result will, it is hoped, show that these films reward such analytical seriousness immensely.

## Chapter Five – Baroque and Decadent Animation Histories: The Testing-Ground of Modern Narrativized Spectacle

The cinema of narrativized spectacle evoked in the previous chapters finds its fullest apotheosis in the Disney-style animated feature. All too often written off as a highly specialized form of entertainment – intended purely for children; not really “cinema” so much as a distinct art form in its own right; wholly interchangeable and lacking in narrative drama; less worthwhile than its short-film cousins; etc. – this kind of animated feature, at its best, is one of the great repositories of cinema’s capacity for sheer imagistic, imaginative showing (Bendazzi 1994). To the spectator prepared to look beyond the aforementioned dismissals, the Baroque and Decadent genealogies traced in the previous chapters can be appreciated as existing more fully in the animated feature than in virtually any other cinematic spectacle.

The *cinophile* close reading of specific films which has characterized this dissertation thus far, moreover, constitutes a particularly noteworthy intervention in discourses on the “Disney” style in animation. This is because while the spectre of Disney has long loomed large over writing on the subjects of hyperrealism and simulacra – as in the writings of Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard – “Disney” has, for these purposes, generally been identified with the three-dimensional, physically-existing environment of “Disneyland,” rather than the imaginative spectacles of the feature films of the Disney studio. Indeed, Disneyland and other reifications have loomed so large that the very concept of “Disney” has often been treated as mutually exclusive to that of “the movies.” In his 1975 essay “Travels in Hyperreality,” for instance, Umberto Eco declared that, beyond the confines of officially-respectable culture, there lay “an America of furious hyperreality, which is not that of Pop art, of Mickey Mouse, or of Hollywood movies” (Eco 1986, 7). This statement is notable for its positing of a distinction between “Mickey Mouse” – or the imaginative empire of the Walt Disney Studio, historically built upon the production of cel animation films – and “Hollywood movies” in general. Eco continues to declare that:

Disneyland is more hyperrealistic than the wax museum, precisely because the latter still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it absolutely clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced. (Eco 1986, 43)

Likewise, in a collection of Baudrillard's writings, one comes across specific mentions and analyses of Hollywood films such as *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971), *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975), *The China Syndrome*, *Apocalypse Now*, etc. The only reference to Disney, and thus the simulacra of animation, however, begins with the caustic declaration that "Disneyland is the perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra. It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms," and continues to assert that "All its values are exalted by the miniature and the comic strip. Embalmed and pacified..." (Baudrillard 1995, 12). This equation of "Disney" with the experience of "Disneyland" – where there is a constant human crush of line-ups and spatial regimentation, along with the overt, wallet-gouging consumerism of gift shops and souvenir stands – has allowed the concept of Disney-style spectacle, and its hyperreal, simulacrum nature, to accumulate connotations which range from the trivial and ephemeral to the outright negative. In what follows, however, I will seek to suggest a more utopian, imaginatively questing nature for the spectacles of Disney-style animated features, by conversely foregrounding the privately-appreciated and imaginatively evocative Baroque and Decadent poetics of the cinematic text.

To understand the full import of the Disney-style animated feature's affinity with Baroque and Decadent cinematic spectacle, it is necessary to step a decade or two back in history. This chapter will seek to demonstrate how the revival of the Walt Disney Studio in the latter 1980s – the period commonly referred to as the "Disney Renaissance" – would also be the period in which Disney's animated features anticipated and pre-formulated much of the Baroque aesthetic visible in current Hollywood spectacle. This era was born with the take-over of the Disney company by the new regime of Frank Wells, Michael Eisner, and Jeffrey Katzenberg – men who would bring with them an experience of "Hollywood" in general, rather than "animation," or "the cartoon" in particular. The third of these, Katzenberg, would assume the title of "studio chairman" to Wells's CEO and Eisner's COO and – in progressively de-reifying the animated feature from the negative connotations of "the cartoon" – would cause the Hollywood animated feature to achieve unprecedented blockbuster status. The succession of films which make up this "Disney Renaissance" – defined here as consisting of *The Great Mouse Detective* (Ron Clements, Burny Mattinson, David Michener & Jon Musker, 1986), *Oliver & Company* (George Scribner, 1988), *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements & John Musker, 1989), *The Rescuers Down Under* (Hendel Butoy & Mike Gabriel, 1990), *Beauty & the Beast* (Gary Trousdale & Kirk Wise, 1991),

*Aladdin* (Ron Clements & John Musker, 1992), and *The Lion King* – are films that would, by the mid-1990s, bring into existence a fully-realized Baroque aesthetic in the animated feature – one which predated the Baroque stylistics seen hitherto in this dissertation by over a decade. As such, these films can be said to have used hyperreal cel animation to lay the foundations for the Baroque spectacles which DVFX would soon enable films to present in an idiom of live-action. In effect, they normalized in advance the idea of a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster being constructed by imaginative simulacra rather than profilmic indexicality.

This Baroque aesthetic of cel animation, however, would wither almost as rapidly as it emerged. This would be due, on the one hand, to the unavoidable evolutionary logic of artistic style; and on the other hand, to digital “3-D” animation emerging on the scene to doom “2-D” cel animation to obsolescence. The years 1994 and 1995 were the crucial ones here, with 1994’s *The Lion King* seeing the Disney Baroque aesthetic of cel animation reaching its highest crowning glory, and 1995’s *Toy Story* (John Lasseter) – produced by Disney’s own in-house subsidiary Pixar Animation – sowing the first seeds of cel animation’s ultimate obsolescence. In the event, the decay of cel animation took only a decade, with Disney’s seven-decade, unbroken tradition of production in the form ending with a whimper with 2004’s *Home on the Range* (Will Finn & John Sanford) – to be sporadically revived as an object of self-conscious nostalgia in years to come. Over the course of that crucial decade, however, there would be seen another development in the animated feature – one at least as interesting as the prior formulation and triumph of Disney’s Baroque aesthetic. It was the spectacle of the cel-animated feature entering its terminal Late Decadent period – an era in which more such films were produced, by more studios other than Disney, and at a higher budgetary level, than ever before. As Nicole LaPorte has pointed out, “following *The Lion King*’s billion-dollar bonanza, nearly every studio in town was scrambling to set up [cel] animation units” in hopes of replicating *The Lion King*’s profitability (LaPorte 2010, 102). Under these conditions, the formal conventions of the Disney Baroque aesthetic would rapidly show signs of strain, and begin to mutate in intriguing and provocative ways. At the same time, it would rapidly become apparent in Hollywood that the immense box-office success of *Toy Story* had not been an anomaly, and that the continued rise of digital animation – what with the consistent success of Pixar’s films *A Bug’s Life* (John Lasseter & Andrew Stanton, 1998), *Toy Story 2* (John Lasseter, Ash Brannon & Lee Unkrich, 1999), *Monsters Inc.* (Pete Docter, David Silverman & Lee Unkrich, 2001) and *Finding Nemo* (Andrew

Stanton & Lee Unkrich, 2003) – was threatening to obviate cel animation altogether. This would lead to studios experimenting with new and different permutations of the Disney cel-Baroque model, in hopes of staving off total extinction before the digital. Again, for a spectator willing to suspend dismissive preconceptions about the nature of the cel-animated feature, these conditions can, with retrospect, be appreciated as having produced the form’s final Decadence – fully conducive to a rhetoric of “decay,” “dissolution,” and “derangement” which fits exactly with that used to characterize the *fin-de-siècle* Decadence of the nineteenth century. And, like the products of that moment of aesthetic Decadence, the products of this era in the history of the cel-animated feature are some of the most endlessly beguiling and fascinating around.

The cel-animated feature’s Late Decadent phase found its fullest, best embodiment in the four films released by DreamWorks Studios between 1998 and 2003: *The Prince of Egypt*, *The Road to El Dorado* (Eric “Bibo” Bergeron & Don Paul, 2000), *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (Kelly Asbury & Lorna Cook, 2002), and *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*. The most remarkable fact about comparing this Decadent period at DreamWorks to the Baroque period at Disney, however, is that the chief guiding auteur of both was in fact the same person. Jeffrey Katzenberg – studio chairman, and head of animation production at the Walt Disney Studio during the Disney Renaissance – was let go from his position in the corporate succession drama that followed Frank Wells’s death in a helicopter crash in 1994. Michael Eisner would ascend to the position of CEO, after which he chose to fire Katzenberg rather than see him maneuvering for the COO position for himself. It was a move that shocked Hollywood, and led to the seismic decision of Steven Spielberg and David Geffen to join Katzenberg in establishing a new studio – “DreamWorks SKG” – the first new Hollywood studio founded in six decades, they would collectively boast. It was to be from this new base that Katzenberg would deploy the same genius for the animated feature that had driven the Disney Renaissance of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the event, however, the aforementioned historical processes, along with the vicissitudes of audience taste, disallowed DreamWorks’s cel animation productions from achieving anything like the box-office success of the films of the Disney Renaissance. That would ultimately come with the studio’s capitulation to digital animation, and its production of the *Shrek*, *Madagascar*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, and *Kung Fu Panda* franchises, among many other irresistible spectacles. The four cel animation films between ’98 and ’03, however, remain fascinatingly topical case studies in Decadent aesthetics. As will be seen below, they represent the furthest

possible remove from a modernist aesthetic predicated solely upon originality, insofar as they are acutely self-conscious about the rich – though by then largely moribund – Hollywood genre traditions which they used the simulacra freedoms of animation to revive, and reformulate with a Late Decadent perversity. *The Prince of Egypt* was chiefly a remake of *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), and thus a revitalization of the grand-scale Bible epic – a genre which had been out of favour in Hollywood for an entire generation, since the early 1960s. *The Road to El Dorado* was intended as an update of the Bing Crosby/Bob Hope *Road to...* comedies of the 1940s. *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, in spite of some similarities to equine dramas such as *The Black Stallion* (Carroll Ballard, 1979) or *Black Beauty* (Caroline Thompson, 1994) is chiefly a Western, and moreover, one that bears strong visual overtones of the films of John Ford. And finally, *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* is most immediately apparently an update of the *Sinbad*-style spectacles – spanning the 1950s to the early 1980s – which showcased Ray Harryhausen's famous stop-motion animation. In reviving – and, via the simulacra freedoms of animation, dramatically expanding upon – the iconography of these genre traditions, however, DreamWorks's four cel-animated films did not simply reiterate their original thematic meanings. Rather, to varying degrees, these films took advantage of their decades of separation to problematize, daemonize, or outright subvert the supposed moral meanings and ideological underpinnings of their predecessors. They were, in essence, formal exercises in the very best aestheticized sense – preserving the aspects of spectacle which were most beguiling about the mid-twentieth-century films from which they draw their inspiration, while largely distilling away the reactionary Americanisms which so often accompanied this spectacle. In this, they fluently encapsulate the utopian potentials of the Hollywood blockbuster, as well as cel animation's simulacra capabilities. These latter, in particular, were well-caught by Dudley Andrew, with his declaration that:

Animation is one ascendant category, promoted by some to the top of the hierarchy of film styles today. ...unencumbered moving images outrun photographically generated shots, which are held back by the drag of ordinary space and time. Under the new regime, all films, not just animated ones, should be viewed and assessed as efforts to respond to the imagination, liberated from mundane constraints. (Andrew 2010, 30)

The utopian, Romantic implications of such language are clear, and speak vividly to cel animation's nature as a medium of imaginative transcribing. This is still not, however, a

generally accepted view among scholars and theorists – least of all when one abandons the present moment in cinema and casts a historiographical gaze back over the history of the form.

In only the second sentence of her 2006 article “The Joyous Reception: Animated Worlds and the Romantic Imaginary,” Rachel Kearney makes the telling assertion that animated cinema is “an art form associated primarily with Modernist or Postmodernist ideologies,” and thus that her suggestion of aligning it with the nineteenth-century Romantic Imagination is potentially a “historically incongruous” one (Kearney 2006, 1). This introductory caveat on Kearney’s part testifies, again, to the pervasive emphasis on (post)modernist discourses of anti-mimesis in Cinema Studies, and in discourses on animation within Cinema Studies in particular. Discourses such as these, defined by assertions such as Paul Wells’s that animation and modernism bear innate and inherent affinities with one another, are aggressively hostile to animation’s nature as imaginative transcribing (Wells 2002). They refuse any allowance for the sense, which Andrew elicits, that realistically-drawn cels can realize cinematic imaginative visions that “photographically-generated shots... held back by the drag of ordinary time and space” will not allow. Guided by this sense, a conceptual alignment between animation and Romanticism, such as Kearney suggests, ought to be among the first and most logical explanatory paradigms for the animated feature, not one which requires defence against charges of incongruity. Throughout the course of her discussion of Romanticism as an aesthetic mode, for instance, Kearney invokes Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s notion of the imagination – a connection which, right away, speaks to Andrew’s point. One need hardly point out the difficulties which would have been entailed in filming a screen version of *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in live action, before the days of DVFX. Animation, however, would have faced no comparable difficulties. It could, theoretically, have realized Coleridge’s Antarctic ice shelves, becalmed expanses of open ocean, daemonically possessed ship, primordial writhing sea snakes, and celestial apparitions, with a scale and intensity limited only by the filmmakers’ imagination. Inherent in an observation such as this, however, is a refutation of the modernist prioritization of self-reflexivity – and concomitant wish to see the means of production/construction emphasized – in favour of a more conceptual approach to subject matter. The Romantic imagination, unlike modernism, emphasizes the existence of a vision preceding the text, and sees the text itself as merely a means to the end of expressing this vision, rather than an end in itself.

Coleridge posited a primary “Imagination” which was a wholly creative and generative faculty, capable of synthesizing opposites, and envisioning the truly unprecedented (Coleridge 2002, 488-89). A secondary Imagination, in turn, was necessary to actually transcribe these imaginative visions in legible form. In other words, it is of the essence that a powerful vision predate the actual writing of lines of poetry. This relativizes the importance of the text itself, relative to the original imaginative vision. Camille Paglia declares, for instance, that “*The Ancient Mariner* is one the greatest poems in English, yet what it achieves is almost in defiance of language. Vision and execution often wildly diverge” (Paglia 1990, 322). She continues, furthermore, that “Coleridge and Poe have cinematic minds. They are masters of emotional extremity and archetypal visualization,” and that “Coleridge and Poe are seized by visions that transcend language, that belong to the dream experience beyond language” (Paglia 1990, 578/322).

Coleridge and Poe have written works of cinema. Had film been available as a medium, perhaps that is the form they would have chosen, for language here is only an obstruction to vision. (Paglia 1990, 322)

In this elucidation of the Romantic imagination, one also hears a potent schema for understanding realist cel animation. The same “wild divergence” between “vision and execution” which Paglia attributes to Coleridge and Poe’s literary output also describes the dynamics of live-action cinema throughout much of its existence. Historically, directors might envision whichever grandiose spectacle they wished, but the constraints of the index and available special effects would necessarily temper their ultimate realization onscreen. The imaginative visions conjured up by the story of *King Kong* in the abstract are very different from the halting Willis O’Brian stop-motion with which they ultimately end up on screen, for instance; and to read Michael Ende’s novel *The NeverEnding Story* (1979) is to gain a very different imaginative experience than one does watching Wolfgang Petersen’s 1984 film. Realist cel animation, however, has always possessed the theoretical ability to allow a far closer transcribing of the imagination’s vision – to more vividly channel the “archetypal visualization” that Paglia credits Coleridge and Poe with. The hyperrealist style of the Disney tradition is, historically, Hollywood’s best-known tradition in this regard, but the Disney films are not the only ones that do honour to cel animation’s potential for imaginative transcribing. It can be seen in works as diverse as the Fleischer *Superman* shorts, *Animal Farm* (John Halas & Joy Batchelor, 1953), *Charlotte’s Web* (Charles A. Nichols & Iwao Takamoto, 1973), or the best parts of *The Land Before Time* (Don Bluth, 1988). In all of these,

whatever is done with the formal properties of the animation cel, it is never allowed to become a self-referential game for its own sake – there is always the inescapable countervailing factor of needing to do justice to an imaginative ideal, derived from a novel, comic, or paleontological enthusiasm, which possesses a life and resonance beyond the text.

Kearney mentions how the Disney tradition’s “use of European folklore and rural settings suggest the Romantic immersion in nature,” but this is only in passing, in the course of a discussion of Sergei Eisenstein’s notions of the “plasmatic” and “ecstatic” animated image – ideas that were, in their effectively modernist import, largely inimical to the ideals of the Romantic imagination (Kearney 2006, 2-3). In his 1999 book *Walt Disney and Europe: European Influences on the Animated Feature Films of Walt Disney*, however, Robin Allan marshals a vast amount of research to demonstrate that the greatness of the Walt Disney tradition – the same tradition, begun in the 1930s, that would experience a Renaissance in the late ’80s/early ’90s, and continue to underlie the Decadent texts produced at DreamWorks – lies in the fact that it has very little to do with anything savouring of modernist or postmodernist ideologies, and everything to do with Europe’s centuries-long canon of representational art. The invaluable nature of Allan’s book is threefold. Firstly, there is the simple fact that it situates the Disney films in a much longer historical and aesthetic context, which disallows the parochialism, presentism, and imaginative myopia of (post)modern theorizing. On his very first page, Allan declares that “The Disney product is indebted to an older cultural heritage; Disney absorbed and recreated that heritage for a new mass audience that was part of the popular culture of his own period” (Allan 1999, 1). From here, he makes such observations as – referring to the nineteenth-century German tradition of agrarian and pastoral painting – “Disney was a *Biedermeier* artist par excellence, since he used realism to promote nostalgia for a romanticized past” (Allan 1999, 20). He reminds readers of the immense imaginative debt Disney animators owed to Gustave Doré, whose immense popularity in America was driven by “popular editions of his illustrations for Dante, Coleridge, Cervantes, and the Bible, which were dramatic, intense, and theatrical” (Allan 1999, 22-23). He observes that “Snow White’s forbears come from the Pre-Raphaelites and the late nineteenth century Romantic vision in England and Germany,” while the evil witch Queen is situated “in the tradition of the great European witches from Circe onwards, including Morgan le Fey” (Allan 1999, 59/52). Regarding the “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” sequence in *Fantasia*, he traces a lineage whereby “Goethe’s poem *Der Zauberlehrling* of 1797 was based on a story by Lucian,”

and “The Scherzo, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, first performed in 1897, and based on Goethe’s poem, was one of [Paul] Dukas’ most famous compositions” (Allan 1999, 122). Of *Fantasia*’s sequence of Beethoven’s 6<sup>th</sup> – his *Pastoral Symphony* imaginatively situated in an art deco Ancient Greece – Allan writes of its rendering of Bacchus that “The antecedents for this comic strip god come from academic art, a favourite from Titian to Rubens. Also Böcklin’s leering merman in his aquatic fantasies are close cousins to Bacchus,” as well as observing that the girls in Edward Poynter’s painting *A Visit to Aesculapius* (1880) “stand before the physician in the same way as the Disney centaurettes parade before their beaux” (Allan 1999, 146-47). And of *Fantasia*’s concluding cinematic treatment of Franz Schubert’s “Ave Maria” – “influenced by the early Romantic painting of Caspar David Friedrich” – Allan declares that while “Friedrich is precise... Disney is vague,” continuing that art director Kay Nielsen “lacks the intensity of the devout Friedrich or the liberal Schubert” (Allan 1999, 166). And finally, most relevant to this dissertation, he quotes an animator on *Cinderella* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson & Hamilton Luske, 1950) as saying that, to “underlin[e] Cinderella’s isolation and loneliness in the palace,” it was necessary “to theatricalize, to show the baroque, the size and the exaggeration” (Allan 1999, 209).

Secondly, having done all this, Allan’s book also unhesitatingly and unapologetically takes up and elucidates Disney’s hyperrealist animation style, with no fanatical dedication to the delusion that modernism, and only modernism, can be imaginatively emancipatory. “When Disney visited Europe” in the summer of 1935, Allan simply states, “he became fascinated by the miniature and the mechanical, and by the turning of illusion into reality” (Allan 1999, 74). Regarding the *Snow White* production’s initial failures at creating a hyperreal heroine, he declared that “the attempt to develop the straight human element failed” not because cel animation was inherently unsuited to this task, but “because the artists were not capable of animating human beings convincingly,” often lapsing into cliché and resorting “to an accepted convention of the period which was not imaginatively realised in the animated form” (Allan 1999, 41-42). Allan thus legitimizes the goal of Disney hyperrealism, and continues, moreover, that “the struggle to master the human form continues until this day” (Allan 1999, 41-42). Of a famous multiplane shot in *Pinocchio*, furthermore, he declares that “Detail is piled upon detail so that the spectator is reduced to a condition of wonderment and acceptance of the spectacle, of fantasy made flesh” (Allan 1999, 77). At the end of that film, moreover, he writes of how Disney,

“determined to create illusion,” would strive “to give the characters the feeling of more depth and roundness – or more of a third-dimensional quality,” even to point of emphasizing Monstro the whale’s “muscles rippling underneath his shiny, menacing, dark exterior” (Allan 1999, 75). Of *Bambi*, he writes that “The naturalistic animals are drawn with painstaking attention to detail,” and avers that “we forget this is an animated film, until episodes of broad caricature or comedy remind us that all is achieved by paint and brush” (Allan 1999, 181). The closest Allan comes to ever being condemnatory of the Disney hyperrealist style is his declaration – recalling films such as *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973) and *Blade Runner* – that “Disney as puppet master had no vision beyond the recreation of reality through his figures, and he could not see how easily his benignity could become malignity” (Allan 1999, 229).

This last point, moreover, brings us to Allan’s book’s third invaluable aspect. This is the fact that, in establishing the aesthetic pedigree of the Disney tradition, Allan situates his corpus of films in the history of cinema in general – emphatically not inventing a reserved domain for animation where the form may only be discussed in relation to other works of animation, and not live action films. Allan reminds his readers that, from the very first, “Disney, by basing himself in Hollywood instead of in New York where most of the animation studios were established, allied himself to the centre of American popular film culture” (Allan 1999, 15). He likewise recalls animator Ken Anderson’s hunch – drawn from such personal recollections as “When he had shown *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) to his family at home, Disney said, ‘Why can’t I make films like that?’” – that “Disney was a live-action filmmaker *manqué*” (Allan 1999, 202 n15). Of *Snow White*, Allan writes that “The pictorial references are to [Mary] Pickford and [Mitzi] Gaynor, but Shirley Temple should also be borne in mind” (Allan 1999, 59). Of Jiminy Cricket, he writes “The character is a mixture of W.C. Fields and Charlie Chaplin” (Allan 1999, 84). Discussing the broom-automata in *Fantasia*’s “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” sequence, Allan declares that it recalls how “German expressionism in the cinema used the imagery of mindless energy in films made after the First World War,” and mentions *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Metropolis* especially in this connection (Allan 1999, 124). And of *Fantasia*’s “Rite of Spring” sequence, furthermore, he recalls Winsor McCay’s famous cartoon short *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) and Willis O’Brien’s iconic stop-motion animation in *The Lost World* (Harry Hoyt, 1925) and *King Kong* – as well as his lesser-known short film *The Ghost of Slumber Mountain* (1919) – before declaring that “Astonishing as some of these effects are, with computerisation and advances in

electronic puppetry, McCay's Gertie and Disney's monsters [sic] still retain their conviction" (Allan 1999, 130). Allan also points out that the movie rights for Felix Salten's 1923 novel *Bambi, a Life in the Woods* were originally purchased in 1933 by producer/director Sidney Franklin, director of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1933) and *The Good Earth* (1937), who only turned the rights over to Disney upon "recogniz[ing] that the lyricism of Salten's book could not be captured by live action," however some years later, Salten would produce another film on the same theme – Clarence Brown's *The Yearling* (1946) (Allan 1999, 181). Furthermore, regarding *Cinderella*, Allan observes that "there are similarities between Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and *Cinderella* in the portrayal of Cinderella/Stepmother and the second Mrs. De Winter/Mrs. Danvers," and that furthermore, "The use of stairs and shadows reminds us of the trapped heroine in *The Spiral Staircase* (1945)" (Allan 1999, 210). And finally, of the three-dimensional experience of Disneyland, Allan recalls musing in his diary:

...is it a work of art, as *The Wizard of Oz* or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* or *Singin' in the Rain* are works of art, commercially manufactured products that transcend their age and have a meaning all to themselves as all great works of art have? (Allan 1999, 231)

Allan's scholarly survey of the Disney canon ends with the death of the man himself in 1966, and so says nothing of the Disney Renaissance beyond some short, cursory remarks in the conclusion. His survey, however, nonetheless offers an invaluable starting place for any inquiry into the Disney Renaissance because, simply put, the aesthetic parameters described above – deep imaginative situation in a longer aesthetic tradition; an unwavering commitment to hyperreal simulacra in animation style; and an ontology as real Hollywood movies rather than "cartoons" – were still the parameters which defined the Disney brand in the Renaissance period, and continue to do so to this day.

It will be the goal of what follows to take up Allan's de-reifying parameters, and apply them to the films of the Disney Renaissance period. These later films benefit just as greatly from being released into a centuries-long tradition of philosophical engagement with the world via aesthetics, rather than imprisoned in (post)modern circumlocutions about the desirability or possibility of representation. All the aesthetic lineage and richness which Allan traces means little to theorists such as Kearney, who have been conditioned to think and theorize chiefly, if not exclusively, in very presentist (post)modern terms. She follows the lead of those who, following Eisenstein, treat only Disney's earlier work, such as the *Silly Symphonies* shorts (1929-1939), as having any intellectual relevance to a discussion of animation, due to their apparent modernist-

friendly undermining of representational – and thus, supposedly, ideological – fixities. Her positing of “the freedom that Eisenstein confers on the animation of Disney,” however, offers only a very narrow definition of freedom or the animation of Disney (Kearney 2006, 3). Of the beautiful, imaginatively liberating, story-world simulacra created by the Disney studio at the top of its hyperrealist game, Eisenstein and his subsequent devotees are either mute or critical. Even theorists such as Kearney, however, do a certain amount of honour to the Disney tradition, by interpreting its ontology and workings in aesthetic terms – even if they are misguided modernist ones.

The first and most salient fact, regarding the Baroque spectacles of the Disney Renaissance, however, is that they contain no concession to modernist-style anti-illusionism or anti-mimesis. Indeed, the paintings and frescoes of the seventeenth-century Baroque possess vivid affinities with Disney-style cel animation films, insofar as both strive for the graphic freedom to realistically show absolutely any imaginative vision, liberated from the physical constraints of actual matter. The terms of actually achieving such freedom however are – as we saw with Don Bluth’s recollections from *The Secret of N.I.M.H.* – often inglorious and un-artistic in the extreme. This is likely a contributory factor in many modernist-minded critics, theorists, and practitioners of animation’s rejection of realism. The attendant requirements of uncreative grind such as “in-between-ing” and “clean-up animation” – which are necessary to achieve the appearance of 24-frames-per-second movement and near-invisible outlines – seem to violate the modernist shibboleths of originality, spontaneity, and foregrounding of technique. One certainly hears this in Halas’s inveterate hostility to the “conveyor-belt,” “factory”-style production “associated with the Disney studios” – with its “over-emphasis on ‘realism’” and “repetition of the same actions and situations” (Halas 1970, 108). And yet, at its best, Disney-style hyperrealism can achieve an imaginative transcendence impossible in work such as Halas would value, by virtue of its having performed the necessary humbling drudgery and sublimation. And it is in this that the Disney tradition resonates powerfully with the Baroque. At work in modernist hostility to mimesis is a paradigm which rejects art-making which, in the course of creating sophisticated illusions and story-worlds, necessarily entails reducing aesthetic affects to a matter of schemata – that would need “to reduce the rendering of the emotions to a systematic catalogue,” as John Rupert Martin puts it (Martin 1991, 89/91). And yet the sublimities of the seventeenth-century Baroque were indissociable from this very same spirit. Looking at Charles

Le Brun's schema of sketches for the realistic representation of facial emotions, one is struck by the degree to which one is almost literally looking at character art sketches or key frames for a cel-animated film, yet Le Brun's sketches pre-date the form by over two centuries. Le Brun's sketch work formed the basis for an address to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, in which he endeavoured to explain how the seemingly fluent naturalism and realism of his paintings such as *The Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander* (1660-61) were in fact the result of his seeking to "analyse a variety of emotional reactions" and, in the spirit of Descartes's *Treatise on the Passions of the Soul* (1649), organize them into a "system of paired opposites" (Martin 1991, 89-91). In such a system, for example, "Fear" is conveyed by:

...the Eye-brow a little raised next the Nose, the Eye-ball sparkling in an unquiet Motion, and situated in the middle of the Eye; the Mouth open, being drawn back, and more open at the Corners, than in the middle, having the under Lip more drawn back than the upper; the Complexion redder than even in Love or Desire, but not so beautiful, inclining to livid, with the Lips of the same Colour and dry. (Martin 1991, 91)

This Cartesian approach to art-making would reappear virtually unchanged in the great Disney tradition of hyperrealist cel animation, and again be put to strikingly similar uses: the creation of works of visual art that sought to viscerally, emotively, awe and impress by opening a voyeuristic window onto a realistic story-world, not by soliciting the spectator's awareness of the images' constructed and illusionistic nature. Indeed, it is possible that the latter mentality only came into being once a certain threshold of realism and verisimilitude had become possible in representational art. Martin asserts that caricature – the "comic exaggeration of physiognomic traits" – was "born at the same moment as Baroque art itself" (Martin 1991, 99). The studied and deliberate violation of naturalist realism is only possible once the latter has properly established itself in the realm of aesthetics.

This dichotomy would underlie the animated film for much of its lifetime, and the Disney tradition – to the consternation of so many writers on the subject – would resoundingly and consistently come down on the Baroque side. This would become most fully apparent when the new Wells/Eisner/Katzenberg regime took over at Disney in 1984. The first Disney animated feature released fully under Katzenberg's auspices, *The Great Mouse Detective*, is not usually classed by film historians or animation buffs as part of the Disney Renaissance, but it emphatically deserves inclusion, for the simple reason that it clearly shows the eventual Disney Baroque aesthetic in embryonic form. Even at this early stage, the commitment to the utopian

imaginative liberation inherent in Baroque verticality, profusion, and sublimity is readily discernible to the sympathetic viewer. This is most vividly visible in a climactic action sequence that takes place around, on, and inside Big Ben. From roughly the 64-minute mark of a 74-minute film, *Great Mouse Detective* takes the form of an aerial chase far above London – with the irresistible Vincent Price-voiced villain Professor Rattigan piloting a miniature zeppelin with the young heroine Olivia hostage; while the Sherlock Holmes and Watson analogues Basil and Dawson have gathered a number of helium balloons together in a Union Jack flag, and tied it around a matchbox, which they fly in pursuit by letting gas spurt out. The scene is chiefly remarkable for the genuine verisimilitude of rapid flight it seeks to evoke. In stereotypical “cartoons,” it is a well-known convention that gravity is wholly arbitrary, and the most astonishing aerial feats are often treated as matters of comic routine, rather than vertiginous exhilaration and wonder. One sees a burgeoning aesthetic of Baroque realism, however, in the way that *Great Mouse Detective* works to correct this. It is with a sense of real inertia and palpably rushing air that we see Basil leaning forward into the thrill of the aerial chase, which is situated in a hyperreal simulacrum of London, involving a spiral upwards around Nelson’s Column, as well as a near-miss under the upper walkways of Tower Bridge, before it terminates at Big Ben, Rattigan’s mini-zeppelin crashing into the clock face of it. Following this, the film cuts inside Big Ben for an action scene staged among its vast clockwork mechanisms. And for much of the next ninety seconds, one sees a narrativized spectacle that is not merely a high point of *Great Mouse Detective*, but a watershed for Hollywood spectacle in general: the first mainstream Hollywood feature to integrate a digitally-created environment into its diegesis without pausing, or even disrupting, the action or character drama. Whereas live-action films would take many more years to come to this point, the slight alterity already present in cel animation emboldened the filmmakers at Disney to integrate DVFX much more confidently, employing digital environments as part of a larger narrativized spectacle, rather than as a novel spectacle in their own right, after the fashion of *TRON* four years earlier. In the first seconds of *Great Mouse Detective*’s Big Ben sequence, one sees Basil – momentarily knocked senseless by the crash and fall – come to on the surface of a vast horizontal cogwheel, and register his surroundings with shock and dismay. The interworkings of gears were already visible in the background of this initial shot, but it is only when the “camera” begins to pull out from him – dextrously hiding a cheat-cut to a new “camera” move – that the spectator fully comprehends the

Baroque massive sublime environment. Zooming out from the one horizontal cogwheel he is on, itself interworking with many other large vertical ones, the “camera” then pans right past an even vaster one, before tilting upwards, taking in more vast gears – these suffused with an eerie, almost otherworldly, golden light filtering in through the interior of the clock face.

The ensuing action sequence takes full advantage of the vertiginous heights and dense visual profusion of the environment. Rattigan attempts to knock Basil off the cogwheel to fall to his death, only to have Basil scramble back and pin his cloak into a gear works, trapping him. In his rage, Rattigan kicks Olivia down into the terrifyingly dense abyss of Big Ben’s workings, where she lands in wheel’s mesh, and finds herself about to be crushed by a giant gear tooth. Basil, however, leaps down even further to a pulley release and, borne back upwards on a chain through the dense mechanical mesh, rescues her in the nick of time. Seeing this, Rattigan furiously rips free of his trapped cloak, and – in a five-second dollying shot of dazzling virtuosity – scampers up and through the mountainously dense gear formations with a rat-like dexterity that gives credence to his name, combined with a sheer furious ferocity not seen in a Disney villain for a generation past. This development will, in turn, be fully emphasized once the action shifts outside Big Ben’s exterior, where Basil and Rattigan have their final battle on the hands of the clock face – the almost-60-metre drop below looking hundreds of times higher from a mouse’s perspective. In all this, Disney is virtually giving birth to a digitally-liberated Baroque aesthetic, and powerfully signalling the Renaissance that was to flower in the studio’s following films. The gears and cogwheels of Big Ben’s interior, viewed from mouse scale, were so vast and complex that they would have been virtually impossible to animate on a wholly traditional drawn-cel basis. As a result, the filmmakers elected to pursue a rudimentary, but effective, digital solution – “building” the clockworks environment in a computer, and then simply tracing out the hundreds of dizzyingly complex cels required for the sequence. In this, the imaginative transcribing that had always underlain cel animation took its first tentative steps into the digital age.

The Big Ben sequence in *Great Mouse Detective* – being fully immersed in an animated-simulacra diegesis – was able to the dwarf – in terms of its detailing, “camera movement,” and narrative integration – the previous Hollywood attempts at digital environment creation seen in *TRON* and *The Last Starfighter*. As such, it anticipates the contemporary logic of narrativized-spectacle-as-imaginative-simulacrum far more presciently than the narratively bracketed-off and untextured digital spectacles of those films, which belong rather to the technofuturist canon that

Pierson would theorize, and which would be wholly superseded by the latter 1990s. Likewise – and for the same reason – *Great Mouse Detective* has, as an animated feature, also dated far better than the more overtly cartoon-ish *An American Tail* (Don Bluth, 1986) the same year, even though the latter was initially more successful at the box office. Indeed, in terms of formal virtuosity, complex worldmaking, and evocation of the sublime, few live-action spectacles of 1986 could match *Great Mouse Detective*, either. James Cameron’s *Aliens* must obviously be conceded, but beyond that, films such as *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (Leonard Nimoy), *Legend* (Ridley Scott), *Labyrinth* (Jim Henson), *Highlander* (Russell Mulcahy), and *Big Trouble in Little China* (John Carpenter) often seem to speak far less vividly to us over a gap of nearly three decades. Works of high seriousness such as *Platoon* (Oliver Stone), *The Mission* (Roland Joffé), and *The Name of the Rose* (Jean-Jacques Annaud) are evidently sincere in their worldmaking endeavour, but show little spectacle which is recognizable in today’s Baroque aesthetic *lingua franca*. And the year’s reigning mega-blockbuster, *Top Gun* (Tony Scott), was characterized by a pugilistic rejection of aesthetics – seeking not to awe spectators with the liberated quality of a Baroque spectacle, but to impress them, with macho immediacy, at the feat of having gleaned any useable footage at all by strapping cameras to the outer fuselages of F-18s. *Top Gun* is an aesthetic experience totally foreign to the cinema of today – of which *Great Mouse Detective* is now appreciable as an early avatar – whereby any kind of aerial dogfight could be digitally conjured to appear from any camera angle, again making the spectacle of what is shown far more significant than the mere giddy act of being able to show anything at all. It is unfortunate, but perhaps not surprising, that histories of modern Hollywood do not discuss *Great Mouse Detective* in such exalted terms as this. What is more disconcerting, however, is that even standard histories of the Disney Renaissance tend to under-emphasize it.

One reason why *Great Mouse Detective* is often discounted from being part of the Disney Renaissance, however, is that it is historically marooned on the opposite side of its successor. The Baroque liberation evoked by *Great Mouse Detective* – especially with its digitally-conjured Big Ben sequence – would in no way be repeated in Disney’s next film, *Oliver & Company*. As Chris Pallant declared in a 2010 essay on Disney’s aesthetic history, “when periodizing a distinct body of film, within that grouping peaks and troughs will exist,” and this sentiment applies acutely to *Oliver & Company* (Pallant 2010b, 109). Its chief legacy is the ambivalent one of foreshadowing the presence of Broadway-style musical numbers in the Disney films. Song sequences had always

been a part of the Disney tradition, of course, but it was only with the arrival of the Katzenberg regime in the 1980s that they began to be self-consciously constructed as self-contained spectacles in the Broadway fashion. *Oliver & Company* has no narrativized spectacles of Baroque verticality or profusion, on the order of *Great Mouse Detective*'s Big Ben sequence, because all the film's creative energies in this regard have been sunk into its "Why Should I Worry?" and "Perfect Isn't Easy" numbers, which exist largely apart from the main narrative. This narrative, in turn – being derived from Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) – necessarily banished all Baroque concern with imaginative worldmaking, the massive sublime, self-immolation, and dramatic triumphalism, in favour of a saccharine sanctification of the supposed uncorrupted innocence of the child. These errors would not be repeated for the Disney Renaissance's subsequent films, but they render *Oliver & Company* little more than a historical curiosity today.

Whereas Baroque verticality was confined to the aerial chase and Big Ben sequences in *Great Mouse Detective*, and expunged almost entirely from *Oliver & Company*, with *The Little Mermaid* – nigh-universally considered the first great film of the Disney Renaissance – it would be elevated to a fundamental structuring principle. The film is suffused with Baroque verticality, making the privileging of any individual sequence somewhat arbitrary. These virtues show off to particularly memorable advantage, however, in a sequence beginning at the fourteen-minute mark of the 83-minute film – which begins with Ariel swimming away from the atrium of her father's palace, with Sebastian following her. From the very first, these images demonstrate, eleven years beforehand, the same pure graphic logic about verticality that Jen and Shu Lien's chase in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* would conclusively introduce into the Hollywood mainstream. One sees Ariel, flanked by Flounder, cruise off into the distance at speed, and seemingly without much use of her tailfin. Sebastian, in turn, must take to the open water with desperately exaggerated swimming motions – claws and legs flailing in an effort to even barely keep pace. Actual marine biology is of course thrown out the window here – crabs do not in fact swim up above the ocean floor at all – but the legitimating principle of this Baroque big lie is more than mere cartoonish-ness. It is establishing, by sheer graphic logic, Ariel's mastery of Baroque verticality. This is resoundingly confirmed by the next shot, which vividly shows off a "camera move" whereby Ariel is initially swimming towards the frame – still moving at speed and yet not pumping her tailfin much at all – before the "camera" tilt-pans 180° vertically as she passes overhead, then recedes again into the distance, towards her grotto hide-away. Again, after she has

disappeared from the frame, Sebastian enters it, still struggling, with inversely exaggerated effort, to keep up. This image is a striking one, insofar as one gets just long enough a look at Ariel's face to see a deadpan look of fixed purpose on it, which exactly matches the image of her form passing, sleekly and determinedly, above the spectators. Her being flanked by Flounder recalls nothing so much as the image of a shark with its remora entourage. The fatuous ingenuousness with which her character has been saddled hitherto – throughout dialogue sequences with Flounder, Scuttle, and her father King Triton – is here totally transcended, in a moment of spectacle which bespeaks the sublimity which the films of the Disney Renaissance achieved when they abandoned dialogue, and simply let their formal virtuosity with imagistic spectacle flow freely.

These previous images in *Little Mermaid*, however, were mere transition. The film now arrives at the secret grotto in which she keeps her treasured human artifacts. The first establishing shot spectators are given of this space, via a gobsmacked Sebastian's POV, lasts a full ten seconds, and is devoted to an extended tilt downward, from a near-vertically high-angled shot to floor level. This shot foreshadows the aesthetic of Baroque verticality which will govern the sequence to come, establishing a vertical canvas for dramatic images of ascent and descent to play out upon – images which, because of the film's animated nature, will not be subject to the constraints of camera placement in a tightly enclosed environment which would bedevil a live-action film shot in a comparable setting. Indeed, from the very beginning of the sequence – in which Ariel delivers the first of the two “Part of Your World” song-soliloquies that would entrance a generation – one notices that the “camera” has seemingly come unstuck from static framing to a greater degree than was then usual for an animated feature. As she sings the first few lines, it tracks almost 360° around her. Then, following a cut-in to a more empathic close-up of her, it pans upward slightly, staying with her as she begins to swim upwards, demonstrating her ability to move weightlessly through underwater space. Throughout the sequence, we see shots end abruptly when she surges further upwards, leaving a cloud of bubbles filling the frame behind her; and we see her seemingly levitating higher simply by casually undulating her lower fish-half; even before we get to tilting and dollying shots which follow her ascending dramatically further upwards in spiralling or somersaulting motions, with such smoothness and grace that she seems almost physically drawn upwards by divine power. This association, not coincidentally, is visually furthered by the fact that the surface is visible through a circular

skylight at top of the grotto, through which brilliant white light shines down. In one extreme low-angle shot, the majesty of her ascent is accentuated in the same manner as Guercino's *Aurora*, with its flock of birds: by having a shoal of small fish swim upwards in tandem with her, as though providing the opposite, complimentary half of a compositional helix. A freeze-frame of this low-angled shot – taken as the compositional helix seems poised to unite in the point of pure white light descending from the top of the grotto – shows that the term “Baroque” is, here, no metaphorical or poetic fancy. The Disney animators have produced an image of such vertiginous, profuse sublimity that it would fit right into a seventeenth-century ceiling fresco. Furthermore, they are honouring their own history here, insofar as this sequence's sublime images – deeply spiritually resonant, but devoid of any specific religious association – vividly recall the concluding “Ave Maria” segment of *Fantasia*. Robin Allan's words regarding that image – that “at first sight this looks like a standard Hollywood cliché, but... the imagery is much more complex in its associations” – are likewise vividly applicable here (Allan 1999, 170).

The sequence ends with her allowing herself to sink, slowly and gracefully, back down to the bottom of the grotto. A final overhead shot – of her reclining there – pulls out from a medium-long shot to a long shot proper, in the process again emphasizing the height of the grotto, of which she has just shown such vertical mastery. Watching this sequence in *Little Mermaid*, one is reminded of the film *Supergirl* (Jeannot Swarc, 1984) from only five years before – a film which also featured a young woman who was posited by the narrative as possessing limitless powers of verticality. Because of the technological limitations of the time, however, and the film's production values being poor even by the standards of such, this premise was never paid off satisfactorily. *Supergirl*'s supposed powers of verticality were demonstrated too sparingly by the film, and when they were, they were transparently either blatantly obvious wirework, or sloppy optical compositing work. The undiluted imaginative simulacra – the total sublimation of technique to diegetic story-world – which one sees with Ariel in *Little Mermaid*, was wholly lacking in *Supergirl*. In the former, one genuinely *sees* Ariel take flight in the water; in the latter, one only sees actress Helen Slater, wearing a superhero costume, being manipulated on a wire rig, making a Baroque aesthetic of sublime verticality impossible. Like *Top Gun*, *Supergirl*'s value as a work of cinematic spectacle is now largely antiquarian, whereas its contemporaneous Disney peers still speak vividly to our own era of digital simulacra and imaginative transcribing.

As with *Great Mouse Detective* before it, however, *Little Mermaid*'s moments of Baroque sublimity were hedged in with inordinate amounts of more cartoonish animation. They are appreciable only in intermittent shots and images, with much of their framing narrative taking a wearily hypocritical anti-aesthetic stance. The sequence following the one discussed above, for instance, is couched in the grandiose image of Ariel ascending to the surface and jumping, dolphin-like, towards Eric's ship, which is soon wrecked in a storm which does Baroque credit to the chthonian power of Nature. In between, however, the film nonetheless treats the revelation of Eric's heroic statue with derision, pandering to the quintessentially American disdain for aesthetic grandiosity. The balance, however, was demonstrably shifting, with *Little Mermaid* coming closer to a genuinely sustained Baroque aesthetic than anything before. It would be with the opening moments of *The Rescuers Down Under*, however, that Disney animation would finally, resoundingly, achieve such a sustained Baroque spectacle. The film's first spectacular sequence – running five and a half minutes, from the four to the nine-and-a-half-minute mark of this 77-minute film – has a young boy named “Cody,” who can talk to animals, climbing to the top of an enormous outback cliff in order to rescue a mother “great golden eagle” named Marahute, who has been ensnared and tied down by an evil poacher.

The white-and-gold eagle Marahute is remarkable for being one of the most outstanding figurations of the Baroque massive sublime ever committed to film. She is at once beautiful, majestic and awe-inspiring, but simultaneously – with her great size, intense red eyes, and deadly-looking talons – in no way cozily reassuring. The effect of all this is that, when she is first shown to the spectator, there is a profound aesthetic revulsion at seeing such a majestic creature tied down. This, in turn, makes her resurgence – in a grand dramatic low-angle shot – after Cody cuts the ropes with his pocket knife, all the more sublime. Her aggressive spreading of her wings, however, knocks Cody off the cliff-top plateau, and it is here that *Rescuers Down Under*'s Baroque spectacle truly begins in earnest. After some initial, and complex, shots of Cody falling down the cliff face again, the film cuts to a grandiose five-second tracking shot, in which the frame is now positioned overhead Cody, following him downwards as the ground looms closer and closer. At the last second, though, Marahute soars into frame beneath him, interposes herself – visibly adjusting for updrafts and inertia – catches him on her back, and zooms out of frame again, leaving the “camera” to complete its downward track to the ground without Cody in shot. After a few reaction shots to this deliverance from death, the film begins one of its centrepiece

moments: a tracking shot lasting a remarkable fifteen seconds of sublime Baroque verticality. In an astonishing deployment of multiplane animation technique, the film positions the frame behind Marahute, with Cody on her back, and proceeds to show her first ascending above a large ridge topped with a tree; then ascending up a mountain face to a huge crag, which she dextrously banks and steers through, the “camera” still in tow; then ascending above not one, not two, but three successively higher clifftops, the last of which she grips with her talon and shoves off from, for emphasis’s sake – the Baroque realism of the sequence emphasizing the gravel being knocked loose as she does so. The frame continues to follow her upwards, but there is now nothing but the clouds before and above them. The film continues with this shot, however, because all throughout the preceding ascent, Bruce Broughton’s musical score has likewise been building and building, and it is only as Marahute shoves off from the final, highest, clifftop and soars up into the clouds that the music reaches its triumphal crescendo, and reveals the film’s defining one, two, six note theme.

Cody and Marahute are now up in the clouds, and from here, the film begins working through a succession of beautifully-composed images of sublime Baroque verticality. One has Cody and Marahute cresting upwards through a bank of cloud; one has Marahute ascending in a spiraling pattern up a new cliff face, of white cloud rather than red rock; and another has her – having reached the unthinkable heights atop this cliff of cloud – remarkably doing a barrel roll and tossing Cody up in the air, catching him again in her talons. The film now cuts to an epic extreme-long shot – one framed from an extreme-high angle, situating the spectator so high up in the sky that Marahute is now a barely-visible dot below them, slowly making her way across a vast, featureless, white plateau of cloud. From this, however, the film then cuts to a medium-long shot directly above her, in which the cloud-top plateau now seems to rushing past beneath her at extreme speed. It is in this shot that she reaches and crosses the edge of the cloud plateau, and as this happens, Bruce Broughton’s score again dramatically builds, and again hits its triumphal crescendo as Marahute takes Cody across a new threshold of verticality. Flexing her wings slightly to slow down, the image allows both Cody and the spectator to savour the spectacle of a vast ocean of green spread out far beneath – their being so high up that a dense tropical forest looks like mere moss.

The film having taken spectacular vertical ascent as far as possible, it now has Marahute make an equally spectacular vertiginous descent back earthwards. Cutting to a shot of Cody from

behind – he having been pulled vertically upside-down by Marahute’s inertia, such that only the soles of his shoes, the seat of his shorts, and the back of his head are visible – one again sees the ground approaching him at speed. This time, however, neither he nor the spectator is afraid. At the bottom of their dive is a river, which Marahute pulls up level as she reaches, and begins to skim Cody’s feet along the surface, letting him go to simply surf along on the soles of his shoes through sheer inertia – and causing the film to arrive at a long shot composition of sublime Baroque profusion. One sees Cody surfing along, projecting from the front of Marahute’s massive gold and white form, her wings pumping as she flies mere inches above the river surface; which in turn is lit up with a beautiful pink-purple light; while every part of the frame is filled with white birds flying alongside them; while the trees along the riverbank pass in the very background. Lasting only three seconds, this composition nonetheless leaves an indelible impression, and precedes one final burst of sublime Baroque verticality. The frame cuts to a high-angled overhead shot of Cody surfing unassisted along the river surface – which abruptly vanishes from under him as he leaps off the waterfall it has given way to, Broughton’s score again hitting its crescendo. All the white birds flying alongside him are now likewise out above open air and, spreading his arms wide as he leaps, Cody seems for a second to be gliding through the air exactly like them. As gravity begins to work on him, Marahute enters the frame again, and again catches him on her back. Unlike his earlier fall off the cliff – and fully in the spirit of Baroque narrative’s valorization of commanding action – Cody is now aggressively projecting himself out into the abyss, eager for the liberating vertiginous rush, and fully trusting in Marahute to buoy him up again.

Nothing else in *Rescuers Down Under* – in which Cody is, in turn, himself kidnapped by the evil poacher, and used to lure out Marahute to be recaptured, leaving them both in need of rescuing by a trio of mice – comes remotely close to matching the Baroque sublimity of this early spectacle sequence. It is likely in large part due to this that the film ultimately proved a serious disappointment at the box office, making it the oft-unmentioned black sheep film of the Disney Renaissance. This pacing issue, however, would be far better handled in Disney’s next film, *Beauty and the Beast* – a film still widely revered as one of the studio’s best ever, and one far too richly multifaceted to do justice to in full here. While its Baroque visual spectacle cannot possibly be distilled from a single sequence, *Beauty and the Beast* is narratively and thematically significant as the first film of the Disney Renaissance to convincingly overcome the pseudo-

Christianizing tendency which can bedevil Baroque narratives. As we have seen with modern-day spectacles such as *Real Steel* and *Elysium*, the visual grandeur which the cinematic Baroque inherits from its seventeenth-century forbear – grandeur intended to instill a sense of awe before the imaginative power to conceive of such images, and the financial and institutional power to bring them to the screen – can be disastrously sabotaged by a narrative which privileges that side of Christianity which champions the meek, and holds that all valuation of worldly might is wicked. It is this pseudo-Christian aspect which Disney films have often channeled in their narratives, in flagrant contradiction of the Baroque visual aesthetics in which these narratives are couched. One saw this throughout *Little Mermaid*, with Ariel’s character so often plaintively passive before fate – the film not daring to award her more independent agency for fear of violating this pseudo-Christian mindset. And after its amazing Marahute sequence, *Rescuers Down Under* would likewise largely regress into this register. With *Beauty and the Beast*, however, the Disney Baroque aesthetic would at last begin to evolve beyond this. A two-and-a-quarter-minute segment in the second act demonstrates this vividly. Belle having fled the castle – in the dead of night during a blizzard – following the Beast’s latest fury of temper, she and her horse Philippe lose their way in the snow-filled woods, and are soon waylaid and attacked by a pack of wolves. A full sixty seconds of rapidly-edited spectacle is devoted to the horror of Belle and Philippe futilely attempting to flee – even fording a frozen river when the ice collapses under them – but finally finding themselves outflanked, surrounded and trapped. The wolves, in turn, are not rendered as the broadly caricatured slaving monsters of the “Peter and the Wolf” segment of Disney’s *Make Mine Music* (various, 1946) – or a terribly cartoon-ified great white shark seen in one of *Little Mermaid*’s earliest sequences – but as realistic, and thus more genuinely intimidating, charismatic megafauna. Belle bravely attempts to stave them off with a big stick, but it is visibly hopeless. As the pack closes in, one seems poised to witness the same brutally unforgiving drama of Nature at work as in *Fantasia*’s “Rite of Spring” sequence – what Camille Paglia referred to as “a Sadean and Darwinian vortex where the weak are devoured by the strong” (Paglia 1990, 435).

That Belle and Philippe are rescued instead of being torn apart and devoured is not surprising. What is remarkable, however, are the terms of their rescue. The wolves do not repent before Belle’s innocence and beauty, and become her obligingly obedient hounds; nor does a fairy godmother appear, pull out her wand, and put things to right by magic; nor does some

serendipitous accident provide Belle and Philippe with a miraculous clean, bloodless getaway – all narrative devices familiar from the Disney tradition. Instead, the Beast abruptly appears and lunges into the fray, overpowering the wolves through sheer primal, chthonian force and ferocity. He is introduced grabbing, in mid-air by its scruff, the wolf which initially leaps at Belle, roaring full into its face with his fangs on full display, and then flinging it bodily away as he positions himself on all fours over Belle’s supine form. The pack momentarily retreats, then lunges upon him as one, inflicting bite after bite on Beast’s massive form, and eliciting furious roars of combined anger and pain from him. Pivoting about on all fours, and swiping about furiously with his paw, however, he manages to shake the wolves’ jaws loose, and put the pack to flight. The primal spectacle of it all – again, rendered in scrupulously hyperreal animation – is remarkably un-cartoonish. In its own way, it even exceeds *Fantasia*’s “Rite of Spring” sequence in its depiction of the chthonian. The former at least contained the implicit pseudo-Christian meaning that primal, carnivorous, ferocity was still sinful, even in triumph. *Beauty and the Beast*’s Baroque vision, however, ennobles it. The only recourse in the face of aggression from charismatic megafauna, the film shows, is to answer it with the aggression of charismatic mega-hyper-super-ultra-fauna – a theme wholly inimical to the pseudo-Christian worldview.

The film’s climactic battle sequence carries on from this powerfully, with the additional refinement that the opposing charismatic megafauna is now human, in the form of the muscle-bound brute Gaston. The initial fracas – between the posse-cum-lynch-mob which Gaston has put together to storm the Beast’s castle, and the castle’s furniture-and-accessory-shaped servants and staff – is a wanton bit of caricature and cartooning. It, however, merely leavens, presumably for very young children’s sake, the frankly startling horror and intensity of the hyperreal simulacrum spectacle that follows, when Gaston comes upon the Beast in his chamber. The spectator notes that he is now carrying a bow and arrow rather than the blunderbuss he has sported throughout the film hitherto, presumably so that his killing the Beast with it will have a more sensate, personal imprimatur – again, a thematic sophistication about carnage not usually associated with the Disney brand. Beast initially suffers himself to be shot thus, knocked through a glass window, and kicked off a castle balcony, not out of any Christianized morality, but simply out of morbid languor. Believing himself to have surrendered Belle and lost his love, it no longer matters what happens to him. Hearing Belle’s voice ring out again, however, his ferocity returns to him, such that in short order he has not merely physically subdued Gaston, but overawed him through sheer

force of aggressive charisma. Some unfortunate concluding equivocation here does not obviate *Beauty and the Beast's* Baroque achievement – using the simulacra capacities of cel animation to venture into realms of chthonian drama that could, in 1991, never be explored in live-action. The film deserves comparison, on equal aesthetic footing, with Jean Cocteau's 1946 version of the story – if only because they belong to two different aesthetic registers. Despite being filmed in live action, Cocteau's film is actually the more artificial of the two – self-evidently taking place in a lyrically and ethereally stylized fairy-tale world with little in common with the real one – while Disney's version, despite being realized with cel animation, is a far more physical and sensate experience, grounded in a much realer world of pain, blood, testosterone, and physicality. That such an observation is not more commonsensical at first glance simply testifies, again, to the deep-seated reification of ideas of the “animated cartoon for children.”

Disney's next film after *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, would regress somewhat in its narrative-thematic Baroque aspect – returning to an idiom of magical problem-solving rather than triumphally privileging forceful dramatic action. It would compensate for this, however, with a greater virtuosity about Baroque verticality and sublime worldmaking than any of its predecessors. Unlike the more diffuse *Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin's* Baroque spectacle is wholly crystallized in – but unlike *Rescuers Down Under*, not wholly confined to – a segment running six and three-quarter minutes, as the film's first act gives way to the second. Here, Aladdin and his monkey Abu descend into the Cave of Wonders, encounter the film's mute – but highly expressive – magic carpet, find the magic lamp, and must escape as the Cave collapses upon them in a volcanic chthonian fury. These are the moments in which all the narrative's pseudo-Christian aspects have been put on hold; while on the other hand, the Genie has not yet been unleashed from the lamp to demolish the film's worldmaking endeavour with contemporary pop culture references and impressions. As a result, these six-plus minutes showcase all of the virtues of the Disney Baroque aesthetic, with no contrary vitiating factors.

The sequence begins at the entry-portal of the Cave of Wonders – a spectacle in itself whereby the desert sands come to life and rise up to form the shape of a giant tiger's head. This tiger-head entry-portal is one of *Aladdin's* greatest imaginative feats of the massive sublime, and indeed, as a digital spectacle, possibly the most striking rejoinder to Pierson's technofuturist aesthetic in the entire Disney Renaissance. It was realized with what were then the highest caliber of DVFX, which, in 1992, meant that there was still a slight, unavoidable smoothness and lack of

texturing which rendered the illusion slightly other than, and apart from, the rest of the film's cel-animated diegesis – with its detailed and subtly colour-graded painted environments. Unlike a film such as *Lawnmower Man* the same year, however, there was no singular emphasis placed upon this aesthetic fact for its own sake, after the fashion Pierson valued. Rather, *Aladdin* determinedly situates the massive sand-tiger-head-portal in the same realist-illusionist diegesis anyway, and trusts to the workings of narrative drama to elide any disjunct. As a result, when Aladdin starts to advance down the tiger's maw, there is no (post)modernist distancing in the name of connoisseurship. Rather, the narrative diegesis is wholly unified in generating suspense. One sees, for example, a final dramatic push-in on Aladdin beginning to descend the throat-staircase, in which we see his upper back and head disappear below the tiger head's lower lip and incisors, between its two enormous lower fangs.

A few shots later, the film has brought Aladdin and Abu – and the spectator – into the interior of the Cave of Wonders, which consists of mountainous piles of gold coins, vessels, and ornaments, as well as a massive work of Mesopotamian or Persian statuary appended to a fragment of a giant wall of golden bricks. This last, in turn, dominates the composition in juxtaposition with a giant, free-standing jack arch in the Classical Greco-Roman fashion, arousing a host of implicit meanings that do honour to the film's worldmaking aesthetic. At this point, the film briefly regresses to an idiom of “cartoon” comedy, for the sake of introducing the magic carpet. This accomplished, however, the spectator is then shown the carpet guiding them deeper into the cave, through another giant golden jack arch – this one inlaid with huge Corinthian-style pillars, and seemingly set into the cave wall rather than free-standing. The space within the entrance, however, is invisibly shrouded in pitch black. Following this, there is a brief shot of the carpet leading Aladdin and Abu through a far denser section of cave. The film then cuts to a sublime wide shot – in which Aladdin, Abu, and the magic carpet are dwarfed so totally as to be barely-visible specks at lower frame left – of the expansive interior of a new cavern, which is a huge, circular, subterranean lake, around which craggy rock walls extend sheerly vertically upwards. In the exact centre of the cavern's lake, moreover, there stands a vast high pedestal, seemingly made of a vertical agglomeration of the bulbously-shaped rocks, and from the top of which there extends upwards a sharply-defined beam of white light. There is, moreover, a rough path laid out towards this pedestal, as more of the bulbous rocks protrude, at intervals, out across the water. Again, the film's worldmaking aesthetic works by implicit

meaning. One immediately infers that all this could not possibly be naturally-occurring, but the daunting scale and apparent antiquity of it all baffle any notions of human construction. And as with previous Disney Baroque spectacles, the “camera” is capable of far more movement within this vast environment than the characters are. First, with a cut to an extreme-high-angled long shot, the “camera” has risen omnisciently above the peak of the pedestal, and looks down upon Aladdin finally reaching the circular plateau of the top – the great length of the staircase plunging away behind him in the left of frame, while his form strides into the base of the beam of white light. The frame begins pushing in on this extreme-long shot, then kinetically cuts in to a medium shot of Aladdin’s walk, the frame dollying back before him as he reaches a podium bathed in the white light. Finally, a cut to a low-angled shot of him places the podium squarely in the centre of the foreground – the Genie’s lamp clearly visible for the first time – allowing Aladdin to loom over it, imbuing his action of finally grasping it and picking it up with the maximum of visual drama. All this, paid off by the cut to a close-up of the all-important lamp now being cradled in Aladdin’s hands, represents the Disney hyperrealist tradition at its finest.

Throughout all this, however, the film has been intercutting with the somewhat cartoonish action of Abu becoming mesmerized by a giant, glimmering – indeed, almost glowing – red ruby, held in the hands of a golden statue of a grotesque ape-creature. Upon his hefting it, the unseen presence of the tiger-head entry-portal booms “Infidels! You have touched the forbidden treasure. Now you will never again see the light... of... DAY!!!” upon which portentous declaration, the podium upon which the lamp sat just seconds before explodes into flame. From this point on, the Cave of Wonders becomes a test case in Baroque immolatory aesthetics. A quick shot of Aladdin leaping back from the flames engulfing the podium cuts to an apocalyptic familiar image of the initial grand establishing shot of the cavern. This shot is canted at almost a 45° angle, and shows that the initial cool bluish light of the cavern has now been replaced by a fiery red one, while the previously flat and unrippled lake surface is now being churned as chunks of rock fall from on high. As the pedestal’s staircase smoothens out, Aladdin is left sliding helplessly downwards, toward a roiling lake of terrifyingly realistic, digitally-enabled lava – which just seconds ago was the cavern’s placid lake. The film cuts to Aladdin’s point-of-view as he slips off the bottom of the slope and the surface of the lake of lava, filling the entire frame, plunges ominously closer. At the last possible second, however, *Aladdin* imitates a shot from *Rescuers Down Under*, with the magic carpet zipping into frame like Marahute, and catching

Aladdin in mid-fall. From here, as with the Marahute sequence in *Rescuers Down Under*, *Aladdin* enters a register of pure Baroque verticality. It differs from the former film, however, in that there is less of an emphasis on the sublime, and more of a graphic logic of sheer kinesis. In another POV shot, one sees Aladdin and the carpet's forward-zooming perspective as they thread their way – so fast as to be barely distinct – through a newly-created chasm between the great pedestal and a giant chunk of rock fallen beside it. Having done this, the POV shot seems to continue to play across the cavern walls at speed as they gain altitude, but this in fact masks a cut to a long shot of Aladdin and the carpet's climb upwards cresting, and them beginning to swoop downwards again towards the frame, now to rescue Abu from the encroaching lava. The aggressively suspenseful editing with which this is handled – like Olivia stuck in the clock gear, Cody's initial fall, or the wolves menacing Belle – is, in turn, exactly the same kind seen in a live-action spectacle. *Pace* Michel Gondry, the spectator is being urged to forget the artifice of animation, and relish the sheer narrativized spectacle of what they are seeing – a spectacle which is simply using animation to transcribe an imaginative vision which could never have been realized in live-action.

Following Abu's rescue, the lake of lava surges into a vast digital tsunami, which bears menacingly down upon the heroes. After a pair of initial shots establishing this, the film offers one of its most astonishing Baroque spectacles: a digitally-enabled aerial dolly shot where the "camera" is situated behind Aladdin and the carpet. Over the course of five intense seconds – containing as much kinesis as so many minutes in a different film – we see the carpet zoom forwards across the lake of lava, banking left and right as more chunks of rock fall from above, throwing up more gouts of lava in their path, then climb slightly to clear the crest of the rock platform at the cavern entrance, then begin zooming through the close quarters of a blue-and-purple-lit tunnel. The film here cuts for two seconds to a reverse-angle shot, emphasizing that the surging wave of lava is still following them through these much closer quarters. Following this, it cuts back to the previous "camera" position of breakneck aerial dolly behind the carpet – a position it maintains for a further four seconds, as the digitally-rendered tunnel hyperkinetically unfolds before us in three dimensions, the carpet following it left, right, up and down. All this is before plunging vertiginously downward into a hidden trough, which takes them down to the opposite side of the Corinthian-pillared jack arch from earlier and, through it, into the gold chamber again, this time seen at intense speed rather than the sedate pace of its introduction. The

“camera” conveys all this digital virtuosity in an elaborate series of 360° barrel roll movements, which show an intensity of Baroque verticality which was nowhere to be seen in the cinematography of any live-action film of the time, and still retains the power to astonish today, for any spectator able to see past the reified status of “animated cartoon.”

With a cut to a shot of a raging river of lava bursting through the arch and into the gold chamber – directly on the carpet’s tail again – the Cave of Wonders sequence enters its end-game. One sees a grand wide shot of the Aladdin steering the carpet through the upper atmosphere of the gold chamber, great pillars of flame and fountains of lava now surging up in their path. The final key development of the sequence is a cut to a lateral shot of the carpet speeding through the air, before a falling boulder finally catches it. Their mode of conveyance knocked out from beneath him, Aladdin and Abu – like Cody two films ago – continue flying through the air through sheer inertia, and crash violently into the short rock face directly beneath the entryway where Jafar is waiting. Knocked nearly senseless by the impact, Aladdin tumbles down the face, and grasping at the very bottom, dangles abjectly above the abyss. Meanwhile, the film shows the carpet being ignominiously borne all way down to the rocky ground by the boulder.

The sheer sustainedness and complexity of the flight in this sequence confirms Kristen Whissel’s assertion, in her 2006 essay, that “verticality is no longer confined to hair-raising stunts and dramatic stunts,” but that, rather, it has “become a cinematic mode that structures and coordinates setting, action, dialogue, and characterization along radical lines of ascent and descent” (Whissel 2006, 25-26). *Aladdin*’s Cave of Wonders sequence – following the climactic zeppelin/Big Ben sequence in *Great Mouse Detective*, the aquatic zero gravity of *Little Mermaid*, Marahute in *Rescuers Down Under*, and any amount of *Beauty and the Beast*’s cinematography – demonstrates how Disney’s animated features were a decade in advance of the rest of Hollywood in this regard. *Aladdin* was not a unique spectacular achievement, but merely a superior iteration of a Baroque tradition of cel animation that was becoming routinized. And after 1993 saw this tradition lying fallow for the first time in five years – the Disney studio empire confining itself to live-action spectacles, distributing the Tim Burton-produced cult classic *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Henry Selick), and re-releasing *Snow White* – the Disney Baroque aesthetic would reach its final, and most sublime, culmination in 1994, with Disney’s Baroque masterpiece, *The Lion King*.

Even more than *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King* is a film whose richness would require a whole dissertation unto itself to do justice to do. For my purposes here, it will suffice to point out that while *Beauty and the Beast* was notable for largely overcoming the pseudo-Christian problematic in Baroque narrative, *The Lion King* would banish it totally, making charismatic megafauna power and ferocity into its central organizing principle. The film's leonine cast vividly embody the noble "king of beasts" archetype that goes all the way back to Ancient Mesopotamian civilization; and the film's dramatic climax is given over to a dead-serious battle sequence of an utterly operatic grandeur. Likewise, to an even greater degree than *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King* would do all this in a visual idiom of simulacrum – using hyperreal animation to create a real, functioning, sensate story-world, with an absolute minimum of anthropomorphism in its characters and cartoonish self-undermining in its diegesis. These two distinctions come into harmony in a moment at the film's 54-minute mark, where the adult Nala becomes the only heroine in the Disney canon who is introduced trying to kill and eat the film's comic sidekick. Indeed, this scene stands as a key to great deal of the film's genius. When the spectator is given their first look at Nala positioning herself in the grass to make her lunge at Pumbaa, there is no concession whatsoever to ideals of "the cartoon." We are shown a slow, deliberate frontal push-in on Nala crouched low to the ground, through strands of tall golden grass that shift and sway in the wind with a real sense of mass. Likewise, as she prepares to spring out of her crouch towards Pumbaa, we see the weight on her shoulder blades shift from one side to the other with a vivid sense of anatomical realism, as she readies the muscles of her forelegs for her imminent burst of speed. Finally lunging, she does so with a roar and a baring of her fangs that is frighteningly vivid in its hyperrealism. As the chase begins, one sees it play out with a realistic sense of weight, mass, speed, and gait that makes one reflect again that the "animated documentary" is by no means as oxymoronic a notion as it might seem. Likewise, when Simba finally surges in at the last minute to save Pumbaa, he and Nala – not yet recognizing each other as adults – fight tooth and claw in another scene of animated leonine behaviour that bears the least possible taint of anthropomorphism. One readily comprehends that the Disney animators did extensive studies of real lions at close quarters for the film, and the results – like so much of their hyperrealist animation over the years – show a profound aesthetic continuity with the Baroque's repurposing of Renaissance anatomical studies to create grand emotive spectacles.

In these displays of leonine ferocity, furthermore, one sees the sublime aspect which so many “cartoons” excise from their aesthetic, but which the films of the Disney Renaissance consistently strove to do honour to. This is the sublime in the specific sense articulated by Edmund Burke, which does not simply mean beautiful to the point of being spiritually resonant. Rather, it is inextricable from the threat of immanent pain and torment – the sense that, as indubitably impressive as an imaginative vision may be, it would, if realized at close quarters, do you real bodily harm. The sense of having witnessed something great but terrible, Burke declared:

...produces a sort of swelling and triumph that is extremely grateful to the human mind; and this swelling is never more perceived, nor operates with more force, than when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects, the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates. (Burke 1998, 96)

Much as one loves them as characters, in short, if one were to interpose oneself between Nala and Pumbaa, or Simba and Nala, in the sequence mentioned above, one would be gruesomely ripped to shreds. The same goes for many other scenes in the film where fangs are roaringly bared. The cast of *The Lion King* is, essentially, the wolves from *Beauty & the Beast* having been promoted to the leads. The film’s immense commercial success, however, suggests that many spectators loved its characters because of this fact, not in spite of it. And this, in turn, prompts one again to reflect upon the degree of ideological reification inherent in the notion of the “animated film for children.” Whereas many animated features before and since *The Lion King* would present their spectators with milksoppish, ineffectual, and/or overly ingenuous characters – and a cinematic world designed to flatter and reassure them in, rather than brutally disabuse them of, these traits – *The Lion King* embraced a diametrically-opposed aesthetic: one of the sublime, in the Burke-ian sense. That such great visual and thematic richness – to which so many responded so passionately – could result reveals a great deal about what the animated feature’s ultimate aesthetic capacities, as opposed to its conventionally ideologically-approved ones, might be.

To a greater degree than any of its predecessors, furthermore, *The Lion King* also prompts one to meditate upon the sublimity of Baroque aesthetics in their worldmaking aspect – how they create a suitably grand canvas for sublime drama to play out upon. As we have seen, *Aladdin*’s Cave of Wonders was an excellent example of this. *The Lion King*, however, adopts a much broader imaginative scope. The exact geographical expanse of the film’s “Pridelands” setting is

never made clear, nor is the film's supposed temporal period, because human beings have been totally censored out of the film's world and cosmology, so that no "human hunters" in the *Bambi* mould may intrude upon the film's idealized vision of Nature in harmony. This is one of the film's Baroque "big lies" in the mould posited by Paglia: the tendency to make grand and audacious adjustments to reality in the name of art rather than small and tentative ones – imagining the world as it ought to be, rather than as it is. It is the same spirit one saw in Pozzo's *Glory of Saint Ignatius Loyola* ceiling, with its vision of the entire human world united under the Christian faith. *The Lion King* has simply laid claim to this same imaginative freedom, and repurposed it for the liberal/secular purpose of fashioning a world where lions, and other African wildlife, are not endangered species threatened by poachers and big game hunters, but rather ubiquitously rule an Edenic world free of such scourges. The film's opening "Circle of Life" sequence, for instance, evokes all of Africa's natural lushness and beauty, but uses the freedom of animation to scale them up to even greater Baroque proportions, creating an aestheticized ur-Africa. The sequence's images include a vast waterfall which evokes Victoria Falls, but far higher, and with a volume more reminiscent of Niagara's Horseshoe Falls; a snow-topped mountain that evokes Kilimanjaro, with gazelles bounding through the morning mist surrounding its base; and an aerial view of a great river, flocks of birds flying high above it, which evokes stretches of the Congo River in how a multitude of small islands and islets dot the course of its flow. All this is inexpressibly beautiful, but it also speaks to the sublime in the Burke-ian sense, insofar as it is implicitly inhospitable *terra incognita* – human beings are not welcome there, and would represent a profanation if they were to be sutured into the film's story-world. Some cultural critics, predictably, decried the film's imaginative worldmaking project as implicitly racist. These criticisms ranged from more moderate assertions – such as Robert Gooding-Williams's suggestion that the film was a grand metaphor for the ghettoization of American inner cities – to extremely broad, hyperbolic ones – such as Matt Roth's *Jump Cut* article "A Short History of Disney Fascism," whose title really says it all. In doing so, however, they again demonstrated the indifference to the workings of art and imagination that Pollitt observed. Depressing documentaries about Africa which remind us that lions and other charismatic megafauna are threatened by hunting and habitat loss have long been ubiquitous. *The Lion King*, instead, offered a compensatory Baroque big lie envisioning the very opposite.

One sees this same imaginative audacity in the scene, at the end of the film's second act, where Mufasa's spirit appears in the night sky above Simba, in an effusion of white cloud and golden light – a spectacle vividly reminiscent of the seventeenth-century Baroque's frequent representations of the sky opening above the saints, and the divine manifesting itself in a direct way, rather than through the abstractions of faith. Spectacles such as these, in turn, bespeak a narrative rooted in a Western cultural tradition of monarchy which is far older – and far more imaginatively deep-seated – than most late-twentieth-century cultural critics are willing or able to think in terms of. Although the affinities with *Hamlet* in particular, which have often been imputed to it, are largely spurious, *The Lion King's* Shakespearean overtones – in the *Macbeth/Richard III/Henriad* mould – are nonetheless profound. The image, in the opening “Circle of Life” sequence, of the airborne “camera” dollying in on Mufasa – standing as a unitary figure atop the promontory of Pride Rock, exuding strength and nobility – resonates profoundly with the Baroque tradition of the absolute-monarchical sublime. Likewise, the film climaxes with Simba assuming his kingship and birthright in a scene of immense grandeur and graphic logic, with the triumphal musical score measuring every step he takes up the promontory of Pride Rock – to stand where Mufasa did in the opening sequence, as the same unitary figure – before letting loose an earth-shaking roar, symbolizing his conquering right of claim. The sense of primitively powerful pageantry to the whole business is striking, and signifies the furthest possible remove from a pseudo-Christian worldview based on therapeutic-ness and self-esteem issues. Moralistic cultural critics, however, desperately resist seeing all this, preferring instead simply to speak in myopic presentist generalities about “the celebration of antidemocratic social relations” – as though the utopian aesthetic raptures inspired by such spectacles can ever, or should ever, be censored out of the human imagination (Giroux 1999, 107). Reading work such as this, one yearns for the self-consciousness of Stendhal who, in *The Red and the Black* (1830) – describing a royal reception in a church – wrote that “there was a Te Deum, clouds of incense, infinite volleys of musketry and artillery; the peasants were delirious with joy and piety. One such day undoes the work of a hundred issues of Jacobin newspapers,” and continues that “the spectacle deprived our hero of what remained of his reason. At that moment he would have fought for the Inquisition, and with full conviction” (Stendhal 2008, 91-92). Stendhal was here simply ruefully acknowledging a fact of life, at a time when such Old European royal pageantry was still a living,

politicized reality rather than a mere picturesque imaginative idiom. In our present day, by contrast, the grandiosity of a moment such as this is more its own legitimation.

Like Decadent art, Disney-style animation's Baroque emphasis on the royalist grandeur of ritualized pageantry and ceremony – of evoking a tradition which relied upon a staged sublime to overawe the spectating masses into acquiescence – may be fundamentally reactionary in a philosophical sense. But also like Decadent art, in the pragmatic terms of our current social and cultural moment, it has the irreplaceable redeeming quality of offering a de-reifying function – of evoking a transcendent aesthetics of a world beyond the unsatisfactory and frustratingly self-referential one of suburban consumer capitalism. In his newly-added conclusion to the 2002 second edition of *Only Entertainment*, Richard Dyer mused that entertainment “based on a dynamic of separation and escape” might be going into eclipse as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, as a number of trends seemed to suggest “people increasingly want[ing] to take pleasure in people like themselves, realities like their own” (Dyer 2002b, 175-177). In justifying this assertion, Dyer points to movie stars having grown progressively less glamorous over the generations – “Swanson and Dietrich become the Spice Girls via Brigitte Bardot, Valentino becomes Gable becomes Kevin Costner and Tom Hanks”; to the consistent popularity of soap operas “where it is precisely a sense of ordinary, everyday life in its endless ongoingness that is constructed, albeit with various degrees of fantastification;” to the surging popularity of reality TV shows on the order of *Big Brother*, *Popstars*, and *Survivor*; and to the less-widely appreciated, but perhaps even more striking, popularity of online amateur porn, which speaks to the apparent wish not “to see honed bodies in perfectly oiled couplings but lumpy, scrawny, pimply ordinary bodies doing ordinary things to each other” (Dyer 2002b, 177-78). Where once entertainment “classically dealt in glamour, utopia, the exotic, the extraordinary, the exceptional, enjoyment through imagining other worlds or ways of being,” Dyer muses, all the above may bespeak a worrying shutdown of the popular imagination which would serve “merely [to] confirm the comfortable overclass of Western society in the rightness of its life while extinguishing even the tawdriest vision of happiness for the rest of the world” (Dyer 2002b, 179). Against this grim prospect, however, Dyer reminds us that “the waning of entertainment is uneven,” and affirms that blockbuster films on the order of *The Matrix* and *Gladiator* continue “to imagine other worlds” with transcendent spectacular appeal (Dyer 2002b, 179). It is in light of a schema such as this that a film like *The Lion King* can be appreciated as a striking example

of keeping the utopian faith. To people inhabiting the most de-aestheticized spaces of modern consumer capitalism – whose daily existence may consist of little beyond the suburban or exurban sprawl of big-box-store strip malls with kilometer-wide parking lots, situated on a grid of vast, pedestrian-unfriendly intersections – the Baroque spectacles of films such as *The Lion King* can offer an invaluable utopian window onto a grander, richer imaginative world.

*The Lion King* is usually understood as the last film of the Disney Renaissance, because it represented the peak of the steadily-increasing critical and commercial worldwide acclaim that the output of the revived Disney studio would enjoy. Furthermore, with two decades retrospect, one can appreciate that its Baroque grandeur was such that no subsequent film could seem to match it. It would be steadily downhill again for Disney from here on. There is another reason, however – having more to do with Hollywood backstage drama – that *The Lion King* stands as a finale for the Disney Renaissance. It was in the heady months after its release, with the box office receipts pouring in, that – having ascended to the office of Disney CEO after Frank Wells's death – Eisner fired Katzenberg. Following this, the Disney studio would continue to release animated features – including *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Gary Trousdale & Kirk Wise, 1996), *Hercules* (Ron Musker & Jon Clements, 1997), *Mulan* (Tony Bancroft & Barry Cook, 1998), and *Tarzan* (Chris Buck & Kevin Lima, 1999), to name only the first four – on an annual basis. The fact, however, that these films were more uneven, and – despite being more technologically sophisticated – often seemed to possess no more, or even less, of the Baroque grandeur of their predecessors under the Katzenberg regime, testifies to the degree of rupture which took place with his firing from Disney. This, however, did not happen until the studio's next film made under Katzenberg's auspices – 1995's *Pocahontas* (Mike Gabriel & Eric Goldberg, 1995) – was already complete and awaiting release. The film thus provides a kind of postscript and coda for Disney's Baroque period, as defined by this dissertation.

The story of *Pocahontas*, situated in real American history – and a crucially symbolic, foundational moment in that history, no less – fundamentally vitiated the Baroque aesthetic that Disney, under Katzenberg, had spent the past nine years and seven films formulating. The film's crippling flaw as an imaginative spectacle in the Baroque vein was its debilitating over-written-ness. Much of *The Lion King*'s greatness as a Baroque spectacle lay in its suppression of dialogue, and simple use of images set to music to tell its story through pure graphic logic. The first lines of dialogue, for instance, did not occur until nearly five minutes into the film – after the

massive sublime imagery of the “Circle of Life” sequence had established the story-world – and its use of graphic logic would continue throughout the rest of its running time. *Pocahontas*, however, was an acutely different case, consistently lapsing into dialogue dealing with dichotomies of “civilized” versus “savage.” These moments, in turn, betrayed the film’s exasperating ideological indecisiveness. On the one hand, *Pocahontas* was vaguely liberal-revisionist towards Manifest Destiny ideology – sentimentalizing the Algonquin people, and characterizing Governor Radcliffe as a contemptible fop – but on the other hand, it dared not go too far with this and say anything radical, and so nonetheless ended up working in some “Indian savage” rhetoric and stereotypes to arrive at a fatuous “split-the-difference/fault-on-both-sides” dramaturgy. Whereas *The Lion King* and its predecessors would generally allow the grandeur of sublime images to speak for themselves, *Pocahontas* can rarely present anything visually without having its significance tortuously contextualized and explained – and this, moreover, in dialogue or song that is consistently laden with crude plays upon racial and cultural sensitivities. All this serves to drag the film out of the realm of sublime Baroque spectacle, and re-situate it squarely in the logocentric realm of ideology, which so many cultural critics were so eager to reduce Disney to in the first place.

The film’s most notable exception to all this, moreover, comes by virtue of being situated in a wholly different mode of spectacle. A three-minute sequence, beginning at the 28-minute mark of the 81-minute film, is devoted largely to showcasing John Smith and Pocahontas gazing at each other – him abjectly at the base of a waterfall, Pocahontas standing on a rock in mid-river, her singular form suffused by light mist from the waterfall, and her hair billowing in the wind. The sequence is a fascinating game of dual voyeurism which recalls the kind of cinematic spectacle that animated so much of Screen theory in the Laura Mulvey line – that of a cinema organized by the spectacle of the female form. *Pocahontas* does not stint in creating vast, panoramic vistas of the American wilderness – akin to those of Michael Mann’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1992), but liberated by animation – but, exactly like H. Rider Haggard’s novel *She* (1886-1887) over a century before, the film does not couch its real imaginative spectacle in terms of huge inanimate environments which dwarf the human scale. Rather, as with Haggard’s *She*, the film locates its most vivid sublimity in the spectacle of the sexualized form of the beautiful, mysterious woman whom the male explorer finds in this daunting new world. And in this, it is fundamentally different from its predecessors. Basil, Olivia, and Rattigan inside Big Ben; Ariel

under the sea; Marahute and Cody up in the sky; Belle and the Beast in their grand castle surrounded by imposing forest; Aladdin, Abu and the carpet in the Cave of Wonders; and Simba and Mufasa regally standing aloft Pride Rock: all of these derived their Baroque sublimity from the characters being situated in an environment of which they were not wholly the master – its scale and grandeur being such as to dwarf them in spite of their bold and commanding actions. *Pocahontas*, however, is more rooted in the scale of the gendered human form. Indeed, it was the film that tested the limits of how far themes of human sexuality could be taken within the governing conventions of the Disney Renaissance. Apparently an especially sensual scene was animated which featured Pocahontas and a shirtless Smith kissing passionately, but this was then cut for fears of inappropriateness (Ward 2002, 46). The show-stopping “Paint with All the Colours of the Wind” song sequence likewise contains the image of Pocahontas and Smith tumbling to the ground together in a strikingly sexualized position, but the film does not dare make a sustained thematic element out of this. *Pocahontas* is, if anything, even more reticent about its violence than its sex. In spite of the film’s tediously hysterical dialogue about caricatured savagery – and even though such an atmospherics would seem indispensable to such a film’s working – there is scarcely ever much sense in that anyone is in real imminent danger of being shot and killed with arrows or musket balls, gruesomely skewered with spears or swords, or hacked or maimed with clubs, knives, daggers, tomahawks, etc. of any kind.

In this, one sees a Baroque cinematic aesthetic that is organically approaching its Late Decadent phase, but is being held back by convention. Decadence, Camille Paglia put it, is “a complex historical mode, a thrilling, sensationalistic late phase of culture dominated by themes of sex and violence” (Paglia 1994, 343). A film that revisited the story of Pocahontas, over three and a half centuries later, fully in an idiom of myth and legend, and that did so, moreover, armed with the full graphic emancipation of digitally-augmented cel animation, would benefit enormously from being imbued with such a Decadent sensibility. This, however, was not to be that film. A film that would treat the story of Pocahontas in more scrupulously historical terms – and that would do so with a wistful and ethereal tone that was neither Baroque nor Decadent – would be seen ten years later, with Terence Malick’s fascinating and inimitable *The New World* (2005). Disney’s *Pocahontas*, in contrast, represents a lost opportunity both for the studio’s previous Baroque aesthetics, and a potential future Decadent aesthetics – embracing the “big lies” aspect of neither. It showed, with stark clarity, that the Disney Baroque had reached a point

where a greater psychosexual salaciousness and moral perversity was necessary for its continued aesthetic development, but that this was exactly what Katzenberg's secure position at Disney made him unwilling to risk. His firing – and consequent determination to beat Disney at its own game from DreamWorks – can thus, in retrospect, be seen as a great boon to cinematic art, insofar as it provided a stimulus to devote himself, with a new animation division, to more ambitious use of the form. From the very first, in brainstorming with Spielberg and Geffen, he would speak of “hoping to expand the breadth of animation and use the genre [sic] to make films about bigger, grander themes” – the potential, for instance, to use the form's greater graphic freedom to revisit and improve on the spectacles of such modern classics as the *Indiana Jones* trilogy, the *Terminator* diptych, or *Lawrence of Arabia* (LaPorte 2010, 55). Discussing *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, Thomas Lamarre implicitly touched on this spirit when he invoked Lev Manovich's suggestion that cel animation and DVFX – having become the new dominant norm of cinema – stood poised to “reanimate” it in new directions; an idea however, that left him unsure whether this “reanimation” suggested:

...a situation in which live action cinema is treated as a stable, immutable world with a defined origin and end, which world new media must replicate or simulate in order to come alive. In effect, cinema must be pronounced dead for new media to come alive. (Lamarre 2006, 135)

This brought Lamarre to what he called a “basic problem”: “How can the replication or simulation of something dead result in life? To become animated (or reanimated), cinema must be seen as dead or at least completely motionless” (Lamarre 2006, 135). In the event, however, the four cel-animated films which DreamWorks would release between 1998 and 2003 proved Lamarre's necrophilia analogy to be strikingly apposite. This was because these four films – *The Prince of Egypt*, *The Road to El Dorado*, *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, and *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* – rather than “reanimating” modern genre classics such as *Indiana Jones* and *Terminator*, would instead draw upon traditions in Hollywood genre filmmaking which were either largely moribund, or outright extinct, by the turn of the century. DreamWorks would take up, sequentially, the Biblical epic, the Bob Hope/Bing Crosby *Road to...* comedies, the classic Western, and the Ray Harryhausen *Sinbad* spectacles, and use cutting-edge new cel-computer hybrid animation to reanimate these genres from their celluloid graves. Beyond Lamarre's suggestions about necrophilia, Elsaesser and Hagener's suggestion about digitally-animated films such as *Toy Story* – that their “sheriffs and space warriors” could symbolize a sort of salvage

anthropology of Hollywood's genre tradition, "mak[ing] sure that no one and nothing is left behind in the radical move that the cinema undergoes" from the indexical-photographic to the digitally-liberated simulacrum – seems vividly literalized by these four films (Elsaesser & Hagner 2010, 172). They all represent essentially formal exercises – deeply concerned with the visual iconographies of spectacle of their source genre traditions, but perversely indifferent to their original ideological underpinnings. Furthermore, in their devotion to schemas of visual iconography, they conform to the Decadent logic of the "late style." Decadence is "the Mannerist late phase of Romantic style" Camille Paglia declares, insofar as "Romantic imagination broke through all limits" but, "burdened by freedom," Decadence "invents harsh new limits, psychosexual and artistic. It is a process of objectification and fixation, disciplining and intensifying the rogue Western eye" (Paglia 1990, 389). The eye and imagination are deliberately hit with a surfeit of imagistic content and implication, such that imaginative liberation can never be a serene or ecstatic experience, but always a demanding and exacting game of ocular mastery. The four DreamWorks films demonstrate, a century later, the same textual dynamics which Paglia also attributed to the Decadent late-phase Henry James. Of his final novels, she declares:

Reading late James is like swimming upstream. The prose resists us with its weight and opacity, its 'dizzy, smothering welter' (a phrase from *The Golden Bowl*). In his Romantic withdrawal from masculinity, James wraps each act or remark in an immobilizing sheath of excess words. He sadistically imposes a sense of frustration and entrapment on the reader. The prose is the medium but not the message. (Paglia 1990, 616-17)

In large part, these observations are equally applicable to DreamWorks's four cel animation films between '98 and '03. The four films, in their visual style and *mise-en-scene*, are likewise "encumbered with Alexandrian ornamentation," "a Byzantine fabric of shuddering grandeur," under whose "opulent burden" the viewer may feel at a loss (Paglia 1990, 607/621). The sheer density of much of their *mise-en-scene* is such that even the sharpest-eyed spectator can never appreciate it fully on a single viewing, or without the pause and slow-motion functions on their DVD remote. Visual elements hold the screen either so briefly, or in such profusion, that the viewer can only acknowledge the limits of their own spectatorial eye, keeping their Decadent gaze in play nonetheless; or disengage completely and dismiss the film. The latter impulse would involve insisting – after the fashion of some (post)modern-minded critics and theorists – that because the normative spectatorial eye is outclassed, it can only mean that there's really nothing to see. The notion of cinema, as an art, making hostile claims on its spectator just runs afoul of

too much deep-seated critical and theoretical ideology which sees Hollywood films simply as undemanding commercial product, or unctuous vehicles of reactionary ideology, rather than complex works of art with deep genealogy in the Western canon.

Preconceptions such as these, however, are sharply tested by DreamWorks's four cel-animated films. Furthermore, in true Decadent fashion, there is a considerably greater moral perversity to the narratives of these four films than those which Katzenberg superintended at Disney – a tendency to imagine real damage, danger, and pain in a way that the Baroque spectacles of the Disney Renaissance did not, and which runs wholly contrary to reified notions of what the supposedly family-friendly animated feature does, or should do. The four films conjure story-worlds to daunt and dismay as well as to dazzle and delight – their stimulation of the utopian instinct slightly leavened with ambivalence due to content of the spectacles. These include Old Testament plagues and massacres, Cortes's Conquistadors in full bloodthirsty fury, Native Americans massacred and displaced by the US cavalry, and the persistent risk of death from the caprices of *femme fatale* goddesses. The films are beautifully aestheticized to the last degree, but the ostentatious innocence and innocuousness that characterized much of the Disney Baroque corpus has been self-consciously banished. In all this, one recalls A.E. Carter's assertion that the French Decadents "produced the literature of disaster – though it had not yet taken place" (Carter 1958, viii). Carter made this assertion in the course of asserting that, whatever sententiousness it contains, the archive of nineteenth-century Decadence is an invaluable literary artefact, insofar as its jaded, morbid, and perverse fantasies offer an imaginative, and pessimistic, counter-narrative to the pervasive nineteenth-century belief in progress through science and technology. From the vantage-point of the violent mid-twentieth century, Carter concluded, one can appreciate that "there is not one horror in Péladan, Rachilde, Mirbeau and the rest which has not become commonplace since they wrote," and that "We no longer need to hunt up atrocities in an obscure Latin chronicler; they are in the newspapers" (Carter 1958, viii). The mechanism by which the Decadents achieved this surprising prescience, Carter suggests, was purely imaginative: "Since they knew nothing of actual disaster, they had to use their imagination: consult Suetonius, consult Lampridius, think themselves back to the court of Heliogabalus or Aracadius" (Carter 1958, viii). This aspect of Decadence stands as a rebuke to the (post)modernist tradition which would wish to deny or denigrate the continuing weight of the Western canon's millenniums-long history of aesthetics, in favour of a spurious aesthetic and

conceptual enlightenment reached with the age of “modernity” and modernism. It also speaks powerfully to the substance of *The Prince of Egypt*, *The Road to El Dorado*, *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, and *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*. After the same fashion that Carter imputes to the French Decadents, these films used the freedoms of digitally-liberated cel animation to create imaginative story-worlds of a detail and complexity rarely seen before in cinema. They did so, moreover, not through parochial and presentist emphasis upon “originality,” in the modernist mould, but by using the imaginative transcribing capabilities of cel animation to take up and revitalize Hollywood genre traditions that had lapsed into obscurity before the advent of digitally-liberated filmmaking.

DreamWorks’s prestige flagship animated feature *The Prince of Egypt* – an epic retelling of the story of the Book of Exodus, after the fashion of Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* – is at once both the most aesthetically ambitious, and the most abjectly flawed, of the four films. It is also, not coincidentally, the one in which their governing Decadent aesthetic has not yet fully cohered. Its aesthetic sophistication was never in doubt. Katzenberg reportedly conceived of the project as a synthesis of the Biblical woodcuts of Gustave Doré, the paintings of Claude Monet, and the cinematography of David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* – a trilogy of influences that speaks profoundly to the level of aesthetic ambition at work on the production (LaPorte 2010, 116). Whatever else *Prince of Egypt* was destined to become, it was never going to be trivial. Indeed, the production was intended as a work of such vision that the usual “stretch and squash” processes of cel animation as a means of imaginative transcribing were felt to be inadequate to its scope, and these were consequently challenged. Don Bluth, for instance, declared in his book *The Art of the Storyboard*, that in the theatre “Snappy timing, broad actions, strong expressive poses, and exaggerated or caricatured facial movements” constituted “the rule to communicate to audiences,” and that, supposedly, in cel animation, “a similar approach was necessary” because:

Using the subtleties of live-action filmmaking with animated characters proved to be ineffectual. The characters appeared lifeless and weightless. Broad, caricatured movement and timing helped sell believability and humor with animated characters. (Bluth 2004, 53)

It is a testament to the radical scale of *Prince of Egypt*’s ambition that it fundamentally rejected this. To Bluth’s assertions, one may contrast Charles Solomon’s declaration that:

The complex story and themes of *The Prince of Egypt* required the characters to act with exceptional depth and subtlety. Animators traditionally rely on expansive gestures and

exaggerated expressions to convey their characters' emotions, but the usual approaches to animated acting didn't fit the biblical subject and emotionally complex situations in *The Prince of Egypt*. (Solomon 1998, 54)

Furthermore, a collectively drafted statement by the production crew declared that:

...the story would not accommodate many of the standard animation devices with which we were familiar. *The Prince of Egypt* would have no talking animals, no comic confidants for the lead characters, and no easy distinction between a good protagonist and an evil antagonist. The very nature of the story of Moses was one of complexity and nuance and called for a treatment and approach quite different from the usual animated film. (Solomon 1998, 8)

Indeed, beyond explicitly vetoing talking animals, Katzenberg emphasized at length the importance of drawing longer faces on the characters, so as to avoid the "cartoon" look of roundness (LaPorte 2010, 116). According to animator Rudolph Guenoden, the film sought to create animated characters "as believable as live-action characters in terms of mannerisms," while animator William Salazar declared that "the directors want[ed] the characters to act in ways I've never seen before in animation. The audience has to understand the characters' feelings and motivation" (Solomon 1998, 54). The ultimate results of all this, moreover, cannot possibly be described as "ineffectual" in the spirit of Bluth's dictum, meaning that *Prince of Egypt* advanced the state of the art for cel animation. And finally – speaking most profoundly to the de-reifying of the animated feature that Katzenberg had begun at Disney, and was now taking to the next level – animator Fabio Lignini declared that "with this film, we didn't think about the usual language of animation; we thought of live action most of the time" (Solomon 1998, 54). Previous generations' criticisms of Disney animation – such as the *Bambi* animator's declaration that they might as well have taken photographs of real deer, or art critic Arthur Knight's assertion that "the studio's undisputed technical proficiency is squandered in a laborious process of recreating through animation what might be done better live in the first place" – were now virtually being embraced as positive ideals by the animators at DreamWorks (Ohmer 1993, 235-36). In the stylistics of its animation, thus, *Prince of Egypt* is an impeccably Decadent film. In finding the homely norms of amusing, caricatured "cartoon" animation inadequate to its imaginative vision, and seeking an even more hyperrealist style than had ever been tried before, in order to transcendently do justice to its vision, it recalls Balzac's 1831 story *The Unknown Masterpiece* – in which the fictional master-painter Frenhofer schools Frans Pourbus the Younger, in sight of the young Nicolas Poussin, in how a human figure should not appear stuck to the background of a

painting, but should seem to on the verge of getting up and walking around; and that furthermore, the viewer should be conscious of the air between themselves and the figure.

It was in this spirit – as well as one of James-ian Decadence – that *Prince of Egypt* broke new ground in hyperrealist simulacra-style animation. All this is evident from the film's first few minutes. An astonishingly visually busy sequence of the Hebrew slaves labouring under the lash to build the pharaonic architectural spectacles of Egypt rapidly gives way to a genocidal cull of the slaves' infant population, which in turn gives way the famous Biblical episode of Moses' journey down the Nile in a basket. In this latter, especially, the spectator's eye is bombarded with different visual elements in each shot, few of which last longer than a second or two. One sees overhead shots of baby Moses's basket drifting down the Nile – the digitally-rendered surface of which catches the light in a dizzying profusion of colours, while monkeys chatter on a branch overhead – before being shown a lateral shot of the basket drifting along while a school of perch jump from the water around it, which draws birds swooping down around it. A cut to a shot under the river's surface, meanwhile, sees the school of fish darting apart as a crocodile emerges from the seaweed beneath to lunge at the basket; but narrowly missing, its chomp precipitates the basket into the midst of a herd of hippopotami who surge up from beneath it. These, in turn, buffet it further into the path of some fishing boats, which briefly haul it up along with their full nets. Coming loose again, however, the basket is buffeted in the slipstreams of multiple boats – briefly seeming in danger of being rammed and destroyed by one of their prows, or crushed in the narrow pass between two of them – before being fortuitously tossed free again, to drift into the grounds of Pharaoh's palace. All this punitively dazzling detail, however, is underlain by one haunting image of Decadent ocularity: an intense close-up of the eyes of Moses's mother, Yocheved, tearfully gazing after the basket – directly into frame – after setting it loose upon the Nile. This shot lasts a remarkable ten seconds; long even by traditional standards of modern Hollywood editing, and downright striking in a sequence in which other shots typically last only one or two seconds each. The intensity of the image's piercing ocularity and lack of caricature – the depth of its evocation of Lorenzo de Medici's famous maxim that “the eyes are windows into the soul” – defies the spectator to dismiss the film as a mere “cartoon.” It emphasizes that these characters have been envisioned, and imaginatively transcribed, with an eye on real soulfulness and subjectivity, not as mere juxtaposed graphic shapes to self-referentially fill the frame, as the modernist mindset would have it.

For all that *Prince of Egypt* admirably puts Balzac-via-Frenhofer's hyperrealist words about painting into practice for cel animation, however, the film is, ultimately a failure as a Decadent text. The reason for this is that – due to its Biblical source material, and its *Ten Commandments* master-text – *Prince of Egypt* puts its archly aesthetically-distilled animation in the service of a frankly anti-aesthetic narrative, humanistically exalting the humble scruffiness of the Hebrews over the hieratic elegance of Egypt. The intensely aestheticized ocularity which one gleans from the iconic close-up of Yocheved's parting gaze is an Egyptian bequest, not a Hebrew one. The latter culture was devoted to the abstracted world above all, and outlawed the visual reverence of graven images – the very value that Egyptian culture was defined by. One thinks wistfully of the main body of Gautier's *Romance of a Mummy*, which likewise deals with Moses's arrival in Egypt, but took Decadent liberties with tone and emphasis that shame *Prince of Egypt* – not situating the reader, at the last, with the Hebrews who have miraculously crossed the parted Red Sea, but with Pharaoh, who:

...standing within his chariot, which had come to the surface, shot, drunk with pride and anger, the last of the arrows of his quiver against the Hebrews, who were now reaching the other shore. Having exhausted his arrows, he took up his javelin, and although already nearly half engulfed, with his arm alone above water, he hurled it, a powerless weapon, against the unknown God whom he still braved from the depths of the abyss. (Gautier 1906b, 293-947)

In all this, there is never the slightest pretence that there is any great moral or aesthetic uplift to be found in the Moses and Exodus story, relative to the hieratic aesthetic splendour of its pharaonic Ancient Egyptian setting. As with his brief and perfunctory introduction of Marc Antony at the conclusion of his 1838 story *One of Cleopatra's Nights*, Gautier simply uses the Biblical trappings as convention – as a token familiar historical/mythological verity with which to ground his meandering meditations upon the aesthetic splendours and Decadent amorality of Ancient Egypt. In its irresistible digitally-liberated animated spectacles, *Prince of Egypt's* first act emphatically makes it available to appreciation in the same spirit. It then, however, makes the crippling error of scrupulously imitating its *Ten Commandments* master-text, and relocating the plot away from the hieratic beauty of Egypt and into the Hebrews' desert encampment. The film never recovers from this misstep, and the only real aesthetic attraction which it retains after this is the four-minute sequence of the Hebrew Exodus itself. This – staged on an epic scale, as the vast human ocean of freed slaves decamp past Egypt's broken and humbled monuments, all set to the operatic song number "When You Believe" – attains a sublime grandeur that can leave no

spectator cold, but it is a sublime grandeur in the Baroque mold rather than the Decadent, and thus has nothing to do with the films' main virtues. Indeed, it serves to help repudiate them.

The moments of greatest emotional truth in *Prince of Egypt* come in a sequence lasting less than two minutes, and depicting Moses (voiced by Val Kilmer) returning to the palace after meeting his birth sister Miriam in the street, and being told of his true Hebrew birth. As he runs, he begins reciting a song-soliloquy in the operatic mode of Ariel's "Part of Your World" number. Its refrain is simply "All I Ever Wanted," and has him, in good Decadent fashion, itemizing and describing the hieratic beauties of Pharaoh's palace. These include "Gleaming in the moonlight/Cool and clean and all I've ever known" as he approaches the palace along a huge avenue of white stone, flanked by two massive sphinxes that dwarf the human scale; and "Sweet perfumes of incense/Graceful rooms of alabaster stone" as he enters its main hall, through which there runs a row of incense burners, flanked on each side by a row of massive limestone columns, again dwarfing the human form. There is also his reference to "With my father, mother, brother/Oh so noble, oh so strong" as he passes before a monumental family portrait executed in stone sculpture. Reaching his room – the design and decoration of which mirrors that of the palace as a whole, simply scaled down to microcosmic human scale – the spectator hears his declaration, picking up and holding aloft a khopesh for emphasis, that "I am a sovereign prince of Egypt/A son of the proud history that's shown/Etched on every wall" as he gazes up on a wall covered with paintings and hieroglyphs detailing Egypt's glories and triumphs. The sequence concludes with Moses collapsing to the floor, leaning back against a pillar base, letting his head fall back to rest, and drifting off to sleep – before which last image, however, an intense degree of emotional anguish plays across his face. He is now prey to the suspicion that all he has ever known, wanted, and loved was not truly his birthright after all. And the hieratic pharaonic beauty of everything we've seen over the past moments is such that the spectator wholly shares his pain.

To whatever degree in spite of themselves, the filmmakers at DreamWorks here leave spectators imploringly wishing that the film would commit the immense Decadent "big lie" of rewriting the Old Testament, in order to have Moses not join his birth people, but remain in his titular role as a prince of Egypt. The tactile nature of the final image – of him simply slumping back against the pillar base, which is ornately carved with hieroglyphics – is especially valuable, insofar as it brings Ancient Egypt to life in a way one rarely ever sees onscreen. The nature of much Egyptian art – with its arch, physically impossible poses and lack of depth or detail – has

often seemed to trickle down into cinematic representations, with characters' every movement, gesture, and utterance seeming highly posed and ritualized. This, in turn, contributes to an atmosphere of extreme Other-ness, which stifles empathy and identification with Ancient Egypt as a culture and people. In films such as *Ten Commandments*, moreover, this was entirely deliberate. Countervailing images, which would allow this ritualized façade to be dropped, and a familiar humanity glimpsed – one for whom the imposing monoliths of Egypt were not alien and evil, but home – are much fewer and farther in between. *Prince of Egypt*, however, offers a resounding example of such. It creates a vision which is far more graceful and resonant in its affect than the thuggish emotional coerciveness of the rest of the film's remaking of *Ten Commandments*. Furthermore, in the vein that Carter described, it represents a masterful feat of imagining oneself back into the Ancient World.

Charles Solomon's book on *Prince of Egypt* emphasizes the sublimated Decadence which is so glaringly obvious to the sympathetic spectator, but constrained by narrative exigencies from flowering fully. He speaks of "the mysterious, cruel nobility of the Egyptians," "the monumental elegance of the Egyptian world," and "the grand scale" of "monuments that have awed visitors for thousands of years" (Solomon 1998, 10/26/46). He includes turns of phrase such as "majestic and aloof, Seti's palace shimmers in the distance," and "the cosmopolitan world of aristocratic Egyptian society" (Solomon 1998, 20/48). All this testifies powerfully to the degree to which, like Gautier's *Romance of a Mummy* 140 years before, the film's aesthetic schema really favours Egypt and its hieratic beauty and glory, but – because of the film's debilitating fealty towards its Old Testament subject matter, and DeMille's *Ten Commandments* as its master-text – it cannot actually embrace this fact in its narrative. This would, however, be corrected in DreamWorks's next film, 2000's *The Road to El Dorado*, insofar as the latter film would be free of these constraints of influence and, more in line with prevailing liberal climate at DreamWorks Studio, could safely demonize philistine monotheism instead of having to exalt it in defiance of aesthetic logic. The film – about the arrival of the Conquistadores in South America – would have been entirely safe in depicting Hernán Cortés and his conquistadores as generically secular imperialist meanies. Instead, however, it contains a telling image of Cortés's monstrously imposing frame standing beneath a crossbeam in his ship's cabin – which, in frame, resembles a cross – and snarling with bloodthirsty genocidal aggression that "my crew was as carefully chosen as the disciples of Christ, and I will not tolerate stowaways," whom he declares will be multiply flogged

and then enslaved on Cuban sugar plantations for the remainder of their short, miserable lives. These early scenes in *Road to El Dorado*, thus, also vividly show Katzenberg and his writers and animators revisiting and demonizing *Pocahontas* – giving this film’s Cortés the Decadent sharpness which the earlier one’s Ratcliffe signally lacked. The way in which *Road to El Dorado* bears an imaginative affinity with *Prince of Egypt*, moreover, is well-encapsulated by Bertrand Russell in his bestselling *History of Western Philosophy* (1945). Here, Russell declared of Ancient Egypt that:

The civilization was in many ways similar to that which the Spaniards found in Mexico and Peru. There was a divine king, with despotic powers... there was a polytheistic religion... and also a priestly aristocracy. The latter was often able to encroach on the royal power if the king was weak or if he was engaged in a difficult war. (Russell 1961, 25-6)

With *Road to El Dorado*, the filmmakers at DreamWorks seemingly embraced this concept, and used it to stage a *mea culpa* for their aesthetic treatment of Ancient Egypt in *Prince of Egypt*. Shifting its setting from Egypt to a fantastical, imagined Pre-Columbian America, it depicts what “the Spaniards found” there in inverse, positive terms. The divine king is now a wise and caring chieftain, the polytheistic religion rendered a harmless irrelevance to the film’s essentially secular worldview, and the priestly aristocracy is depicted as tractable and containable in its efforts to encroach on the royal power. Of course, as a Decadent text, the film still relishes the chance to give some visual evocations of gruesome human sacrifice in the Aztec and Mayan traditions. In situating all these narrative premises, *Road to El Dorado* offers another instance of DreamWorks’ four films’ essential status as formal exercises. It is very knowingly based on the series of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby comedies: *Road to Singapore* (Victor Schertzinger, 1940), *Road to Zanzibar* (Victor Schertzinger, 1941), *Road to Morocco* (David Butler, 1942), *Road to Utopia* (Hal Walker, 1945), *Road to Rio* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1947), *Road to Bali* (Hal Walker, 1952), and *The Road to Hong Kong* (Norman Panama, 1962). Of these, however, the third – *Road to Morocco* – is the best remembered, and its premise and narrative structure is virtually identical to *Road to El Dorado*: a duo of comic antiheroes, through a series of unlikely mischances, find themselves adrift on a raft in the middle of the ocean, only to wash ashore within striking distance of an mystical foreign kingdom, where they find themselves mistaken for the fulfillment of a divine prophecy, and become entangled in jealousies over a beautiful, exotic woman. When the two films are viewed in such juxtaposition, this narrative similarity only serves to emphasize

DreamWorks's overwhelming concern with their films' formal aspect as visual spectacle: their ardent embrace of animation's capacity to show – to imaginatively transcribe with a breadth and detail that would so long elude live-action.

In a 1996 *New Statesman* feature entitled “100 Films that Changed the World,” the *Road to Morocco* and its comedic brethren are defined as:

Wartime films with a strong postwar agenda. Bob and Bing's wisecracks in exotic places prepared the idea of a world wide open to nice Americans with cash. The *Road* series sold the earth as a safe place for golfing Republicans to do business in. (Boyd 1996, 29)

This characterization of these films as fundamentally reactionary in nature finds a vivid echo in *Road to Morocco*'s inherently anti-aesthetic nature – its glib refusal to conjure a sincere story-world. Instead, the film constantly disrupts and undermines its own narrative integrity in order to commentate upon its own presumption in attempting to create a fictitious illusion. At one point mid-way through the film, for instance, Bob Hope's character rapidly re-summarizes the whole plot thus far to Bing Crosby's character. The latter declaring “I know all that,” the former replies, “Yeah, but the people who came in the middle of the picture don't.” During the climactic sequence of comic mayhem, likewise, the film abruptly cuts away to two onlooking camels, who are made to *say* to each other, via composited animated lips, “This is the screwiest picture I was ever in” and “When I see how silly people behave, I'm glad I'm a camel.” If nothing else, this offers a vivid demonstration of Paglia's declaration – in the course of her 1991 critique of Grand Theory – that there is a certain type of intellectually conservative, masculine mindset which “gravitate[s] toward the gameplaying self-reflexive style” of “ironic, late-phase works,” because “there is an alienation from emotion in it, a Nervous Nelly fear of letting go an being ‘exposed’” (Paglia 1992, 231). This catches the tenor of the Bob Hope/Bing Crosby duo very well. *Road to Morocco* never for a second invites or allows its spectator to let go and become “exposed” to any imaginatively sincere Orientalist spectacle. The constant volley of self-cancelling satire does not let up for a moment. Again, therefore, *Road to El Dorado* is remarkable in that it breaks with all this in no uncertain terms. For all that the film contains a definite quotient of humour, it is never humour of a kind that ridicules the very notion of emotionally giving oneself over to a constructed illusionist discourse. The film makes its antiheroes Tulio (voiced by Kevin Kline) and Miguel (voiced by Kenneth Branagh) the butt of any number of jokes, but the film's narrative transitivity remains sacrosanct. Like *Prince of Egypt* before it, the film demonstrates

fidelity to Carter's evocation of the Decadent principle of being entirely serious about imagining oneself into other worlds.

Both *Road to Morocco* and *Road to El Dorado* feature a song sequence dedicated simply to emphasizing the fact that the two heroes have hopped a four-legged mount – a passing desert camel in the former; a deserting Spanish war charger called Altivo in the latter – and are on their way to their titular destination. Both sequences run between two-and-a-half and three minutes, but the quotient of visual spectacle contained in *Road to El Dorado*'s "The Trail We Blaze" number, relative to *Road to Morocco*'s "We're Morocco-bound" number, bespeaks two fundamentally different kinds of cinematic vision. The contrast between the two sequences is impossible to overstate. The "We're Morocco-bound" sequence consists simply of Bob and Bing riding their camel across rolling sand dunes, singing the song as they go. The film leisurely intercuts between long shots in which both men are visibly mounted on their camel in the wider environment, and medium shots in which only the upper bodies of both men are visible. The sequence's visual aesthetic goes no further than this. The "Trail We Blaze" sequence, in contrast, depicts, in music-video-montage fashion, Tulio and Miguel making their way through the dense Amazonian jungle to find the fabled golden city of El Dorado. The sequence repeatedly returns to the theme of Tulio and Miguel's navigational incompetence, but one early moment – where a succession of jump-cuts has them criss-crossing to every different part of a single static shot of a giant tree's root system, looking off in every different direction – is especially telling. It is impossible that this giant tree root system's resemblance to the one in *Apocalypse Now* – on which Willard and Chef loiter before the latter goes off looking for mangoes – can be an accident. This affinity cues one to the scope of the film's imaginative ambition, so very different from the Hope/Crosby comedies. After the Decadent fashion of making intense demands on the spectatorial eye, the film blitzes through its jungle environment – following Tulio and Miguel past a succession of spectacular landmarks marked on their map – at such a pace that the inattentive spectator will be wholly at a loss. The first of these spectacular landmarks is a cavern which opens up to the sky in the shape of a giant falcon, creating a vivid silhouette-image in both the cavern roof above and on the cavern floor below. The second is a jungle lagoon, where a cliff face has been worn into an uncanny resemblance to a human face, and some rivulets flowing out of its "eyes" give it the appearance of crying. And finally, the third is a cave mouth which bears a strong resemblance to a saurian or reptilian snout, like a dragon – an image vividly confirmed a

second later, as a swarm of pink, purple, and red butterflies emerges from the “mouth” of the cave, such that the “dragon” appears to be breathing fire. These are the kind of spectacles one would expect to see in a good adventure film – animation is not used to “cartoon” them, but simply to render them more vividly and picturesquely than live-action sets or unpredictable real locations could. This is an intriguing aesthetic strategy, moreover – one redolent of Decadent perversity – for a film based on a series of satirical, slapstick comedies which were, in essence, live action cartoons.

The film’s Decadent aesthetic becomes even more explicit when Tulio and Miguel actually reach and enter El Dorado. This is because, simply, the titular city/civilization is made into one gigantic Decadent bower, squarely in the tradition of Poe’s *Domain of Arnheim*. The path to the city begins with an opening among the rocks at the base of a waterfall, hidden to any casual eye, and further occluded by the thundering white of the falls’ spray. Entering this, one must then boat down an underground river, through a vast tunnel worn into the rock, and supported by pillars of unguessable age. Finally, at the end of this, one’s boat reaches an extremely narrow – and remarkably vaginal-looking – cleft in the rock hung with vines. Passing through this, one finally enters the grand golden city itself – evidently situated in a vast geological basin, just like the Domain of Arnheim – and the river becomes a canal, the city boulevard-embankments rising on both sides. The film gives the spectator their first look at El Dorado with a cut to an epic wide shot facing down the canal through the city, towards the giant golden pyramid in the centre of both the city and the frame. To centre left and centre right of the frame are two subsidiary golden pyramids, and at the far edges of the frame, one sees the treeline of the jungle surrounding the city. Beneath all this in frame, we see the city’s boulevard-embankments punctuated with flights of stairs that lead directly down into the water. The only exception to the basic symmetry of all this is that sunbeams are coming down from the upper left of frame, giving everything an especially vivid golden glow, although this is offset in the palette by some straight yellow, as well as green and red. This wide, full-frontal establishing shot is held for about four seconds before the film cuts away again, and begins to detail the setting from different angles and closer shots. These run slightly longer than most shots in the preceding “Trail We Blaze” sequence, but given that these images are just as minutely detailed, and even more imaginatively sublime than anything in that sequence, one still feels the film’s Decadent visual aesthetic at work.

Again, in displaying these sublime imaginative worlds, *Road to El Dorado* is wholly bullish in its use of Disney-style hyperrealist, simulacrum cel animation, taking up the innovations in technique that were pioneered for *Prince of Egypt*, and continuing on with them. Indeed, the use of studied, deliberate contrast between hyperrealist animation and more modernist, self-reflexive animation – seen in *Dumbo* in the earliest days of the Disney style – is deployed again, with a sharpness of Decadent perversity never seen before. The juxtaposition of hyperreal “West Coast” style animation with surreal, phantasmagorical “New York” style animation in *Dumbo*, Mark Langer observed, was attributable, in narrative terms, to *Dumbo*’s drunken hallucinations at having accidentally drunk liquor-spiked water, “with predictable results” (Langer 1990, 316). In *Road to El Dorado*, the same device is used, but with the significant difference that Tulio, Miguel, and Altivo are drinking deep of El Dorado’s wine entirely deliberately. A musical number entitled “It’s Tough to Be a God” is animated in a surreal, hallucinatory style similar to that of *Dumbo*’s “Pink Elephants” number – but with the important difference that it begins in a mostly mimetic style, and only grows increasingly non-representational in proportion to Tulio and Miguel’s increasing inebriation. By the end, the sequence has reached a state of phantasmagoria whereby Tulio and Miguel are subjectively seeing the locals dancing on air in front of a multicolored carnival of grotesque monsters and masks, fish and animal puppets, skeleton marionettes, a grotesque bat maquette from which emerge a swarm of real bats; and, furthermore, Altivo is staggering in and out of a pink double exposure of himself. The payoff to all this is that, after the fade-to-black which concludes the sequence, the film’s plot re-starts with an emphatically hyperreal close-up of Tulio and Miguel’s unshaven and dishevelled heads, snoring and snorting in hung-over sleep. The supposed high-minded progressive-ness with which modernist discourses invariably anoint themselves is here resituated as the most elemental and base kind of regression. This kind of self-assertive aesthetic striking back of simulacrum animation – against the pretensions of modernist, anti-mimetic animation – has reached a much harsher pitch than in *Dumbo* fifty-eight years before. The hyperrealist form’s ability to open voyeuristic windows on other, sublime, imaginative story-worlds had been so well-demonstrated by this point in film history that *Road to El Dorado* evidently felt entitled to treat anti-realist forms with greater contempt, while simultaneously contributing one more masterpiece to the former pantheon.

Over the course of the film to come, one sees a number of striking images of everyday life in El Dorado. In the initial entry scene, one sees – via a very long high-angled shot – that the main canal contains catfish the size of the shark from *Jaws*, above which boats float unconcernedly. One later sees a long shot of Miguel, along with two locals, tossing seed down for birds, only to find himself surrounded by a quartet of twelve-foot birds, of the phorusrhacidae type, who lean down and begin pecking seed from his bowl. One also sees that the ferries across a lake consist of standing atop the shells of giant turtles, which sport rhinoceros-style horns and serrated spikes along their tails and necks. In a determined exercise of the worldmaking impulse, however, all these spectacles are presented in framings wide enough to strongly emphasize their spatial situation – making the design and texturing of their surrounding environment and architecture at least as important as the giant creatures themselves, which are, in turn, at least as important as Miguel, Tulio, or Altivo in the composition. In all this, these images profoundly problematize Aylish Wood’s declaration that, in animated features in the classical-realist narrative mould, “the meanings of any given space” are defined by “character actions,” insofar as “their actions draw a viewer’s eye, while all the other space of the screen is used simply as the location in which the movements can occur” (Wood 2007, 15). These “unif[ied] spatial configurations,” Wood suggests, allow – indeed encourage – the spectatorial eye to repose upon “a single point of focus,” making no stringent aesthetic demands upon it (Wood 2007, 15). Wood cites *Toy Story* as her exemplar-text in this, but her modernist bias is evidently so strong that she cannot conceive of different aesthetic registers *within* the realm of the narrative-realist animated features. As such, she cannot see that *Toy Story*’s aesthetic conservatism is simply due to its situation in a different, decidedly non-Decadent tradition. The aforementioned images in *Road to El Dorado*, however, emphatically show that a Decadent aesthetic has no room for a character-centric compositional paradigm such as this.

*Road to El Dorado*’s final, and most significant, legacy to the Hollywood animated feature, however, lies in another of its facets. It was mentioned earlier, following Richard Dyer, that a sure-fire mark of a genre’s having reached its Decadent phase is that a film can be seen to be espousing an implicit or symptomatic moral meaning that is diametrically opposed to the supposed founding premises of its genre. In the same way that Dyer saw *Sweet Charity* as a final Decadence of the classical Hollywood musical, this dissertation has posited films such as *Takers*, *Prometheus*, *Godzilla*, and *Man of Steel* as points of Late Decadence for Hollywood’s more

recent action, horror, and science fiction staple genres. *Road to El Dorado*, likewise, contains at least one element never seen in a mainstream Hollywood animated feature before: a flamboyant and undisguised streak of sensuality that borders on the outright sexual. This is embodied in the character of Chel, voiced by Rosie Perez, the young Amerindian woman who, through comic mischance, becomes Tulio and Miguel's *de facto* sidekick, and the object of both of their lust – an utterly unsurprising development given that she is drawn with a level of sexualisation totally foreign to the supposed “genre” of “the Disney style.” The legacy of Disney has long been the assumption that animated features which aren't pitched on the totally desexualized “cartoon” level, and are about humans rather than anthropomorphized animals, will remain totally pre-sexual in their narrative atmosphere, no matter how alluringly their heroines might be drawn. This was emphatically the case with *Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*, with Ariel and Jasmine's pronounced breasts and bare midriffs never attracting anything much in the way of narrative comment. They seemed, to quote Roger Ebert, to project “the same innocent sensuality of the classic B-movie sexpots - an ability to seem totally unaware, for example, that she is wearing a low-cut dress” (Ebert 1991). And, as we have seen, *Pocahontas* virtually foundered, aesthetically, on this fact – its desexualisation making nonsense of its narrative aesthetic of exoticism and voyeurism. *Road to El Dorado*, however, corrects *Pocahontas*'s errors, with Chel presenting a *wholly* self-conscious sensuality. There is a moment mid-way through the second act where – sensing that, of the two, Miguel is more interested in the exotic spectacle of El Dorado than in her – she artfully persuades him to give in to his yearning to go out and explore, then brings her full seductive wiles to bear on Tulio, lounging on a couch and provocatively toying with her hair. As Tulio begins to massage her shoulders, the scene cuts away to Miguel's explorations through town. It then cuts back – four minutes later in plot time; much longer in story time – to Chel and Tulio now tangled up on the floor. In this state, they suddenly finding themselves interrupted by the high priest Tzekel-Kan (voiced by Armande Assante), and Chel exclaims “Oh! Oh, no, no, no. The High Priest! What is he gonna think when he sees one of the gods like this with me?” To which Tulio can only dazedly reply “Lucky god?” The film does not make it clear if they're still in the foreplay stage, or post-coital by this time, but the mere fact that such questions occur to the spectator at all puts *Road to El Dorado* far in advance of most animated features before or since.

This Decadent reversal of the historical gender and sexual premises of the Disney “genre” would be taken to an even deeper, more fundamental, level in DreamWorks's next cel-animated

film: *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*. What the supporting character of Chel was to female representations in this supposed genre, the titular Kiger mustang hero of *Spirit* would be to the male. For all that feminist critics have frequently criticized Disney, and Disney-style, animated features over the years, the fact remains that – in line with the pseudo-Christian standpoint which also underlies much of modern liberalism – such films have granted traditionally-conceived masculinity very few privileges. Over the decades, most mainstream animated features have had female protagonists – or, at the very least, a strong heroine juxtaposed with a somewhat de-masculinized or inconsequential hero – and have tended to belittle or score points off masculinist ideals at every turn. Beyond the Disney filmography itself, there is the decades-long history of films such as *The Secret of NIMH*, *The Last Unicorn* (Jules Bass & Arthur Rankin Jr., 1982), *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (Bill Kroyer, 1992), *Once Upon a Forest* (Charles Grosvenor, 1993), *The Swan Princess* (Richard Rich, 1994), *Thumbelina*, *Anastasia*, *Quest for Camelot* (Frederick Du Chau, 1998), and *The King and I* (Richard Rich, 1999). Virtually all these films have in common a narrative structure which rejects the very ideal of dramatic conflict. Or rather, one in which the hero/ine-protagonist embodies some form of “muscular Christianity” dramaturgy – in which right makes might – and whom the plot must allow to win through at the end without their ever really being willing to fight for it. Or the narrative must simply be arranged so that other forces are at work which will ensure the victory of the good without much action from our hero/ine at all, leaving the implication simply that it was their purity of heart and spotlessness of soul which brought all the stars into alignment. The exceptions offered by Disney Renaissance films such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* represent the triumph of their Baroque aesthetics over this pseudo-Christian default mode for the animated feature. The animated feature’s late 1990s/early 2000s turn into Decadence, however, would alter this state of affairs even more intriguingly.

The perverse genius of nineteenth-century Decadent literature lay in its banishing of the civic and martial virtues of masculinity which had underlain past centuries of European literature, in favour of the exultation of aesthetics above all other concerns. Reading Balzac’s *Sarrasine* (1830) – which she called “the century’s first fully Decadent work” – Paglia declares that “Romantic poetry... grants virility no privileges”: the Romantic-cum-Decadent male hero cannot act, and “instead of killing, he is killed” (Paglia 1990, 389/391-2). One sees this vividly in another work by Balzac the same year: *A Passion in the Desert* (1830), in which the soldier-

protagonist – having been separated from his unit in Napoleon’s army and become lost in the Egyptian desert – spends the course of the story not chafing to rejoin his regiment and his fellows, to redeem his honour against the British, but instead holing up in a cave and gazing admiringly upon a beautiful leopardess, whom he has named Mignonne. This diametrical reversal of values is integral to a Decadent narrative artistry, and in one of Western art’s odder evolutions, this same Decadent spirit would migrate into the Disney-style animated feature, in the diametrically opposed ethos that – rather than being a vulgarization of the purity of aestheticism and contemplation – brusque, decisive action is an unacceptable stain upon the pre-lapsarian childhood innocence that animated features are supposed to sustain. The historical prejudice that such films were primarily for children kept the form hamstrung in a state of perpetual “innocence,” whereby triumphal physical action on the part of the protagonist could never be countenanced, because it would evoke a will-to-power which children are supposedly innocent of. It should go without saying that all this is, ultimately, absurd. A Decadent self-consciousness of this fact would, therefore, entail a massive injection of aggressively amoral agency into the animated feature form. And, properly read, *Spirit* constitutes just such an intervention. Its Bryan Adams soundtrack and some extremely cute early scenes of *Spirit* as a foal and colt should not distract one from the fact that the film is essentially a point-for-point rebuttal of the pseudo-Christian paradigm of feature animation described above. It is very emphatic, for example, about how the opportunity to toss your opponents around like rag dolls is not one to be avoided out of deferential moral scruple, but something to be seized upon with full sadistic enjoyment.

This rehabilitation of assertion and aggression is the enabling condition of *Spirit*’s real Decadent enterprise: its reversal and repudiation of the Manifest Destiny ideology underpinning the genre tradition of the Hollywood western. The aforementioned tossing of opponents like rag dolls takes place in the corral of a US Cavalry outpost – one which readily evokes John Ford’s “Cavalry Trilogy” of *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950); and is, in turn, located in a Western wilderness that uncannily resembles the vision of Monument Valley immortalized by Ford – where *Spirit* is resisting being broken for the ranks. Having proved totally indomitable for rider after rider, a sadistic Colonel voiced by James Cromwell – of whom *Spirit* recalls “the first time he saw a rattler curled up in his path” – orders him tied to a post in the blazing sun for three days with no food or water. By the end of this ordeal, he has become so weak and demoralized that he is unable to prevent the Colonel from

saddling him, mounting him, and beginning to ride him around the corral. And at this point, the Colonel begins holding forth with the impeccable Manifest Destiny rhetoric that:

There are those in Washington who believe the West will never be settled, the Northern Pacific Railroad will never breach Nebraska, a hostile Lakota will never submit to providence. And it is that kind of small-minded thinking that say this horse will never be tamed. Discipline, time, and patience are the three great levelers.

By the end of this discourse, Spirit's pride has now been rankled to the point that he gets a surging second wind, and hurls the Colonel off him as with all the others. The moment works both on an immediate narrative level of catharsis, and on a deeper, more implicit and symptomatic, level of ideological rejection by the film. It is followed by an extended sequence of kinetic action in which all the other Cavalry mounts mutiny and – with Spirit and the aforementioned Lakota brave, who is also captive at the outpost – escape, but the aforementioned moment is sufficient unto itself to encapsulate the film's Decadent re-writing of genre.

The Colonel's speech at the corral is climactically paid off in a sequence at the beginning of the third act, where a by-now-demoralized and homesick Spirit has been press-ganged into a team of horses which are being made to haul a locomotive over a mountain which the Pacific Railroad is tunneling under. Upon reaching the crest of the hill and seeing the wilderness beyond, there comes a dramatic moment where Spirit finally understands the full import of the Colonel's words: that the humans are trying to extend their dominion into his "homeland." This realization reawakens all of his inner reserves of strength and courage. Pretending to fall down dead from overwork, he's taken out of his harness, at which point he resurges and thunderously gallops back to the prow of the locomotive. Rearing up and drawing upon all his super-equine strength, he smashes his hooves down full force on the couplings to the horse teams, staving them in. The horse teams now free, the locomotive begins to slide back down the mountainside, gathering momentum as it does. Smashing into the depot at the bottom of the hill – built, like all of the other surrounding buildings, out of wood – the locomotive explodes, starting a violent inferno, which quickly spreads into a firestorm which engulfs the railway construction yard, obliterating any imminent prospect of the Pacific Railroad breaching the frontier of the American West. In this, *Spirit* is apocalyptically reversing the historical drama that John Ford evoked in *The Iron Horse* (1924) – shaming and destroying the ideals of American Manifest Destiny in the same proportion that Ford's film celebrated them. One sees here, as with *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* nine years later, *Spirit* using the graphic logic of spectacle to blatantly say radical things that

could not (prudently and/or commercially) be expressed in logocentric terms. In the same way that Robin Wood saw Leo McCarey's film *Rally 'Round the Flag Boys!* (1958) as a symbolic "unfounding" of America – "a collapse into ignominious chaos ... a collapse that embodies the film's comedic wish-fulfillment that America had never existed" – *Spirit* immolates the American mythos of the conquest of the frontier, in the most total Decadent reversal of the premises of the classic, Ford-ian Western possible (Wood 1998, 172). The film also offers an inordinate amount of beautiful, spectacular images of American landscapes in their pre-Manifest Destiny form, untouched by man. These lie outside of the film's main Decadent credentials, but there is one scene which deserves special attention, simply because it demonstrates so vividly the harsh demands that a Decadent visual aesthetic makes upon the spectatorial eye.

At the forty-minute mark of this 83-minute film, *Spirit* has found himself residing, as a reluctant guest, in a Lakota encampment – and it is at this point that the film offers one of the purest examples of the Decadent density of DreamWorks's *mise-en-scene*. In the same way that *Road to El Dorado* would confound Aylish Wood's remarks about how "character actions" draw the viewer's eye to "a single point of focus," *Spirit* here features a seven-second tracking shot in which – as *Spirit* and his local companion, a paint mare named Rain, wander through the Lakota encampment – well over a dozen visual elements compete for the spectator's eye. There are six teepees behind *Spirit* and Rain, in addition to the bright gold of the autumn forest in the far background, and the mountain ridges at the very top of frame, in the extreme background. While *Spirit* and Rain walk through the composition in middle distance, at extreme frame left, the spectator initially sees some hides hung out to dry, behind a cooking pot hung up on a tripod pyramid of sticks. Even further in the foreground, one sees two small boys with tomahawks playing at being braves. As the frame drifts from left to right, just to the right of *Spirit* and Rain – in the extreme foreground – we see one old woman dramatically telling a story to another, who has her back to the frame. Directly behind them, a young woman carrying a jug walks through the composition. Additionally mixed into the shot's composition are some tent posts strung up to the teepees, and two tribal shields stood up on sticks. Furthermore, no sooner has the frame moved far right enough to lose the two boys playing, then two puppies and a toddler chasing them rush into frame from behind one of the teepees. Again, for a shot lasting only seven seconds, the amount of visual detail and narrative implication that has been coded into it is remarkable. This Decadent information overload, moreover, serves a narrative, thematic end: the wish to restore

the Native Americans to total centrality, and dominant importance, in the American West, rather than simply figuring as “Indian” props for “Cowboys” to shoot down. This is not a feat of fantastical worldmaking so much a historical feat of world-re-making, or the restoring of a world to its proper place in cultural memory. As we have seen with regard to the workings of genre life cycles, the idea of the “revisionist Western” – which blanched at, and sought to critique, the genocidal bases of the classical Hollywood Western – had existed for some three decades before *Spirit*. No film, however, had ever before approached the genre with such digitally-liberated graphic freedom.

After this somewhat somber exercise in re-writing the genre conventions of the classic Hollywood Western, however, DreamWorks’s next, and final, cel-animated film, *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*, would self-consciously be a work of total fantasy. *Sinbad*’s cinematic forebears are the Ray Harryhausen stop-motion spectacles such as *The 7<sup>th</sup> Voyage of Sinbad* (Nathan Juran, 1958), *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963), *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (Gordon Hessler, 1973), *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (Sam Wanamaker, 1977), and *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis, 1981) – fantasy-adventure films that, like *Sinbad*, draw freely on the “Arabian Nights” and Ancient Greek mythology for their imaginative spectacles. These films also, moreover, did this very eclectically, and with scant pretence at scholarly respect or mythological accuracy. As a Decadent text, *Sinbad* fully embodies this same spirit, but also adds to it a perversity that was often lacking in the originals, which could often sabotage their visual spectacles with crude and reactionary ideological narrative formulae. *Sinbad*, however, is essentially a Wilde-ian film, creating a cosmology where, as Oscar Wilde put it in his dialogue *The Decay of Lying* (1889):

Facts will be regarded as discreditable, Truth will be found mourning over her fetters, and Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land. The very aspect of the world will change to our startled eyes. Out of the sea will rise Behemoth and Leviathan, and sail round the high-pooped galleys, as they do on the delightful maps of those ages when books of geography were actually readable. Dragons will wander about the waste places, and the phoenix will soar from her nest of fire into the air. We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk, and see the jewel in the toad’s head. Champing his gilded oats, the Hippogriff will stand in our stalls, and over our heads will float the Blue Bird singing of impossible things, of things that are lovely and that never happen, of things that are not and that should be. (Wilde 1954, 85-86)

In effect, this means that the “truths” – about gender relations, “normality” versus “monsters,” good and evil, etc. – that the old Harryhausen spectacles swore by are, in *Sinbad*, treated as

matters of complete frivolity. Indeed, the opening images of the film *literally* channel Wilde's remarks with a scene that fascinatingly anticipates the star-map in *Prometheus*. The film begins with the frame roving through the digitally-rendered vastness of outer space, before coming to rest in what appears to be a transparent dome in space, demarcated only by the pale lines of a cartographical/astronomical grid, which is inlaid with strange pictograms and symbols. The base of this dome-space, in turn, is a translucent horizon of orange and white nebula cloud, at the centre of which sits the globe of Earth, seemingly half immersed in liquid. No sooner has the frame come to rest on this than the spectator sees Eris, the Goddess of Chaos (voiced by Michelle Pfeiffer) liquescently materialize inside the wall of this dome-space, and begin descending towards the Earth, insouciantly declaring that "It's a brand new day and the mortal world is at peace. But not for long." Smirkingly monologuing to herself – with all the devious perversity of a classic cinema villain – about how "this is going to be fun," Eris enlists one of her "beauties" to create "glorious chaos." Her "beauties," incidentally, are an array of digitally-rendered constellations – in the shapes of various charismatic megafauna – which descend from the walls of her celestial planetarium in physical form, a translucent "body" surrounding their star structure. In all this, one sees Wilde's "delightful maps" of other ages brought vividly back to life. One of these constellation-creatures, a sea monster named Cetus, Eris then makes fall from the heavens – losing his constellation-nature in the process – and land in Earth's sea right in the path of the ship which the notorious seafaring thief Sinbad (voiced by Brad Pitt) is attempting to board and rob. A spectacular swordplay and martial arts sequence – demonstrating that the thematic gains of *Spirit* regarding unapologetic action have been fully recuperated – ensues, but of chief relevance here is simply the degree to which Cetus represents a triumphant feat of imagination. He is a biological invention which resembles a giant squid or octopus, but with a facial structure reminiscent of a cuttlefish – albeit a cuttlefish with malevolently expressive binocular eyes – and giant fringes on each side of its head, reminiscent of the pronounced pectoral fins on flying gurnards or lionfish. His presence in the film establishes, from the very first, that the imaginative idiom of behemoths, leviathans, dragons, phoenixes, basilisks, jewelled toads, and hippogriffs which Wilde evangelized is very much going to be *Sinbad's* own.

Nor is Cetus simply an initial tantalization will not be followed through upon, like the Marahute sequence in *Rescuers Down Under*. Once *Sinbad's* "quest" narrative begins in earnest – at the 23-minute mark of this 86-minute film – one sees any number of similar feats of

imagination. First, there is a sequence deploying – with a Decadent *mise-en-scene* of dazzling density and complexity – the old Homeric trope of sirens whose seductive song lures sailors to their doom. These digitally-realized sirens live, in turn, in the midst of an extremely dense forest of towering rock formations, which allows the film to stage more Decadently dense *mise-en-scene*, as Sinbad’s ship must delicately navigate between the huge rocks, and over the rapids and waterfalls they hide. Following all this, there is another sequence featuring a giant sea creature. This one, almost as bizarre as Cetus, resembles a mountain-sized humpback anglerfish. The mountain analogy is especially appropriate, because the creature does indeed camouflage itself as such. It is introduced into the narrative when Sinbad’s ship lands on it – the characters believing it to simply be an island, and only learning their mistake when they find themselves standing on top of an eyeball twice the height of a human being. Following this, the film shows us a roc – the mythical bird of prey so huge it can swoop down and carry off elephants. Again, *Sinbad* here uses the digitally-liberated simulacra freedoms of cel animation to bring this mythological figure to life as never before, creating a creature whose physical screen presence is one of nuance rather than mere spectacular menace, after the fashion of Harryhausen’s two-headed version in *7<sup>th</sup> Voyage of Sinbad*, to say nothing of the legendarily crude avian monster of *The Giant Claw* (Fred F. Sears, 1957). In *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*, in contrast, the roc’s gait and eyes convey a slight ungainliness and unintelligence underlying the danger – more after the fashion of a giant wild turkey than a truly imposing evil version of Marahute. This, however, was not accidental, but deliberate, for reasons of pacing – insofar as this was not to be the film’s penultimate moment of spectacular lying in the Wilde-ian mould, but simply another flight of Decadent imagination. The film’s definitive spectacle comes when Sinbad and the film’s heroine Marina (voiced by Catherine Zeta-Jones) must actually enter Eris’s domain of Tartarus – an entirely mercurial digital realm of shifting sands, diverse ruins, and her constellation-creature “beauties” up close and personal. The gate they must pass through to get there, however, is a narrow seam of white light embedded in a massive slab of stone suspended in infinity beyond the edge of the world. So normalized is *Sinbad*’s Wilde-ian aesthetic of grandiose lies, by this time, that the revelation that the world is flat – or at least that Eris has made it appear so at this juncture – seems less remarkable than it might. Sinbad having successfully rigged the ship’s sails so they will catch the cosmic updrafts buffeting the edge of the global disc, he is able to have his ship hover in position before the gate of Tartarus, allowing him and Marina to rope themselves together and swing in

from the side of the ship. The sheer scope of imaginative emancipation at work here is remarkable, and rarely matched throughout Hollywood's history. Indeed, so vivid was the image of Sinbad's jury-rigged ship sailing off the edge of the world – and tentatively venturing out into the infinity of beyond – that Gore Verbinski would very closely imitate it four years later, in *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007).

All these Wilde-ian big lies make for excellent narrativized spectacle, of course, but ultimately, it is in the realm of narrative itself that *Sinbad* is truly special. It is that penultimate animated feature that finally, definitively, conquered the inability of the Disney Renaissance films to write dialogue worthy of their visual spectacles. It represented the final vindication of Katzenberg's long-standing effort to bring the production of animated features more into line with that of Hollywood features in general – and so de-reify the form as a somehow distinct and specialized one – by commissioning screenplays which would form the basis of the whole production, rather than simply treating them as protean texts which would evolve to fit the needs of brainstorming sketches. In a form which has historically been characterized by multiple credited writers, who may or may not have any experience in non-animated cinema – Don Bluth's film *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989), for instance, finally credits an astonishing ten writers, all more or less fitting this description – *Sinbad* is credited solely to John Logan. Previously credited on the scripts for *Any Given Sunday* (Oliver Stone, 1999), *Gladiator*, Simon Wells's *The Time Machine*, and *Star Trek: Nemesis* (Stuart Baird, 2002), Logan would also go on to put his pen to *The Last Samurai*, Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator* (2004) and *Hugo* (2011), Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007), and the epic James Bond reimagining *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012). A talent with no reticence or hostility towards Hollywood blockbuster spectacle, and a genius for elevating and burnishing it to best advantage, Logan was thus a natural match for Katzenberg's project of de-reifying the animated feature. The result was that *Sinbad* is one of the best-written animated features ever released by a Hollywood studio, featuring character arcs, motivations and backstories of a sophistication virtually never seen before or since – for the simple reason that this screenplay was not assembled according to reified notions of what was appropriate for a “cartoon,” but for a normative Hollywood blockbuster. The film was conceived of as “Katzenberg's boldest experiment yet” – an effort to put the imaginative transcribing potentials of animation to their fullest possible use, to make what Katzenberg called “an adult period piece” whose animated ontology was merely incidental

(LaPorte 2010, 354-55). And in the event, however, the film was disastrously rejected by American audiences. None of DreamWorks's previous three cel-animated exercises in genre revisionism had been successful at the box office, but with *Sinbad*, Nicole LaPorte observes, "When the opening box-office grosses came in, they weren't just bad, they were comical," and "It was a complete and total rejection of the marketplace," which would ultimately see DreamWorks lose \$125 million (LaPorte 2010, 355). It also precipitated Katzenberg's, and the studio's, final parting of ways with the cel technique. His "love affair with 2-D animation was officially over," LaPorte continued, and "Katzenberg said goodbye to the medium that made him" (LaPorte 2010, 356).

Film history renders a kinder judgment on *Sinbad*, however. Over a decade later, the showdown in the forum of North American audience taste – in which *Sinbad* and its predecessors were four very crucial texts – between cel animation and digital animation is now past, the latter having definitively prevailed. This original contextualizing issue removed, *cinephiles* can now appreciate *Sinbad* and its Decadent kindred more purely on their narrative and imaginative merits, and simply be grateful that DreamWorks made these films at all. *Sinbad*'s climactic image, in which Sinbad and Marina sail off towards the horizon together, marked the end of more than just a single narrativized spectacle. It also marked the end of a brief but compelling moment in cinematic Decadence – one in which the suppleness and versatility of traditional cel animation was wedded to the realistic texturing abilities of digital animation, to create a succession of films which fully embraced cinema's simulacra potentials for imaginative transcribing, and did so with a brilliantly perverse disregard for the animated feature's reified status as somehow discrete from the mainstream of Hollywood's genre tradition. Even beyond the wider historical trend towards the supplanting of cel animation with digital, *Prince of Egypt*, *Road to El Dorado*, *Spirit*, and *Sinbad* were always going to be dubiously commercial propositions, simply by virtue of the degree to which they treated their animated ontology as incidental, rather than defining, and how little they conceded to the animated feature's putative status as facilely undemanding "family friendly" fare – in the vein that Pixar was staking out to such great success. The films of the Disney Baroque broke new ground in terms of how spectacular and dramatic animated features could be, but the DreamWorks Decadent was more concerned with simply imagining its spectators back to Ancient Egypt, pre-Columbian America, the unconquered American frontier,

and fantastical mythic never-worlds – all of which simply happened to be realized in cel animation because of the graphic freedoms of the form.

As we have seen, this embrace of cel animation as a means to an imaginative end, rather than an end in itself – as modernist-minded critics and practitioners would have it – was also being pursued in the same spirit, and at the same time as *Sinbad*, by George Lucas's empire, with the TV series *Star Wars: Clone Wars*. That same year, furthermore, films such as *Dr. Seuss's The Cat in the Hat* (Bo Welch, 2003), *Peter Pan* (P.J. Hogan, 2003), *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003), and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Stephen Norrington, 2003) all showed that the increasing normalization of DVFX was making distinctions between live action and animation increasingly untenable. All of these films were essentially "live action" ones, but they were all cinematic treatments of material which had originated as – or were best-known as – cartoons or comics, and so all faced the task of realizing imaginative visions totally alien to indexical and corporeal reality. As such, they all relied on DVFX to render their story-worlds so unbound by physical reality as to make their "live action" ontology largely meaningless – leaving them, ultimately, with at least as much in common with *Sinbad* as with their contemporary, fully-live-action spectacles such as *2 Fast 2 Furious* (John Singleton, 2003), *The Recruit* (Roger Donaldson, 2003), and *The Rundown* (Peter Berg, 2003). Since then, this logic of animated simulacra has only continued and intensified, leaving the latter group of films looking more and more anachronistic. The ideal of making a film via simulacra – of simply seeking the most efficient means with which to faithfully transcribe one's imaginative vision, with no special value granted to the indexically real and photographic – has become normalized to a degree that few, if any, of the initial spectators of the first Disney Renaissance films could have predicted in the late 1980s. And the result, as we have seen, is that in approaching these early years in the spirit of media archaeology, their animated features may now seem more familiar to spectators in the mid-2010s than their live-action ones. The Marahute sequence in *Rescuers Down Under*, for instance, is fluently of a piece with the Baroque sublime-vertiginous spectacles of *Avatar* nineteen years later; Disney's Beast vividly anticipates the feral spectacles of *The Wolfman* (Joe Johnston, 2010) or the *X-Men* franchise; and, to come full circle back to the very beginning, *The Lion King* fully achieved the noble leonine gravitas that the digitally-conjured Aslan of the *Chronicles of Narnia* trilogy (Andrew Adamson/Michael Apted, 2005/2008/2010) strove for.

## Conclusion

For two generations now, the spectacles of cinema – as a medium of animated movement – have progressively militated against fetishism of the indexical and photographic, in favour of the narrative worldmaking imagination. The logic of simulacra has not become all-pervasive – to the point of obviating cinema’s photographic recording function – as some antagonistic theorists would apocalyptically declaim. Rather, it has simply become wholly normalized, making cinema’s photographic aspect merely one facet among many. Photorealistic DVFX have followed in the path marked out by cel animation, in the Disney hyperrealist style, in enabling the imaginative transcribing of any narrativized spectacle vision, no matter how divorced from corporeal, gravity-bound reality. And this has, in turn, enabled an aesthetic paradigm shift. The liberation wrought by the digital has made it possible for Baroque and Decadent flights of blockbuster fancy to become a matter of routine, rather than occasional outsized “event” productions which could be reified away as something out of the medium’s mainstream. This, in turn, has at last made it possible for cinematic aesthetics to create a supple and protean *lingua franca* for the evoking, recreating, rewriting, or reformulating of the vast accumulated body of imaginative spectacle which stretches back across the millenniums-long Western canon.

These new horizons of cinema ushered in by DVFX should not, however, be confused with a new idiom of Eurocentrism. Indeed, as we have seen, not only has the rise of the digitally-liberated blockbuster compelled Hollywood to globalize its imagination, but the technologies of DVFX have been disseminated, economically and globally, far more rapidly than older techniques of spectacle were. This has enabled other world film industries to realize their own cultural imaginaries with a scale and grandeur never possible before – East Asian ones being perhaps the most striking thus far. As we saw in Chapter One, the Japanese film industry debuted digital backlot production the same year Hollywood did, and would proceed to go in wholly independent directions with it – *Goemon* (Kazuaki Kiriya, 2008) being a very different kind of spectacle than the *Sin City* films. Likewise, when viewing Chinese blockbuster films such as *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (Tsui Hark, 2010) and *Flying Swords of Dragon’s Gate* (Tsui Hark, 2011) – with their spectacular digital recreations of the Tang and the Ming Dynasties, complete with city-dwarfing Buddha colossi and aerial swordfights inside the funnels of tornadoes – one is struck by the inescapable fact that politicized fretting about the supposed

“cultural imperialism” of Hollywood’s beguiling spectacle and illusionism is now largely obsolete. Such spectacle can now, as never before, be appreciated as an inherent aesthetic potentiality of the cinema, which will be seized upon and exploited with different rhythms, poetics, and tonalities in all different world cultures. In this, the West is simply one region among many, exploring the implications of how DVFX have enabled the literal *showing* of its heritage of visual imaginings – taking them out of the realm of the static or literary, and into realm of the photorealistic moving image. To cite merely one example among innumerable possible ones, there is the case of Julie Taymor’s 2010 adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1610-11). The play had been adapted to the screen before, of course, and at least twice – in the treatments by Derek Jarman (1979) and Peter Greenaway’s *Prospero’s Books* (1991) – the results had been appreciated as highly canonical works of film art. With all previous adaptations, however, the limitations of existing special/visual effects technology, combined with the frequent budgetary limitations of high-cultural filmmaking, meant that there was no possibility of literally imaginatively transcribing Shakespeare’s more fantastical visions. Other means of visual expression had to be found, which would stay within the corporeally-practical. Such a cinema of profilmic indexicality, however, could not actually show Ariel’s capacities “to fly, to swim, to dive into the fire, to ride on the curl'd clouds” (Act 1, Scene II), or give any real otherworldly horror to the stage direction “*Enter divers Spirits, in shape of dogs and hounds*” (Act IV, Scene I). Taymor’s version, however, was able to do both, giving Ariel the ability to digitally diffuse into a translucent being of pure white light, and float freely on the air and water; while making the “divers Spirits in shape of dogs and hounds” into demonic, fire-mouthed fiends – like digitally-enabled iterations of Conan Doyle’s Hound of the Baskervilles. And most symbolically importantly, unlike with Jarman and Greenaway, Taymor was now able to genuinely *show* Antonio and his company’s ship being violently buffeted by the titular tempest – in an opening spectacle that bears more resemblance to *The Perfect Storm* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2000) than a stage play which is simply being performed for a camera instead of a live audience. By the time of Taymor’s *Tempest*, in essence, DVFX had diffused so far down the filmmaking food chain from the biggest Hollywood blockbusters that she was able to draw upon the same digital liberation of representation that, a decade-and-a-half prior, had been the exclusive purview of totally mainstream, overtly child-friendly spectacles such as *Jumanji* (Joe Johnston, 1995) and

*Casper* (Brad Silberling, 1995). That this norm has been so totally transcended, in turn, has profound implications for cinema, and its place in Western aesthetics.

One of Camille Paglia's most useful, provocative, and far-reaching suggestions in *Sexual Personae* was that the complex fusion of eroticism and socio-political hierarchy – an “eros of hierarchical orders” which “entered Europe via Greece” to become “one of the west's most characteristic perversions” distinguishing it from eastern cultures – had its actual origins in Ancient Egypt (Paglia 1990, 59). The hieratic imposingness of Egyptian art and architecture, Paglia declares, is the true “source of Greek and Roman classicism – clarity, order, proportion, balance,” and “the idea of ‘classical’ antiquity should be revised to contain it” (Paglia 1990, 61). And, as always, in making this suggestion, the spectacles of Hollywood cinema are never far from Paglia's mind: “Conceptualization and precision: in Egypt is forged the formalistic Apollonian line that will end in modern cinema, master genre of our century,” as she puts it (Paglia 1990, 59). “The Egyptians were visionary materialists,” she continues: “They began the western line of Apollonian aestheticism that we see in the *Iliad*, in Pheidias, Botticelli, Spenser, Ingres, Wilde, and Hollywood cinema” (Paglia 1990, 61). The monumental remains at Giza and Luxor, in short, are simply Western history's very first iteration of the aesthetic impulse towards spectacle that today underlies the creation of cinematic setpieces for projection in IMAX format – the will to dwarf the human figure with mythic representation. Egypt's innumerable vast obelisks, thus, were likewise the first engagement with the normalization of aesthetic verticality that Kristen Whissel traces in cinema spectacle of today. That all this goes largely unrecognized or underappreciated in modern academia is, Paglia suggests, “because of the moralistic obsession with language that has dominated modern academic thought,” ensuring that “the thinness of Egyptian literature keeps it out of core curricula” (Paglia 1990, 61). In short, an instance of the privileging of logocentric discourses over all else; a refusal or inability to think visually, and show humility before the sensuous image. “Words are not the only measure of mental development,” Paglia declares, and “To believe that they are is a very western or Judeo-Christian illusion” (Paglia 1990, 61). As we have seen, however, Cinema Studies has – throughout its history as a discipline – in no way been immune to this tendency. Surveying the foundational, historical discourses of radical modernism – as traced by D.N. Rodowick in his 1988 book *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* – one is struck by the paucity of attention to the actual impression and affect of the cinematic image or

diegesis. The prevailing concern, rather, was the formulation of highly-abstracted paradigms for understanding cinema, which draw their methodology and assumptions from the field of literary theory – such as Roland Barthes’ meditations, in response to Sartre, on the concept of *écriture*, which were taken up in turn by *Tel Quel*, in a spirit of “dissolv[ing] the ethical and existential dimension of ‘writing’ in favor of the formal and theoretical conceptualization characteristic of the discourse of political modernism” (Rodowick 1988, 15). One sees that, even at its first principles, the radical modernist impulse has drifted far indeed from any concern with the cinematic image as affective, voyeuristic window into a story-world. The governing assumption, rather, was that words and logocentric discourses are the *real* means of address, and that cinema’s viscerally, imaginatively-stimulating, imagistic nature is simply a distraction or an ephemera – if not an outright inhibition – in understanding its workings. In a tradition such as this, therefore, close, humble attention to a narrativized spectacle’s *mise-en-scene*, editing rhythms, visual effects, deployment of star personae, or any other kind of imaginative imprimatur, would seem unnecessary, and so were duly ignored.

The most egregious examples of this kind of modernist theorizing would subside over the course of the 1990s, as the critiques mounted by Bordwell/Carroll-ian cognitivism would open doors to greater methodological pluralism, while the growing interest in “Early Cinema” required a re-emphasis of historicism and empiricism. Both these trends allowed *cinophilia* to reassert itself to some degree. As Dudley Andrew wryly quipped, at the start of a 1993 essay: “Breathe easy. *Epuration* has ended. After a dozen years of clandestine whispering we are permitted to mention, even to discuss, the auteur again” (Andrew 1993, 77). And, as with *auteurism*, today one has little difficulty finding numerous books about the affective dimension of cinema and the visual moving image. In much of this writing, however, one can still discern the many-times-removed traces of radical modernism in its initial form – except now totally detached from any coherent or convincing Marxist commitment, and given to positioning itself in opposition to the spectacles of contemporary Hollywood simply on some manner of general principles and/or received wisdom. In such work, Hollywood may be spoken of in neutral, or even approving tones, but only on the condition that it is made explicitly clear that it is the safely-reifiable “classical” Hollywood of generations past that is at issue, not the actual, existing one of today. One sees this in especially crude form, for instance, with Steven Shaviro’s assertions – in his 2010 book *Post Cinematic Affect* – that “contemporary high-end movies are cynically

instrumentalized, far beyond the dreams of old-school Hollywood avarice,” and that “what does determine editing rhythms in the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster” is something of a mystery, since obviously “meaningfulness is no longer a criterion” (Shaviro 2010, 119-20). In this, one still hears Mark Crispin Miller’s classicist-chauvinist sentiments of twenty years prior. And while a book such as Adrian J. Ivakhiv’s *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (2014) may contain no such broad assertions, its classicist-chauvinist aspect – and resistance to the spectacles of modern DVFX – is just as discernible. Ivakhiv allows that Hollywood, “in its classical era,” could be “characterized as a utopian enterprise” but as soon as one gets to the more modern blockbuster era of Steven Spielberg and *Jurassic Park*, such allowances are forgotten, and we are back to hearing the same old cant about how the spectacle at work is a self-congratulatory and hegemonic one that militates against alternative narrative understandings (Ivakhiv 2014, 114-15). It remains an article of faith, no less than during the heyday of political modernism, that only cinema from outside the Hollywood mainstream can have any imaginatively-emancipatory effect. The delimitation of such alternative realms has broadened over the decades, to be sure – one reads less about Godard and Oshima at their most audience-unfriendly, Mulvey/Wollen, Straub/Huillet, Snow, Rainer, Potter, Gidal, Sharits, LeGrice, etc. than one used to, and more about films which are at least somewhat more available to traditional *cinophile* sensibilities – but work within Cinema Studies which moots the possibility that imaginative-ideological emancipation may be inherent in the spectacles of the contemporary Hollywood mainstream, rather than an occasional exception-that-proves-the-rule, is still decidedly in the minority. Even a book such as Eric S. Jenkins’s *Special Affects: Cinema, Animation, and the Translation of Consumer Culture* (2014) – which tantalizingly promises to trace a fundamental commonality between Disney-style animation and live-action Hollywood cinema in a positive spirit – proves too beholden to old modernist methodologies to constitute much of an intervention here. It ultimately proves to be little more than an extended test-case in the same classicist-chauvinism as Shaviro and Ivakhiv, situating its terms of value in “early animation, early live-action film, classical Hollywood movies and classical Disney features” (Jenkins 2014, 9). After the mid-twentieth century, however, we learn that “Affect becomes captured, personalised into emotion and molarised into institutions of the consumer economy” (Jenkins 2014, 190). Jenkins’s book, furthermore, is remarkable in that – in making these assertions over more than 200 pages – his corpus of actual filmic exemplar-texts barely enters the

double digits. And thus, in writing such as this, one still sees the tendency toward what Andrew Britton caustically described, in his 1986 critique “In Defence of Criticism,” as the propagating of “modes of analysis which are programmed to produce exactly the conclusions which the reader is presumed to hold in the first place” (Britton 2009, 383). Among the insidious effects of such theorizing, Britton declared, was exactly the indifference to topicality and textual elucidation described above:

No film theory is worth anything which does not stay close to the concrete and which does not strive continually to check its own assumptions and procedures in relation to producible texts. (Britton 2009, 383)

A dispiriting amount of recent film theory, however, still remains imbued with just enough of the radical modernist tradition’s assumptions to ensure that such checking of assumptions and procedures – i.e., some form of constructive engagement with the spectacles of the modern commercial mainstream, against which other inquiries may be defined – is held to be unnecessary, because supposedly everyone knows what the contemporary Hollywood mainstream is and how it works. It has been the goal of this dissertation to show that such dismissiveness is untenable, and that the imaginative vitality and scope of current Hollywood admits of no such trivialization. Its sublime images constitute what Britton would further call a “cognitive control” – an irreducible sensory reality upon which all theorizing of cinema must ultimately rest (Britton 2009, 383). In this, Britton was to be strongly rhymed by Paglia. “There is no such thing as a ‘mere’ image,” she writes:

Western culture is built on perceptual relations. From the soaring god-projections of ancient sky-cults to the celebrity-inflating machinery of American commercial promotion, western identity has organized itself around charismatic sexual personae of hierarchic command. (Paglia 1990, 33)

The insistence upon the continuity, and continued relevance, of millennia-old aesthetic methodologies here stands as a rebuke to radical modernism’s presentism and – in contrast – postmodernism’s relative indifference to the profound importance of such historical continuities. In *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Angela Ndalianis brings up Bernini’s great sculptural compositions in terms of contemporary media; and, likewise, compares the Apollo sculpture series at Versailles to the spectacles of modern popular culture – she mentions Batman, Lara Croft, and *Star Trek* in particular – as an exemplar of serial narrative logic and allegory (Ndalianis 2004, 54-55). Her paradigm, however, is seemingly so indebted to

the postmodernist idea of rejection of “grand narratives” that the radical import of such commonalities is not fully appreciated. History, her argument seems to presume, is arbitrary, and so vivid commonalities of aesthetic practice – across centuries between which so many other socio-cultural, political, religious, economic, and scientific assumptions have changed – is not especially remarkable. This dissertation, however, has presumed otherwise – in keeping with its privileging of cinema’s status as an art form above all else. The goals of the Counter-Reformation Popes and Louis XIV had nothing in common with the goals of contemporary Hollywood studio executives, and yet the aesthetic *lingua franca* of the works they commissioned is often strikingly congruent. This is a fact which speaks potently to the transcendent and idealist value of art in the long run of Western culture, but again, Ndalianis’s postmodern paradigm admits no such terms of value for “art.” In these same terms, however, the imaginations of those nineteenth-century authors working in the stream of Romanticism which would culminate with *fin-de-siècle* Decadence were not shaped by anything like the influences of modern popular culture, but the rolodex of images and archetypes which they ultimately presented were often uncannily similar. In all this, one can see that, *pace* the assumptions of the radical modernist tradition in film theory, cinematic art is not simply reducible to the naturalization and/or perpetuation of ideology – any more than any art form can be said to be. As Todd Berliner succinctly puts it: “Cultural and ideological analysis may demonstrate the ways in which... films respond to the ideologies of the time, but it threatens to foul up aesthetic analysis” (Berliner 2010, 17). The poetics of imaginative visualization transcend parochial limitations of time and place, and endure across the centuries, reappearing in strategically modulated forms in different periods and national contexts, but always readily recognizable. To read the eleventh-century epic poem *The Song of Roland* – the earliest such surviving work in French literature, and one deeply imbued with the spirit of the Crusades – for example, is to see an early avatar of the Hollywood Western and war movie, in the tradition of *The Unforgiven* (John Huston, 1960) or *We Were Soldiers* (Randall Wallace, 2002), simply with Moors as the demonized and dehumanized Other instead of Native Americans or Vietnamese. Again, the workings of art and aesthetics transcend period and context.

Imputations of unique distinctiveness – where in fact there is no such thing – have also characterized Cinema Studies’ discourses about the very nature of its subject: namely, the assumption that cinema is necessarily photographic and/or indexical in nature. As has been seen throughout the previous chapters, however, such assumptions are now self-evidently untenable.

The logic of cinematic-image-as-simulacrum was always there throughout film history, for those theorists willing to see it. Even before one gets to the fact of the cel-animation feature, there were always films that used the artifices of the medium – the gloriously artificial richness of three-strip Technicolor, painted backdrops, double exposures, and other optical effects such as the Schüfftan process, stop-motion animation, etc. – to create images which, in the tradition which Paglia attributes to Coleridge and Poe, have more to do with an overarching imaginative vision than with the immediately-apparent materials of the medium. *Wizard of Oz*, Fritz Lang's *Indian Tomb/Tiger of Eschnapur* diptych, *Fantastic Voyage*, and *Aliens* were already mentioned in this connection. To these, however, could also be added such historical classics as *King Kong*, the two versions of *The Lost World* (Irwin Allen, 1960), the two versions of *The Thief of Baghdad* (Michael Powell et. al, 1940), *Things to Come*, *Lost Horizon*, the Kordas' *Jungle Book* (Zoltan Korda, 1942), Powell & Pressburger spectacles such as *Stairway to Heaven* (1946) and *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The War of the Worlds*, Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, and the earlier versions of *The Time Machine* (George Pal, 1960) and *The Mysterious Island* (Cy Enfield, 1961), in addition to the various Ray Harryhausen spectacles of the era. All this is to give only a cursory sampling, situated well within what is customarily called the "Classical" era of Hollywood-style filmmaking, but the cumulative effect of these titles is to profoundly problematize a conception of cinema based solely upon the camera's photochemical recording function. All these films go well beyond the Hollywood traditions of the "period piece" – which derived their spectacle simply from recording images of actors wearing exotically historical costumes, and acting on comparably exotic sets or locations – or the horror film – historically identified simply with the photography of prosthetics or makeup. Instead, they use the aforementioned battery of optical artifices to fundamentally change the nature of the cinematic image into one which had no indexical, profilmic referent – into one which only came into ultimate existence onscreen, through compositing work, motivated by no other force than the filmmakers' spectacular imaginations.

Under these conditions, the cel animated feature was simply a logical final step – one which Western film industries, for their own cultural reasons, never took to the degree that the Japanese industry did. Hollywood had to wait for the normalization of photorealistic DVFX to produce imaginative visions of the scale and complexity which a wholesale embrace of cel animation offered. The contrast between a film such as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*

(Hayao Miyazaki, 1984) and *The Last Starfighter*, in this regard, is simply stunning. Even at this early stage, however, an utterly fatuous Hollywood film like *Starchaser: The Legend of Orin* (Steve Hahn, 1985) only remains worthless until one performs the thought-experiment of pondering how it could have been filmed in live-action. The answer is that it never could have; the simulacrum of cel animation was its only possible ontology. In this light, it provides yet another lucid test case of how the *Star Wars* franchise was instrumental in pushing Hollywood spectacle as a whole in a more animated direction – acclimatizing an entire generation of audiences to imaginative spectacles and story-worlds that could never be created in traditional, corporeal live-action, and so mandating some form of animation as the way forward. If *Starchaser* is a historical curiosity today, it is because – the efforts of films such as those produced at DreamWorks between 1998 and 2003 notwithstanding – cel animation would lose out to DVFX as that form, to the extent of almost redefining the everyday meaning of the word “animation.” Cel animation’s historical importance, however, must never be forgotten, especially if one credits Kristin Thompson’s suggestion that it was unconsciously marginalized by the Hollywood industry as a defensive measure to preserve live-action’s patina of “movie magic.”

Such forgetting of animation, however, was to prove the radical modernist tradition’s stock-in-trade. It was an article of faith of the radical modernist tradition in film theory that cinema practices should be “materialist,” in emphasizing – rather than occluding for the sake of narrative transitivity – the concrete material bases of the medium. But these materialist bases were invariably couched in terms of photographic reproduction, and the ideological problematics regarding Western Quattrocento perspective which this supposedly entailed. So averse was the tradition to examining the textual poetics of specific films, in a spirit of impressionistic *cinophilia*, that it remained largely innocent of imaginative genre narratives of visual effects, to say nothing of animation. All this, in turn, profoundly relativized the tradition’s assumptions about the material bases of film – it seemingly never occurring to political modernism’s chief exponents that the medium’s material basis could not just be something to be either occluded or emphasized, but something to be fundamentally transcended, in the interests of realizing the grander imaginative/narrative visions at stake. This was a goal that was, ultimately, not possible in the mid-twentieth century. It has become possible, however, in our own time. And, as we have seen, this has given rise to some considerable resistance among more contemporary film theorists who still answer to the basic impetus behind modernism. Although they are not situated in

exactly the same discourse as Wollen, Heath, McCabe, Mulvey, Rodowick, et. al., theorists such as Klein, Bukatman, Tuck, Darley, Pierson, Geuens, Manon, etc. all share a basic ambivalence towards cinema's narrativized spectacle aspect – its function for realistically visualizing story-worlds which offer a profoundly utopian imaginative-escapist aspect. And as we have seen, this aspect is profoundly important because, as Dyer has shown, it offers a reminder that the existing Western world of consumerist banality and corporate-capitalist vexation is not the only one which exists, has ever existed, or ever will exist, not least because the human imagination can conceive of so many others. A film such as Mike Judge's *Office Space* (1999) is all very well, in declaring that “work sucks,” but contemporaneous digitally-liberated spectacles such as Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) or Disney's *Tarzan* go one further, in vividly showing a world where not only do the aggravations of life in a cubicle not exist, but the fatuous corporate consultants of Judge's film would soon be decapitated or mauled by a leopard.

All this, however, presumes the acceptance of one fact that the modernist tradition has never been able to admit of: the existence of an imaginative consciousness that precedes and subsumes the moviegoing experience and cinematic diegesis. This is the sort of consciousness that feels indignantly cheated when Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) sets up a sequence premised on the concept of “astronaut gets sucked into black hole” – a launching pad for Baroque massive-sublime spectacle if ever there was one – and then offers precious little in payoff, regressing into a sub-par imitation of Kubrick's *2001* “Stargate” sequence, underlain by breathtakingly unconvincing scientific pretensions and a saccharine theme of father-daughter affection. Nolan's film manages the difficult feat of being even more unsatisfying than the treatment of the same event in *The Black Hole* (Gary Nelson, 1979) thirty-five years earlier. Opinions such as these, however, require a certain knowledge and curiosity about the real-world subjects of astronomy and space exploration to formulate, and such curiosities are one of the chief things that the tradition of radical modernism – so given over to the abstractions of semiotics and psychoanalysis – tended to ignore. To focus solely upon the material signs of creation, or supposed psychological nature of reception, of spectacular sequences such as these is inadequate: an admission is needed that an imaginative sense – in the Coleridge vein – exists outside of and beyond the filmic text, and is not wholly reducible to concerns with ideology. And it is this sense that film theory discourses derived from radical modernism have been most unable to accept; forever emphasizing the fact of the film's technical construction – and how we *must*, in

defiance of all evidence, be *supposed* to notice its artifice – as a way of avoiding any such imaginative curiosity about wider implications. For it is once the imaginative content of films' imaginative spectacles are allowed, on their own terms, that cinema's utopian escapist function – its ability to take us out of ourselves and into more exotic, exciting, fulfilling places – comes most fully to the fore. If, as the modernist mindset would have it, one is only supposed to notice give-away matte lines, noticeable rear-projection, tell-tale signs of model work, or give-away lack of digital texturing, in a cinematic spectacle, then one may still be able to admire a certain ingenuity of technique – but at the cost of any imaginative, narrative empathy with the story-worlds these things were meant to re-situate you into. Films are thus not allowed to take you out of yourself into another, potentially emancipating, world, but only to leave you in your seat as a spectator, meditating upon the impossibility of illusion. The former prospect, this dissertation has argued, bears far greater utopian possibilities than the latter.

The Baroque and Decadent genealogies this dissertation has traced for contemporary cinema, therefore, represent an attempt to offer a language for an alternative discourse. The Baroque cinematic aesthetics evoked throughout represent an attempt to insist upon the vast geographical and temporal breadth of the empirically-existing world – to evoke a worldview not reducible to the parochial and presentist concerns of (post)modernism. The visual spectacles of verticality, profusion, and sublimity, couched in narrative terms of exultant self-immolation, the massive sublime, and the privileging of dramatic action, create a cinematic affect totally at odds with concerns over self-reflexivity. Such cinematic aesthetics force upon the spectator the substance and content of what it is being dramatized, bombastically disallowing any concern with the mere fact that representation is taking place. To view the battle in Hong Kong in *Pacific Rim* or the opening Krypton sequence in *Man of Steel* with an eye to scrutinizing the frame for tell-tale compositing lines or imperfect digital texturing is a fool's errand – everything about these diegeses has been designed to disallow such modernist concern with transparency, and instead force spectatorial complicity in the spectacle. It is profoundly significant, furthermore, that upon *Pacific Rim's* release, fan communities immediately began to apprehend it at least as much in terms of *Neon Genesis: Evangelion* as *Godzilla/Gamera daikaiju* spectacles. And likewise, one of the least-remarked, but most telling, facts about Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* was that – a villain named General Zod notwithstanding – its chief source of visual inspiration was not Richard Lester's *Superman II* (1980), but the feature-length cartoon *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton*

(Curt Geda, Scott Jeralds & Dan Riba, 1996). The latter was broadcast as the pilot of a new TV series (1996-2000), and in it one clearly recognizes *Man of Steel's* extended opening action scenes on Krypton – fantastical creatures, senescent bureaucrats, high-flying action chases, vertical columns of fiery lava, and all. Again, cel animation staked out frontiers of Baroque spectacle that it would take DVFX-enabled “live action” another generation to catch up to. Whether it takes the form of a beautiful otherworldly landscape glimpsed for the first time, a massive alien spacecraft hovering above a city and promising doom upon mankind, or a great golden eagle majestically taking to the air, this dissertation has sought to invoke the terms of the seventeenth-century Baroque to suggest a range of imaginative experience that cannot be satisfactorily addressed by theories of the critique of ideology or the epistemological harmonization of all media address.

Furthermore, as we have seen, cinema cannot be done justice to by any paradigm which underestimates the perverse, and the allure of transgression simply for its own sake. The Decadent aesthetics traced in this dissertation are, among other things, testimonies to the degree to which the antisocial and the contrarian are intrinsically stitched into human nature, and a constituent part of artistic genius. To censor these perverse instincts is to kill art. Decadent aesthetics – in all their morbidity and grotesquerie; their fetishism of the gaze, their will toward isolating embowerment, and their amoral obsession with form, couched in narratives of perversely rewriting cultural certitudes, of narcissistic self-consciousness, and of feverish, free-associative, interconnectivity – are thus a reminder that cinema must necessarily be allowed its disreputable and disturbing side if it is to exist at all. Stanley Kauffmann once defined cinema as “this muddied, quasi-strangulated, prostituted art, so life-crammed and responsive and variegated and embracing” (Kauffmann 1980, 436). A phrase such as this – with its scatological, sadomasochistic, promiscuous, hyperactive, and obsessive-compulsive connotations – is, I would suggest, one of the better summations of cinema’s appeal to the Decadent sensibility.

DreamWorks Animation’s *Rise of the Guardians* – again in contrast to *The Santa Clause 3* – offers a valuable final illumination of what the real power dynamics are between cultural critics and the spectacles of Hollywood. It is not the former who pronounce and pass judgment upon the latter, but rather the opposite. *Rise of the Guardians’* Baroque and Decadent aesthetic is revelatory in the frankness with which it dictates the terms of its own reception to the audience. This is because “Jack Frost” is not quite a universally-known mythic persona in the West today,

and so the name may be familiar to some spectators, but not to others. Faced with this reality, a film like *Santa Clause 3* would play it safe and flatter those who do not know the name/persona – and do so by channeling a jeering know-nothing mentality whereby if our omnipresent popular culture has not made all children aware of something, then it must not exist or be worth knowing. *Rise of the Guardians*, however, recognizes the flaw in such myopic thinking. Simply put, its makers are fully cognizant that they are purveyors of the aforementioned omnipresent popular culture, and therefore have no need to defer to such limitations on their audience's part. The number of children unfamiliar with "Jack Frost" as a persona will have substantially declined in the wake of *Rise of the Guardians*' theatrical run and home-video release, because the film has devoted all the resources of Hollywood spectacle to presenting it as common knowledge. This one example can stand for numerous others. Such self-assertions on Hollywood's part are crystallizations of how, as per Paglia above, the spectacles of the cinema are basically lapidary in nature – evincing a heritage, derived all the way from Ancient Egypt, of being able to impose and impress themselves upon the memory, consciousness, and imagination of their spectators through sheer, overawing visual display. These grand logics and potentialities of spectacle – with their deep historical roots in grandiose Pharaonic-Greco-Roman scale of assertion – constitute a certain discernible *lingua franca* for Western aesthetics which has endured for millennia, across the numerous different media of architecture, poetry, drama, sculpture, painting, the novel, and now – for the past 120 years – the cinema. Even as the cinema has changed with the advent of DVFX, the continuity with past aesthetic traditions has only grown stronger, rather than weaker. This, ultimately, reminds us that aesthetic traditions have a life of their own, which can transcend specific period and culture – defying the present vagaries of ideology in either – and continue to speak for themselves, and endure.

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