

Diegetic Breaks and the Avant-Garde

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I am sitting in the movie theater with my wife watching the Hughes Brothers film, *From Hell* (2001). I jump as Jack the Ripper grabs and kills another prostitute. As officers arrive on the scene, the film speeds up in time-lapse fashion and the investigators and passers-by become blurs of motion. The only visual constants on the screen are the room in the background and the motionless corpse of the victim. Watching the still body surrounded by activity seems to accentuate the woman's death. I think to myself "that's a neat effect," and suddenly I am no longer in Whitechapel fearing for the safety of Johnny Depp or the next targeted prostitute: I am back in the theater watching a movie screen with my wife.

What happened? Why was I suddenly involuntarily transported from the diegetic world of the film back to the world in front of the screen? Sheena Rogers (2001) sees the movie screen as a window, much like Alice's looking-glass in the novels of Lewis Carroll. Imaginatively, we can see into the screen and become part of the world beyond; however, the glass always remains between the viewer and the other side (p. 10). As a film viewer, I am accustomed to imaginatively jumping through the screen to

the world beyond, and shall remain there until something breaks me out of that diegetic world. If the person in front of me gets up for another drink or the child behind me cries, I am usually temporarily distracted from the movie. However, I increasingly find myself transported back to the theater by what is happening *within* the frame. The film itself reminds me that I am watching a film.

Normally, the filmmaker's role is assumed to be that of minimizing the barrier between viewer and film, and facilitating the imaginative leap into the screen. However, the intrusion of film structure into the diegesis is not a new occurrence. Avant-garde films, such as those made by Yvonne Rainer, have long gone against the grain of traditional Hollywood cinema: "Her use of discontinuous editing, scene repetition, multiple perspectives, disjunctive juxtapositions, and nonrealist narration is designed to question the sorts of perceptual procedures which accompany mainstream narrative" (Ryan & Kellner, 1988, p. 283). In describing the film *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), Stephen Prince (2001) says "the film's disjointed, dreamlike, and irrational narrative frustrates the audience's desire to draw a coherent interpretation of its dissociated events" (p. 330). What is striking is how these statements could describe many films now being aimed at and distributed to a mainstream audience.

Over the last several decades, American audiences have embraced an increasing number of movies that borrow narrative and production styles from the avant-garde. Many of these techniques

have a tendency to break the diegesis of a film. However, since the purpose of mainstream cinema is frequently different from non-mainstream, we might suspect that avant-garde directors and their more commercial counterparts are using these techniques differently. Because the term *diegesis* has been used in many different ways (see Branigan, 1986), I will use the following definition of the word to clarify my thesis: “the story understood as a pseudo-world” (Aumont, Bergala, Marie & Vernte, 1983/1992, p. 89). To set the stage for this discussion, we will examine the general codes separating traditional Hollywood and avant-garde films and how these dividers seem to be breaking down.

The Codes of Mainstream Hollywood and Avant-Garde Films

Since the early days of film, scholars have been fascinated by cinema’s ability to absorb an audience, especially that of American cinema. In the second decade of the twentieth century, a group of Russian filmmakers interested in studying the powers of film used American movies because they elicited the greatest reaction from viewers and seemed superior in form to other cinemas (Kuleshov, 1974). It was obvious even then that a general style of filmmaking was developing out of Hollywood, a style that would eventually become recognized as embodying “mainstream or dominant cinema.”

Although this classic Hollywood style has many facets, its main tenets are three: the means of film production should be invisible to the audience; it should be accessible; it should be universal in its

emotional appeals (Bordwell, 1985). As a result, trying to keep the viewer within the diegetic world is an important concern of the mainstream director. This view is embodied in Alfred Hitchcock's (1937/1966) description of his craft: "I try to tell a story in the simplest possible way, so that I can feel sure it will hold the attention of any audience and won't puzzle them" (p. 59). While generalities can be made about mainstream film, David Bordwell rightly points out that classic Hollywood style is not a formula, but a set of ranges with built-in limitations. Each film is an independent creation that operates under a relatively unified code of aesthetics.

By contrast, avant-garde and experimental films define themselves in opposition to the mainstream. Not surprisingly, this frequently entails opposition to the diegetic constructs favored by mainstream filmmakers. It should be noted there are many other descriptions for similar works, such as "experimental" and "underground," and that "avant-garde" carries many different meanings and is even opposed by some filmmakers labeled with the term (Rees, 1999). However, lacking a universally accepted alternative, I have chosen to use this most widely recognized heading and to borrow a working definition of "avant-garde" from author William Wees (1992): "experimenting with the medium and opposing the dominant film industry" (p. ix).

The idea that the camera lens is an extension of Renaissance perspective and therefore

attempts to limit and impose Western values (Baudry, 1974/1999) is central to an understanding of avant-garde aesthetics. Artists such as Stan Brakhage attempt to “wreck” the perspective of lenses by spitting on them or shooting through cloudy glass (Wees, 1985). Avant-garde filmmakers create by shattering the confines of mainstream cinema and rending their modes and conventions. As a reflection of this, Noel Burch and Jorge Dana base their taxonomy of films on the criterion of adherence to dominant film codes. According to this scale, the more radical the disruption of these codes, the more ideological ties the film breaks, and the greater the value of the film to the avant-garde (Casetti, 1993/1999, p. 202).

The relationship between audience and the avant-garde filmmaker is equally dissimilar to dominant cinema. The film theorist Noel Carroll (1993) notes that avant-garde films are designed to be difficult to understand and often require special knowledge to decipher the meanings. In many cases, a narrative structure is never used; the intention is to force the viewer to be an active participant in interpreting the film (Carroll, 1979/1996). In order to subvert dominant film codes, feminist filmmaker Yvonne Rainer (1990) resists using either a plot or a narrator to move her stories forward (p.188). While a diegesis may exist in an avant-garde film, the director encourages the viewers to be constantly aware of the fact that they are watching a film, a technique commonly called reflexivity. According to Richard

Stam (1985), a reflexive work “points to its own mask and invites the public to examine its design and texture” (p. 1). It strips away the illusion central to mainstream cinema.

Reflexivity vs. Diegetic Breaks

It might be said: diegetic breaks are essentially the same as reflexivity, and since we already have a term, why not use it? However, reflexivity is based on a value judgment. Robert Stam (1985) divides reflexive works into “authentic” (those that call for an active spectator) and “debased” (those that play to passive consumers). Reflexivity’s connection to ideology is unavoidable, and using the word cannot help but bring up the underlying question: “Should filmmakers seek simply to entertain, or to strive toward what some consider to be the loftier goal of challenging the audience?” The question goes beyond the scope of this study, and the word “reflexivity” implies a stance where none is actually offered.

Writers who tap into the concept of reflexivity tend to view film from a theoretical framework based in psychoanalysis, Marxism, and feminism (what is sometimes referred to as “contemporary film theory”). Much of this contemporary theory focuses on how viewers are “sutured” into the film text, and posits them as helpless subjects before a powerful mirror they see as reality (see Metz, 1975; Silverman, 1983). If one is to discuss interaction between audience and film, it is obviously important to

establish a framework that defines the audience's role in this interaction. However, since we are not addressing ideological effects of film, this does not seem a productive model.

Although reflexivity couches audience awareness in dogmatic terms, diegetic breaks serve more to describe cognitive phenomena (see Branigan, 1992). In focusing on how viewers alternate between the diegesis and the film as film, one is really talking about a cognitive shift of attention. Tom Sutcliffe (2000) notes that in order to watch a film, "the watcher must, by force of will, become blind to all kinds of peripheral and distracting detail" (p. xiv). This concept finds a home in cognitive film theory.

In contrast with "contemporary" theorists, cognitive scholars have established a model viewer who knows that he or she is watching a film. Murray Smith (1995) argues: "what is involved in the apprehension of fiction is a form of *pretense* or *make-belief* rather than belief" (p. 117). Spectators know they are in the theater, but *pretend* they are within the world of the screen (see also Currie, 1995). Similarly, Joseph Anderson (1996) uses the concept of framing to describe how the viewer categorizes the difference between physical reality and the diegetic world. In a later work, Anderson (submitted for publication) draws on J.J. Gibson's distinctions between scene and surface to describe the difference between the diegesis and the movie screen: "it is critical to realize that no visual array can be seen as both scene and surface *simultaneously*" (p. 2). In other words, we cannot coexist in the diegetic world

and the real world; when we enter one, we leave the other. This approach to defining the relationship between film and viewer seems to be appropriate for the purposes of this study.

The “Borrowing” of the Avant-Garde

Dominant and avant-garde cinema are often discussed as mutually exclusive categories. However, several authors point out that mainstream films have a way of appropriating the innovations of non-mainstream cinema, thereby blurring the distinction (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001; Rees, 1985). During the 1970s, cinematographers quickly adopted the use of steadicams and other devices that free the point of view (Geuens, 2000). A.L. Rees points out that in the following decade, music videos and advertising executives quickly adopted many of the hallmarks of experimental video. According to Bordwell and Thompson, this led to young mainstream filmmakers’ pushing of the envelope during the 1990s “because their audience, brought up on soap operas, comic books, and video games, were not put off by dense and tricky storytelling devices” (p. 91).

Although many works acknowledge that mainstream films utilize avant-garde techniques, no studies have investigated whether they use them differently, or if so, how. In addition, several scholars have conducted studies of individual films and identified avant-garde styles in them; however, no one has proposed categories of these techniques so they can be applied between films. In this study, I will

use previous scholarship to devise categories of those techniques that tend to create diegetic breaks. I will then use these categories to compare the use of the techniques in several avant-garde and mainstream films.

Categories of Techniques

Several authors have already categorized tendencies within avant-garde film. Peter Wollen, for instance, developed seven binary features of mainstream cinema versus counter-cinema (as cited in Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992, p. 198). In his appendix to *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, Robert Stam (1985) offers an excellent discussion of techniques that can break the diegesis. He divides these into four broad categories: lack of depth, use of color, use of movement, and sound strategies. The divisions suggested by Wollen and Stam are fine for their purposes, however they are too broad to be useful in comparing films from the two traditions. Rather than attempt to group them, William Wees (1992) offers an extended list of visual techniques used in the avant-garde: superimposition, prismatic and kaleidoscopic images, soft focus, unusual camera angles, disorienting camera movements, extreme close-ups, negative image, distorted and totally abstract images, extreme variable in lighting and exposure, scratching and painting on the film, slow motion, reverse motion, pixilation, time-lapse photography, quick cutting, intricate patterns of montage, single-frame editing, and

flicker effects...these techniques pose questions about seeing and are more complex and dynamic than normal film viewing. (p. 55)

All of these perspectives were informative in helping craft a list of practices on which to focus. I have divided these into broad categories of visual and narrative techniques.

Visual Techniques

An audience will usually identify non-standard visual techniques with little effort. We are so accustomed to the visual conventions of narrative mainstream cinema that it rattles us as viewers to be confronted with a drastic divergence. Trevor Ponch (1997) points out that filmic devices become conventions based on their use. An audience may be aware of the structure of a film the first time they see such as device, however subsequent encounters decrease their awareness and make it easier to stay in the diegetic world. Many of the techniques covered in this section have gained increased currency in mainstream films, especially with recent advances in computer graphics and non-linear editing (McQuire, 1999). However, they still lie sufficiently far outside the general filmgoer's understanding of mainstream practices to rupture a film's diegetic world. The categories I suggest follow:

- *Changes in film type*: While once largely the fare of the avant-garde, several mainstream directors have incorporated shifts between film formats, such as Oliver Stone's use of 8mm film in *Nixon* (1995). This also includes effects meant to make film look older or cheaper, such as using sepia tone and adding scratches.
- *Showing production elements*: In an attempt at aesthetic subversion, many avant-garde directors specifically show lighting, production crew, and other elements of the production to remind the viewer they are watching a film. Several Hollywood spoofs, such as *Scary Movie* (2000), play on this approach by having characters in the diegetic world acknowledge crew and production elements.
- *Lack of transitions*: Laura Gaither (1996) notes that mainstream films use "dissolves, subtitles, or fadeouts to indicate a change of time or place" (p. 107). Several recent filmmakers have dispensed with such transitions, taking their cue from avant-garde directors who often try to connect disjuncted scenes (Carroll, 1981/1996). This leads to confusion as to when and where events shown are happening (see Anderson, 1996, p. 123). In the case of dream sequences or similar devices, it can be confusing whether they are happening at all, as in the films *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) and *12 Monkeys* (1996).

- *Abrupt transitions*: One of the cardinal rules of Hollywood editing has been to avoid the jump cut. It is virtually impossible for an audience not to notice violations of this convention. As early as the 1940s, avant-garde directors such as Maya Deren regularly used jump cuts as a device in their films. However, mainstream directors have begun to adopt this technique in their films, especially for violence and shock (Bordwell & Staiger, 1985) but also for stylistic reasons, such as *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996). This category also includes the use of freeze-frame as a transition device. By freezing the action, the audience is instantly removed from the diegetic world
- *Rapid montage*: The fractured representation of 1970s and '80s avant-garde films have found their way to music video and eventually to the mainstream through such films as *Moulin Rouge* (2001).
- *Motion Speed*: Although slow and fast motion have been used in films almost since their inception, manipulations of time are usually kept "invisible" to the audience (Stam, 1985). However, several recent mainstream movies, such as *The Matrix* (1999), flaunt their use of motion speed and have fueled its use as a stylistic (rather than an emotional) effect.
- *Color usage*: Unmotivated shifts between color and black-and-white border on becoming commonplace in films. Other uses of color in films that seem to go against sustaining the diegesis

would be colorizing only portions of scenes, such as in *Schindler's List* (1993), and extreme colors that accentuate “the artificial nature of film color” (Stam, 1995, p. 256).

- *Nontraditional camera movement*: Handheld cameras were once a hallmark of the avant-garde; however, mainstream films quickly adopted countercinema’s styles and tools, such as the steadicam (Geuens, 2000). Floating cameras and jerky camera movements are in widespread use in Hollywood film. This freedom of the camera has led to even more extreme movements, such as shooting with a tilted horizontal axis in *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Since viewers constantly try to give spatial order to a scene, many nontraditional camera movements can cause breaks in the diegesis (Branigan, 1992).
- *CGI and nondiegetic images*: The use of computer graphics in films range from altering images, such as compositing an Alpine villa in *True Lies* (1994), to creating the digital character of Jar Jar Binks in *Star Wars – Episode I, The Phantom Menace* (1999). As Scott McQuire (1999) points out, the only limit to digital creation is how believable it is (p. 389). Stephen Prince (1996) posits that a “perceptually realistic image” displays all the cues an audience expects to see (shadow, texture, etc.) and operates in the way viewers expect them to operate. Despite the lack of a basis in reality,

viewers found the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* (1993) “realistic” because the creatures lived up to their expectations. When computer graphics fail, such as some have argued about the character of Jar Jar Binks, viewers will not accept the creations as part of the diegetic world. While not necessarily using computers, some avant-garde directors have used unrelated animation and other nondiegetic video (such as stock and archival footage) to interrupt their narratives. These devices have also shown up in some mainstream films.

Narrative Techniques

Noel Carroll (1988) envisions movie narration as a question-and-answer proposition; he calls this *erotetic narration* (p. 171). Questions raised by one scene will eventually be answered in later scenes. As viewers, he claims we form these questions subconsciously and begin looking for resolutions. However, many mainstream films now being made do not necessarily follow this form. Just as some avant-garde filmmakers challenge “the notion that time and narration must follow each other in a logical fashion” (Gaither, 1996, p. 107), some Hollywood directors have adopted narrative techniques that have a tendency to break the diegesis. I have identified six of these categories:

- *Nonlinear narration*: In the classic Hollywood film, “the only permissible manipulation of story order

is the flashback” (Bordwell, 1985); however, we can clearly see this is no longer the case. *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is divided into four parts; however, if we number each segment as it appears in the film and then place them in chronological order, the numbers would go 2, 1, 4, and 3. Despite this break with tradition, it was still one of the top-grossing films of 1994. Rather than the questions and answers Carroll suggests, the film often gives answers before the audience has the questions. Some of the actions only make sense in recalling earlier segments of the movie. Because viewers try to impose temporal order (Branigan, 1992), this kind of storytelling can cause a diegetic break by forcing the audience to leave the world of the film in order to mentally reorganize what they have seen.

- *Direct address*: When characters look into the camera and directly address the audience, such as in *Tom Jones* (1963) or *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986), the audience has no choice but to be aware of themselves and the film. Branigan (1986) suggests this is because by directly addressing the camera, a reverse shot or eyeline match becomes impossible (p. 53).
- *Narrator becomes character*: Narrators have been a staple of Hollywood since the first sound films. One way of subverting this norm is for the narrator to suddenly become a character in the diegetic

world. *The Big Lebowski* (1998) uses this technique by having Sam Elliot, who has been a disembodied narrator for over half the film, walk up next to the main character and briefly engage him in conversation.

- *Revealing the film in the narration*: While some directors will remind the audience they are watching a film by showing the tools of filmmaking, other will actually reveal the film as a part of the plot. For instance, in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) the police show up and shut down film production just before an attack is mounted against the French castle.
- *Intertextuality*: According to Emanuel Levy (1999), “the meaning of a particular work derives from its relations to a larger set of works. There can be a conscious borrowing of a character or plot element, but a film can also comment or revise or correct established conventions” (p. 10). Some directors use these intertextual references with little explanation and thus audiences must be familiar with other films and genres to properly understand their meaning. This can cause confusion and a diegetic break when viewers do not have this body of knowledge. For instance, some dialogue in Tim Burton’s *Planet of the Apes* (2001) cannot be properly understood without knowledge of the original 1968 film.

- *Conflicting style*: Viewers are aware of many different film and television styles. Greg Smith (1999) points out that filmmakers can set a mood to elicit emotions from the audience by using such common cues. Some directors have played off of this cultural knowledge by presenting subject matter in a contradictory style, such as Oliver Stone in *Natural Born Killers* (1994). In the film, we are shown a scene from the character Mallory's childhood, where she is being sexually abused by her father. However the entire scene is presented in the production style of a television sitcom, complete with an "I Love Mallory" title sequence. By subverting audience expectation, Stone forces the viewers to be aware of the structure of the film and how it conflicts with what they know about film culture.

Although these categories are not exhaustive, they account for a large number of avant-garde techniques utilized within mainstream cinema.

Selection of Texts

In order to compare the use of these techniques between mainstream and avant-garde films, I have chosen three films to represent each category. The mainstream films were chosen based on their ability to yield rich examples of the techniques discussed above, as well as on their acceptance by a

mainstream audience based on box office receipts and their directors. The first film chosen was *Moulin Rouge* (2001). This film was the 42nd highest-grossing film of 2001, earning \$57,000,000 (according to *Variety* magazine) in the year it was released. It was nominated for an Oscar for Best Picture. The director, Baz Luhrmann, also directed the monetarily successful *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet* (1996).

The second film chosen was *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Director David Lynch's film earned \$5,600,000 in 2001, and was ranked 155th grossing film of the year (*Variety*). Lynch was nominated for Best Director by the Motion Picture Academy for his work on the film. In addition, Lynch has directed several films that have won some level of mainstream acceptance, such as *Blue Velvet* (1986). He also directed the television show *Twin Peaks*, which was rated one of the top fifty television shows ever by *TV Guide*.

The third mainstream film used in this study was *Natural Born Killers* (1994). The film grossed \$50,000,000 in its year of release, ranking it the 29th top-grossing film of the year (*Variety*). Director Oliver Stone is a well-known force in Hollywood who has found mainstream success with several movies, such as *Platoon* (1986) and *JFK* (1991).

These three films cannot be said to broadly represent mainstream Hollywood film. As mentioned

previously, they were chosen because they are well known for containing many of the techniques identified as breaking the diegesis. All three of the films can be called mainstream based on their acceptance by American audiences; however, these films represent a body of mainstream work that actively question and disregard some of the conventions of traditional Hollywood film production.

Just as the selected mainstream films have avant-garde tendencies, so are the selected avant-garde films closer to traditional Hollywood films than many. The selections reflect an attempt at a level playing field, as well as the difficulty of comparing narrative devices in films that actively seek to prevent any narrative from developing. Regardless, the following films can be identified as avant-garde under the definition set out previously: “experimenting with the medium and opposing the dominant film industry” (Wees, 1992, p. ix). The films are selected from three different decades, the better to test whether some of the techniques from earlier films have found later acceptance.

The first film chosen was Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (1961). As one of the founding members of the French New Wave movement, Godard had a tremendous impact on art films. In a retrospective on the film, David Sterritt (2000) notes that Godard “revel[s] in cinematic expression for its own sake and plac[es] stylistic pyrotechnics at the center of the moviegoing experience” (p. B7).

Stevie (1978), directed by Robert Enders, is the second avant-garde movie used in this study.

Edward Hirsch (2000) describes *Stevie* as a “low-budget, low-tech art movie” (p. 32). The film was shot in seventeen days on a budget of \$500,000.

The third avant-garde film used in this study is *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), an independent film by black feminist director Julie Dash. In describing this film, Laura Gaither (1996) notes “[it] is a challenging film to view: the roving camera, the new images, the thick dialect, the many characters. Audiences are continually reminded that they must work hard to understand the film” (p. 105).

Daughters of the Dust represents an avant-garde work from a particular point of view. As a black female director, Dash is particularly interested in how Hollywood conventions work against minorities, and how these conventions can be subverted.

Results

Each film was viewed in light of the established categories, to see which techniques were used and how (see Appendix). All nine of the visual techniques are found in at least two of the six films in this study. Of the six narrative techniques listed, five are used by at least one of the films; none of them utilize the technique of revealing the film in the narration. Each category will be examined separately to ascertain if techniques are used differently.

Changes in Film Type

Changes in film type show up in two movies, both mainstream. *Natural Born Killers* makes liberal use of different film stock, such as 8mm, as well as adding touches to film to make it look old. This is done on a fairly regular basis, with no discernable motivation other than stylistic concerns. *Moulin Rouge* also uses effects to make the film look aged; however, this technique is utilized during transitions and dance sequences, not during the main narrative.

Showing Production Elements

None of the films included in the study uses the traditional avant-garde style of showing production elements. However, *Natural Born Killers* includes several effects that make the means of production apparent. Throughout the film, flat objects are used as “projectors” to display a variety of images, most of them nondiegetic (such as video of livestock and old movie clips from westerns). On ceilings, walls, windows, churches, etc., seemingly random clips appear that have the effect of reminding the audience that mass media pervades our everyday life. The audience cannot help but be aware of the production of the film as the images flash.

The lighting techniques in *Natural Born Killers* also make the viewer aware of the production. After the beginning sequence, which takes place in a diner, Mickey and Mallory stop their mayhem for a dance. The natural lighting of the diner gives way to obvious track-style theater lighting as colorful gels

pulse in rhythm with the dancers. The unnatural use of lights immediately becomes obvious, and alerts the viewer to the presence of the lighting instruments.

Lack of Transitions

A lack of transitions is a similar theme across all the selected films. In *Daughters of the Dust*, a character known as the Unborn Child walks from present-day events into a flashback, and begins fetching indigo for the slave workers with no visual indication of the temporal change. *Stevie* makes wide use of flashbacks, using only standard cuts between scenes. Most of the flashbacks only last for a second or two and act almost as B-roll in a news program. As Stevie mentions her school teacher, we suddenly cut to a shot of the teacher and then back. Similarly, *Breathless* occasionally shifts in time with no warning to the viewer. As Michel talks with Liliane, an earlier scene of him stealing a car is suddenly repeated for several seconds.

While the lack of transitions in the avant-garde films generally fall into the category of flashbacks in time, the mainstream films studied make widespread use of this technique. *Natural Born Killers* shifts temporally and spatially, and often launches into dream sequences without alerting the viewer, resulting in a temporary state of disorientation. Similarly, *Mulholland Drive* unexpectedly drifts into what might be termed “surreal sequences.” At one point, Betty’s neighbor comes to her apartment and picks up an

ashtray she had left. After the neighbor leaves, Betty goes back to the couch and the ashtray is still on the table. In another scene, Betty gets up to answer the door and is wearing a different dress when the door opens. These seemingly impossible occurrences take place as a part of the natural narrative, with no attempt to reconcile the discrepancies. In *Moulin Rouge*, spatial and time shifts occur with little warning to the audience.

Abrupt Transitions

Several abrupt transitions appear in the films studied. Both *Daughters of the Dust* and *Moulin Rouge* incorporate freeze frames as a transition device. In *Daughters of the Dust*, the picture freezes on the pregnant Eula in pain. The frozen picture then dissolves to an action shot featuring the Unborn Child. The freeze frame can be interpreted as the sudden arrest of reality as the spirit of the Unborn Child arrives. By contrast, *Moulin Rouge* uses freeze frames as a stylistic device and to draw attention to characters. For instance, when Christian meets the troupe of bohemians, the nonstop movement and zooms of the camera is temporarily frozen as each character is introduced.

Natural Born Killers and *Breathless* both make use of jump cuts as regular production devices. Godard seems to utilize jump cuts to denote shifts in time. As Michel drives on the highway, we see cars disappear and others suddenly take their place. One infers that time is passing, but the effect is

still jarring to the audience. Oliver Stone uses jump cuts with no discernable intent. They generate additional motion within a visual array that is in constant flux, but they neither advance the film nor make a narrative (or extra-narrative) point.

Rapid Montage

Only two of the films studied include rapid montage sequences: *Natural Born Killers* and *Moulin Rouge*. Both films use this technique to increase the pace and level of excitement. However, the quick string of images seems to risk alienating viewers, because they are not given time to take in the substance of each image.

Motion Speed

Only one of the avant-garde films tamper with motion speed, while all of the mainstream films include such techniques. *Daughters of the Dust* frequently uses slow motion for two reasons: whenever the Unborn Child appears or other supernatural forces come into play, and when the spirits of the ancestors are evoked (such as when the bottles hanging from the tree are broken). Dash also makes use of other motion changes by strobing the actions of the Unborn Child, and by contrasting slow and fast motion as Eula and the Unborn Child race toward each other.

All three mainstream films use slow and fast motion together as a stylistic tool. In *Natural Born*

Killers, Mickey throws a knife and the audience sees the knife moving toward the victim in slow motion. Once the knife has almost reached its target it instantly speeds up and kills the person in a blur of action. The dancers and patrons of the *Moulin Rouge* frequently speed up, slow down, and stop to little purpose. In *Mulholland Drive*, Betty and Rita prepare to enter a theater. A tracking shot begins from far away and quickly picks up the pace until it abruptly stops at the door as they enter.

Color Usage

Shifting from black-and-white to color has become an extremely popular effect for both avant-garde and mainstream films. *Stevie* makes extensive use of black-and-white scenes to denote flashbacks. Several times, these flashbacks will gradually become color scenes, as the narrator takes over the reins of the story. *Natural Born Killers* features rapid changes in color. In just the first seven minutes of the film, there are 22 shifts from color to black-and-white. There seems to be no hidden meaning behind the use of this technique. *Moulin Rouge* also shifts to black-and-white several times as part of the visual style.

In *Daughters of the Dust*, color is used to draw interest. When the women of the island prepare food, viewers cannot help but notice the unnaturally vibrant colors of the fruits. This effect makes the audience aware of the hands preparing the food, and thus of their work.

Nontraditional Camera Movement

Several of the films call attention to their use of handheld cameras. In *Breathless*, the camera is constantly moving and free to roam. Godard often uses shots that are slightly tilted on the horizontal axis. This is similar to Oliver Stone's use of the camera in *Natural Born Killers*. Since the camera is rarely at a 90 degree angle to the floor, the viewer's ability to identify with the camera is frustrated. In *Mulholland Drive*, handheld cameras are used during conversations at the diner. The cameras use over-the-shoulder shots, but smoothly move up and down and left and right as the conversations take place. The random smooth movements almost go behind the heads of the subjects and way above their eyeline.

Some of the films use other techniques as well. Godard holds shots for an extreme length of time. When we first see Patricia and Michel together, the shot lasts for almost three full minutes. In *Moulin Rouge*, Luhrmann uses short lenses and fisheye lenses to distort characters, such as Harold Zidler.

CGI and Nondiegetic Images

All of the avant-garde films were made prior to the wide use of computer effects; however, *Daughters of the Dust* uses a special effect that does not rise to the level of believability. Towards the

end of the film, Eli walks out onto water to push a statue into the ocean. The scene is highly symbolic: the statue represents a freeing of spirit; Eli taps into that spirit to enable his walk.

All three mainstream films feature computer-enhanced images. In *Natural Born Killers*, computers are used to morph Mickey's face so that his features distort briefly. Lower-tech effects are also used to project the word "too much tv" on Mickey and Mallory's bodies. Nondiegetic images are used heavily throughout the film, whether it is stock footage of a 1950s-style family watching the killers, or characters turning into exaggerated cartoon representations.

When Betty and Rita discover a corpse in *Mulholland Drive* they run out of the apartment. As they go through the door the scene is superimposed several times, with each superimposition slightly out of synch with the others, creating a "trailing" effect. Lynch also uses computers to create a scene where an elderly couple crawl out of a paper bag, walk underneath a door and then grow back to normal size.

In *Moulin Rouge*, Satin and Christian jump along stars to get from the elephant to a plateau of clouds with a miniature Eiffel Tower. In a later scene, a picnic with the Duke and the lovers is composited in front of a faked representation of Paris. The Méliès-style effects are meant to enhance the fantasy feel of the film.

Nonlinear Narration

Daughters of the Dust uses nonlinear narration to drift between events in different places and times. The technique mirrors the storytelling practices of Nana, the elder figure. Characters are used in mini-narratives, but the identity and meaning of the characters are not revealed until later in the film.

Mulholland Drive also could be said to use nonlinear narration. The last quarter of the film blends several different parts of the story. However, instead of placing the narrative out of sequence, the final sections of the film place the earlier narratives themselves in doubt. The timeframe of events is never clear, so there is no way of deducing when the sequence occurs (if it is really happening at all). In fact, various scenes do not seem to be occurring at different times, but on different levels of reality.

Direct Address

None of the mainstream films employed direct address; however, it does appear in *Stevie* and *Breathless*. Godard makes limited use of the technique by having Michel turn and talk to the camera during one scene. By contrast, *Stevie* utilizes direct address constantly through the film. The main character, Stevie, turns to the audience between and within scenes to elaborate or add to the discussions she is having with her Aunt and other characters. Through this device, the viewer is almost always aware of the movie outside of the diegetic world.

Narrator Becomes Character

Stevie also utilizes another diegetic-breaking narrative technique by presenting a narrator who steps into the story. This narrator is spatially separated from Stevie's apartment during the first three-quarters of the film, and offers an introduction for each narrative scene. However, during the last quarter of the film he suddenly enters the diegetic world and visits Stevie's apartment to give her a ride.

Intertextuality

While the avant-garde films used in the study offered only minor cases of intertextuality (such as Godard drawing on the conventions of mainstream crime movies), the three mainstream films were rich with pop-culture references. *Natural Born Killers* is sprinkled with allusions to past media: everything from America's fascination with violence to the world of 1950s television receives a knowing nod. Part of the story plays out within the framework of a tabloid news-magazine show called "American Maniacs," using shows like "Geraldo" as a reference point for the audience. During the story, a commercial for Coke suddenly pops up; and although the product is never named, the polar bears with the familiar bottle leave no doubt.

Mulholland Drive taps into popular culture through the use of extreme stereotypes. An elderly couple and Betty, a small-town girl who comes to Hollywood to be a star, both overact their parts,

drawing on common characters with which the audience is already familiar. Lynch also plays on the audience's familiarity with his own work. When the main characters enter a theater, a woman on stage begins lip-synching Roy Orbison's "Crying" in Spanish. This is an implied reference to Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, where a character croons Orbison's "In Dreams"; however the audience must be aware of the earlier work to "get it."

Moulin Rouge is another film submerged in pop culture. Satin makes her first entrance dressed like Marlene Dietrich. She sings a "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend," a song made famous by Marilyn Monroe, and then segues into Madonna's "Material Girl." In this one scene, Luhrmann draws on three icons of popular culture to illustrate the character of Satin. *Moulin Rouge* also makes widespread use of popular music. In one scene, Satin and Christian have a dialogue using the lyrics of nine different pop songs to debate love.

Conflicting Style

Two mainstream films included in the study use conflicting style as a narrative technique. As mentioned earlier, *Natural Born Killers* includes a sitcomsque sequence called "I Love Mallory." Mickey enters the obviously fake set to a hail of applause from the "audience," and even smiles and waits for the ovation to die down before delivering his lines. In *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch plays off of the

familiar conventions of film noir to present a surrealist vision running against the genre.

Analysis

Analysis of the data collected shows three major trends between the films and the techniques used in this study:

- 1) The mainstream films in this study adopt more of the visual techniques of avant-garde than narrative ones.
- 2) The mainstream films primarily use these techniques for stylistic purposes.
- 3) The avant-garde films primarily use these techniques to convey a message and to critique mainstream film practices.

It is not surprising that the mainstream films in this study utilize so many techniques that break the diegesis of a film. All three were chosen with a belief that they do contain examples of these practices. However, all of them overwhelmingly favor visual techniques. With nine visual categories and three films, there are a possible 27 occurrences of these techniques (see Appendix) amongst the mainstream. They actually occur 22 times, or 81% of the possible total. In contrast, out of the 18 possible occurrences of the six narrative techniques, they only happen six times, or 33%. While all three films displayed intertextuality, none of them used direct address, the narrator becoming character,

or revealing the film through narration.

As noted in the description of the use of each technique, the mainstream films primarily use these devices for stylistic reasons. Although they have appropriated some of the conventions of avant-garde, their use supports the entertainment value of the movie. This is not to deny the fact that several of these techniques are used to engage the audience: playing on their prior knowledge with the use of intertextual references, or the use of projection surfaces in *Natural Born Killers*. However, even these examples seem to work more towards supporting the look and feel of the film, than delivering a message to the audience. What is surprising is how well this embodies the descriptions many use for modern avant-garde films: “there is emphasis on style over substance, a consumption of images for their own sake, rather than for their usefulness or the values they symbolize, a preoccupation with playfulness and in-jokes at the expense of meaning” (Levy, 1999, p. 57).

The avant-garde films used in this study do utilize these techniques in some of the traditional ways of the movement. Clearly, nontraditional camera movement and abrupt transitions are meant to be a repudiation of classical conventions, however their purpose does not end there. Jump cuts become a device for showing the passage of time, and changes in motion tell us the spiritual world is encroaching on the diegesis. These avant-garde directors are using these techniques to challenge the

audience on the one hand and to enhance the narrative on the other.

Conclusion

This study suggests there is a breakdown between the traditional worlds of the avant-garde and the mainstream. Hollywood directors are appropriating nontraditional techniques, usually meant to actively engage an audience, and using them as just another tool in their stylistic arsenal. However, whether the director intends to or not, many of these stylistic endeavors end up divorcing the viewer from the film's diegesis.

It is worth repeating that the trends emerging from this study reflect the content of a small, purposeful sample, and so they should not necessarily be generalized to an entire body of work. However, these films do illustrate the breakdown that is occurring. Bordwell and Staiger (1985) point out that the polarities of dominant style and films that destroy pleasure, invisibility, etc. "lack nuance and precision" (p. 380). Similarly, Robert Stam (1985) acknowledges that no film is entirely illusionist or reflexive. I have shown how these categories of diegetic breaking techniques can be used to compare films that have traditionally been separated into opposing traditions. Further research should be conducted with a larger sample of films that represent a greater diversity of style and age. It would be interesting, for instance, to see if these categories work just as well with more radical avant-garde films

that seek to destroy narrative.

By defining the techniques appearing in mainstream films that have a tendency to break the diegesis, it is also possible to study the effects of these techniques on the audience. It may be argued that these techniques are merely conventions waiting to happen. For instance, Eisenstein (1949) tells the story of how studio executives were shocked when D. W. Griffith wanted to show a close-up of a character. Or it could be argued, as Stephen Heath (1980) has, that stylistic inventions are the result of technical advances; and that many of these techniques are just a result of improved technology.

However, David Bordwell (1996) points out that artistic conventions are not arbitrary. Some conventions are more appropriate to conveying a message than others. A close-up of a woman's knee will not convey her happiness to a viewer. However, a close-up of her face has a better probability of carrying that message. In a recent study, researchers found that the structure of film has a cognitive effect (Schwan, Hesse & Garsoffky, 1998). The subjects in the study grouped film segments into meaningful units based on the location of cuts. As established codes are ignored, it would be beneficial to study whether these new diegetic-breaking techniques affect the viewer's ability to follow and connect with the film.

Researchers Richard Gerrig and Deborah Prentice (1996) have developed categories that could

prove especially useful in researching diegetic breaks. They envision viewer responses to films as fitting into a small number of categories. In their taxonomy of audience responses, they use the categories inferencing and participatory (p. 395). Inferencing occurs when the audience fills in gaps. For instance, in the film a car leaves and pulls up outside a house. The audience can infer the car was driven to the house. Participatory responses, on the other hand, elicit a mental response from the viewer, such as “Don’t open the door!” This would be an example of an “as-if” participatory response; where the audience reacts as if they are in the diegetic world. There are also participatory responses which are not “as if”. These are usually comments on the viewing experience itself: “this music is really mismatched,” or “this person is a horrible actor”. By tracking participatory responses that cannot be categorized under “as if,” a researcher could discover where the breaks occur and what is happening on-screen at these moments.

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Appendix

	Breathless	Stevie	Daughters of the Dust	Natural Born Killers	Moulin Rouge	Mulholland Drive
Changes in Film type	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Showing Production Elements	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Lack of Transitions	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Abrupt Transitions	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rapid Montage	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Motion Speed	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Color Usage	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Nontraditional Camera Movement	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
CGI and Nondiegetic Images	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nonlinear Narration	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Direct Address	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Narrator Becomes Character	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Revealing the Film in the Narration	No	No	No	No	No	No
Intertextuality	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

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