

Over the past two decades, Hollywood cinema has produced many films that present its spectators with overwhelming special effects sequences and countless scenes involving computer-generated imagery (CGI). This has resulted in many people, from film critics to the general public, believing that contemporary Hollywood films are more focused on visual pleasures, as opposed to coherent narrative structures and psychologically motivated characters. This recent trend can be compared to the type of cinema at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which Tom Gunning refers to as the “cinema of attractions.” Cinema at this time was presentational and based on exhibitionism. In this essay, I am going to argue that the use of CGI and special effects in contemporary Hollywood cinema have resulted in a return to the “cinema of attractions.” I will begin by outlining Gunning’s argument on early cinema and how it was attractive. I will then explain how early cinema and contemporary Hollywood cinema can be compared, with regards to the use of revolutionary technology. I will spend the majority of my essay focusing on the consequences of this recent trend towards visual pleasure. These include: the assurance of offering something new, constant breaks in the narrative, regular films being made from existing popular culture, and a blurred vision of fiction and reality. I will reinforce my argument by analysing three films: *Independence Day* (1996), *King Kong* (2005), and *Superman Returns* (2006).

Gunning argues that the history of film has been studied mainly from a narrative development perspective. He explains that this “distort[s] ... the actual forces shaping cinema before 1906” (Gunning 381). These forces were the technological discoveries in filmmaking that were taking place. People were amazed at their ability to show something new. According to Gunning cinema up until 1906 was not dominated by narrative or storytelling. Instead cinema was about “presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of [its] illusionary power” (Gunning 382). He defines this as the “cinema of attractions”.

Gunning’s opinion on early cinema can be traced back to early forms of theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that captured audiences with their visual displays. Phantasmagoria was one of these early forms of entertainment and involved using an image projector to show supernatural objects such as ghosts, “disembodied spirits and floating heads in darkened halls” (Pierson 22). These magical shows effectively used lighting and shadow techniques to frighten and surprise viewers. Essentially their purpose was to arouse emotion.

In the 1890's, filmmakers were still discovering the capabilities of film. They experimented with this new technology through the use of time-lapse photography, reverse motion, and simple, single shot films. The Lumiere Brothers were influential in early filmmaking. They produced many non-fictional or "actuality" films that showed ordinary aspects of everyday life. *Exiting the Factory* (1895), is one of their films and consists of a single shot where workers do exactly what the title suggests. Another one of their influential films was *Arrival of a Train* (1895). In this film a train moves closer to the camera and therefore seems to increase in size. Cousins explains the effect it had on people: "audiences ducked, screamed or got up to leave. They were thrilled, as if on a roller-coaster ride" (23). Some initial viewers even thought that the train was going to come out of the screen. This film especially, and other films of the Lumiere Brothers, can be related back to Gunning's argument. Although their films only presented life's ordinary moments, people were still shocked and astonished at what this new technology could show them.

Georges Melies was also among the earliest filmmakers in history. According to Strauven, Melies was "the master of the stop trick" technique (106). Many of Melies' films, known as trick films, involved filming a moving object, turning the camera off while the object moved out of sight, then turning the camera back on to create the illusion that the object had disappeared. This can be related back to Gunning's argument on the cinema of attractions. Trick films involved no narrative and provided their audiences with the illusion of a vanishing object. As a result they were effective at grabbing the attention of viewers, who were amazed at the remarkable capabilities of this revolutionary technology. Melies was also very influential with his use of special effects. *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), is one of his most well-known films and contains the famous scene of a spaceship crashing into the eye of the moon. Even though this film is considered to be a precursor to the development of narrative, Dancyger mentions that it is "no more than a series of amusing shots, each a scene unto itself" (3). In other words the film was more influential with regards to how it used new filmmaking technology and special effects to entertain audiences.

Gunning says that the dominance of the cinema of attractions ended around 1906 and that the period from 1907 to about 1913 "represented the true *narrativization* of cinema" (Gunning 385). This time period saw the emergence of continuity editing in film. The linear narrative of cause and effect was established and emphasis was placed on psychologically driven characters. However, Gunning argues that attractions do not just disappear during this time period, but go "underground" and still appear in "periodic doses of non-narrative spectacle given to audiences"

(Gunning 123). In other words the cinema of attractions can be seen more clearly in certain film genres, such as science fiction and musicals. These films have narratives but also contain spectacle-driven sequences that have the ability to fascinate audiences.

The technological revolution that was taking place at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century allowed audiences to visually experience something they had never seen before on the screen. The films of this time were dominated by spectacle and stirred people's emotions. This is exactly what CGI and special effects are doing in contemporary Hollywood cinema. The development of these technologies came with the promise of offering something that had never been seen before. As a result there are many current Hollywood films, including science fiction and fantasy-adventure, which can be viewed as a return to the cinema of attractions.

Science fiction films have the unique ability to directly assault their spectators. According to Abbot, these films are "designed to instruct the audience on how to respond" (7). This can be applied to the film *Independence Day*. From the moment the alien mother ship first attacks, we are presented with a sequence of explosions that grow larger as they move closer to the camera. There are several shots that show fireballs, from the perspective of people either on the streets or in their cars, rapidly moving down the city streets. One memorable shot shows a massive fireball lifting up a fire truck, and rolling it towards the camera until it engulfs the whole screen. There are also the memorable shots of the president and other main characters escaping an explosion in an airplane, and also when Captain Hiller's girlfriend, Jasmine, is stuck in a tunnel with a fireball approaching her. This sequence of events is significant because it uses enlarging, dramatic explosions to force the feelings of shock and astonishment upon us. Although contemporary audiences would not go as far as jumping out of their seats at the sight of all of these explosions, these scenes, especially the rolling fire truck one, can be related back to the Lumiere Brothers' *Arrival of a Train* film when audiences witnessed a train getting larger as it approached the camera. Therefore *Independence Day* can be seen as retaining aspects from the cinema of attractions era.

Annette Kuhn, when talking about *Alien* (1979), argues that the film is "periodically ... halted by episodes whose only function is to invite the spectator's awed gaze" (148). Kuhn's view can also be applied to the films I have chosen to analyse. Just before the alien ships attack in *Independence*

*Day*, a group of people are on top of a high-rise building looking up to a ship. They seem to be fascinated at the glowing green light above them. In *Superman Returns*, Superman forcefully picks up the kryptonite-filled island. We are presented with a series of shots from different angles. This allows us to realise just how large the island actually is. The sequence ends when Superman, now shown outside the Earth's atmosphere, releases the island into outer space. In *King Kong*, the narrative is put aside during the fast-paced sequence when Kong protects Ann from the dinosaurs. We are presented with countless shots of CGI from various lengths and angles as the characters struggle through the island's environment. These contemporary examples are very similar to Gunning's argument on early cinema. Sequences driven by CGI and special effects have the ability to disrupt the narrative of a film. They allow the audience to momentarily forget about the film's narrative and marvel at what they are seeing.

*Independence Day* is a great example of a return to the cinema of attractions not only because of its spectacular sequences, but also because of its lack of emphasis on character psychology. Roger Ebert points this out in his review of the film: "why don't the humans react more? At one point, the news comes that New York, Washington and Los Angeles have been destroyed, and is there grief? Despair? Anguish? ... Not a bit" (1996). Sobchack has a similar view: "there is panic on the streets, but not exactly fear and anxiety to reinforce it" (139). The filmmakers have done this intentionally. As viewers of *Independence Day* we are meant to be absorbed into the visual displays that are presented to us and not the characters' emotions.

Another consequence of the increasing trend towards CGI and special effects driven films is the production of regular films based on existing popular culture. Tomasovic, when writing about *Spiderman* (2002), explains this recent trend and how it compares to early cinema:

"like early films, *Spider-Man* proposes a profoundly exhibitionist system of the image-attraction, because, after all, it is always a question of giving to see rather than of telling; moreover, the stories do not have much to tell (the story of *Spider-Man* has been told a thousand times in the comics)" (314).

This does not just apply to the story of Spiderman. Fans of Superman already know the story: he has super-human strength, his weakness is kryptonite, and his enemy is Lex Luthor. The challenge

for Bryan Singer, the director of *Superman Returns*, was to present this story in a new, visually appealing way. He does this effectively during the scene when Lex Luthor and his allies visit the Fortress of Solitude. He brings the two-dimensional images of this setting from the comics to life, in the form of a bright and sparkling three-dimensional composition. Superman's relationship with kryptonite is dramatically expressed when we see long shots of him lifting the island up into outer space. This action sequence does not happen in the comics. *King Kong* is a remake of the 1933 film of the same name, which was based on a story by Edgar and Cooper Wallace. Before viewing the film, people who are familiar with the story already know that Kong is a giant gorilla on a mysterious island and climbs to the top of the Empire State Building. *King Kong* uses CGI to present Skull Island's landscape in a very detailed way. Jackson also uses CGI during the climax of the film when Kong climbs to the top of the Empire State Building and shares his last moments with Ann before plummeting to his death. *Independence Day* can be classed as a disaster film. Many of these types of films were made in the 1970's, including *Airport* (1970) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972). However the genre declined in popularity by the end of the 1970's. It wasn't until the mid-1990's that the genre was revived, probably due to the development of new computer technologies (Filmbug 2011). What the respective makers of *Superman Returns*, *King Kong*, and *Independence Day* have done, is retell already established stories. They also take full advantage of the technologies available to them. Therefore people do not necessarily view these films to follow their stories, but watch them with the expectation that they are a visual and emotional advancement on previous versions.

Gunning believes that the cinema of attractions originated from vaudeville theatre acts: "film appeared as one attraction on the vaudeville programme, surrounded by a mass of unrelated acts in a non-narrative and even nearly illogical succession of performances" (Gunning 385). In other words unrelated actors, such as magicians and dancers, performed in a theatre. In *Superman Returns*, Superman himself can be viewed as a performer during the scene where he successfully lands an airplane on a baseball field amongst a huge, cheering crowd. Nearly everything in this scene is digital (Robertson 2006). In *King Kong*, Ann Darrow is a vaudeville actress and shows this during the scene when she performs for Kong. It is clear that Kong is entertained by this as he laughs and roars. Later on in the film, Kong himself is featured in a theatre. "Scenes set in the Broadway theatre ... were filmed in Wellington's Opera House and Auckland's Civic Theatre" (Morton 327). A combination of CGI and live-action shots are used to show Kong's dramatic escape from his chains and the theatre. Both films prove that contemporary Hollywood cinema

uses CGI to produce films that relate to the performance aspect of early cinema. These scenes can also be seen as evidence of their function as presentational and performance based films.

A common trait of all three of my chosen contemporary films is the ontological uncertainties they create. In the cinema of attractions era trick films were effective in opening up questions of reality. This is exactly what CGI and special effects are doing in today's films. The success of films can be based on how well they blur the boundary between fiction and reality, to the extent that we are unable to tell the difference between the two. In her article "Super CG," Robertson mentions that "Sony Pictures Imageworks used the LightStage 2 system developed by Paul Debevec [a computer graphics researcher] to capture photographs of [Brandon] Routh's face that they applied to a 3D model" (2006). When viewing the film it is difficult to distinguish between Routh's real or digital face. The makers of *King Kong* were successful in blending the digitally created Kong into real natural and city environments. Although audiences know that it is impossible for Kong to be real because of his size, the precise details of his body hair, facial expressions, and body movements, do a great job in convincing that he possibly is real.

Dean Devlin, producer and co-writer of *Independence Day*, gives out a challenge to viewers of the film: "I defy anyone to tell which ones are the models and which are computer-generated" (Pierson 147). He is referring to the battle sequence between the aliens and U.S. F-18 fighter planes. Some of the fighter planes were motion controlled models. A scaled-down model of the White House was used for the scene where it explodes. Even though we know that the filmmakers did not actually blow up the White House, this scene captures us because it looks so real. Special effects were also used to create "atmospheric disturbance as [the spaceship] approaches New York" (Brinkmann 466). As Brinkmann explains, this was done in two ways: by injecting a cloud tank with some liquid and having a model spaceship emerge out of a smoke generator (468). The atmospheric disturbance visually emphasises the ship's size. Therefore it gains our attention by bringing forward a sense of fear. Like cinema at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of special effects and CGI in my chosen films is successful in making question if what we are seeing is real. These films present us with something we previously lacked the ability to perceive.

In conclusion, Gunning's argument on the cinema of attractions can be compared to an increasing trend in Hollywood cinema over the past two decades. The presentational mode of early cinema

has many similarities with the visual pleasures provided in contemporary films, with regards to technological advancements and the promise offering viewers unique visual spectacles. *King Kong* and *Superman Returns* are both based on existing popular culture and the narrative of *Independence Day* is not exactly new either. Therefore CGI and special effects are used in contemporary Hollywood cinema at the expense of narrative, so we can take the time to admire and react to the visual spectacles in front of our eyes.

## Bibliography

- Abbot, Stacey. "Final Frontiers: Computer-Generated Imagery and the Science Fiction Film." *Science Fiction Studies*. 33.1 (2006): 89-108.
- Brinkmann, Ron. *The Art and Science of Digital Compositing*. Massachusetts: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2008. Print.
- Cousins, Mark. *The Story of Film*. United Kingdom: Pavilion, 2006. Print.
- Dancyger, Ken. *The Technique of Film and Video Editing: History, Theory, and Practice*. Massachusetts: Focal Press, 2002. Print.
- "Disaster Movies." *Filmbug*. Web. 22 April 2001. <<http://www.filmbug.com/dictionary/disaster-movies.php>>
- Ebert, Roger. "Independence Day." *RogerEbert.com*. Web. July 2, 1996. 23 April 2011. <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19960702/REVIEWS/607020301/1023>>
- Gunning, Tom. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator." *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*. Ed. Linda Williams. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995. 114-133. Print.
- Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Ed. Wanda Strauven. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006. 381-388. Print.
- Kuhn, Annette. "Spectators: Introduction" *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*. London: Verso, 1990. 145-151. Print.
- Morton, Ray. *King Kong: The History of a Movie Icon From Fay Wray to Peter Jackson*. Wisconsin: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005. Print.
- Pierson, Michele. *Special Effects: Still In Search of Wonder*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Print.
- Robertson, Barbara. "Super CG." *The Computer Graphics Society*. Web. 3 July 2006. 23 April 2011. <[http://features.cgsociety.org/story\\_custom.php?story\\_id=3644](http://features.cgsociety.org/story_custom.php?story_id=3644)>
- Sobchack, Vivian. "Cities on the Edge of Time: The Urban Science-Fiction Film." *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science-Fiction Cinema*. Ed. Annette Kuhn. London: Verso, 1999. 123-146. Print.
- Strauven, Wanda. "From 'Primitive Cinema to 'Marvelous'." *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Ed. Wanda Strauven. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006. 105-120. Print.

Tomasovic, Dick. "The Hollywood Cobweb: New Laws of Attraction." *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Ed. Wanda Strauven. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006. 309-320. Print.

#### Filmography

*Arrival of a Train*. Dir. Auguste and Louis Lumiere. Kino Video. 1895.

*A Trip to the Moon*. Dir. Georges Melies. Gaston Melies Films. 1902.

*Exiting the Factory*. Dir. Louis Lumiere. Lumiere. 1895.

*Independence Day*. Dir. Roland Emmerich. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. 1996.

*King Kong*. Dir. Peter Jackson. Universal Pictures. 2005.

*Superman Returns*. Dir. Bryan Singer. Warner Bros. 2006