The Frenzy of the Visible: Spectacle and Motion in the Era of the Digital

by Angela Ndalianis

Angela Ndalianis is a Senior Lecturer in film and new media. She teaches in the Cinema Studies Program in the School of Fine Arts, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne.

During my first viewing of *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999) I found my vision bombarded by imagery and sensations more akin to theme park rides like the *Spiderman* attraction at Universal Studios' Islands of Adventure in Florida. My visual and aural faculties were plunged into a state of disorientation that constituted a physical assault on my senses. Not only was an array of framing effects and camera movements employed - from high velocity pans, tracks and fast paced edits, to 360° camera somersaults - but there was motion and there was lots of it! Bodies, cameras, sound and visual effects - everything moved and it moved fast, even when 'bullet-time' speed was visualised through slow motion techniques. Here's a film that's dictated above all by the speed of the image: within the filmic space (with its economically ordered narrative and fast paced action); within the production space (with its special effects and high velocity stylistic techniques); and within the audience's space (in the capacity the film has in affecting us on a highly charged sensory level).

The Matrix epitomises contemporary effects cinema's tendency towards enveloping the spectator in pure, unadulterated spectacle. As mentioned above, this spectacle of motion finds its closest parallel in the similar sensations to be experienced on funrides that simulate movement and dupe us into momentarily (in the case of *The Matrix* momentarily for about two hours) losing ourselves in spaces that present themselves as temptingly lying somewhere beyond our reality. The distinction between these entertainment forms occurs in the way the two media differentiate their sensory experiences. In the case of *The Matrix* we are engaged in a perceptual assault. The *Spiderman* ride, on the other hand, involves both a physical onslaught (in that we're plummeted through 'New York City' on a roller coaster and spun multiple times at 360° angles) and a perceptual assault (in that the ride also strategically places the coaster in front of numerous screens on which are projected cutting edge 3D film and digital images of Spiderman at war with various supervillains). Both examples share a concern for the haptic and kinesthetic, a concern which has increased recently as media such as film, digital technology and amusement park attractions converge and share common concerns centred around the speed of the image. This may be witnessed in the ease with which films like *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991), and *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997) are able to cross media and become rides such as the *Back to the Future* and *Terminator 2:3D* rides at Universal studios, and the soon to be released *Men in Black* ride, also at Universal.

It's been argued that the current simulation ride and computer game craze has had a lasting (and some would say detrimental) effect on Hollywood cinema, in particular on the effects blockbuster form, which today appears to go hand in hand with action cinema tendencies. This shift, this line of thought would have us believe, manifests itself especially in the move away from mainstream cinema's supposed ties with the nineteenth century literary tradition and its concerns with story telling and narrativity, towards an aesthetic centered around action, movement, speed, special effects (visual and aural), and engagement on the level of the sensation.

Even from the beginning, however, the cinema's debt to the nineteenth century novelistic tradition was only one aspect of a vast array of sources that the cinema drew upon - sources that above all encompassed a rich visual culture which included vaudeville, the circus, the theatre, wax museums, amusement park rides, comic strips, and magic lantern shows, to name but a few [Gunning 1994, 86]. (references at tail of article)   In other words, a visual culture that moved beyond a purely literary form of storytelling in order to deliver its cinematic narrative to the audience. As Tom Gunning states in his article "Bodies and Phantoms: Making Visible the Beginnings of Motion Pictures", there was nothing from earlier cinema that hadn't appeared in some other form of popular entertainment [1994, 86].

In this respect, in the case of contemporary cinema, while the sources may have altered, nothing much has changed. Movies are still influenced by a rich pool of visual, literary and, indeed, sound forms alike, but it is entertainment forms like computer games, theme park attractions, and comics that appear to have taken the front seat currently. The increased popularity and impact of current visual media (especially those that incorporate digital technology) has merely amplified a tendency that was already there and which was on the increase from the 1960s onwards - a tendency concerned with the speeding up of the cinematic.

The 1960s were definitely a turning point with regard to this interaction between various visual and literary sources. The rate of interchange between diverse entertainment media reached heightened levels, with a complex and dynamic series of exchanges occurring at a rate not witnessed before. This was evident especially in the spate of parodic television shows like *Get Smart*, which parodied the Bond films, spaghetti westerns, science fiction, and Hitchcock classics. Likewise, the effect of this crossover manifested itself in a marked rise in action and speed components. This applied not only to the film products being produced but also made itself felt on the level of reception. Partly as a result of the booming popularity of television, the 1960s saw audiences developing a rapid fluency of cinematic codes and generic formulas that were being thrust at them in an ever-increasing self-reflexive style of delivery.

For example, in the 1960s, the western genre - a genre which had been popular from the beginning of the cinema - became a testing ground for new developments and explorations in the direction of a revamped cinema of motion, and this shift felt itself in television and film alike. As a random example, in *Wild Wild West* (a very popular '60s tv show set at the turn of the last century - and, more recently, remade into a blockbuster film) the westerner figure Jim West introduced the audience to a new and popular breed of hybrid hero who was an amalgamation of: Western hero (West was a man who was always prepared for action), martial arts expert (as popularised in the *Samurai* TV series which provided greater excuses for bodies in motion), and the secret agent (recalling the equally popular Bond films and TV shows like *FBI*, *Peter Gunn* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* - thus providing a variety of action scenarios from which those bodies in motion could arise). This triple combination that crossed generic, media and national boundaries was a lethal cocktail in a transition that would see a shift towards the aestheticisation of action, speed, and bodies in motion on the screen.

This movement became even more obvious in the cinema in the sixties, with films like Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) (itself combining the western form with stylistic devices employed by Akira Kurosawa in *Seven Samurai* [1954]). *The Wild Bunch* introduced audiences to highly choreographed, slow motion bloodbaths, thus aestheticising these moments of action, moments that existed on a plane beyond that occupied by the narrative of the film, while also taking the western genre and action cinema along new paths that would put Action with a capital 'A' into contemporary cinema.

Tom Gunning argues that early motion pictures focused their central attraction around the physical action of the body [1994, 91], and that the discovery of motion as spectacle in early cinema is something that was peculiar to the cinema [98]. It would be an understatement to claim that this inclination towards action and motion as spectacle has increased dramatically in the post-1950s era. The motion of the body, in fact, has shifted to the stylistic tools of the cinematic body, as sound, editing and cinematography combine with the muscular, hyper physiques in breathless displays of hyperkinetic motion. Furthermore, Gunning claims that the emergence of the moving image led to the development of a new game of sight that involved the spectator. In the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s and today (especially in the mega million dollar blockbuster film) we're still witnessing this audience engagement with various games of sight and motion, but the games are now more literal and they also incorporate a more literal embodiment of what Gunning refers to as the "frenzy of the visible" [86].

The frenzied features of contemporary cinema exist on multiple levels: in the writhing, sweating bodies in action as they kickbox, shoot, fly, explode and chase their way through their respective spectacular narratives; and in the speed that manifests itself not only in the form of the bodies in motion but in the speed of the camera as it takes on an animated function while mirroring the movements of the events it tries to capture. In the famous kung fu fight scene in *The Matrix* choreographed by Yeun Wo Ping, Morpheus (Larry Fishburne) and Neo (Keanu Reeves) engage in a struggle that sees their bodies go through the throes of all manner of motion. Legs kick furiously and arms dance in a flurry of kung fu gestures, bodies twist through the air in 360° motions, and gravity itself seems to be defied as both leap upwards and backwards, clinging onto walls like giant, humanoid flies (this technique being especially reminiscent of Shintara from the 1960s *Samurai* series). To quote one of the characters watching this display who comments on Neo's actions: "Jesus Christ he's fast! Take a look at his neural kinetics". The overall impact of Neo's neural kinetics, however, relies on special effects. It is the technological body - the film camera, film stock, photographic camera and computer - that make possible this frenzy of the visible.

As if in response to Morpheus' challenge to Neo - "What are you waiting for? You're faster than this" - the image indeed speeds up, amplifying the bodies in motion by creating effects such as the multiplication/superimposition of Neo's hands as they move at breakneck speed to defend against Morpheus' oncoming attack. These effects, which are achieved by the Manex Visual Effects company, include traditional high speed shooting combined with a series of transitions of shots from a range of shutter speeds (including images filmed at 12,000 frames per second). In addition, harking back to Marey's nineteenth century photographic studies of movement, multiple still cameras were also employed to photograph figures from multiple angles. Most of these filmed and photographed action sequences were digitised and their final effects were the product of computer production. [Martin 1999, 69-70]. In unison, these effects not only give the illusion of greater speed, but they make speed itself the spectacle. While the kung fu scene acknowledges its predecessors, in particular, the *Samurai* and *Kung Fu* television series, unlike Shintara or the little

grasshopper, Neo and Morpheus' masterful actions are guided not by Eastern philosophy of religion, but a new religion that's the result of the union of the digital and the cinematic - a union that stakes a claim for a redefined (and faster) frenzy of the visible in the late twentieth century.

In *Future Visions* Hayward and Wollen have suggested that the "development of audiovisual technologies has been driven not so much by a realist project as by an illusionary one" [1993, 2]. With regard to blockbuster effects cinema and its spectacular and special effects concerns, the "illusion of the real" has had to be made more "realistic" and, as a result, "(a)udiovisual technologies have had to make illusions realities" [2]. While occurring in a variety of different ways, many contemporary films centre their games of vision and sight precisely around this notion of making illusions perceptually transform into reality.

The climax of *The Matrix*, for example, plays precisely on this notion of making the impossible (of imperceptible speed) appear possible, and of transforming the invisible into the visible. In the scene in which Neo and the sentient program (Hugo Weaving) confront each other at the train station the audience (this member of it, at least) experience disbelief as we view the hyperkinetic motions of these two bodies, motions that are so fast they can only be made visible to us through special effects. Neo and the Matrix agent face one another in a scene that deliberately alludes to the shoot-out tradition of the western; only, in this instance, a newspaper replaces the tumbleweed as it rustles across the space, intersecting the shoot-out about to take place. As the action unfolds, slow motion techniques recall the highly stylised methods familiar to the audience in films since *The Wild Bunch*, only this time, *The Matrix* alludes to traditional forms (which, likewise include the martial arts film) in order that it may stake its claim: it is faster than its western and martial arts predecessors.

In this film space, bodies move to kung fu techniques the likes of which have never been witnessed before, and the bullets from guns are so fast that we bare witness to the physical impact they make on space. Indeed, when Neo is shot, then resurrected (triggered by a kiss from Trinity in 'real' space that reverses the Prince Charming tradition) his speed becomes a mark of his Holiness. He is driven by a speed that is so phenomenal he can catch bullets in full flight. And we become party to this holy experience within the matrix. We witness his speed through the stillness of the image. Bullets are literally frozen in time and space and we marvel at Neo who contemplates bullets that we know move so fast they should be imperceptible to the human eye. We see the world through his eyes, eyes that create a freeze-frame effect out of 'bullet-time' speed. In these last minutes of the film, Neo has mastered the frenzy of the visible and we have been granted access to this mastery.

While diegetically Neo masters the frenzy of the visible, it is the directors and effects crews who display a mastery of effects that are exhibited for the audience. Reflecting Gunning's argument regarding the exhibitionist concerns of pre-1908 cinema [1990] the game played by films such as *The Matrix* is one which flaunts film's capacity for magically making a reality out of an illusion. The effects of these films leave us in states of astonishment. An invitation is extended to us to marvel at the speed, special effects, camera work, and ability the cinema has to extract from us a sense of wonder when confronted with these effects. They can envelop us in such real ways, yet in states that are mere illusion.

Mainstream effects films (and their '90s theme park ride cousins) dare us to test out and cross the fine line that exists between reality and illusion. These films engage us in "worlds that are like reality only different" [Laurel 1991, 10]. As Brenda Laurel argues in relation to audience interaction with computers, these films "have the capacity to represent actions and situations that do not and cannot exist in the real

world, in ways that invite us to extend our minds, feelings, and senses to envelop them" [32]. The invitation, therefore, is to participate on a sensory and perceptual level and become involved in a cinema that seduces us with its numerous spectacles.

In attempts to explain the spectator of Hollywood cinema, many contemporary film theorists have leaned more towards a concern with sight as a means to a theoretical narrative (e.g. the ideological, the psychoanalytic) leaving to one side the possible pleasures that the sight of the spectacle of motion may have for the audience. When the notion of spectacle is broached discussion tends to centre on the Guy Debord type of approach (provided in his *Society of the Spectacle* of 1967) which focuses on a society in which the "consumption and contemplation of images has replaced all forms of human communication" [Mayne 1993, 5]. In fact, it would seem that the blockbuster film extends an invitation to having numerous postmodern catch-phrases and labels pinned to its credits - labels that speak of escapism, the fragmentation of form, and the collapse and dispersal of 'meaning' as a result of the movement beyond narrative concerns towards a form that prioritises the visuals and spectacle.

While discussing horror and comedy genres in his book *Laughing Screaming*, William Paul makes a point that equally applies to many spectacle and action driven blockbuster films of the 1990s. He states that: "All too often, we make art serious and seemingly of value by downplaying play, by making art something other than fun. But like play, art may well be an end in itself... As with play, we ought to value art precisely because it evades teleology" [1994, 422]. This is not to deny the ideological implications of the cinema; instead, Paul's statement calls for a need to open up interpretation and take into account the fact that sometimes other elements beyond the ideological, for example, may also be at work in cinematic reception, elements that involve a more rudimentary sense of play and interaction. Like a trip through a funhouse or a ride on a roller-coaster, many blockbuster effects films have the capacity for allowing us to "get lost in play,...(and)... in the rush of the immediate experience" [422]. As Paul argues, "because we do not take anything in the amusement park seriously, it is easy for us to see the emotions we indulge there as ends in themselves", and a similar kind of visceral response is often demanded of us from these films.

In films like *The Matrix* we're thrust head on into a journey that invades our senses, and often our vision is plunged into and merged with the camera's field of vision as it moves around in a state of kinetic frenzy through the film landscape. New technologies and further advancements in special effects will only serve to increase this cinema of high velocity, and from this point on, someone (possibly a clone of Keanu Reeves) will continue to put the foot down on the accelerator of that Hollywood Blockbuster Bus - and the driving force will be speed all the way.

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