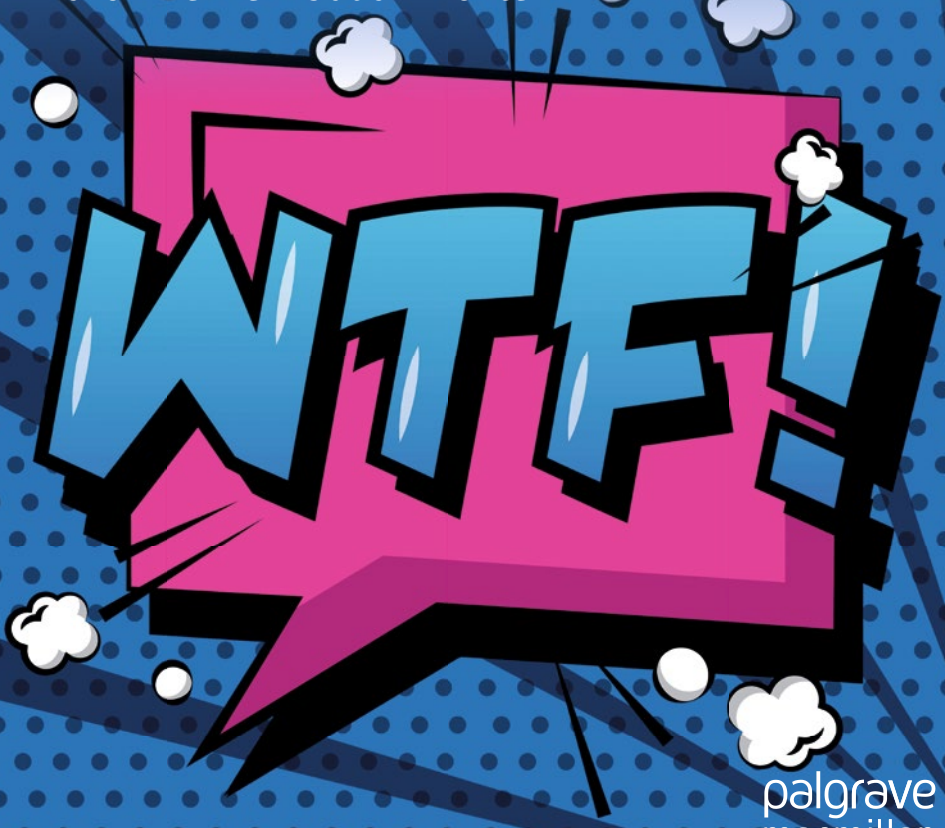
Theorizing Stupid Media

De-Naturalizing Story Structures in the Cinematic, Televisual, and Videogames

Aaron Kerner · Julian Hoxter



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Preface

The current volume steeped for many years—Kerner thinks it has been about 10 years, Hoxter remembers it being something a little less than that. Whatever the case is we have been discussing this project, bouncing ideas back and forth, for many years. To begin with, we thought we were focusing on spectacle-driven films, and how that generally harkened back to the cinema of attractions. However, over many beers and conversations (often at our local bar the Little Shamrock in San Francisco), we began to think in broader terms. In earlier iterations, the book was divided into larger sections: Extreme, Explicit, and Everyday. And under these headings, we imagined individual case studies. That too went by the wayside. Nevertheless, all these nascent ideas are present in the sinews of the present volume.

The stupid, as an idea, though, was probably with the conception of this book from the very start. It took us years to figure out, though, what we actually meant by the stupid. (And we are not sure if all those beers helped, or hindered our progression towards the objective of determining what the stupid in media actually is. Maybe that's why it took us so damn long to bring this book to final fruition?) Frankly, we probably could not give you a definitive answer all those years ago. But this has been a labor of love, we embarked on this project simply because we wanted to. We honestly wanted to come to grips with narratives that did not neatly conform to existing regimes of assessment—specifically, paradigms of analysis that are premised on the evaluation of narrative. We are unapologetically writing from a position of privilege as tenured faculty. This freed us from (real or imagined) professional concerns—could someone get tenure

writing about the stupid, or perhaps our gravest sin of all writing about *Transformers*? And, to be clear, *Transformers* was a part of this project pretty much from day one. Actually, we think so, but we also expect that any emerging scholar looking to secure tenure would be advised to do something else, to do something "serious." Even when couched as a self-indulgent project, from the very beginning we took this topic seriously. And we hope that we can contribute to the expanding tool kit that media studies have at its disposal. Because the tool kit matters. If one only has a hammer, then, one is only going to work with nails. The tools matter, precisely because they also determine what enters the conversation, and what approach is taken to the object of study.

Additionally, and this only emerged in the last stages of writing, we realized that the stupid often surfaces at evolutionary moments. The stupid materializes in response to a failure in categorization—violations of established categories, the emergence of a referent without a "proper" category, a hybrid that falls between categories. And thus, and again this came to us relatively late in the process, we felt compelled to focus on contemporary media. The stupid lays latent in all narratives, but it is most evident in innovations. What is that? Wait, what? What the ****?

The case studies that we offer are not merely illustrative of this or that aspect of the stupid, but also are some of our personal favorites and examples that have emerged from our personal as well as professional lives: a girlfriend who spends too much time playing *Pokémon GO*; students who pushed the discussion of the evolutionary stupid in SVOD serial drama. Media that did not quite fit in other projects, but kept bugging us to write about them (specifically, *Adventure Time*, and *Gone Home*). We had fun writing this book, and we hope you have some fun reading it.

We are grateful to Sandra Ly for her sage advice and criticism, especially on the sections concerning videogames. Any errors are, of course, our own.

Finally, we want to thank Lina Aboujieb, the Executive Editor for Film, Television and Visual Culture at Palgrave Macmillan. Quite understandably she might have looked at me crossed-eye once—when Kerner first pitched the idea of a stupid book, Aboujieb was probably thinking, "You want to write a book on the whaaattt?" Despite any reservations she might've had, Aboujieb has been supportive. Aboujieb somehow managed to wrangle three readers. And in our experience, these have been some of the most thoughtful and helpful reader reports that we have ever received. Each of the reports contributed to our thinking about this

project, and we hope that we have made the most productive use of their ideas, thoughts, suggestions, and critiques.

San Francisco, CA — Aaron Kerner
San Francisco, CA — Julian Hoxter

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CHAPTER 1

The Stupider the Better

Introduction: No Really, the Stupider the Better

During the course of a conversation with my colleague and co-writer trying to recall a title I said, "You know, that movie with the women in anime cosplay outfits and zeppelins." Immediately, he knew exactly what I was talking about, "Oh, right, *Sucker Punch*." Not a shred of narrative information to speak of really, rather the identifying markers that I offered fell squarely in the realm of spectacle—the fetishistic exhibition of the female form and fantastical airships. Zack Snyder's 2011 film *Sucker Punch* makes little effort to adhere to conventional narrative devices, this is not to say that narrative is absent, but rather the film is driven by its continual promise to deliver a compendium of audio/visual marvels. *Sucker Punch* is a pastiche of spectacle tropes: it draws heavily on exploitation cinema, specifically women in prison films from the 1970s, chambara and martial art films, the fetishistic rendering of the female body drawn explicitly from the pornographic genre, spectacular dystopic landscapes with no shortage of apocalyptic carnage, strongly influenced both by fantasy films and videogames, and elements of torture and humiliation indicative of the post-9/11 horror genre that David Edelstein dubbed "torture porn." It is safe to say that, in commonsense terms at least, *Sucker Punch* is stupid. But *how* is it stupid? Let us concede first that the plot is eye-rollingly inane—an institutionalized young woman finds her inner strength in vivid (male-) fantasy worlds. But there are also novel formal elements in *Sucker Punch* that prompt us to read it as stupid.

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This is precisely what we are concerned with here: charting the terrain of stupid media at a particular, convergent moment in the history of those media. Let us be abundantly clear, our use of the term "stupid" is not necessarily intended to disparage, in fact in many instances we use it in quite the opposite sense. We appropriate the term "stupid" from a passage in Julia Kristeva's essay, "Fantasy and Cinema." Kristeva observes that counter to our preconceived notions otherwise, films that emphasize *form* over *content*—even films that we might consider in poor taste—might offer a well-spring of affect, and this harbors cathartic potential. And so while this might seem counterintuitive, Kristeva insists that "the *stupider* it is, the better, for the filmic image does not need to be intelligent: what counts is that the specular presents the drive—aggression—through its directed signified (the object or situation represented) and encodes it through its plastic rhythm (the network of lektonic elements: sounds, tone, colors, space, figures), which can come back to us from the other without response and which consequently has remained uncaptured, unsymbolized, unconsumed."[1] In other words, what is at stake here are those things that exceed, or ooze out of the narrative, but are not necessarily a component of narrative. A lekton—a signifier without a signified—an audio source that straddles the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic registers, an extreme close-up that effectively obliterates what it purports to represent, compositions overwhelmed by scale (sublime), color, and so on. These things do not necessarily serve the narrative (i.e., they do not directly advance the plot), but rather exalt in the spectacle of excess, which for all intents and purposes has "no meaning."

The stupid, for instance, might be found in narratives that experiment with and/or throw off the yoke of storytelling conventions, eliciting from the spectator a sense of "disappointment" in the face of an unexpected, or unresolved narrative. Facing stupidity in this way invites us to rethink categories altogether, to break free of long-established regimes of storytelling, and reimagine storytelling modes (e.g., videogames). The media under consideration here might also be deeply embellished, intended to elicit an affective response in the spectator. While it may present as vapid, or lacking any discernible "meaning" as such, what we hope to address are the ways in which the cinematic might speak to our "sensorial intelligence." Moreover, the embellishments in their excessiveness have the potential, on the one hand, to leave the spectator in a stupefied awe, and perhaps even simultaneously call attention to the very fabric that constitutes the cinematic. Sion Sono's 2016 film *Antiporno*, for instance,

discussed at length in Chap. 3, self-consciously undercuts its own narrative progression and places a premium on spectacle. Sono's usurpation of narrative progression and incorporation of overwrought flourishes challenge even the liberal bounds of the softcore erotic genre, of which it is ostensibly situated. *Antiporno* places a strain upon the narrative and genre conventions, and in so doing invites the spectator to reflect upon the limits of a genre and the general qualities of what narrative cinema is.

Rather than take the term "narrative" for granted, let us offer our general understanding of what narrative is. Narrative is in short, a set of storytelling conventions. Whether we are addressing documentary films, the latest Hollywood blockbuster, or even a videogame, a narrative typically involves a character, or set of characters, that confronts some sort of conflict that is typically resolved by the conclusion of the plot. The primary character in the process of resolving that conflict usually undertakes some sort of transformation—for example, they "grow up," or acknowledge a wrong that they have committed and rectify it. Regardless, the internal story-arc typically arrives at a denouement and a modified form of catharsis.

Even the champion of classical narrative conventions, David Bordwell, recognizes the changes in recent cinematic storytelling in what he terms "intensified continuity." And this idea shares some affinities with the stupid. Bordwell suggests that "Intensified continuity is traditional continuity amped up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis. It is the dominant style of American mass-audience films today."[2] Similarly, Steven Shaviro referred to this disregard for conventional editing regimes as "post-continuity," which is preoccupied "with immediate effects" rather than attending to "broader continuity—whether on the immediate shot-by-shot level, or on that of the overall narrative."[3] Shaviro pushes Bordwell's conception, vocalizing what Bordwell apparently cannot bring "himself to say explicitly … that, when intensified continuity is pushed to this absurd, hyperbolic point, it does indeed result in a radical aesthetic 'regime change.'"[4] What Shaviro refers to as the "stylistics of post-continuity," we call stupid.

Storytelling, as others have observed, is not static. Rather it adapts and evolves to meet emerging and converging media platforms, changing along with technology, and to satisfy evolving tastes. "The triumph of intensified continuity reminds us that as styles change, so do viewing skills."[5] Indeed, without making allowances for storytelling innovations, and ill-equipped to "read" "intensified" storytelling elements a viewer understandably might profess, "that's stupid!" Bordwell focuses on cinematic storytelling, and he illustrates that contemporary films have much

shorter average shot lengths (ASL). No surprise there. Digital editing software, Bordwell observes, contributes to shorter ASLs. "By cutting on computer, filmmakers can easily shave shots frame by frame, a process known as 'frame-fucking.' Frame-fucking is one reason some action sequences don't read well on the big screen. After cutting the car chase from *The Rock* on computer, Michael Bay saw it projected, decided that it went by too fast, and had to 'de-cut' it."[6] But it is not simply the duration of shots (read: speed) that is at stake here, but the integrity of spatial relations and the legibility of the cinematic text that establishes clear cause and effect relationships. Bordwell proclaims that intensified continuity does not change storytelling conventions writ-large. "Contrary to claims that Hollywood style has become post-classical, we are still dealing with a variant of classical filmmaking."[7] And perhaps this is where intensified continuity and the stupid part ways because the latter (at least in certain instances) very well might depart from established storytelling conventions.

Bordwell, and others in decidedly more staunch terms, still cling to narrative. Lisa Purse observes that the frenetic possibilities of cinema need not explicitly present events, rather that the "[p]opular cinema is free to think bodies-at-speed in ways other than the literal show-and-tell, and is increasingly doing so."[8] A fight sequence in *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) dispenses with longer shots and longer takes in favor of a more kinetic camera style and lightning quick cuts—the "reality" of a gladiatorial battle is given over to the sensation of it.[9] The sensate experience (body) is privileged over the intelligibility (mind) of the onscreen events—stupid. Matthias Stork vociferously bemoans current trends. Referencing Bordwell's intensified continuity, Stork laments, "In many post-millennial releases, we're not just seeing an intensification of classical technique, but a perversion. Contemporary blockbusters, particularly action movies, trade visual intelligibility for sensory overload, and the result is a film style marked by excess, exaggeration and overindulgence: **chaos cinema**."[10] What Stork dismisses as chaos cinema—which is a "perversion," lacks "intelligibility," is excessive—we embrace as the stupid.

While the general understanding of narrative is rooted in ancient traditions the cinema, particularly in its nascence, did not necessarily adopt this mode of address. And this calls to mind the very prejudice that Tom Gunning exposes in his seminal essay, "The Cinema of Attractions." Gunning's argument is an historical one, tracing the evolution of narrativized cinema. Gunning observes that between 1907 and 1913 the cinematic form assimilates recognizable narrative form—directed largely

toward an internal diegetic story-world and the characters that inhabit it.[11] Prior to this though the cinematic form tended to be directed outwards toward "an acknowledged spectator" anticipating the elicitation of pleasure (or some other sensation)—thus placing the cinema of attractions closer to the amusement park ride, or attraction. The cinema of attractions offered visual spectacles (relatively) unencumbered by the obligations of narrative, as Gunning states, "emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality."[12] Narrative subsumed the cinema of attractions, but Gunning argues that vestiges of the cinematic attraction can be found in experimental cinema (at least those unconcerned with narrative), and nested within mainstream narratives. New Hollywood blockbusters such as *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* witnessed the rise of "spectacle cinema [which] has reaffirmed its roots in stimulus and carnival rides, in what might be called the Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects."[13] Exploding Death Stars, spectacular action sequences, are like the song-and-dance numbers in the musical, they are "tamed attractions" nested within the "proper" narrative.

Gunning elsewhere adds that the cinematic attraction can be differentiated from narrative conventions through temporality. "Narrative invokes the spectator's interest (and even desire, in a psychoanalytic model) by posing an enigma."[14] This enigma is worked out in the diegesis of the cinematic text, and at the very least feigns ignorance of the audience's presence—establishing the voyeuristic enterprise of classical narrative cinema. "Attractions pose a very different relation to the spectator. The attraction does not hide behind the pretense of an unacknowledged spectator." Gunning adds that "the attraction invokes an exhibitionist rather than a voyeuristic regime. The attraction directly addresses the spectator, acknowledging the viewer's presence and seeking to quickly satisfy a curiosity. This encounter can even take an aggressive aspect, as the attraction confronts audiences and even tries to shock them (the onrushing locomotive which seems to threaten the audience is early cinema's most enduring example)."[15] The attraction often featured sexual, violent, or taboo subject matter—all the things that might be associated with the fairground, the carnivalesque, the freak show. "Attractions' fundamental hold on spectators depends on arousing and satisfying visual curiosity through a direct and acknowledged act of display, rather than following a narrative enigma within a diegetic site into which the spectator peers invisibly."[16] The

attraction satisfies the spectator on a different order than narrative resolution. The cinematic attraction "arouses a curiosity that is satisfied by surprise rather than narrative suspense. This different temporal configuration determines its unique spectatorial address as much as its acknowledgement of the spectator's gaze, and it is the explosive, surprising, and even disorienting temporality of attractions" to which Gunning calls our attention.

Part of this curiosity, in Gunning's assessment of the cinema of attractions, pertained to the novelty of the cinematic apparatus itself. New technologies, and new and emerging media, likewise afford opportunities to rekindle this curiosity. Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor's 2009 film *Gamer*, incorporates videogaming elements into its diegetic plot, as well as utilizing compositional strategies from other media (e.g., videogaming, surveillance cameras, and computing platforms) achieved through the use of new digital technology. Steven Shaviro is critical of *Gamer* and its directors that appear to emphasize these novel tools and perspectives, without regard for their narrative motivation: "They force us to pay attention to *how it works*, instead of *what it means*."[17] The emphasis placed on the technology (and the perspectives that it affords), harkens to the cinema of attractions. *Gamer* is not concerned with meaning per se, but, as Shaviro puts it, "working with new equipment that is still in beta."[18] Shaviro continues to bemoan that *Gamer* is nothing but "flourishes," in other words, it is only concerned with spectacles. The filmmakers "are not weighted down, as higher-budget movies tend to be, by demands for plot rationalization and secondary elaboration. They cannot cover over their proceduralism with a veneer of plausibility and good sense. In consequence, they make a film that appears wildly mannerist. They follow procedural and executive logic as far as they can—however crazy and aberrant the results may be."[19] *Gamer* is, in a word, stupid!

Whereas narratives primarily unfold in a linear fashion, where one event follows unrelentingly after another, the attraction does not necessarily conform to these temporal conventions, rather the attraction has "one basic temporality, that of the alternation of presence/absence which is embodied in the act of display. In this intense form of present tense the attraction is displayed with the immediacy of a 'Here it is! Look at it.'"[20] The cinematic attraction is, in other words, episodic in structure. Where narrative expects the development of a story that "links the past with the present in such a way as to define a specific anticipation of the future (as an unfolding narrative does), the attraction seems limited to a sudden burst of presence. Restriction to the presentation of a view or a central

action, the cinema of attractions tends naturally toward brevity rather than extension."[21] The temporality of narrative invites anticipation of how an event will unfold, compared to the attraction that solicits the spectator's enthrallment "with *when* an event will occur."[22] The attraction irrupts within a temporal sequence, rather than an unfolding of an event in a sequential narrative. The attraction "consists more of framing a momentary appearance than an actual development and transformation in time."[23] The cinematic attraction has the potential to "effectively halt the narrative flow through an excess of spectacle, shifting spectator interest from what will happen next to an enjoyment of the spectacle presented to them."[24] The excess of attraction overshadows the narrative. "Rather than a developing configuration of narrative, the attraction offers a jolt of pure presence, soliciting surprise, astonishment, or pure curiosity instead of following the enigmas of which narrative depends."[25] One iteration of the stupid, then, *is* the untamed attraction, in effect the attraction on steroids, where the thrill eclipses the narrative, where the attraction is the point of the thing, or where the narrative is a vehicle for the spectacle. The untamed attraction infects the tissues of the narrative. What concerns us then is this: How do we address spectacle-saturated media, especially in contemporary media practices? The moments where those "tamed attractions" are unleashed and allowed (at least for a little bit) to run wild. Our ambition here is to make an intervention in critical assessments of the cinematic—a paradigmatic shift in the very means of approaching some cinematic and emerging media texts.

Others have appeared to take notice of this need to recalibrate the means of assessment in cinematic and media studies. Like the present volume, Martine Beugnet in the introduction to the edited volume *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty* eloquently calls for a paradigmatic shift to account for those things in excess of the (visual) story. One of the things that the volume highlights is the tension in post-millennial digital technologies, which on the one hand offer unparalleled opportunities for clear and distinct images, and on the other hand the art of cinematic and media productions that (for many different reasons) obscures the visual image. *Indefinite Visions* considers "moving images and sounds in their more indefinite, ungraspable manifestations, where film hovers on the threshold of representation and legibility and challenges the way we look and listen."[26] There are distinct affinities between the indefinite and the stupid.

Assuredly the evolving media conventions have not meant the demise of narrative. It would be premature to begin writing an obituary for narrative, and, indeed, frankly dumb to do so. We should acknowledge that we are by no means the first to discuss the waning of coherent linear narrative conventions: Jon Lewis's edited volume *The End of Cinema as We Know It* published nearly two decades earlier, for instance, makes similar proclamations. What we emphasize here is *not* the end of narrative—let's repeat that, we are not suggesting that we have reached the end of narrative—rather, the stupid often manifests at the forefront of narrative evolutions. What we are suggesting is that certain experiments in narrative form, certain corporate/creative wagers on the future evolution of a genre or medium, certain innovations in technology that afford new modes of storytelling, or enable new modes of consumption which then potentially misalign with established paradigms of narrative comprehension and/or assessment, can be ruled stupid under our grid.

We are writing at a moment of evolutionary acceleration in the media, and some of the concordant stupid experiments in spectacle and narrative have already fallen by the wayside of media history, or have been/are being superseded as media recalibrate around and away from them. For example, the competing vernaculars of the tentpole movie played out over the last two decades were predicated at least in part on very different corporate readings of the state and the future of cinema exhibition in the digital age. The spectacular excesses of the *Transformers* franchise, pushing almost beyond the boundaries of conventional cinema offered one powerfully distinct vision of that present and future, whereas the "relentless self-cannibalization" of Marvel's ever expanding and never truly resolving MCU mega-franchise emerged from a very different reading of both culture and industry.[27] We consider this contested cinematic vernacular in some detail in Chap. 2. As we will argue, other instances of the stupid emerge less from spectacle per se as from equally arresting semantic collisions as genres and forms seek and fail wholly to conform to new interfaces between technology and narrative. Notable here are instances of ludonarrative dissonance in videogames and the hesitant accommodations of serial narratives in expanded television to emerging creative and regulatory regimes and consumption paradigms.

All this is to say that we do not intend to apologize for stupid media, neither to suggest that it is somehow secretly superior to narrative nor do we intend to dismiss the architectural scaffolding of narrative. Rather what we are concerned with is expanding our critical paradigm to accommodate

media texts that do not necessarily conform to established narrative conventions. What we strive to do here is to open up a space within the critical scholarship of film and media studies that might accommodate those media texts that are *not* governed by traditional narrative conventions, including those of genre, but instead are structurally or conceptually dissonant, or spectacle-driven, or sharply interrupted by overwhelming spectacles, that have less to do with meaning and thus, by extension, narrative. For our purposes, these are stupid.

What Is Stupid Media?

Stupid media is not necessarily inane, or mindless entertainment, though, it most certainly could be those things. Rather what we are categorizing as stupid media pertains to form more than it does to content. Stupid media is stupid precisely because it fails to meet the criteria of an established category—be that genre conventions, narrative structure, formal cinematic syntax, or an uneasy tension in emerging media and storytelling. There is then a tendency for these media texts to be episodic, as opposed to coherent linear narratives. There might well be a failure in meaning as well, where there is no "meaning" as such, and rather an accumulation of audio/visual signifiers divorced from any apparent signified—BOOM! for the sake of things going BOOM! "Ohhhh," for the sake of "Ohhhh!" Cinema that is affecting for the sake of eliciting sensations in the spectator. As Carl Plantinga argues, spectators go to the cinema not simply "on the basis of genre, stars, critical reviews," but rather "on the basis of the kind of affective experience they believe such films will afford."[28] Stupid media typically appeals to the body, rather than to emotion.[29] Emotional investment typically relies on narrative contextualization, and purchase in a character's situation. Affect, on the other hand, tends to be more immediate, visceral, and can function free of any narrative motivation.

The stupid should *not* be confused with the "bad object" though, which is the darling of those coming from the disciplinary corner of Cultural Studies (Kerner counts himself among them). Bad objects very well might be conventional in their storytelling, in their mode of address, and thus perfectly "intelligible." The bad object might come in a number of different forms: camp, the disreputable object, and low culture/genres. Camp is not necessarily stupid, though what is camp could be stupid. What is clear though is that they share certain affinities. Camp invariably pertains to a sensibility and aesthetic, whereas the stupid manifests in

narrative form. Susan Sontag famously outlined the characteristics of camp in her, "Notes on 'Camp.'" Camp is challenging to pin down precisely because: "A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about."[30] Sontag continues, "It is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed, the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques."[31] Because camp is a sensibility—slippery, ineffable, and distinguished on the grounds of taste (not reason)—Sontag resorts to a series of theses, rather than a "proper essay," which stakes a "claim to a linear, consecutive argument," and thus, for Sontag, a series of theses "seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility."[32] Sontag begins with broad brushstrokes, noting that "Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization."[33] And this emphasis on stylization, exaggerated stylization, might be where the affinities between camp and the stupid are most evident. In fact, Sontag goes further to add that, "To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical."[34]

While there are clear affinities between camp and the stupid—in their championing of style over content, or a mismatch between them—what sets them apart is their relationship to narrative. While camp is an aesthetic sensibility related to cultural artifacts, the stupid manifests in narrative form. "For Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content. Concert music, though, because it is contentless, is rarely Camp."[35] The stupid very well might be in the "contentless"—in effect, the "meaninglessness" of narratives, the lektons.

Sontag, of course, includes the cinema in her discussion on camp (how could she avoid not talking about movies?). Camp materializes in film criticism, Sontag suggests, for example, in end-of-the-year lists, "The 10 Best Bad Movies I Have Seen." Camp carves out a space for "so bad it's good," or for "guilty pleasures," and these lists are "probably the greatest popularizer of Camp taste today, because most people still go to the movies in a high-spirited and unpretentious way."[36] The stupid, however, is not necessarily "bad," or a "guilty pleasure." In fact, the stupid, as it

relates to disruptions of narrative conventions, potentially marks sophisticated innovations in storytelling, or negotiates novel or evolving storytelling modes (e.g., videogames).

Very briefly, because we go to fair length about this later in the book, Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani's 2009 film *Amer*, which very well might be characterized as a "bad movie" by some critics, is not camp. Stephen Holden, for example, in his *New York Times* review of *Amer* concludes by asking, "What does it all mean? Less than meets the eye. *Amer* is a voluptuous wallow in recycled psychosexual kitsch."[37] In short, *Amer* is meaningless, vapid (less than meets the eye)—stupid. We too view *Amer* as stupid, but not in derisive terms—but rather to speak to its resistance to established regimes (i.e., narrative and genre). It is, however, difficult to view *Amer* as camp. Examples of "pure camp," Sontag insists, "are unintentional; they are dead serious."[38] Cattet and Forzani are too self-aware to be considered camp in these terms, it is however (perhaps understandably, but mistakenly so) possible to view *Amer* as camp in its "spirit of extravagance."[39] Extravagance has the potential to slip into "pseudo-camp" when it is "inconsistent," or "unpassionate"—when it "is merely decorative, safe, in a word, chic."[40] *Amer* is lavish in its stylization, but it is not "safe," or "decorative," it might be "cool" though if that is what Sontag means by "chic."

Camp, at the end of the day, is about pleasure. While we identify plenty of instances of joyous stupidity, at the same time, the stupid can be frustrating, repulsive, or elicit unease, because it fails to meet expectations, or it invites an affective or ludic experience that we might generally characterize as "contradictory" or "negative." "Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy." Sontag adds, "Camp taste doesn't propose that it is in bad taste to be serious; it doesn't sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures."[41] Again, taking *Amer* as an example, the Cattet and Forzani film is not a "passionate failure," rather it "fails" to conform to existing categories and paradigms of assessment—*it stupefies because we have to "read it" differently*. Camp does not level the same demands, it does not require a paradigmatic shift in our means of assessment.[42] Camp merely requires a love of established narrative forms, while celebrating certain exuberances.

Sontag addresses bad movies, and the potential for camp enjoyment: "There is Camp in such bad movies as *The Prodigal* and *Samson and Delilah*, the series of Italian color spectacles featuring the super-hero

Maciste, numerous Japanese science fiction films (*Rodan*, *The Mysterians*, *The H-Man*) because, in their relative unpretentiousness and vulgarity, they are more extreme and irresponsible in their fantasy—and therefore touching and quite enjoyable."[43] Mike Fahey celebrates the stupidity of the videogame *Earth Defense Force 5* (*EDF5*), in the same way, that Sontag celebrates the campy character of Japanese *diakaiju eiga* (giant monster movies). The *EDF* series comes out of D3 Publisher, a Japanese videogame producer, and Fahey describes it as a "long-running B-movie bugfest: *Earth Defense Force* is the best kind of stupid. What began in 2003 as an entry in D3 Publisher's 'Simple' series of budget Japanese games has grown into a cult favorite, thanks to hordes of monstrous insects, aggressively bad voice acting and a general disregard for quality control."[44] Although there is something painfully and nonetheless endearingly stupid about *EDF*, Fahey reports that he invested a significant amount of time into the game so that he could level-up and finally "play with up to three random strangers." He concludes, "For all its faults—and I mean that lovingly—*Earth Defense Force 5* is such a wonderful place to be stupid together."[45] In this instance, perhaps, we do see the convergence of bad movies, bad videogames, the camp sensibility and the stupid.

The bad, or disreputable object is not necessarily stupid in the way that we are conceiving it. John Waters's 1972 film *Pink Flamingos* is self-consciously "trashy"—from its content to its amateur production. The film, which is now a cult classic, is nonetheless firmly entrenched in the category of exploitation cinema.[46] The exploitation tradition trades in the carnivalesque, and in fact, its heritage is clearly rooted in the carnival, the sideshow, the exhibition of freaks. *Pink Flamingos* is less a narrative film, and more a compendium of queers, freaks, and spectacles (the utterly absurd, crude, sexually lude, disgusting). As the trailer for the film proclaims, *Pink Flamingos* is an "Exercise in bad taste." And while this places *Pink Flamingos* (and films of this sort) in relation to the cinema of attractions—being just a stone's throw from the carnival freak show, and thus sharing affinities with the stupid, exploitation's self-consciousness—its willful turn away from established narrative and genre regimes inoculates itself against stupidity. If we understand exploitation to be excessive, it paradoxically and summarily undoes itself; excess exists only because boundaries are established, limits are erected. But if exploitation makes affordances for all sorts of excess, even demands transgression, then, each "violation"—each gaff in continuity, each poor cut, each instance of coprophilia—is recouped by exploitation's built-in allowances.

Similarly, media texts that are associated with low culture are not inherently stupid—WWE has its place. Crass genres, the American convention of body-humor films being exemplary, are not stupid. Self-consciously juvenile in nature, and focused on the lower-stratums, body-humor films are often quite conventional. From Paul and Chris Weitz's 1999 film *American Pie* (and its subsequent sequels) to Greg Tiernan and Conrad Vernon's 2016 raunchy animated film *Sausage Party*, these films are situated within a well-established convention of gross-out body humor films. These films are typically geared toward a young male demographic and harken back to films such as Bob Clark's *Porky's* from 1981.[47] While stupid in a colloquial sense, *American Pie*, and other "low brow" films like it, are remarkably conventional in their cinematic syntax and narrative form, and thus not in the least bit stupid in the ways that we presently conceive it.

We have given considerable real estate to outlining the stupid by what it is *not*, let us now consider what it *is*. And perhaps it's best to imagine the stupid more as a state, than a static object, a definable thing as such. The stupid pertains to the (in)stability, the integrity, the understood bounds of categories (e.g., narrative conventions, genre). The stupid emerges when, for instance, technological innovations necessitate modifications to established storytelling regimes. In this context, the stupid can sometimes manifest in terms of a time bound or temporary perceptual definition, until critical and popular cultural orthodoxies can form around previously evolving, liminal, or misunderstood creative affordances thus (re)incorporating once-stupid texts and sub-genres into mainstream discourse. Videogames, for example, generally rely on spatialized storytelling, rather than conventional linear, cause and effect, narrative progression. The stupid is located at the intersection of media practices, audience encounters, and scholarly/critical engagement and where these "fail" to align. While some might argue that stories are universal (and in that sense, ultimately unchanging), and this is *not* something that we subscribe to, what remains uncontestable is that storytelling modes are inextricably linked to technology. The modes of storytelling have evolved, and they will continue to do so—from traveling curated Lumière programs screened at a fairground to your algorithmically curated Netflix feed, from the silent era to the talkies, from Pong to PS4 VR. Each technological innovation affords new storytelling possibilities. In addition to technological innovations, media producers innovate in style and narrative. Audiences and critics/scholars, when encountering these innovations, might not be equipped to negotiate these innovations—they might be stupefied. In some cases, this

encounter—because it does not align with preconceived notions of what a narrative is, or should be—might elicit ire, frustration, or disappointment, but in other instants stir more "positive" receptions including awe, surprise, curiosity, tickled bewilderment, exhilaration. The latter "positive" receptions are nothing short of what Gunning termed the cinema of attractions. And yet technological developments also bring with them the potential for the kind of stupidly dissonant and unforeseen collisions that define moments in the history of particular mediums. The technological innovations that facilitate fuller integration of storytelling into videogames, for instance, have led directly to the phenomenon of ludonarrative dissonance discussed in a later chapter.

The stupid, then, is what is in excess of established narrative conventions—be that mode, genre, or some other media storytelling conveyance. Although somewhat suspicious of it, Eugenie Brinkema, speaks to the concept of "excess," which certainly shares some affinities for what we are calling the "stupid": "The concept of excess spoke to the ways in which a text's contradictions, ruptures, and non-coherences could be more important to a reading than its apparent seamlessness. Although film theory, not unlike Barthes, moved between structuralist and poststructuralist phases, this insistence on the too-much dimension of films, the always-beyond quality that cannot be reduced to coded narrative structures, is a central poststructuralist problematic. In the history of film theory, one shorthand for this switch to poststructuralism would be the shift from codes-in-texts to texts-in-process."[48] The stupid, in this sense might be in process. As the boundaries of narrative are pushed, and formerly "excessive" practices are assimilated, what is excessive (or in our case, stupid) also changes.

The stupid potentially has more affinities with music than with cinematic narrative conventions. Music and lyrics need not make sense, rather we are typically invited to enjoy music on the order of rhythm and harmony. The stupid, we postulate, has been an integral part of the cinematic arts from its inception. The French Impressionist filmmakers, for instance, were not exclusively interested in narratives, but rather in eliciting sensation and emotion through cinematic devices—superimpositions, visual distortions, rhythm (sometimes quite frenetic) editing, and so on. Filmmaker and theorist Jean Epstein, as Martine Beugnet observes, advocated for "film as the medium of flux." Epstein traded in the stupefaction of the cinematic, not only in the integrity of the image but also in the "spatio-temporal anchors that are cut adrift." The cinematic is movement for Epstein "and as such, it contradicted all knowledge systems based on

the establishment of stable rules."[49] The innovations of the French Impressionists clearly influenced the surrealist filmmakers that would follow, and even American melodramas. The overwrought moments in melodrama were frequently accompanied by cinematic devices such as dissolves, an image thrown out of focus, a flashback, and/or the swelling of a non-diegetic score, in contrast, the stupid in contemporary media marks the resurgence of the untamed attraction.

The stupid in many instances is exhilarating, and it very well might elicit physiological symptoms in the viewing body. Sweaty palms elicited by a stupendously choreographed chase scene. Accelerated heartrate as a response to gameplay. An exasperated, "What the …!" at an unexpected turn in narrative structure. Arousal occasioned by the highly fetishistic treatment of bodies, perhaps accompanied by mouth thrown agape, and/or some non-verbal utterance. The much-maligned Michael Bay, or any other tentpole spectacle-driven filmmaker, very well might be the object of scholarly ridicule. And even to some scholars, heaping ridicule is lending Bay too much credit, but this willful disregard (because it is "below us"), fails to acknowledge that Bay is masterful in creating cinematic sequences that are thrilling. What is it that makes these films viscerally affecting? Perhaps, even *despite* their narrative stupidity, these films have the potential to still be enthralling—and dare we say it, innovative enough to stake a claim for the stylistic vernacular of contemporary Hollywood.

Like music, where even to the completely untrained ear, we somehow innately anticipate the flow of particular rhythms, harmonies, and pattern of notes—correspondingly, dissonance, then, only exists because of our conditioned response to music. Stupidity emerges on the occasion where narrative expectations are shattered—creating what we call "narrative dissonance." Different from a surprising plot twist, narrative dissonance pertains more to narrative syntax than it does to narrative content. In effect, it has more to do with *form* than *content*. The composer Arnold Schoenberg actively incorporated dissonance into his musical scores. As Adorno recognized, Schoenberg deliberately played with commonly held musical conventions that subsequently sounded dissonant precisely because they countervailed standard principles. Far from immutable, dissonance reveals not simply the negative possibilities of consonance, but the imaginative potential beyond reified norms.[50] Narrative dissonance, similarly, wields the potential to spurn critical ire and exasperated wonderment all at the same time. In the medium of videogames, the particular context of narrative dissonance, known as "ludonarrative dissonance," occurs when there

is a disjunction between the espoused principles of a game's narrative and the structures of its gameplay (notable in the *Uncharted* series, *Bioshock* and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, and *South Park: Phone Destroyer* among others). Confronted with narrative dissonance, or ludonarrative dissonance spectators, or gamers, are likely to be stupefied. At least for a time.

Just as music wants to be dissonant (as Adorno insists), the cinema (and other media) wants to be stupid. History, storytelling imperatives and prohibitions, convention, habituation beat narratives into submission—drubbing the stupid right out of narrative. This is not to suggest that the stupid is eclipsed altogether, rather it is simply tamed, groomed, made to conform. And this is what makes innovations—be that technological, or evolutions in storytelling modes (e.g., long format television)—so susceptible to the stupid: they have yet to experience in a sustained manner the stinging pain of critical censure, or perhaps even worse the shameful loneliness of utter indifference. There are, however, instances where the naked display of the stupid finds its audience.

Just as a tamed dog has lurking within it an untamed wolf, and if provoked could maul; likewise, the narrative (whatever its form, or mode) has within its very fibers the stupid.[51] "The temptation," of course, as Avital Ronell notes, "is to wage a war on stupidity as if it were a vanquishable object—as if we still knew how to wage war or circumscribe an object in a manner that would be productive of meaning or give rise to futurity."[52] The stupid is always already present, and always already threatening its punk rock insurgency, as it seems as though it is the unspoken duty of all critics and scholars to stand guard and prepare to do battle with it. But the stupid "exceeds and undercuts materiality, runs loose, wins a few rounds, recedes, gets carried home in the clutches of denial—and returns. Essentially linked to the inexhaustible, stupidity is also that which fatigues knowledge and wears down history."[53] Stupidity is not the opposite of knowledge, or "meaning" as such, but rather is an unaccountable, unassimilable excess. Or perhaps more accurately, the stupid is that yet-to-be-assimilated excess, because innovations or creative outbursts at the fringes that might seem "incoherent," "wild," "untamed," or *stupid* can be formalized into a motif and incorporated into the standard storytelling regime.

As with narrative dissonance, media texts might be implicitly, or on some occasions quite explicitly labeled as stupid because they run afoul of genre. Critics unable to contextualize untamed media, might express

frustration, and perhaps without explicitly saying as much dismiss it as stupid. The videogame *Gone Home*, is exemplary of this. The game "fails" to conform to preconceived notions of gameplay, and thus earned the scorn of gamers as a "walking simulator." A number of critics, however, also praised the game on precisely the same grounds—for expanding the potential of gameplay, and how that might intersect with innovations in storytelling.

Given our understanding of stupid media, employing the standard criterion of narrative assessment—for example, character development/motivation, narrative arc—is perhaps not always the most effective measure. In fact, such novelistic-based paradigms of assessment are ill-equipped, or simply cannot account for the excesses of stupid media. The assumption that cinematic narratives are (or should be) coherent linear events set in a cause and effect regime is specious because this reified paradigm precludes from consideration cinematic texts that are more episodic. If the cinematic text does not conform to this presupposed criterion, then, it is ruled stupid. Aristotle's critique of the episodic notwithstanding, in many instances, we find that stupid films are episodic: a series of vignettes strung together to varying degrees of cohesion. Genre films are rarely considered "good" precisely because of their tendency to rely on formulaic structures in which set pieces are effectively plugged into, or seen from a slightly different perspective they *lack* "organic" narratives motivated by specific cause and effect relations. Musicals, horror, action films, and pornography are genres that are generally more episodic—a series of discrete numbers with morsels of narrative located within the interstitial spaces between them. But even established genres might be given a "pass" if they "color within the lines" so to speak. However, if a genre film introduces an aberrant element this might invite scholars, critics, and the general viewing public to heap scorn upon the offending material—to call it stupid.

Storytelling that does not conform to conventions of linear cause and effect relations might be characterized as stupid: films that sit between genre categories, narratives that are episodic and/or structured according to spatial relations. Videogame narratives, for instance, are less about linear cause and effect relations—which is the product of temporal events. Videogames, more often than not, are predicated on exploring spatial fields, and it is through this exploration that a videogame narrative might unfold. Consequently, the narrative unfolds according to movement, and often in individuated units—and hence episodic—that are assembled according to gameplay as opposed to a prescribed narrative arc. "Spatial

stories," Henry Jenkins observes, "are often dismissed as episodic—that is, each episode (or set piece) can become compelling on its own terms without contributing significantly to the plot development, and often the episodes could be recorded without significantly impacting our experience as a whole."[54] Particularly since the millennium ludologists have, among other things, wrestled with the intersection of narrative and gameplay. The convergence of media compels us to consider research in areas that have attempted to negotiate the specularization of narrative. While disciplinary ego invites us to think about the ways that videogaming has appropriated cinematics, however, we should also consider the ways in which the cinema has appropriated videogame aesthetics, formal elements, and storytelling strategies.

Genre films such as melodrama, horror, and pornography—the trifecta that constitutes the body genres as determined by Linda Williams—are frequently cast as the "poor cousins" to more "serious" or more "authentic" dramatic narratives. While the latter follow venerable narrative conventions, and are principally concerned with character motivation that appeals to the spectator's emotions, the former on the other hand tend to be organized as episodic units that punctuate linear narrative progression, and that appeal more directly to the body and the sensate experience (crying, jumping, cumming). The musical too interrupts narrative progression with song-and-dance numbers. Videogaming, and the assimilation of videogame aesthetics/narrative form into cinematic storytelling shares certain affinities with the body genres. As with the established network of body genres, videogaming invites the spectator/player to imitate the sensate experiences onscreen—oral utterances upon failure or the completion of a major feet, the physical dodging of objects. These haptic experiences are generally prized over and above narrative coherence and resolution.

Scholars and popular critics alike tend to fetishize narrative. The inflated value of narrative structure squeezes out other possible critical paradigms that might be mobilized to assess different modes of storytelling. It's not that these "alternative" modes of storytelling are somehow better than a more "conventional" linear narratives, rather what we call for is a willingness to be open to other modes of assessment—to broaden our array of tools to apprehend storytelling that is not necessarily suited to traditional modes of narrative analysis.

Although our focus is on contemporary media practices, the stupid is by no means a new phenomenon. Take for instance a film like *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969): the narrative of the film is repeatedly "interrupted"

with driving sequences set to 1960s rock anthems like Jimi Hendrix's "If Six Was Nine." These driving sequences depict the scenic trip that the two counterculture characters are on; traveling from the American southwest enroute to New Orleans. These driving sequences capture some of the most breathtaking picturesque landscapes of the American southwest, and some of the most iconic (and sometimes melancholic) images of southern poverty—perhaps bordering on poverty porn. These driving sequences are highly stylized with kinetic cinematography and rhythmic editing—they are in effect music videos before such a thing properly existed. Insofar as the narrative is concerned the driving sequences are "meaningless," and instead revels in audio/visual stimulus treated in a highly embellished fashion. It should be noted, though, that the emergence of stupidity in a media text means that they are rendered "unintelligible." The editor for *Easy Rider*, Donn Cambern, recounts that following a screening for Columbia studio executives there was a long pause, Leo Jaffe, chairman of the board, finally stood up and pronounced, "I don't know what the fuck this picture *means*, but I know we are going to make a fuck of a lot of money."[55] A compendium of numbers, no meaning per se, but gripping all the same. We might dismiss Jaffe as just a stuffy square executive, but what this anecdote illustrates is how innovations in storytelling conventions may stupefy. This is all to say that the stupid in media is not necessarily new, this however is our focus precisely because the stupid tends to manifest in technological, stylistic, and narrative innovations that fails to conform to established narrative regimes.

The Contours of Stupidity

What we have attempted to do in this opening chapter is to set the stage for a discussion on the stupid—how we conceive it. We have organized the remainder of the book thematically, focusing on different manifestations of the stupid: "The Stupid in the Contemporary Hollywood Vernacular," "The Stupid in Genre Fails," "The Stupid as Narrative Dissonance," and "The Stupid as Ludonarrative Dissonance." Within each thematically framed chapter, we include a series of case studies, media that we take to be exemplary of the respective manifestation of the stupid. This is not to suggest that these are *the* examples of the stupid, but rather are illustrative of a particular kind of stupidity.

In Chap. 2, "The Stupid in the Contemporary Hollywood Vernacular," we take as our primary example the much-maligned *Transformers* franchise.

In these films, and so many like them, action sequences (typically battles, or chases) are rhythmically insinuated into the narrative—narrative-spectacle-narrative—in the same way that musical numbers punctuate the musical genre. But in these films action is also directed to infect its narrative buffers, pushing the whole syntactic enterprise to or beyond the edges of coherence and comprehension. The conventional wisdom suggests that the number frustrates the advancement of the narrative. There are instances though, of course, where a number (a song-and-dance, sex scene, chase sequence) does not halt narrative progression, but advances it. Bollywood films, for example, as Rajinder Dudrah describes, insists that song and dance numbers in Bollywood films are "narrative accelerators," where the numbers are critical in advancing plot elements—miss the number and miss a significant feature of the narrative.[56] Or, if taking a less apologetic position, then, illustrating that the spectacle *is* the narrative, it is not a design flaw, it is not a narrative mistake, but rather the spectacle is the whole point of the thing. Likewise, this iteration of the contemporary Hollywood vernacular incorporates, in its full-throttle embrace of action, the energy of the frenetic action into its editing and cinematography. A premium then is placed on the sensation of the action, rather than fidelity to intelligibility and spatial integrity. This new attempt at a vernacular, by conventional standards, then, comes at the expense of continuity editing and camera placement/movement. Furthermore, because the spectacle is the point of the thing, narrative conventions (e.g., character arc) are deemphasized, or colonized by yet more action, to lend more storytelling real estate to spectacles.

One facet of the stupid pertains to categories, whether something conforms to existing notions of a particular category. In our Chap. 3, "The Stupid in Genre Fails," we chart the problems that emerge when genres evolve in some fashion—either through the introduction of technological innovations (e.g., streaming services that invite innovations in long-format television, and interactive narratives), creative interventions in storytelling, or the hybridization of genres. In some cases, these evolutions have the potential to blossom into something vigorous and exciting, while on the other hand, they might encounter a negative response from critics or the general viewing public—in both cases though such developments (especially when first encountered) might stupefy and be considered a genre fail. With time, however, even the most contemptuously treated media might well be recouped. If the stupid is repeated enough, then, it becomes a motif, a trope, and ceases being stupid, and is assimilated as one

of many narrative devices storytellers can deploy. In time Richard Hell leads to Green Day.

While Chap. 3 contends with types of narratives, Chap. 4, "The Stupid as Narrative Dissonance" tackles the internal logic of narratives. While conventional storytelling anticipates consonant narratives—coherent linear narratives that end with a satisfactory resolution—narrative dissonance potentially unsettles the "smooth flow" of a narrative. We take Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* as a particularly good example of narrative dissonance. In addition to being simply bizarre, narrative rules are frequently broken in *Adventure Time*, resolutions, for instance, might end on an apparent negative (and in utterly unexpected fashion), or narratives might well feel truncated, ending prior to what would be considered the established expectation. *Adventure Time* is a particular case because it appears to draw directly from Mikhail Bakhtin's literary notion of the chronotope: literally meaning "time space."[57] Bakhtin called this specific play with space and time, often found in the Greek romance tradition, "adventure time." All manner of mayhem could befall the protagonist, but this makes little difference to the overall narrative—all the little internal quests, all the events in the adventure time have little or no bearing on the story. And with the adventure time, the overall narrative appears to go nowhere. Rather than following the conventional linear narrative arc, *Adventure Time*, at times follows a videogame logic where narratives rely on spatialized storytelling, rather than standard cause and effect progression.

Chapter 5, "The Stupid as Ludonarrative Dissonance," negotiates the relatively new possibilities for storytelling in the videogame form. While the tension between gameplay and storytelling marked the emerging field of ludology, what has emerged since, setting aside the debate of whether games could (or should) ever tell stories, is ludonarrative dissonance. This term describes an internal logic within a (video)game that puts the structure of gameplay (what actions should be taken to win) in conflict with narrative impulses (a "negative" outcome for a character should you elect to "play along" with the game structure). *Bioshock* is the first videogame that has been cited as doing this in a sustained and notable way and is a subject of discussion in Chap. 5. Fans are increasingly accommodating to, and even anticipating ludonarrative dissonance. Rather than being a product of poor design, game designers are now consciously building in ludonarrative dissonance to intensify the narrative experience of videogames. We also consider videogames that emphasize the story element, which some conservative gamers would say, comes at the expense of

"good" gameplay. *Gone Home* is our example here. Lauded by progressive game critics, and target of ridicule from facets of the gamer community, *Gone Home* invites us to reconsider what a (video)game is, or can be. So-called "casual games" too, typically simple phone-based games, begin to interrogate the bounds of "serious" games.

While these specific examples are intended to illustrate particular manifestations of the stupid, they are not intended to be viewed as *the* representative of each manifestation. We could, for instance, in our "The Stupid in the Contemporary Hollywood Vernacular" chapter have pointed to any number of tentpole films—swap out the *Transformers* franchise for *Pacific Rim* and its sequel, or *The Fast and the Furious* films. What we have discovered along the way, is that the stupid is usually found at the forefront of innovations in storytelling. Whether that is innovations in technology or creative experiments that expand what is conceivable in storytelling (narrative structure, genres, and modes of storytelling). Indeed, the stupid is not a singular thing, but rather is *symptomatic* of a particular state. It points to the never-ending evolutionary process of storytelling. When a critic, a scholar, or the general public vociferously proclaims, "that's stupid!" while it might indeed be "bad," at the same time it might also suggest that the referent does not correspond to an existing category, that it is a *mis-fit*.

Notes

1. Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University, 2002), 77. In an email exchange with Lechte, Kristeva's former student, he notes that he would translate, "plus c'est bête, c'est mieux," as "'the sillier the better.' However, a case could be made for the fact that 'stupider' is a more direct opposite of 'intelligent,' which is the basis of the contrast Kristeva is trying to make." Burdick's translation also gives this phrase as "the sillier the better." Julia Kristeva, "Ellipsis on Dread and the Specular Seduction," trans. Dolores Burdick, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, Philip Rosen ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 239.
2. David Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film," *Film Quarterly* vol. 55, no. 3 (Spring 2002), 16.
3. Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (London: British Film Institute, 2011), 123.
4. Ibid.
5. Bordwell, 25.

6. Ibid., 23.
7. Ibid., 24.
8. Lisa Purse, "Affective Trajectories: Locating Diegetic Velocity in the Cinema Experience," *Cinema Journal* vol. 55, no. 2 (Winter, 2016), 156.
9. See the documentary on editing: *The Cutting Edge: the magic of movie editing*, Wendy Apple, 2004.
10. Matthias Stork, "CHAOS CINEMA: The decline and fall of action filmmaking," *IndieWire*, August 22, 2011, accessed November 10, 2018, http://www.indiewire.com/2011/08/video-essay-chaos-cinema-the-decline-and-fall-of-action-filmmaking-132832/. Bold text in original.
11. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 385.
12. Ibid., 384.
13. Ibid., 387. Elsewhere Gunning writes, "There are many ways of telling a story in film, and some of them (particularly in cinema before the twenties or, obviously, in avant-garde work) are clearly non-classical. In some genres (musicals, crazy comedies) the attractions actually threaten to mutiny. By describing narrative as a *dominant* in the classical film I wish to indicate a potentially dynamic relation to non-narrative material. Attractions are not abolished by the classical paradigm, they simply find their place within it." Tom Gunning, "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (Fall, 1993): 4.
14. Gunning, "'Now You See It, Now You Don't,'" 5.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 6.
17. Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 127.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 128.
20. Gunning, "'Now You See It, Now You Don't,'" 6.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 7.
23. Ibid., 9.
24. Ibid., 10.
25. Ibid.
26. Martine Beugnet, "Introduction," to *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 6–7. In her excellent book *Cinema of Sensations* Beugnet likewise invites us, in the face of post-millennial trends, to recalibrate our "critical and theoretical approaches and, possibly, [adopt] different viewing habits." Martine

Beugnet, *Cinema of Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 32.

27. Gerry Canavan, "Why the Marvel Cinematic Universe Can Show Us a Story, But Can't Tell Us a Plot," *Frieze* (blog), May 3, 2018, accessed March 12, 2019. https://frieze.com/article/why-marvel-cinematic-universe-can-show-us-story-cant-tell-us-plot.
28. Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 14.
29. Aaron Kerner and Jonathan Knapp, *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 12–14.
30. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Anchor Books and Doubleday, 1990), 275.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 276–277.
33. Ibid., 277.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 278.
36. Ibid.
37. Stephen Holden, "Ogled and Threatened on a Journey to Womanhood," *New York Times*, October 28, 2010, accessed November 10, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/29/movies/29amer.html. Robert Musil locates affinities between kitsch and the stupid: "Since throwaway goods, junk, enter into the word *kitsch* principally through their associated meaning of unfit, useless wares, but incapability and uselessness also form the basis for our use of the term *stupid*, it is hardly an exaggeration to maintain that we tend to address everything we don't agree with—especially when, apart from that, we pretend to respect it as intellectual or aesthetic!—as 'somehow stupid.' And in determining what this 'somehow' means, it is significant that the use of expressions for stupidity is shot through and through with a second usage, which embraces the equally imperfect expressions for what is vulgar and morally repellent and leads one's attention back to something it had already once noticed, the fateful conjoining of the notions 'stupid' and 'indecent.' For not only 'kitsch,' which is the aesthetic expression of intellectual origin, but also the moral words 'filth!' 'repulsive!' 'horrid!' 'sick!' and 'insolent!' are undeveloped kernels of art criticism and judgments about life." Robert Musil, "On Stupidity," in *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, eds. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 277–278.
38. Sontag, 282.
39. Ibid., 283.

40. Ibid., 284.
41. Ibid., 291.
42. Greg Taylor also positions camp in relation to "reading" or "interpretation," and consequently to the re-contextualization of a cultural production: "The critic thus liberated the movie behind the movie; it was not the movie everyone else saw, the one Hollywood technicians thought they had made. *That* film was terrible; it was worth watching only because it might be remade into something much more interesting, aesthetic even." While our mobilization of the stupid invites the spectator to "reconsider" stupid media, we are not necessarily making value judgments. Stupid media very well might be idiotic, or crass. Furthermore, Taylor's positioning of the camp critic (Taylor is specifically addressing the poet and film critic Parker Tyler here), is still fundamentally adjacent to the "stupid critic." Identifying the stupid is not an exercise in demonstrating "superior powers of discernment and connoisseurship," as Taylor says elsewhere, but rather point to the sometimes-uneasy integration of innovative storytelling devices. Greg Taylor, *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 53; 64.
43. Sontag, 284–285.
44. Mike Fahey, "Stupidity Escalates Exquisitely In *Earth Defense Force 5*," *Kotaku*, December 11, 2018, accessed April 20, 2019. https://kotaku.com/stupidity-escalates-exquisitely-in-earth-defense-force-1831004222.
45. Ibid.
46. Speaking to the tradition of cult cinema, Mark Jancovich notes, "These films showings began in New York and brought together an eclectic series of movies from excessively gorey art movies such as *El Topo*, horror classics such as Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and the 3D version of Jack Arnold's *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, to movies such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*, both of which were self consciously designed as cult movies." Mark Jancovich, "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production of Cultural Distinctions," in *The Cult Film Reader*, eds. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (New York: McGraw Hill and Open University Press, 2008), 159.
47. For a fuller discussion of gross-out comedy see, inter alia, Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2002).
48. Brinkema, 42.
49. Beugnet, "Introduction," 10.
50. Another potential way to think about the stupid is awkwardness. Adam Kotsko specifically positions awkwardness in relation to the violation of norms. See Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness* (Washington, Zero Books, 2010), 17.

51. Ronell similarly compares "stupidity" to the foreigner, "… stupidity as a foreign body that can be neither fully repelled nor successfully assimilated." Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 12.
52. Ibid., 3.
53. Ibid.
54. Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 124.
55. Donn Cambern in the documentary, *The Cutting Edge: The Magic of Movie Editing* (Wendy Apple, 2004). Emphasis added. Along similar lines, Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) was not immediately embraced by critics. On March 16th, at the 2019 annual Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Janet Staiger presented a paper entitled, "*2001* as the Ultimate Trip: Exposing Altered Spectatorship." In this presentation Staiger surveyed the initial lukewarm response to Kubrick's film. Repeatedly, film critics characterized the film as a "trip," "psychedelic," or "surreal." Staiger observes that the "non-typical aesthetic features of *2001* facilitated the linkages between the movie and a drug trip. Amongst these are the minimal dialogue, an oddly mixed soundtrack, the 'slow' pace, and visual novelties." Staiger drawing from Harry Benshoff, notes that he suggests that "a film good for watching while stoned or tripping is one which 'regularly eschews or modifies classical Hollywood narrative form' and has a 'focus on spectacular aural and visual effects'; it is 'often episodic or nonnarrative' or is a 'anthology concert film' (Benshoff). David Church concurs, the '*psychedelic film* proper devotes extended sequences to dazzling effects which audiovisually recall hallucinogenic experiences, often through avant-garde (or avant-garde-inspired) techniques'" (Church). Staiger adds that *2001* was treated "as a new kind of cinema," from which debates emerged "whether or not films should have 'meanings,' whether the ending of the film is 'worth the deadly boredom of the rest of [the] film,' (Spinrad) whether this is a step forward in science fiction, and whether the reason youth like this film so much is because they have grown up in the visual environment of television." From the psychedelic and surreal, to the emphasis on "visual novelties," to the eschewing of "classical Hollywood narrative form," to the "episodic or nonnarrative," to the "meaningless" all these things point to what we are calling the stupid. See Harry M. Benshoff, "The Short-Lived Life of the Hollywood LSD Film," *Velvet Light Trap* 47 (2001), 31; Mark Gallagher, "Tripped Out: The Psychedelic Film and Masculinity," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* vol. 21, no. 3 (2003–04), 163; David Church, "The Doors of Reception: Notes Toward a Psychedelic Film Investigation," *Senses of Cinema* 37 (June 2018), http://sensesofcinema.

com/2018/feature-articles/the-doors-of-reception-notes-toward-a-psychedelic-film-investigation/; and Norman Spinrad, "*2001: A Space Odyssey*," *Cinema* vol. 4, no. 2 (Summer, 1968), 58.

56. Rajinder Dudrah interviewed by Scott Simon, "World's Most Popular Film Industry Turns 100," *Weekend Edition Saturday*, *NPR* (December 21, 2013): http://www.npr.org/2013/12/21/256003573/worlds-most-popular-film-industry-turns-100.
57. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Michael Holquist ed., and trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

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CHAPTER 2

The Stupid in the Contemporary Hollywood Vernacular: Spectacularly Stupid *Transformers*

Introduction: "How Do You Smell Loud and Confusing?"

We are in hell. In a scene from a recent episode of the NBC comedy show *The Good Place*, one demon sprays another with a diabolical new scent: "It's called *Transformers*," the demon tells his colleague, "it smells like *Transformers* movies make you feel." Later in the episode, the joke pays off when another character encounters the sprayed demon and asks: "how do you smell loud and confusing?"[1] If the joke lands with us it is because we recognize the truth within it. In 2009, Roger Ebert ascribed another whiff of the demonic to the franchise in his review of *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*: "If you want to save yourself the ticket price, go into the kitchen, cue up a male choir singing the music of hell, and get a kid to start banging pots and pans together. Then close your eyes and use your imagination."[2]

Of course, *Transformers* movies are loud and confusing; they are, in important ways, designed to be so. Their untamed visual style and scattershot storytelling engage us in ways that other movies do not and, if we are either not inclined or not able to experience them with the untamed joy of a 12-year-old (no matter our actual age) it is likely we will think they are stupid. Indeed, the *Transformers* franchise has long been convenient low-hanging fruit for jokes about bad moviemaking—in truth, we have made them ourselves on occasion. And yet it is precisely because of the franchise's invidious reputation, because it sits squarely at the intersection

A. Kerner, J. Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28176-2_2

of scholarly and popular-critical discussions of stupidity, because its own iteration of stupidity is inscribed onto the history of Hollywood filmmaking at a very particular moment and, finally, because it tests the implicit assumptions of this book that stupid media is/can/should be creatively complex, challenging, and even potentially transgressive, that discourses around the *Transformers* movies are of particular interest to us.

For media journalists and movie buffs alike, this series of high-budget science fiction films, based on a line of toys manufactured by Hasbro, has become the sine qua non in the discussion of all that is commonly perceived to be wrong, bad, lost, or otherwise deficient with contemporary American commercial moviemaking. After all, *Transformers* movies typically present in ways that seem explicitly designed to antagonize film journalists. They just do not behave how proper movies—even proper blockbuster movies—are supposed to behave. The long list of craft and, in particular, special effects credits that follow every *Transformers* movie argues that they are, indeed, creatively complex in their way. However, it is harder to swim against the tide of popular critical opinion to argue that they are also challenging, let alone transgressive (dysfunctionally or otherwise). In the end (we feel we should feel) whatever else they might be, *Transformers* movies are "not for us."

Their reported sins are legion, chief among them: breaking storytelling rules, devaluing character development, and fetishizing the (untamed) attraction of hyperbolic kinesis on the screen. We will go on to argue that *Adventure Time*, an animated show on the Cartoon Network, indulges in similar creative digressions from storytelling norms. However, the popular critical argument would go: *Adventure Time* is (maybe) for adults and *Transformers* is a (stupid) tentpole movie franchise aimed primarily at a (stupid) demographic with all the inevitable critical baggage that both the (stupid) medium and (stupid) audience bring. Unlike *Adventure Time*, which deploys its narrative dissonance in ways that imply, at the very least, more than a degree of challenging and even transgressive sophistication, it is easy to argue that a *Transformers* film glories in its own brand of knockoff dissonance by blasting its lektonic syntax at the viewer in an explosion of empty affect. And yet, like its simian analog, this cinematic poop-flinging chimp of the tentpole era has proved, for many, to be compulsive viewing.

The *Transformers* franchise first untamed its spectacular attractions in 2007, deploying the stupid in order to stake a claim for the future *vernacular* of the tentpole movie. In using the term we follow, for a certain

distance, the exegesis of the cinematic vernacular developed by Mikel J. Koven in his analysis of the Italian *giallo* horror/thriller genre in *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film*.[3] Building on the research of Christopher Wagstaff, Koven argues that the structural form and spectacular tropes of the giallo served an industrial distribution pattern in which these films were primarily to be watched by a particular cultural audience (working class Italians) in a particular exhibition context (*terza visione* cinemas).[4] In short, and like other Italian popular *filoni*, *gialli* were obliged to fight against the marginal attention of an audience who went to the cinema as a social event, and for whom the content of the film they had paid to see was of lesser importance than the interactions going on in front of the movie screen. Koven argues that the electrocardiogram structure of the spectacular *giallo*—driven and punctuated periodically by sequences of hyperbolic action, violence, and sexual activity—was intended regularly to draw the audience's attention back to the screen. Thus, the form of the *giallo* was informed, inspired, and certainly delimited, at least in part, by its exhibition context. The genre developed a stylistic and structural vernacular to interface effectively with the norms of a particular movie-going culture. Koven's argument for an Italian vernacular cinema is more nuanced than this, but it is enough, for our purposes, to establish the relationship between genre, style, and exhibition.

Consistently, the creatives behind the *Transformers* franchise have pushed the narrative structure and film grammar of their movies in the direction of the post-cinematic. In effect, they read the tea leaves of a converging and accelerating global media landscape—and the emerging economic lessons of 3D exhibition—to pre-position their cinematic vernacular at the boundary of its medium in preparation for an anticipated battle for relevance and market share. As we shall see, they framed and targeted this competition less at competing tentpole movies than at other forms of convergent and even transmedial entertainment (notably videogames and theme park rides). The resulting cinematic formulation is simultaneously structurally bloated and stylistically accelerated, as Lutz Koepnick notes, comparing the director, Michael Bay's work to a form of modernist experimentation: "Bay's world cinema is a world on steroids, a world in which everything conspires to outpace the burdens of time, history, and memory; a world that futurist speed aficionados of the early twentieth century would have loved to embrace."[5] Indeed, the intention that the *Transformers* franchise would be defined in part by its hyper pacing was clearly built in

from early development, as Tom DeSanto (one of the first movie's producers) suggested back in 2003: "we believe we can create an incredibly fast-paced, exciting movie that will be appealing to anyone who loves action films."[6] For Koepnick, the fetishization of speed (of character movement, of action, of shooting and editing regimes) in these films also flushes out "whatever might prevent the individual from relishing the pleasures of movement for movement's sake." Furthermore, this stylistic vernacular "typically leaves audiences hapless, either mindlessly titillated or thoroughly anaesthetized." In sum then, for Koepnick the modernist/post-cinematic vernacular of Bay's movies is, indeed, designed to be loud and confusing, rather in the way that an encounter with the sublime assaults the senses: "Bay's fast-cut images, his pounding soundtracks, his hurried, albeit largely insubstantial narratives—all roll over the viewer's sensory systems and cognitive capacities like a steam engine."[7]

We will return to the curious notion that there is something of the post-cinematic experiment about the *Transformers* franchise below. However, the anticipated competition for audiences between the Hollywood tentpole, and other forms of convergent, transmedial, and post-cinematic entertainment has not played out in quite the way Bay and the franchise's screenwriters anticipated. Indeed, we argue that the battle to define the vernacular of the tentpole for domestic audiences (although arguably not as clearly for international audiences) is currently being won over at Disney, with the comparatively buttoned-down film grammar of the Marvel Comics Universe (MCU).[8] In effect, the writers and filmmakers at Marvel Studios made their own bet on the needs of convergent audiences by integrating their attractions more classically, through character and story as much as through spectacle, drawing their tonal lessons as much from 1990s indie and Indiewood cinema as they did from Space Mountain.

Nevertheless, although *Transformers* may be currently losing the box office war to define the global popular cinematic vernacular, its movies still speak to the untamed potential of the tentpole in a loud, confusing, and yet still influential dialect (not least, of course, in emerging global franchises like *Pacific Rim*). The franchise is, in this sense, a clear example of the evolutionary stupid in convergent media; its vernacular now bypassed by the mainstream tentpole and yet still strangely innovative in its way. *Transformers* repeatedly broke and then remade movie syntax to redefine what a movie might need to be in a vision of the end of cinema that has not (yet) occurred. Indeed, Lutz Koepnick suggests that it is in the marrying of film style to the global and transmedial production and distribution

contexts for Bay's films, and especially for the *Transformers* franchise to date, that "there are many good reasons to think of this cinema as perhaps the most forceful expression of world cinema today, perhaps the truest exemplar of what it means to design moving images for and in the world under the conditions of twenty-first century capitalism."[9] The designed-in spectacular stupidity of this untamed *Transformers* vernacular has certainly proven to be a successful (if recently diminished) economic formula although, perhaps inevitably, that very success has helped to stoke the fires of critical approbation—for many, the *Transformers* franchise does not deserve its own success.[10]

It is not hard to find examples of negative critical reaction to a *Transformers* movie. A recent Google search of "Transformers stupid" elicited approximately 6,300,000 results. At the top of the first page was an excoriating review of the most recent entry in the franchise, *Transformers: The Last Knight* (2017), from the respectably liberal British newspaper *The Observer*, under the hyperbolic title: "*Transformers: The Last Knight* is Sloppy, Stupid and Quite Possibly Evil."[11] The reviewer, Oliver Jones, takes exception to a number of specific storytelling issues in the film, not least among them the rewriting of Adolf Hitler's suicide to provide a throwaway plot device. He also makes a broader case that the franchise has declined in quality over time, from merely enjoyable to actively meretricious. "The series has become increasingly bereft of imagination," Jones intones, "something this installment attempts to make up for with a seemingly bottomless budget and a battalion of screenwriters. All they are able to dredge up is a visually and thematically muddled story and a flood of graceless words that signify less than nothing."[12]

Alongside his vitriolic tone, one of the most revealing aspects of Jones's response to the movie is a repeated attempt alternatively to pre-empt antipathetic fan responses to his criticism, while championing what he perceives to be the attenuation of fan interest in, or tolerance of the franchise as a whole. Jones clearly feels the need to persuade himself and his implied readership that *Transformers* may be on the wane, that we may be free of it soon. He begins by positioning himself and the franchise's implied fandom in the familiar hierarchical oppositions of the elite and the popular, or the critic and the audience. "[The movie] is loud and dumb," there is a pattern emerging here, "and it expects its fans to be the same in its defense—to decry anyone who might take issue with it as elitist members of this summer's no fun squad."[13] Jones concludes, however, with a personal, anecdotal report of fan responses to the movie during a screening

he attended in Los Angeles. Here he tries to assume more of a common cause with his fellow filmgoers. It is worth quoting his piece at some length because his critique suggests avenues for further discussion that we will follow in this chapter:

> A note to those who would argue that a movie like this—or *The Mummy* or *Baywatch*, for that matter—is for audiences and not for critics. When I saw *Transformers: The Last Knight* at Universal CityWalk in Los Angeles a few days before its national release, the full theater fell mute to the film's supposed jokes and thrills. The silly fun that was apparent 10 years ago in the first movie in the series … has been pounded out by the corporate necessity of every new installment. And the audience can feel it. They are reflecting back upon the *Transformers* movies the same cynicism that oozes from every cog of this empty, money-making enterprise. That's probably not enough to keep the film from grossing a billion, or to keep the next one, teased inevitably and nonsensically at the end of *The Last Knight*, from coming to fruition. But it does give us hope.[14]

For Jones, therefore, *Transformers*'s stupidity is a function of two linked issues. Firstly, the content of *Transformers: The Last Knight* is "loud and dumb," with a script whose words somehow "signify less than nothing." This simultaneously aligns the movie against conventional critical discourse and places it in the oppositional, dismissible or, at least, liminal category of "fun." But this kind of fun is somehow distinct from the "silly fun" of the first *Transformers* movie. What has changed? In Jones's terms, as the *Transformers* franchise has run its course the silly has been transformed into the stupid. He locates the operating mechanism for this transformation squarely within the conglomerate Hollywood institution, for which the movies are made. The second part of his argument implies that the seriality of the franchise has been debased by a strategy of out-bidding born of "corporate necessity." Each entry tries to out-do the last in terms of the deployment, at the expense of conventional storytelling, of the kind of kinetic attractions and set-piece sequences that are its calling cards to fans. As Frank Kelleter and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann note in their discussion of American television, there is a tendency of recent series to indulge in out-bidding and one-upmanship by intensifying successfully established strategies of distinction.[15] The same often applies in Hollywood tentpole franchise series and the *Transformers* movies have certainly embraced inter- and intra-series out-bidding as a feature, not a bug. Koepnick makes this very point in his study of Bay's career: "The films themselves, however,

have turned increasingly bigger, louder, and complex in their production, design, marketing, commercial tie-in appeal, and global box office command."[16] As Ehren Kruger, a screenwriter on three entries in the franchise, notes of his experience working with the director, Bay, "no matter [what] idea I will pitch him, it will come out bigger."[17]

Of course, Jones is far from alone among movie journalists in ascribing stupidity to the *Transformers* franchise. Manohla Dargis's 2007 *New York Times* review of the first entry in the rebooted franchise spoke for many in calling it (all together now, you know the words), "a movie of epically assaultive noise and nonsense."[18] Bilge Ebiri, in *The Village Voice*, even included a photograph of a page of his screening notes in his review *Transformers: The Last Knight*. The words "WHAT IS HAPPENING" are scrawled across it.[19] His review is interspersed with several long "quotations" of intentional semi-nonsense, utterances illustrating just how dissonant the movie appears to his critical eye, just how far outside of non-stupid critical discourse he deems it to have veered. The statement-fragments and question-fragments embedded in this nonsense include "so much random stuff so much," "it's like you thought the earlier movies were confusing," and "actually how are adults supposed to understand any of this," thus he writes (to be clear, this is a direct quote):

> fiiigjhkwetwnwwwjsahafajhwfohofoehaoowofoeoicioeciaqidjFaerlaeaffjgjlje XGRSXSsfdsmfjjjsomuchrandomstuffsomuchegjwogpjwd bldklhjitslikeyouthoughttheearliermovieswereeconfusinghahahah mfjff7ga98fhfhfplwxczc howarekidssupposedtounderstandanyofthisVSSH gmnskglactuallyhowarea dultssupposedtounderstandanyofthisjskjjlvr lmnkrjsljrjsaywhatyouwillbuton ceuponatimejsogrjdvpvarivpaeimp grfggjsfsfpoemichaelbaycouldbringbeautytoanactionsceneeeevgrhcgg oiwxgamanicpoetryfilledwithkineticgraceandheroismgjvbbp mnfwdwdwkpad3dkkalikewhateverhappenedtoTHATguydzxwqs szmtheguywhomadetherockandbadboys2andeventhefirsttransformerswzns hmnffrqerqrqpainandgaintoothatwasprettygoodhahqqxjpq3Oirgaraaem hjsxsmvermavrbutnowhesbecomeaselfparodykljekwjkjjjejhar grmfagafafmmfhkjasxxandthecrazythingisheknowsitjcejjdagmfflrlrl 3jq3aefrabutdoesntseem toknowhowtoescapeitzklWSCMC.[20]

Even when a critic was generally well disposed toward *Transformers* they often felt the need to excuse, explain, or compartmentalize their praise in some way. Roger Ebert, for example, enjoyed the first rebooted *Transformers* entry, in 2007, with the caveat that the spectacular set pieces

are wearying: "the mechanical battle goes on and on and on and on … and enough is enough."[21] For his part, the passionate contrarian Armond White offered a wry corrective in dismissing conventional criticism of Bay, and his films while simultaneously acknowledging their stupidity: "Why waste spleen on Michael Bay? He's a real visionary—perhaps mindless in some way (he's never bothered filming a good script), but *Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen* is more proof he has a great eye for scale and a gift for visceral amazement."[22] Read either with or against the grain, the popular discourse from critics around the source and symptoms of *Transformers*'s stupidity offers openings for investigation, and for textual and contextual analysis of the franchise, but it also proffers clear binary choices around if and how we are expected to exercise even the most straightforwardly evaluative critical judgment.

Most film critics are hampered in this regard, not least because they are neither trained in nor open to the stupid, but at least one journalistic critic has acknowledged the challenge implicit in making just such a choice. Josh Tyler of *cinemablend.com*, writing revealingly from the perspective of a fan-critic, opens his review thus: "*Transformers* is astoundingly goofy, but it knows it's goofy and simply doesn't care, which is why Bay's film is so much giant freakin robot fun. There's no attempt to be serious."[23] He goes on to position himself in opposition to Oliver Jones's imagined "no fun squad" in suggesting that there are two ways to review *Transformers*:

> The right way is to look at it objectively, examining how the film is put together and picking apart the script by pointing out the gaping logical gaps present in it. I'll be reviewing the film the wrong way, as a man who was once a little boy crying because Optimus Prime was dead. Now whatever is left of that kid inside me has had a wakeup call. The movie he's been waiting twenty years to see is finally here; Optimus Prime is back from the grave and he needs my help.[24]

For Tyler, therefore, *Transformers* elides criticism because its stupidity grants it a kind of immunity. Indeed, the franchise's box office success has occurred despite the almost universal disapprobation of the critics. Not unlike Butters, in the *South Park* episode in which he thinks he has become a vampire, the franchise has become other, and thus "ungroundable." At the same time, Tyler also senses that his emotional, fannish response is somehow "wrong." It makes him guilty of inappropriate critical behavior and it does not mesh with his role as a responsible online popular cultural

taste arbiter. In his own defense, he testifies to his childhood *Transformers* fandom. For all its "gaping logical gaps," the movie still spoke to him powerfully, in his gut. It is an eloquent fan rejoinder and Tyler's "two ways" offers us an opening for our own discussion of *Transformers* in this chapter. Of course, in one sense we are guilty of considering the franchise in the right way—Tyler's right way, which is, by implication, also the wrong way—and yet our analysis tries to occupy a both/and position. It is prompted and informed by a desire objectively to account for and contextualize exactly that intentional goofiness—the very stupidity that appeals to audiences, and makes these movies ungroundable by critics.

Stupid Screenwriting

Stupid media, whether so defined under a scholarly or a journalistic grid, does not just happen. Professionals from the creative media crafts strive for the opportunity to write and produce it and they pay their mortgages with the payment they receive for their labor. Indeed, the exercise of the professional craft of screenwriting in the *Transformers* franchise comes in for particular criticism in the press and online, with the prevailing judgment being that the series's stupidity begins with its screenplays. We already have Jones disparaging the "battalion of screenwriters" who contributed to *Transformers: The Last Knight*, Tyler acknowledging the "gaping logical gaps" in a *Transformers* screenplay, and White claiming that Bay "never bothered filming a good script." However, professional screenwriting, stupid or otherwise, does not happen in a vacuum either. Stupid media is developed within and emerges from particular institutional contexts and its particular variant of stupidity serves equally particular corporate goals.

In the media industries, there has always been a tension between what Patricia F. Phalen terms the "creative logic" of writers and the "market logic" of executives.[25] These terms are not mutually exclusive, rather they are in tension because they represent the discursive poles of quality and profitability and both exert their magnetic forces on the creative development process. The easy assumption is that the further the balance between these poles is shifted toward market logic in a media institution, the stupider the products produced by that institution are likely to be. We should consider the industrial and institutional contexts of *Transformers*'s writing and development, therefore, to ask whether the franchise is—or was—functionally distinct from cognate tentpole franchises. To what extent,

then, does it take a stupid Hollywood institution, and stupid Hollywood crafts to produce a stupid franchise?

One important signal of the move toward stupid screenwriting in Hollywood is that the globalized and conglomerated studios are no longer in the business of buying many original scripts. Instead, in the so-called tentpole paradigm, they now chase huge audiences by focusing on developing adaptations of already successful intellectual properties and other franchises in-house. Smaller profits from smaller movies no longer register within their conglomerate institutions, and this affects the kind of movies they now make. The market for spec scripts—screenplays written not on assignment but in the hope of a sale—is a fraction of the size it was in the 1990s. The Hollywood screenplay sales tracking blog, *The Scoggins Report*, reflected on the parlous state of the spec market in March 2016 (and things have not improved materially since that date): "By our count, there were 93 spec script sales last year. That's slightly up from 2014's 90, not far off the 7-year average, but way down from the mid-triple digit numbers we saw in 2011 through 2013. That said, those three years now feel like outliers—in 4 of the last 7 years, fewer than 100 spec scripts sold."[26] The state of spec screenplay sales can be illustrated, albeit imperfectly, by comparing those numbers to the roughly 50,000 screenplays registered with the Writers Guild of America (WGA) every year.[27]

Another marker of the move toward stupid screenwriting is the increasing economic importance of the global box office for the bottom lines of Hollywood studios. In a recent piece for the *Los Angeles Times* titled "R.I.P. for the spec script, long a source of some of Hollywood's most beloved films," Chris Erskine checks the adaptation box as the primary cause of the spec's demise, adding that "economic forces, from globalization to the downfall of the rental DVD market, were also cited as factors in the death of the spec; talented writers' increasing preference to work in television is considered another factor."[28] In globalized Hollywood, Erskine argues (quoting a former Sony executive), where foreign markets have now eclipsed domestic in terms of revenue, the original spec often reads as "too American … If you're going to hit a global home run, then you're not going to be able to do that with an original screenplay."[29] Screenwriter Ehren Kruger explains the tentpole paradigm from the perspective of the market logic of an imaginary studio president:

> The big studios are in a big money business. They're all segments of major corporate behemoths, and they need to be making movies that put people

> in seats. And so that's why you'll have a studio president who looks at the slate for the year and says, "We need to make five tentpole, four-quadrant movies; we're going to make a couple of romantic comedies, a couple of horror pictures, a few teenage comedies, and one or two serious, award-caliber, fine filmmaker/movie star films. So that's what we're looking to fill."[30]

In short, the *Transformers* franchise emerges from a Hollywood industry in which the major studios are now making very few, mostly very big movies each year, with their eye on international markets, where many in the audience do not speak English, and subtle dialog and complex characterizations—long the staples both of "smart" writing and of the spec screenplay—are no longer kings. On the other hand, explosions and giant robots are inscribed prominently into the Rosetta stone of international movie distribution. *Transformers*'s stupid vernacular is designed directly to appeal to this conception of the international marketplace. Globalization and conglomeration do incentivize the spectacular iteration of the stupid in tentpole screenwriting. That was underscored in 2017 when *Pacific Rim*, another "giant robot" movie driven by its own post-*Transformers* tweak on the vernacular of untamed attractions, had a sequel greenlit purely on the basis of international box office—the movie having fared relatively poorly in the US.

As Kruger's knowing incarnation of a studio president suggests, therefore, Hollywood is no longer in the business of making what we might loosely refer to as conventional dramas. These dramas have moved to smaller screens, meanwhile, in the battle of genre, the "stupid" B genres defeated the "smart" A genres to dominate the feature film marketplace.[31] This battle was won and lost some time ago, but it has taken a while for the defeated genres to drag themselves to the edge of the field.

To a certain extent, stupid screenwriting has always been encouraged and even coerced in Hollywood institutions by the polymorphous pressures of market logic. Of course, commercial pressures are exerted on all projects, whether deriving from spec or assignment screenplays. However, that has never been more evident than in the last two decades during which, as the Writers Guild of America claims, changes to the management and contracting of screenwriting labor has significantly compromised the originality of screenplays written on assignment. Professional screenwriters complain that recent trends in employment practices, such as one step deals and sweepstakes pitching, make vulnerable writers

disinclined to innovate or risk-take. The one step deal, for example, breaks tradition by guaranteeing a writer only a single draft of a script. (Past practice was to contract the writer for at least two drafts, giving them the opportunity to work with the studio, and its producers to revise and improve a first draft.) With the one step, the pressure is on the writer to second-guess studio intentions and to write to stay on the project, rather than to explore its creative potential more freely. From the studios' perspective, on the other hand, the one step deal saves time and money by dropping projects quickly when they have no future. It also allows them to hire relatively inexperienced (cheaper) writers for first drafts, to fire them and replace them with A-list writers for subsequent development. This also saves money because a rewrite fee is substantially less than a first draft fee.[32] In short, one step deals can also incentivize at least one definition of stupid screenwriting and storytelling in Hollywood movie development.

Moreover, the major studios operating the tentpole paradigm valorize conglomerate synergy over originality. Thus, their development practices privilege franchises that can be cross-marketed between departments and silos within the studio's conglomerate master. Again, this is not, in itself, especially new. Many of the lessons taught by *Star Wars* were learned in Hollywood long before Bay was hired to make his first movie about toy robots from space to sell toy robots from space. Nevertheless, the development of spectacular Hollywood media is now more attendant than ever on the particular iteration of market logic generated by conglomerate marketing departments as it is on other iterations of that logic once generated by creative executives in the more independent, pre-conglomerate movie studios.

There is another interested screenwriting constituency from which we have not yet heard, however. The screenwriting paraindustry—made up of the writers, professors, coaches, and others who trade both in the myth and the reality of breaking into Hollywood screenwriting—has also been vocal in decrying *Transformers*'s stupidity, according to their own professional lights. Of course, the paraindustry is principally invested in enunciating, sustaining, and marketing normative storytelling paradigms, so it is hardly surprising that divergence from established models has exercised screenwriting "gurus." The June 2017 posting, "How to Write a Screenplay Bomb: *Transformers: The Last Knight*," from Lucy V. Hay's paraindustrial blog *bang2write.com*, offers an entertaining and pertinent critique that encompasses the position of many others in her field. Her website is intended not to review movies but to draw practical screenwriting

lessons from Hollywood storytelling for the benefit of her—presumably aspirant screenwriter—followers.

Hay, a script editor, crime novelist, and an established author of "how-to" screenwriting books, is also sympathetic to the tentpole, to action, and even to some of Bay's other films, so her critique is perhaps more revealing than that of a stuffier guardian of screenwriting's normative best practice. As she writes in her introduction: "As long as there's some explosions, some robots kicking the shit out of one another, some running, some comedy, a bloke with his shirt off and a budget Angelina Jolie slinking about the joint, then it's usually a thumbs-up from me."[33]

Hay takes a moment to praise instances of the film's spectacle before launching into an analysis of what she finds lacking in its (stupid) screenwriting. The salient points of her critique of *Transformers: The Last Knight* can be broken down as follows:

1. The movie is much too long, deploying multiple false endings that become frustrating.
2. The story has a confusing and unmotivated inciting incident (or moment of initial story impetus).
3. Frequently the writing pulls us out of the story with too many instances of empty homage to other blockbuster films.
4. There are too many characters, some of which have little purpose in driving the story.
5. The movie is unsure whether it is a thriller, a comedy, an action movie or a mystery.
6. The movie suffers from an incoherent structure and plotting. It begins in some vestige of control but then, as Hay notes, "After Mad Anthony Hopkins turns up … all bets are off. This is when Michael Bay and his team must have had a good toke of the crack pipe and said: 'Fuck it! Why not just put ALL our 3AM decisions in here?!'"[34]

For Hay, therefore, the storytelling of *Transformers: The Last Knight* is stupid because it is unbound by the conventional markers of genre, because it over-indulges in meta-textual and intertextual reference, because it breaks utilitarian rules of narrative economy, and because it frees itself from the shackles of conventional causality in multiple ways. We have seen all of these tropes of the stupid before, in other contexts. On her website, Hay illustrates the stupidity of *The Last Knight*'s storytelling through a

complex diagram (below) that *positions* them explicitly as dysfunctional. This diagram shows what stupid screenwriting looks like when it is represented graphically. In order to interpret the diagram, one must be aware of the long-established conventions of para industrial storytelling models. "Normal" feature film structure is located in the simple horizontal line, broken by acts and by the midpoint and underscored by typical craft shorthand for key plot points (set up, conflict, resolution). This three-act structure is, with minor variation, how the Hollywood screenwriting paraindustry expects a movie story to develop and resolve. Its graphical representation, at the heart of Hay's diagram, clearly emphasizes the sleek economy of the professional craft model. The rest of the diagram consists of notes and prompts to the (stupid) storytelling accretions in *Transformers: The Last Knight* that Hay identifies as being problematic in one way or another. These accretions sit complexly adjacent to the central line of conventional storytelling and literally muddle things up, making the whole diagram much harder to read and to understand. Our eyes are drawn to the series of stars below the "resolution," for example, where Hay is suggesting that the movie is guilty of too many false endings. Similarly, we note the lines of cramped text at the top of the diagram that articulate plot and story beats as homages and isolated moments. In sum, and just like the movie whose structure and storytelling it attempts to represent, this diagram is also loud and confusing (Fig. 2.1).

Importantly, Hay concludes by comparing the (stupid) story structure of *Transformers: The Last Knight* to "every insane spec screenplay I have ever read." In so doing, she suggests that, in the craft terms of Hollywood feature screenwriting, those spec screenplays are stupid because their writers either do not understand their profession at all or are still learning the basics. Specifically, the scripts present as stupid because they do not internalize and communicate clear answers to important para industrial questions like:

1. "WHO they're FOR." (Who their audience is.) She argues that the movie would bore and confuse the children who are its core demographic.
2. "WHAT they are." She argues that the movie lacks genre consistency.
3. "WHERE they're going." Hay argues that the story switches track and becomes distracted by the accretion of unnecessary material.
4. "WHEN they're going to end." Unlike *Transformers: The Last Knight*, Hay argues, good genre movies do not outstay their welcome, and power toward dynamic conclusions.

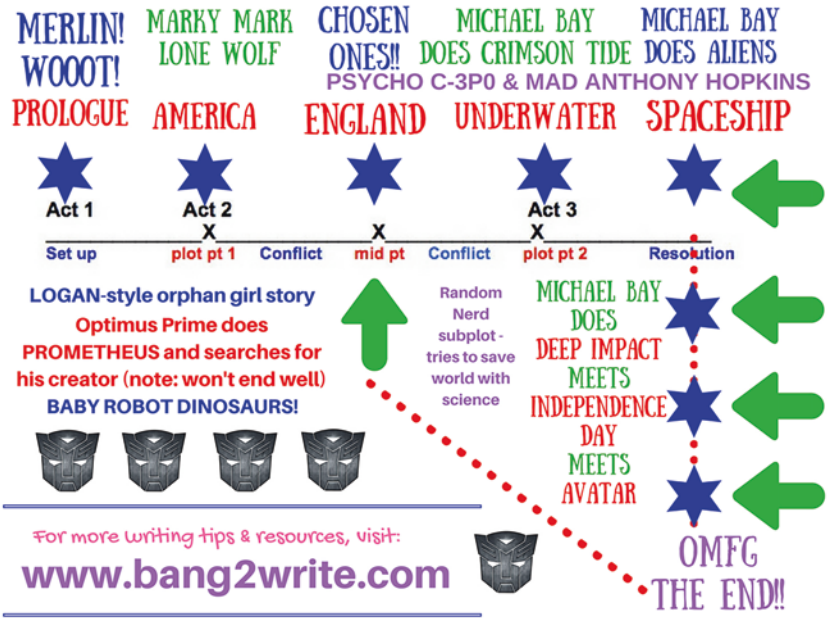

Fig. 2.1 Illustrated chart produced by Lucy V. Hay in an effort to explain *Transformers* (Hay, Lucy V. "How to Write a Screenplay Bomb: *Transformers: The Last Knight*." *Bang 2 Write* (blog). June 26, 2017. Accessed February 19, 2018. http://www.bang2write.com/2017/06/how-to-write-a-screenplay-bomb-transformers-the-last-knight.html)

5. "WHY this story." Hay, the sometime fan of that most commercial of directors, Michael Bay, acknowledges that transparent commercialism completely overwhelms story.

In making this connection between *Transformers: The Last Knight* and the kind of naïve spec screenplay that would never make it past Hollywood's gatekeepers, Hay directly evokes a sense of amateurishness that runs counter to another kind of evidence, namely the professional, creative, and corporate investments that have generated and sustained the billion-dollar *Transformers* franchise. She concludes: "Characters simply CANNOT carry the story on their own in screenwriting, however good they are. Seriously, you need to watch it to understand WHY structure and plotting is so key. I'm sicking [sic] of writers telling me structure is a 'formula'—

IT'S NOT A FORMULA. It's a bloody framework. The likes of *Transformers: The Last Knight* illustrates perfectly how writers need to keep things simple and focus on their plot."[35]

Finally, to gain a professional craft perspective from within the development process of the franchise, we smash cut (although hopefully not too loudly and confusingly) to a close up on *Transformers*'s stupid screenwriting from the writer of three of the movies. Ehren Kruger, a former recipient of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' prestigious Nicholl Fellowship for new screenwriters, has spoken candidly and perceptively in interviews about his experience of working with Bay. His remark about how collaborating with the director inevitably makes ideas "bigger" is entirely consistent with the authorial and commercial priorities, on the part of the director and the producing entity of the franchise, to expose, expand, and transcend the borders of conventional cinema. Indeed, continual intra-franchise over-bidding has had the effect of narrative distillation, of reducing story ever further toward the set piece. In our terms, Bay and his collaborators have been deploying the stupid in an attempt to move *Transformers* beyond conventional cinema. Kruger explains how this priority was explicit in the collaborative story development for *Transformers: Age of Extinction*. "I have pitched the kind of core story … Then I start sitting down with Michael [Bay], just the two of us in a room, and we start discussing visual ideas and how the story could lend itself to spectacular sequences."[36] In another interview he doubles down on how Bay's style leads the story development process: "he's a very sensory director, and sometimes an 'overload' director. He's someone who is always looking to top himself, certainly from an action perspective and a stylistic perspective. So very early on we're throwing ideas back and forth. We talk about sequences and visuals and moments."[37] Thus, the over-bidding of (stupid) spectacle is conceived and engineered up front in the script development process, with other modes of storytelling available to backfill later as necessary. Moreover, Kruger is open about the (stupid) attitude to narrative logic that increasingly characterizes the storytelling in the franchise: "When you're talking about aliens, robotic machines which disguise themselves as vehicles and animals, you start to make your peace with the idea that logical sense doesn't have to be the be-all, end-all."[38]

The freedom that Bay and his collaborators take to reinvent the definitions and expectations of commercial cinema with the *Transformers* fran-

chise is both indicative of broader trends in contemporary cinema history and of a specific and limited, hard-nosed economic judgment regarding the status of cinematic tentpole entertainment vis a vis other media. On the one hand, *Transformers*'s stupid reinvention of cinematic narrative is redolent of Francesco Casetti's formulation of cinema's contemporary condition as both "attenuated"—allowing it to "insinuate itself in the crevices of our social world"—and "redefined"—constantly asking us to "accept the transformations it has undergone, and even to project them back in time into its history." He concludes: "Lightness and reinvention: If cinema is to remain among us, these are the conditions that allow it to do so."[39] On the other hand, in Kruger's read, Bay positions *Transformers* in competition not with other tentpole movies but with the haptic attractions of "Six Flags." As a consequence, the experience of writing a *Transformers* movie sometimes felt to the writer like a "quasi-experimental" practice more akin to writing a Cirque du Soleil show than a Hollywood movie. In the end, Kruger explains that Bay "is a populist entertainer, and he's delivering spectacle the way that P.T. Barnum promised … He always wants to push thrills, spectacle, humor, and fun. Somewhere way down the list is "all the 'i's must be dotted" for old-fashioned narrative practices."[40]

Again, and again, therefore, the screenwriting of *Transformers* has been critiqued on the basis of incoherence, on the basis that it abandons the norms of proper Hollywood storytelling in the quest for a different kind of movie going experience. What becomes palpably self-evident is the way in which Bay wholeheartedly embraces the cinema of attractions and its attendant relation to—and indeed active competition with—fairground fun. In the commonsense critical vernacular, therefore, *Transformers* is stupid because its writing is divergent. On the contrary, we have argued that the scripting of the *Transformers* franchise is in important ways both symptomatic of wider shifts in Hollywood development practices and priorities as well as with creative tendencies in contemporary tentpole screenwriting more broadly. However, it is also undeniable that *Transformers* movies are not merely stupidly constituent with other tentpoles, they are indeed also stupidly distinct. Ehren Kruger's account of story development with Bay reminds us of the degree of creative intention that lies behind the untaming of their attractions and now we need to follow the franchise into production to account for the relationship between stupid screenwriting and stupid style.

Stupid Style

We argue that, as of this writing, the *Transformers* franchise has been a leading exemplar of contemporary studio production in that the films have been sites for a targeted, convergent, and experimentally post-cinematic—or perhaps even post-narrative—drive for corporate synergy in which the perceived failings of its movie storytelling—the "commonsense" of *Transformers*'s structural and stylistic stupidity—are variously recapitulated and reified by the creative team behind the movies as features, rather than bugs. In other words, we argue that, while in conventional terms *Transformers* movies are stupid, the intentionality behind their stupidity, the specific nature of their deviations from normative storytelling paradigms, elevates them into a more interesting category, one that is more than adjacent to the terms of our investigation.

Transformers movies are one iteration of the contemporary stupid stylistic—deploying their untamed attractions to lure audiences with the promise of going on an exhilarating ride. And this is precisely what many critics and scholars fear. *The New Yorker*'s film critic David Denby joins Oliver Jones in arguing that the stupidity of the *Transformers* franchise is symptomatic of a broader shift in the style of Hollywood storytelling. He codifies the result of this shift as "conglomerate aesthetics"; in our terms, he might as well have called it stupid aesthetics. "The language big movies are made in," he writes, "the elements of shooting, editing, storytelling, and characterization—is disintegrating very rapidly and in ways that prevent the audience from feeling much of anything about what it sees."[41] In short, Denby's critique calls out conglomerate aesthetics as relying on recycling and cliché. He emphasizes the replacement of drama, which elicits emotion, with mere movement, which he suggests provokes an empty haptic response in the audience. He reads back this absence of emotion as stupidity—as "a zero degree of meaning." Under this grid, then, contemporary cinema repeatedly thwarts psychological investment in characters (this is what "normal," or "good" films do), and instead trades heavily in "sensory excitement." Cinema has in a sense become utterly meaningless, disposable, and plays simply to the body, and its sensations.[42] And in this sense, the *Transformers* cinematic franchise might share affinities with the pornographic genre.

The style of *Transformers*, at least the refraction of that style through the lens of Bay's popular critical reputation, has proved easy to lampoon. "Michael Bay Presents: Explosions!" an animated sketch in the form of a parody movie trailer from *Robot Chicken*, pokes fun at the director's style by turning its humor around the idea that he is producing an increasingly

stupid—an increasingly lektonic form of cinema, exactly equating to Denby's complaint of a zero degree of meaning in conglomerate aesthetics. The sketch first reduces Bay's approach to cinematic storytelling to the explosion and then moves to remove the last vestiges of conventional signification by taking progressively larger bites out of the language of the titles that are intercut with explosion gags onscreen. First, "MICHAEL BAYSPLOSIONS," then, "MI-BA-BLA-BA SPLOSIONS!!!!" followed by, "MICHAEL BLA-BLA SPLOOM!!!" and finally, "MA BA SPLOOM."[43] Although this sketch digs a little deeper than most, other parodies of Bay's style posted to *YouTube* also equate it to a combination of explosions, bright lights, and hyperactive editing. Often these parodies recut existing movie trailers under titles such as: "What if Michael Bay directed *Up*?" or "If Michael Bay directed *Toy Story 3*." In each case the joke is, once again, to transform the original film into the stupid by the addition of elements of a kinetic, aspirationally lektonic movie syntax.[44]

Transformers movies deploy their untamed attractions in a manner that exhibits many of the characteristics of other stupid media—episodic, dissonant, and visceral. What Bay does best is spectacle, and it is Bay that is emblematic of a post-millennial cinematic vernacular. Take, for instance, the chase scene through the streets of London in the 2017 installment of the franchise, *Transformers: The Last Knight*. The geography of London is nearly impossible to discern—in fact, from shot to shot the "real" geography of London is disregarded. Unsurprisingly, the spatial integrity of the locations is sacrificed in favor of action. But the license that filmmakers take with "real" locations is nothing new, think of Kuleshov, for instance, so this in itself—save their knee-jerk response—should not spurn the indignation of critics. Exotic high-performance sports cars race through the streets. The duration of shots in some instances are reduced to a blink of an eye. The mobile objective camera, like the sports cars that it depicts, appears to be mere inches off the London pavement. And like the cars themselves, the camera also swerves, and pivots, echoing the fishtailing of the vehicles.

The exotic cars (and not to mention robots) are highly fetishized. The color of the cars is clearly intended to stand out from the police, the international agency (driving black Lexuses) pursuing the protagonists, and civilian vehicles minding their own business. Bay's signature low angled circular camera movement typically reserved for characters in dialog (recall *Bad Boys II*, "This shit just got real"), is also lavished upon the vehicles. The curves and the design of the cars are embellished with low angled

shots analogous to the treatment of Bay's heroic male protagonists. While normative young male (boyhood) libidinal energy is directed toward the wonders of the mechanical world, from adolescence to adulthood typically that libidinal investment is redirected to the female body. In-between these points of cathexis though is the strange fetishistic economy that combines these—pin-up girls leaned up against muscle cars, suggestively straddling a motorcycle, or some other mechanical marvel. The infamous Carl's Jr. commercial featuring Paris Hilton, for instance, exemplifies this strange convergence.

The car fetish is particularly potent in American culture. The car is inextricably bound to the American ethos of autonomy, mobility, and self-determination.[45] David Laderman observes that the opening of *Bonnie and Clyde* "foreshadows the film's association of freedom with the road and stolen cars." Clyde cases Bonnie's mother's car, and as he does Bonnie voyeuristically gazes out at Clyde from her mundane home, "most notably" as viewed through the "bars of her bed as the visual equivalent of a prison. She is bored, restless, and confined." Laderman continues to note that Bonnie's attraction to Clyde, at least in part, is "because of his association with the car, and the liberation the two together signify for her. The car and its potential mobility are thus set up as the casual vortex of their meeting, and the start of the story."[46] The *Transformers* films perhaps queers this fetishistic economy—where the male protagonists, in particular, are deeply invested in their Transformer/cars, which invariably are coded male.

The first of the Bay *Transformers* films capitalizes on the convergent fetishistic economy—where fetishistic treatment of the female body is coupled with the fetishistic treatment of cars. With the first *Transformers* film, Sam Witwicky, a bookish and insecure adolescent boy, purchases his first car: a vintage 1977 Chevrolet Camaro. Little does Sam know it, but the Camaro is inhabited by the Transformer, Bumblebee (Bee). Not only is Sam's car a ticket to autonomy and mobility, it is also an avenue leading to masculinity and sexual maturity. Bee in effect serves as Sam's much-needed wingman, coaching and coaxing him into situations where he might actualize his sexual awakening. Bee brings Sam and Mikaela Banes (Megan Fox) to a secluded area, feigning car trouble, all the while playing Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" on the car radio (this is summarily followed with James Brown's "I Feel Good").

Mikaela puts up her hair and tells Sam to open the hood as Sam hopelessly stammers ineptly trying to explain away the sexually charged situa-

tion. Mikaela opens the hood to reveal a spotless chrome-gilded engine—the sound track echoes the awe-inspiring sight with a strong metallic twang. The non-diegetic audio parrots the drawn-out boyish expression of, "damn!" which might be uttered in exasperation when encountering the female form that corresponds to the subject's fetishistic fantasy. However, in this particular case the fetishistic object is not a female body, but an eight-cylinder engine that rests neatly in an unusually pristine engine compartment. Mikaela announces that "Wow, nice headers. You've got a high-rise double pump carburetor, that's—pretty impressive Sam." The sexually suggestive character of the dialog is impossible to miss, especially when it is coupled with the highly fetishistic cinematography that emphasizes Fox's body. Although the vaguely circular camera movement is evident here, there is a reverse close up shot of Mikaela's face that interrupts the circular movement. In fact, the camera doubles back and repeats the circular movement (though highly truncated now), and with tighter framing. Sam, however, does not return Mikaela's gaze in the standard shot/reverse shot formation; rather Sam is transfixed by something else: Mikaela's exposed midriff. The low riding mini skirt coupled with the snug-fitting top, that emphasizes Fox's buxom figure, exposes her taut slim waist. Fox's golden complexion glistens in the sunlight—the treatment of her exposed midriff is deeply embellished (clearly greased up to gleam in the sun). Assuming Sam's point of view the camera pans up from Mikaela's exposed midriff to her torso and long dark hair as her body gyrates—supposedly, jiggling on the loose distributor cap. Close ups of Fox's face emphasize her shocking blue eyes set in contrast with her tan complexion, dark eyebrows, and hair. While the fetishistic economy of the pin-up girl and car are self-evident here, the spectacle of Camaro-engine-Fox do not halt the narrative altogether, rather the spectacle drives the narrative. The spectacle speaks to Sam's desires, and to the awe-inspiring power of the Transformers. Bee is everything that Sam is not, but wants to be.

Whether it's the eroticization of bodies (and to be sure male bodies are also fetishized—Mark Wahlberg is clearly framed for erotic contemplation in the series), or the eroticization of mechanical bodies (from exotic cars to robots) what Bay is really known for is action sequences. To return to the car chase in *Transformers: The Last Knight* this sequence is exemplary of what Matthias Stork dismissively terms "chaos cinema." Importantly, the editing, cinematography, and the choreography of exotic vehicles and robots, to Stork's mind, moves far beyond what David Bordwell refers to

as "intensified continuity."[47] Bordwell suggests that while shot durations have got increasingly shorter, the basic principles of narrative storytelling remain intact. Stork, on the other hand, suggests that contemporary popular cinema perverts long-established storytelling conventions tearing "the old classical filmmaking style to bits. Directors who work in this mode aren't interested in spatial clarity. It doesn't matter where you are, and it barely matters if you know what's happening onscreen. The new action films are fast, florid, volatile audiovisual war zones."[48]

Moreover, in *Transformers* movies the post-narrative impetus of the franchise's big bet on its tentpole vernacular requires that nothing is ever truly still. The promised outbidding of the latest cinematic *Six Flags* ride can never end; we are merely offered moments of relative deceleration as our car climbs the slope before the next, inevitable vertiginous plummet. To be truly distinct, in Bay's and Kruger's terms, and truly stupid in our own, *Transformers*'s vernacular must always be being actively spoken; it can never remain passive and silent. Indeed, the same hyper-kinetic aesthetic that powers cinematic action in a *Transformers* movie also infects the (already minimal) sequences of exposition and character development that would, in other franchises, in more conventional vernaculars, offer moments of respite and reflection. (In this way, one of the consequences of intra-series outbidding is that the *Transformers* franchise increasingly diverges from the analogy to pornography we developed above.) Once untamed, the vernacular attraction spreads into almost every scene and sequence of *Transformers: The Last Knight*, eliding spectacle with character and paring the human down to little more than a quintessence of thrust. A short scene in which a Decepticon brings bad news to Megatron, for example, is punctuated by repeated dramatic blasts of fire from the giant robot's weapon—fire equals anger and frustration, in case the point was lost.

And yet when action does not interfere directly in these sequences, distracting from the human and literally animating the static, then characters or context conspire to curtail them. Another short scene in which scientists brief politicians is interrupted almost before it has begun by one bored participant picking up a model Space Shuttle and making an offhand comment about its flying characteristics before professing he can't be bothered to listen to the technical explanation of an incoming threat. Thus, the ensuing briefing scene is reduced to a single line of warning, played on a push in to close up. In so doing, the bored politician directly incarnates the movie's "meta," its stupid vernacular exposed for a stark

moment at the very surface of the cinema text. The character simultaneously adopts the position of the vernacular's implied audience; surely, we have been taught to be bored and a touch resentful when the giant robots and their equally giant actions—that we have paid good money to watch—are away from center screen. Similarly, in the scene in which the fugitive Cade Yeager (Mark Wahlberg) makes a satellite call to his daughter, Cade is told he has a scant 20 seconds before the call will be traced. Cade sits in moody silence as his (unseen) daughter speaks on the other end of the line. She also knows about the 20 second drill, even repeating the call's time budget in case we missed it the first time. Even so, she overspeaks and her words are cut off abruptly as the call goes dead and the visual storytelling rushes us forward once again.

The longer scene in which Cade and the young runaway mechanic, Izabella (Isabela Moner) compare backstories is particularly instructive in this regard. The encounter begins in movement, as the two shout at each other while hurrying through the maze of Cade's junkyard, observed by giant robots. When they reach Cade's trailer he sits, the action bringing with it the sudden danger of rapid kinetic deceleration. Immediately, however, two small dinosaur robots come to the vernacular's rescue. In a moment of comic relief, one of these baby Transformers belches fire and sets the curtains ablaze. Cade and Izabella talk loudly at, if not to, one another while she goes to work with a handy fire extinguisher, but Cade gives more attention to the continuing antics of the baby fire-breathing robot, who is evidently just learning to control its adult powers. Through a fast cutaway on a look to a handy photograph on the refrigerator, the human conversation is then given license to bypass small talk and get straight to the expositional heart of the encounter. Even so, Izabella's angle is framed with another baby Transformer prominent in the foreground of the shot, offering us additional distraction from the (boringly transgressive) human interaction taking place behind it. The exchange itself is cross cut in an editing regime so fast that it clearly omits the time it would take for real human beings to hear, absorb, and prepare to respond to one another's utterances. This is narrative economy at the bleeding edge; character development on afterburners; the stupid vernacular compensating for the terror of the conventional. Incidentally, the scene's editing regime also sells out the dramatic delivery of the two actors who are left high and dry, as if committing the great craft crime of not playing the moment, of not listening to one's acting partner. It is not the actors' fault—clearly, the performances are there, glimpsed fleetingly between the

edits—*Transformers*'s vernacular simply does not need to give them the space and time to seem credibly human. The scene ends with Cade testing Izabella's knowledge of Autobot mechanics to see if she is worth keeping around. Even this pop quiz is accelerated out of coherent language as Izabella simultaneously shows she knows her stuff while shorthanding the explanation—she does not know the right terms. Apparently, you "rechannel the central flow into the whatchamacallit, the doohickey…" It is enough for Cade, the pseudo-science, just like the movie's aesthetic, doesn't need to be coherent to be operational. Izabella has passed the test and once again we are spared a long, technical explanation. The writers know that we know how these things go in genre cinema, so why waste action time watching it happen?

A second, equally instructive example of the stupid vernacular's need continuously and assertively to speak its name occurs later in the movie, when the hero group meets Sir Edmund Burton (Anthony Hopkins) in Castle Folgan to hear the true history of Transformers on Earth. The sequence plays out through several locations, but principally the library and chapel of the castle. The dry—and in a different sense stupid—exegesis of the "true" backstory of the entire franchise is livened up (relatively conventionally) by illustrative diegetic and extradiegetic cutaways, but also frequently punctuated by increasingly irrational and, in one sense, pointless interruptions by Cogman, the insane robot butler (voice acted, for an intertextual joke, by the actor Jim Carter who was well known at the time of the movie's production for playing the butler in the popular TV series *Downton Abbey*). In the first scene in the library Cogman suddenly physically attacks Cade, supposedly to defend the honor of Vivian Wembley (Laura Haddock), in the process running across the table he has just laid with tea. Burton chastises him for overreacting, and he is barely restrained from further violence. Later, in the chapel, Burton's explanation of the ancient pact between the Transformers and King Arthur is underscored by a dramatic organ score until it is revealed that the soundtrack is, in fact, diegetic as Cogman is playing the chapel's pipe organ too loudly and dramatically. As Burton remarks: "you've ruined the moment again." Cogman's reply is defiantly "on the nose," as screenwriters say, reminding the audience—as if such a reminder was necessary—of the pressing needs of the franchise's vernacular: "I was making the moment more epic." Shortly afterwards, the gag is repeated in minor variation when the (now operatic) score is revealed once again to originate from Cogman, this time singing and dancing his way across the raised organ gallery. At once puer-

ile and annoying, when viewed through a conventional narrative grid, and yet both incommensurable to such a grid and thus utterly necessary to the sustenance of *Transformers's* "Six Flags" vernacular, it is these ruptures, these repeatedly "ruined" moments that the narrative actively recapitulates through commentary and dialog. This repeated recapitulation serves not to confirm the narrative ruptures as random—or even sustained—instances of "bad" filmmaking, but to remind us of the intentionality behind this relentlessly intrusive action. In this curiously awkward way, they most perfectly articulate the relentlessly kinetic intent of the stupid vernacular of the *Transformers* franchise.

Of course, it is during action sequences that *Transformers* movies speak their stupid vernacular most fluently. Lambasting another Bay film, *Bad Boys II*, Stork acknowledges that the action sequences, namely the car chases, are "cool to look at, but it's hard to discern in detail, and there's no elegance to it. The shots are often wobbly. Sometimes this is due to the use of deliberately shaky handheld cameras. Other times, the filmmakers have made relatively stable shots seem much wilder and blurrier in post-production through the use of AfterEffects software. (This is not film grammar, it is film dyslexia.)"[49] The chase sequence in *Transformers: The Last Knight* is presented in precisely the manner in which Stork describes. What prevents the sequence (or other chaotic sequences like it) from being utterly unintelligible is the audio design. Stork argues that while the visual field is chaotic, it's the diegetic audioscape that "insist[s] that we *hear* what is happening onscreen. Ironically, as the visuals in action films have become sloppier, shallower and blurrier, the sound design has become more creative, dense and exact. This is what happens when you lose your eyesight: your other senses try to compensate."[50] Stork is absolutely correct, though not precisely in the ways that he thinks he is.

The car chase in *Transformers: The Last Knight* is ridiculous when bound to "naturalistic" assumptions, or strict narrative cause and effect relationships. Watching the car chase frame-by-frame, in fact, reveals some surprising details. In this series of shots, we see that an oncoming car, what appears to be a silver Mazda 3 series hatchback, swerves to the left of the frame to avoid hitting the red McLaren. The McLaren presumably zig zags to miss the silver hatchback, and darts back again allowing an oncoming silver sedan (either a BMW or Volvo) which is immediately behind the hatchback to slam into one of the pursuing Lexuses. The silver sedan slamming into the Lexus head-on performs tremendous aerial acrobatics, embellished with a spray of golden sparks. In an overlap edit, the

Fig. 2.2 A Mazda 3 swerves to miss the oncoming McLaren in *Transformers: The Last Knight* (Michael Bay, 2017)

violent dance of the two colliding vehicles is seen again, however, the front ends of the vehicles never touch and the silver sedan flies inexplicably through the air, while the back end of the Lexus shoots upward with explosive power (Fig. 2.5). This is subsequently followed with the great raining down of newspaper and debris—the explosive mini-climax within the chase scene is characteristically Bay. Perhaps the strangest of all elements in is found in Fig. 2.3 where the passing silver hatchback does not pass the McLaren, but is momentarily superimposed on it. This is only noticeable when going frame-by-frame, but this is a clear artifact of CGI animation (Figs. 2.2, 2.4, and 2.6).

While nowhere as frenetic as this (or some other contemporary tent-pole movie), the climax of Jean Epstein's 1927 film, *La glace à trois faces* (*The Three-Sided Mirror*), shares some affinities with this chase scene in *Transformers: The Last Knight*. At the conclusion of Epstein's film, the male protagonist speeds down countryside roads in an exotic sports car. Spatial integrity is difficult to discern, the lapse of time between cuts is impossible to know. Similar to *Transformers: The Last Knight*, Epstein gives us shots from a low angle to embellish the speed of the protagonist's

Fig. 2.3 A Mazda 3 passes the oncoming McLaren in *Transformers: The Last Knight* (Michael Bay, 2017)

Fig. 2.4 A silver sedan slams into a Lexus in *Transformers: The Last Knight* (Michael Bay, 2017)

Fig. 2.5 The back end of the Lexus shoots upward with explosive power in *Transformers: The Last Knight* (Michael Bay, 2017)

Fig. 2.6 The great raining down of newspaper and debris—the explosive mini-climax within the chase scene in *Transformers: The Last Knight* (Michael Bay, 2017)

vehicle, kicking up a storm of leaves. Likewise, we also get mobile shots mere inches off the ground, again, quite similar to shots found in *Transformers: The Last Knight*. Shots of blurred countryside give us little

in the way of spatial or narrative information, rather they signify speed. As French Impressionist filmmakers were prone to do, Epstein also gives a number of shots of superimposition, distorting the clarity of the image, but suggesting something with respect to the emotional state of our character. Erika Balsom observes that "Such strategies—frequently remarked upon as characteristic of French Impressionist filmmaking—are inevitably deployed in combination with shots that feature 'straight' recording, but this contrast arguably serves to draw out their status as artistic interventions even more."[51] The art of the cinematic craft is not in its verisimilitude, but in its manipulation and the cinematic image—the instinct of the cinematic arts is not toward a transparent intelligibility, but a stupefaction of the "real" world (Fig. 2.7).

Let's also take further stock of the instant where the Mazda 3 is momentarily superimposed over the McLaren (Fig. 2.3). This is precisely where the *Transformer* films intersect with experimental practices. Despite the fact that new digital technologies offer greater fidelity to the world—high definition images continue to promise to give us the illusion of a transparent look at the world. This car chase sequence, however, reveals that far from a transparent window onto the world we are given instead a highly manipulated image filled with post-production effects—where the legibility of the image is given to shakiness, and blurring (see for instance the pavement). The momentary superimposition also blurs the temporal—where two simultaneous moments are rendered one on top of the other. Where one would anticipate the Mazda 3 passing behind the McLaren (and thus out of view), instead the moment exists in the same pictorial frame. The contemporary vernacular—despite the promise of transparency with the high definition image—works against clarity, as Jacques Aumont observes: "the intervention, between control and chance, of the cinematographer (in the case of flares), or the stupid and uncontrollable intervention of the material (in the case of hazes or blurs). It results undoubtedly in a style, but not the kind of style that naturally matches my natural perception. This style, as with any film style, is *an experiment in perception*."[52] The blur and the momentary superimposition of the Mazda 3 bears little fidelity to the "real" world, and instead comes much closer to early twentieth century futurist painting where the frenetic qualities of the world were rendered in a blurred repetition of the image (see for instance Luigi Russolo's 1912 painting *Dinamismo di un treno*, or Marcel Duchamp's futurist inspired 1912 painting *Nude Descending the Staircase*

Fig. 2.7 Racing down country roads in Jean Epstein's *La glace à trois faces* (*The Three-Sided Mirror*) (Jean Epstein, 1927)

II). (Recall that, above, Lutz Koepnick cited the affinities between Bay's depiction of frenetic action to that of the futurists as well.) "When new technologies are once again promising unprecedented heights of iconic fidelity," Balsom also notes, "filmmakers are once again turning against the automatic production of exact likeness, in search of blurrier, smudgier

ways of seeing."[53] Joss Whedon may have pioneered the use of a blurry special effects aesthetic combined with the repeated snap zoom in the science fiction TV show *Firefly* (Fox 2002–2003), but the latest high-budget iteration of this smudgier ways of seeing, in effect a stupefaction of the image, is situated squarely inside Bay's vision of the new contemporary vernacular.[54]

Conclusion: Narrative Overload

Steven Shaviro rehearses the typical film criticism diatribe: Bay's editing is incoherent, and all that matters is the affect of forward movement, with no regard for continuity. Shaviro adds though, that Bay's editing offers a novel narrative paradigm. "Using the tools of digital editing and compositing, together with CGI, Bay makes films that are utterly disjointed, and yet unfold in such a 'smooth space' that these disjunctions scarcely matter to mass audiences," Shaviro observes. "Even in mainstream popular cinema, we now have films that, in Deleuze's terms, evidence 'a new status of narration,' in which 'narration ceases to be truthful, that is, to claim to be true, and becomes fundamentally falsifying.'" Shaviro, as we have already discussed in relation to the *Transformers* films, locates affinities between Bay and other cinematic traditions that resist the continuity imperative. "Bay's films, no less than the art films of the Deleuzian *time-image*, reject organic unity, and are littered instead with gaps and false accords."[55]

Similarly, if in more vociferous terms, Stork bemoans the emergence of this new Hollywood vernacular, with Bay being a chief offender. Of course, Stork is absolutely correct that the indefinite vision (to borrow a phrase) evident in many contemporary tentpole films really makes no sense. It often presents as a hyper kinetic jumble of shots and yet, despite the lack of fidelity to spatial-visual reality and the basic principles of physics, and contrary to Stork's position, it does make *stupidly sensorial sense*. Stork claims that post-millennial blockbusters and action movies "trade visual intelligibility for sensory overload."[56] We contend however that it is only "overload" when scholars, critics, or casual viewers forcibly attempt to read the narratives of stupid cinema through a narrow and, to be charitable, venerable paradigm where "naturalistic" is read as established Hollywood continuity editing. The car chase in *Transformers: The Last Knight* is stupefying to us as well. And, in fact, we generally agree with Stork's overall description of Bay's treatment of action sequences. However, where Stork—and, for that matter, Denby and many others—see nothing but

chaos and mournfully eulogize the demise of narrative cinematic conventions, we instead see the stupid, and the emergence of a new cinematic vernacular predicated on a particular assessment of the industry and its audiences in a specific historical moment. In fairness, however, we do get that Michael Bay really does like explosions.

We hope that our analysis of the *Transformers* franchise puts a stake in the heart of any notion that the stupid is somehow precious. As we stated in the introductory chapter, and it is worth repeating, we do not contend that the stupid is secretly superior, or that we have divined the supposed "true artistic merit" of this otherwise popular but much maligned franchise. Rather we have made an effort here to illustrate how analytic paradigms premised on conventional narrative regimes can only ever perceive the kinetic choreography and disregard for continuity as inherently bad, wrong, or a violation of cinematic rules. (As if these rules are somehow static and unchanging.) *Transformers*'s new, and aspirationally post-cinematic, vernacular signifies a realignment that anticipates and responds to the eddies of industrial and creative convergence. Recent textual and technological innovations in convergent media provide their own challenges for critical comprehension, often reducing questions of judgment down to the evaluative—is such an innovation important, or are we being humbugged? Is it, to all intents and purposes, stupid?[57] The *Transformers* films, and other "chaotic" cinematic experiences like them, are not "mistakes." It is not an accident, for example, that *Pacific Rim* works as something like "one 131-minute action sequence."[58] From its poster to its shot regime, *Pacific Rim* is a movie that deploys its narrative for the primary (stupid) purposes of selling sheer scale in a monster movie and unashamedly saturating it with associated adolescent joys, as the director Guillermo del Toro remarked to his special effects team: "I'm channeling my inner fourteen year old, I'm trying to make the movie that would have blown my mind when I was [that age]."[59]

The *Transformers* movies were developed within a specific corporate industrial context that wagering on this new vernacular being simultaneously the cure for convergence, when it comes to the future of theatrical exhibition, and also its exemplar in the quest for cross media synergy in a globalized market. *Transformers*'s hyper-kinetic cinematic style slides easily across mediums into Universal Studios' *Transformers™: The Ride 3D*, for example, because the *Transformers* cinematic vernacular has become a monetizable commodity in itself. It drives the affective logic of the ride it both anticipated and, inevitably, became. Equally as inevitably there are

some critics who were clearly sprayed with too heavy a dose of *The Good Place*'s hellish scent during their experience of the ride, not least the Orlando Sentinel's reviewers in 2017: "The twisting, rolling metal battle is so fast and in your face, trying to keep up with the action may cause a nosebleed … Transformers' bewildering, overblown 3D action becomes a sensory blur that leaves me with a headache."[60] Job done, as the creative team behind the ride would no doubt reflect.

Nevertheless, categories—or, in the realm of film and media criticism, things such as genre, medium, or narrative conventions—have always guided the critic. Adherence to old definitions of these conventions has, indeed, served to provide convenient sticks with which critics have beaten the *Transformers* franchise. Indeed, categories instruct us, as Foucault notes, "in the ways of knowledge and solemnly alert us to the possibility of error, while in a whisper they guarantee our intelligence and form the a priori of excluded stupidity."[61] To abandon *existing* categories is to abandon truth, and as Foucault suggests, "to think 'acategorically' is to confront a black stupidity."[62] Whether implicit or explicit, genres are a guiding principle in the assessment of media. Genres, however, are not static, unchanging categories, rather they evolve—and sometimes they fail. That is the subject of Chap. 3.

Notes

1. *The Good Place*, season two episode ten, "Rhonda, Diana, Jake, and Trent," NBC Television, aired January 18, 2018.
2. Roger Ebert, "Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen," *rogerebert.com*, June 23, 2009, accessed April 4, 2018, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/transformers-revenge-of-the-fallen-2009.
3. Mikel J. Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006).
4. Christopher Wagstaff, "A Forkful of Westerns: Industry, Audiences and the Italian Western," in *Popular European Cinema*, edited by Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1992), 245–261.
5. Lutz Koepnick, *Michael Bay* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 50.
6. Chris Gardner, "'*Transformers*' rolling out in live-action pic," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 11, 2003, A1.
7. Koepnick, 51.
8. Even though several *Transformers* movies made more individually at the box office than many MCU movies, a snapshot comparison highlights the

power of the development strategy at Marvel/Disney that has dominated the tentpole market with 19 releases since 2008 against *Transformers*'s 5 releases since 2007 (excluding the previous iteration of the franchise in *Transformers: The Movie* from 1986). However, *Transformers: The Last Knight* (2017) performed relatively poorly domestically ($130 million against $475 million international, figures from *boxofficemojo.com*, accessed June 6, 2018.) which may influence the direction of future *Transformers* iterations, starting with *Bumblebee* (2018) which was marketed very differently and represented a move back toward conventional narrative—the film is a "girl and her pony" movie only with a giant robot. To date *Bumblebee* has grossed $459,512,841 internationally, its $127 million domestic playing somewhat more strongly than its most recent comparator in the franchise given the movie's much lower budget point (officially $135 M against $217 M). Figures from *boxofficemojo.com*, accessed March 18, 2019.

9. Koepnick, 18.
10. Per *boxofficemojo.com*, the *Transformers* franchise is approaching $1.5 billion gross domestic and over $4.3 billion worldwide, as of January 2018, accessed January 11, 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=transformers.htm.
11. Oliver Jones, "'Transformers: The Last Knight' is Sloppy, Stupid and Quite Possibly Evil," *observer.com*, June 21, 2017, accessed January 10, 2018, http://observer.com/2017/06/transformers-the-last-knight-is-sloppy-stupid-and-quite-possibly-evil/.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Frank Kelleter, "Die Dynamik Serieller Überbietung: Zeitgenössische Amerikanische Fernsehserien und das Konzept des Quality TV," In Kelleter, F. (ed.) *Populäre Serialität: Narration – Evolution – Distinktion. Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2012), 205–224.
16. Koepnick, 50.
17. William Bibbiani, "Transformers: Age of Extinction: Ehren Kruger Interview," *craveonline.com*, posted June 27, 2014, accessed January 15, 2018, http://www.craveonline.com/site/715045-transformers-age-of-extinction-ehren-kruger-interview#/slide/1. Kruger's writing credits include *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), and *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014).
18. Manohla Dargis, "Car Wars With Shape-Shifters 'R' Us," *nytimes.com*, July 2, 2007, accessed January 13, 2018, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/02/movies/02tran.html.

19. Bilge Ebiri, "Here's What the New Transformers Movie is Like," *villagevoice.com*, June 20, 2017, accessed March 23, 2018, https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/06/20/heres-what-the-new-transformers-movie-is-like/.
20. Ibid.
21. Roger Ebert, "Transformers," *rogerebert.com*, July 5, 2007, accessed January 13, 2018, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/transformers-2007.
22. Armond White, "Bay Watch: Armond White's Transformers 2 review for CityArts," *nyfcc.com*, May 5, 2013, accessed January 13, 2018, http://www.nyfcc.com/2013/05/bay-watch-armond-whites-transformers-2-review-for-cityarts/.
23. Josh Tyler, "Transformers movie review," *cinemablend.com*, no post-date, accessed January 13, 2018, https://www.cinemablend.com/reviews/Transformers-2362.html.
24. Ibid.
25. Phalen adapts her terms closely from P. H. Thornton's model of "editorial logic" and "market logic" (outlined in P. H. Thornton, "The Rise of the Corporation in a Craft Industry: Conflict and Conformity in Institutional Logics," *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 45, no. 1 (February 2002): 81–101). Patricia F. Phalen, *Writing Hollywood: The Work and Professional Culture of Television Writers* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 74.
26. Jason Scoggins, "2015 Year-End Spec Market Scorecard," *The Scoggins Report*, March 29, 2016, accessed January 28, 2018, https://medium.com/scoggins-report/2015-year-end-spec-market-scorecard-bb572a2055fb. This compared to the high three figures in spec sales in the early 1990s.
27. By no means all of those 50,000 registered screenplays are either intended or ready for sale, and many never will be, but the illustration is still powerful.
28. Chris Erskine, "R.I.P. for the spec script, long a source of some of Hollywood's most beloved films," *latimes.com*, January 19, 2018, accessed January 19, 2018, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-st-spec-scripts-20171219-htmlstory.html.
29. Ibid.
30. John Robert Marlow, "lonely keyboard interview, Ehren Kruger," johnrobertmarlow.com, no post-date, accessed January 28, 2018, http://johnrobertmarlow.com/lonelykeyboard/sa_ehrenkruger.html.
31. Fantasy genres, broadly defined and often creatively iterated (*Stranger Things*, *Legion*), are also popular in expanded television, of course. Our point is that the rise of the tentpole, the adaptation, and the franchise have

transformed the movie business in a way that the development of fantasy genres on smaller screens have not.

32. The one step deal and other employment trends such as "bakeoffs" are discussed in detail in Daniel Bernardi and Julian Hoxter, *Off the Page: Screenwriting in the Era of Media Convergence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).
33. Lucy V. Hay, "How to Write a Screenplay Bomb: Transformers: The Last Knight," *bang2write.com*, June 26, 2107, accessed February 19, 2018, http://www.bang2write.com/2017/06/how-to-write-a-screenplay-bomb-transformers-the-last-knight.html.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Bibbiani.
37. Russ Fischer, "'Transformers: Age of Extinction' Writer Ehren Kruger: Logical Sense Doesn't Have to Be the Be-All, End-All," *slashfilm.com*, June 27, 2014, accessed January 15, 2018, http://www.slashfilm.com/transformers-logical-sense/.
38. Ibid.
39. Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 213–214.
40. Ibid.
41. David Denby, *Do the Movies Have a Future?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 29.
42. Ibid., 32.
43. "Michael Bay Presents: Explosions!" *Robot Chicken*, posted to YouTube by *Adult Swim* December 20, 2011, accessed February 14, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7ssUivM-eM.
44. "What if Michael Bay directed *Up*?" posted to *YouTube* by MrStratman7 August 15, 2014, accessed February 14, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5KQQWlIgGc; "If Michael Bay directed *Toy Story 3*," posted to *YouTube* by Un Gordo Gamer on January 4, 2015, accessed February 14, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrzEYO1vtso.
45. James Todd Uhlman and John Heitmann, "Stealing Freedom: Auto Theft and Autonomous Individualism in American Film," *The Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 48, no. 1 (2015): 87.
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47. David Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film," *Film Quarterly* vol. 55, no. 3 (Spring 2002), 16.
48. Matthias Stork, "CHAOS CINEMA: The decline and fall of action filmmaking," *IndieWire*, August 22, 2011, Accessed November 10, 2018,

http://www.indiewire.com/2011/08/video-essay-chaos-cinema-the-decline-and-fall-of-action-filmmaking-132832/.

49. Bordwell, 16.
50. Ibid.
51. Erika Balsom, "One Hundred Years of Low Definition," in *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 80. Ricciotto Canudo, "The Birth of a Sixth Art," in *French Film Theory and Criticism, A History/Anthology, 1907–1939: Volume One, 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1911] 1988), 61.
52. Jacques Aumont, "The Veiled Image: The Luminous Formless," in *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 35–36. Italics in original.
53. Balsom, 87.
54. Matt Patches, "*Firefly*, Snap Zooms, and Joss Whedon's influence on *Man of Steel*," *New York Magazine*, June 19, 2013, accessed March 26, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2013/06/how-joss-whedon-influenced-man-of-steel.html.
55. Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 174 n. 55. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 131.
56. Bordwell, 16.
57. Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 78.
58. Cory Perkins, "Watch: The Secret Sauce That Makes *Pacific Rim*'s Fight Scenes So Thrilling," wired.com, posted July 19, 2013, accessed June 23, 2019, https://www.wired.com/2013/07/visual-effects-as-design-solutions-in-pacific-rim/.
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61. Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 188.
62. Ibid., 189.

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CHAPTER 3

The Stupid in Genre Fails

Introduction: Genres Behaving Badly …

"Hi friend …" the email starts. The influential screenwriting guru John Truby is being chummy in my online direction, so he must have something to sell. "It used to be you just had to master one genre" his email continues. "And that's hard enough. Now, one of the biggest strategies for writing a blockbuster best seller [sic] is combining 2, 3, even 4 genres." Genre hybridity, Truby suggests in his email, pitching me his master class on *Avatar* and contemporary genre writing, is the new—perhaps the not so new—normal in Hollywood. The next line of the email is in bold: "**This is how the game is played in every medium**."[1] Truby proceeds to offer an anecdote about the revelatory experience he had while watching George Lucas's 1977 film *Star Wars: A New Hope* for the first time. He found its plotting genuinely surprising, a rare phenomenon and one that he ascribes at least in part to its revolutionary hybridity, combining tropes or beats from science fiction, the western, the samurai movie, and weekly serials to name but four genres. "I realized," Truby continues, switching again to bold for emphasis, "that what was making this an exciting story was that the writer was using all these **beats from different genres at the same time**. So the plot was totally dense with story beats. And instead of getting the beats of just one story, like detective, we were getting beats of four stories in rapid-fire succession."[2]

The plot structure of *Star Wars: A New Hope* is considered by most contemporary screenwriters not only to fit within a conventional

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Hollywood story type but is often presented as the primary exemplar of the *hero's journey* form, inherited by Lucas from Joseph Campbell and later codified for the movies in the screenwriting paraindustry by Christopher Vogler.[3] At the time of its release, however, the movie's radical genre hybridity was something new and, for Truby and many others in Hollywood, revelatory: "That's when I realized I was watching a revolution for writers unfold before my eyes. Popular story from then on was going to be all about mixing genres. That's the moment when the movie industry realized the same thing. And it's been that way ever since, not just in movies, but in novels and television, all over the world."[4] Truby goes on to argue that the finest example of genre hybridity since *Star Wars* is *Avatar* and, thus, segues into his true purpose in sending me a friendly email one Saturday morning in mid-November.

His sales pitch notwithstanding, therefore, Truby's anecdote reminds us that genres are always in play, that the conventional grid (western, thriller, romantic comedy, etc.) on which semantic theorists have long established a taxonomy of texts, claiming them for categories and positioning them both within and between conventional genres is always shifting and that, in recent decades, common critical wisdom has certainly repositioned hybridity from the margins—the exceptions—of genre inclusion toward the normalized center. The questions this chapter proposes follow on from this identified shift. In the seemingly amaranthine flowering of media convergence, if hybridity (in the sense implied by *Star Wars: A New Hope*) is now the new normal for genre movies, what now transgresses that hybrid norm? More importantly, how do we understand and position those transgressions that cannot easily be contained in this moment of convergence; how do we read the phenomenon of convergent genres, or even media that "fail"?

Excess by its very definition cannot exist without a defined border—a contingent relationship premised on an unassimilable other. Nevertheless, excess invariably is intimately bound to what it transgresses. Genre failures follow a similar logic. Inherent to any coded system, there lies an abject presence that threatens its coherence—for instance, as discussed in Chap. 4, the way that dissonance shadows consonance (or, as Adorno posits, dissonance is the truth of consonance). Stupidity does not cancel out a system, it does not stand as an alternative, rather it is integral to it. Understood as a coded system, genre too has its own stupidity, its own unassimilable excess, that threatens to tear it asunder. Rick Altman recognized this years ago. Falsely conceived as a natural, self-evident mode of categorization,

Altman was critical of the assumptions made in media studies, as if genres sprung "full-blown from the head of Zeus." And these assumptions about genre invited critics and scholars to look past industry practices (e.g., marketing, and the subsequent response from consumers), and cling to the idea that genre "is fundamentally ahistorical in nature."[5] On the contrary, rather than being unchanging "Platonic categories," genres are evolutionary by nature. Altman observes that within the discipline there was a history of divergent approaches to genre, which he places in two different camps: the semantic theorist (who establishes a taxonomy), and the syntactic theorist (who identifies general themes and motifs). While the former offers a veritable check-list, which significantly narrows the oeuvre of a genre, the latter is far more inclusive, making allowances for films that by outward appearances might not immediately look to meet the criteria of a genre, but on further inspection reveal to have the necessary characteristics (e.g., reading *Star Wars* as a western).[6] As Steve Neale notes genres are "always *in* play rather than being simply re-played."[7] Regardless, genres evolve along both semantic and syntactic analytic paradigms. We have no intention in resurrecting genre theory debates, rather we want to recognize that genre fails, at least implicitly, have dogged our discipline for decades—if not since the inception of cinema itself (from actualities to appropriations from stage theater).

All this is to say that a genre is a collection of generally agreed upon tropes. While operating under something of an acknowledged fiction (i.e., that a genre is a relatively static category), at the same time, a genre is historically and culturally contingent. And even more than this, individual spectators might espouse their idiosyncratic variations on these already contingent terms. By this logic—when we cannot even agree where the exact bounds of a genre might be drawn—it makes it impossible for us to estimate when a "failure" has taken place. But this is the very nature of stupidity, is it not? We have to embrace the contradiction—genre failures, then, exist only because of established categories, and at the same time demonstrate their fragility or even the impossibility of existing as a stable category at all. The term "genre" refers to "kind; sort; style,"[8] originating from the French for "gender" still referring to "kind, sort," but also the qualities of "being male or female."[9] In either case, genre insists upon a boundary, and failure then is in excess of that boundary or falls outside the established regime of a particular category. A genre failure, as a manifestation of the stupid, is at once premised upon the conception of a (static or established) category, but in the very same instance, poses a challenge to

that very category. Thus, we take a broad, if somewhat slippery understanding of genre. We assume a genre to be an implicit contract between the media complex (from screenwriters to marketers and distributors and everything in-between), critics/scholars, and the general consuming audience. The implicit contract, though always subject to ongoing negotiations, establishes basic storytelling elements, themes, and motifs. A breach of contract—where expectations are not met—potentially courts catastrophe, but at the same time, opens the way for invigorating innovations in a genre. Genre failures, then, mark a juncture in an evolutionary branch, which can lead to a dead-end, a limp wilting limb, or a vigorous new branch.

Narratives evolve, and so do genres. The evolutionary process can be spurred by creative innovations, cultural/market attitudes, and technological advances that allow for different storytelling modes—from green-screen to CGI to online streaming services. The genre of the western for instance lost its cultural saliency; depicting the conventional antagonist as a Native American for instance became culturally untenable in a slightly more enlightened era (apparently, it's still culturally acceptable to use Native people as sports names and mascots though). The western, to borrow a phrase, moved into new territory: "Space, the final frontier," as the famous tagline from *Star Trek* proclaims. Gene Roddenberry famously described *Star Trek* as a wagon-train in space and, a generation later, the science fiction-retro-western TV show *Firefly* adopted multiple tropes from the western genre openly and unashamedly. Of course, *Firefly* was canceled during its first season, in part because Fox Television (the producing network) did not have confidence in its iteration of hybridity, assumed it to be a genre fail, and threw it away.[10] However, a genre can evolve to such a degree that it hardly resembles its hereditary ancestor. Hybrid genres, in the mixing of categories or in borrowing and adapting categories from other mediums, might come off as monstrous disasters (e.g., *Bloodrayne, Wing Commander*, and many other movie adaptations of videogames). In some instances, the innovations "work," and in other instances they might be met with outright hostility, or perhaps something even worse, complete indifference. Ridley Scott's 1979 film, *Alien*, for instance, successfully blended science fiction and horror, and found a welcoming audience.

There are, however, instances in which spectators are confronted with a film or text in another medium that frustrates viewer expectations in what we call genre fails. And at the same time, while genre fails might spawn ire from some factions, at the same time they possess the capacity to

elicit unknown, or unexpected pleasures. As we will argue, genre fails might also mark the evolutionary growing-pains of a transitional species, or be the transitional symptoms of an entire medium that is in flux. Our examples encompass the three principle contexts for a discussion of genre fails, developing from a reading of two stupid horror movie texts (*mother!* and *Amer*), through a case study of stupid movie genres produced at a single studio (Nikkatsu), to a consideration of the impact of the stupid on genres caused in part by the fundamental realignment of an entire medium (expanded television).

Stupid Horror(?): The Wrong Kind of Stupid, and Just the Right Kind of Stupid

In his review of Darren Aronofsky's 2017 film *mother!* Rex Reed concludes: "I hesitate to label it the 'Worst movie of the year' when 'Worst movie of the century' fits it even better."[11] By comparison the Stephen King adaptation, *It* (Andy Muschietti, 2017), which opened at the same time, trounced *mother!* at the box office.[12] While *It*, a recognizable horror film (attached to the King brand-named no less), captured audience attention, nothing appeared capable of making *mother!* less than an unmitigated failure. Hollywood's artistic darling, Aronofsky, could not save the film, nor its considerable star power (Jennifer Lawrence, Javier Bardem, Ed Harris, and Michelle Pfeiffer). One of the things that perhaps gets in the way of the film is its pretentious insistence on meaning—a "deeper" allegorical meaning.

Although the marketing campaign was obtuse, it was effectively peddled as a horror film. The trailer for the film uses an audio design replete with shrieking violins, and sharp auditory eruptions timed to cuts to suggest the presence of jump scares (which are not actually in the film). Blood oozing from floors, walls, and lighting fixtures; flashes of invading hordes; muted lighting and color scheme one would be forgiven to imagine that *mother!* is a horror film—and it is kind of. "If the only thing we wanted, or expected, a horror film to do was to get a rise out of you—to make your eyes widen and your jaw drop, to leave you in breathless chortling spasms of WTF disbelief—then Darren Aronofsky's *mother!* would have to be reckoned some sort of masterpiece."[13] But as much the film is a riddle, it is also a puzzle as to its genre. Owen Gleiberman's review in *Variety*, throws his hands up, "By all means, go to *mother!* and enjoy its

roller-coaster-of-weird exhibitionism. But be afraid, very afraid, only if you're hoping to see a movie that's as honestly disquieting as it is showy."[14] Gleiberman makes some of the obvious connections—*The Shining*, *Rosemary's Baby*—trying to reign *mother!* in, tether it to familiar psychological horror films, but at the same time, finds affinities with B-movie horror, and even videogames. Although we do not think this ever came to pass, Gleiberman suggests that fanboys, and navel-gazing graduate students will save *mother!* "Instead of just sitting back and watching, you enter a video-game universe where nothing is what it seems and you learn how to master the game by deciphering what everything signifies. And in this case, it's fanboy meets film snob. More than anything, *mother!* seems like a movie designed to please and flatter your inner grad student. If you can delineate the allegory, then you're in the club. *The club of people who get it!* As opposed to a dumb-ass like me."[15] We have our own allegories, but we just assume to be in camp "dumb-ass."

On their own, the cinematography, mise-en-scene, and audio design plays with the stupid, however, Aronofsky continually directs us to overripe signifiers that are pregnant with meaning (though slippery, and open for multiple interpretations). So utterly beholden to meanings—Biblical, the artist and their muse, ecological destruction—that *mother!* can never quite be that unadulterated roller-coaster horror film. And in this case, perhaps *mother!* just is not stupid enough, or perhaps it is not stupid in the "right way"? The stupid is at its most potent when it manifests as lektons. Nonetheless, as suggested in the reviews there are allusions to the cinematic attraction—the "breathless spasms," and the roller-coaster, and even the WTF-experience that encourages (perhaps despite its allegorical insistence, or working at counter-purposes to it) the spectator to "go along for the ride," and take the film as a sensate experience. Whatever the case might be, what is revealed in the film reviews is the Sisyphean task of trying to situate *mother!* within a proper genre. Anthony D'Alessandro, for example, notes that "while *mother!* looks and smells like a horror film, it's essentially something crazier, Lynchian, and completely Aronofsky-esque."[16] D'Alessandro recalibrates to dodge the genre question and turns to genre's cousin—the auteur.[17] Michael Sragow makes a similar turn in his *Film Comment* review, "With its isolated rural location and atmosphere of domestic fret, *mother!* comes on like an Ingmar Bergman chamber piece, or the early parts of *Straw Dogs*. But the first half plays like a parody of psychological drama."[18] Time and time again, reviewers grapple with how to situate *mother!*, more often than not to some variant of horror, but

always coming up short, and failing to name this mutant beast—*wrongly*? stupid.

Similar to *mother!* Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani's 2009 film *Amer*, is an evolutionary digression from the genus of horror. Both films are quite similar in their emphasis on embellished spectacles, however, *Amer* is largely content to leave its spectacular audio-visual referents unburden with the imperative to carry "meanings." It is often difficult to place Cattet and Forzani films—sitting somewhere between experimental cinema and horror, giallo, and erotic thrillers. Cattet and Forzani's *Amer* (French for "bitter"), appropriates the giallo vernacular to explore the sexual life of its central character, Ana. The film emphasizes the cinematic experience—stripping away much of the dialogue and accentuating a compendium of audio-visual spectacles. In an interview, Forzani insisted that their films are, "Definitely not homage. It's more that we reinterpret and re-use the *giallo* language to tell our story." In the same interview, Cattet adds to this, noting that they use the giallo language "as a tool, especially because there are strong iconographic elements whose meaning we can subvert."[19] In addition, to the appropriation of the giallo language, there are also elements of Japanese cinema—especially pink eiga (softcore erotic films), and even hentai (which directly translates as "pervert," but also refers to the pornographic genre of anime). The pair cite Eiichi Yamamoto's 1973 Art Nouveau-styled erotic animated feature *Belladonna of Sadness* as a significant influence. One might immediately sense the affinities with Yamamoto's animated film, Cattet and Forzani films are often adorned with Art Nouveau mise-en-scene—architectural features, furniture, jewelery, lanky female characters with long hair and erotically charged parsed lips. Likewise, Cattet and Forzani films call to mind the lavish Art Nouveau features found in the classic giallo film *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977).

Amer is told in three parts—Ana as a girl, late adolescent, and a woman (in her late 20s, or early 30s)—the film makes extensive use of extreme close-ups (especially of eyes), giallo scores, colors, and highly choreographed cinematography to amplify fetishistic fascination. From the very instant that *Amer* begins the spectator very well may sense that something is off. We begin with the opening credits with the extreme close-up of an eye, Ana's eye to be specific, but also more telling the first few notes of the nondiegetic score there is a shift in pitch (and distorted manipulation of the tape—perhaps to replicate the worn character of vintage grindhouse films). The score, Bruno Nicolai's "La Coda Dello Scorpione," is drawn from Sergio Martino's 1971 giallo film *The Case of the Scorpion's Tail*. The

shift in pitch (and willful distortion) is added—a conscious contrivance on the part of the filmmakers.

There is an emphasis on audio drones and an embellished diegetic audio. Although it might not be evident (at least initially), but the diegetic audio elements are not necessarily objective. In fact, the diegetic audio is embellished precisely because we hear things through Ana's ears. She is hypersensitive to audio stimulation, and thus there is an emphasis in the diegetic design. What is perhaps unusual here, is that the audio design functions more like the POV in the visual field. While internal subjective diegetic audio designs are not altogether novel, what makes *Amer* different is the way that the audio design *stays* within Ana's head—the entirety of the film, very well might be filtered through Ana's audio perception? Regardless the inability to locate the precise source of the audio (is it an objective audio element, or is it filtered through Ana's subjective perspective?), wields the potential to elicit dread in the spectator, because of its liminal character. Even when the audio source is immediately visible, its intensity suggests that it's located elsewhere—in Ana's body. In addition, this is not a brain separated from a body, but rather "the film's sound was mixed so as for the viewer to be *inside the brain* of the character, with the brain conceived of here as flesh, a vibrating and receiving tissue, rather than a mind disconnected from the body—inviting us to let go of our traditional apprehension of cinema through the intellect, and to instead investigate it through our five senses."[20] In fact, the filmmaking duo work in the Italian tradition of recording sound in post-production. Cattet explains that from the very start of their filmmaking career they never recorded sound on set. They begin with a mute visual track, and then begin the painstaking process of intensive foley work in an effort to make a fully *fleshed* out audio design, as Forzani describes it, "sensorial."[21] Cattet and Forzani want their films to have "a physical impact … we try to feel it in the guts and in the belly … we try to add that physical experience, this sensorial experience that you can have only in the theatre."[22] And perhaps more so than the visual information, that is the neural processing of reflected light, sound is more physical—sound actually touches the body. Sound waves are physical pulsations that bump up against the viewing body.

When we listen to music we do not necessarily insist that it convey a coherent narrative. Rather with music we are swept up in rhythms, harmony, catchy phrasing. *Amer* can be imagined as a series of songs—and this is not just in terms of its appropriation of giallo scores, but rather in its structure, its rhythm of shots, its fantastically choreographed fetishistic

renderings of the body. The filmmakers tell us as much: "The music inspires the way a sequence develops," Cattet explains. "It gives us a rhythm, and ideas too. We listen to music as we write, and all of a sudden there's one track that strikes us, so we play it again and again, and it inspires the rhythm."[23] Forzani adds that the music also inspires the images.

Take for instance when Ana discovers her parents having sex, the primal scene is presented in a highly stylized manner—alternating colored filters, alteration of speed, and multiple overlap edits that repeat the frenzy of the visible (*a la* Linda Williams). Ana, naturally, is surprised by what she sees, gripped with fascination and fear—we see her reaction in tight close-ups and extreme close-ups, filtered lenses, and the fracturing of the image. Ana's view of the world, quite literally, breaks apart. Ana returns to her room, and when she awakes she discovers that she has wet the bed. However, the source of the wetness is not exactly clear. In relation to the primal scene, there is a suggestion that it is related to sexual arousal—or a sexual awakening. The oneiric nature of the sequence slips into an audio-visual montage of a dripping bodily fluid (perhaps drawn from Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* and the dripping of water), sounds of fluids, bodies in extreme close-ups (in some cases too close to discern the geography—perhaps even the interior of bodies?), spasmodic legs coupled with the audio of fluttering of bird's wings, bodies out of control. The scene is assembled in a fashion that closely resembles another Cattet/Forzani project: *O Is for Orgasm*, a 2012 short included in the omnibus film *The ABCs of Death. O Is for Orgasm* appears to be an effort to visualize the experience of female orgasm. And as much as *O Is for Orgasm* applies the audio-visual rhetoric of the giallo film, it shares just as much in common with Carolee Schneemann's landmark 1967 experimental film *Fuses.* Schneemann assembles in a generally discontinuous fashion short instances of sex, but these encounters are largely obscured by the manipulation of the celluloid strip—scratched, hand-colored, over or underexposed, physical artifacts placed on the filmstrip (e.g., stars). Schneemann also includes humorous cut-aways that reference human anatomy: bushes, farm silos (which could reference either the penis or breasts), a cat, Christmas tree ornaments. Between the cut-aways, the intermittent sexual encounters, the alternating flashes of color Schneemann attempts to visualize the pulsating sexual experience, of female orgasm, as she notes: "I wanted to allow film to give me the sense that I was getting closer to tactility, to sensations in the body that are streaming and unconscious and fluid—the orgasmic dissolve unseen, vivid if unseeable."[24] This is precisely what we find in the work of

Cattet and Forzani—though approached from multiple sensorial poles, exploring the sadomasochistic experience of pleasure and pain. "We see the films we make as an experience," Forzani explains. "We try to give our viewers a filmic orgasm. There is definitely that aspect, to give pleasure to people." Cattet explains further, "It allows us to approach the story in a sensual, physical way, to play with very strong feelings of attraction and repulsion."[25]

One could very well approach *Amer*, or other Cattet/Forzani projects, through the psychoanalytic lens. As much as the palatial seaside home calls to mind the ballet school in *Suspiria*, at the same time it mirrors Norman Bates's Victorian home. And in the same way that the different stories in the Bates's house signify the Freudian tri-tiered models of subjectivity (Conscious/Preconscious/Unconscious; Ego/Id/Superego). On the upper floors of the villa in *Amer* Ana encounters Eros (and the figure of the witch, perhaps the Kristevan figure of maternal authority). In the basement (or the room under the stairs—the geography of the home is a little vague) Ana confronts Thanatos—an elderly man who we assume to be Ana's grandfather lays in state, his embalmed corpse sharing clear affinities with Norman's mother secreted away into the fruit cellar. The affinities are not simply coincidental, nor are the cinematic parallels intended to merely bemuse astute cinephiles, rather the engagement is genuine. The portrait of Freud, mounted in the stairway, suggests as much. Bruno notes that, "We work with the subconscious, when we are writing, because you want to touch the senses through the subconscious, like in dreams, so that even if you don't understand, you are touched by something sensorial."[26] The emphasis on the sensorial, though, goes beyond what most psychoanalytic models can apprehend. Psychoanalysis is largely concerned with "meanings," with the economy of objects. This is what makes phobics nearly impossible for psychoanalysis to negotiate because the phobic's fear stems from a non-object. Likewise, the melancholic laments the loss of an impossible object, a non-object. Phobics and melancholics are, in a sense, hopeless cases. The depressive, on the other hand, locates sadness in an object, and once that object is ascertained, then, the healing process might begin, a substitute can be found. The phobic and the melancholic, on the other hand, must entertain rituals that merely hold anxiety at bay. The sensorial experience tends to fall with the non-objectal economy—uncoded sensations, what Kristeva refers to as the semiotic, or the abject. When one approaches sensations, or the non-objectal economy, one is not negotiating

"meanings" as such, but rather feelings, the visceral experience detached from meaning.

With the appropriation of giallo syntax and iconography the filmmaking team askew any effort to ascertain "meaning." The filmmakers place a premium on the cinematic experience and utilize narrative/story elements as a mere trellis on which to hang striking audio-visual spectacles. "The result is highly abstract, with an emphasis on sensory assault rather than dramatic logic," Kat Ellinger observes, "which also acts as a catalogue packed full of visual and musical nods to Italian directors such as Dario Argento, Umberto Lenzi and Giulio Berruti."[27] While the film anticipates a certain cinematic intelligence (recognizing the cinematic quotations), at the same time, it invites (perhaps even demands) a stupid spectator—a spectator that can let go of "meaning," and allow the audio-visual experience to stand on its own. Anecdotally, at least, when I (Kerner) screen this film in my undergraduate classes I tell the students beforehand to abandon any effort to look for a story, "It's not there, you're not going to find it." This, of course, is hyperbole, there most certainly *is* a story, but this is not the point of *Amer*, and students are surprisingly open to the possibility of a spectacle-for-the-sake-of-spectacle-film if they understand the implicit contract that they are signing up for when watching *Amer*.

Cattet and Forzani films are pornographic. And this most certainly is *not* intended in the pejorative sense, rather their films are first and foremost intended to be sensorial experiences, and only secondarily stories. Cattet explains that sensorial experience comes first, the story comes to the spectator later—perhaps in retrospect. "The story is told by what is experienced through the sounds and images. We try and convey the ambiguity of a character through stylistic effects."[28] Forzani adds further that their films are constructed in two ways: "The first is the sensorial way, which corresponds to the first viewing of the film: you experience the film physically, then it sinks in." A story, or meaning, is there to be found, and it might take multiple viewings to "make sense" of the film.[29]

Similar to Martine Beugnet's insistence that post-millennial French films—now associated with what has been dubbed New French Extremity—invite us (maybe even demand us) to approach the cinema differently. These films that privilege the affective experience necessitate a paradigmatic shift in our "critical and theoretical approaches and, possibly, different viewing habits."[30] In reference to their 2017 film, *Let the Corpses Tan*, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas makes a similar observation, that, Cattet and Forzani "demand [that] we look differently, think differently, and

experience cinema differently."[31] The same is true of *Amer*, which (as we have already established) privileges the affective experience before a "meaningful" story. As a result, the paradigms of assessment—premised on narrative assumptions whether that's genre analysis, close readings, an assessment of narrative structure, character analysis, or even socio-cultural approaches (intent on locating "deeper" narrative "meanings") are not altogether suited to assess the affective experience of *Amer*. Reading *Amer* through the common narrative modes of cinematic assessment ensures that it will be read as a "failure." To the detractors of the film—likely grasping at splinters of narrative contextualization—decry that *Amer* is style over substance. Cattet and Forzani fire back at such claims, "But the form is the content!"[32] When we take a ride on a roller coaster, we do not necessarily assess its "meaning," or even expect that it has a story to tell—we enjoy it for the thrill of it, and little more. A Cattet/Forzani film must be approached in a similar fashion—it is difficult then to precisely locate the critical paradigm to assess a film like *Amer*, it is in a sense acategorical insofar as conventional genre or narrative assessments are concerned. The emergence of theories of affect hold promise, but such endeavors necessitate that we loosen our grip on the imperative to locate narrative meaning and make allowances for the stupidity of the body.

Nikkatsu: Japan's Stupid Studio

The Japanese studio Nikkatsu was a major purveyor of films with adult content intended for theatrical distribution in adult only theaters—pink film (effectively an overarching genre for Japanese softcore erotic films),[33] or specific to Nikkatsu studio, Roman Pornos. On November 20, 1971 Nikkatsu initiated a line of films under the heading Roman Pornos; production of this line continued until 1988 (all told between 1971 and 1988 Nikkatsu produced 850 titles under this line of films).[34] By the 1980s the wide circulation of VHS significantly disrupted the market for theatrically released adult films.[35] Nevertheless, Roman Pornos typically had much higher production values, shot in color, wide-screen aspect ratio, and produced for "about two and a half times the budget of Pink film."[36] Additionally, they enjoyed some critical support from countercultural facets, often featuring storylines that were anti-authoritarian, and featured strong female characters (relatively speaking, at least, compared to pink films).[37] Typically, Roman Porno films were expected to be approximately 70 to 80 minutes in length and had a requisite sex scene (or some other

erotically charged spectacle) every 10 minutes. Only a stone's throw from the conventions of pop music in its canned formulaic structure (and thus potentially *not* stupid), Roman Pornos relied on a regular supply of erotic spectacles.

Marking 45 years since its inception, in 2016 Nikkatsu resurrected the Roman Porno brand. The rebooted series inaugurated with five films released in 2016: Akihiko Shiota's *Wet Woman in the Wind*, Isao Yukisada's *Aroused by Gymnopedies*, Kazuya Shiraishi's *Dawn of the Felines* (actually released in January of 2017), the director of *Ringu* Hideo Nakata's *White Lily*, and finally *Antiporno* directed by Sion Sono (which we will discuss at further length shortly). Historically, Sono owes a huge debt to one of the godfathers of stupid cinema in Japan, Seijun Suzuki, who was famously fired by Nikkatsu studio following the release of his 1967 film *Branded to Kill*. Critics and studio executives alike found the film "incomprehensible." Although others have characterized Suzuki as "cynical," or "nihilistic" this does not appear quite right—he seemed to love life too much for that—rather "irreverent" seems more fitting.[38] In his life, and his work there appears to be a complete irreverence for figures of authority. And that authority could manifest in any number of ways: American Occupation or cultural imperialism, the Japanese studio system,[39] or the conventions of a genre. He was punk rock, before punk rock existed.[40] A lot of his attitudes were probably shaped by his wartime experience. Marooned twice—he was aboard ships sunk by American forces on two separate occasions. He witnessed the poor treatment of the dead, and injured—Japanese soldiers terribly wounded battered against the haul of a ship as they were being hoisted aboard. Rather than retreating into melancholy in the face of his wartime experience he stated a number of times that such scene spawned laughter. After being stranded at sea twice and witnessing the brutality of war, what could one do, but laugh? While based in Taiwan he squandered any money that he had on prostitutes and alcohol. And thus, it seems cynicism or nihilism is not quite it—irreverent is more fitting. His work, and *Branded to Kill* is certainly indicative of his irreverent spirit, casts off the yoke of genre conventions.

We should treat a lot of Suzuki's work, and this is true of *Branded to Kill*, more like a piece of music—pop music. We cannot measure Suzuki's films according to narrative or genre conventions—it requires a certain paradigmatic shift in our assessment. Analogous to *Amer*, rather than attending to *Branded to Kill* through the narrative lens, it is perhaps best to approach it as we might a song, locating pleasure in its harmonics, or

rhythm, or catchy phrasing. This is how one might approach a film like *Branded to Kill*—seizing on the playful motif, creative shots, animated ruptures, and editing. Suzuki was never pretentious and always strove to make entertaining films. Tony Rayns compares Suzuki's work to poetry, "Within the Japanese poetic tradition (*waka*) lurks a counter-tradition of comic verse known as *kyoka* (literally, 'crazed *waka*'). *Kyoka* are often direct parodies of solemn *waka*, designed to subvert pompousness and pretension; they are invariably comic (at least in intention), provocative and superbly self-assured. That's Suzuki. The *kyoka* factor in Japanese movies."[41] While we generally concur with Rayns's overall assessment, we think that the poetic comparison runs the risk of "elevating" Suzuki's work, to lend it cultural cache, or perhaps even to "make up for" its lower cultural status, and it is for this reason that I believe the pop (or punk) music comparison is more fitting. The narrative alone endlessly meanders, and more than this *Branded to Kill* is a menagerie of genres: heist movie, yakuza/gangster movie,[42] spy movie (think James Bond), action film, erotic thriller, and—although not a genre properly speaking because it speaks to an approach to filmmaking, rather than themes, motifs and plot elements—the art film. As for the latter, *Branded to Kill* gestures toward the Japanese New Wave, and incorporates experimental practices, including instances where animated elements disrupt the more or less "naturalistic" diegetic narrative.

Suzuki, as a salaried director, worked at Nikkatsu studio from 1956 until he was summarily fired in 1968. *Branded to Kill* was no different from any other production Suzuki directed, but he was likely scapegoated for Nikkatsu's slacking business.[43] Irritated by the incomprehensibility of *Branded to Kill*, the president of Nikkatsu, Kyusaku Hori, pulled all of Suzuki's films from circulation and forbid him from screening in "cinemas specializing in retrospective screenings."[44] Suzuki's dismissal spawned protests; filmmakers including figures like Oshima, cinematographers, screenwriters, film buffs and film clubs rallied behind the embattled filmmaker. Suzuki successfully sued Nikkatsu for breach of contract, the court finally siding with Suzuki in 1971, but he would not make another film for nearly 10 years after his release from Nikkatsu. He survived making television commercials and acting. Facing deepening financial pressure and, "In August 1971, Nikkatsu stopped producing films, and then three months after that it turned to the production of pornographic films."[45]

Although Hori had pulled Suzuki's films from circulation, his work did eventually see the light of day again. And he was effectively recuperated by

foreign filmmakers and scholars. Many of his films were featured in film festival retrospectives and enjoyed a new life when distributors such as Criterion Collection began circulating his films.[46] And in locating Suzuki's work within the regime of "cult film," films like *Branded to Kill* cease being stupid. Comparisons have been made to other international filmmakers. Quentin Tarantino is often suggested to have drawn from Suzuki, however, the American filmmaker (to our knowledge) has never expressly acknowledged this.[47] Jim Jarmusch, on the other hand, brought back VHS tapes from Japan (without subtitling), including the work of Suzuki. What Jarmusch took, then, was Suzuki's stylization over narrative content. Jarmusch makes explicit cinematic quotes of *Branded to Kill* in his own 1999 film *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*. Wong Kar-Wai and John Woo are commonly compared or said to have been influenced by Suzuki.[48] And at least by outward appearances, domestic filmmakers such as Takashi Miike, and Sion Sono share affinities with Suzuki.

Following in Suzuki's footsteps, Sono's *Antiporno* hits the requisite quotient of sex and erotic spectacles in the Roman Porno tradition, but his film is nearly impenetrable insofar as the narrative is concerned. I (Kerner) cannot, for the life of me, convey what *Antiporno* is "really about." And even when watching the film, and you think you have a grasp of the story-world, that gets yank out from under you. Approximately 29 minutes into the film we hear, "Cut!" followed by a reverse shot revealing a film crew. Something very similar happens in his 2005 film *Strange Circus*, where the diegetic narrative approximately 35 minutes into the film is suddenly revealed to be the musings of a novelist. The interruption in narrative progression presents the spectator not only with a momentary WTF moment (a narrative surprise) but it also marks the uneasy juncture of where genres collide. Unlike *Star Wars*, where Truby proclaims Lucas's film neatly assimilates multiple genres at once, Sono sets genres on a collision course. Truby applauds Lucas's apt mobilization of story "beats from different genres at the same time." In Sono's *Strange Circus* and *Antiporno* he explodes genres, and the narrative beats all feel off—stupid. Wait, what?! *Antiporno*, for instance, although bizarre from the start, is a dramatic narrative, until it is not. Then it's a meta-film/experimental film? And even then, even if we accept it as a somewhat navel-gazing meta-film, it again slips into surrealistic territory inviting us to view the film as a dream(?), fantasy(?), mental breakdown(?) of its central female character, Kyoko.

"Cut!" effectively turns everything that we have seen up to that point on its head. In sum *Antiporno* is a series of vignettes that features the fetishistic and sadistic treatment of women. Sono meets the requisite demand for Roman Porno films with a sex scene every 10 minutes, or some other sexually charged display of the female body, and a running-time of 76 minutes. Sono, though, is a wild genre alchemist, creating a volatile mix of elements that threatens to explode. While he sticks to the letter of the genre-law, his irreverence (perhaps even more daring than Suzuki), is on display in vivid colors. The filmmaker might actually have something to "say," and he gives Kyoko some of the most caustic and politically charged monologues rarely exhibited in (contemporary) Japanese cinema (Sono also wrote the screenplay).

In the concluding moments of the film Kyoko in a stark space (once the set of her live-work studio) angrily rants against patriarchal culture: "1: This nation's men are shit! 2: the freedom they created is shit! 3: the world they dream of is shit! And me, acting in a shitty porno, is …" Kyoko is interrupted by her sister (a ghost?) who, entering from off-screen brings a cake, and wishes her a happy birthday. Kyoko, however, continues her tirade, but not before repeatedly smashing her own face in the cake: "The shitty reason this shithead calls herself a whore is superior to a day's worth of all the shit in Japan! Far superior! To exquisite shit! To extravagant shit! She has more reasons than all that shit! More! More!" Without warning, and without any (narrative) motivation bright pink paint splashes down from above (off-screen), and Kyoko flops on the floor, followed by more and more paint—a veritable Jackson Pollock, meets Yves Klein ("Anthropometries of the Blue Period," 1960), meets *Flashdance* (Fig. 3.1). The paint is brilliantly colored and the exhibition is erotically charged, Kyoko writhes on the floor in her school-girl uniform, midriff exposed, and lathered in the viscous paint. Soon thereafter, her parents appear in the scene—fucking, of course, to fulfill the demands of the genre.

The whole scene is impenetrable. Are we supposed to take Kyoko's diatribe seriously? Is the political vitriol a "genre wink," where the Roman Porno differentiated itself from the larger generic pink film genre by including (relatively) progressive and anti-authoritarian stories, featuring an empowered female character? Or does Sono hollow out the political potential of the Roman Porno genre in its absurdist staging? Does the erotic tension in the exhibition of bodies (mixed with vibrant colors), undercut, or re-enforce the potent scream against the patriarchal system? It is utterly stupefying, and at the same time strangely captivating (perhaps

Fig. 3.1 The vivid and wild conclusion of Sion Sono's *Antiporno* (Sion Sono, 2016)

simply because of its titillating exhibition of bodies, and sex). The film ends with Kyoko repeatedly pleading "Where is the exit?" a practical effort to extricate herself, and at the same time serving as a dummy to the screenwriter-ventriloquist, Sono, who wonders out loud how he will possibly resolve the narrative (such as it is). He doesn't.

The affinities between Sono and Suzuki are manifestly evident—in their punk rock sensibility, their absurd and/or theatrical staging, and their general disregard for narrative conventions (including genres). In the comparison between the filmmakers let us consider Suzuki's *Pistol Opera* (2001), a loosely based sequel to *Branded to Kill*, which is self-consciously theatrical—sparse sets, an emphasis on tableau, the incorporation of dance, theatrical posturing, and deliberately labored dialogue. With some of the sparse sets, it is suffused with a brilliant yellow—a flat backdrop of pure color. In *Antiporno*, Kyoko's live-work studio is remarkably similar in this regard—a palette of primary colors. Kyoko's bed is draped in dark blue satin bedding, her bathroom (which is open to the live-work space) is a bold cherry red, and the live-work space itself is a brilliant yellow (including the floor and ceiling). The sparse yellow set bearing strong affinities with some of the sets in *Pistol Opera* (Fig. 3.2). Aside from four large portraits leaned against a wall (portraits of characters in Kyoko's latest novel) the space is remarkably flat, three industrial fans (above the

Fig. 3.2 On the left *Antiporno* (Sion Sono, 2016), on the right *Pistol Opera* (Seijun Suzuki, 2001)

portraits) allow for some interesting lighting effects during the film. Four vertical windows—adjacent to the wall with portraits—motivate the wash of light filling the room. The open stage-like set (at one point there is a cutaway to a scene played out on an actual stage), *Antiporno* allows much of the film to unfold on effectively a blank slate, a blank canvas on which diatribes share the stage with fetishistic and sadistic treatments of female bodies. Given license with the rebooted Roman Porno line, Sono at once strictly "colors within the lines," but by the same stroke, does so with such veracity that it challenges the integrity of the entire (genre) system.

Stupid Television: From Binging to Bloat

As of this writing, some of the most significant evolutionary growing-pains that mark and are marked by genre fails in convergent media occur on a grander scale than that of the individual text or even of a single genre. Rather they emerge from transitional processes, marking a particular historical moment across entire mediums, or represent the side effects of larger convergent trends and processes. For example, a simple yet still revealing way of thinking about the emergence of ludonarrative dissonance in videogames, which we will discuss in detail in Chap. 5, is to start by tracking the narrativization of games as a function of increases in computer and software memory. (The history of narrative in videogames is more complex than this simple model, of course, and yet it is also indisputable that without more memory capacity there could have been no commensurate increase in narrative capacity.) In other words, a particular

technological development enables more fluid and involved storytelling in videogames, which leads to sometimes uncomfortable (stupid) experience and yet potentially fecund (stupid) collisions of the narrative principle with the ludic, experienced in terms of a player's moral allowances. The current, transitional status of expanded television in the United States offers a particularly salient example of how the stupid resides not only in experimental, challenging—or even, in a popular critical sense, unwise or unsuccessful—instances of hybridity between and within established genres but also emerges from sometimes fundamental changes in the ways those genres are conceived of, as the forms of monetization, delivery, and perhaps most importantly consumption shift radically when enabled by new technologies and platforms. In this case the stupid resides in a range of creative attempts to reconceive long form serial drama—across genres—and to adapt and conform it to the changing conditions of the emerging streaming economy.

For a number of years now, the networks, post-network production and distribution entities, and showrunners who are currently producing serial dramas for what we commonly call expanded television (to include the legacy networks, basic and pay cable channels, and a wide variety of online and downloadable, or streamable services including Subscription Video on Demand, or SVOD platforms like Netflix and Hulu) have been experimenting with the form and content of their shows, working to reposition them in line with the logic of the new mediascape. In so doing they have begun to rework our default expectations of what a series, a season, and an episode can and should be. Typically, this process of reworking and repositioning manifests as a kind of stupid cinematization, variously free and bold, or bloated and flaccid, in which the series is claimed by its creators (at least) as a form of extended movie experience.

By way of broad context, the institutional and technological frameworks within which serial drama is now produced and distributed have changed significantly in the era of what FX Network's Chairman John Landgraf calls "Peak TV" for six key reasons.[49] Firstly, the reliance on advertising revenue to monetize television shows has decreased with the launch of subscription services, freeing creative teams from the need to write to please—or appease—the sponsor. Secondly, and commensurably, the development of streaming and download technologies has expanded the television platform onto new screens, with more flexible attendant regulatory frameworks. Thirdly, streaming has enabled new articulations

of the series form, in which shows are no longer required to run 20 plus episodes per season in order to eventually reach profitability.[50] Distributors have begun to allow their producing teams to develop shows with varying season lengths. This flexibility has also facilitated active attempts to cinematize television drama, but nor has it stood in the way of creative defaults toward such cinematization as television drama fills and exceeds the old cultural spaces vacated by the shift away from movie drama and toward the tentpole outlined in Chap. 2. The most common length in SVOD distribution is now settling at around 10 to 12 episodes, but mini-series and shorter "event" series are also becoming more common (and, in this sense at least, closer to the old British and European model). Fourthly, streaming services have also moved beyond the standard episode-a-week release model still practised by terrestrial and much of cable TV, experimenting with different release patterns, sometimes releasing an entire season on the same day and date—Netflix famously did this with *House of Cards*. This new "box-set" release model for streaming series has further encouraged emerging consumption patterns, notably binge-viewing, that were already gaining popularity with the DVD season box-set. The fifth key change acknowledges the power of the marketing algorithm in placing content in front of likely viewers. Data-driven streaming services, such as Netflix, customize the user experience to the individual subscriber, thus one viewer's perception of the streamer's content can be very different from another's.[51] Their use of algorithms also seeks to ensure that future greenlight decisions for movies and series are informed by established data sets that track audience demand. "For streamers like Netflix, mining viewing data is an essential part of the approach, and analytics play a pivotal role in not just the selection of content to produce, but how to recommend content to current and prospective customers."[52] The sixth key change inserts online fan culture and its (often benign and occasionally malign) influence in placing fan service into the equation of expanded television. The immediate and sustained reciprocity of online fan interactions is both a sought-after boon to and driver of a series' popularity and longevity and yet it can also lead to formal and narrational dissonance when discomposed producers feel obliged to defer to fan opinion at the expense of narrative coherence, series style, or tone. For example, critics and fans have commented on the drop in major character deaths in recent seasons of *Game of Thrones* since the scripts have moved into a freer narrative space beyond the published source novels. The resurrection of Jon Snow is often cited by fans and critics as a prime example of *Game of Thrones* overindulging its fan

community.[53] A similar discussion has taken place about recent seasons of *The Walking Dead*. Another way of expressing all of this is that we have moved past the age of television and into a new age that is still defining itself. As Nicolas Winding Refn told *The Guardian* provocatively in 2018, "Television is dead. And television will not be reborn. It will not come back," he said. "What has surfaced instead is the digital platform of entertainment."[54]

That claim notwithstanding, however, many of these experiments in the form, content, and monetization of serial drama began long before streaming technologies were available, as pay cable (HBO, Showtime) proved the concept of subscription services and basic cable channels, such as FX and AMC, increasingly outpaced the censorious reach of their own risk-averse Standards and Practices departments.[55] Some of these explorations focused on testing the boundaries of a show's content in terms of public attitudes to a wide range of issues of taste (FX's *The Shield*, Showtime's *Dexter*, and NBC's *Hannibal*, to name but three). Others have been less groundbreaking or controversial in terms of their onscreen content, but their simple popularity on DVD proved the concept of the box-set, for the short term, and served as a salient lesson about the potential of binge viewing for the executives of the SVOD services of the future. In the era of streaming, however, producers found that developing series *to be* binge watched brought concomitant technical challenges alongside new creative potentialities. Some of these challenges were mundane, and yet they illustrate at a granular level how changes in the way shows are consumed affect the creative and craft labor required to produce them.

When Katie O'Connell Marsh ran Gaumont International Television, for example, the company produced the horror drama show *Hemlock Grove* for Netflix. As Nellie Andreeva reported for *deadline.com*, after Gaumont delivered the show's second season, O'Connell Marsh binge-watched the new episodes with the Netflix executives in their offices and was surprised at the creative and technical issues that were exposed by this significant, yet still emerging form of television viewership. One straightforward lesson she learned from binge-watching her own show was that *Hemlock Grove*'s "music cues were becoming repetitive." What might not be noticed—what might pass as normal—when a show is consumed at a rate of one episode a week became intrusive and grating, in an obvious sense stupidly so, when episodes were watched in a batch. She admitted that binge watching "really changed what we thought fundamentally … We made a lot of changes in production and storytelling."[56]

Andreeva's report continues with a broader example that goes to the form that the serial drama—in any genre—in expanded television is either adopting or transitioning through. She relates an anecdote from Stacey Rukeyser, former showrunner for *UnReal*, in which she was counseled by Netflix executives on how to address the pilot for a binge watched show. "You don't have to cram everything into the pilot episode as you used to," she told Andreeva: "Their viewers look at the first three [episodes] to sample a series, you can take a more relaxed approach to setting up the whole concept for the series."[57] This emerging norm of television consumption, potentially freeing the serial drama from conventional constraints of pacing and exposition, also allows producers to rethink how they approach what Jason Mittell calls "managing the mechanics of memory" within the arc(s) of a season, if not between seasons. "The typical model of television consumption, divided into weekly episodes and annual seasons, constrains producers interested in telling stories that transcend individual installments, as any viewer's memory of previous episodes is quite variable, with a significant number of viewers having missed numerous episodes altogether."[58] Conversely, Mittell argues that the binge model additionally, places new constraints on storytelling, of which *Hemlock Grove*'s music cues are but one minor example, as producers seek to "avoid redundancies and repetitions that become annoying and excessively obvious when viewed without long serial gaps between episodes."[59]

The challenge of accommodating to the liberations and constraints of the binge-watching era has helped to pull many new streamed television drama series away from the old norms of seriality. Binge-programming has encouraged producers to conceive of their series less as conventional episodic narratives, and rather treat streamed content as long form "novelistic," or "cinematic" stories divided naturally into chapters or parts. Take for example the Showtime seven-part limited series *Escape at Dannemora* (2018), directed by Ben Stiller. Terry Gross interviewed Stiller on the January 8, 2019 broadcast of NPR's *Fresh Air*. In the latter part of the interview Gross presents Stiller with a telling question: "So, I know award season is mostly movies, and the Emmys are in the fall. But is *Escape At Dannemora*—does that qualify as a movie for award season?"[60] Implicit in the question is her uncertain reaction to the displacement of evolutionary expanded television toward the stupid—what is this thing now, this evolving television medium? Is it still what it once was? Is it already what it might become? By what category are we to assess *Escape At Dannemora* and shows like it—cinema, or television? It does not quite conform and

yet it is not completely different either. Gross's question gets right to the heart of the issue, how exactly do we categorize long-form television now that, besides its length and distribution, it has a distinctly cinematic feel? The question has certainly vexed television critics, a number of whom have responded with a common-sense critique of these emerging serial forms. At the core of their complaint is that many Peak TV shows are deemed to have (stupidly) eschewed or elided the episodic, the heart of the televisual, in favor of a hybrid cinematic style—a *medium fail* that carries with it, by implication, an entire suite of structural genre fails at the level of the individual show. The question we ask is whether their critique of an emergent form fails adequately to engage with the potential of a nascent stupid television norm, or rather does it simply mark this transitional or evolutionary period in which the serial narrative is temporarily—and stupidly—unsettled, carrying with it the expectation that it will evolve again, past its current clumsy "adolescent" phase that is too often marked by formal dysfunction?

The cinematization of serial drama has a cultural-political as well as an aesthetic dimension. When an executive producer like Jonathan Nolan claims (as he did at Paleyfest) that his show, *Westworld*, is "a ten hour movie," or when the showrunners for *Game of Thrones*, David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, argue (as they did at South by Southwest) that their series is "a 73 hour movie" they are not only making statements about the form and style of contemporary television.[61] Rather they are deploying an old promotional tactic, a marker of distinction that is a less comfortable fit for the convergent era. As Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine remind us, previous attempts to cinematize television have sought to claim higher cultural status for some shows—originally "quality television" in the era of *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*—at the expense of others (daytime soaps, game shows, and reality television, inter alia).[62] In our present cultural moment, Peak TV showrunners seeking to align their shows with the cinematic is an ironic—even a dissonant—double move that simultaneously defers to the cultural weight of movies as a form while promoting the widely held idea that TV drama is "better" than film right now. The tension in this statement goes a long way to explain the evolutionary "problem" of serial drama as its producers attempt to rationalize a collision between media, between narrative forms that may either be stupidly dissonant or stupidly harmonious.

These claims are read by television critics in ways that resonate with our case study of the critical reception of *Transformers* and the spectacular

tentpole. Typically, the line taken is that new shows on Netflix and other streaming services too often undervalue the episode as a basic creative unit of TV storytelling. Alan Sepinwall summed up the complaint after "growing frustrated with too many shows (particularly ones made for streaming services) that have no interest in differentiating one episode from the next, and just offered up 13 amorphous hours of … stuff."[63] Kathryn VanArendonk notes, "how frustrating it is that, for some reason, TV can't stand on its own as a 'prestige' narrative. For TV, prestige means getting reframed as something else and basking in the reflected glow of another art form's cultural currency."[64] Her argument develops along the lines that novelistic or cinematic forms of storytelling are taken to be long and complex, requiring critical attention, and reservation of judgment from the viewer. In effect, she argues, prestige serial dramas too often operate as narrative ponzi schemes, ever deferring the promise of fulfillment and masking incoherence with "visual darkness, humorlessness, and incomprehensibility." "They are not interested in your current pleasure," she continues, "because good, worthwhile narratives are about delayed gratification. That's why it doesn't matter that *Westworld*'s first season was deliberately, gleefully impossible to parse until you saw the final episode." The tendency of some Peak TV shows literally to disguise their storytelling in almost impenetrable darkness is especially telling. The world of *Mr. Robot* is shrouded in darkness; many viewers reported missing key plot information in *The Walking Dead* because the scenes were too dark; some interior sequences in the opening episode of *Hannah* are almost impossible to glean. Similarly, Todd VanDerWerff notes that *Legion*'s and *True Detective*'s first seasons both follow a structure where you have to sit through "cinematic showcase with only minor bearing on the plot" and "breather" episodes before you get to "the one where everything's explained."[65] In the end, as VanArendonk suggests, the argument comes down to whether the episode is viewed by TV creatives as a block to the smooth flow of storytelling or whether "it can be greeted as an opportunity, a regular and reliably renewing chance to tell a story, to sketch a theme, or to experiment with form and structure on a self-contained canvas."[66]

The implicit analogy operating in this chapter has been that critics and scholars function as police, patrolling genre boundaries, but in this case perhaps their function is more like that of the track-suit-wearing dietitian warning against the hazards of "Netflix bloat." Of course, the history of the future of serial drama on expanded television cannot yet be written,

but it is both intriguing and instructive to see how this new, evolutionary, and convergent iteration of the return of "quality" to television is now being met with a kind of popular critical resistance that reifies the televisual rather than deferring to the cinematic. Inevitably, dissonant storytelling emerges from the uncomfortable fit of colliding media. In the end, the kind of slow (stupid), meandering (stupid), and—sometimes—incomprehensible (stupid) storytelling about which VanArendonk and her colleagues complain is truly redolent neither of the best traditions of television nor of cinema. Rather it is reads most often like an imposed meta that attempts to evoke one medium in another, licensed by new freedoms of form but too often crippled by its (stupid) assumption that the "higher" form can unproblematically elide the "lower"—or, indeed, that such assumed hierarchies still apply in the lexicon of evaluative media criticism in the era of Peak TV. We will consider other dissonant collisions between medium and storytelling in Chaps. 4 and 5.

Conclusion: "Thank You, Sir, May I Have Another?"

Genres are a powerful means of assessment, allowing critics and scholars to police the media. Scholarship and even journalistic criticism can put the discipline (read: punishment) back into the discipline of film and media studies; lashing out when films (or other media) behave badly, venturing too far astray from established conventions. *mother!*, for instance, got its fair share of good old fashioned spankings. Likewise, the near hysteria that Suzuki spawned with his *Branded to Kill*, which critics and studio executives found "incomprehensible," ended with Suzuki being blacklisted (put into a veritable corner—nearly a decade-long time out). Our discussion of serial drama should make clear that we do not necessarily mean to suggest that the critics have it all wrong (and we know better), but rather that these vitriolic responses have the potential to be read symptomatically of a genre fail. And in some cases, the fail is "genuinely" bad (and well deserving of a spanking), as when Peak TV creatives assume that the surface cinematization of their medium short circuits its evolution, allowing us to fast forward to the art form in its mature state, and other instances we might be encountering as an evolutionary or creative shift that requires a corresponding paradigmatic shift in viewing/assessment.

As we found in Chap. 2, the contemporary Hollywood vernacular exemplified in the *Transformers* franchise views its competition not merely with other media, but the theme park attraction. And this too demands a

paradigmatic shift in our assessment of that contemporary Hollywood vernacular. And in this sense, *Amer*, because it privileges the sensate experience, might have more in common with *Transformers* than with a conventional horror film. As cited in the introductory chapter Stephen Holden concludes, "*Amer* is a voluptuous wallow in recycled psychosexual kitsch."[67] And Holden is not completely wrong, Cattet and Forzani trade heavily in the economy of giallo imagery, which is shamelessly "psychosexual kitsch." However, let us make a musical analogy: The musician Alan Wilder was instrumental in designing the sound for Depeche Mode during its most creative period (1982–1995). He was largely responsible for the use of samplers, to create highly complex, but eminently catchy pop tunes—he could transform the chaos of "clangs" and "clops" (the banging of pots and pans) into pop music. Cattet and Forzani do something similar—effectively "sampling" the "psychosexual kitsch" of the giallo film, and transforming it into, "Everything Counts," or "People Are People." And this could be taken almost in a literal sense: Cattet and Forzani do not create narratives per se, they create incredible music. *Amer* anticipates a stupid viewing body—a body that is open to sensations, and willing to relinquish the imperative to locate meaning in the same way that we consume (pop) music.

Emerging media—from streaming platforms to VR—are also addressing the body. Perhaps they don't do so in quite the same way that *Amer* does, but these emerging storytelling media invite us to physically move—in the case of VR—and with streaming to point, tap, swipe. Additionally, the streaming of games and television has allowed for new storytelling modes (at least new for the televisual media)—recent experiments in interactive storytelling sit somewhere between literature (recall reading choose-your-own-adventure novels) and videogames. *Doki Doki Literature Club*, for instance, is a "visual novel" that requires our involvement to advance the narrative, and is available on Steam, a videogame distribution platform. There is no "gameplay" as such though, positioning it in a liminal state. Similarly, there is no conventional (video)gameplay in *Hatoful Boyfriend*, another visual novel available on Steam, that combines a dating simulator—in which the human protagonist dates intelligent pigeons—with a dystopian science fiction narrative about the end of humanity. Both are also deploying dissonance as an attraction in linear storytelling as well as at the meta-generic level, in subverting the typically benign form of the dating sim. In expanded television, David Slade's 2018 interactive story, *Bandersnatch*, which is part of the *Black Mirror* series on Netflix, is in its

own way something of a meta-examination of an emerging media storytelling mode. And perhaps this "meta"-examination is premature, coming before the interactive storytelling has developed a corpus of works to reference. The prefix "meta" almost invariably is a subject that comes after, it rises above an existing field.[68] In addition, the interactive storytelling mode, at least in its current state, lends to meandering (stupid) narratives, because "[t]he more malleable the story, the less cogent the experience."[69] There is concern, though, with this emerging storytelling form precisely because of the way it demands us to touch and interact.

Writing for *Wired*, Peter Rubin sounds the alarm in his article, "With Interactive TV, Every Viewer Is a Showrunner Now," noting how we are constantly being monitored: "VR headsets that track our gaze and see our pupils dilate; virtual assistants that read our mood; sneakers that can tell we're getting tired because our running stride falters. These are reactions, not choices." And Rubin adds that these emerging technologies do not "have an opt-out feature." In an era where we (as consumers) are becoming increasingly suspicious of data-collection practices, Rubin admonishes that interactive media is just yet one more site of data-collection. It is not merely choosing what route a character should take, but another data set that can be monetized—what types of narratives do I like, and thus show up in my curated feed, or paving a path toward a "paint-by-numbers" narrative factory. "Netflix already famously pores over every byte of viewer behavior data. Now the buttons we choose, the prompts we pick, the tastes they suggest could become part of that great graph that defines how the company sees us. Television in the age of psychographics."[70]

Bandersnatch is set in the early 1980s, Stefan Butler is a young videogame designer. He attempts to design a videogame based on a choose-your-own-adventure book. As pressure mounts, a deadline is missed, Stefan becomes increasingly paranoid that someone is controlling him. And he is not wrong, because in fact we are manipulating him, we are prompted to make decisions for Stefan—from the mundane (which cereal to eat) to the most consequential (kill your dad?). (But what does it mean, when a paranoia is confirmed? Netflix is not watching Stefan, Netflix is watching us watch Stefan.) In a fit of programming, trying to complete the game, a mysterious agent appears: Netflix. When speaking to his therapist, he explains that he is being controlled by Netflix, "It's some sort of future entertainment thing." His therapist trying to understand asks, "Like a computer game?" In this instance, yes, it is like a computer game. *Bandersnatch* is not that far removed from interactive fiction games like

Depression Quest, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, and *Gone Home*. The Netflix program only muddies the water further, blurring the boundaries between narratives and (video)games.

Videogames, especially now that graphics have approached cinematic quality, are a novel space for storytelling. The medium itself, however, already poses challenges to the conventional linear narrative arc. Videogames are more likely to rely on spatialized storytelling (discussed in Chaps. 4 and 5). Gamers and ludologist have also questioned if storytelling even has a place in the realm of videogames, like the pornographic genre, story frustrates the ostensible point of videogames—gameplay. Nonetheless, stories are being told through the videogame medium, and it tests the bounds of genres. And this, in part, is what we will address in the following chapters.

Notes

1. John Truby, "The story that changed an industry," November 10, 2018. Email sent to Julian Hoxter.
2. Ibid.
3. See, for example, Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces (The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell), Third Edition* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008); and Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Third Edition (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).
4. Truby.
5. Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," *Cinema Journal* vol. 23, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 8.
6. Note that Altman actually is critical of placing *Stars Wars* within the western genre: "By maintaining simultaneous descriptions according to both parameters [i.e., semantic/syntactic approach], we are not likely to fall into the trap of equating *Star Wars* with the western (as numerous recent critics have done), even though it shares certain syntactic patterns with that genre" Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," *Cinema Journal* vol. 23, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 13.
7. Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 206.
8. *Oxford English Dictionary*, sv "genre."
9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, sv "gender."
10. See Looper Staff, "The Real Reason Why *Firefly* Got Canceled," *looper.com*, no date, accessed January 9, 2019, https://www.looper.com/10800/real-reason-firefly-got-canceled/.

11. Rex Reed, "*mother!* Is the Worst Movie of the Year, Maybe the Century," *Observer*, September 15, 2017, accessed November 10, 2018, https://observer.com/2017/09/darren-aronofsky-mother-worst-movie-of-the-year/.
12. Seth Kelly, "Box Office *Mother!* Crumbles with $7.5 Million, *It* Repeats No. 1," *Variety*, September 17, 2017, accessed November 10, 2018, https://variety.com/2017/film/news/box-office-mother-it-american-assassin-1202561464/.
13. Owen Gleiberman, "Film Review: *mother!*" *Variety*, September 5, 2017, accessed November 10, 2018, https://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/mother-review-jennifer-lawrence-venice-film-festival-1202545924/.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Anthony D'Alessandro, "The Method To The Madness Of *Mother!*'s Box Office Marketing," *Deadline Hollywood*, September 14, 2017, accessed November 10, 2018, https://deadline.com/2017/09/mother-marketing-jennifer-lawrence-tiff-video-darren-aronofsky-1202168737/.
17. On a related note, Judd Apatow might be an interesting study, because as Adam Kotsko explains, "a certain slippage has occurred so that the name 'Apatow' has come to designate not so much a man as a genre, such that movies that he is not directly involved in can somehow feel like an 'Apatow film.'" Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 48.
18. Michael Sragow, "Deep Focus: *mother!*" *Film Comment* (September 14, 2017): https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/deep-focus-mother/.
19. Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani interviewed by Virginie Sélavy, "Interview with Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani," *Electric Sheep: a deviant view of cinema*, April 10, 2014, accessed November 10, 2018, http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/features/2014/04/10/interview-with-helene-cattet-and-bruno-forzani/.
20. Jeremi Szaniawski, "The Strange Shape of Their Cinema's Body," *Senses of Cinema* 87 (2018): http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/split-screen-cattet-forzani/cinema-body-helene-cattet-bruno-forzani/.
21. Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani interviewed by Anton Bitel, "Fragments of Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani," *Senses of Cinema* 87 (2018): http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/split-screen-cattet-forzani/helene-cattet-and-bruno-forzani-interview/. In an interview with the producer of *Amer*, Ève Commenge, she reflects on the post-production process, and the audio-design of the film: "A genre film, or at least Hélène and Bruno's films, is produced with a longer post-production than usual. There is a whole second shoot in terms of sound, and the sound editing is quite huge. They told me, 'ten weeks is okay', they asked for so many days of foley, and so

forth. I built that into the budget, based on what we had discussed. Sometimes it goes over budget by one, two days, but hardly more than that. On *Amer* we realised that the sound edit required more time, so it was difficult for (sound editor) Daniel Bruylandt. And we had started the sound edit, then did foley in the middle, then did another sound edit. That didn't work, we didn't have enough direct sound to work with before foley was added. So now we do foley/sound design first. Right after the image cut. We gather a lot of material, and then Daniel does the sound edit." Éve Commenge interview and translation by Jeremi Szaniawski, *Senses of Cinema* 87 (2018): http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/split-screen-cattet-forzani/interview-with-eve-commenge/.

22. Cattet and Forzani interviewed by Bitel.
23. Cattet and Forzani interviewed by Sélavy.
24. Carolee Schneemann interviewed by Kate Haug, "An Interview with Carolee Schneemann," *Wide* Angle vol. 20, no. 1 (1998): 25.
25. Cattet and Forzani interviewed by Sélavy.
26. Ibid.
27. Kat Ellinger, "Vice and Vision: Magnifying Sergio Martino for *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*," *Senses of Cinema* 87 (2018): http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/split-screen-cattet-forzani/the-strange-colour-of-your-bodys-tears/.
28. Cattet Forzani interviewed by Sélavy.
29. Ibid.
30. Martine Beugnet, *Cinema of Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 32.
31. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, "Facial Landscapes: Elina Löwensohn and *Let the Corpses Tan* (2017)," *Senses of Cinema* 87 (2018): http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/split-screen-cattet-forzani/let-the-corpses-tan-2017/.
32. Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani cited in Christopher Huber, "A Language of Their Own: An Introduction to Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani," *Senses of Cinema* 87 (2018): http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/split-screen-cattet-forzani/introduction-to-helene-cattet-and-bruno-forzani/.
33. Pink films, perhaps in retrospect, is attributed to films known as, among other things, "*erodakushon eiga* or *eroduction* (a contraction of the words 'erotic' and 'production'), *oiroke eiga* ('sexy films') and *sanbyakuman eiga* ('three million-yen films') due to their shoestring budgets." Loosely speaking, even *euroguro* (erotic-grotesque) films—which shares affinities with the American grindhouse, or exploitation film—might be characterized as pink films. Jasper Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain: The Complete History of Japanese Sex Cinema* (Surrey, UK: FAB Press Ltd., 2008), 11–12.
34. Ibid., 123.

35. Jasper Sharp adds that Nikkatsu attempt to enter the video market too "with the Roman X video series," but this was not enough to postpone the inevitable demise of the studio declaring bankruptcy in 1993. The company has since been resurrected, with its extensive back catalog, but as a shadow of its former self. Sharp, 129–130.
36. Zahlten Alexander, *The End of Japanese Cinema: Industrial Genres, National Times, and Media Ecologies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 86.
37. Ibid., 88. Also see Sharp, 129. Sharp also notes that "by all accounts its seems that Nikkatsu were quite keen to attract couples and female viewers to its cinemas, something never possible with the rowdy men-only pink theaters." Sharp, 129.
38. Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp characterize Suzuki in a similar manner, "Wacky, irreverent, occasionally incoherent, but always dazzlingly original and imbued with a playful charm that has become the maverick director's trademark, his work continues to thrill and amuse an entire new generation." Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp, *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2005), 12.
39. From 1948 to 1955 Suzuki worked at Shochiku as an assistant director prior to working at Nikkatsu (1956–1968). While at Shochiku Suzuki recounts looking for the best place to take a nap while on the job.
40. Filmmaker Shinji Aoyama takes a similar view: "What Suzuki represents to me is anarchy. He's a complete anarchist, and he's the only person in Japanese cinema who could get away with a film like *Story of Sorrow and Sadness*. I was born in 1964 and so I was in my early teens when I experienced punk, and on me Jean-Luc Godard and Seijun Suzuki had the same sort of impact." Shinji Aoyama cited in Mes and Sharp, 3.
41. Tony Rayns, "The Kyoka Factor: The Delights of Suzuki Seijun," in *Branded to Thrill: The Delirious Cinema of Suzuki Seijun*, eds. Simon Field and Tony Rayns (London: Institute of Contemporary Art; Japan Foundation, 1994), 9.
42. Temenuga Trifonova views the "sequel" to *Branded to Kill* (and sequel needs to be viewed in the loosest, or most liberal terms), Suzuki's *Pistol Opera* (2001) as a meta-yakuza film, a film about the representation of violence in yakuza films. See Temenuga Trifonova, "From Genre Flick to Art Film: Seijun Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* (1967) and *Pistol Opera* (2001)," in *Genre in Asian Film and Television*, eds., Chan F., Karpovich A., Zhang X. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 149–162. Note: due to a lack of accessibility to the published volume, we worked from a Word document of Trifonova's chapter. We would like to thank Trifonova for generously sharing her work with us.

43. As a cog in the studio machine, Suzuki was assigned scripts, assigned actors, and regularly commissioned to make conventional genre films (gangster, detective films, romantic melodramas, war films). Suzuki was expected to churn out B-movies, intended for double-bills, and he built a reputation as a capable filmmaker completing his assignments "on low budgets (typically between one-third and two-thirds the cost of 'A' films) and within tight schedules (e.g., producing two to six films per year for more than a decade)." Daisuke Miyao, "Dark Visions of Japanese Film Noir: Suzuki Seijun's *Branded to Kill* (1967)," in Alastair Phillips and Julian Stringer eds., *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Context* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 195.
44. Kyusaku Hori quoted in Miyao, 194.
45. Miyao, 202.
46. Criterion released seven Suzuki titles: *Branded to Kill* (1967), *Tokyo Drifter* (1966), *Fighting Elegy* (1966), *Gate of Flesh* (1964), *Story of a Prostitute* (1965), *Youth of the Beast* (1963), and *Take Aim at the Police Van* (1960).
47. For example, the *New York Times* obituary for Suzuki notes the connection between Tarantino and Suzuki. Dennis Lim, "Seijun Suzuki, Director Who Inspired Tarantino and Jarmusch, Dies at 93," *New York Times*, February 22, 2017, accessed November 10, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/movies/seijun-suzuki-director-who-inspired-tarantino-and-jarmusch-dies-at-93.html.
48. "Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai … used the theme music for *In the Mood for Love* (2000)," drawing from Suzuki's *Yumeji* (1991). Mes and Sharp, 11.
49. Ken Basin, "How Broadcast, Cable and Indies Can Survive the Peak TV Era," *Variety*, July 31, 2018, accessed April 20, 2019, https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/peak-tv-broadcast-cable-indies-streaming-1202890389/.
50. Historically, most network TV shows run at a loss in the short term and make significant profit only after they transition to syndication.
51. Netflix curates its content based on who it thinks you are. In a *Marketplace* report, Nitasha Tiku notes that depending on your (presumed) race Netflix will even select images that presumably corresponds with your demographic. Listen to the report: Kai Ryssdal and Phoebe Unterman, "Is Netflix Personalization Making You Feel ∗Seen∗ … Or Profiled?" *NPR's Marketplace*, October 26, 2018, November 10, 2018, https://www.marketplace.org/2018/10/26/world/netflix-personalization-making-you-feel-seen-or-profiled.
52. The disruptive nature of streaming and SVOD services to the established media industry is explored astutely from a business perspective in Arne Alsin, "The Future Of Media: Disruptions, Revolutions And The Quest

For Distribution," *Forbes*, July 18, 2018, accessed November 10, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/aalsin/2018/07/19/the-future-of-media-disruptions-revolutions-and-the-quest-for-distribution/#4194bae060b9.

53. For online fan discussion see, for example, the subreddit: "Has the show become more fan service/fiction and less realistic over the last 2 seasons." https://www.reddit.com/r/asoiaf/comments/6zah9n/spoilers_main_has_the_show_become_more_fan/.
54. Peter Bradshaw, "Nicolas Winding Refn: 'Cinema is Dead. And now it is resurrected,'" *The Guardian*, July 9, 2018, accessed April 12, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/09/nicolas-winding-refn-cinema-is-dead-bynwrcom.
55. Daniel Bernardi and Julian Hoxter, "Running the Room: Showrunning in Expanded Television," in *Off The Page: Screenwriting in the Era of Media Convergence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 111–113.
56. Nellie Andreeva, "TV Producers on Changing Storytelling Techniques For The Binging Era & Unusual Places Series Can Come From—INTV," *deadline.com*, March 12, 2019, accessed March 12, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/03/tv-producers-changing-storytelling-techniques-binging-era-unusual-places-series-can-come-from-intv-hannibal-hemlock-grove-good-witch-1202574197/maz/.
57. Ibid.
58. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 180.
59. Ibid., 181.
60. Ben Stiller interviewed by Terry Gross, "Ben Stiller Unlocks An 'Old-Fashioned' Prison Break In *Escape At Dannemora*," *Fresh Air*, *NPR*, January 8, 2019, accessed January 8, 2019, https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=683192524.
61. Nolan's claim is cited in a Tweet from Paley Center, "@WestworldHBO #PaleyFest," March 25, 2017, 8:33 PM. https://twitter.com/paleycenter/status/845841101193830400, Benioff and Weiss are cited in a range of media including Julia Alexander, "Game of Thrones showrunners ignite debate over whether it's a TV show or a movie," *polygon.com*, April 13, 2017, accessed April 9, 2019, https://www.polygon.com/tv/2017/3/13/14911318/game-of-thrones-tv-movie.
62. Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
63. Alan Sepinwall, "Your TV Show Doesn't Have To Be A Movie: In Defense Of The Episode (Again)," *uproxx.com*, March 14, 2017, accessed April 9, 2019, https://uproxx.com/sepinwall/in-defense-of-the-episode-again/. Italics in original.

64. Kathryn Van Arendonk, "Why Are We So Sure 'Prestige' TV Looks Like a 10-Hour Movie," *vulture.com*, March 28, 2017, accessed April 1, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2017/03/prestige-tv-why-are-we-sure-it-looks-like-a-10-hour-movie.html.
65. Todd Van Der Werff, critic at large for *Vox*, offers his structural breakdown of both shows in a tweet @tvoti, March 23, 2017, 10.37 AM, https://twitter.com/tvoti/status/844966371670736896.
66. Van Arendonk.
67. See note 37 on page 34.
68. The second entry for the prefix "meta," is: "With sense 'beyond, above, at a higher level.'" *Oxford English Dictionary*, sv "meta."
69. Peter Rubin, "With Interactive TV, Every Viewer Is a Showrunner Now," *Wired*, January 21, 2019, accessed April 1, 2019, https://www.wired.com/story/netflix-interactive-tv-every-viewer-is-a-showrunner/.
70. Ibid.

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CHAPTER 4

The Stupid as Narrative Dissonance

Introduction: Narratives Want to Be Dissonant

Different from a surprising plot twist, narrative dissonance pertains more to narrative syntax than it does to narrative content. In effect, it has more to do with form than content. Like music, where even to the completely untrained ear, we somehow innately anticipate the flow of particular rhythms, harmonies, and pattern of notes—correspondingly, dissonance, then, only exists because of our conditioned response to music. Far from immutable, dissonance reveals not simply the negative possibilities of consonance, but the imaginative potential beyond reified norms. Theodor Adorno goes so far to say that, "Dissonance is the truth about harmony."[1]

The root of "dissonant" the prefix "dis" contravenes the suffix "sonant" which comes from the Latin "sonāre to sound." But, of course, this goes beyond hearing or not hearing, but what is pleasant to the ear, or not. The etymology of "dissonant" comes from the Latin: "Latin dissonānt-em, present participle of dissonāre to disagree in sound, sound diversely, differ." "Dissonant" then is that which is: "Disagreeing or discordant in sound, inharmonious; harsh-sounding, unmelodious, jarring."[2] Narrative dissonance, then, often "hits" the viewer. And this jarring affect might happen in near literal terms, because when confronted with narrative dissonance the viewer might respond in a real and very physical way: recoil, mouth fall agape, brow furrow, shake their head in the negative, gesticulate hands, utter an exasperated expression. Conventional narratives, perhaps even narratives with surprising endings, lead the viewer along a

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predictable path, in the same way that a musical composition might. Even if someone is unfamiliar with the composition might instinctively follow its melody. Narrative dissonance, then, as a jarring affect jolts the viewer as it diverges from the conventional expectation—stupidity emerges on the occasion where narrative expectations are shattered.

Suzanne Keen uses similar terminology referring to narrative consonance and dissonance: while she refers to the former as a "relative closeness to the related events" between narrator and reader, the latter on the other hand corresponds to a "greater distance between the happening and the telling."[3] For her part, Keen is interested with reader identification—specifically how a reader might come to empathize with characters. And assuredly our conception of narrative dissonance pertains to spectator identification to some degree, however, what we intend to emphasize here relates more to cultural conventions regarding storytelling structures. Daniel Melnick also uses similar phrasing in reference to narratives, but states that, at least in his study of Proust, his "concern is … with the bearing of dissonance on the aesthetic and ethical aims."[4]

The composer Arnold Schoenberg actively incorporated dissonance into his musical scores. "Schoenberg's dissonance achieves an intentionally difficult negation of music's grounding, commonly received, tonal conventions," Melnick surmises. As others have observed (namely Charles Rosen and Theodor Adorno) Schoenberg's dissonance functions "*in the context* of the common musical language" by which it stands in contrast. Schoenberg, however, did not view consonance and dissonance as an unchanging binary, rather he mobilized dissonance "to explode the compulsively and falsely 'affirming' stasis of the common language in order to emancipate the creative imaginative potentiality of language itself." Although set in negative opposition to consonance, Schoenberg's ambition was to lend "his musical language the guise and substance of freedom, of a freed, continual becoming."[5]

Narrative dissonance indicates a moment of excess, where the perceived bounds of conventional narrative are breached. "Dissonance is the technical term for the reception through art of what aesthetics as well as naiveté calls ugly." The ugly as Adorno surmises "is that element that opposes the [art]work's ruling law of form."[6] The ugly is that which is mixed, a composite, the abject, the referent that falls outside established categories. Narrative dissonance is not necessarily aligned with negative emotions; indeed, dissonance offers a potential well-spring of pleasure in its violation

of narrative conventions. But the pleasure fully derives from the excess, the transgression of customary narrative paradigms.

Dissonance, for Adorno, is indicative of the artistic impulse toward liberation. And while dissonance has the potential to elicit unease in its jarring affect, at the same time, Adorno insists that: "There is more joy in dissonance than in consonance."[7] And while consonant narratives amount to the conventional narrative paradigm, it is always shadowed by dissonance. "Art, whatever its material," as Adorno insists, "has always desired dissonance, a desire suppressed by the affirmative power of society with which aesthetic semblance has been bound up. Dissonance is effectively expression; the consonant and harmonious want to soften and eliminate it."[8]

Undoubtedly there is something of a paradox baked into this concept of narrative dissonance, because it can only exist because of our implicit understanding of narrative consonance.[9] Embedded in the paradox is the always already presence of stupidity. Narrative conventions paper over the stupid. The form of the conventional narrative paradigm falsely presumes that stupidity can be eradicated, but as much as consonant narratives work to evacuate it does not mean that it has been overcome, vanquished, made extinct. In the same way that the attraction surfaces as a return of the repressed, the stupid—as narrative dissonance—ruptures narrative as a form of liberated expression and, then, as such, wields the potential to be joyously stupid.

Joyously Stupid: Elastic in Just About Every Way …

The animated series *Adventure Time* (2010–2018)—which aired on the Cartoon Network, and was created by Pendleton Ward—is joyously stupid. It is not inane, or unintelligent, in fact it is probably just the opposite. It is stupid insofar as it throws off the shackles of contemporary storytelling conventions—it celebrates the topsy-turvy world of the carnivalesque (a subject for later discussion), and explodes narrative paradigms. *Adventure Time* invites us to confront the Foucauldian "black stupidity," to think outside conventional narrative paradigms.[10] It does this in a number of ways: defying conventional story-structure, adopting videogame logic, and enact Bakhtinian principles.

Adventure Time is a bizarre exhibition of carnivalesque tropes, and with some regularity casts the yoke of narrative conventions aside. While there is an overarching narrative loosely tying the individual atomized episodes

in the series together, the rudiments of the series are this: the program focuses on Finn (the human), and Jake (the dog). The series is set in the Land of Ooo, after the apocalyptic Mushroom War, wherein all humans (save Finn) perished or mutated. Innumerable other creatures and animated inorganic entities (e.g., the candy people) with varying degrees of sentience also inhabit the Land of Ooo.[11] Finn is juvenile in nature. He is approximately 13 when the series begins, and by the end of the series has his 17th birthday. Although he matures emotionally, he has a childish demeanor throughout, nevertheless, he is often responsible for the well-being of the inhabitants of the Land of Ooo—he is also prophesied to be the savior of Ooo. (The series, however, in the end undoes "the knight in shining armor saves the day" narrative trope, and Ooo is saved through a team effort, and significantly it's the female characters that are instrumental in saving Ooo.) Emotionally immature and relatively diminutive in stature, his sidekick and more mature brother often has to come to Finn's assistance. Jake's parents found Finn alone in the forest and adopted him—raising them as their own along with Jake, and at least one other dog-brother. Jake, born of odd and unnatural circumstances, possesses superhuman (or rather super-dog) abilities—stretching into nearly any shape or size, as well as possessing abnormal strength. In many cases Finn and Jake seek out, or are compelled to go on some sort of quest, which in the end serves as the narrative logic for many of the episodes.

Relative to the later seasons the first season is fairly "straightforward," establishing the internal logic of the *Adventure Time* story-world (e.g., the cast of characters, the quest motif) peppering episodes with fart jokes, double entendre, and discreetly veiled sexual innuendo. Later seasons experiment more with narrative and aesthetic forms—nonsensical psychedelic mind-trips, episodes that defy conventional storytelling logic, and the incorporation of bizarre carnivalesque tropes. In "Beyond the Grotto," for instance, Finn and Jake are in pursuit of a sea lard (something like a sea slug) and get pulled into a whirlpool—a veritable rabbit hole—and slip into a dimension where words begin to become undone from their meanings, and the composition is saturated with colors and psychedelic designs. Whether an episode slips into nonsensical psychedelia or ends in some counterintuitive manner many *Adventure Time* episodes stupefy.

Adventure Time is stupid for a number of different reasons—but chiefly because of its repeated retreat from conventional narrative conflicts and anticipated resolutions. In some cases, this might be the product of the videogame logic that is integrated into *Adventure Time* narratives. Think

too of the plot plausibility in animation, which is incredibly elastic. "Recall a standard *Tom and Jerry* cartoon," Slavoj Zizek reminds us, "Jerry is run over by a heavy truck, dynamite explodes in his mouth, he is cut to slices, yet in the next scene he's back again with no traces of the previous disasters. The stuff of comedy is precisely this repetitive, resourceful popping-up of life—no matter how dark the predicament, we can be sure the small fellow will find a way out."[12] This narrative elasticity is not unique to the animated form, it is also found in videogames where a player's avatar might be afforded multiple lives—dying and miraculously re-spawning—characters in *Adventure Time* likewise might well die, but then re-emerge no worse for wear in the next shot, scene, or episode. In addition, the videogame informed narratives mesh with the quest scenarios that frequently dictate the structure of *Adventure Time* episodes. Like the sudden demise of a videogame avatar, in a number of different instances, *Adventure Time* episodes come to an abrupt end as if in mid-…

WTF Narratives: "There Is More Joy in Dissonance Than in Consonance"[13]

Adventure Time is strange for many reasons, including the mystery behind what the actual target demographic actually is, which is a commonly trafficked discussion in the popular press and blogosphere. It originally aired in the early evening, largely targeting an elementary school to adolescent audience. But clearly it appeals to adults as well—whether it is stoners, hipsters, or the parents of the supposed "real" target demographic.[14] On a number of occasions, watching *Adventure Time* with my daughter (she was 4 years old when the series began), at the conclusion of an episode we might turn to each other in stunned amazement and in unison utter an exasperated, "What the …!?" This surprise usually stems from our shattered sense of narrative expectation: an episode might end "prematurely," Finn and/or Jake, or some other character, seemingly might be left for dead.

Although Cartoon Network schedules *Adventure Time* in a standard half-hour broadcast time-slot, many of the episodes are only 10 minutes in length (a number of episodes are only 3 minutes long—for instance, "All's Well That Rats Swell"). The length in itself is not necessarily an issue—assuredly economic conventional storytelling can be highly concentrated. The "limitation" of 10 minutes then is not what predicates the truncated quality of the narratives, rather these are *conscious* choices made by the

writers. Herein lies the stupidity, or at least one variety of it: the apparent narrative "failure"—the narrative dissonance—found in some episodes. An episode like "All's Well That Rats Swell" appears to meander without any purpose, the ostensible resolution finds BMO successfully chasing away a rat raiding the household's stash of flour. However, the short episode in effect follows BMO on its morning routine—a mundane litany of chores and habituated procedures. And in the face of such a routine the compendium of events the spectator might be inclined to think: What was that about? On other occasions an abrupt conclusion of a narrative that leaves a plot unresolved, or resolved in some unexpected or improbable fashion (e.g., the death of Finn and Jake) wields the potential to stupefy the spectator. Stupidity, then, in these cases is not only located at the site of production but also in its anticipated reception.

Anecdotally at least based on my (Kerner) 4-year-old daughter's response to the conclusion of some episodes, it is striking how deeply seated narrative expectations apparently are. As stated previously, whether musically trained or completely ignorant we seem to innately recognize that which is consonant and dissonant. No doubt what we are referring to as "innate" comprehension of music is based in the acquisition of specific cultural musical conventions, and therefore strictly speaking not innate. Nonetheless, *Adventure Time*, because on occasion it shatters narrative expectations, plays with what we might call "narrative dissonance."

Narrative dissonance might materialize in the untimely demise of a primary character(s), which appears to stand in opposition to the overarching narrative of the series as a whole. In "Web Weirdos," for example, Finn and Jake are performing parkour-type stunts in the forest. Jake announces that he has found a "vertical trampoline," but that it is all sticky—it turns out he is stuck in a spider's web. Jake asks Finn to cut him out, but that would be too simple and says, "No way I'll stunt you out." Of course, things do not go as Finn intends and the boy also gets stuck in the web. The male partner of the roosting pair of spiders cuts Finn and Jake (and a couple of flies) free after a bitter argument with his female companion. Finn and Jake escape as the pair argue, but Finn is compelled to return when the female spider is poised to cannibalize her male partner. Finn appears to be doomed when all of a sudden the female spider's egg-sack explodes showering everyone with thousands of tiny baby spiders. Finn and Jake are slowly subsumed in a mound of baby spiders wondering if the couple will resolve their differences now that they are parents, but Jake in a sedate inebriated voice observes: "Love like theirs will *always* find a way.

It'll crawl all up over you and drain your body fluids, poisoning you slowly until you pass out …" With this Finn breaks into hysterics, flapping his arms wildly and belting out a feral, "Whaaa!" But Jake seemingly resolved to his fate says calmly, "Circle of life Finn." And in a dying whisper repeats, "Circle of life." The shower of tiny baby spiders is nowhere near its end it seems, but this is precisely where the episode ends leaving Finn and Jake to be consumed in a sea of baby spiders with no apparent means of escape. Beyond this atomized episode, one is left befuddled in how this squares with the larger *Adventure Time* story-arc.

Similarly, the possibilities of "dying" and respawning are integral to videogaming, and this is worked into some of the *Adventure Time* plots. The episode, "Guardians of Sunshine," explicitly incorporates videogaming into its plot. The very first image is "Level 1" in green letters on a black matte: Finn and Jake are playing an early generation computer game on their game console/computer BMO. The game features monochromatic low-resolution graphics—simple angular green lines and a blocky avatar. After Finn loses the game in frustration he throws his joystick controller to the floor and complains that if he were combating the digital foes with his own hands he would assuredly win. BMO acknowledges that in fact it is possible for Finn and Jake to enter the internal digital landscape, but BMO insists that it is too dangerous. After BMO goes to sleep, Finn and Jake manage to smuggle themselves into BMO's internal digital world. Once inside Finn and Jake, while retaining their familiar color palette, appear as blocky pixilated 8-bit figures approximating their "real" bodies. The pair enter the cavern where the quest begins and coming upon the first challenge—leaping over a molten pit—they discover that the chasm is much wider than it appears in the videogame. Jake recalling how easy the first challenge is jumps, but falls into the pit of lava and screams, "Ah, I'm burning!" Finn screams after him, but with a flurry of digital beeps Jake re-spawns and chuckles. Finn is puzzled at Jake's miraculous reappearance, Jake points to the top of the frame where icons representing how many "lives" Jake has left. Finn comments, "You still have two left," and Jake laughs as he willfully flings himself over the edge again, and twirling in the molten mass screams, "Ow! It burns!" When Jake respawns again, Finn lectures Jake asking, "Dude, what if losing all your lives in here makes you die in real life?" At this possibility Jake sullenly slumps down. Finn "dies" twice too when the Bouncy Bee screws in one of its spikes square through Finn's prone torso—Finn watches himself

being gored to death by the bee and screams in agony. Finn dies again when he is consumed by a frog, and quickly expelled as a digital block turd.

At the end of the episode BMO lectures Finn and Jake about not listening to its admonishing words. Finn and Jake though, addicted to the thrill of quests (and videogames), insist that they now know what to expect and it should be easier. (This is precisely the logic of videogaming—once the idiosyncratic logic of a videogame is established, gameplay becomes easier.) Infuriated by their insolence, BMO begins to perform a combo move which presumably kills Finn and Jake (or perhaps returns them to its digital internal world) immediately followed with, "Game Over" on the screen written in that familiar green lettering on a black matte. Respawning appears to resolve narrative dissonance and the untimely demise of a character, however, as Finn posited, it remains an open question "if losing all your lives in here makes you die in real life?"

The nonsensical can also serve as another form of narrative dissonance—surrendering meaning to aesthetic experimentation. As previously mentioned, "Beyond the Grotto" quickly slips into psychedelic nonsense.[15] Finn and Jake are in the pursuit of a sea lard, which they have tossed into a pond imagining that it would be happiest in the freshwater environment, but in the end, have to chase after it upon discovering their twofold error: (1) the pond is freshwater, not saltwater, and (2) a sea lard is actually a mammal and in fact a land creature. Like Alice who follows the White Rabbit down the hole, Finn and Jake follow the sea lard through a series of underwater tunnels. (In fact, in one shot Finn's apparent alternate-dimension doppelganger is reimagined in the form of a white rabbit—emerging from a crevice at the base of a tree.) Immediately prior to be sucked into a whirlpool a water nymph admonishes, "Don't touch the purple stuff!" Of course, this is precisely what Finn and Jake end up doing.

When they reach the lowest strata, the illustration itself changes: the lines that outline Finn and Jake, as well as the environment all around them, vibrates, and become unstable. The entire color palette changes too—everything is washed out in a greenish blue tint when they first arrive. Finn yells out, "Lard! Lard!" multiple times in an effort to locate the sea lard, but he loses himself in the rhythm of the call and his utterance shifts from a beckoning into something musical, "La, la, la, la!" And in this shift temporarily forgets all about his objective, and Finn begins simply singing for the sake of singing, rather than attempting to call for the sea lard. Finn comments that, "Everything is like wonky here. It's familiar, but weird." As he says this a fox crosses their path opens its mouth allowing

a duck to march out, only a second later to consume the duck again in a single gulp. (The cyclical relation to consumption, expulsion, and a connection to the natural world has some bearing on the grotesque body in the carnivalesque imagination—discussed later.)

Finn and Jake do stumble upon the sea lard, but are distracted by a singing flower (clearly an avatar of Marceline, the Vampire Queen); captivated with the flower's tune Finn and Jake lose track of the sea lard once again. The full-force of psychedelia occurs when Finn and Jake encounter Princess Purple Patch (clearly an avatar of the Ice King)—the frame is suffused with purple, all color is drained from Finn and Jake's form, and the landscape in the background, while pretty minimal in detail and simplified, slips into an abstraction of color only with highly abstracted foliage dotting the backdrop. Jake introduces the pair, "Hi Purple, I'm Jinn and he's Fake." Jake mumbles to himself, "Hmm, that's not right," as Finn plops down on the ground and tosses tufts of purple (the purple stuff) up in the air. In the end, it is the sea lard that saves Finn and Jake, catapulting them back through the whirlpool wherein they entered the alternate purple dimension. While the quest ultimately resolves with the sea lard safe and sound, the journey itself, just like Alice in her adventures in Wonderland, is filled with lektons—signifiers without a signified: color, sounds, words—all divorced from their meanings. Utterances given over for the sake of rhythm (rather than expository purposes), color for the sake of color, joyfully absent of meaning—stupid.

Videogame Logic

In addition to bucking conventional narrative structure at times, *Adventure Time* also adapts the logic of videogames. In fact, videogaming is worked into the plot itself on a number of occasions. Finn and Jake regularly play videogames, and the audio design is peppered with sound elements that recall early home-console videogames. The top executive of Frederator Studios, Fred Seibert, where *Adventure Time* inaugurated, reflects on the evolution of storytelling in the wake of gaming. Seibert suggests that in "the post-*Hill Street Blues* era" television forged its own way forward, while the film industry clung to, as Seibert calls it, "novelistic storytelling." Television, Seibert notes, can accommodate "fifteen storylines simultaneously, without even thinking about it." Seibert suggests that gaming has made allowances for narratives that are not exclusively focused on a central character, their motivations, and how they negotiate the

internal diegetic conflict. "Traditional movie and television narrative would tell you, you have to have a main character, three subcharacters and a couple of ancillary characters, and that is all you can balance in an hour or ninety minutes." If nothing else, Seibert observes, videogaming, and games in general (e.g., Dungeons and Dragons), have expanded narrative possibilities. "Games, in the same way, have changed our ability to think through characters and stories. For example, in *Pokemon*, there are 150 characters just to start, and then it grows from there."[16] But it's not simply the quantity of characters that is at issue with videogame storytelling, but the basic form particularly its reliance on spatial storytelling, rather than linear narratives that correspond to the temporal axis (this is explored in greater detail in the discussions of *Gone Home*).

Beyond the audience's apparent openness, if not an expectation for videogame-inspired narratives, as Seibert suggests, the creators of *Adventure Time* have consciously applied videogaming to their storytelling. Seibert is amazed by Ward's efforts to adapt videogaming into cinematic storytelling, explaining that Ward for the last 20 years has attempted "to integrate video games into filmmaking, I think almost no one has done it successfully except him." Seibert adds, "Going through a great *Adventure Time* episode is like getting into a video game for the first time and not knowing the rules of the universe, and fumbling through until, at a certain point, you're playing the game without even [having realized] you've started."[17]

Ward himself is invigorated by videogame narrativization—and particularly its haptic potential that invites a "deeper" more "embodied" identification with videogame characters. Ward heaps praises upon Fullbright's videogame *Gone Home* (discussed later), which is something like a choose-your-own-adventure story, but experienced through a first-person perspective, unearthing discoveries as you make your way through the character's empty family-home. As you proceed through the home, you rummage through drawers, bookshelves and the like, finding notes, journals, and other things that help to unlock the story. Ward describes the experience of playing *Gone Home* as hair-raising, and while Ward insists that this haptic investment in characters or that embodied thrill of videogaming is only ever achieved through gameplay itself, nonetheless Ward clearly draws from videogaming not only to seed plots but to inform the structure of his narratives.

The videogame logic seamlessly meshes with the quest motif found in the series. In many episodes Finn and Jake have to pass through various

"levels" before advancing in a quest—for example, in "Wizard" Finn and Jake want to obtain wizard powers and have to go through a series of levels graphically illustrated onscreen (e.g., "Level 8"). Similarly, in "Ocean of Fear" Jake develops a multi-level plan to help Finn overcome his fear of the ocean. The quests in *Adventure Time*, just like videogames, demand that the characters do any combination of things: solving puzzles/riddles, locate secret keys or passages, and/or battle a series of foes.

Adapting the videogaming structure in *Adventure Time*, opens other opportunities for narrative dissonance, because videogaming story structure often relies on spatialized storytelling. While conventional storytelling draws on the expectation of cause and effect relations, in concert with character motivation, and conveyed in a linear fashion, videogames, on the other hand, are told as an avatar traverses the virtual landscape. Unlocking narrative elements is dependent upon an avatar traversing through space, through obstacles, unlocking elements, etcetera. Videogaming storytelling is almost entirely dependent on an avatar's movement—save perhaps cut-scenes, and even still to arrive at a cut-scene an avatar must navigate through some spatial field first. Without movement, it's entirely possible that the story-game (or game-story) will effectively pause. Many *Adventure Time* episodes are premised on videogame logic, where the traversal of spatial fields yields narrative elements. And the aggregated narrative elements amount to story—but the accretion of atomized story-elements, set in contrast with the conventions of the default linear, cause and effect trajectory, has the potential to come off as dissonant.

Gameplay is also found in the visual perspective as well. In "Hug Wolf" Finn is attacked by a hug wolf—imagine a werewolf that rather than eating or mauling its victim, accosts its victim with affectionate hugs. Finn is accosted by a she-wolf on the night of a full-moon, which transforms Finn into a hug wolf. At night Finn transforms into a hug wolf, and while in his monstrous form a number of shots are taken from his POV. The shots are reminiscent of both the wandering I-camera found in the slasher genre (somewhat fitting given that werewolves are a trope of the horror genre), but the shots also share affinities with the perspective associated with first person shooter games (FPS). Frequently with FPS games the means of delivering violence is featured at the bottom-fore of the frame, similarly in "Hug Wolf" Finn's outstretched arms (with his heart-shaped paws) are visible as he attempts to accost a victim. Adapting the videogame visual form, but replacing guns for hearts, countervails videogame conventions.

(There are affinities here with *Gone Home*, where some of the conventions of gameplay—namely, shooting, jumping, running—are notably absent.)

The quest motif is a staple of the series, and this dovetails with the videogame logic of some episodes. In "Too Young," for instance, Jake is playing a game on BMO, while at the same time Finn is away trying to win the affection of Princess Bubblegum. Jake is not progressing well in the videogame and begs BMO to tell him where the key to the castle is. In this we witness how the videogaming narrative meshes with the quest motif: Just as much as Jake attempts to locate a key to the castle, Finn is on a quest to "open Bubblegum's heart" so to speak.

In many episodes Finn and Jake seek out, stumble upon, or are commissioned/compelled to go on a quest. They might need to save a princess locked up in a dungeon, to prove their own valor (just for the sake of it), save a realm from some nefarious agent, or some such thing. And this motif extends to other characters as well: Marceline, for instance, conscripts Princess Bubblegum in an effort to retrieve her teddy bear, Hambo, stolen by Maja the Sky Witch ("Sky Witch"). While the quest motif has in effect a conventional narrative structure virtually inherent to it: the challenge of the quest serves as the narrative conflict, and whether that quest is successfully accomplished typically functions as the narrative resolution. And while this might seem to directly contradict the premise of the current chapter the individuated quests generally have no immediate correlation to the overarching *Adventure Time* narrative. The quests are divorced from the real biographical time of the characters (a subject of later discussion). As such the atomized quests stand alone as episodic units, as individuated story elements, as opposed to a clear linear progression.

Bakhtin's Literary Adventure Time

The title of the program, *Adventure Time*, whether by design or coincidence (I suspect the former), points to Mikhail Bakhtin's literary notion of the chronotope: literally meaning "time space."[18] Bakhtin notes that: "This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely)."[19] Bakhtin's mobilization of the term intends to account for the ways in which time-space is depicted in literature.

As part of the chronotope and the negotiation of spatial-temporal concerns in early literary narratives is what Bakhtin calls the "adventure time." This is a common motif, and Bakhtin identifies the Greek romance tradition as particularly emblematic: "There is a boy and a girl of marriageable age. Their lineage is unknown, mysterious … They are remarkable for their exceptional beauty. They are also exceptionally chaste. They meet each other unexpectedly, usually during some festive holiday. A sudden and instantaneous passion flares up between them that is as irresistible as fate, like an incurable disease. However, the marriage cannot take place straightway. They are confronted with obstacles that retard and delay their union."[20] The adventure time occurs in the interstitial moment between the initiation of passions and their long-delayed consummation at the resolution of the narrative. "The first meeting of hero and heroine and the sudden flare up of their passion for each other is the starting point for plot movement; the end point of plot movement is their successful union in marriage."[21] The contemporary equivalent of this is the formula for the romantic comedy: girl meets boy, girl loses boy, girl gets boy back. In this conventional formulaic model, the "loss of the boy" is where the adventure time takes place. All manner of mayhem and mishaps might befall the hero and heroine during this median act, but in the end, it makes no difference to the arc of the romantic narrative.[22]

The lovers in adventure time—Finn and Princess Bubblegum being the most obvious heteronormative pairing, though Flame Princess is also a love interest for Finn in later seasons—are obstructed from effectuating a union. All manner of mischief and mishaps impede any union. The lovers in adventure time typically do not have parents, or they are absent. Finn's parentage is mysterious for a good part of the series. Finn's father is a deadbeat, and in fact when Finn actually finds his father, he is a scoundrel through and through and rejects the boy. Finn's mother is absent for almost the entirety of the series, allowing the suggestion of immaculate conception to simmer in the background.[23] (In season 8 the episode, "Islands Part 7: Helpers," Finn does actually locate his mother, Minerva Campbell. Minerva, however, has long since died, but before dying she uploaded her consciousness to the Internet, and "lives" on in the ether, and an army of automatons that are modeled after her likeness, and that she controls.) Finn, as with most lovers in adventure time, is an object of desire for a number of characters—on the rare occasions when Finn removes his iconic white hat he reveals long flaxen hair over which Oooians gawk and swoon. The objective of adventure time, the moment that the

adventure time resolves and comes to a close is the pairing of the long-dashed lovers. Finn the ostensible hero of *Adventure Time* is too immature to be considering marriage; though in at least one episode, "Puhoy," in a parallel dimension he witnesses himself as an elderly man (who dies!), with a wife and children, and in other episodes begins to develop romantic relationships with other characters. (Jake has a girlfriend and has offspring.) Marriageability aside, many of the other tropes resonate with *Adventure Time*—among a host of other tropes not listed here.

The adventure time as such is stupid. It makes no difference what the adventures are, they have little or no bearing as such on the overarching narrative, the adventures are interchangeable. "This time—adventure-time, highly intensified but undifferentiated—is not registered in the slightest way in the age of the heroes. We have here an extratemporal hiatus between two biological moments—the arousal of passion, and its satisfaction"[24] And yet this is what *Adventure Time* focuses on, which the title spells out quite literally; it is in the least concerned with the "real" narrative, as if disregarding the "arousal of passions, and its satisfaction," and instead focuses on everything in-between, all the things which are in a sense "meaningless"—in other words, stupid.

Adventure time in the Greek romance is torn from the moorings of human time.[25] The adventures that happen between the arousal of passions and consummation seem to occur outside normal biological time. With adventure time "nothing changes: the world remains as it was, the biographical life of the heroes does not change, their feelings do not change, people do not even age. This empty time leaves no traces anywhere, no indications of its passing."[26] The internal logic of adventure time is amorphous—divorced from the conventions of linearity, continuity, and cause and effect determination. Untethered from the bounds of linearity and driving to a specific conclusion, adventure time by its very nature is episodic: "It is composed of a series of short segments that correspond to separate adventures; within each such adventure, time is organized from without, technically. What is important is to be able to escape, to catch up, to outstrip, to be or not to be in a given place at a given moment, to meet or not to meet and so forth."[27] Whether an adventure sequence is measured in days or hours it makes no difference, an adventure might come to an abrupt end, or take a sudden turn. The logic of adventure time invites chance, randomness, good fortune, some abrupt interruption that (at the last moment) allows our characters to live and fight another day—and most significantly, to go on yet another adventure.

As we have already indicated though, some quests, or *Adventure Time* narratives end quite abruptly without any, or perhaps a negative resolution to the individuated adventure. Nonetheless, the individual adventures (no matter how they end) in most instances stand on their own as isolated vignettes largely disconnected from the overarching framing narrative.

Adventure Time, the cartoon, like the literary conception of adventure time is presented as a series of episodic sequences that "are strung together in an extratemporal and in effect infinite series: this series can be extended as long as one likes; in itself it has no necessary internal limits." Bakhtin continues, "For all the days, hours, minutes that are ticked off within the separate adventures are not united into a real-time series, they do not become the days and hours of a human life. These hours and days leave no trace, and therefore, one may have as many of them as one likes."[28] In *Adventure Time* the atomized quests typically stand alone as individuated events, but occasionally we find glimmers of the overarching narrative, which begins prior to the Mushroom War and ends with some yet unknown but presumably stable future. The literary concept of adventure time suspends the rules of the "normal" world, where so-called normal life is interrupted: "These points provide an opening for the intrusion of nonhuman forces-fate, gods, villains—and it is precisely these forces, and not the heroes, who in adventure-time take all the initiative. Of course, the heroes themselves act in adventure-time—they escape, defend themselves, engage in battle, save themselves—but they act, as it were, as merely physical persons, and the initiative does not belong to them."[29] Everything in the Land of Ooo is out of the ordinary, but throughout the series there is a suggestion that there is (or at least was) a moment when things were "normal," or perhaps that "normalcy" exists in a parallel dimension. The Land of Ooo is built upon the detritus of our civilization—but "civilization" as we know it is never restored as such at the end of the series. Melancholy is built into *Adventure Time*, nothing can ever stay the same, life and the world is always already in a state of becoming. There is nothing to "restore," because there is nothing to "go back to." In fact, while there is an ostensible "happy ending" to *Adventure Time*, there is simultaneously that terribly sublime feeling that change is inevitable, that nothing is permanent—sharing certain affinities with the ephemerality found in Ozu, but far more potent in its subliminity.

The conclusion of season 2 is interesting in how it plays with the romantic narrative and adventure time. In "Mortal Recoil" Princess Bubblegum is inhabited by the spirit of the Lich—an evil entity hellbent on killing all

life. Taking on a monstrous form, and gigantic proportions the possessed Princess Bubblegum goes on a rampage. Finn enrolls the Ice King in the battle; the crackpot old wizard encases the monstrous Bubblegum in ice and halts the assault. But the monstrous statuesque figure, to no one's fault, topples over and shatters into multiple pieces—torso, limbs all strewn about. The medical staff try to reassemble Bubblegum. At the conclusion of the episode she re-emerges—although there was not enough gum to restore her to her original age, and she re-emerges as a 13-year-old girl, the same age as Finn. Both characters are surrounded by the spangling of stars—completely smitten with each other. The story arc of season two at least, seems to come to a close (or is it an opening?) in precisely the way that Bakhtin describes: biological age makes no difference, and the median events make no difference, what matters is that the couple (re) unite in the end.

This is all undone, however, in the following season with, "Too Young." Princess Bubblegum is still 13 and Finn is winning her affections. When the Earl of Lemongrab comes to rule the Candy Kingdom until the Princess once again reaches the age of 18, his authoritarian and utterly unnuanced conception of governance force Bubblegum to rejuvenate as her "real" adult age. The candy people donate parts of their bodies to increase her biomass, and so lumped together she needs one more thing, the Princess says: "Only the heat from a whopping love-hug will catalyze the re-agefying process." Before the pair hug, the Princess laments that she wishes that she could stay 13 and remain with Finn, but her kingdom needs her. The pair hug, and kiss which is enveloped into a scalding white-hot light, and the Princess is once again 18. The Princess casts Finn aside after she transforms—the dissonance of biological ages reintroduced into the narrative, as is adventure time.

In adventure time the temporal is uninhibited by the laws of our world where time marches unrelentingly in a unidirectional fashion and in consistent increments. These laws in *Adventure Time* come loose allowing for a certain fluidity—time is reversible, thousands of years might be no more than a second by our conventional notion of time, or vice versa. Marceline the Vampire Queen, for instance, apparently used to reign over the Land of Ooo, and is 1000 years old. And yet Finn is only about 13 and was probably born shortly before or after the Mushroom War. The biographical time of these characters does not appear to line-up, but this is of little consequence in *Adventure Time*, or adventure time.

Adventure time, the literary conception that is, the spatial is also fungible. And as Beaton Roderick observes that in actual fact Bakhtin probably used the term "adventure time" as a shorthand, because the concept is best understood as "'adventure-time-space,' since the theory of the chronotope binds time and space into a continuum. What happens in this time-space Bakhtin contrasts with what he terms 'biographical moments.'"[30] With *Adventure Time* space indeed is interchangeable, but also the very concept of space itself is flexible. While it does not matter if an adventure takes place in the Candy Kingdom, or the Nightosphere hardly makes for any difference. But in addition to this in certain instances Finn and Jake enter environments that are governed by very different spatial logics: the flat blocky pixilated world of the BMO videogame (discussed earlier), or with encounters with Prismo, a god-like figure that grants wishes and inhabits a yellow cube (the Time Room) in a liminal nonplace, in some other dimension. (Prismo is an apparition of an old man's dream.) Prismo has no three-dimensional shape as such, he is nothing more than a mere two-dimensional silhouette. Not only are locales interchangeable so are dimensions. And in perhaps one of the most interesting plays with time and space is the episode "Sad Face," where Jake's tail stretches out in a snake-like form, and regularly goes out to lead a separate life as a circus clown. At the conclusion of the episode, when Jake's tail retreats it is not entirely clear if it recoils according to spatial logic (as would be logical), but rather retracts according to the chronology of previous events.

Neither Fish nor Fowl: Videogaming and Environmental Storytelling

> Not surprisingly, most embedded narratives, at present, take the form of detective or conspiracy stories, since these genres help to motivate the player's active examination of clues and exploration of spaces and provide a rationale for our efforts to reconstruct the narrative of past events. Yet … melodrama provides another—as yet largely unexplored—model for how an embedded story might work, as we read letters and diaries, snoop around in bedroom drawers and closets, in search of secrets that might shed light on the relationship between characters.[31] (Henry Jenkins)

This passage seems prophetic—written more than a decade prior to the release of *Gone Home*. In terms of game mechanics and melodramatic

storytelling *Gone Home* is exemplary of Jenkins's prescient vision. The game though in its emphasis on storytelling places it in a liminal space. The very fact that *Gone Home* has been reviewed in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* already says something of the status of the *Gone Home* narrative: It suggests that the videogame has some literary merit.[32] Ian Bogost, in his review of *Gone Home*, questions the paradigm on which we might assess the videogame. Bogost suggests that it is unfair to weigh *Gone Home* "against time-tested works of narrative accomplishment. But if not, then by what measure shall we judge it? *Gone Home* gets the praise one would associate with Alfonso Cuarón-does-*7th Guest* or Sarah Waters-does-*Myst*, when in reality it's more like John Hughes-does-*7th Guest* or Judy Blume-does-*Myst*. It's a literary work on the level of young adult fiction."[33] Rather than disparage Bogost insists that, "Hughes's movies and Blume's books have a place in the world, and that place is not necessarily better or worse than Jim Jarmusch films or Roberto Bolaño novels. But it is *different*, and that difference makes a difference."[34]

Indeed, the difference is critical, not only in terms of the associated cinematic/literary genre that we might justly compare *Gone Home* to (or any other videogame for that matter), but also acknowledging the unique characteristics of the videogame format. It is important to recognize that simply mapping (cinematic, or literary) narrative theories over the videogame platform does it a disservice. Videogames deserve to be viewed on their own terms, and the experience of playing a videogame is (while not wholly alien) different from reading a book or watching a film. The videogame platform also affords medium-specific narrative potential that a content oriented narrative analysis cannot account for. Cinema scholars cringe when literary analysis is applied to cinema without any regard for the specificity of cinematic storytelling, why would we not expect ludologists to bemoan the increasing trespasses on their discipline with the rapid and seductive expansion of media convergence?[35] And this is a well-worn concern, debated at least more than a decade prior to the release of *Gone Home*.[36] Henry Jenkins insists that spatiality is critical to our understanding of videogames, and thus an analytic approach to videogame necessitates that we think about it in spatial terms—noting that game designers are less storytellers and more aptly "narrative architects."[37]

In the cinema, the mise-en-scene might carry a tremendous narrative responsibility, and Walt Disney Imagineers understand this too. When designing an attraction Don Carson, who has worked as a videogame designer and a Disney Senior Show Designer, insists that the physical

environment must be infused with story elements, and it is the environment that shoulders much of the storytelling responsibility.[38] The lessons of a theme park attraction designer apply to cinema and videogames as well. Much of the storytelling though relies on player/viewers own cultural awareness. "Armed only with their own knowledge of the world, and those visions collected from movies and books," Carson observes, "the audience is ripe to be dropped into your adventure. The trick is to play on those memories and expectations to heighten the thrill of venturing into your created universe."[39] (With spatialized storytelling and Walt Disney Imagineers we are, once again, returned to the fairgrounds and the cinema of attractions.) And herein lies another possible emergence of stupidity in *Gone Home*: players prior to or following Gen-X might find it difficult to connect with the 1990s-nostalgia woven into the mise-en-scene.[40] An anonymous review of *Gone Home* laments that players will "experience a lot of 90's references,"[41] surely this is not a point of endearment. The early 90s decor, technology, and cultural iconography to players of a certain age draws on our "memories and expectations," where to younger generations (in particular, but perhaps to older generations as well) the artifacts of the 90s fails to resonate (read: find a category, or contextualize the referent), and thus might simply seem stupid.

While much of the significant and critical expository narrative is delivered through Sam's diary entries (read aloud by Sam in voiceover), it is the environmental storytelling that cradles those expository moments. And environmental storytelling is a product of spatial relations instead of the cinematic/literary causal relations, which are generally mapped onto the temporal axis (e.g., this happened, and then this, which led to this conclusion). Katie is the narrative device that gives us entry into the Greenbriar narrative—and we/she unlock the narrative through her spatial explorations. The spatial nature of *Gone Home* is more in keeping with quest-orientated literature than horror infused romantic fiction (which in terms of narrative content, and, at first glance, might seem more fitting). And this quest-orientated narrative aligns with the storytelling structure of *Adventure Time* (discussed previously). Many videogames, Jenkins observes, "fit within a much older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken the form of hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives. The best works of J. R. R. Tolkien, Jules Verne, Homer, L. Frank Baum, or Jack London fall loosely within this tradition, as does, for example, the sequence in *War and Peace* that describes Pierre's aimless wanderings across the battlefield at Borodino. Often, such works exist on the outer

borders of literature."[42] In many cases these literary works are genre outliers, and more concerned with constructing fabulous or spectacular landscapes/storyworlds perhaps "at the expense of character psychology or plot development."[43] A point that is likely to earn a (spatialized) narrative the moniker: stupid!

The videogame platform does not necessarily lend itself to linear cinematic/literary storytelling, rather because of the spatial element inherent to the videogame platform stories tend to be more episodic, or fragmentary. Each space, each room, each turn might unlock one more piece of a larger narrative-whole. Carson, again, notes that designing an attraction or videogame concentrates less on constructing a linear narrative, and more on developing the "big picture," a story-world with a set of rules, and wherein individuated story elements convey a story more through an accretion of constituent parts than through conventional linear cause and effect and relations. Causal relations very well might have a place in videogames, but generally contained within isolated vignettes. For instance, we discover a locker in Sam's room, which is locked in *Gone Home*. Why is it locked? What is she hiding? Inside the locker we find a photograph of Lonnie with bright freshly dyed hair, which is accompanied by one of Sam's voiceover diary entries that recounts an intimate encounter between Sam and Lonnie. This corresponds to another discovery in the house: a bathtub splattered with red. At first glance, we expect foul-play, but then discover the bottle of Wild Color hair dye (clearly the label is modeled after Manic Panic hair dye). We also see clothing in her locker with security tags still affixed, suggesting that Sam has engaged with some petty shoplifting (another suggestion that she is testing the bounds of authority). All these individuated details—hair dye in the bathroom, Lonnie's bright red hair, locked locker, diary entry, evidence of shoplifting—speak to Sam's relationship with Lonnie, and how her experimentation and exploration also brushes up against (petty) delinquency. (It must be stated that there is perhaps a problematic equation that is established here though: Where illicit behavior is made synonymous with queer sexuality.)

The episodic structure of videogame narratives flies in the face of conventional cinematic storytelling that relies on a specific sequence of events to make the narrative as a whole comprehendible. The spatial construction of videogames function on a different order, where one story fragment might be compelling in its own right independent of the overarching narrative. Moreover, the spatial design of videogames allows for players to assemble them as they please, or simply by happenstance electing, for

instance, to investigate the ground level floor of the Greenbriar home, rather than electing to go straight upstairs. Consider, for instance, whether one discovers the bathroom stained with hair dye first, or open Sam's locker and find Lonnie's picture first? It probably makes no (narrative) difference really. Along these very lines Jenkins observes that "often the episodes [in videogames] could be reordered without significantly impacting our experience as a whole." And this is entirely true of *Gone Home*. Clearly the creators of *Gone Home* intend players to discover certain elements prior to others (controlling a player's access to parts of the house by hiding keys and combinations to locks). "The organization of the [videogame] plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution."[44] Nonetheless, even certain parts of the house might go completely unsurveyed, without any loss to the "big picture" narrative (I for one never unlocked Katie's father's filing cabinet, but that did not seem to matter). Whether certain story elements are skipped, overlooked, randomly assembled this potentially has little consequence for the story as a whole—which might sound like sacrilege to narratologists of most stripes. Literary and cinematic analytic paradigms are in themselves geared toward the analysis of conventional narratives and are not particularly well-equipped to negotiate other modes of storytelling. "Spatial stories are not badly constructed," Jenkins argues, "rather, they are stories that respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development."[45] Nonetheless, critics approaching *Gone Home* from a more cinematic/literary paradigm tended to praise it, most of the negative criticism has come from (some facets of) the gamer community.

While constituents of the gamer community deride the narrative-heavy elements of *Gone Home*, the videogame platform opens the potential for environmental storytelling. Inhabiting the narrator's body, manipulating Katie so that we/she can unlock the secrets of the Greenbriar home. As novelistic as *Gone Home* might be, the videogame platform necessitates an embodied investment and physical engagement as the player, and thus, unlike a novel, calls upon the body of the player in addition to their cognitive faculties. Pendleton Ward, the creator of *Adventure Time*, was enthralled by *Gone Home*, explaining: "it was wild to feel so intimately connected with the character in that game. Movies and books transport you to a place where you're along for the ride, games make you drive the thing forward. That's especially true in scary

games, because instead of shouting, 'Don't go in that room!' … you're the one taking the steps forward towards that room. It's huge."[46] And this intimacy with the player's body might qualify *Gone Home* as stupid—conventional game play relies in a real sense on being "absent minded," more experiential than cerebral. Clearly, though, as much as *Gone Home* is experiential, and relies on the physical maneuvering of Katie, it engages cognitive faculties as well. Katie as our avatar works through the narrative in spatial terms. "Spatial stories are held together by broadly defined goals and conflicts and pushed forward by the character's movement across the map."[47] The resolution of the *Gone Home* narrative rests on Katie's/our ability to assemble story elements together discovered throughout the house, and even if the player manages to get to the end of the game, some of the enigmas might remain. The reliance on spatialized storytelling, especially when attempting to compare it to the *supposed* default linear narrative paradigm, might strike some as dissonant—stupid.

Conclusion: It's the Paradigm Stupid!

When assembling Ikea furniture, it is essential that you have an Allen wrench. If, however, you attempt to assemble the EKEDALEN/HENRIKSDAL dining set with standard tools, it is likely to leave you exasperated. Even if by some minor miracle you managed to assemble the dining set with standard tools, you will likely discover that it's wonky, or unstable. Without the Allen wrench, one is likely to declare (along with some choice expletives), "That's stupid!" Obviously, we are not here to discuss the joys of assembling Ikea furniture, but rather to illustrate the importance of bringing the right tools to the occasion.

Narrative dissonance, spatialized storytelling, and other narrative forms that do not conform to conventional storytelling modes wield the potential to stupefy and, in turn, to elicit awe, bemusement, surprise, or ire. The experience of stupefaction—what Foucault refers to as "black stupidity," because the object is obtuse, or absent of a category—might very well invite a reflexive dismissal on the part of the critic or consumer. Indeed, depending on the content and the cultural proclivities of the individual consumer, that dismissal might be relatively benign ("oh geez, that was strange"), or much more critical ("that doesn't even merit my attention"). What we are arguing is that this experience of stupefaction demands greater consideration, not because it is "secretly better" than conventional storytelling modes, but because the very form and bounds of storytelling

are at stake. Stupefaction is also potentially symptomatic of narrative dissonance, and it is incumbent upon us as cultural and media scholars/critics to be patient and contemplative, not only with the content but also with the form.

The quest motif, inspired at least in part by the logic of videogaming, is well-suited to the logic of *Adventure Time*. Many of the show's episodes can be viewed as individuated quests which, while potentially having some marginal relation to the overarching narrative of the series, by and large are contained events. Additionally, given the predilection for videogame-inspired narratives, the respawning of a character (which allows for a character to "die"), can be accommodated by the show's (stupid) structural affordances, whereas by most narrative standards the death of a protagonist or major character would likely spell the end of a story. Capitalizing on the potential for respawning also affords writers of the series to introduce narrative dissonance: disrupting the viewer's expectations of narrative. Even without the death of a character, the storytelling rhythm of an *Adventure Time* episode might simply be "off"—utilizing narrative dissonance to celebrate the stupidity of a story that appears to go nowhere, to exploit meaninglessness, to meander without apparent purpose.

Adventure Time is not on the same order as Schoenberg, obviously, nonetheless the abrupt endings, the non sequiturs, the baffling psychedelic mind-trips that lead nowhere, these still *rigorously* disrupt narrative expectations. Narrative dissonance wields the potential to unlock creative storytelling strategies, and (at least theoretically) to afford the viewer greater agency in their discernment of the narrative.[48] *Adventure Time* is not necessarily unique, it is however exemplary in its enthusiastic and creative embrace of the stupid. Other programs, notably other animated television series—such as *Family Guy*, and *The Cleveland Show*—incorporate radical non sequiturs into their narratives. These are perhaps more narrative idiosyncrasies than the stupid, though. Viewers familiar with the *Family Guy* narrative recognize when a non sequitur is coming; leading into these narrative eruptions a character will likely say something like, "It's like that time when …" And as part of the idiosyncratic narrative syntax, it stops being stupid—it is no longer an innovation, it does not surprise, nor does it disrupt the narrative rhythm, it is integral to the program's rhythm—it is an expected feature of these narratives. Similarly, for years the running gag on *South Park* was how was Kenny going to die in this episode?

The HBO series *Game of Thrones* offers another instance where narratives are disrupted. The first seasons of this series were notable for killing off significant characters, *Game of Thrones* sometimes quite quickly and perhaps unceremoniously, dispatches characters that we might even like, or have come to identify with. *South Park* brilliantly satirizes this in a three-episode trilogy: "Black Friday," "A Song of Ass and Fire," and "Titties and Dragons."[49] Randy, taking up a part-time job as a mall security guard, mourns over a dying mall cop, "No, you can't die. Everybody really likes you."[50] But *Game of Thrones* routinely upsets our narrative expectations. In our narrative conditioning, we have come to assume that certain characters—by virtue of being central to the narrative—will not be killed. In *Game of Thrones*, however, we discover that almost no character is safe, no character is completely indispensable. But as the *South Park* parody suggests, this too has become an essential part of the series' idiosyncratic narrative syntax. Following *Game of Thrones*, we are contingently conditioned, and if for a moment surprised (or saddened, or perhaps relieved—"bad guys" get it too) by the loss of a character, at the same time, the narrative contract that *Game of Thrones* issues demands that we accept their demise.

After a certain point, oft repeated innovations cease being novel. Rather they slip into their adjacent status as exploitable narrative motifs. Once they are, thus, established, once they are loaded in the quiver of narrative devices, they stop being stupid. Recall, for instance, the use of handheld camera in *Hill Street Blues* (1981–1987). It was by no means the first show to use the technique but, in the visual-vocabulary of primetime television drama, the choice was initially fairly surprising, perhaps even annoying to some viewers, or even stupid. Since *Hill Street Blues* though, the use of handheld camera has become a mainstay of police procedurals, thrillers, and medical dramas. It is no longer a surprise, it is perhaps still annoying—the style was over-done on early seasons of *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005), for example—but it is now a customary part of dramatic television syntax. The creative dissonance in *Adventure Time,* on the other hand is so varied, so quirky, so unpredictable that it resists the drive toward codification. It resists the urge to distill story-elements into a recognizable motif—and refuses to let go of the stupid. The stupid then is often located at the edges of a category; it marks the liminal point or points where a paradigmatic shift is occurring. Correspondingly, analytic paradigms might well need to shift as well to accommodate such evolutions in narrative—whether those evolutionary branches are spurred by changes in technology, changing

tastes, or creative innovations. As a relatively new storytelling mode, videogames have contended with how to tell stories (or whether they should tell stories at all). This is the subject of Chap. 5.

Notes

1. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. and eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 110.
2. "Dissonant," s. v., *OED*.
3. Suzanne Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," *Narrative* vol. 14, no. 3 (2006), 224.
4. Daniel C. Melnick, *Fullness of Dissonance: Modern Fiction and the Aesthetic of Music* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), 74.
5. Ibid., 55–56.
6. Adorno, 46.
7. Ibid., 40.
8. Ibid., 110.
9. "Although art revolts against its neutralization as an object of contemplation, insisting on the most extreme incoherence and dissonance, these elements are those of unity; without this unity they would not even be dissonant." Ibid., 157.
10. Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 189.
11. In later seasons, other human beings are discovered.
12. Slavoj Zizek, "Camp Comedy," *Sight and Sound* vol. 10, no. 4 (April, 2000), 29.
13. Adorno, 40.
14. Neda Ulaby, "An *Adventure* for Kids And Maybe For Their Parents, Too," *Morning Edition*, NPR, June 17, 2013, accessed November 10, 2018, http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2013/06/17/192385255/an-adventure-for-kids-and-maybe-for-their-parents-too.
15. The episode "King Worm" might be equally bizarre, with multi-level dreamscapes.
16. Maria Bustillos, "It's Adventure Time," *The Awl*, April 15, 2014, accessed November 10, 2018, http://theholenearthecenteroftheworld.com/.
17. Ibid.
18. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Michael Holquist ed., and trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.
19. Ibid. The bracketed text is in the original.

20. Ibid., 87.
21. Ibid., 89.
22. Some might argue here that the median act where the character (or characters) is challenged, perhaps even tempted by another's affection "changes" the character, and thus leads to the negotiated resolution, Bakhtin has this to say: "What is important here is not only the organization of separate adventures. The novel as a whole is conceived precisely as a test of the heroes. Greek adventure-time, as we already know, leaves no traces-neither in the world nor in human beings. No changes of any consequence occur, internal or external, as a result of the events recounted in the novel. At the end of the novel that initial equilibrium that had been destroyed by chance is restored once again. Everything returns to its source, everything returns to its own place. The result of this whole lengthy novel is that—the hero marries his sweetheart. And yet people and things have gone through something, something that did not, indeed, change them but that did (in a manner of speaking) affirm what they, and precisely they, were as individuals, something that did verify and establish their identity, their durability and continuity. The hammer of events shatters nothing and forges nothing—it merely tries the durability of an already finished product. And the product passes the test. Thus, is constituted the artistic and ideological meaning of the Greek romance" (Bakhtin, 106–107). Although Bakhtin is speaking here of ancient Greek romance narratives, the same might be said of contemporary romantic comedies.
23. Bakhtin, 88.
24. Ibid., 89.
25. There appears to be a clear nod to this Greek heritage in the 8-part *Island* series, where Finn, Jake, Susan Strong, and BMO go on an adventure across the seas, wherein Finn actually finds his mother, and all the other humans that survived the Mushroom War. There are sea monsters, Siren-like-hallucinations, and other echoes of the *Odyssey*.
26. Bakhtin, 91.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 94.
29. Ibid., 95.
30. Beaton Roderick, "Historical Poetics: Chronotopes in *Leucippe and Clitophon* and *Tom Jones*," in Bart Keunen et al. eds. *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives* (Gent, Belgium: Academia Press, 2010), 63.
31. This passage seems prophetic—written more than a decade prior to the release of *Gone Home*. Henry Jenkin, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and*

Game, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 128.

32. Discussed in another chapter, *Bioshock* has also been reviewed in the *London Review of Books*, Felan Parker, similarly notes that it is not common for a videogame to be reviewed in the company of literature, "which speaks to *Bioshock*'s prestige status." Drawing from John Lanchester's review of *Bioshock*, Parker summarizes, "the game presents a timely critique of Randian objectivism, free-market capitalism, and individualism in an era when these ideologies are not often subject to scrutiny." Felan Parker, "Canonizing *Bioshock*: Cultural Value and the Prestige Game," *Games and Culture* vol. 12, nos. 7–8 (2015), 748. See John Lanchester, "Is It Art?" *London Review of Books* vol. 31, no. 1 (January 2009): 18–20. https://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n01/john-lanchester/is-it-art.
33. Ian Bogost, "Perpetual Adolescence: The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home*," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (September 28, 2013): https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/perpetual-adolescence-the-fullbright-companys-gone-home/.
34. Ian Bogost, "Perpetual Adolescence: The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 28, 2013, accessed November 10, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/perpetual-adolescence-the-fullbright-companys-gone-home/.
35. Graeme Kirkpatrick makes a similar observation, regarding the fears that the field of ludology might be colonized by other narrative-centered disciplines: "The inauguration of game studies involved violence too. In the first years of video game studies ludologists waged a polemic war against 'narratologists.' The latter became a kind of catch-all term for anyone who wanted to study video games but who did not start from the centrality of play and gameness. Thinkers for whom video games represented a new way to tell stories, for example, were viewed as 'colonising' the new disciplinary field, notwithstanding Aarseth's own background in literary studies. Video game studies was forged in the heat of a struggle between these two approaches." Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), 52–53.
36. Janet Murray is often cited as initiating this discussion in her *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997). Henry Jenkins also raises the topic in his discussion of the ludologists versus the narratologists in his "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," found in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 118–130. Chapter four, "Defining Narrative," of Michael Nitsche's book *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), surveys this very topic.

37. Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 121.
38. Don Carson, "Environmental Storytelling: Creating Immersive 3D Worlds Using Lessons Learned from the Theme Park Industry," *Gamasutra*, March 1, 2000, accessed November 10, 2018. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131594/environmental_storytelling_.php.
39. Ibid.
40. For a concentrated discussion of nostalgia in videogames including *Gone Home* see: Robin J. S. Sloan, "Videogames as Remediated Memories: Commodified Nostalgia and Hyperreality in *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* and *Gone Home*," *Games and Culture* vol. 10, no. 6 (November 2014): 1–27.
41. Anonymous, "Gone Home: THIS IS NOT A GAME," no post date, accessed August 8, 2016. https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Gone_Home.
42. Jenkins, 122.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 124–125.
45. Ibid., 124.
46. Bustillos.
47. Jenkins, 124.
48. Melnick, 9.
49. "Black Friday," (episode 7), "A Song of Ass and Fire," (episode 8) and "Titties and Dragons" (episode 9) aired during season 17 (2013).
50. "Black Friday," Trey Parker, *South Park*, Comedy Central, season 17, episode 7 (November 13, 2013).

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CHAPTER 5

The Stupid as Ludonarrative Dissonance

Introduction: Ludonarrative Dissonance and the Stupid

Clint Hocking coined the term "ludonarrative dissonance" in his critique of the videogame *Bioshock*, developed by 2K and initially released in 2007 (followed by successive sequels). He argued that, in the experience of playing *Bioshock*, the game's two competing architectures, the narrative (storytelling) and ludic (gameplay), come into direct and dissonant conflict around a player's allowances. *Bioshock* at its core is a first-person shooter game set in 1960 in an underwater urban center called Rapture. The narrative is fairly complex, but our avatar and protagonist, Jack, survives a plane crash and finds his way to Rapture, an underwater city designed by the business tycoon Andrew Ryan as a utopian experiment. With the initial help of the enigmatic character Atlas, Jack discovers that the planned utopia has been undermined by Ryan's rival (the gangster Frank Fontaine) after the discovery of ADAM, a genetic substance that can alter a user's DNA to grant them superpowers. Fontaine and his scientist accomplices have mass produced ADAM by implanting it into orphan girls, the "Little Sisters" of the story. The story has two possible outcomes depending how the player interacts with the Little Sisters. If they are spared, Jack will bring them to the surface and even adopt some of them. This version of the ending then plays out scenes of their happy lives on the surface. If all, or at least more than one Little Sister is killed or "harvested" for their ADAM, however, the narrative morally upbraids Jack at the end as he

A. Kerner, J. Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28176-2_5

turns on the innocents and (presumably) destroys them, the level of vitriol dependent on how many Little Sisters have been harvested. The philosophical underpinning of Rapture is premised on Ayn Rand's conception of Objectivism, which dovetails (if not fully aligns) with Libertarian values. A premium is placed on subjective autonomy, and champions self-reliance and unabashed (financial) advancement, while rejecting social welfare—in short, Rand advocated for a radical form of social Darwinism. Needless to say, the underwater social experiment does not go exactly to plan, and the stage is set for an adventure in a dystopian landscape.

Hocking actually goes out of his way to differentiate his "game criticism" from a "game review" proper. While the latter is generally targeted to gamers and whether they should purchase a game (often focusing on gameplay mechanics and visual appeal), Hocking positions his own post, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in *Bioshock*," as game criticism, which is addressed to "game developers and professionals who want to think about the nature of games and what they mean."[1] And were he to be writing a game review of *Bioshock*, Hocking would lavish the game with praise. However, approached from the paradigm of game criticism, Hocking is interested in the tension between the imperatives of the rules of the game, and the underlying (moral) implications for the narrative.

Furthermore *Bioshock*, within conventional gameplay rules, offers the player a degree of autonomy. At the narrative climax of the game, however, autonomy is revealed to be a ruse. The phrase, "would you kindly," which prefaces Atlas's directions, is revealed to be an implanted autosuggestion command, where Jack unconsciously submits to Atlas's directives. When Jack confronts Rapture's "Randian patriarch, Andrew Ryan," with the intent of murdering him, and to "rescue Atlas" gameplay is unveiled, as a series of preordained narrative choices, previously plotted by the designer.[2] Ryan mocks Jack (or us, the player), "An assassin has overcome my final defences. And now he's come to murder me. In the end, what separates a man, from a slave? Money? Power? No, a man chooses, a slave obeys." Wresting control from the player, the actual murder of Ryan is rendered in a cutscene—Ryan hands over his own golf putter and commands Jack to execute his orders, and Jack obediently bludgeons him to death. Hocking complains that, "The game openly mocks us for having willingly suspended our disbelief in order to enjoy it."[3] This pulling back of the curtain, to reveal the wizard/designer, discloses the illusion of relative autonomy in the game, and this is where the ludonarrative tension lies.

The ludic contract—and this is probably true of nearly all games—is that as a player you need to acquire powers, defeat foes, overcome obstacles, solve puzzles in order to advance and ultimately to win. "The rules of the game say, 'it is best if I do what is best for me without consideration for others.'" Hocking adds, "However, it must be pointed out that *Bioshock* goes the extra mile and ties this game's mechanical contract back to the narrative in spectacular fashion through the use of the Little Sisters. By 'dressing up' the mechanics of this contract in well realized content I literally experience what it means to gain by doing what is best for me (I get more ADAM) without consideration for others (by harvesting Little Sisters)."[4] What *Bioshock* establishes is a sadean logic, and sadean in the truest sense of the term. Sadism is often confused as simply the pleasure derived from the suffering of others. This is the colloquial understanding of the term. Read from a philosophical perspective though, the Marquis de Sade leveled a searing critique of the Enlightenment project. Sade was a minor noble; he witnessed the Reign of Terror firsthand, dug graves for fellow members of the French aristocracy, and narrowly escaped the guillotine himself. His pornographic novels are veiled allegorical polemics on the failings of the Age of Reason. Sade's novels enact the logical outcomes of the Enlightenment project, where reason unchecked by ethics is followed to its ultimate conclusion. The French Revolution, inspired by the principles of the Enlightenment and the ability for subjects to determine their own fate (without the guiding hand of a sovereign or theocracy) in the pursuit of liberty, justice, and democracy literally led to blood running through the streets and the mass execution of the noble class. *Bioshock* places the player in the sadean position, to act in accordance with the rules of the game, without regard for ethics. Hocking recounts that, "The game literally made me feel a cold detachment from the fate of the Little Sisters," and that killing the Little Sisters "in pursuit of my own self-interest seems not only the best choice mechanically, but also the right choice. This is exactly what this game needed to do—make me experience—feel—what it means to embrace a social philosophy that I would not under normal circumstances consider."[5] And this is exactly what Sade was warning us against. The sadean logic is interesting, because reportedly in the games early development the game-world was originally set in an abandoned Nazi laboratory. When you elect to harvest Little Sisters, Atlas attempts to assuage our guilt, "You did the right thing. Just remember, them things aren't people no more."

For Hocking the ludonarrative dissonance, then, emerges in this tension between what the rules of the game dictate in order to be successful, and the disturbing implications of "successful gameplay" for the story. As Hocking outlines it, ludonarrative dissonance is the "leveraging of the game's narrative structure against its ludic structure."[6] Encountering instances of ludonarrative dissonance arguably adds an *emersive* element to the player experience. The dissonant collision between story and gameplay potentially breaks Huizinga's "magic circle," drawing the player out of a state of relative immersion and making them aware of the unbalanced (stupid), or at least fictive nature of their experience.[7] Arguably such an encounter is, in this limited sense at least, of a deconstructive nature. Nick Ballantyne, Managing Editor at GameCloud, describes it as "something like a hypocrisy in the game's beliefs … ludonarrative dissonance isn't about *your* beliefs, it's about *the system's imposed* beliefs."[8] In the gaming blogosphere, and in Hocking's own conception of ludonarrative dissonance, there appears to be an almost unquestioned assumption that the cleft between gameplay and narrative is inherently defective, and that ludonarrative consonance is the presumptive default. Narrative dissonance, though, as explored in Chap. 4 can lead to some playful innovations in storytelling. What is automatically presumed to be a flaw, has in fact tremendous potential to be an innovation in game-design and storytelling. Nick Ballantyne also sees this potential, asking his online readers "what if it could be used to a dev's advantage? Video games can force players into uncomfortable situations, and ludonarrative dissonance can help foster that uncomfortableness. Faux glitches have been used as ludo/narrative tools before, so why is ludonarrative dissonance avoided so much? If your intent is to unsettle or confuse a player, then ludonarrative dissonance seems perfect, but this relies heavily on the player."[9] Arguably it also relies heavily on the deployment of what Ian Bogost calls a game's "procedural rhetoric," or its persuasive power, enacted through game mechanics: "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions, rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures."[10] Of course, the power of a game's procedural rhetoric is modified by player skill, experience with the game, and the difficulty setting or level. A player who can defeat the opposition in *Bioshock* without being pushed toward the choice to harvest Little Sisters in order to beat the game will at least partially bypass the draw of its procedural rhetoric and, thus, of its ludonarrative dissonance as well.

The tension that is built into *Bioshock*, for instance, also gives the player an opportunity to contemplate sadean logic (whether players actually think about it in these exact terms or not).[11] In fact, the game in its sadean tension is not that far removed from the enormously popular television series *Breaking Bad*, where our protagonist Walter White, is (if not in name, but in action and deeds) a Nazi. White sets aside all ethics to kill, to profit from the manufacturing of, sale, and distribution of methamphetamine. He orchestrates mass hits, he corrupts Jessie, a wayward youth, compelling him to commit murder. White justifies this all in the name of saving his family; diagnosed with terminal cancer, White creates a criminal empire to ensure the financial well-being of his family. He fulfills the imperative to be a "real man," and to provide for his family. And while "successful" in heeding this imperative, White is a reprehensible human being. Despite our own presumed moral disposition, we root for White, we want him to succeed at all cost. Cognitive dissonance.

This indeed is a fascinating area of investigation, and we cannot explore it fully here, but emotional and affective pleasure can be drawn from things that are politically regressive—despite our best vigilance. Our bodies in particular can betray us—laughter spawned by epic fails or coming at the expense of someone's dignity (see for instance *Jackass, Tosh.O*), sexual arousal elicited by problematic content. We can vociferously rail against problematic content all we want, but until we contend with the emotive and affective experience, then, it does not seem that we are making headway in our understanding of why videogames are a multi-billion-dollar industry. Calling out regressive content is necessary, and there is nothing inherently "wrong" in doing so, indeed we have an obligation to do so, but moral indignation *by itself* is an exercise in self-indulgence (flattering our own progressive egos), because it fails to address the very real *feelings* that are experienced during gameplay. This is fertile ground from which fantasies emerge—allowing for the violation of prohibitions, transgressive (even criminal) behavior, as Hocking says, "what it means to embrace a social philosophy that I would not under normal circumstances consider."

Cognitive dissonance aside, the term "ludonarrative dissonance" gained some currency in the blogosphere, and is beginning to penetrate scholarship, gaining traction with emerging scholars including a growing number of theses and dissertations. It has come to generally refer to the disconnect between gameplay and story. Another example that is frequently cited is *Max Payne*, where in the gameplay-world our avatar is a kick-ass (former) cop, but at the same time, in the story-world the same character is a

depressed alcoholic addicted to painkillers—setting the gameplay at odds with the insobriety of our character. "Authenticity," then, is woven into this general conception of ludonarrative dissonance—where infinitely deep pockets, endless rounds of ammunition, and the weight of weapons or devices have no bearing on your ability to run, jump, or dodge. "Is it stupid and unrealistic?" Scott Hughes asks. "Sure. Does it matter? No. Why? *Because it's a video game*."[12] For Hughes, even as games become increasingly more "realistic"—a term that makes us cinema scholars cringe—this in no way should impair gameplay. Nevertheless, ludonarrative dissonance is located in the tension between "naturalistic" aesthetics—a term that we cinema scholars are perhaps slightly more amenable to—and the lack of fidelity to earth-bound physics demands a suspension of disbelief.

Hughes focuses on *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013, remastered for PS4 2014)—in effect a post-apocalyptic survival game, in a world populated by humans infected by the Cordyceps fungus causing infected individuals to act like zombies (though they are never called that). In the infinitude of resources and nearly superhuman strength of our avatar, the gameplay and the narrative fail to align, thus, generating the ludonarrative dissonance for Hughes. He insists that the "developers could have made it more realistic, thereby weaving its narrative and gameplay together more cohesively." While such fidelity to "reality" would have likely compromised market-share, making the game harder to play, "[t]his distressing realism wouldn't have simply served to inform the story; it *is* the story." Hughes insists that videogames "could stand to have a little more realism—not in graphics but in gameplay. If developers want their virtual world to seem brutally real, they shouldn't hold back."[13]

But, like *Bioshock*, this game too, also demands that we make a difficult if not an impossible choice. The plot of *The Last of Us* resembles in many ways the plot of the AMC series *The Walking Dead*. Ellie a teenage girl is immune to the infection that has led to the destruction of civilization. Our avatar is Joel, and it's his (our) mission to smuggle Ellie out of the quarantined area and get her to a group of revolutionaries in the hopes of developing a cure, and ultimately to save humanity. However, what we discover is that in order to determine what makes Ellie immune, she will die. Although the narrative is derivative, as Jason Sheenan observes, it is at the same time, "one of the most moving, affecting and satisfying stories you'll find anywhere."[14] Sheehan recounts that during the first run through the game he drew his weapons "and slaughtered my way to the end credits,

alight with fury and sure knowledge that I'd made the only choice I could." However, on his second go-around Sheehan, played with the "awful wisdom. Cassandra's curse. I know how this story ends and I have made up my mind that, this time, I will make the other choice. The *right* one (morally, mathematically, humanistically), and so I walk with ghosts the whole way, right up to the end, and then …" Sheehan makes "the exact same choice again. I can't make the other. It hurts too much. Because *that* is how good the storytelling is in *The Last Of Us*. It makes you care so deeply for a smartass bunch of pixels in the shape of a teenage girl that you will damn the whole world *twice* just for her."[15] Sheehan, in the face of ludonarrative dissonance, *wins* (as it is designed), but cognizant of the (narrative) consequences feels guilty, or perhaps even feels like he *lost*. Despite the narrative tug—to allow the surgical procedure to proceed—in fact there is only one possible option in *The Last of Us*—to damn the world and to save our precious Ellie. Hypothetically, we suppose, a player could simply put the controller down, and theoretically allow the surgical procedure to happen (in their own imagination), but this would be a willful conceit, and something that the ludic design does not permit for.

Despite the critical interest in particular instances of ludonarrative dissonance like those discussed above, from the perspective of many gamers the concept, while familiar, is often dismissed as an unnecessary critical overthink of the emergence of complex narratives into gaming. Either gamers simply don't care, because their personal gaming priorities lie elsewhere, or they see ludonarrative dissonance merely as a run of the mill symptom of what we are calling the evolutionary stupid, attending on the videogame medium to mature through an inevitable period of dissonance toward eventual consonance, just like the evolutionary serial drama in expanded television. Elijah Gonzalez outlined this position succinctly in an article for GameRVW in 2018. "As gamers," he suggests, "we've internalized this logic as acceptable over time, particularly because for the majority of the medium's existence gameplay has been prioritized over story. When your protagonist is nothing but a vague cliché, and the plot boils down to "kill those aliens," or "save the princess," there's no narrative to clash with in the first place. This problem is mostly a modern one, arising out of an increasing sophistication of the ideas that games present, as well improved graphical fidelity."[16] Gonzalez credits many AAA games for attempting to avoid, mitigate, and minimize the issue while acknowledging that some independent developers are making a virtue of the creative potential of ludonarrative dissonance in their design. He cites the

example of Lucas Pope's indie game *Papers Please* (3909 LLC, released in 2013) in which the everyday work of an immigration officer in a dystopian nation is gamified. "It has puzzle sequences that require players to sift through the documents of potential immigrants, rewarding harsh vigilance over empathy."[17]

We argue that an even more extreme, yet equally knowing manipulation of the phenomenon of ludonarrative dissonance occurs in the "cult" role playing videogame *Undertale* (created by independent developer Toby Fox and released in 2015). Here the collision of the ludic and narrative principles is intentional (designed-in) and both immersive and emersive. In other words, it is at turns integrating dissonance into the ludic experience and yet at others drawing the player out of the game to consider its manipulative, even deconstructive procedural rhetoric. It is also morally highly charged. In *Undertale* the player navigates an underground world, attempting to find their way to the surface. As they quest, they encounter a number of monsters and denizens of this Underground. These sprites can either be pacified or non-violently subdued, or alternatively slaughtered to allow passage. Depending on the player's previous choices in their interactions with the monsters the game imposes permanent consequences to all future gameplay. There are three possible endings. The first "Neutral Route" is imposed by the game and the outcome is the same regardless of how many characters you choose to kill or spare; from there the player can choose to engage in either the "Pacifist Route" or the "Genocide Route" provided that they adhere to the strict criteria of sparing or killing every monster resulting, in the latter case, in the effective destruction of the game world of Underground. If the player completes a genocide run, any subsequent play-through will effectively treat the player as tainted. However, in order to play again in any fashion, the player must first go through a sequence that confronts them with the consequences of their actions, as the Undertale fan WIKI explains: "Upon relaunching the game, only a black screen with howling wind appears, and the game's window is unnamed. Inputs do nothing, and the player must wait ten minutes before Chara [their companion] addresses them. Chara reminds the player that they destroyed the world and then questions if the player thinks they are above consequences. If the player confirms by selecting 'YES,' Chara simply says, 'Exactly.' If the player selects 'NO,' Chara asks them, 'Then what are you looking for?' Chara suggests that they could compromise and that they will bring back the world in exchange for the protagonist's SOUL …"[18] If the player agrees, the game relaunches as if

after a hard reset, but although the now "soulless" player can choose a Pacifist Route or Genocide Route as before, they will discover that the new "soulless" versions of the game have been subtly changed. The player cannot undertake a "pure" Pacifist Route again (unless they completely purge the gamefiles). The consequences of their actions and, presumably, implicitly, their guilt remain with them forever and the gameworld is changed permanently and accordingly.

Similar to the way procedural rhetoric underpins ludonarrative dissonance and initiates the stupid in *Bioshock*, critics have argued that in *Undertale* it interferes with the player's allowances and pushes their moral choices toward pacifism. As Frederic Seraphine suggests in a recent conference paper, "*Undertale* is incentivizing some choices of the player by unbalancing the gameplay."[19] In the game's narrative the player is actively encouraged to avoid violence, so there is an argument that undertaking a Genocide Route is an act of willful imbalancing; a willing initiation of the stupid, in our terms, because the player knows—or at least intuits—that the decision is ludonarratively dissonant. Certainly, it has consequences that more than imply it is an incorrect action in the terms, once again, of the game's procedural rhetoric and of its explicit moral judgment in the narrative. In this case this initiation of the stupid is also potentially deconstructive because, as Seraphine argues with some justice, the game "messes with pre-established hierarchies, it allows its players to break the processes to understand how they are made and it puts them in aporic situations—situations where an informed logical choice on the basis of the pre-established morals or rules is made impossible, leaving the player with only a choice of their own."[20]

It is around this question of player choice, or agency that the judgmental morality and dissonant imbalance of *Undertale* rubs up directly (and intentionally) against the psychology of gamers and their expectations of gameplay. Indeed, the game offers its overtly dissonant option to players as a kind of dare—will you make a mistake you can never take back? The Genocide Route is clearly designed to appeal to the kind of player who is a completist; if the game allows for a certain kind of gameplay, then it should be attempted. Also, players tend to gravitate toward violence because in videogames, as *Undertale*'s creator Toby Fox reminds us, "hurting things is normalized and has loads of established ways to make it feel fun."[21] Jake Krajewski highlights the connection between *Undertale*'s ludonarrative dissonance and player psychology in a piece for the Rochester Institute of Technology's student-run *Reporter* magazine: "Every aspect

of the Genocide Route is tailored to a gaming mindset. If something 'can' be done, we 'have to' see it through … We make friends in one timeline, then slaughter them in the next with no regard for consequences because we can just delete that save and do everything over. 'Undertale' doesn't allow that … There is no way to cleanse oneself of the Genocide Route's consequences. It puts perspective on the way we play video games and enacts harsh, unavoidable punishment on violent players. When playing 'Undertale,' gamers are no longer above consequences."[22] The many discussion threads about the experience of playing *Undertale* that flowered on game sites and WIKIs after the game's launch in 2015 also make it clear that for many players the moral implications of killing digital characters in a video game are a real issue and often genuinely felt. (The number of posts asking about how to "cleanse" your game files also hint at this.) One player, who posted on Steam's discussion boards as Wisp-Odyssey in 2016, summed up the feelings of many: "[w]ell, if YOU do the Genocide route, even if you REMOVE the sin from your files, you still KNOW YOU did it. Which is why some might not even do it. Even if everyone else forgets, you cannot MAKE yourself forget it."[23]

While the challenging and (creatively) stupid moral choices of *Undertale* play out in a graphically simple—one might say consciously retro—story world, ludonarrative dissonance also inhabits AAA games that place narrative and graphical realism above all other considerations. In more recent memory than *Undertale*, on its release *Red Dead Redemption II* (Rockstar Games, 2018) was hailed for its aesthetic qualities. It even allowed players to go into "cinematic mode," which made for (as the term suggests) a more cinematic experience of the game. The camera angle shifts and black bars—very labor intensive black bars—appear at the top and bottom of the screen as if this visual intervention alone communicates the cinematic.[24] And while selecting cinematic mode enhanced the narratological element of the game in a narrow sense, it also led to some hilarious gameplay incidents often involving your horse plowing straight into obstacles and sending your avatar flying, sometimes with grave consequences.[25] The tension between the gameplay and the cinematic, in the case of *Red Dead Redemption II*, is certainly an illustration of ludonarrative dissonance insofar as Hocking positions it. While this is how ludonarrative dissonance has been used, however, we think there is more to it than just that. The term is, in fact, productive in thinking about the historical tensions between narratological and ludological approaches to games. However, at least according to many players and critics, the stupidity of *Red Dead Redemption*

II goes beyond encouraging amusing, or even tragic—depending on your affective investment in your character's horse—digital pratfalls. Rather it is built deeply into the gameplay and even into the interface, where conscious design choices have led to an often-counterintuitive interactive experience. The same buttons control key combat and conversation options, for example. "I keep trying to do things …" one player lamented on Twitter, "but the game seems to have other plans."[26] More importantly for our current purposes, the game's pursuit of realism at all costs brings the narrative and ludic principles into clearly dissonant and emersive misalignment. Much of the work made evident in the game's design and a player's activity revolves around maintaining the minutiae of a "real" western life. Horses need constant care and attention, the character's weight, warmth, and level of comfort in the game world's wintery environment must be maintained or they will suffer negative consequences. The quest for realism also condemns the frequent gunfights in the game to be experienced at the same general level of difficulty. This works against the more typical combat mechanic of videogames in which subsequent fights become harder, requiring more skill and attention to beat. As the inimitable Film Crit Hulk argues, video games have grown past realism, but you wouldn't know this when playing the (stupid) game-movie hybrid that is *Red Dead Redemption II*. "The gunfights never really get harder or more interesting," he notes, "Rockstar just adds more characters you have to kill if it wants a battle to feel like a big deal." Furthermore, the hyperrealist approach "doesn't work in practice. The endless capacity to interact with equally endless items ends up creating endless, but meaningless [stupid], interactions. Those meaningless interactions then numb the player to the meaningful aspects of the game."[27] With a knowing glance toward the creative exceptions of our next case study, the common-sense lesson here seems to be that successful games still defer to the ludic over the narrative, no matter the potential for dissonance. Games should, in this sense, first and foremost be games. Under this grid, when a game pushes too far toward the cinematic, or diffuses its ludic content with too much realism, even moral realism, it becomes stupid. Intentionally or otherwise. And yet the stupid emerges not only in the tension between gameplay and narrative, but also in the potential of storytelling innovations at the increasingly fuzzy boundary between videogames and other storytelling modes.[28] Once again *Gone Home* serves as a particularly potent example.

"THIS IS NOT A GAME," DAMN IT!

The Fullbright videogame *Gone Home* was highly praised by many videogame critics, but quite vociferously ridiculed by some facets of the gamer community. *Gone Home* is a mash-up of a choose your own adventure thriller and a first-person shooter game (significantly, minus the shooting).[29] In videogame contemporary parlance it is derisively characterized as a "walking simulator." The POV perspective of the game, and its conspicuous absence of shooting (or any violence whatsoever) is made all that more evident by the fact that a key plot point revolves around one of the characters, Lonnie, a JROTC cadet, who enlists into the US Army. Lonnie, we learn, has earned ribbons for orienting, adventure training, and rifle team—all the stuff of conventional gameplay. From the conventional conception of gameplay—running, jumping, shooting, and general running amok—this is where ludonarrative dissonance materializes: the narrative effectively is given priority, while the facets of gameplay are essentially secondary. *Gone Home* generates ludonarrative dissonance in the reversal of priorities from the perspective of the conventional conception of gameplay.

Our embodied avatar is a woman in her early 20s, Kaitlin (Katie) Greenbriar, who returns home from a European adventure in the middle of the night. It is stormy, which makes for a foreboding atmosphere. She arrives at her Portland Oregon family home to discover that no one is there, and this introduces the basic conflict into the narrative: Where is everyone? The objective of the game is to discover the whereabouts of Katie's parents, and more urgently her younger sister Samantha (Sam). In the most rudimentary sense the narrative structure of *Gone Home* shares affinities with *Citizen Kane*: Katie, like Thompson, is kept in the dark (literally and figuratively), but is the narrative device that unlocks information about the central character.

Sam, who is a couple of years younger than her sister Katie, is the central character, and we learn more about her as Katie rifles through her family's belongings. In many instances, we learn about Sam through inferences: She leaves whiny and snarky notes for her parents, we find disciplinary notes from school, we find encouraging notes from teachers that direct Sam to make plans for college, etcetera. Through these various clues we are led to infer that Sam is in many respects a completely ordinary middle-class (white) teenage girl testing the limits of her parents' authority, and beginning to establish her own independence. We are also given direct

insight into Sam and her inner-life through journal entries—these are narrated aloud with Sam's voiceover. The narrative takes place on June 7, 1995, and Sam is very much of the grunge/indie rock generation—an archetypical Gen-X-er. We learn about her through mix-tapes, fliers for shows (grrrl rock), magazines (one with Kurt Cobain on the cover), and zines promoting girl-power.

Stripping *Gone Home* down to its most basic mechanics, and how the story is revealed to the player, it is actually no different from *Bioshock*. As mentioned earlier, much of the narrative in *Gone Home* is revealed in diary entries, which are read aloud by Sam in voiceover. Katie needs to explore the home to find these diary entries, which are woven into the environmental storytelling. All the other facets of the mise-en-scene further the embodied story as well (e.g., the mix-tapes, the zines, etc.)—collectively, all these embedded story elements build a complete picture. At its most fundamental sense, the *Bioshock* narrative manifests in exactly the same fashion. "The player gradually uncovers what happened to Rapture," Felan Parker explains, "in the course of exploring the game world's 'embedded narrative' through radio communication from other characters and collectible audio diaries that both reveal important plot information and flesh out the history of the city and its inhabitants."[30] Although diary entries are a weak storytelling crutch, and almost invariably make for cringe-inducing expository dialog, nevertheless, they are an efficient (if not necessarily elegant) device for conveying important plot details.

Nonetheless, storytelling in *Gone Home*, or *Bioshock* for that matter, relies on the exploration of space. And our story develops not so much as a matter of cause and effect relations, in a relatively linear chain of events, but rather as an accumulation of narrative elements. (We discuss spatialized storytelling at some length in Chap. 3 Narrative Dissonance.) This videogame narrative strategy is also found in conventional media as well. Graeme Kirkpatrick establishes a difference between stories and (story) worlds, and he takes the television series *Lost* as exemplary—while the former offers explicit plot details, the storyworld "fleshes-out" what we know. "The web-based elements will cast light on events in the TV show, which most people would still consider central to *Lost*, but they do so not in a direct, linear fashion but rather by adding to our accumulating background knowledge. We do not follow events in *Lost* so much as we gather information about it and piece together snippets we have found in order to extend rather than deepen our understanding."[31] Experiencing the narrative of *Lost*, then, is very much like videogame narratives, which more

often than not, is a cumulative process. Kirkpatrick directs our attention to Henry Jenkins, who "describes the way we build our understanding of such worlds as a process of 'additive comprehension' and relates it to a new kind of reading process: 'we are seeing the emergence of new story structures, which create complexity by expanding the range of narrative possibility rather than pursuing a single path with a beginning, middle and end.'"[32] Jenkins insists that this novel development in storytelling requires that we be "inside" the narrative. "This precludes the kind of distanced reading associated with narrative fiction, where readers interpret the meaning of a text as a representation. Now people are actively involved in producing the fiction, which Jenkins sees as a point of connection between video games and other contemporary media."[33] *Gone Home*, then, is placed right at the intersection of this convergence of gameplay and contemporary media narratives—in fact, for the story to materialize at all, it is incumbent upon us to be *inside* the story, to physically move (our avatar) through space in order to reveal the story-elements embedded in the mise-en-scene.

The mise-en-scene, the melancholic non-diegetic scoring, and the ambient diegetic sounds of the storm outside—emphasized further by narratively opportune claps of thunder and lightning—guide (or perhaps more accurately mislead) our narrative expectations. During the intervening time between Katie's departure for Europe, and her return home the family has moved into a new house—inherited from a delusional uncle who has passed away. The move offers convenient narrative motivations for Katie's apparent befuddlement in her own family's house, as well as the still unpacked boxes, and the general feeling that—while they have been there for quite some time, maybe as much as a year—the Greenbriars are still settling into their new home. Likewise, the delusional uncle makes the existence of secret passages and compartments hidden behind wall paneling plausible. The player has to rummage through drawers, sift through notes and journals, locate keys, combinations, hidden compartments, and passages to resolved the narrative conflict. And assuredly *Gone Home* problematizes this term "player," because the player is also a reader, a viewer (in the cinematic sense), and even an amateur sleuth. Despite the thriller and horror genre tropes the overarching narrative is melodramatic (though) with a heartwarming twist at the end.

Many critics lauded *Gone Home*. In a *New York Times* review of the game Chris Suellentrop from the onset heaps his praises upon it: "*Gone Home*, the first game from the Fullbright Company, is the greatest video

game love story ever told and proof, in case any more were needed, that video games do not require shooting or punching or jumping or action of any kind to create gripping fiction."[34] Hard to imagine a more glowing response to the game. Writing for *Kotaku*, an online platform for video-game blogging/journalism, Patricia Hernandez gushes:

> The personal ache I felt is partially due to the knowledge that I've been waiting so long for a game to feature someone like Sam—a game that was about someone that's similar to me in a non-abstract way. Me! My background makes me a most unmarketable demographic (or so I am told). It feels embarrassing to say, but I could cry—did cry—with the relief of knowing a game like this even exists. Between the superbly written Sam and the focus on quiet, contemplative exploration, everything about *Gone Home* makes you wonder how the game can exist in a market that doesn't seem to value the same things as it does—there's no explosions or shooting, no adrenaline-pumping excitement, no gritty story of unlikely heroes. Just you, a house and its (still living) ghosts. Better yet, it's the type of game that makes you wonder why it's taken so long for games like this—games this personal and human—to be made and come to our attention.[35]

We cite Hernandez at length here to illustrate the affect-laden charge of her prose, expressing this pent-up desire—this longing for a game that finally speaks to her. And the empathy and the identification invested in the characters that are "like me" are probably the key to the game's critical success, and at the same time it's near hysterical rejection from other corners of the gamer community. As for the latter, there is a refusal or a terrible soul crushing anxiety elicited by the invitation to identify with a female character(s)—and arguably a "real" woman, rather than some buxom fetishistic male fantasy of woman. In fact, aside from a single-family portrait that hangs in the entry foray, there are no visual representations of Sam and Katie, rather we are invited to identify with the two young women through their innermost thoughts: their anxieties, their desires, their ambitions. The portrait is as "white bread" as it comes: perhaps taken at a local Sears on a Sunday afternoon after church.

Many of the negative comments regarding *Gone Home* are done so anonymously—offering a platform for some of the most toxic rhetoric. One such entry is entitled, in big flashing rainbow colored lettering, "THIS IS NOT A GAME," a title that is repeated seven times no less. The entry begins:

> *Gone Home* is a full-on architectural simulator, made by two chicks, a fag and a white guy with dreadlocks, wherein you control Kaitlin Greenbriar who will unravel the uninteresting history of her lesbian sister who decided to bail on her military duty [sic.] in order to scissor with her dyke friend. You can also learn about how her parents don't love each other anymore, her uncle is a child molester who is now a ghost and you will get to experience a lot of 90's references and text … lots and lots of text.[36]

This too is quoted at length to illustrate the affectively charged vitriol. The internet trolls that spout misogynistic and homophobic diatribes such as this, and perhaps some of the reserved critical responses to *Gone Home* reveal yet another reason why the game might be stupid: It's narrative is girl-focused.

It is no secret that the mainstream videogame industry has been largely geared toward (young) male audiences and trades heavily in the currency of heteronormative machismo—allowing (young) men to play-out fantasies of power and unbridled aggression. In recent memory, the controversies around "Gamergate" brought these tendencies to the light of day in truly noxious ways. In fact, *Gone Home* and another game, *Depression Quest*—an interactive fiction game (and thus also at odds with conventionally conceived gameplay)—were two of the games that spawned the Gamergate controversy. Inconsistent, and without a clear structure or organization, Gamergate amounted to a conservative backlash against "progressive" games. Zoë Quinn independently developed *Depression Quest* in 2013. It largely received positive reviews, acknowledging its significance as a tool to lend insight into the experience of depression. However, Eron Gjoni, Quinn's disgruntled ex-boyfriend, alleged in a blogpost that Quinn's personal relationship with Nathan Grayson, a journalist at *Kotaku*, led to the favorable reviews. Gamers were convinced that there was collusion between journalists and "progressive" game developers, and what resulted was a deluge of negative comments (including death threats, and rape threats). Gamergate exposed the worst elements of game culture as a hotbed of toxic masculinity. The fact that *Gone Home* is very consciously "feminine"—our avatar is a young woman, the central narrative conflict is about an adolescent girl discovering her (queer) sexuality—disrupts the common currency of videogames, and thus is seen by many as counterfeit, or in other words, stupid. Not only is it a "girl" game, it is a "queer" game.

Even critics that are generally amenable to *Gone Home* struggle with the fact that it is neither fish nor fowl. *Gone Home* is not quite a videogame (in the conventional sense), nor is it a movie or novel—it is in a sense, abject, something in-between categories.[37] Ian Bogost, who admires the game, in a rhetorical gesture wrestles with the question: By which paradigm are we to assess a game like *Gone Home*? While conventional gamers, on the other hand, understand videogames in the narrowest terms. In their opinion, and the recurring motif in internet troll posts, is that *Gone Home* is not a game, which is explicitly stated in the title of the cited negative post above. The latter anonymous post laments that *Gone Home* has "lots and lots of text," which apparently impedes, if not excludes the possibility of, gameplay. Indeed, the very paradigm of "videogame" is at stake here.

Stupid Games: Mobile, Casual, and Freemium

In his *New York Times Magazine* article, "Just One More Game … *Angry Birds*, *Farmville* and Other Hyperaddictive 'Stupid Games,'" Sam Anderson argues that, "Today we are living, for better and worse, in a world of stupid games."[38] It began, Anderson suggests, with the Nintendo Game Boy, which came bundled with *Tetris*. The simple game, designed "in a Soviet computer lab in 1984," as Anderson describes it, was "a simple but addictive puzzle game whose goal was to rotate falling blocks—over and over and over and over and over and over and over—in order to build the most efficient possible walls. (Well, it was complicated. You were both building walls and not building walls; if you built them right, the walls disappeared, thereby ceasing to be walls.)"[39] The coupling of *Tetris* with its rather primitive graphics, paired perfectly with "the Game Boy's small gray-scale screen." The simple block design of *Tetris* pieces, and the pace of the descending blocks meant that graphics did not blur, "its action was a repetitive, storyless puzzle that could be picked up, with no loss of potency, at any moment, in any situation."[40] Fast-forward decades later, where many of us have a smartphone (probably on your person at this very instant, or strategically placed right next to you for a welcomed interruption from our hapless musings about the stupid, or perhaps you're even *reading this on your phone!*), nevertheless, the phone, like the Game Boy before it, serves as a platform for "small," what have been called "casual games"[41] that typically do not demand constant and intense attention, but

are perfectly suited to killing time while on the bus, waiting for a friend to arrive, and so on. (The term "casual" already suggests a major cleft between these phone-based games, and PC or console-based games, which in a contingent relation with phone-based games would have to be considered "serious," or "real" games.) The casual phone-based game owes its heritage to the Game Boy, which Anderson calls "(half descriptively, half out of revenge for all the hours I've lost to them) 'stupid games.'"[42]

Unlike AAA (triple-A) PC and console-based games that invest heavily in graphics, narratives, and established franchises (e.g., *Call of Duty, Halo*) designed to be played for extended periods of time in front of a stationary monitor, Anderson notes, "Smartphone games are built on a very different model." The phone-based game is designed for a much smaller screen, and free of a Dualshock (or similar) controller. The phone-based game interface "responds not to the fast-twitch button combos of a controller but to more intuitive and intimate motions: poking, pinching, tapping, tickling. This has encouraged a very different kind of game: *Tetris*-like little puzzles, broken into discrete bits, designed to be played anywhere, in any context, without a manual, by any level of player." Anderson adds that, "You could argue that these are *pure* games: perfectly designed mini-systems engineered to take us directly to the core of gaming pleasure without the distraction of narrative."[43] This aligns (almost uncannily) with our conception of the stupid—"storyless," "without the distraction of a narrative."

The smartphone platform democratized gaming, by Anderson's estimation, though not necessarily for the good. When the iPhone was first released in 2007, suddenly games did not require legions of EA designers, programmers, and marketing departments, rather relatively modest games could be developed (perhaps even by an individual person), and then find distribution through the Apple app store. The Apple app store did not require esoteric knowledge, or familiarity with online gaming distribution platforms like Steam (which officially launched in 2003), and that serves a relatively small niche market. "Instead of just passing their work around to one another on blogs, independent game designers suddenly had a way to reach everyone—not just hard-core gamers, but their mothers, their mailmen and their college professors. Consumers who never would have put a quarter into an arcade or even set eyes on an *Xbox 360* were now carrying a relatively sophisticated game console with them, all the time, in their pockets or their purses."[44]

In somewhat of a paradox though, what Anderson fears the most (donning his Frankfurt School hat) is the "gamification" of everything. Specifically, where advertisements will be cloaked in casual gaming. We say "paradox," because the fleecing of games, where advertisements are embedded into the game, suggests at a minimum "messaging," and thus narrative. "Gamification seeks to turn the world into one giant chore chart covered with achievement stickers—the kind of thing parents design for their children—though it raises the potentially terrifying question of who the parents are. This, I fear, is the dystopian future of stupid games: amoral corporations hiring teams of behavioral psychologists to laser-target our addiction cycles for profit."[45] Anderson's fears are warranted, of that we have little doubt. The gamification of everything is Adorno's worst nightmare; an activity that we willfully (and quite happily) participate in, that at the same time works against "thinking," fostering in Adorno's conception of it—stupidity. However, we have to part company here, because the stupid, insofar as we have conceived it, is not about the stupefaction of consumers, or the duped consumer incapable of seeing the wolf in sheep's clothing, but rather speaks more to the form of videogaming, and its potential for storytelling.

The casual game industry threatens to dumb-down "serious" gaming. Indeed, those fears also permeate the world of "serious" PC and console gamers who tend to dismiss or disparage mobile "freemium" (ostensibly free to play, but with microtransaction monetization built in) games as simultaneously formally unsophisticated and economically meretricious; not merely stupid-by-failure, but stupid-by-design. The most cynical contemporary mobile games are deployed in models that offer gameplay paradigms that only become satisfying after the player engages in microtransactions to purchase resources and upgrades of various kinds. *Game of War: Fire Age*, for example, monetizes its player versus player structure through microtransactions that are necessary for a player to become and remain competitive. *Clash of Kings* uses its in-game economy to encourage players to purchase the resources needed to defend their digital empires. Many other mobile games follow similar models, encouraging the most dedicated players, or "whales" in the vernacular of gaming, to spend thousands of dollars to compete.

Inspired by research undertaken by its creators after receiving pitches from mobile game developers, *South Park* dedicated an episode, "Freemium Isn't Free," to critiquing freemium games.[46] In the episode, the Canadian Minister of Mobile Gaming describes his game's monetization

model, thus: "It's a simple cycle. A never-ending loop based on RPGs. Explore. Collect. Spend. Improve. But whereas those just used the concept of XP or experience points, WE'VE introduced the idea of micropaying with money." The creators of *South Park*, apparently relented, in 2017 Ubisoft released *South Park: Phone Destroyer* developed by RedLynx. And yes, in-game purchases are available to boost abilities. There are multiple endings to the game, depending on how much money the player spent on in-game purchases. Along with the rest of the South Park gang, "Businessman" Cartman congratulates us on our success, "Yes, excellent work, new kid. Of course, now we will need to be collecting your payment for the game. All these costumes, props and sets cost a lot of people time and money. So now let's see what your contribution to our game has been," Cartman pulls back a curtain and reveals how much the player has spent. If a player spends a lot of money Cartman exclaims, "Holy shit, dude, what a contribution!" Some of the other kids chime in to congratulate the player, and Kyle finally adds, "Yeah, and you might wanna see someone about mobile game addiction." If the player spends a relatively small amount of money, the kids whine and wonder what they might do with such a pittance, Stan finally laments, "told you, we should have charged them money *before* playing the game like in the olden days." And if the player spends nothing, then, the kids moan, and Stan whinges, "That's not cool, people worked really hard on this game." He adds, before walking off-screen, "I told you guys we'd get fucked going freemium."

There are three broad models of game design monetization in the mobile games market. The first puts obvious barriers of difficulty in single player games, requiring the purchase of power-ups and stamina boosts to beat the levels. The second leverages player-versus-player titles in terms of competitiveness. The third is based, either loosely or explicitly around the functionality of Japanese "gacha" capsule toy slot machines, using the rareness of key in-game items to encourage the purchase of "blind" loot boxes, containing possible desirable gameplay content. The loot box system is not confined to mobile gaming, *Overwatch* uses it on PC and Mac for example, but only for cosmetic items and not to enable "pay to win." "Serious" gamers' attitudes to and anxiety around the meretricious mobile market were on clear display recently when Blizzard Entertainment, previously an independent developer before it merged with Activision, announced that it was putting more resources behind the development of mobile games for its existing franchises (notably *Diablo* and *World of*

Warcraft). The announcement drew loud boos from the audience of fans at the company's annual convention, Blizzcon, in 2018 and angry online discussion among the fan-base. Arguably Bethesda committed a similarly stupid "mobile" gamer-foul with the release of the AAA game *Fallout 76*. With this title, the developer forced an online-only competitive player versus player model onto an existing solo-play franchise and monetized it through the sale of in-game items, including skins and power-ups that are only relevant in a multi-player environment (showing off to other players).[47]

Of course, to tar all mobile games with the same brush misses the unique social and formal spaces occupied by hybrid games such as *Pokémon GO*, and ignores the often-radical landscape of truly independent game development using mobile-friendly platforms such as GameMaker Studio and Twine. While independent games have penetrated the market in significant ways, nothing compares to the *Pokémon GO* phenomenon in terms of its global scale. Launched in July of 2016, *Pokémon GO* is a phone-based game that relies on GPS positioning, allowing players to interact with the physical environment. Building on the design of its developer Niantic's previous AR phone-based game, *Ingress*, *Pokémon GO* is one of the first consumer products to utilize "augmented reality" (AR), an emerging technology. It is certainly the first game to do so at such a massive scale.[48] Narrative is largely evacuated from *Pokémon GO*, however the game serves as a paratextual element to the larger *Pokémon* franchise, especially as it relates to the animated series and previous handheld videogames developed by Game Freak. Why are we invested in collecting Pokemon, why do they inhabit specific spaces, what is your role as a Pokemon collector/trainer, what is the final objective? These narrative questions are not necessarily answered within *Pokémon GO*. Rather *Pokémon GO* is liberated from extensive narrative obligations, because that work is done elsewhere, within the larger *Pokémon* franchise.

Pokémon GO is stupid precisely because it demands a surrender both to the body and to spectacle—the GPS locator dictates how we orientate our bodies, walking in this or that direction, pivoting toward the illusive creature lurking within the augmented environment. The game eschews narrative, replacing it entirely with the untamed attraction of discovering digital monsters cohabiting your apartment, or some other quotidian location like a bus stop or coffee shop. Surrendering to the body, which overshadows good reason, is not without its problems though. Out of respect, both the Arlington National Cemetery and the US Holocaust

Museum in Washington DC have asked visitors not to play *Pokémon GO* on their grounds, or in their facilities.[49] Implied in this plea is that visitors need to approach these institutions with stone-cold sobriety to properly reflect on the solemnity of the sites. Playing *Pokémon GO* at these sites is deemed disrespectful precisely because of the ways that it directs us away from (cognitive) reflection, and steers us toward the stupidity of the body.

While *Pokémon GO* invites us to interact with our immediate environment, at the same time, the siloed experience—intently focusing on our phone screen—removes us from the very environment that we inhabit. Directing our attention to the screen and the positioning of our bodies has had deadly consequences—numerous car crashes have been reported, with players either playing while they are driving, or drivers swerving to avoid hitting a *Pokémon GO* player that has haplessly wandered into the street. While there have been grave consequences for playing *Pokémon GO*, eminently more hilarious (if sadistically so) are the countless *Pokémon GO* fails posted online. Often caught on surveillance cameras, *Pokémon GO* players have been witnessed falling into fountains, walking to lamp posts, falling down stairs, falling into pools, property owners confronting players in their yard.

One of the things that *Pokémon GO* illustrates is that the stupid is not singularly located in the media referent, but rather in the reception of the body. The way that we respond to watching other bodies (mindlessly) twist, tumble, fall, relent to gravity, or confront the concrete realities of space, geography, architecture. Where the out of control body in the "frenzy of the visible" elicits arousal in the spectator (per Linda Williams's discourse on hardcore), it is the uncontrolled flailing body in a *Pokémon GO* fail that elicits a different affective response—laughter. Arguably, however, this exercise in schadenfreude, this (relatively) harmless stupidity, carries with it more than a whiff of white privilege, because bodies of different colors are received very differently in our culture. As a polemical article in the left-wing *Jacobin* magazine reminds us, "the game might be very dangerous for young black men. A player wandering blithely through a white neighborhood, maybe passing several times in front of the same houses in pursuit of a grinning cartoon tortoise, would be subjected to a very different form of mapping and systemization of reality: they could be read as suspicious, and being read as suspicious can get a young black man killed."[50] The potential for catalyzing stupid violence and authoritarian discipline lurking under the digital skin of *Pokémon GO* reminds us also of the Arab Situationist Abdelhafid Khatib's attempts to carry out a

psychogeographical report on Les Halles in Paris in 1958 (at the time of the Algerian War of Independence). Khatib was arrested twice and his unfinished report ends with this matter of fact editorial note: "This study is incomplete on several fundamental points, principally those concerning the ambiant [sic] characteristics of certain barely defined zones. This is because our collaborator was subject to police harrassment [sic] in light of the fact that since September, North Africans have been banned from the streets after half past nine in the evening. And of course, the bulk of Abdelhafid Khatib's work concerned the Halles at night. After being arrested twice and spending two nights in a holding cell, he relinquished his efforts. Therefore, the present—the political future, no less—may be abstracted due to considerations carried out on psychogeography itself."[51]

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that a number of observers and participants have attempted either to praise or critique the game by associating it with the psychogeographical experiments of the Situationist International, whereby a player's wanderings in search of their cartoonish digital prey is likened to a *derive*, or by vainly populating it with nerdy twenty-first century variants of that other archetype of the wandering—and also privileged—modern city dweller, the Flâneur. Of course both matches are decidedly imperfect, and a full discussion is beyond the scope of this project, and yet Jeff Sparrow has a point when he suggests that the game offers its players a reimagined *derive* at the same time as it demonstrates exactly what Guy Debord was attempting to critique, namely the commodity colonizing social life.[52] "In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*," Debord famously wrote in Thesis 1 of *Society of the Spectacle*. "All that once was directly lived has receded into representation."[53]

Pokémon GO superimposes a ludic grid of fantasy monster hunting on the urban and exurban GPS mapscape, encouraging players—whether they happen to be in or out of control—to explore their neighborhoods or current locations the digital surfaces of which are now invested with secret meanings only apparent to themselves and their fellow players. Incidentally, because this digital grid is adapted from GPS tracking software, as a number of critics have pointed out, the AR game shares software functionality with a system originally designed to guide missiles, and thus in the broadest sense its technological architecture sits somewhat at odds, or is indeed in a dissonant alignment—for those who are aware or who think of it—with the ludic. Of course, we have normalized our relationship with GPS technology in so many other aspects of our daily lives

that it barely rates a mention here. However, one typical critique of *Pokémon GO* from the left draws additional authoritarian analogs from the game's GPS-driven software interface, arguing that the faux *derive* is itself transformed from an unplanned journey in which the traveler opens their mind to the attractions of the locality and allows themselves to be drawn through it, to a directed excursion in which the digitally colonized landscape is already codified with gaming destinations and commodified with lures purchased by businesses that wish to attract players: the stupid player body accedes to this stupid *derive*. As the *Jacobin* piece continues: "all routes are already set, all eventualities accounted for, all points of interest marked and immutable; there's not even the possibility of a purely idle wandering, not when *Pokémon GO* creates its map and its territory all at the same time."[54]

And yet when considered paraxially to the intent of its gameplay, players of *Pokémon GO* invest physically and socially in their (stupid) directed excursions in unexpected and arguably productive ways. Anecdotally, we know relatively unathletic people who walk miles a day in their attempts to complete their Pokedex who likely would get little physical exercise otherwise, arguably a less stupid bodily interface with the AR universe. In 2016 *The Mary Sue* recorded numerous (but also anecdotal) Twitter reports of players suffering from depression and other mental conditions who have felt able to engage with the outside world in ways they had not before. This is facilitated by the recently implemented raid functionality that turns the world into an MMO, where complete strangers can emerge at a spot and engage in an activity together with no prior coordination or contact. "Depression and many mental illnesses can often make one feel they should stay at home, so given the fact that *Pokémon Go*'s works by tracking players' movements and location, people feel motivated to leave the house and be outside for a bit."[55] The anecdotal evidence is backed up by a scientific study at McMaster University reported by the American Psychological Association. "One third of participants (33 percent) reported changes in social behavior since they started playing *Pokémon Go*. Within this group, 85 percent spoke to more unfamiliar people, 76 percent spent more time with friends, 41 percent made new friends while playing, and 51 percent reported that the game increased their physical activity. In addition, 29 percent reported an improved sense of well-being and 12 percent reported weight loss."[56] Dissonant systems often produce creative byproducts.

Conclusion: This Is a Narrative (Game)

There appears to be a knee-jerk attempt to legitimize gaming through a comparison of other narrative-driven media—specifically cinema, and perhaps to a lesser extent literature.[57] In his NPR series "Reading the Game," Jason Sheehan reviews *Red Dead Redemption II*, noting that the videogame "is, in the universe of video games, our *Godfather*, our *Star Wars* or *Wild Bunch*—the work that transcends its genre and, in this case, its medium. It is a film brought to life, a novel given legs, and to speak about any piece of it is to necessarily reduce it to a bunch of cogs and sprockets—how this piece fits with that one. And that's a disservice, I think. It's why deconstructionists are often very little fun at parties."[58] We are killjoys *par excellence*. While we understand the impulse, nevertheless videogame narratives need to be taken on their own terms to account for their unique mode of storytelling.

And upon further reflection, it seems that everything is at stake here—not just videogames. For as much the videogame is a contested (narrative) paradigm, it also compels us to reconsider the nature of (cinematic) narratives as well. With a certain Barthesian resonance, the spatialized storytelling of videogames invites us to begin thinking about the location of a narrative—regardless of the narrative form. The "[e]vocative elements" located in the videogame environment, as Michael Nitsche observes, "improve the meaning-building process of the player." Nitsche does not go so far as to call these "evocative elements" as "'stories,' but [rather] suggestive markings. They are clustered in certain ways, and aimed to trigger reactions in players in order to help them to create their own interpretations. One consequence of such a model is that the stories are never in the piece itself but in the mind of the player."[59] Nitsche, then, proposes the death of yet another author—the videogame designer—and locates the narrative with the player and his/her accretion of "evocative elements," and the connections that players draw from them. And perhaps it is this intense sense of authorial responsibility that encourages such a deep investment in gameplay?

What is also revealed in the tension of ludonarrative dissonance particularly, and "casual" phone-based games as well, is an encounter with the untamed attraction. The innovations in gameplay and storytelling reveal themselves, and the attraction is always rooted in the novelty of the technology. Whether it's *Bioshock* and the uneasy tension between gameplay and narrative that reveal the mechanics of the game, *Gone Home* which sits

somewhere between literary fiction and gaming, freemium games (or some form of pay-to-play), hilarious *Pokémon GO* fails, all these bring to light the novelty of the technology and our stupefaction in an effort to make sense of them.

One of the things that *Pokémon GO* illustrates is that the stupid is not singularly located in the media referent, but also in the reception of the body. The way that the body (mindlessly) twists, tumbles, falls, the way the body relents to gravity, to the physics of space. And the location of the stupid might also be located in reaction to *Pokémon GO* fails, when the body is swept up in the spasms of laughter. There are affinities between laughter and orgasm, where the body is, at least for a moment, "out of control." In her book *Beyond Explicit*, Helen Hester expands the notion of the pornographic, arguing that "the conceptualization of the pornographic as a realm of representation that not only sporadically eschews or displaces sex, but that need not be sexually explicit at all."[60] Rather, Hester's notion of the expanded pornographic is something that elicits an *intense affective* charge in the viewing subject—laughter being a prime example.

While there is perhaps colloquial sadism in the humor derived from witnessing *Pokémon GO* fails, there is what Kerner has called elsewhere a clinical sadism built into *Bioshock*.[61] There is discontentment in the tension between gameplay mechanics and the *Bioshock* narrative, and most particularly in the revelation that our choices are effectively preordained whether we decide to harvest Little Sisters or not, or whether we have been "tricked" into subscribing to sadean logic, this is precisely where the game's critical success rests. As much as *Bioshock* is about a 1960s-dystopian world, it is also about gameplay itself. The narrative twist, which is meshed with the gameplay (which is wrested away when you/Jack are compelled to kill Ryan), as Parker observes, functions "as a self-reflexive, critical metacommentary on the artifice of gaming conventions." And in this sense, the dissonance *is* the meaning of the game. "Dissonance is seen to be crucial to *Bioshock*'s artistic achievement offering players the kind of (post)modernist reflexivity typically associated with a medium or art form's evolution to maturity." However, being at the forefront is bound to stupify, even "a dangerous and decisive artistic move, imposing critical reflection upon complacent, unsuspecting players."[62]

We are seeing evidence that designers are beginning to treat ludonarrative dissonance, not so much as a flaw, but as a creative potential. The third person shooter videogame, *Spec Ops: The Line* (designed by Yager

Development, and published by 2K Games, 2014) actively uses ludonarrative dissonance as part of the gameplay and the story. "What if the negative feelings resulting from ludonarrative dissonance was not some byproduct of miscalculated design but was instead purposefully crafted and mobilized for ends other than gratifying the player?" Matthew Thomas Payne asks. Payne continues to wonder, "Would players be 'game' for such a potentially un-fun adventure? Might such a different set of expectations, in turn, liberate designers to create more diverse gameplay experiences, and encourage publishers to bankroll them?"[63] While most militaristic shooter games spare the player the true realities of warfare, particularly the "collateral damage" that is often inflicted on populations, *Spec Ops* makes an explicit point of illustrating the wanton destruction that you have reaped in an effort to "win" the game. "The result is a game that wields its affective distance as a critique of the necessary illusion that all military shooters trade in, but one that so few acknowledge," Payne observes. "In particular, the game's brutal mise-en-scéne, its intertextual references to other war media, and its real and imagined opportunities for player choice, create a discordant feeling that lays bare the ease with which most video war games indulge in their power fantasies."[64] Clearly *Spec Ops* illustrates that the creative potential of ludonarrative dissonance is being explored. However, and it is evident in Payne's framing, ludonarrative dissonance retains its negative connotations—"un-fun adventure."[65] *Gone Home* perhaps remains one of the most significant steps forward insofar as gameplay serves the story—reversing the presumed hierarchy in the ludonarrative pairing.

As noted above Pendleton Ward (creator of *Adventure Time*), along with a host of reviewers, expressly recalls feeling "intimately connected with the character" in *Gone Home*, and more so than any film or novel. It borders on blasphemy to not share the enthusiasm voiced by so many critics. Philosopher, game designer, and journalist Ian Bogost, for instance, admits: "I felt charmed upon completing *Gone Home*, but then I felt ashamed for failing to meet the emotional bar set by my videogame-playing brethren." Bogost is quick, however, to validate the very legitimate feelings that some players of *Gone Home* reported. "But it's also not unreasonable," Bogost adds, "to ask how these players could have been so easily satisfied. For readers of contemporary fiction or even viewers of serious television, it's hard for me to imagine that *Gone Home* would elicit much of any reaction, let alone the reports of full-bore weeping and breathless panegyrics this game has enjoyed."[66] I (Kerner) share Bogost's

sentiments. I too was invested in the outcome of the narrative, but not bowled-over at its conclusion. But perhaps *Gone Home* was not speaking to me (or Bogost) in the same way that it was to Patricia Hernandez, for instance: "Me!" Even as part of the presumptive default gamer constituency, I could identify—did identify—with the characters in *Gone Home*. Just not as intensely as others apparently. Nonetheless, *Gone Home* serves as an important indicator of what is possible with the videogaming platform, and the mobilization of environmental storytelling. *Gone Home* probably should not be held as the pinnacle of what is possible, but an important milestone in a quickly evolving (and still converging? or converged?) media landscape. But perhaps most importantly, what is particularly novel is that the game is designed with a different demographic in mind, beyond what the multi-billion-dollar gaming industry is commonly geared toward.

Gone Home is a videogame, but this also necessitates (at least among some in the gamer community it seems) to expand the category of what gaming is. Indeed, if gaming is only shooting, kicking, punching, dodging, running, driving, flying, running amok, then narrative elements get in the way of just "having fun." If gameplay is an end in itself (and gameplay here is understood as the action-orientated play) then, as Jenkins notes, "exposition can be experienced as an unwelcome interruption to the pleasure of performance."[67] Videogames inherently involves physical activity—Graeme Kirkpatrick and others have associated gameplay with dance—and thus often at odds with the cerebral activity of "reading" a film or novel. In this chapter, we have problematized this false binary, nonetheless, gameplay does act upon the body. And this suggests to me that conventional videogames are pornographic.[68] Our characterization here is not intended to be pejorative, rather it is more in keeping with a genre assessment. As Linda Williams has suggested, the pornographic genre is akin to the musical—the musical number aligns with the sexual number of pornography. In pornography, and especially contemporary pornography, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the sexual numbers, and very little attention, if any, is given to the narrative. (It seems that earlier pornography, for whatever it was worth, offered more opportunities for narrative—think for instance of *Deep Throat*, or *Behind the Green Door*.) In fact, some pornographic films do away with narrative as such, and simply organize the sexual numbers according to themes. In conventional videogames gameplay, like the sexual number, is the focus. And like the pornographic genre, gameplay might be briefly interrupted and quite typically filled with

narrative information, particularly save points. The brevity of the interstitial narrative moment is critical (else threatening to frustrate the player), an eager player might in fact (just like porn) skip the narrative to return to the action. Like pornography that invites an affective response from the viewer, with conventional gameplay there is also an embodied response: jerking around, throwing your controller across the room, adrenaline induced sweating, non-linguistic utterances (e.g., ugh!, oh!), or expletives accompanied with intense excitement or exasperated frustration. The essential function of the body genres, of which pornography is one of the three constituents (horror and melodrama being the others), is that they speak to the body, and elicits sensations. Videogaming, then, like the body genres anticipates the playing body.

Gone Home, and games like it (*Depression Quest*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*), because it is "narrative heavy" relatively speaking might unbound videogaming from the pornographic. We are not altogether sure where to situate it though, perhaps softcore erotica? Retaining some element of pornography, but at the same time developing a narrative? The embodied gameplay is critical to *Gone Home*, but it is not on exactly the same order as something like *Call of Duty*. But we realize that this framing of videogames comes with potentially problematic gendered norms—where hardcore is associated with male pleasure, while softcore erotica is perceived to be feminine. While acknowledging the potential pitfalls here, the analogy appears to be productive in thinking through the emotive and affective pleasures found in different types of gameplay. Wherever we might elect to place *Gone Home* (or other games like it, or games like it yet to be imagined), it necessitates a paradigmatic shift in our consideration of videogames.

Notes

1. Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock," *Click Nothing*, October 7, 2007, accessed November 10, 2018, http://www.clicknothing.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.
2. Marcus Maloney, "Ambivalent Violence in Contemporary Game Design," *Games and Culture* vol. 14, no. 1 (2016): 35–36.
3. Hocking.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

7. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016).
8. Nick Ballantyne, "The What, Why & WTF: Ludonarrative Dissonance," *gamecloud.net*, February 15, 2015, accessed April 10, 2019, https://gamecloud.net.au/features/opinion/twwwtf-ludonarrative-dissonance. Italics in original.
9. Ballantyne. Italics in original.
10. Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), ix.
11. The Smithsonian *The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass Effect* exhibition catalog similarly observes, "*BioShock* manages to deliver an action game that forces the player into uncomfortable situations and requires him or her to think about the implications of one's actions." Chris Melissino and Patrick O'Rourke, *The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass Effect*, exhibition catalog (New York: Welcome Books; Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2013), 162. At the same time, however, the game is not necessarily a wholesale rejection of sadean logic, or Randian Objectivism. As Parker observes, "*Bioshock* is neutral enough in its politics to be widely marketable. As Aldred and Greenspan argue, the game is politically ambivalent, sometimes interrogating and sometimes celebrating the ideology it engages." Felan Parker, "Canonizing *Bioshock*: Cultural Value and the Prestige Game," *Games and Culture* vol. 12, nos. 7–8 (2015), 747–748. Parker, in this instance, is drawing from Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan, see: Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan, "A Man Chooses, A Slave Obeys: *BioShock* and the Dystopian Logic of Convergence," *Games and Culture* vol. 6, no. 5 (2011), 480.
12. Scott Hughes, "Get Real: Narrative and Gameplay in *The Last of Us*," *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* vol. 6, no. 1 (Summer 2015), 150.
13. Ibid., 153–154.
14. Jason Sheehan, "Reading the Game: *The Last of Us*," *NPR*, December 31, 2016, accessed December 31, 2016, https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/12/31/505592646/reading-the-game-the-last-of-us.
15. Ibid.
16. Elijah Gonzalez, "What is Ludonarrative Dissonance," *gamrvw.com*, July 22, 2018, accessed April 23, 2019, https://gamervw.com/2018/07/22/ludonarrative-dissonance-matter/.
17. Ibid.
18. *Undertale WIKI*, accessed April 21, 2019, https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Genocide_Route.

19. Frederic Seraphine, "The Rhetoric of Undertale—Ludonarrative Dissonance and Symbolism," *Digital Games Research Association JAPAN, Proceedings of 8th Conference*, accessed April 21, 2019, 2. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323545890_The_Rhetoric_of_Undertale-Ludonarrative_Dissonance_and_Symbolism.
20. Ibid.
21. Chris Isaac, "Interview: Undertale Game Creator Toby Fox," *The Mary Sue*, December 102,015, accessed April 232,019, https://www.themarysue.com/interview-undertale-game-creator-toby-fox/.
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24. Jason Schreier, "Inside Rockstar Games Culture of Crunch," *Kotaku*, October 23, 2018, accessed April 20, 2019, https://kotaku.com/inside-rockstar-games-culture-of-crunch-1829936466.
25. For some laughs search: "*Red Dead Redemption II* cinematic mode fails."
26. Quoted in Film Crit Hulk, "*Red Dead Redemption* Six Months Later: A Detailed Look at the Failures and Success of Rockstar's Latest Hit," *Polygon*, April 22, 2019, accessed April 22, 2019, https://www.polygon.com/2019/4/22/18298277/red-dead-redemption-2-review-rdr2-story-design-criticism?fbclid=IwAR1r8A5zVy6X0o4ZfiHnHmt7Hx3quHyda3xfxcw_aY4ubrUorH6htpUoMJA.
27. Film Crit Hulk.
28. The Netflix series *Love, Death, and Robots* (2019) some of the episodes use photo-realistic animation, but the movement in some cases is slightly stilted. It is difficult at times to determine what we are looking at—wait is this real, or is this animated—and in this confusion, there is a possible encounter with the stupid.
29. Almost invariably *Gone Home* is compared to, or placed in the company of the *Myst* videogame franchise (the first in the series released in 1993) where players were likewise invited to read diaries, and to manipulate parts of the world to unlock secrets.
30. Felan Parker, "Canonizing *Bioshock*: Cultural Value and the Prestige Game," *Games and Culture* vol. 12, nos. 7–8 (2015), 743. For "embedded narratives" see Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan eds. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 118–130.

31. Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), 163.
32. Ibid., 165. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 129, 121.
33. Kirkpatrick, 165.
34. Chris Suellentrop, "Student's Trip Ends; A Mystery Just Begins in *Gone Home*, a Family Mystery Unfolds," *New York Times*, August 18, 2003, accessed November 10, 2018, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/19/arts/video-games/in-gonehome-a-family-mystery-unfolds.html?_r=0.
35. Patricia Hernandez, "*Gone Home*: The Kotaku Review," *Kotaku*, August 15, 2013, accessed November 10, 2018, http://kotaku.com/gone-homethe-kotaku-review-1118218265.
36. Anonymous, "*Gone Home*: THIS IS NOT A GAME," no post-date, accessed August 8, 2016, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Gone_Home.
37. Daniel Nye Griffiths suggests that it might be best to read *Gone Home* as a novel: "It might be best to think of *Gone Home* as a novel—once it is read it is read, although you may wish to dip back in—and a set of modifiers allowing the player to unlock all doors and turn on all the lights will allow second runs to focus on neglected areas without retracing too many superfluous steps." Daniel Nye Griffiths, "'*Gone Home*' – Review A Teenaged Girl at the Heart of a Grown-Up Game," *Forbes*, August 15, 2013, accessed November 10, 2018, http://www.forbes.com/sites/games/2013/08/15/gone-home-review-a-teenaged-girl-at-the-heart-of-agrown-up-game/#b84cafc583a5.
38. Sam Anderson, "Just One More Game … Angry Birds, Farmville and Other Hyperaddictive 'Stupid Games,'" *New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 2012, accessed November 10, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/magazine/angry-birds-farmville-and-other-hyperaddictive-stupid-games.html.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Aubrey Anable defines "casual games" in the following way: "The industry classification of casual games encompasses several genres—online puzzle, word, and card games such as *Candy Crush Saga, Angry Birds*, and solitaire; simulation, time management, and social games such as *Words with Friends* and *FarmVille*; and less definable hits like *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* and *Clash of Clans*. These very different games share some basic similarities: they have simple graphics and mechanics, they are usually browser or app based, and they are free or cost very little to play. Perhaps more than anything, casual games are designed to be played in short bursts

of five to ten minutes and then set aside. With the advent of micro-purchases, often these games have built-in features that limit the amount of time a person can play in one sitting before being prompted to take a break or pay to continue playing. These games are designed to be interruptible because they are understood to be played in the context of work done while sitting in front of a computer or played on a mobile phone that might at any moment receive an email, text, or call." Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 74.

42. Anderson. Related to the topic of "wasted time," see Katherine Isbister's discussion of networked-games, many of which are app-based intended to be used in small snatches of time, and how this potentially interferes with "real world" interactions. Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 126–130.
43. Anderson. Anderson cites Charles Pratt, "a researcher in New York University's Game Center, refers to such games as 'knitting games.'" This seems slightly problematic, it connotes a gendering of "casual games" or phone-based games as feminine; while "real" console based games are presumably masculine. We understand the analogy of knitting being an activity that can be done during "idle time," nonetheless the cultural connotations of the analogy are impossible to overlook.
44. Anderson.
45. Ibid.
46. "Freemium Isn't Free," Trey Parker, *South Park*, Comedy Central, Season 18, Episode 6 (November 5, 2014).
47. Incidentally, *Fallout 76* could also be viewed as a stupid genre fail because, in the opinion of many of its players, the new genre added nothing to the franchise and that, arguably for gamers more than the consumers of other media, game genre directly implies and addresses questions of respect between developer and consumer.
48. Paul Tassi reports in his 2018 *Forbes*'s article that, "The game made $104 million in May, which is a 174% jump from the previous year, and the game had 147 million active users in May." Paul Tassi, "*Pokémon GO* Is More Popular Than It's Been At Any Point Since Launch in 2016," *Forbes*, June 27, 2018, accessed November 10, 2018. https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2018/06/27/pokemon-go-is-more-popular-than-its-been-at-any-point-since-launch-in-2016/#7ecededacfd2.
49. Rebecca Hersher, "Holocaust Museum, Arlington National Cemetery Plead: No Pokémon," *NPR*, July 12, 2016, accessed April 20, 2019, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/07/12/485759308/holocaust-museum-arlington-national-cemetery-plead-no-pokemon.

50. Sam Kriss, "Resist Pokemon Go," *Jacobin*, July 14, 2016, accessed April 13, 2019, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/pokemon-go-pokestops-game-situationist-play-children/.
51. Abdelhafid Khatib, "Attempt at a Psychogeographical Description of Les Halles," *Internationale Situationniste #2*, December 1958, accessed April 28, 2019, https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/leshalles.html.
52. Jeff Sparrow, "Live in the moment: the Situationists & *Pokémon GO*," *Overland Literary Journal*, July 12, 2016, accessed April 25, 2019, https://overland.org.au/2016/07/live-in-the-moment-the-situationists-pokemon-go/.
53. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2002), 7.
54. Kriss.
55. Jessica Lachenal, "It's Super Effective: Players say *Pokémon GO* Helps Their Mental Health," *The Mary Sue*, July 12, 2016, accessed April 30, 2019, https://www.themarysue.com/pokemon-go-mental-health/.
56. News report, "New Research: *Pokémon Go*: A Potential Tool for Mental Health," *American Psychological Association*, May 06, 2018, accessed April 30, 2019, https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/new-research-pok%C3%A9mon-go-a-potential-tool-for-mental-health.
57. Note that among Sheehan's "Reading the Game" series, is a review of *Walden*, a videogame premised on the Henry David Thoreau's memoir *Walden*. See Jason Sheehan, "Reading the Game: *Walden*," *NPR*, December 13, 2018, accessed December 13, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/12/13/676129780/reading-the-game-walden.
58. Jason Sheehan, "Reading the Game: *Red Dead Redemption 2*," *NPR*, January 1, 2019, accessed January 1, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/01/01/681222316/reading-the-game-red-dead-redemption-2.
59. Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 44. Others have drawn on Fredric Jameson's conception of cognitive mapping to frame the discussion of spatialized storytelling. See for example, Luke Arnott, "Mapping Metroid: Narrative, Space, and Other M," *Games and Culture* vol. 12, no. 1 (2017), 21–22.
60. Helen Hester, *Beyond Explicit: Pornography and the Displacement of Sex* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014), 65.
61. See Aaron Kerner, *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensations* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2011), 56–59.
62. Parker, 751. Parker has assimilated a lot of research here, see: Roger Travis, "*Bioshock* in the Cave: Ethical Education in Plato and in Video Games," in *Ethics and Game Design*, eds. Karen Schrier and David Gibson (Hershey,

PA: Information Science Reference, 2010), 97; Tom Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 153–154; Grant Tavinor, "*Bioshock* and the Art of Rapture," *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 33, no. 1 (April 2009), 101; Anonymous, "Game Play: BioShock Narrative," blogpost, September 21, 2007, accessed February 12, 2019, http://cathodetan.blogspot.ca/2007/09/game-play-bioshock-narrative.html; A. Pfister, review of "*BioShock*" blogpost, August 16, 2007, accessed February 12, 2019, http://www.1up.com/reviews/bioshock_3; Andrew Vanden Bossche, "Analysis: Would You Kindly? BioShock And Free Will," *Gamasutra*, August 18, 2009, accessed February 12, 2019, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/115766/Analysis_Would_You_Kindly_BioShock_And_Free_Will.php; R. Tulloch, "Ludic Dystopias: Power, Politics and Play," in *Proceedings of the Sixth Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment*, ed. M. Ryan (New York: ACM., 2009), no pagination; Sparky Clarkson, "You Can't Put a Price on Your Soul," blogpost, *Ludo-narratology*, April 4, 2009, accessed February 12, 2019, http://ludo.mwclarkson.com/2009/04/you-cant-put-a-price-on-your-soul/; Charles Onyett, "*Bioshock*," review, IGN, August 17, 2007, accessed February 12, 2019, https://www.ign.com/articles/2007/08/17/bioshock-review-2; and Tavinor, 104.

63. Matthew Thomas Payne, "War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* vol. 31, no. 4 (October 2014), 269.
64. Ibid., 270.
65. Ben Whaley cites *Catherine* (designed by Atlus 2011) as an example where ludonarrative dissonance is used for comedic (and meta-gameplay) purposes: "a crucial difference between Hocking's critique of *Bioshock* and *Catherine* is that the latter consciously uses these jarring, alternative design choices precisely for meta-narrative and comedic purposes. *Catherine* wants to make players laugh and think at the same time. Because of this, the distanced engagement of Japanese game design capitalizes on the feeling of ludonarrative dissonance and redeploys it as a useful tool for player creativity and immersion" (Whaley, 109). Whaley suggests that the objective of *Catherine* is actually to get gamers to stop playing games, and to get out into the "real world": "With regard to distance, the self-reflexive and meta-narrative elements continually force the player to be cognizant of the fact that they are playing a video game. This is accomplished via the confessional gameplay segments and online indexing of poll answers as well as the occasional breaking of the fourth wall in character monologues. Meta-gameplay such as this purposefully detaches the player from the game world and encourages them to think about their real everyday life and actions. Indeed, one cannot progress through the game if they do not

answer the polls and the sheer act of answering elicits self-reflexivity from the player. It is the synthesis of these two forms of engagement that give video games like *Catherine* the potential to function both as effectual social narratives and also potentially encourage real social change through player self-reflection." Ben Whaley, "Who Will Play *Terebi Gemu* When No Japanese Children Remain? Distanced Engagement in Atlus' *Catherine*," *Games and Culture* vol. 13, no. 1 (2015), 110.

66. Ian Bogost, "Perpetual Adolescence: The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 28, 2013, accessed November 10, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/perpetual-adolescence-the-fullbright-companys-gone-home/.
67. Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," 126.
68. John Lanchester also associates videogames with pornography, but in a decidedly less generous manner: "And what do they want? The same thing the audience for any new medium always wants: they want pornography, broadly defined. They want to see things they aren't supposed to see. This is why video games, in general (and away from the world of Miyamoto-san) are so preoccupied with violence—it's what young men want to see. (Pornography in the sexual sense is less of an issue: they can get that from the internet, any time they want.) Their rule-bound, target-bound educations and work lives leave them with a deep craving to go and commit imaginary crimes—as well they might. Not all games are cynically, affectlessly violent, but a lot of them are, and this trend is holding video games back. It's keeping them at the level of Hollywood blockbusters, when they could go on to be something else and something more." (John Lanchester, "Is It Art?" *London Review of Books* vol. 31, no. 1 (January 2009): https://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n01/john-lanchester/is-it-art.) Summerley, however, similarly recognizes the structural similarities between the pornographic (and musical) genre and that of videogames: "Pornography, musicals and games are all forms that can be enjoyed apart from a fictional context and it is surprising that they are not compared more often given their remarkable structural similarities. For pornography, games and musicals an explicit narrative is arguably optional and their formal structure means that they often come across tensions when trying to convey fictional information. Fiction in pornography is fraught with difficulty when reading it mostly due to the nature of pornography and its audience. Like games, there are those who would question whether there is even any need for any kind of fiction, narrative or story in pornography. Game developer John Carmack made the infamous analogy that, 'Story in a game is like a story in a porn movie. It's expected to be there, but it's not that important.' … However, this does not detract from the fact that there are audiences that engage with stories in both games and pornography." Rory

K. Summerley, "Approaches to Game Fiction Derived from Musicals and Pornography," *Arts* vol. 7, no. 3 (2018): no pagination. Summerley cites David Kushner, *Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture* (New York: Random House, 2003), 120.

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CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: Well That Was Stupid

Introduction: An Exercise in Stupidity—*Sucker Punch*

We opened the present volume with Zack Snyder's 2011 film *Sucker Punch*, so let us return to it as a concluding exercise. Snyder's film is not stupid in all the ways that we have explored in this volume, but it hits many of the notes. By conventional narrative standards, the screenplay is an unmitigated disaster, and there is even a sense that Snyder is fully aware of this fact, and that he is being consciously stupid. (Snyder co-wrote the screenplay with Steve Shibuya.) Our primary character is Babydoll, and she has been institutionalized in the Lennox House asylum—she is grief-stricken by her mother's death, and further traumatized after accidentally killing her younger sister during an altercation with her smarmy stepfather. Babydoll's stepfather in all likelihood murdered her mother, and he is merely interested in the family's wealth. The Lennox House, though, is no ordinary asylum, it is a cover for a high-end brothel, where the institutionalized women perform burlesque numbers for the clientele, as well as sexual services. The stage, the theater, the incorporation of burlesque into the narrative (such as it is) gives license to the shameless exhibition of highly fetishized female bodies.

The burlesque, of course, was a feature of the cinema of attractions. And the tradition of burlesque continued even after narrative cinema matured; notably, the musical genre assimilates the burlesque. At the apex of studio controlled Hollywood narrative cinema in the 1950s there was

A. Kerner, J. Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28176-2_6

an effort "to contain female sexuality," Eric Schaefer observes, "the burlesque film was directly confronting viewers with the sight of women who were uninhibited in their sexual expression. In burlesque films women strutted, pranced, swung their arms, bumped their hips, poured out of, and then stripped off their costumes in what appeared to be a flood of uncontained sexual display. The women on screen met the gaze of the spectator, acknowledged that gaze, and defiantly invited him to look further."[1] When Babydoll initially encounters the business of the brothel, a fellow asylum inmate explains (while seated on a private brothel-room bed), "Blue owns the club. And we, my dear, heh … are the main *attractions*. Ta-da!" Here is a degree of awareness within the diegetic space, and a meta-diegetic nod that *Sucker Punch* is nothing more than an untamed attraction.

Babydoll acknowledges that she is being looked at, she is explicitly placed on various stages—in the dance studio, in the burlesque theater, on the kitchen cutting block (as a piece of meat?). In this latter instance, in an effort to steal a knife, Babydoll dances for the cook in order to distract him, and immediately prior to her dance one of Babydoll's accomplices seductively instructs the cook, "You're gonna want to watch this." However, there appears to be dread built into this moment—especially in the face of female directives to look at the fetish head-on. Aligning our perspective with the corpulent and sweaty cook, who seems gripped with fear more than erotic desire. The spectator in this case, perhaps shies "away from the grotesque image of phallocentrism" that the cook signifies, "and perhaps [is] actually relieved this time to have escaped" the erotic encounter "in favour of *Sucker Punch*'s impossible fantasy"[2] (Fig. 6.1). The slip from an erotically charged dance number into a sci-fi heist scenario, wards off the dread of unbridled female sexuality.

In addition, the *performance of the female gender* (not *woman*) in *Sucker Punch* is so exaggerated, played to the absolute hilt that the hollowness of the fetish is made painfully obvious. The outfits and accoutrements of patriarchal-imagined femininity—pigtails, unnaturally long eyelashes, glistening lips, schoolgirl outfits, nurse uniforms, lingerie, thigh-high stockings, fishnet stockings, high-heeled shoes, battle-gear, leather, and so on, and so on—draws attention to the constructed nature of the fetish of woman, which Schaefer calls "hyperfeminine."[3] Schaefer adds the outfits in burlesque are "far removed from contemporary fashion and often harked back to the nineteenth century (bustles and corsets) or biblical/'slave girl' costuming (veils, sarongs) as filtered through Hollywood period

Fig. 6.1 Babydoll invites the male gaze in *Sucker Punch* (Zack Snyder, 2011)

pictures. Costumes also featured tassels, feathers, sequins, elaborate headdresses, and other 'feminine' signifiers and were often designed to emphasize the breasts and pelvis. Hyperfemininity in the costuming, while drawing attention to sex, simultaneously functioned as a virtual 'masquerade,' taking on parodic overtones."[4] While the clothes and accoutrements of performed femininity in *Sucker Punch* do not follow this precisely, though *many* of these elements are in fact present, nevertheless the flaunt-

ing of the fetishistic image of woman performs the masquerade, and potentially invites parodic readings. These highly fetishistic gestures—erotically charged spectacles, which is what truly drives *Sucker Punch*—are addressed outward toward an acknowledged spectator, rather than working to contain events within the interior diegetic narrative.[5] And this outward address—as found in early kinetoscope films, or traveling Lumière programs—is where we find the untamed attraction, the stupid.

But *Sucker Punch* even goes one step further, layering one fetish upon another.[6] When Babydoll performs, she is apparently so captivating that she induces an awe-struck paralysis in those that gaze upon her. What is particularly striking though, is that we *never* see Babydoll dance. Rather as she begins to sway *Sucker Punch* slips into Babydoll's fantasy worlds—invariably some sort of battle scene. The erotically charged dance number is given over to the videogame-inspired combat mission—wholesale eroticism is displaced for erotically charged violence. Oscar Moralde views this radical disconnection between erotic dance numbers and the scenes of highly choreographed violence as a transparent gesture: "the effect is disorienting and forces disengagement from the flow of the story while making a thematic connection between the CG pyrotechnics and the girls performing in the brothel. Drawing attention to this disconnect, fellow patient/prostitute/commando Sweet Pea (Abbie Cornish) comments that Baby Doll's first dance (in place of which we watch a sequence—borrowing from Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*—where she fights a trio of giant samurai) looks like meaningless 'gyrating and moaning.'"[7] She disparagingly adds, "The dance should be more than just titillation." Whether it is an erotically charged dance number, or an exciting fight scene (which might be simply a different type of dance number), makes little difference. These are both "meaningless," and are directed toward titillation—favoring affect over emotional investment in characters—stupid.

A slightly decelerated iteration of *Transformers*' aspirant Hollywood vernacular is evident in *Sucker Punch*, and this is particularly true of the combat mission sequences. Take, for instance, the combat mission set in WWI trenches, fused with a steampunk aesthetic (we learn that the German side is manned by zombified German soldiers powered by steam and clockworks). As Babydoll and her companions fight their way through the trenches spatial geography is nearly impossible to discern, quick cuts from one perspective to another hurriedly disorientate—but this is of little consequence, it does not matter. Likewise, individuated fights (of which there are many) are reduced to lightning quick shots, usually ending with

steam jetting out from the fallen German soldier. Beyond intensified continuity (Bordwell), *Sucker Punch* avails itself of the chaotic (Stork), the stylistics of post-continuity (Shaviro), and jubilantly exchanges "visual intelligibility for sensory" stimulation.[8] Stupid!

As for genre, *Sucker Punch* is perhaps most indebted to the women in prison film—that fixture of 1970s exploitation cinema—this is perhaps the only genre that could possibly "contain" the film. However, the slips into various combat missions, Babydoll's fantastical musings are individually genre-coded: chambara/samurai movie (with faint whiffs of daikaiju eiga—Japanese monster movies), war movie (filtered through the lens of videogames—namely *Bioshock*), fantasy film (a middle-Earth battle replete with dragons and Orcs), western heist movie set in a science fiction world (*Apocalypse Now* meets *The Matrix* meets *Star Wars*). These individuated set-pieces have their own distinct characteristics. The diegetic narrative, set in the Lennox House asylum while largely governed by the women in prison film it is infused with a litany of other genre tropes (pornography, action, fantasy, horror, torture porn). While John Truby assures us that multiple genres can (and should) co-exist in the contemporary mediascape, in *Sucker Punch*'s pastiche of genres there is an uneasy collision, which Moralde already suggested disorientates and prompts the spectator to disengage "from the flow of the story." Stupid!!

Narrative dissonance emerges in a couple of different ways in *Sucker Punch*: first, there is a question about whose story is actually being told? And second, the mode of address does not necessarily correspond to the narrative at hand. Let us begin with this basic story question, in the latter moments of *Sucker Punch*, Babydoll turns to her last surviving compatriot Sweetpea and says, "This was never my story. It's yours. Now, don't screw it up, okay." (Snyder's wink that this is all stupid?) Despite the fact that we begin with Babydoll, despite the fact that *Sucker Punch* is quite literally *her* vision, *her* perspective, it is apparently Sweetpea's story? Shortly after Babydoll arrives at Lennox House she is lobotomized, though this event is not explicitly presented, in the latter moments of the film we see Babydoll in a catatonic state—it leads us to believe that everything that has transpired is a figment of Babydoll's imagination, not just the fantastical combat missions, but even the diegetic events within the Lennox House. This realization also casts a dark shadow on the ostensible "happy ending" where Sweetpea boards a bus to make her escape. As the bus rides off into the sunset (or dawning light) it is as if she is Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* traveling down the Yellow Brick Road—to the right of the road is a field

with a scarecrow, and a billboard with "Paradise Diner" scrawled across it. The billboard appears to reference an earlier line of dialog, where Blue, a Lennox House orderly and the despotic brothel manager, notes that following Babydoll's lobotomy, "She'll be in paradise." The coloring of the closing scene also leads one to think this is yet another one of Babydoll's fantasies. So, is it Sweetpea's story or not? Is it still Babydoll's (post-lobotomy) story?

There is a cut from Babydoll's lobotomy to a staged burlesque performance of a lobotomy; Sweetpea takes the role of Babydoll, complete with a blonde wig resembling Babydoll, but Sweetpea interrupts the dress-rehearsal: "Stop! This is a joke, right? Don't you get the point of this? It's to turn people on. I get the sexy little schoolgirl. I even get the helpless mental patient, right? That can be hot. But what is this? Lobotomized vegetable? How about something a little more commercial, for God's sakes?" But perhaps this is exactly the point: Snyder appears to be calling attention to the fact that the fetishistic image of woman, is, in fact, nothing more than a lobotomized vegetable, which is infinitely open to commercialization. "Because of all the stylistic and narrative roadblocks thrown up between the audience and the characters, it's nearly impossible to identify with them as 'real' people," Moralde observes. "This leaves only one significant way to identify with anything in the film: *the act of watching a spectacle*."[9] Let's spell this out, "S-t-u-p-i-d!"

However, there is an "emptiness" here, not simply because the characters are effectively non-existent beyond their superficial fetishistic appeal, the meta-cinematic critique potentially even threatens to destroy the fetish that it so painstakingly constructs. *Sucker Punch*—and we cannot believe we are doing this—might actually be, in certain instances, too smart for its own good. Although *Sucker Punch* establishes itself as an exploitation film, it could be viewed equally as a film *about* exploitation (films). "We see the mechanisms of how exploitative cinema works because this film pushes forward an example where all the breaks and the seams are showing," as Moralde observes. From this perspective, *Sucker Punch* does not encourage stupidity (as Adorno views it, inducing "unthinking"), but rather demonstrates *how* the cinematic fuels stupidity. *Sucker Punch* is "a deeply tragic message driven by the knowledge of the true power of the fetishized image. *Sucker Punch* knows that these images, seemingly charged with significance, have the power to turn brains off—which seems to include the brains of most critics."[10] Similarly, Alexander Sergeant suggests that *Sucker Punch* places "[f]antasy and scopophilia … in an overt dialogue

with one another, and this dialogue features throughout the rest of Snyder's increasingly impossible plot."[11] In a complex tug and pull, then, *Sucker Punch* at once invites us to consider the ways in which the fetishistic economy has "the power to turn brains off," and at the same time, apparently still works to seduce the spectator with a compendium of fetishistic images.

Sergeant makes an analogous argument, "By placing the fantasy act up on screen within a narrative that consistently dramatizes the multifaceted dream worlds of its protagonist Babydoll, *Sucker Punch* invokes rather than supports the symbolic structures of patriarchy, objectifying its female protagonists not in a manner that supposedly renders them as possible objects of a male scopic desire, but instead in a manner that transmits their status as impossible objects of an impossible desire." While at first glance it seems obvious that *Sucker Punch* caters to the male gaze, however, it seems to problematize this, "with its latex costumes rendered as impossible as its high-kicking action and folkloric imagery." Sergeant does not suggest that *Sucker Punch* undoes the male gaze altogether though, but rather "illuminate[s] its inherently fantastical nature," and resists the potency of the fetish.[12] In its stupidity, is it too smart?

Narrative dissonance is located at many junctures. While the trajectory of the story is told through Babydoll, the narrative arc supposedly belongs to Sweetpea, despite the fact that she is a supporting character, and often is at odds with the established narrative objectives. This is not to suggest that upending conventional storytelling structures—where secondary characters are in fact the "real" focus—is not possible, clearly such a thing is conceivable, but in this case, it feels off. And while we agree that we might be overly generous here, it is possible to read *Sucker Punch* as a critique of the very thing it depicts, a meta-cinematic exercise in the economy of fetishism. Leading us to question, is the spectator the one being (sucker) punched?

Additionally, there is a problem in storytelling mode. *Sucker Punch* does not quite know what it wants to be. A string of music videos, a musical, or a narrative film ("properly speaking")—genre failure? Narrative wants to be dissonant, conventional narratives are beaten into submission, smoothed out, and shaped to meet standard expectations—molded into a consonant narrative. *Sucker Punch*, on the other hand, is beaten, but not beaten into submission, and emerges misshapen, wonky, it exposes "all the breaks and the seams," and allows its dissonance to come through. The opening scene is nothing short of a music video (most, if not all in slow

motion), very limited muted diegetic dialog (though we are given some establishing voiceover narration from outside the diegetic space), desaturated color palette, all the while Emily Browning's affecting cover of the Eurythmics's, "Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)" plays as the non-diegetic score—Browning plays the primary character Babydoll. Shortly thereafter another music video number follows. In a duet, again, Browning covers the Pixies, "Where Is My Mind?" Narrative is mounted in the interstitial moments between the music video numbers. However, the established pattern of music video-narrative-music video is given over to the spectacle of Babydoll's fantasy worlds and thus becomes narrative-spectacular fantasy-narrative, and so on. In terms of structure just like the musical, or porn, narrative is shoehorned in-between arousing set-pieces. While the general spectacle-narrative-spectacle pattern remains intact, the nature of those spectacle set-pieces is so divergent, so idiosyncratic, that despite their formulaic regularity they feel dissonant.

Sucker Punch: A rose by any other name would smell as stupid.

The Charge of Stupidity, and How the Stupid Questions Our Assumptions About Storytelling

Robert Musil took stupidity seriously. His published lecture, "On Stupidity," notes that the "most general notion of stupidity" has to do with the soundness of a thing, a category, or with capability, "and everything that is incapable or unsound might then, on occasion, also be called stupid."[13] From interventions in narrative conventions to genre fails, we too associate the stupid with "soundness" and "capacity"—the stupid emerges when the integrity of a category, paradigm of assessment, or established narrative/genre conventions are challenged. Media-makers flirt with catastrophe when advancing innovations, and appear to lack the capacity to play by prevailing storytelling regimes—stupid!

Perhaps what is most intriguing about Musil's meditation on stupidity is his placement of it in the realm of aesthetics and the sensate experience. Although Musil does not characterize it exactly in these terms, it is not that far removed from Kant's conception of the beautiful. To express, "That's beautiful," says nothing of the referent, but says far more about the subject uttering it, because it merely functions as a veiled expression of pleasure.[14] In a similar fashion to utter, "That's stupid!" potentially says very little about the object, but rather reveals frustration, exasperation,

confusion on the part of the subject. "There is something of a 'short circuit' in this, and it is more understandable if we consider that *stupid* and *vulgar*, whatever they may mean, are also used as terms of abuse," Musil notes. "For the meaning of these terms, as we are well aware, lies not so much in their content as in the way they are used; many among us might well love the donkey, but be insulted if we are called one. The insult does not stand for what it signifies, but for a mixture of ideas, feelings, and intentions which it cannot even remotely express, but which it can signal."[15] "That's stupid!" in most instances is inflected with *feelings*—affectively charged. Slang, contemporary vernacularism, "teasing words, faddish words" are adopted not simply for what they might communicate, but also in their slipperiness as (novel) signifiers indicating their emotive charge: "what they all have in common, however incomparable they may otherwise be, is that they are in the service of an affect, and it is precisely their lack of precision and absence of referent that enables them to suppress, when they are used, whole realms of words that are more accurate, more relevant, and more correct. Evidently life sometimes needs this, and we have to allow for it, but what happens in such cases is without a doubt stupid; it wanders, so to speak, along the same path as stupidity."[16] Expletives work in a similar fashion; they do not signify as such, but rather forcefully communicate "affectivity." Language is not purely utilitarian (serving as a means of communication), but is frequently laced with the sensate experience, what amounts to communicative excess, as Musil insists, "thoughts and feelings act together."[17] "Stupid" is affective laden.

While the stupid is something that might be felt, it is often elicited through storytelling structures. In his discussion of Richard Kelly's 2006 film *Southland Tales*, Steven Shaviro notes that elements of the film might come off as effectively stupid because they appear as unmotivated tangents. Shaviro does not use the term stupid here, but just as well might have: "The compositional logic of *Southland Tales* is paratactic and additive, having little to do with conventional film syntax. The film is filled with inserts; it overlays, juxtaposes and restlessly moves between multiple images and sound sources. But it does not provide us with any hierarchical organisation of all these elements. Many of the film's most arresting images just pop up, without any discernible motivation or point of view. For instance, around the five-minute mark, shortly after a title reading 'Los Angeles,' there is a shot of a G. I. Joe doll, advancing on knees and elbows along a wet sidewalk, then firing a rifle."[18] This element has no narrative function per se, other than to in effect give some sense of the storyworld.

Shaviro adds there might be a loose association between certain provocative images, "but we are not given any rationale for this connection. All these correspondences and connections form something like an affective constellation; but they are too dispersed, and too indefinite and arbitrary, to work in the focused and organised way that Eisensteinian montage theory demands. Rather, these links are weak ties, such as we are accustomed to find on the Internet."[19] These "weak" connections—or affective constellations—might well make them stupid, precisely because they are difficult to contextualize within standard narrative conventions. And the idea of "affective constellations" might share certain affinities with the conception of spatialized storytelling. A constellation appearing across the vast space of the sky, the discernable celestial bodies only perceptible with the star-gazer's capacity to connect the dots. Spatialized storytelling also relies on the spectator to assemble the accretion of story-elements into an intelligible "narrative" (if only as an "affective constellation"). Videogame narratives might work in this manner.

Although we have not come right out to say it until now, what this volume illustrates is that we (critics, and scholars) fetishize continuity editing. Far too much emphasis has been placed on its importance. We can turn to Michael Bay as evidence of this fact—audiences are remarkably forgiving for violations in continuity. Shaviro also observes that the "*Transformers* series no longer seem to be invested in meaningful expression, or narrative construction, at all. They don't even show a concern for accurate continuity."[20] Shaviro goes on to cite Bay himself, "I think you have to make movies for the general public and not the details … When you get hung up on continuity, you can't keep the pace and price down. Most people simply consume a movie and they are not even aware of these errors."[21] We actually concur with Bay, as far as he goes, and are disappointed with Shaviro's summary dismissal of audiences—voiced with a thinly veiled classicist contempt—that "no longer seem to be invested in meaningful expression, or narrative construction." While nowhere as frenetic as Bay, we only need to look to figures like Jean-Luc Godard, who famously violated the 180-degree rule (among other rules of continuity) in his 1960 film *Breathless*. Why is it that Godard's violations of continuity are enthusiastically celebrated, and Bay subject to such virulent scorn? Was it not Godard's cinematic violations that lent license to filmmakers after him, from Kubrick, to Wong Kar-Wai to … Tony Scott, to experiment with the established rules of continuity?

David Denby observes that there has been a sea-change in cinematic storytelling, one that moves away from psychological dramas, and into the realm of the stupid (without calling it such, rather he calls it the "conglomerate aesthetic"). "In contrast to films made before 1960, which seem to modern audiences to wallow in pathos," Denby bemoans, "modern films provide spectacle and excitement without emotion. Blockbusters like *Kill Bill* and *Pearl Harbor* offer audiences the opportunity to be spooked, titillated, dazed, impressed, and blown away without giving them the chance to share in any of the characters' feelings."[22] It is not that Denby, and so many other critics and scholars are "wrong," indeed we actually concur with Denby, as far as he goes. But what Denby and others fail to recognize, is the significance of corporal investment, as if psychological investment is the *only* storytelling investment that merits serious consideration. In economic terms, the stupid far outstrips anything that Denby might consider "worthy" storytelling. From the widespread circulation of pornography to videogames (and its ancillary activities—for instance, Twitch and E-sports), to the most profitable box-office pictures, there is a global demand for the stupid. It seems to us that our paradigms of assessment should make a critical shift in order to account for the *majority* of contemporary media output, rather than wring our hands and vociferously protest, "They don't make them like they used to!"

Indeed, spectators can be deeply moved by other storytelling conventions and modes, beyond our established narrative standards. Recall *Adventure Time* creator Pendleton Ward's jubilation with *Gone Home*, explaining: "it was wild to feel so intimately connected with the character in that game." Far beyond what we in the literary and cinematic disciplines have (problematically) called "identification,"[23] videogames have enormous potential to "put us in the shoes" of a character. Ward highlights the potential for scary games, because instead of simply witnessing events unfold, with videogames where you manipulate the onscreen avatar (whether that's third person or first person) "you're the one taking the steps forward towards that room."[24] Imagine, now, the possibilities for (videogame) storytelling with VR! This seems like an emerging area to watch for, precisely because VR is explicitly orientated toward the viewing body. VR invites us to look around, to move our bodies to see below us, behind us, and so on. VR has the very real ability to induce nausea, or vertigo by simulating the experience of being exposed to tremendous heights. The unfortunate example of a friend of ours who is an avid gamer and yet who is unable to engage in any way with VR because it gives her

terrible motion sickness is a case in point. She laments that an important component of the evolving gaming world is now passing her by. The fact is that the body genres—which invariably are addressed to the body (and thus, open to the stupid)—are initial adopters of emerging technologies. And this is particularly true of pornography, which is one of Linda Williams's body genre trifacta, horror, and melodrama being the other two. (At the conclusion of our Ludonarrative Dissonance chapter we made some cursory gestures to add videogames to the body genres as gaming invites us to mimic the kinetic action onscreen.)

The widespread penetration of moving image technologies owes some of its success to the pornographic. Even at the inception of the moving image we find evidence of this from Eadweard Muybridge's study of (female) human movement,[25] to Lumiere films and kinetoscope films that featured burlesque numbers (and other erotic content),[26] to the adoption of VCRs,[27] to the earliest mobilization of VOD via cable television,[28] to video-streaming online, to VR video. At every significant technological innovation, the pornographic has been there as an early adopter, advancing the possibilities for storytelling. While some have speculated that "porn gravitates to new media because new media are more free from restraint than existing ones, whose content authorities have learned to regulate." This does not quite explain pornography's incessant forays into technological innovations though. While published in the mid-1990s Peter Johnson, in his short piece, "Pornography Drives Technology," which is just as relevant now, speculates that "Porn, like its subject matter, is always eager to experiment." He continues, "Its design is, simply, to get to market as quickly and easily as possible. When new media offer new markets, porn spies them quickly and rushes to fill them."[29] But this emphasis on new technology and early adoption opens up a significant point of contention, which we have not addressed in this volume: The stupid is often a site of privilege—the ability to take risks with innovative storytelling and access to new technologies (both at the production and consumption end) is, at least to begin with, accessible only to those with resources. Johnson observes that "porn draws curiosity seekers, who stay to see what else the new media can do. There is a convenient dovetailing in the audience for computers and pornography: young, white males dominate both markets."[30] Indeed, the Michael Bays of the world can take creative risks without jeopardizing their careers, and not to mention the substantial capital it takes to make a film like *Transformers: The Last Knight* (2017). While viewing the latest installment of the *Transformers* franchise

might be in reach of most consumers, access to something like VR hardware and content demand significant resources. A privilege check: We count ourselves in this too, as tenured faculty, we can investigate "questionable" cultural objects without fear of jeopardizing our professional profile. We can also bemuse ourselves by exploring ideas and cultural artifacts, which some scholars/critics might view as silly, frivolous, not "serious," indulgent, or just simply stupid (and not stupid in a good way). While the materialist inquiries are important, our primary focus here has been the structure of storytelling across media.

Stupidity emerges from our assumptions about storytelling. In his preface to *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes bitterly intones, "I resent seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there."[31] While our project is less politically motivated (at least overtly), nevertheless, we too are indignant about the presumed qualities of a narrative, which are a product of historical development. Moreover, the paradigms of assessment have evolved in tandem with storytelling conventions. And let us remind ourselves that "conventions" are merely culturally agreed upon norms, and the analytic paradigms have developed to police those. The stupid challenges our most fundamental assumptions—what we assume to be true, narrative conventions that are presumed to be unmoving, static, intrinsically essential, even natural. All of our storytelling conventions are arbitrary. They are only conventions because they have been assimilated over many years of modeling. John Lanchester in his *London Review of Books* review of the videogame *Bioshock*, reminds us that "Northrop Frye once observed that all conventions, as conventions, are more or less insane; Stanley Cavell once pointed out that the conventions of cinema are just as arbitrary as those of opera." And because there is no *natural* storytelling syntax, or mode, there are bound to be evolutionary elements that, prior to becoming conventions, will appear stupid. As a relatively new storytelling mode videogames are stuffed with stupidity, Lanchester observes that videogames "are full, overfull, of exactly that kind of arbitrary convention. Many of these conventions make the game more difficult. Gaming is a much more resistant, frustrating medium than its cultural competitors. Older media have largely abandoned the idea that difficulty is a virtue." Adding a personal note Lanchester recounts, "if I had to name one high-cultural notion that had died in my adult lifetime, it would be the idea that difficulty is artistically desirable. It's a bit of an irony that difficulty thrives in the

newest medium of all—and it's not by accident, either. One of the most common complaints regular gamers make in reviewing new offerings is that they are too easy. (It would be nice if a little bit of that leaked over into the book world.)"[32] So do we.

A Final Word: I'm with Stupid →

Recounting Musil's observations, Avital Ronell notes that, "stupid often comes in couples—like dumb and dumber, perhaps, or Dick und Doof (the German version of Laurel and Hardy), or Bouvard et Pécuchet, or, reaching back further to Hellenic comedy, the alazon and eiron, who became the significant dumb-ass couple of de Man's reflections on irony."[33] But there is no need to go that deep, after all, we do not have to look any further than the present authors—Aaron and Julian.

Notes

1. Eric Shaefer, "The Obscene Seen: Spectacle and Transgression in Postwar Burlesque Films," *Cinema Journal* vol. 36, no. 2 (Winter, 1997), 53.
2. Alexander Sergeant, "Zack Snyder's Impossible Gaze: The Fantasy of 'Looked-at-ness' Manifested in *Sucker Punch* (2011)," in *Sensational Pleasures in Cinema, Literature and Visual Culture: The Phallic Eye*, eds. Gilad Padva and Nurit Buchweitz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 136.
3. Shaefer, 55.
4. Ibid., 55–56.
5. See Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 384.
6. Commenting on the doubling, or the displacement of fetishistic imagery Oscar Moralde notes, "The General (Scott Glenn) speaks almost entirely in platitudes like 'If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything,' and any dialogue that doesn't directly drive the action forward is the type of one-liner audiences have heard in countless action films before this one. Like the fetishized imagery, the dialogue is pushed to such an artificial extreme that it approaches self-parody, detached from concerns of narrative tension—just like how the battle sequences mostly dispense with the labored process that many action films go through to justify why the heroes need to slaughter their enemies, and instead relies on the audience recognizing that zombies and orcs need to be destroyed because that's what

happens in these sequences. The battlefield layer is pure decontextualization composed of setpieces extracted from other action stories and sutured into this one, worlds constructed entirely of surfaces." Oscar Moralde, "*Sucker Punch* and the Fetishized Image," *Slant*, April 5, 2011, accessed November 10, 2018, https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/sucker-punch-and-the-fetishized-image/.

7. Ibid.
8. Drawn from Stork's petulance (cited in our introduction), "Contemporary blockbusters, particularly action movies, trade visual intelligibility for sensory overload, and the result is a film style marked by excess, exaggeration and overindulgence: **chaos cinema**." Matthias Stork, "CHAOS CINEMA: The decline and fall of action filmmaking," *IndieWire*, August 22, 2011, accessed November 10, 2018, http://www.indiewire.com/2011/08/video-essay-chaos-cinema-the-decline-and-fall-of-action-filmmaking-132832/. Bold text in original.
9. Moralde. Italics added. Sergeant comments on this same scene: "In this shift from reality to Babydoll's imagination, an off-screen negotiation of eroticism is now placed on screen and, rather than spectators watching theatricality, we become spectators watching fantasy spectators watching theatricality who, like Sweetpea, are aware of our role in the process. Žižek's impossible gaze of fantasy is made apparent, and the spectator's own role in masking that impossibility is thus made equally apparent." Sergeant, 133.
10. Moralde.
11. Sergeant, 134.
12. Ibid., 129.
13. Ibid., 276.
14. Salim Kemal, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory: An Introduction Second Edition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 34.
15. Robert Musil, "On Stupidity," in *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, eds. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 278.
16. Ibid., 278–279.
17. Ibid., 285.
18. Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 70–71.
19. Ibid., 72–73.
20. Ibid., 119.
21. Michael Bay cited in Shaviro, 119. See *Armageddon* DVD Review, https://www.michaelbay.com/articles/armageddon-dvd-review/.
22. David Denby cited in Carl R. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 85.

23. Carl Plantinga productively complicates "identification." Plantinga instead suggests that "engagement" offers a more nuanced approach, but is rooted in the end to emotional involvement in the narrative: "Character engagement is the trajectory of mental activities and responses viewers have in relation to film characters. Viewers sympathize with, have antipathy for, are conflicted about, and are indifferent to various characters. Engagement involves cognitive assessment, viewer desires for various outcomes, and sympathetic and antipathetic emotions in response to a character's situations." It's the narrative, not simply characters that invites any sort of "identification" as such. Emotional engagement or identification, especially in the Hollywood tradition, is steered: "the audience cares deeply about a character," but this is because the spectator "also has deeper concerns about the unfolding narrative." Plantinga, 111.
24. Maria Bustillos, "It's Adventure Time," *The Awl*, April 15, 2014, accessed November 10, 2018, http://theholenearthecenteroftheworld.com/.
25. See Chap. 2 "Prehistory: The 'Frenzy of the Visible,'" in Linda Williams's *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California, 1989).
26. See *The Good Old Naughty Days* (Michael Reilhac, 2003), a collection of explicit films dating between 1905 and 1930.
27. Megumi Komiya and Barry Litman note that, "From the inception of the prerecorded videocassette industry, adult-orientated movies have been a substantial component of sales and rentals." Megumi Komiya and Barry Litman, "The Economics of the Prerecorded Videocassette Industry," in *Social and Cultural Aspects of VCR Use*, ed. Julia Dobrow (New York: Routledge, 2009), 36. Sony's failure with Betamax was in part driven by the tape-length, running an hour, while VHS boasted 2-hour run time and eventually developed tapes that could hold 6 hours of content. "What were people watching on these early videotapes? The early home video rental stores, the outlets that drove Betamax from the market, were almost exclusively pornographic, drawing on the same clientele as early nickelodeons. The same was true of home video sales. It was not until the mid-1980s that first, local video rental stores, and next, national chains like Blockbuster entered the field with videos for the mass-market. By then, porn had shown the way. Thus, the victory of VHS over Betamax, and the triumph of video rental and purchase over time-shifting, is a rare example of pornography specifically adopting a product and a method of retailing that drove its competitor from the market." Peter Johnson, "Pornography Drives Technology: Why Not to Censor the Internet," *Federal Communications Law Journal* vol. 49, no. 1 (1996), 222.

28. "One of the first uses of pay-cable was pornography: people would pay to watch X- and R-rated films at home." Johnson, 221.
29. Ibid., 223.
30. Ibid.
31. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), 11.
32. John Lanchester, "Is It Art?" *London Review of Books* vol. 31, no. 1 (January 2009): https://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n01/john-lanchester/is-it-art.
33. Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 85.

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