

VISUAL DIGITAL CULTURE

Surface play and spectacle in new media
genres

Andrew Darley



London and New York

CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
Introduction	1
PART I	
History	9
1 A back story: realism, simulation, interaction	11
<i>Beginnings</i>	11
<i>Digital cinema</i>	16
<i>Computer games</i>	23
<i>Special venue attractions</i>	31
2 Genealogy and tradition: mechanised spectacle as popular entertainment	37
<i>Popular entertainments and the cinema</i>	37
<i>Spectacle displaced</i>	48
<i>Extending a tradition: fin-de-siècle digital forms</i>	52
3 Shaping tradition: the contemporary context	58
<i>On formality in contemporary visual culture</i>	59
<i>Eco and Jameson: repetition and surface</i>	67
<i>Résumé</i>	73

PART II	
Aesthetics	79
4 Simulation and hyperrealism: computer animation and TV advertisements	81
<i>Computer animation: second-order realism</i>	82
<i>TV advertisements: neo-montage and hyperrealism</i>	88
5 The waning of narrative: new spectacle cinema and music video	102
<i>Spectacle and the feature film</i>	104
<i>Spectacle cinema: digital effects</i>	106
<i>Music video: spectacle as style</i>	115
6 The digital image in ‘the age of the signifier’	124
<i>Repetition as the measure of visual digital culture</i>	125
<i>Montage and the digital image</i>	129
<i>Genre and authorship in visual digital forms</i>	134
PART III	
Spectators	145
7 Games and rides: surfing the image	147
<i>Computer games: ‘into the image’?</i>	149
<i>Simulation rides: the almost motionless voyage</i>	160
<i>Interactivity and immersion as mass entertainment</i>	162
8 Surface play and spaces of consumption	167
<i>Reading de-centred</i>	167
<i>Active spectators?</i>	173
<i>Exhibiting spectacle (and style)</i>	179
Conclusion	191
<i>Notes</i>	198
<i>Bibliography</i>	207
<i>Author index</i>	216
<i>Subject index</i>	218

THE WANING OF NARRATIVE

New spectacle cinema and music video

The clearest manifestation of the renovation of spectacle within late twentieth-century visual culture is the so-called ‘blockbuster’ film: technologically dense and laden with special effects, such films are, arguably, the principal emblem of the recent turn to image and form. The blockbuster has been firmly established as a deliberate and pivotal commercial strategy within Hollywood since the 1970s – with films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) cited among early examples (see, for example, Schatz 1993). However, it is from the mid-1980s that a clear trend, based squarely upon a revitalised resurgence in special effects techniques becomes discernible in the production of these high budget and intensively media-hyped movies. This impulse has, undoubtedly, been prompted and underpinned by various developments in digital image technologies. Such films, early examples of which include *Alien* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Last Starfighter* (1985), *Robocop* (1987), *The Abyss* (1989) and *Total Recall* (1990), are texts that tend more and more to give spectacular imagery and action equal status with narrative content and meaning. As we start the new century the extraordinary growth of this kind of film shows no sign of slowing down. On the contrary, though such films still only constitute a small percentage of the overall output of mainstream cinema, they nevertheless invariably capture most of the pre-release publicity and continue to generate most of the profits.

This chapter comprises an exploration of the aesthetic character of current modes of spectacle through a closer examination of such mainstream digital cinema and one of its important correlates: music video. I shall suggest that both mass cinema and music videos – or, at any rate, the important groupings within them that concern us here – exemplify, in their rather different ways, a shift at the visual aesthetic level to formal preoccupations and excitations. That is, they involve the elevation to prominence within mainstream visual cultural practices of formal attributes in and for themselves: the prevalence of technique and image over content and meaning. The kinds of mass cinema and music video discussed below are primary examples of a distinct space that opened up within mass visual culture in the last decades of the twentieth century. In this space (introduced in chapter 3) the chief aesthetic *modus operandi* involves

recursive modes of self-reference (both backwards and sideways) to already existing images and image forms.

The introduction of digital technologies into the production processes of the forms in question here is enabling the development of this new sense of *formalism*, and this is happening in ways that are both complex and diverse. In particular, different kinds of spectacle are manifest within each of the genres under discussion – a fact which, to some extent at least, is related to the different ways the same digital imaging possibilities are aesthetically deployed. Thus, positive reception of the films of mainstream digital cinema depends as much on a *fascinated spectator*, immersed in dazzling and ‘spellbinding’ imagery, as on identification with character and the machinations of plot and theme. Computer imaging techniques have assumed a central authority in this new mode or genre. Both directly and indirectly, they are introducing important and distinctive registers of *illusionist spectacle* into the cinema, as evidenced in such ‘technological thrill’ films as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *The Mask* (1994), *Speed* (1994), *True Lies* (1994), *Independence Day* (1996), *Starship Troopers* (1997) and *Titanic* (1997) (to name but a few). The modes of special effect or *trucage* mapped with such precision by Christian Metz in the late 1970s are now being stretched and overhauled with the emergence of digital techniques of image fabrication (see Metz 1977). Currently, the business of ‘astonishing the senses’, which Metz attributes to the ‘avowed machinations’ of special effects within classical cinema, is mutating. In so doing it threatens to overwhelm traditional concerns with character and story. In the kind of films at issue here, elevation of the immediately *sensuous* constituent vies with our usual means of entry to symbolic meaning, i.e. narrative. This does not mean that narrative content or ideological significance disappear in such films (see, for example, Tasker 1993), rather that this new dimension of visual display is now so distinctive that it requires recognition and analysis as a formal aesthetic element in its own right.

Music video shares with digital cinema (and computer animation and TV advertising – discussed in the previous chapter) the same thrust towards forms of textual production that are constructed upon an intensification and augmentation of modes of image combination or montage. In this respect, however, it is closer to TV advertising, for it is *hybridity* that defines the character of music videos at the level of cultural form. This is manifest at the level of individual texts through the pervasive manner in which tapes freely refer to and incorporate other styles and types of image, as well as forms and models from other media. Unlike the cinema, music video manifests its ‘eclecticism’, its ‘intertextual references’ through a veritable profusion of styles. The digital cinema tends to mask and contain its rediscovered penchant for montage and its recurrent recourse to borrowing from and referring to other texts within an illusionist aesthetic. Music video, on the other hand, does no such thing. Exultantly and overtly, it displays a diverse array of imagery and styles – frequently within the same tape. This tendency to capriciously copy, replicate

and combine has intensified in music video over the relatively short period in which it has become established as a cultural form. Clearly, digital imaging techniques have been greatly enabling to this process. Indeed, they have begun to contribute new forms of imagery based upon image simulation and combination, delivering even greater visual intensity to these playful and ephemeral texts.

Spectacle and the feature film

The notion of spectacle is somewhat difficult to discuss precisely because of its non-verbal character. Nevertheless, in critical studies of the dominant cinema institution, centred upon analysis of classical narrative films, attention has most frequently focused on the ‘tension’ between the narrative dimension and the visual dimension, that is, between identifying with characters, being absorbed in a fictional world and following the plot on the one hand, and the pleasures involved in looking at images on the other. Of course, much of the pleasure of looking, particularly in the classical Hollywood cinema, is derived from the striking impression of hidden observation inscribed within its peculiar ‘invisible’ mode of story telling. The satisfying feeling of power involved in looking in, unobserved, on someone else’s life-world; of being visually close to characters (even to the extent of seeing through ‘their’ eyes); of surreptitiously ‘entering’ their story space, safe in the knowledge that one won’t be found out – this is certainly *one* source of pleasurable looking in the cinema (see Metz 1976).

However, although this pleasurable looking of the story space or of the world of the fiction may be predominant in classical Hollywood, it is not the only way in which looking is mobilised – even there. Within the development of the cinema it was narrative drama that eventually came to define its classical (dominant) model, not some other form based on a more sustained ‘exhibition’ of the visual itself. Yet, within the classical mode an array of tensions between narrative and the visual have been muted. If, ultimately, the spectacular aspect has always been viewed as subordinate to and in a sense subject to the control of a repressive narrative logic, this is precisely because spectacle is, in many respects, the antithesis of narrative. Spectacle effectively halts motivated movement. In its purer state it exists for itself, consisting of images whose main drive is to dazzle and stimulate the eye (and by extension the other senses). Drained of meaning, bereft of the weight of fictional progress, the cunning of spectacle is that it begins and ends with its own artifice; as such, spectacle is simultaneously both display and on display.¹

It is variously argued that the visual aspect of narrative cinema is imbued with the potential to undermine or disrupt the spectator’s primary subordination to narrative motivation. The sabotage of meaning through the sheer captivation of powerful images lurks beneath Hollywood’s productions, threatening the cohesion of fictional or diagetic illusion. Most frequently, perhaps,

this has been argued in relation to the problems posed by images of women in the films of classical Hollywood (see, for example, Mulvey 1975; Mellencamp 1977). However, it might analogously be argued – though far less specifically – that a similar propensity, one, moreover, with similar effects, has operated at the more general level of *mise-en-scène* itself.

Certainly, the technical virtuosity employed in the production of spectacle has constantly functioned to halt and disrupt narrative flow and – intentionally or otherwise – to draw attention both to the image and its fabricated character. The musicals associated with Busby Berkeley, wherein women are physically assimilated into the kaleidoscopic *mise-en-scène* of the lavish and elaborate camera-choreographed musical numbers, are clear and oft cited instances of this. Common, if somewhat more subtle examples of the same impulse include the extraordinary lighting and framing styles that occur in the films of so-called ‘*film noir*’, or the ‘artificial’ (non-realistic) lighting and colour styling in a film such as *Written on the Wind* (1956) – indeed, the peculiarities of visual stylisation attributed to Hollywood melodrama generally. Similarly, historical films and biblical epics offer up the possibility for moments involving extravagantly staged panoramas and displays. Musical, as already indicated, provide the chance for interludes or scenes containing highly stylised costumes and set design.

Undoubtedly, one of the clearest manifestations of this element has occurred through recourse to special effects.² Here, once again, technical expertise frequently functions to produce, precisely, both spectacle and recognition of artifice itself. The extraordinary character of such imagery no matter how ‘invisible’ and technically opaque, nevertheless calls attention to itself and to its place within a particular aesthetic system: it is astonishing both for *what* it portrays and for *how* it does so.

Along with the musical it is in genres such as the horror film, fantasy and science fiction that earlier forms of spectacle-based entertainments – part of the tangled heritage of Hollywood – resurface to disturb and trouble the narrative cause. I am thinking particularly of traditional forms of popular spectacle such as the circus and the theatre of illusion and magic. For here it is the *staged* combination and display of exotic, strange and incredible events, actions, objects and characters that takes precedence. True, the virtuoso display involved in the visual effects of horror and fantasy (then as now) operated under the particular regime of narrative realism that distinguished the Hollywood style generally. Still, as David Bordwell points out, such acts of ‘[s]howmanship’ entail, ‘to a considerable extent ... making the audience appreciate the artificiality of what is seen’ (see Bordwell *et al.* 1985: 21). Special effects, particularly in the more *outré* of the Hollywood genres, frequently functioned both to produce astonished looking and to exhibit their own fabricated and conventional character. Indeed, we may surmise that this occurred even when the spectator remained puzzled as to the precise ways in which a particular image effect had been produced.

New effects, new spectacle

There are limits, however, to the use of overt visual display in Hollywood films of the studio era. For Bordwell – here discussing classical Hollywood generally, ‘*digressions and flashes* of virtuosity remain for the most part motivated by narrative causality ... or genre. ... If spectacle is not so motivated, its function as artistic motivation will be *isolated and intermittent*.’ (Bordwell *et al.* 1985: 21, my emphasis). Ultimately, what is of overriding importance in the classical Hollywood film is the spectator’s primary subordination to narrative motivation. However, in the Hollywood of the late twentieth century, so-called ‘New Hollywood’ – or a certain section of it to be more precise – this no longer seemed to be so. The notion of controlling or regulating the tension between narrative and image, as I have already intimated, has taken on an ever greater importance with the recent growth of special effects driven films. Indeed, particularly in recent ‘technological thrill’ films, where heightened forms of image and movement now figure so prominently, the conception that film equals narrative, which predominated in the classical era, appears now to have been all but superseded. No longer ‘isolated and intermittent ... digressions or flashes of virtuosity’, the new digitally licensed visual and action effects have now become the predominant aesthetic characteristic of such films. As such they elevate certain of the principles of the classical Hollywood style such as, ‘mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship and cool control of the perceiver’s response ...’, whilst at the same time privileging motives of spectacle over those of narrative (Bordwell *et al.* 1985: 4).

Of course, these movies are still narrative in form, it is just that the story told is no longer the principal reason for going to see them.³ Critics and reviewers may continue to appraise such films in terms of traditional narrative values such as depth of character, machinations of plot and narrative coherence. However, if, as is so often the case, they find them wanting in this regard, then this may well be because they are attempting to use evaluative categories that do not apply to the extent they once did. For in such films it is precisely new kinds of formal concern, tied to the emergent space of intertextuality (introduced in chapter 3), and centred upon the imaging of action, imagery and imaging itself that is at the forefront of their aesthetic operation. In this important strand of New Hollywood, traditional narrative containment of spectacle has crumbled in a manner that is quite unprecedented.

Spectacle cinema: digital effects

Let us take a closer look at that recent trend in mainstream live action film production which, from the mid-1980s, has based itself on a resurgence of special effects techniques: a revitalised resurgence that has been prompted and underpinned by various developments in digital imaging technologies. I shall concentrate on the path-finding films *The Abyss* (1989) and *Terminator 2*:

Judgment Day (1991) as well as more developed examples from the canon such as *The Mask* (1994), *Independence Day* (1996) and *Starship Troopers* (1997).

With respect to these films (and numerous others belonging to the corpus), it is no exaggeration to say that there is barely a scene between them which, in one form or another, does not involve special effects techniques in its construction.⁴ Whilst computer imaging techniques are assuming an ever increasing importance in these new spectacle films, they nevertheless still function as one element within an *integrated battery* of visual effects. Having said this, however, I want to stress that it is the digital element that is introducing an important *new register* of illusionist spectacle into such films. Indeed, the increasing centrality of digital imaging techniques within this kind of film (and increasingly also within live-action cinema generally) is symptomatic, in a further sense, of the current shift at the aesthetic level to formal preoccupations and excitations.

Assuming a certain familiarity with the films under discussion I shall tend to concentrate on specific scenes or extracts, indicating through examination of specific examples just how and what computer imaging is contributing to this novel current within mainstream cinema. In this regard, one of the key films is *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, which, more than any before it, helped to consolidate the centrality of digital image processes within the mainstream feature film. It was not just the use of computer assisted effects that this film perfected and promoted, more significant still was its substantive use of computer generated imagery. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* pointed the way to a new means of producing a distinctive mode of spectacle involving imagery originated by computer.

If *Terminator 2* finally convinced Hollywood that digital cinema was both aesthetically feasible and potentially highly lucrative, one of the films pointing the way to the sheer density of the digital imagery in this and subsequent films within the corpus was *The Abyss* – produced a year earlier. Particularly important here is the only scene in *The Abyss* to employ computer synthesised imagery. This is a sequence occurring about halfway through the unfolding drama, it involves a computer generated ‘alien probe’ – a so-called ‘pseudopod’ consisting of sea water – entering an underwater exploration rig and making contact with its human crew. The duration of the scene is a mere 5½ minutes of the film’s overall running time (140 minutes), whilst the total duration of shots containing computer generated effects is barely 1 minute. Still, it provides one of the most engaging moments of spectacle in the whole film – no mean feat when one takes into account that the film itself is crammed from beginning to end with special visual effects, all of which are calculated for maximum visual excitation.

‘Photographing’ the impossible

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this example, looking both at what it does and how it does it, for it is the paradigm for much of what was to follow. What

makes this scene so astonishing? It is the way in which the computer has been used to produce (and to assist in producing) an extraordinary example of what Metz describes as a ‘perceptible but invisible *trucage*’ (1977: 664). Specifically, the computer has been used to produce the effect of photo-realistic representation in a scene that is conceptually fantastic in character – a scene that could have no direct correlate in real life.

In this instance the computer was called upon to represent the image of a fantastic object, a sentient liquid tentacle, an alien probe. Given the serious dramatic tone and overall realism adopted, this thing had to convince: both in its visual aspect and behaviour and in the way in which it integrated and combined with traditional live action (high definition, high fidelity) cinematography of settings containing live actors. In order to do this the image was called upon to achieve a high degree of technical success on three levels of established cinematic transparency. Thus, despite its fantastic nature, the pseudopod itself had to look and behave in a convincing and credible manner. This involves surface or descriptive accuracy: naturalism. At the same time as distinguishing itself as other (alien) in relation to the human characters and the fictional world, the pseudopod must appear as *indistinguishable* at the level of representation, that is to say in its representational effect. It had to appear to occupy – to be ontologically coextensive with – the same profilmic space as the human actors. This involved the seamless combining of two differently realised sets of realistic imagery: of which one is properly analogical, i.e. photographic, the other seemingly photographic, i.e. digital simulation. Additionally however, it must also integrate, again in a perfectly seamless manner, into the *diegetic* dimension: the story space. In order for this to occur an exceptional amount of pre-planning had to enter into the carefully orchestrated decoupage that eventually stitches the shots together. Here, finally, surface accuracy is subordinated to the rather different codes of narrative illusionism.

The eventual goal of such carefully orchestrated editing, coupled with the high degree of mimetic accuracy of the imagery in the conceptually fantastic nature of the scene itself is the establishment of a powerful visual illusion: the visual resemblance of reality – an analogical effect – even in scenes of the utterly fantastic. It is precisely this effect of *impossible photography* that constitutes the dimension of spectacle in the scene. We begin to see very clearly in this early example one possibility for representational development that is released when ‘photography’ is cut loose, uncoupled from its physical ties to phenomenal reality. Of course, the potential for irresistible and astonishing visualisation *already* apparent in this scene from *The Abyss* has since been amply developed, initially in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, subsequently in films such as *Independence Day*, *The Lost World* (1997) and *Starship Troopers*.

Verisimilitude becomes spectacular

Beginning with *Terminator 2* subsequent films in the corpus have built upon the computer synthesised imagery first used so convincingly in *The Abyss*. This new modality of mainstream cinema is comprised of films that entail new levels of ‘technological density’. Often this manifests itself on two levels: in the subject matter itself, and through means of image construction. Just as significant though is the new aesthetic that such films have engendered. Before looking a little more closely at what this involves I want briefly to say something about what has taken place in the decade or so since *The Abyss* was first released.

Whereas photo-realistic computer graphics are used in just the one scene in the late 1980s film, in *Terminator 2*, produced only one year later, there are over forty shots involving computer originated imagery dispersed in scenes throughout the film. This is because, for the most part, they are used to realise certain aspects of one of the central protagonists – the extraordinary T-1000 Terminator. At different points in the narrative, T-1000 – a ‘cyborg’ composed of liquid metal – is required to display transformation into and through different stages of its physical make-up (i.e. from amorphous blob of liquid metal to human replica) as well as further facets of its fantastic metamorphosing and shape-changing abilities. Needless to say, the scenes in which these things occur are visually rendered with the same photo-realistic accuracy as the scene in *The Abyss*, although in other respects this imagery differs in terms of the increased levels of complexity and sophistication involved.

We need only recall scenes involving this ‘liquid man’ in *Terminator 2* in order to indicate the extraordinary character of the imagery contrived for the film. About a quarter of the way in, in one of the many scenes involving direct confrontation between the two Terminator cyborgs – model T-800 (played Arnold Schwarzenegger) and the new improved model T-1000 (played by Robert Patrick) – a thrilling chase takes place inside the basin of a concrete flood canal. The scene culminates in a miraculous escape for the T-800 and the boy he is trying to protect, when the huge truck driven by the T-1000 speeds out of control, crashes into a bridge support and bursts into flame. The T-800 departs with his charge, safe from the single-minded determination of the T-1000 – the scene does not end here however. To crown the breathtaking spectacle, to which the viewer has already surrendered him/herself, computer generated imaging now comes to the fore. Out of the conflagration and striding towards the camera as it slowly pans left is a shining metallic figure. As it nears the camera the spectator sees it slowly metamorphosing from a featureless metal humanoid into the form and features of the actor playing the role of the T-1000 patrol cop.

At a point later in the film, the malevolent liquid-metal cyborg is at large in a mental hospital intent on pursuing its victim by capturing the latter’s incarcerated mother. During yet another sustained action sequence in which the viewer watches with incredulous fascination this evil Terminator transforming itself

into both objects and people in its dogged and terrifying attempt to complete its mission, an event occurs that is even more astonishing than anything that has occurred in the sequence thus far. Spotting its victim in a small group of people behind a locked, metal-barred gate at the end of a long hospital corridor, the Terminator – transformed once again into its cop disguise – strides purposefully down the corridor towards him. From the victim's point of view and in close-up we watch the cyborg approach the gate, pause momentarily then, still staring intently ahead at its victim, it moves forward. As it does so, the bars begin to pass through its face, head and shoulders (the only parts of its body that are in shot). As if composed of a heavy liquid such as mercury the T-1000's body allows the bars to pass through it, only to reform and reconstitute itself as its passage through them progresses. Needless to say, this event – digitally fabricated – is represented with an extraordinary degree of photo-realistic accuracy. The shots depicted in these scenes are in close-up and medium close-up, and they are graphically displayed within the shot, rather than disguised or merely suggested in some way by editing.

Terminator 2 exhibited unprecedented levels of verisimilitude in its avowed intent to marry convincingly digitally manufactured animated figures with live action (analogue) imagery – perfecting and elaborating techniques first realised in *The Abyss*. Other films since have used the techniques perfected in these films to create further examples of such impossible photography. In films such as *Jurassic Park*, *Independence Day* and *Starship Troopers*, for example, such techniques are used in scenarios which, though involving high (if varying) degrees of fantasy, similarly aim for a measure of classical realism in their overall affect. These films revolve around scenes of fantastic spectacle involving photographic mimesis, for example, a sequence in which a colossal alien spacecraft looms over the Empire State Building and then proceeds to totally obliterate it (*Independence Day*); scenes in which Tyrannosauri and other prehistoric animals run wild in both natural and human habitats (*Jurassic Park*); and shots of a sea of insect-like aliens swarming into attack or seen in ferocious and bloody individual combat with human soldiers (*Starship Troopers*).

Once again, these scenes are spectacular as much for their sheer transparency – the convincing way in which they render images of such fantastic events – as for the events themselves. They simulate photography of the fantastic, offering us the semblance of a moving photographic image of the impossible. In other words, these digitally rendered images seem real, they appear to have the same indexical qualities as the images of the live action characters and sets with which they are integrated. This is particularly pronounced in scenes that involve a certain intimacy in terms of point of view. Thus the increasing perfection of computer image synthesis *and* the ability – again via digital techniques – to seamlessly marry what would previously have been impossibly complex movements and actions, has enabled startling effects to enter the realm of the *close-up*.⁵ I do not want to deny the other dimensions of these and like images, the way they represent and the questions of what they denote and connote.

However, I am concerned to emphasise as the dominant aesthetic feature this *game with spectacular illusion* that is taking place in the films of the new spectacle cinema.

The live action basis of such films has become more and more saturated in its artifice with computer image synthesis and with a host of other special visual effect techniques (many of which ultimately depend upon computer assistance for their success). In terms of the tonalities of spectacle involved, it is possible to make a broad distinction between the uses to which different kinds of effects techniques are put. Thus computer image synthesis can be grouped with animatronics, puppetry, make-ups and prosthetics, whilst the other group includes techniques involving models and miniatures, special sets and mock-ups, pyrotechnics and so forth. The former are utilised much of the time – either in conjunction or immediate juxtaposition – to produce photo-realistic imagery (usually of the most bizarre nature) that involves close-ups and medium close-ups, in scenes involving a relatively ‘intimate’ relation to live protagonists. The latter are more frequently used in scenes of epic or larger scale actions: that is, in sequences which also involve the use of long and panoramic shots.

Such scenes – at least by comparison to those involving the first group – are less bizarre, and may be viewed as attempts to produce highly exaggerated or rhetorical sequences which, all the same, are designed to display a kind of naturalism associated, ultimately, with documentary imagery (the Lumière tradition). The scenes associated with the first group on the other hand, whilst striving for analogical or mimetic accuracy, nevertheless represent characters, actions and phenomena that are thoroughly impossible (Méliès). Whatever the nature of the spectacle, however, and of course there are degrees and hybrid conjunctions of both (cf. *The Lost World*, *Independence Day* and *Starship Troopers*), then travelling mattes, motion control, blue or green screen and optical composites – the transparent cement of such seamless image combination – are definitively associated with the production of both.

A film such as *The Mask* on the other hand represents another strand of the corpus. It deploys techniques of computer image synthesis to rather different ends: humour and pastiche are central to this film. Ultimately, however, the digital techniques lead to a similar effect. Instead of using the computer to simulate live action cinematography, *The Mask* uses it to introduce techniques of graphic exaggeration such as ‘squashing and stretching’ – aesthetic techniques of the classical two-dimensional cartoon – into the ‘three-dimensional photo-reality’ of live action film. This produces extraordinary (and paradoxical) imagery whereby corporeality and verisimilitude gets injected into the graphic hyperbole of the cartoon aesthetic: impossible photography – yet of a different stamp. For here it is *as if*, inconceivably, the bizarre characters and worlds of Tex Avery cartoons and the comic strip hero have, in some kind of grotesque transmutation, come to life and been acted out before the camera lens.

Sutured excess: the paradoxical effect

With these examples in view let me return to my claim that films such as these represent something of a shift relative to traditional mainstream film aesthetics. This turns upon a kind of surfeit or *superfluity* that is directly related to the technological density of the imagery itself. The spectacle involved here does not just depend upon the extraordinary, outlandish, exotic and epic character of the events portrayed. In addition we must take into account the naturalism with which they are rendered, their indistinguishability from photo-reality: in terms of the way they look or appear and the undetectable way they are assimilated into shots and the narrative as a whole.

These films demonstrate that efforts to produce 'live action' cinema by means other than photographic recording are proceeding apace. At the moment, however, given the remaining limitations of the technology, this 'drive' has to be content with an increasingly complex, seamless *integration or blending* of computer and other visual effects within live-action based scenarios that are baroque and outlandish. And the possibility of their undetectable integration into an 'ordinary' *mise-en-scène* grows with the advances which follow each new production of the former kind. We need only recall here the portentous aerial shots in *Titanic* (1997) – shots that operate *as if* taken from a helicopter flying around the boat. For example, movement from an image of the boat speeding over the ocean towards the viewer then up and above the ship's prow, or sweeping over the whole length of the boat itself, revealing as it does so the ship's architecture and passenger life in astonishing detail.⁶

At the same time such films throw into relief a peculiar form of reception, encouraging an engagement with illusionistic image texts that operates no longer solely through traditional modes of interpellation, i.e. the 'willing suspension of disbelief', identification (with both camera and character), absorption in the fictional, though meaningful, world. Pleasure and gratification can now involve a different positioning: a knowing fascination with the play of intertextual reference and – at the same time as surrendering to the sensational delights of image and action – with the analogical perfection and spectacular application of such referentially uncoupled imagery itself. Imagery which, despite its seamlessness and its perfect illusionism, nevertheless offers itself for a kind of perceptual play with its own materiality and the artifice behind its fabrication. The *signifier* itself is here accorded as much weight as the signified.

One feels compelled to ask – and attempt to answer – what, more precisely, it is that constitutes such films as texts of realist or illusionist spectacle. In relation to cinema history, it would appear to be the so-called 'trick-film', first associated with director (and former conjurer/illusionist) George Méliès that introduced this tradition of visual 'magic' or illusion into the cinema. However, if there is a direct line leading back to Méliès and the trick film in the new digital effects spectacles, there are echoes just as strong coming from other (opposing) directions. Ultimately, perhaps we have to view these new kinds of text as

hybrids. Thus they evince both the potential for the ‘marvellous’ – which Méliès first saw and developed in special ‘trick’ effects – whilst, at the same time, displaying an overriding commitment to the dominant and ‘naturalised’ cinematic tradition which involves, to use Burch’s expression, ‘the Recreation of Reality’ (1990: 6).

Indeed, it seems appropriate at this point to introduce the notion of *surfeit* or *excess*. Kristin Thompson (1981: 287–302) introduces a notion of cinematic excess, in her response to writing on the subject by Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath.⁷ In this interpretation, excess is understood as a dimension of cinematic textuality that exists in all films. It revolves around both the physicality and the fabricated nature of films themselves: excess is comprised of all those diverse elements in a film that escape its unifying structures: unmotivated stylistic elements, indeed, everything which is *extra* to narrative function on the visual (and audio) plane. At the level of the image (though not only at this level, of course), classical narrative film has striven – for the most part – to deflect the spectator’s attention away from such aspects as these, precisely through modes of address or reading that privilege concentration upon thoroughly motivated diageses. Those aspects of the cinematic text to which Barthes draws our attention relate to the superfluous, the chance, the incidental, that is, precisely to the *non-motivated* actions and appearances in various forms and combinations of actors, make-up, props, costumes, sets, locations and the like. Although these elements are present in classical Hollywood, they nevertheless tend to escape our attention – or, at best, only touch it, tantalisingly and fleetingly – because of the coercion of motivation that its particular form of narrative causality involves (see Barthes 1977). However, as Thompson says, ‘the minute a viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works that do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning’ (1981: 290).

Describing the operation of excess, Thompson says ‘the material provides a perceptual play by inviting the spectator to linger over devices longer than their structural function would seem to warrant’ (1981: 292). It seems that something not altogether dissimilar is occurring in the corpus of films under discussion here. By comparison with classical narrative, the sheer density, richness and dazzling character of the visual perceptual field in such films is far greater, the propensity for excessive detail correspondingly higher. As I have already indicated, such films represent a renovation and intensification of the potentially disruptive power of spectacle within narrative. The contradiction – ever present in special effects – between knowing that one is being tricked and still submitting to the illusory effect is operative here. Yet, particularly (though certainly not solely) in those scenes involving computer imaging discussed here, the more photographically perfect or convincing the images, the more – paradoxically – does their sutured and suturing aspect seem to recede and their fabricated character come to the fore. In these moments of heightened spectacle (within films that are already spectacular), the sheer perfection of the simulation

encourages a curiosity or fascination with the materiality and mechanics (artifice) of the image itself, which tends to wrest it even further from narrative subordination. Indeed, because of the new imaging capabilities of the computer, increasingly this takes place in sequences that are more intimately integrated than ever before into the diegetic action itself. The tension between narrative and spectacle occurs, not only as segments of narrative redundancy, but also and increasingly in scenes that are part of the diegetic thrust. The 'pseudopod' scene in *The Abyss* is a case in point, though in recent examples such as *Starship Troopers* this occurs throughout – becoming relentless.

Trickery – the duplicitous character of the image – along with its status and operation as such, is no longer subordinated to narrative function. Fascination with the synthesis of visual illusions is one further symptom of the intense self-referentiality that now defines most forms of mediation. Now, the references of images are as likely to be other images (of other images) as first-order attempts at direct representation. However, the extraordinary lengths to which those involved in this kind of film production go in order to achieve illusionism or transparency in moving images is in inverse proportion to the spectator's incredulity. And the latter's curiosity as to how it was done is akin to that evoked by the spectacle involved in aspects of stage magic. This fascination involves a focus on details: elements of particular sequences, actions and images, which, even when they are part of the diegetic momentum, nevertheless vie with the latter for the perceptual attentions of the spectator.

Ultimately, of course, one has to wonder whether or not the intense forms of spectacle present within these 'technological thrillers' are strictly of a piece with the 'unmotivated', 'non-unifying' or strictly 'non-functional' elements that Thompson discusses as excess: concerned, as she is, primarily with a film that exists outside of the aesthetic conventions of the dominant film institution. My concern though, is the homologous way in which the spectacular scenes under discussion might be said to signal, in a manner similar to excess in Thompson's sense, the emergence and promotion of new developments in mass entertainment forms; that is to say, shifts at the level both of production and consumption that are displacing traditional concentration on narrative form and understanding. The growth of spectacle, and the fascination with image as image, in the sense both of visual excitation and technological density (artifice), is one indication that attention to *formal* facets – means and pure perceptual play – are finding a place within mass entertainment forms. One might then wonder – strange though this may seem – whether popular films such as the ones under discussion here, thereby share something in common with experimental or avant-gardist films that also downplay or even oppose narrative. The differences, however, revolve around the ways in which the excessive is foregrounded in each mode. For if it is the materiality of film (grain, focus, splices and so on), and/or the formal characteristics of the image (colour, tone, movement, etc.) that is concentrated upon in the one, in the other, it is spectacle – the image – itself enabled by techniques such as computer image synthesis

which, paradoxically, attempt precisely the opposite, that is, the dissembling or covering up of those features foregrounded in the former. And this in order to produce a realism that is more transparent than ever before, a realism committed to the illusionistic representation of the impossible: a *super-realism* given over to rendering the fantastic with the surface accuracy associated with photography.

The mimetic accuracy and the seamless character of the computer synthesised imagery discussed above is in keeping with the illusionist aesthetic that predominates within New Hollywood generally. This illusionism, however – and this is particularly obvious with regard to scenes that involve computer image synthesis – is somewhat like the Eisensteinian artifice that Barthes describes: ‘at once falsification of itself – pastiche and derisory fetish, since it shows its fissure and its suture ...’ (Barthes 1977: 58). In the films in question here it is the bizarre nature of the imagery, rendered so faithfully, that similarly *denies and simultaneously points to* the highly sophisticated artifice involved in its production. It is *both* the bizarre and impossible nature of that which is represented *and* its thoroughly analogical character (simulation of the photographic), that fascinates, produces in the viewer a ‘double-take’ and makes him or her want to see it again, both to wonder at its portrayal and to wonder about ‘just how it was done’.⁸

When the computer becomes capable of rendering imagery of ‘the everyday world’ with the same degree of mimesis and transparency to that it is presently achieving with respect to the ‘wonderful, chimeric and monstrous’, then we may well wonder what the resulting confusion between the indexical and non-indexical image will have on spectatorship and representation. For the moment though, the computer generated and assisted scenes of the new blockbuster cinema, are producing new registers of displayed virtuosity and formal engagement.

Music video: spectacle as style

Since the early 1980s music video has been firmly established as a significant cultural form: the latest addition to the pop music industry’s perennial concern with ‘the image’ and images (see Goodwin 1987a). Music video brings together and combines music, music performance and, in various ways, a host of other audiovisual forms, styles, genres and devices associated with theatre, art, cinema, dance, fashion, television and advertising. Some of these have always been associated either directly or indirectly with pop, others have a more recent association. However, in music video these elements appear to combine with recorded music and musical performance in a new and *distinctive* way (see Wollen 1988). In this sense music videos are one of the most thoroughgoing forms of that dimension of contemporary visual culture that rests on an aesthetic of *displayed intertextuality* (see chapter 3). The definitive *hybrid* character of music video is manifest at the level of individual text through the

pervasive manner in which tapes appropriate and incorporate images, styles and conventions from other types of image and image form. Music video is implicated in a process of mutation involving the breaking down and redefinition of conventional boundaries (see, for example, Aufderheide 1986; Goodwin 1987b; Kaplan 1987; Wollen 1988).

One important enabling factor in this process is digital imaging. Indeed, the use of different computer imaging techniques has existed within music video production since the early 1980s and their use and significance has grown enormously within the form since then. They have been a central factor in the thrust towards the production of tapes that are constructed upon an intensification of modes of *combination or montage* of different kinds, styles and forms of imagery. This has resulted in an aesthetic that, whilst continuous with the cult of the image, surface and sensation characteristic of digital visual culture generally, has, nevertheless, produced its own distinctive miscellany of loose groupings, models and tokens. What, for the most part, these share in common is a propensity to frustrate attempts at categorisation along traditional lines. Thus asking whether a particular tape is illusionist or anti-illusionist, realist or anti-realist and so forth tends to be rendered meaningless, primarily because these texts are so thoroughly self-referential. That is to say, because their primary reference is already existing media models, image forms, circulating star discourses, and so forth, they largely escape a referential or representational logic.⁹ Furthermore, music videos make little or no pretence at hiding their eclectic media saturated dependence on other forms. They are definitively and conspicuously *about* image: about creating an image for a sound, a performer or performers, and (as often as not) for a performance. The self-reflexivity of music videos stands in marked contrast to that of spectacle cinema. Narrative is even less important to their make-up, whilst 'laying bare the device' is no longer an indirect outcome of a fetishistic concern with the fabrication of surface accuracy, rather a (largely undeclared) principle of production.

I will concentrate in the following brief discussion on three 'classics' of the genre: Neneh Cherry's *Manchild* (1989) and Michael Jackson's *Black or White* (1992) and *Ghosts* (1996). With respect to digital imaging these tapes display something of the rapid technical developments that have taken place throughout the short period they cover. In aesthetic terms, each exemplifies – albeit in an exaggerated manner – some of the particular (and familiar) directions taken by the music video in its 'eclectic', 'combinatory' and 'intertextual' pursuits. Thus, *Manchild* is an early example of a peculiarly *decorative* mode of neo-spectacle that has become a constant of the music video genre or form. *Black and White* is a prominent instance of the conspicuous formal heterogeneity that music promos frequently display. Whilst *Ghosts* – which takes horror fiction film and associated special effects techniques as its object of formal play – manifests yet another aspect of such undisguised or knowing borrowing.

Style: the decorative image

The setting for the action/performance in the music video *Manchild* is highly contrived: a flat, sandy beach on which, in the middle ground, is a clothesline with a few items of washing. A film of water (a patently superimposed element) covers the surface of the beach reflecting the clothes and washing line. The sky is a saturated blue with wispy white clouds and tints of purple. The sea and sky – with the same breakers constantly rolling in and the same cloud pattern drifting across the screen – is on a cycle: it is the same piece of film repeated over and over again for the duration of the text. The sea itself is tinted an unnatural electric turquoise. This patently artificial set or ‘stage’ is itself a composite: the film of water covering the beach and the clothes line have been superimposed over the treated and cycled footage of the beach, sea and sky.

Against this backdrop we see the performing figure of Neneh Cherry who, most of the time, is on screen miming to the song. It is the way both Cherry’s performance and the actions of the other figures – another woman, two children (a boy and a girl) and two male youths – are represented that makes the greatest contribution to the novelty of the visual aspect of the tape. There are several features to this: the sea-sawing motion of the whole setting within the fixed frame, such that the horizontal of the horizon (where sea meets sky) swings continuously and rhythmically approximately 40° with each up and down movement. The choreographed *layering* of the actions of characters over the initial composite set and over each other, such that on occasions one and the same character appears on the screen at the same time, performing the same or different actions on the same or different depth planes. The use of off-screen space and the frame edge to produce novelty and surprise in terms of when, where and how figures and their actions are introduced – in particular in terms of distance from the camera, that is, whether in extreme close-up, medium or long shot. Finally, one must mention the look of the figures themselves – their make-up, the mannered style and colour of their dress.

New techniques of image production and manipulation are here employed to effect innovative ways of visualising musicality. In other words, the velocity and rhythm of image combination, layered cycles and repetitions (reiterated and varied) is determined by the song’s structure and by formal elements such as melody, beat and tempo. The complex patterning thus produced tends to engage not at the level of representation (and signification), but rather at the level of abstract, formal play. It is the *syntactic* and *ornamental* rather than the semantic and referential that predominate here. Indeed, this is reinforced by the fact that the instrumental musical accompaniment to the singing always takes place off screen (i.e. as ‘non-diegetic’ sound ‘off’), never becoming part of Cherry’s visual performance. This only serves to reinforce the concern with ‘image’, both in the sense of visual impressions and stimuli, and the representation of a public persona. If depth exists in this text, then it does so principally as a visual trope in its overall visual economy. The visual style, characterised by the

artificiality of the setting and its unnatural pastel colours, the affectation and/or chic modishness of the costumes, and the posing of the figures, is ultimately decorative – flash and filigree.

Given this foregrounding of the visual and the demotion of representational meaning as traditionally conceived (i.e. realism, narrative), it would appear that extra-textual factors come into play to a significant degree here. The visual dimension is opened up not so much to representation, more to identification with the *feelings* (mood, affect) produced by a certain sound – ‘Neneh Cherry’ – and the style and aura attached to her circulating star persona (see Figure 5.1).

There is more, however, for *Manchild* belongs to a particular corpus of (loosely) related music tapes in which certain features are preponderant at the level of the image.¹⁰ The defining characteristic of this trend turns upon the use of multiple image overlays and repetitions. Frequently this involves utilisation of the same imagery at different depth planes: the repeated and ‘depth-cued’ recycling of the action of figures and objects within the scene. It is not the signified, in terms of a representational or narrative logic, but the *disport* of signifiers that forms the dominant and perhaps defining aesthetic feature of this ‘sub-genre’. What this particular playful manipulation of the image depends upon, of course, is the greater ease afforded to the production of such effects by the integration



Figure 5.1 Stills sequence from the music video *Manchild* by Neneh Cherry (1989)

Source: Courtesy of Virgin Records Ltd.

of the digital computer into video production and post-production technologies. As commentators have already pointed out, the result is an aesthetic based upon dense and complex forms of spectacular, playful and *rococoesque* image effects.¹¹ Such texts are designed to encourage multiple viewing on the part of the spectator, the formal tropes and devices, and the *mise-en-scène* produced being just too elaborate to apprehend in a single screening (see, for example, Hayward 1991a).

It is important to note here how far this aesthetic – though enabled and encouraged by many of the same fundamental digital imaging techniques – nevertheless deviates sharply from the kind of ‘astonishing of the senses’ involved in the attempted synthesis of what I have called ‘the impossible photograph’. Although there is undoubtedly a sense in which a video such as *Manchild* might also be said to display a certain newness at the level of visual aesthetics, it does so in a very different way to, say, the eagle trope in the advert *Reflections* (see chapter 4), the dinosaurs in *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, or the *Titanic* in *Titanic*.

Utilisation of (many of) the same techniques could not have resulted in forms that are more diverse. For here we have texts that foreground technique *not* through the fabrication of impossible illusion, but through perfected forms of *conspicuous* image juxtaposition and re-cycling. Of interest here is the way in which the computer provides for the complex choreography of multiple image overlaying, re-cycling and mixing, thereby enabling the emergence of an aesthetic that involves a kind of *intra-textuality*. Indeed, it seems that a central element of the ‘sub-genre’ or cycle of which *Manchild* is but one example, is the way in which the technique involved produces a kind of involution. Thus, from a limited number of original images, stylistic features and actions, a text is constructed or organised through their continual and varied recombination (layering and cyclic repetition). The slightly varied and potentially endless or recursive play of reiterated and repeated actions and motifs within the visual channel is itself reminiscent of the kind of regulated musical variation that typifies pop music generally.

The trend or cycle represented by *Manchild* is *not* by any means the only way in which the computer is enabling novel developments within the music video form. I end this chapter with a short discussion of two further examples, both of which are similar to *Manchild* in terms of their visual compulsion, yet each in its own way is very different in its aesthetic character. *Black or White* and *Ghosts* both contain strong extra-textual references to media myths about their featured performer, Michael Jackson – myths that were prominent in subsidiary modes of circulation at the time each of the tapes was released. It is not this aspect of these videos, fascinating and significant though it may be, that is of primary interest here, however. Rather, I am concerned to look at the aesthetic form of these tapes with an eye primarily on their potent visual efficacy.

Formal heterogeneity: 'montage of attractions'

Like myriad other music videos, only more so, the image track of *Black or White* is formally heterogeneous: made up of a variety of forms and approaches involving different kinds of live action, animation, video and digital technique. Narrative fiction, documentary (archive footage) and various forms of staged performance, coexist with cartoon animation, three-dimensional animation, as well as new digital techniques that blur established categorical and conventional distinctions. This use of different techniques and forms produces a text involving a veritable profusion not only of kinds of image but also of kinds of image combination.

Thus, taking the latter first, there are seamless, digitally engineered dissolves such as that which freezes dancing live action figures, and, without a cut, fixes them as dolls inside a toy ornament. There is a long, spectacular travelling take which opens the tape – again produced by digital means: a seemingly unbroken first-person point of view zoom from flight high above the clouds to entry into a suburban home. In the scenario inside the home itself, narrative editing of a classical kind is used. Yet, at the same time, in-frame compositing is a distinctive feature, for example, in the Statue of Liberty sequence, where both the background and the dancing Jackson are matted in, or in the scene of the singing/performing Jackson superimposed over archival footage of burning crosses and similar imagery. Whilst, as a final example – and at the time the most striking kind of image combination of all – there is the digitally engineered transformation scenes, where extreme head and shoulder close-ups of singing faces metamorphose into different people and Jackson changes into a panther. Add to the above the fact that the shifts between the major scenes or segments of the tape itself produce similarly conflicting or conspicuous juxtapositions, and the overall sense is one of fragmentation and diversity at the level of the image channel. The tape as a whole is distinctly non-narrative in its decoupage, and, if anything, is more akin to the editing style associated with the more radical tendencies of avant-garde cinema. There is a continual displacement of time and space that contrasts markedly with the verisimilitude and continuity of classical audiovisual forms.

The main scenes are only partially unified by the music track with its intended themes of children, multicultural and multi-racial globalism and the performing presence of Jackson himself, for there is much that exceeds this. The inordinate formal density of the tape and the hybridisation of (previously) incongruent styles and conventions involved, is produced by an allusive intertextual play arising from a *mélange* of different techniques and their attendant forms and visual styles. Thus, the suburban street we fly down at the beginning is reminiscent of the then recent film, *Edward Scissorhands* (1991), and the family drama that precedes the song alludes to both the TV sitcom and the soap opera. Throughout, the tape incorporates different forms, genres and styles, and there are references and allusions to other kinds of text. These range from

the nature and anthropological documentary, through advertising and the musical, to – in the dance performance scene at the end – *film noir*, horror (indirectly – *Nightmare on Elm Street*) and cartoons (directly – *The Simpsons*).

Of course, all of the above entails, as well, a complex diversity of visual styles: a rich and clashing weave of pattern, shape, texture, of setting, costume, action and colour. All of which adds to the impression of contrast and conflict at the formal level. Indeed, the tape calls to mind the idea of the *extravaganza* and a notion coined by Eisenstein to describe his first experiments in the theatre, a kind of ‘montage of attractions’. The senses are assaulted with a profusion of incongruent images, styles and conventions, meanings partially emerge and are cancelled or replaced by different ones, or are overtaken by the distractions and fascination offered up by the simultaneously complex and fleeting character of the imagery itself.

And yet, despite all this, there is a definite thread of unity here. It is carried by Jackson’s performance, the song itself, and the attempt to tie the whole together via return at the end to the family context: a direct mirroring of the introductory scene, only this time it is a cartoon father (Homer Simpson) who is attempting to impose his distaste for Michael Jackson’s music upon his son. In terms of form, therefore, it would be incorrect to attempt to associate *Black or White* too closely with either modernist avant-gardism or popular realism. It is, rather, a complex hybrid, displaying formal and stylistic features that are characteristic of both, but ultimately producing an overall impression which is very different to either.

Perhaps the most engaging facet of this visual extravaganza – indeed, at the time it was its newest attraction – are image sequences produced by what was then a recently perfected technique of digital imaging called ‘morphing’. This is a technique that enables the on-screen metamorphosis of one live action figure into another. *Black or White* used this to striking effect, producing further distinctive examples of what I have referred to as ‘impossible photography’. Thus we witness a ‘simulated recording’ – a ‘live action photograph’ – of someone changing into a panther, and an extraordinary sequence in which live action head and shoulder shots of people of different races and sexes metamorphose in real time one into the other whilst miming to the title song. If the novelty of this image effect already calls attention to itself as such, then the context in which it appears sanctions its use as a further instance of visual enticement.

Spectacle of a third order

By the time of the later promo – *Ghosts* – special effects are no longer just a means to spectacle. This visually arresting video is *about* special effects: trick effects are now essential to the ‘self-reflexive’, mannered character of the work itself. Using the horror genre as an entry point, the tape revolves around a kind of playful exposition of the fabrication of spectacle which then becomes a self-

conscious or second-order form of spectacle in its own right. *Ghosts* implements and promotes the fabrication and operation of spectacle, whilst simultaneously disclosing it.

Ghosts is a veritable compendium of the history of cinematic trick effects. Indeed, for the most part the allusions are so direct that one can pinpoint the individual films in which they first occurred. Thus, the scene in which the ghosts walk up walls and dance on the ceiling is a latter-day elaboration of a trick that was first seen in films such as *The Ingenious Soubrette* (1902) (see Burch 1990: 228). Méliès' pioneering film *The Indiarubber Head* (1901) – the *Terminator 2* of its era – is clearly apparent in a scene where the unsuspecting and relieved mayor opens the door to leave and is confronted by a giant head filling the whole of the doorframe. In another sequence, one of the latest modes of computer animation, so-called 'motion-capture', is used to simulate a *skeleton* performing in the particular dancing style of Michael Jackson. Once again, there is an inescapable comparison to be made here with the Fleischer Brothers' cartoon *Snow White* (1933), which itself includes an arresting dance sequence involving their character, Ko-Ko the clown, metamorphosing into a long-legged 'strutting' spook.¹² The dance movement in this sequence is that of the jazz singer Cab Calloway and it was produced using the rotoscope technique, itself a direct forerunner of motion-capture.¹³ Of course, the illusionism in the *Ghosts* sequence is far more convincing – following the drive to photographic perfection, it involves live action, three-dimensionality and the camera moving freely around the dancing figure. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which ultimately the effect is the same: a highly individual dancing style is transposed to a most unlikely recipient. More recent allusions include the sequences depicting the creation of the ghosts from 'ectoplasm', which are directly rendered using the techniques of computer image generation first developed in *The Abyss* (see pp. 106–7). New, so-called morphing techniques, used to such great effect in *Black or White*, and later in such films as *The Mask* and *Terminator 2*, figure prominently, alongside and in conjunction with the stunning use of prosthetic techniques, themselves so important to the history of the horror genre.

So convincing is the use of prosthetics here that one is completely confounded when one of the central characters – the mayor – a 'straight' middle-aged, large-built man, wearing a grey suit and spectacles is 'possessed' and begins to dance in Jackson's inimitable style. Only in the remarkable credit sequence that ends the tape does the viewer discover that the mayor was played all along by Michael Jackson himself. Indeed, this final sequence is absolutely indispensable to the aesthetic import of the tape as a whole. For, as the title song is replayed the credits role over scenes that systematically expose the ways in which the illusions and tricks seen in the tape itself were fabricated and achieved. Thus we are given direct access to the production process itself: alongside shots displaying the use of the blue screen stage, and the use of motion-capture, are sequences showing the laborious work involved in building

the various prosthetics for the characters Jackson plays. Intercut with each of these is a repeated sequence from the scene in the tape in which they are employed.

In the true tradition of ‘distantiation’ and ‘laying bare the device’, *Ghosts* not only plays parodically with a currently dominant mode of representation – in this instance, spectacle cinema – it also exposes the fabricated character both of its own fabulous effects and, by implication, those of others in the genres to which it refers. However, the peculiarity here is that this work is primarily about nothing other than signifiers: a ‘star image’, image as image and the means of fabrication. Reference to anything beyond image – ‘representation’ in an earlier sense – has definitively disappeared. In this respect, *Ghosts* is more than just an exemplary instance of neo-spectacle and surface play within music video: it seems somehow emblematic of the whole aesthetic ordering discussed both in this chapter and the one that precedes it – the perfect ensign for the so-called ‘age of the signifier’.

connotations of wealth and security, or the fact that each scenario stands as a specific instance of a larger (and insurable) realm.

- 9 It is virtually impossible for the untrained eye to detect the quite phenomenal amount of fabrication involved in these scenes, even when they are viewed on a frame by frame basis, so seamless is the work of combining and retouching involved.
- 10 The most stunning, perhaps, involves the moment when a woman fires a gun at her accomplice/lover, and the whole image – with the exception of the bullet itself – freezes. The camera tracks with the bullet, travelling in slow motion, to its moment of impact with a bottle of Smirnoff. At which point, normal speed is resumed and the bottle – viewed in close-up – smashes spectacularly.
- 11 I am think here of a dazzling black and white advertisement for the Saab 9000, appearing on screens in Europe at the time of writing. Such impossible zooms have become a standard trope, particularly within advertising and music video (see, for example, Abbey National's ad 'Changes' and the Michael Jackson video *Black or White*). See also Gitlin 1986: 136–61.

5 THE WANING OF NARRATIVE: NEW SPECTACLE IN CINEMA AND MUSIC VIDEO

- 1 I do not want to argue that spectacle fails to signify in such films, only that its special or excessive quality as imagery is what takes precedence. It is the dual focus on sensation and artifice that defines spectacle. The experiential character of spectacle tends to displace, demote (or, perhaps, delay), concern with meaning-making in its traditional senses, substituting instead the immediacy of wonderment at what is shown and, frequently, at how it was possible. For a critical approach to spectacle that *is* primarily concerned with content or meanings see, Tasker (1993).
- 2 Indeed, Steve Neale (1990) has argued as much. Drawing on the work of Metz, Neale operates with the psychoanalytic concept of 'disavowal', thereby producing an argument which, in significant respects, is closely related to that of Mulvey.
- 3 'Narrative image', in the sense defined by Ellis (1982), is still the fulcrum of those multiple modes of subsidiary circulation which revolve around the cinema's highly developed marketing strategies. Only now, particularly with the technological blockbusters, 'the promise' purveyed is just as likely to rest upon an indication or reassurance of the centrality of certain visual pyrotechnics and the portrayal of stunning actions as it is traditional story enigmas.
- 4 The thing that unifies the texts of these blockbuster films is that they are avowedly effects driven. This in itself, however, hardly seems to be enough to qualify them as constituting a genre. This is further reinforced by their tendency to cut across previous genres and the frequency with which they consist of a *mélange* of references, pastiche and allusions to a host of prior film kinds.
- 5 I should also point out that I am tending to emphasise one dimension of the spectacular character of such films here. The other dimension is that of action: these films all involve periods of sustained and fast-paced action sequences (some – *Speed*, for example – are relentless in this respect).
- 6 An intriguing forerunner of such simulacra is the film *Zelig* (1983).
- 7 Thompson refers specifically to the following essays: Heath (1975) and Barthes (1977).
- 8 An excellent if somewhat obvious example of this is the well known sequence in the film *True Lies* (1994) involving shots of a Harrier Jump Jet above a city street and depicting events and actions of ludicrous impossibility.
- 9 So too do most of the other expressions of visual digital culture at the centre of this book. It is just that this is, perhaps, more immediately apparent in the case of music video.

- 10 Other examples include Mike Oldfield – *Tubular Bells II*; Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark – *Dream of Me*; Enigma – *Age of Loneliness*; Jamiroquai – *Space Cowboy* and *Virtual Insanity*; Madonna – *Bedtime Story*; and Tori Amos – *Caught a Lite Sneeze*.
- 11 Of the many TV advertisements which operate with a similar aesthetic, among the most striking on UK screens in the late 1990s was the Halifax Building Society’s ad ‘Kaleidoscope’.
- 12 One of the films in the impressive Betty Boop series made by Fleischers in the 1930s.
- 13 Indeed, many of the Fleischers’ films of the time, including this one, have been cited as early forerunners of the music video form itself, involving as they did musical performance and the occasional appearance of popular musical figures such as Rudy Vallee, Ethel Merman and Louis Armstrong.

6 THE DIGITAL IMAGE IN ‘THE AGE OF THE SIGNIFIER’

- 1 This does not mean that before technological reproduction, repetition was an insignificant factor or element in cultural formations. See, for example, Eco (1985) and Latour (1985).
- 2 At the same time, however, he warned that – in the wrong hands – they might well turn into something altogether different. Indeed, were Benjamin alive today, he would no doubt consider – with some consternation – that it has been the more cautionary aspects of his prognostications that have been vindicated.
- 3 A clear example of such ‘difference within repetition’ is manifest in the range of classical animated cartoon series of the middle period of this century (see Warner Brothers’ cartoon series, *Road Runner*).
- 4 See Calabrese (1992: 27–46) for a searching application of the notion of rhythm to a poetics of the series and the serial in general.
- 5 Such techniques, when they were first introduced in the visual arts, initially in Cubist painting, later in works of the various avant-gardes of the 1920s; Dadaism, Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism and so forth, constituted radical challenges, and provoked shock in the recipients of the time.
- 6 That it is photographic imagery that is being simulated, definitively problematises any attempt to make a privileged link between photographic representation and the real.
- 7 Useful overviews of the idea of authorship in relation to the cinema appear in Caughie (1981), Lapsley and Westlake (1988) and Cook (1985).
- 8 George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, James Cameron and Paul Verhoeven are, perhaps the best known.
- 9 Respectively, they are John Lasseter and Douglas Trumbull.
- 10 Significantly, when more extended discussion of music video production and authorship occurs, then this is frequently found within writing from or associated with the domain of experimental video, where video artists are seen as engaging in crossover work.
- 11 Indeed, if, as is perhaps most often the case, the promo is viewed on TV (think of MTV) then production credits do not get seen at all.
- 12 Perhaps the clearest paradigm for authorship’s attenuation in the contemporary context is television.
- 13 For significant insight into the romantic origins of modern concepts of authorship see Abrams (1953).
- 14 This is Wollen’s striking characterisation of ‘the new systems of imagery’ emerging from this integration of the established media and new media (see Wollen 1993: 66).