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The Curious Eye: Symmetry, Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and the Hollywood Spectacle

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by

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Abstract

This thesis brings together scholarship on neo-baroque aesthetics with cognitive theory in an analysis of contemporary Hollywood spectacle films and their effects on viewers. To this end, I draw on a strain in cognitive science that has been relatively unexplored by film scholars so far: Mark Turner's analysis of metaphorical projection of symmetry and Michael Leyton's studies on extraction of symmetry as memory. These ideas are mobilized for an investigation into the role of the camera in *Speed Racer* (2008) as a way of exploring neo-baroque claims about spectator immersion with Hollywood spectacles. *Speed Racer* is a work that formally engages the spectator via sequences defined by unstable and dizzying neo-baroque flourishes achieved primarily by framing effects. Turner's notion of conceptual mapping is applied to illuminate how the film's symmetrically embedded spectacle grounds the camera's role as a projection of the viewer's perceptual activity. Also relevant is Leyton's concept of process recovery, which informs the ways in which asymmetries in framing serve to lead viewers to seek out order in disordered environments. In sum, this thesis demonstrates that a fuller understanding of the spectacle-oriented aesthetics in contemporary Hollywood can be achieved by means of concepts adapted from cognitive research into symmetry as a formal and embodied construct.

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Chapter One - Introduction

Statement of the Research Problem

A detailed analysis of existing scholarship on neo-baroque aesthetics and Hollywood special effects spectacles reveals two persistent claims about current spectacle and thrill ride-type films and their effects on viewers. First of all, such films are described to be immersive, in that they engage the viewer in an embodied sense. Secondly, these films are said to display persistent tendency towards stylistic disorder or asymmetry, which attracts the viewer and requires of him or her an active role in resolving coherence. This thesis seeks to clarify whether these claims are indeed true and, if so, why they are true. I argue that the claims about aesthetic engagement in neo-baroque scholarship require a more grounded study of immersion in respect to film form and human perception. Mobile camera work is one of the main concerns of neo-baroque scholarship on film and the main focus here as I engage with and flesh out these claims.

Spectacle and the Prowling Camera

The film *Speed Racer* (dir. A. and L. Wachowski, 2008) is among a number of recent films characterized by a flamboyant use of special effects along with a thrill-ride presentation of its action scenes.¹ *Speed Racer* can also be characterized as immersive in the way that it engages the viewer with its highly adventurous mobile camera work, which includes an abundance of composite images whose production required the newest digital technologies. Like a great many other contemporary action films, *Speed Racer* is a self-aware work that plays with compositional disorder achieved by the mobile camera

¹ Richard Corliss, "Speed Racer: The Future of Movies," *Time*, <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1738558,00.html> (accessed May 08, 2010).

in order to create fast-paced and engaging framing effects for the observer's benefit. In this thesis I undertake a detailed analysis of how framing and camerawork in *Speed Racer* exemplify the aesthetics of current "spectacle" cinema.

As an illustration of that kind of imagery that *Speed Racer* achieves, consider the way the camera operates in the film's final 12-minute Colosseum Grand Prix race sequence. Contributing to the rapid-fire speed of the racecars, the seemingly overt curvature of the track and exploding debris of metal, the camera work lends the sequence an added impression of instability and motion. Rather than serving to merely frame the action, the camera engages itself closely and dangerously with the race – shifting and swooping as if it were itself a contributing element of the spectacle. The camera is participative in that it glides through the race in a seemingly improvised, unprescribed way, as if to bring the viewer closer to the action and engage him or her with the final conflict between the protagonist Speed and opponent Cannonball Taylor.

At the most extreme moments of the race, the camera engenders spatial confusion rather than clarity by locating the shot's main focal objects away from the center of the composition. In some instances the viewer is afforded little sense of what the shot's spatial relations amount to. The viewer, for instance, may be denied the cues that would allow her/him to recognize where the cars are heading and even the identity of various objects and props appearing in the frame. Shots are often framed so that the composition is de-centered, with both the figures and objects within the frame and the camera itself in motion. In the face of this seeming chaos, one may wonder what the overarching intent of such a camera is. Is the radical mobility intended merely to confuse or can a more sophisticated intent be grasped?

A historical overview can prove helpful in evaluating the novelty of contemporary filmmaking practice. With respect to the intensely mobile, or “prowling” camera so common in today’s commercial cinema, David Bordwell writes that this technique is, in fact, a practice inherited from long ago, going back to the films of Abel Gance in the 1920s— such as *Napoléon* (1927) - and finding subsequent elaboration in Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958), among many others.² Bordwell also emphasizes that the mobile camera is used in contemporary Hollywood films in ways that adhere to classical standards of narrative continuity. The visual bravura of even the most extreme examples of the moving camera, Bordwell suggests, will never overwhelm the narrative functions performed by these same shots.

Bordwell is correct that critics often exaggerate the novelty of current narrative cinema. But he underestimates the potential variety of the camera’s aesthetic function by reducing its effect to yet another contributing element of classical narrative unity. In his book *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (2001), Geoff King writes that Bordwell overstates the degree of coherence in Hollywood and that spectacle is as much a core aspect of Hollywood cinema as is coherent narrative.³ This is not to say that Bordwell is wrong to insist that contemporary Hollywood films are still characterized by a strong commitment to principles of classical narration such as the goal-oriented protagonist, a cause-effect linkage from one scene to the next and, a strong sense of narrative resolution at the end. Bordwell is also correct to state that the camera work in current Hollywood films typically conforms to classical principles of symmetry

² David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 135.

³ Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2000), 3-4.

and narrative intelligibility. Unfortunately his emphasis on current commercial cinema's continuity with the studio-era classicism leads him to overlook the immersive and participative aspects of the viewer's experience of recent Hollywood films. In other words, Bordwell fails to acknowledge that recent action films encourage the viewer not only to engage cognitively with the film at the level of narrative causality and forward progress of the story but to experience viscerally the film's moments of excess and disequilibrium.

In rejoinder to Bordwell's firm emphasis on narrative comprehension, various scholars have tried to shift the focus toward the embodied dimension of contemporary film spectatorship. Exemplary here are critics who have utilized the concept of neo-baroque spectacle as a way of characterizing today's special-effects films. Foremost among such critics is Angela Ndaliansis, who in her book *Neo Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (2005) offers some highly pertinent reflections on the topic. Ndaliansis argues that "entertainment spectacles of the last two decades are reliant on a baroque perceptual, or optical, regime that sensorially engages the spectator in ways that recall baroque art forms of the seventeenth century."⁴ Such a regime tends to create formal disorder, polycentrism and unrest by means of dynamic compositional arrangements that complicate the viewer's ability to understand the work's spatial relations in a rational manner.⁵ This fundamental lack of symmetry, Ndaliansis proposes, endows the neo-baroque work with a sense of incompleteness that provokes the work's

⁴ Angela Ndaliansis, "Architectures of Vision: Neo-Baroque Optical Regimes and Contemporary Entertainment Media," *Mit Communications Forum*, <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/ndaliansis.html> (accessed June 03, 2009).

⁵ Angela Ndaliansis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 15.

beholder to complete it on his or her own terms.⁶

Ndalianis identifies two features of the neo-baroque spectacle that can provide a satisfying point of departure for an analysis of contemporary cinema. First, the neo-baroque spectacle exhibits a compositional arrangement whose sense of complexity derives from an extreme break from symmetry. Second, neo-baroque works imply an embodied viewer whose emotional engagement with work is an essential condition for his or her capacity to make sense of it.⁷ To facilitate the viewer's desire for spatial coherence, neo-baroque works often include moments that suggest the collapse of the conceptual frame between the viewer and representation – the very frame that ordinarily separates the work from the viewer. The neo-baroque artwork confronts the viewing subject with an experience that is fundamentally incomplete without the viewer's intervention.

This notion of viewer intervention is commonly referred to by scholars like Ndalianis as immersion. Action-oriented special-effects films are said to offer an immersive experience. But what exactly does this mean? This thesis tests neo-baroque investigations into the contemporary action-movie experience. I also analyze in detail how neo-baroque accounts of contemporary cinema can be made more compelling when supplemented with a deeper understanding of the viewer's engagement with the camera. Emphasizing the camera's role in embodying the viewer as well as its role in generating disorder or asymmetry, the following analysis reveals the utility of neo-baroque aesthetics in bringing out how films like *Speed Racer* employ the mobile camera for purposes of sheer sensory stimulation. While my analysis acknowledges that the

⁶ Ndalianis, "Architectures".

⁷ Ndalianis, "Architectures".

camera in *Speed Racer* - as indeed in virtually all commercial movies - serves narrative purposes, my concern is to stress how the nuances of camera movement in *Speed Racer* achieve immersive effects and thus encourage the viewer's engagement with the film's spectacle at a sensory level.

Review of Relevant Literature

Bordwell suggests that one of the reasons that filmmakers in Hollywood are so intent to get the camera to prowl is because of the added intensity that the effect provides.⁸ Mobile framing can be expected to "boost the scene's energy" not unlike the use of the handheld camera in Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927) - which at one point in the famous snowball fight sequence supposedly mimics the point of view of a snowball in flight. Recall, too, the iconic Odessa steps sequence of Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (1926), with its many moving camera shots. As these masterpiece films suggest, in sequences involving combat, conflict, or tension of virtually any kind, movement from the camera can boost the sensory aspect of the scene.

While Bordwell makes a valid observation concerning the visceral nature of some types of camera movement, he is too quick to assume that in such cases narrative considerations remain dominant. While it is not at all unreasonable to claim that a frenetic, handheld camera in a combat sequence of a film works to produce a clear signifying effect in relation to the work's narrative, one has to wonder whether there is something about the camera's nuances that will attract the viewer's attention beyond the narrative information conveyed by the shot.

In an extensive study of how theorists have characterized camera work, Edward

⁸ Bordwell, "Hollywood", 137.

Branigan writes that more scholarly attention needs to be paid to the way that the camera can be understood as a “modeling” and “projection” of the viewer’s perceptual activity. Branigan also proposes that recent research in cognitive science into metaphor can help illuminate how a viewer will understand a film’s camera technique by relating it metaphorically to attributes of his or her own world.⁹

The notion of projection as it pertains to the observer’s natural ability to connect elements of representation metaphorically to his or her own life can be compared to the aforementioned neo-baroque notion of the collapse of the frame. This notion has been discussed by art historian William Egginton as a baroque “bleeding” of borders – evident when an artwork engages the viewer in a way that somehow incorporates her or him into the work itself.

One of the effects of baroque trickery is to engage or compromise the viewer in the represented space - to try to blend or bleed the distinction between the space of the spectator and that of the representation. The play between the frame or border separating these two spaces and the dissolution of that frame is paramount in baroque artifacts, and in some ways represents what is perhaps most recognizable about baroque style ... the overflowing of borders (..) In all cases, the play of the Baroque involved a bleeding of borders, an invitation to the spectator to step into another reality.¹⁰

This type of “mapping” of the viewer conforms to the neo-baroque ideal of embodying the viewing subject in such a way that he or she is positioned both within and

⁹ Edward Branigan, *Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 15.

¹⁰ William Egginton, "Of Baroque Holes and Baroque Folds." In *Hispanic Baroques: Reading Cultures in Context*, ed. by Nicholas Spadaccini (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 60-62.

outside of the work. The viewer is plunged or drawn into the work by the virtuosity of the spectacle, whose fundamentally decentered and unstable nature requires the viewer to complete the film on his or her terms.¹¹

The words commonly used to describe neo-baroque works - incompleteness, instability and disorder - all point to a common tendency toward asymmetry. Moreover, instability and disorder imply the opposing concepts of stability and order. As the art historian Ernst Gombrich had suggested, symmetry and asymmetry amount to warring notions that define one another.¹² We can imagine symmetry and asymmetry as two points on the opposite sides of a scale.

I.C. McManus defines symmetry as something that is in proportion and balance.¹³ In his listing of numerous psychological and aesthetic properties of symmetry and asymmetry, McManus' terminology suggests neo-baroque notions. Symmetry in language, he tells us, is commonly associated with rest, order, formal rigidity, boredom, stillness, fixity and stasis. Asymmetry, in contrast, suggests motion, accident, chaos, surprise, flux and complexity. Without delving too deeply into the psychological and aesthetic implications of these categories, McManus's properties appear constant with Ndalianis's description of the neo-baroque ocular regime as one that encompasses works or environments that are out of proportion, balance or symmetry, and in line with the baroque fascination for, to quote Heinrich Wölfflin, "unrest of change and the tension of transience".¹⁴ Conversely, the properties associated with symmetry characterize classical

¹¹ Ndalianis, "Architectures".

¹² I.C. McManus, "Symmetry and Asymmetry," *Aesthetics and the Arts European Review* 13, S2 (2005):159.

¹³ McManus,, 157-58.

¹⁴ Anna Munster, *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 44.

works. For example, Kristin Thompson defines classical Hollywood cinema as exhibiting formal characteristics of unity and clarity.¹⁵

For Ndalianis, the neo-baroque notion of complexity entails a lack of closure and order that overturns classically ordered spaces.¹⁶ Her understanding stems in part from Jose Antonio Maravall, who wrote that one of the defining characteristics of baroque art was changing movement, in opposition to symmetry and harmony of the immutable.¹⁷ Gregg Lambert writes that baroque works are characterized by “the multiplication of surfaces, contours and folds”, which produce movement and “often dizziness in the witness or spectator.”¹⁸ The baroque fascination with the imperfections of the natural world can be understood simply as a fascination with asymmetry. The neo-baroque, like the baroque, maintains a fascination with asymmetry that it likewise magnifies to the extent of becoming, in a word, spectacular. Not merely movement, but overt, emotional movement, animated by anxieties.¹⁹ In this respect, the onlooker’s role becomes that much more challenging, requiring him or her to overcome the anxiety of dealing with the uncertain nature of the representation.

The camera’s tendency to prowl in the racing sequences of *Speed Racer* is magnified by an extraordinary degree of improvisation and freedom to move in fluid and unexpected ways. While Bordwell’s analysis of the mobile frame is limited mostly to analyzing familiar kinds of shots – such as tracking and crane shots – *Speed Racer*’s virtual camera exhibits an approach that cannot always be broken down into ordinary

¹⁵ Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the new Hollywood: understanding classical narrative technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁶ Ndalianis, “Architectures”.

¹⁷ Jose Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque : Analysis of a Historical Structure* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 20-23.

¹⁸ Gregg Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (London: New York: Continuum, 2004), 18.

¹⁹ Lambert, 13.

cinematographic categories. While there are instances when a camera moves in such a way that it can be described as a track or pan or zoom, there are other moments where such labels appear inappropriate. In transcending cinematographic conventions, such moments make the generation of asymmetry in *Speed Racer* unusually complicated, leaving the viewer guessing what the camera may do next.

Lev Manovich expresses a similar dilemma in characterizing camera movement in contemporary action cinema, particularly in respect to virtual spaces. While traditionally critics could break down camera movement into a limited and well-defined set of moves, today its trajectory is unlimited and left to the whims of the director or animator.²⁰ In sum, the camera, by virtue of widespread use of computer simulation, has become so flexible as to transcend its limitations as a material entity. The ways in which the camera generates asymmetries in space is changing. This does not necessarily mean that contemporary approaches to moving the camera do not adhere to classical principles. But it does suggest that the camera in contemporary cinema is generating new kinds of asymmetry that the viewer must somehow cope with.

A Cognitive Inquiry

Neo-Baroque tropes such as immersion and representational disorder can be further elaborated by means of work in cognitive theory on symmetry. An existing body of work on symmetry in the cognitive sciences deals with the way human beings project embodied grasps of symmetry onto environments and seek out symmetries in disordered representations. As shown, neo-baroque aesthetics is characterized by the tropes of immersion and formal asymmetry, which makes this inquiry relevant and necessary.

²⁰ Lev Manovich, "Image Future," *Animation* 1(1) (2006): 42.

The work of Mark Turner discusses symmetry as embodied recognition and projection. The close inspection of the camera work in *Speed Racer* undertaken in the subsequent chapters of this thesis suggests that a viewer will react to an instance of mobile framing in ways based largely on the extent to which the camera can be said to be 'eye-like,' engaging in curious and participative forays in the manner of a self-aware, human presence. My analysis of the film also shows that the film is constructed in ways that encourage the viewer to map his or her own sensory engagement with that of the internal diegetic audience. This type of immersion works naturally in conjunction with the viewer's generic and metaphorical application of bodily symmetry.²¹

In sum, the neo-baroque disorder associated with the mobile frame in *Speed Racer* and in a great many additional commercial films can be seen as a consequence of the viewer's attempt to cope with asymmetrical imagery. Rather than being merely random or incomprehensible, framing asymmetries are constructed to tease the viewer to urge for visual complexity within a balancing act of recovery and loss of order. These issues are elaborated in the next chapter, which examines how recent cognitive approaches to aesthetics can provide film critics and theorists with new ways to study formal constructions of cinematic disorder.

²¹ Mark Turner, "The Body of Our Thought (and the Thought of Our Body)." In *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 68.

Chapter Two – Cognitive Theory Review

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the ways in which two distinct approaches to studying symmetry from a cognitive studies standpoint can be applied to advance the concerns of neo-baroque aesthetics. The chapter presents its demonstration through an analysis of framing and immersion in Hollywood entertainment spectacles, using *Speed Racer* as case study. Mark Turner's study of metaphor and projection in ordinary language is applied to discuss the embedding of the spectacle in *Speed Racer* as a conceptual mapping that works to engage the viewer with the film's diegetic world and the camera entity. Michael Leyton's study of the mind's extraction of symmetry in shape is used to discuss framing as a function of appealing to the viewer's tendency to seek asymmetries in representation with the urge to recover compositional coherence.

Metaphor and Projection

The word 'spectacle' is frequently brought up in discussion of neo-baroque aesthetics, including in the writings of Angela Ndaljianis and Sean Cubitt.²² The word connotes a two-way relationship between a represented attraction and an observer or set of observers. On one hand the spectator can be conceived as someone who watches a play, or a film or a display of fireworks. On the other hand, the spectator can be located at the level of the representation itself, which, by means of a dynamic implication of the spectator and its own particular properties, becomes a spectacle. But what is spectacle if not everything in life that we see, interpret and signify? In baroque and neo-baroque aesthetics, the spectacle is understood as at once a diegetic and metadiegetic effect that works to immerse the real life viewer. In other words, something is spectacle when both

²² Sean Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 217.

the representation and its spectator (or spectators) are present within the very work's diegetic world. A rather simple example would be of a sequence in a film within which a character watches a film or admires a painting or witnesses a sporting event. This dynamic suggests a doubling or nesting of diegetic worlds within themselves – as well as the doubling of the diegetic spectator and the real-life one.

Larry F. Norman provides an example from the baroque period: the many instances where baroque artists blended the represented space of the stage or canvas with that of the audience by creating 'doubles' of the spectator in the artwork's diegesis.²³ A painting like *The Sacrifice of Polyxena* by Giovanni Battista Pittoni, he writes, emphasizes the theatricality of the depicted martyrdom by alluding to two groups of spectators (Figure 2.1).



Fig. 2.1: *The Sacrifice of Polyxena* (Giambattista Pittoni, 1737)

²³ Larry F. Norman, *The Theatrical Baroque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 41.

As those observing the painting, we are one group – those watching the executions – while those within the work are the other. This kind of abstract ‘nesting’ has long served as a common means of blurring the boundaries between the spectator and the represented world. In terms of the baroque mentality, the viewer must enter the work – his or her presence in the real world must also somehow engage with the fictive world of the artwork.²⁴ *Speed Racer* provides exactly this sort of engagement.

Throughout the film, characters actively watch car races, react and excitedly comment upon the goings on. Spectacle is, in fact, an ongoing motif throughout *Speed Racer* – as the protagonist Speed participates in various racing events, they are followed closely by the crucial characters in the story. The motif creates a self-aware embedded dynamic by incorporating an audience of viewers within the film’s diegesis and thus breaking the imagined frame between the spectator and the representation. The internal spectators in *Speed Racer* operate as doubles of the real-life viewer, something that the structured symmetry ensures will be deemed comprehensible and natural by the viewers. The placement of the spectators within the film’s diegetic space mirrors the viewer’s positioning relative to the film.

An inquisitive reader may grasp a similarity in terms of the symmetry discussed here and the structure of metaphor in language. Metaphor can be understood as a common function of anything from conversation to storytelling and it manifests itself with great ease in the way it is registered in the mind. We compare and construct analogy and simile, and frame subjects in ways related to varying contexts in the world. Our readiness to accept metaphor as a way of drawing such connections can be explained in relation to our projection of symmetry. L Bencze, for example, identifies metaphor as a

²⁴ Ndalians, “Architectures”.

kind of symmetry.²⁵ Before proceeding further, let's unpack what is meant here by metaphor.

Mark Turner's work on symmetry projection as an embodied phenomenon is particularly useful in illuminating metaphor's crucial role in allowing for transferences in meaning based on similitude. Turner illustrates the ways that symmetries pervade ordinary language by evoking the proverb "when the cat's away the mice will play."²⁶ The transference here is between the source domain of cats and mice and a target domain of something pertaining to real life, as when cat refers metaphorically to bosses, and mice to employees. The notion of play is likewise transferred from a fictional scenario of cats and mice onto a real-life situation involving play amongst employees in the absence of the boss. Metaphor thus involves, in abstract terms, a transference between two structures – source and target - for the purpose of drawing a connection. The mapping, further elucidated by Turner as conceptual mapping or automorphism, is the overlaying of two properties such that both share a structural similitude.²⁷ Such a mysterious recognition of abstract structure, according to Turner, necessarily involves the generic metaphoric projection of one's embodied grasp of symmetry, one that is "inherent and indispensable to what it means to have a human life."²⁸ In other words, we draw conceptual connections between structures naturally, unconsciously and effortlessly by recognizing the mapped symmetries that connect them. In order for the symmetry to exist, the mapping of elements must be structure-preserving to ensure that the similitude

²⁵ Bencze, "Uncertainty Principle and Symmetry in Metaphors," *Computers & Mathematics with Applications* 17, 4-6 (1989): 702.

²⁶ Mark Turner, "The Body of Our Thought (and the Thought of Our Body)." In *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 72.

²⁷ Turner, 72-73.

²⁸ Turner, 86.

is grasped. What this means is that the relations between elements in one domain – such as people and objects – must have corresponding and identical relations between elements in the other domain. In the case of the given proverb, the domain element of cat will correspond to another element suggested in the context of evoking the proverb – the example mentioned is cat; likewise for boss, the example given is mice. The mind is able to conceive of different connections, in its search for other structures with different elements that correspond to the proverb such that the structure is preserved. Hence, the symmetry.

Nested symmetries in a baroque artwork require a similar cognitive identification on the part of the viewing subject. The aforementioned example is a painting in which a diegetic audience and its object of perceptual attention correspond structurally to the implied real-life relationship between a viewer and the painting that he or she observes. Some films tend to construct similar automorphic mappings, in a neo-baroque spirit of incorporating the viewer's body into the work's conceptual space by symmetrically aligning him or her with an internal audience of observers. This is not to say that such a tactic is confined only to the discussed spectacle film. It does suggest, however, that the purely aesthetic neo-baroque notion of the collapse of the frame requires some blending of the viewer's own space with that of the work. Such blending, as I will show, can be seen to operate in *Speed Racer* once we understand spectatorship in terms of the implied structure-preservation dynamic.

First to consider is the basic positioning of the diegetic spectators against the represented races. The diegetic viewers observe the race from the stands, commentating booths, helicopters and by watching tv (Figure 2.2). As such, they are an audience in

every way that the real-life viewer is – immobile and engaged in the act of observing - their most apparent and explicit activity being perception. Secondly, consider their verbal and emotional reaction to the races – they watch and comment upon what they see, very much in the manner that one would expect from someone at the movies.



Fig. 2.2: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

The two-domain structure is apparent in figure 2.2 above – there are corresponding source and target domains for real and fictional spectators, as well as source and target domains for the real and fictional “play”. The modeling is accepted by the viewer as symmetrical and natural, and also because he or she recognizes, if only subliminally, the abstract similarity between his or her perceptive role and that of the diegetic spectators. In this regard, it makes sense to say that the viewer does not so much watch the characters, as exist among them - cheering on the race collectively with the crowd.

This kind of mapping is relatively straight forward in the way its elements exhibit similitude, and it is crucial that a film like *Speed Racer* incorporate virtual camera work as an extension of its overall symmetry and a means of engaging the viewer. The motif

of spectatorship reinforces the importance of the story to the role of ‘seeing’, but the motif is carried out not only by showing characters cheering on the race, but also by incorporating the virtual camera as an eye-like entity and a metaphorical extension of the audience domain. This metaphor is reinforced by giving the camera a flow of continuous movement and a characteristically human sense of discovery. The camera is modeled to be eye-like – a fluid and curious entity, not unlike Dziga Vertov’s notion of the kino-eye.²⁹ This distinctly human or anthropomorphic quality of the camera provides it with an unmistakable sense of presence and self-awareness that reminds of Vsevolod Pudovkin’s notion of the invisible observer.³⁰ The camera moves in ways to suggest a belonging to a witness who navigates it to explore the space in ways that he/she/it sees fit. As Mike Jones explains, such a camera seeks to free itself from its role as an apparatus and becomes an entity for perception and embodiment, serving to attract the film’s viewer to its unmistakably human qualities.³¹ However the *Speed Racer* camera is not anthropomorphic in the same way as Edward Branigan would define the term, for it continuously breaks physical laws in malleable computer-generated space.³² While still eye-like, the camera is unconstrained by the rules of the diegetic space, meaning that it can go around and even through any object at will. Therefore, the camera does not refer to a realistically human presence in an outright way – its unconstrained omniscience in

²⁹ Dziga Vertov. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O'Brien, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1984), 17. Vertov’s work is indispensable in introducing pioneering notions of the camera’s role in transcending human perception and travelling in a continuous motion to areas that the human body cannot reach.

³⁰ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 9.

³¹ Mike Jones, “Vanishing Point: Spatial Composition and the Virtual Camera,” *Animation* 2(3) (2007): 236.

³² Edward Branigan, *Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 39. Branigan, unlike Jones, sees disembodied, symbolic and ethereal types of camera as non-anthropomorphic.

space means that it cannot represent any single observing character in the film. Rather we can understand the camera, to quote Jones, as “an entity occupying the space”, and therefore an anthropomorphism of the entire domain of the audience in relation to the observed representation.³³ Jones provides the example of the camera work in David Fincher’s *Panic Room* (2002), to illustrate how a camera can operate as an anthropomorphic navigator while still holding little regard to the physical laws of space.³⁴ He argues that in the film, the camera works as the extension of the anthropomorphism of a house, a space within which much of the film takes place. In *Panic Room* the camera is the point of view of the space, whereby its exploration becomes “an act of seeing what the space sees”.

The *Speed Racer* camera is likewise connected not to a subject, but to the holistic audience space that singularly represents the film’s thematic concerns of spectatorship. As the diegetic audience observes the film’s races, the camera eye observes with them, acting as a metaphorical construct of their perceptual role, but also occupying a viewing position irreducible to any singular character. The function of the camera therefore serves as the manifestation of the entire holistic domain of the audience, the row upon row of diegetic observers – and it is connected, by symmetry, to the real-life one.

This eye-like role and the camera’s implied attachment to the observing characters serves the overarching symmetrical mapping in the film, and engages the viewer by inviting him or her to accept it as a means of engaging with and within the diegesis. One is therefore capable of recognizing the automorphic mapping of “sight”,

³³ Jones, 237.

³⁴ Jones, 236.

as it connects conceptual spaces both in the film and in the spectator's own embodied sense of his or her own presence.

Urge and Reward

It is, therefore, by means of symmetry that *Speed Racer* enables the coherence of its own aesthetic virtuosity; however, the camera's tendency to complicate the spatial sense of order is something that also works in relation to symmetry rather than being mere decoration. Unlike the ordered mapping of the spectacle that allows the viewer to experience embodiment, the camera work in the film aims to achieve disorder – it operates asymmetrically. This kind of movement operates to instill the gaze with urges to seek asymmetry, which appeal to the viewer's innate tendency to do the same.

Asymmetry, however, is not something that one can grasp without some connection to symmetry – the two are connected, if only as opposites or contrasting elements. Rudolph Arnheim, for example, conceives of symmetry and asymmetry as two extremes, whereby one represents the stiffness of complete standstill and the other being a terrifying formlessness of chaos.³⁵ Artworks, he adds, tend to find themselves somewhere in between, on a metaphorical scale – either closer to symmetry, or approaching asymmetry. Asymmetrical framing, as theorized earlier, can be understood as an extension of the film's automorphic mapping of spectatorship, but the camera is, likewise, an entity that seeks out disorder in visual environments. Whenever encountered in sequences that privilege movement, commotion or confusion, the unchained and unprescribed mobile frame constructs moments of asymmetry, whereby important visual

³⁵ I.C. McManus, "Symmetry and Asymmetry," *Aesthetics and the Arts European Review* 13, S2 (2005):159.

information is denied by the camera's unpredictable framing selections. Utilizing the work of Michael Leyton, it is possible to connect such asymmetrical behaviour of the camera with the way individuals impose symmetry on their visual experiences.

In order to proceed with this topic, it is necessary, first, to establish what it means when we say that a camera acts "asymmetrically", and, second, to gain some grasp on the logic of how the camera's behaviour attracts the viewer's perceptual interest.

Understanding this kind of aesthetic and its cognitive effect will allow us to make sense of the neo-baroque notion of spectacle and the implied instabilities of formal organization.

Achieving symmetry in a film as a byproduct of framing can be relatively simple. Let's consider an illustration – imagine in your mind an empty room; now add to the composition a table such that it stands against one of the walls; then place a box precisely at its middle; finally, hang a picture frame above the table directly above the box. These objects can be observed to be in symmetry if observed at a certain point, directly adjacent to the middle portion of the table. They can also be framed symmetrically by a camera apparatus, should the frame of the camera itself center the table precisely. Whether or not one actually achieves precise mathematical symmetry is irrelevant, for it is close enough for one to conceive of a sense of order in the film's composition (let's assume that the camera never moves from its point of capture). This type of framing symmetry applies to every film ever made – there exists a camera entity that serves a role of framing certain focal objects and bodies; the more symmetry there is to the framing the more coherent and comprehensible is the environment. Let's avoid editing for the time being and focus strictly on framing.

In *Speed Racer*, the racing sequences most typify the resistance to framing symmetry. This is, first and foremost, for two reasons – cars and other objects are seldom still, and the camera apparatus that frames them is not physically attached to the objects (meaning that it follows them on its own accord). That said, even in the case of a hypothetical racing sequence, some sense of compositional symmetry can be achieved. A god's eye view of the racing track, for example, can frame the action in ways that make the whole race visible at all times. However, such framing might be extremely boring for the viewer in the absence of adjacent close shots that engage the viewer's desire for other means of experiencing the action. These close shots introduce a degree of risk to comprehension, as they take attention away from the entirety of the race in order to focus on a particular aspect of it. A moving close-up tracking shot of a racecar may severely compromise one's sense of visual coherence. A racing event filmed with several cameras from various locations in a stadium can also present a risk to comprehension, one that must be tempered in some way in the editing of the shots. Different camera angles must be assembled so that they complement one another very much in the way that an establishing shot, medium shot and close up complement one another in the so-called analytical editing common in narrative cinema. *Speed Racer*, however, complicates these traditional modes of framing. The cutting that persists throughout the film's racing sequences is not unlike continuity editing, though every bit as crucial to the composition is the constantly moving camera. Indeed, the endlessly restless camera moves in such a frenetic and fast-paced fashion that one can imagine that the filmmakers had taken delight in confusing the spectator and increasing that very risk of comprehension and compositional symmetry. The event is framed in ways that undermine the possibility of

spatial clarity, so involved is the camera with the action. The camera in effect becomes another moving object among other moving objects – as fast and reckless as the cars, but impervious to harm and entirely omnipotent in its ability to reach every avenue of the track.

The camera's ability to move at its whim allows for a seamless dynamic between itself and other moving objects (such as racecars) – that of following them and capturing their movements. The resulting asymmetry is typified by a near-impossibility of perfect framing – as the desired objects, race cars, always make their moves first, the camera can only react and is therefore always a step behind them. We see this in the still from *Speed Racer* reproduced in Fig. 2.3 which shows the kinds of positions that the frame takes on in relation to moving targets.



Fig. 2.3: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

The camera's ability to frame objects 'in symmetry' is constantly thwarted by this existing dynamic. The camera can anticipate and intuit in space, but due to its closeness to the action it faces an environment so chaotic that its participation in it only adds to the confusion. As such, the camera's direct and up-close involvement in the race increases

asymmetry and, by extension, the risk that the viewer will fail to achieve visual comprehension.

This particular practice suggests an engagement with what Leyton refers to as the viewer's urge for asymmetry, his or her disposition for "asymmetry seeking".³⁶

Scholarship on neo-baroque aesthetics reveals identical concerns about the viewer's role of drawing coherence from works that maximize compositional asymmetry. Angela Ndaljianis compares the contrasting notions of balance and symmetry in classical works and the virtuosity and asymmetry of baroque works by evoking two statues of David – one by Michelangelo, which represents the classical, and the other by Bernini, which represents the baroque. Ndaljianis is particularly interested in the way that these two works affect the spectator's activity. Michelangelo's David (see Fig. 2.4), she says, is a self-contained piece that stresses David's quiet contemplation, depicting his body standing stoically and firmly at rest.³⁷ The work requires that the viewer take in the frontal portion of the work in order to make sense of it (Figure 2.4). This kind of frontality, according to Ndaljianis, indicates that the work has to be viewed properly in order for its meaning to be adequately deciphered. Bernini's *David*, conversely, is baroque in the way that its narrative changes depending on the viewer's mobility of perspective (Figure 2.5). Its three-dimensionality and dynamic sense of motion encourage the viewer to constantly shift his or her gaze and take in the work from various angles.³⁸ The baroque work therefore abandons the notion of meaning being nested

³⁶ Michael Leyton, *Symmetry, Causality, Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 478.

³⁷ Angela Ndaljianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 153.

³⁸ Ndaljianis, "Neo-Baroque", 158.

within the work and to be deciphered, and embraces a more open attitude that invites the viewer's perceptive engagement to order it on his or her own terms.



Fig. 2.4: *David* (Michelangelo, circa 1501-1504).

Probing this aesthetic interpretation further, one is bound to notice that both works differ in the way they deviate from symmetry. Michelangelo's *David* (Figure 2.4), in terms of its frontality and static sense of calm, is more symmetrical than Bernini's statue. One is upright, clear in its narrative intentions – the other dynamic and busy in the way David's limbs and folds of fabric appear to flow into one another and morph, leaving the work in a state of continued transformation. There is another more apparent and specific characteristic to asymmetry in Bernini's *David* – it has a greater degree of 'memory' than Michelangelo's. In order to clarify what memory means we must look at the narrative that the shapes, in themselves, tell. Bernini's *David* captures the boy in the process of throwing a stone at Goliath – he turns his body and goes into a windup, just

having unleashed the object. By capturing this moment ‘in process’ the statue effectively runs time backwards, allowing the observer to project into a past action. In other words, David having just thrown a rock, his arm pointing down, committed an act that began at some point, proceeded and ended.



Fig. 2.5: *David* (Bernini, circa 1623-1624).

Conversely, Michelangelo’s *David* refers to no such past action in and of itself. Those who are aware of the related mythology know that this *David* is depicted as about to fight Goliath, but stripped of this context the statue refers not, in any visible way, to a past action. If anything, the work emphasizes a state of rest, or a kind of confident present. One cannot infer the past of the figure depicted by Michelangelo because it lacks the asymmetry of Bernini’s statue. One can tell that Michelangelo’s work represents a boy, presume some details of what the boy is like, what he may be thinking and so on. But one cannot truthfully know what the boy did before he stood upright and

contemplated. Certainly, one can suppose that David had gotten up in the morning at some point and then contemplated, but that is only something that we can apply from general knowledge rather than the work itself. In simple terms, the work provides minimal traces of past action. Being confined to the present means that it lacks a ‘memory’.

‘Memory’ has been conceived in a rather specialized sense by Michael Leyton who writes on the extraction of shape as a perceptive activity.³⁹ He sees symmetry in the same basic way as Bencze – as something that is a kind of given; a natural or default state (Bencze, for example, says that health is symmetrical and lack of health is asymmetrical).⁴⁰ Leyton also defines symmetry in terms of what symmetry isn’t. His ideas concerning asymmetry, however, are unique in the role assigned to memory. Asymmetry, he writes, is the memory that processes leave on objects.⁴¹ A scar is an asymmetry that converts something, upon which it comes into being (a body part), into memory. One consequence of this way of thinking is that symmetry amounts to the absence of memory. Michelangelo’s *David*, as an example of classical architecture, thus emphasizes symmetry by aiming to remove memory, while Bernini’s *David* maximizes memory and, by extension, asymmetry.⁴² A good example of a given state of symmetry would be an object such as an orange, which, in general understanding, is round with an orange colour. Of course, one is bound to encounter some oranges that are misshapen in various ways, but by common knowledge an orange is a relatively round object.

³⁹ Leyton, “Symetry”, 1.

⁴⁰ L. Bencze, “Uncertainty Principle and Symmetry in Metaphors,” *Computers & Mathematics with Applications* 17, 4-6 (1989): 697.

⁴¹ Leyton, “Symetry”, 7.

⁴² Michael, Leyton, “Group Theory and Architecture 2: Why Symmetry/Asymmetry?,” *Nexus Network Journal Architecture and Mathematics Online* (2001), <http://www.emis.de/journals/NNJ/Leyton3-4.html> (accessed June 10, 2009).

Now suppose an action that alters the shape of the orange: one takes the orange with one's hand, squeezes it and wipes it against the soil. This leaves upon the orange two distinctive marks – the marking of the hand that misshaped the object, and the traces of the soil that discoloured the object. The orange therefore has traces of a past action that caused it to look a certain way outside of one's normal conception of the fruit (it is no longer round and no longer wholly orange). Someone who is to come upon the orange at some point in time would be able to “run time backwards” and draw hypotheses about the actions that caused it to look that way. One would most likely conclude that it was squeezed and that it also, at some point, had made contact with soil. The process of inferring the past is what Leyton calls “process recovery”, which is, as shown, elicits a degree of curiosity in the beholder, who must engage with an unseen cause of an action.⁴³ This sense of curiosity is made possible by a desire, or urge, for asymmetry, which Leyton suggests is a natural cognitive response.

Asymmetry seeking is a principle that can and should be adaptable to the study of symmetry in film form. It construes the drive in individuals to continually find and increase asymmetry as a way of maximizing aesthetic pleasure.⁴⁴ Asymmetry in its difference from symmetry counts as a challenge to one's sense of comprehension – something that signifies the quality of what remains unfinished, whereby one's mind is required to complete and cohere the form in question.

The baroque, and by extension the neo-baroque, reflect such concerns at the level of artistic form – Maravall sums up a peculiar taste of the baroque for “loosely related words, unfinished painting, architecture that eludes its precise outlines, emblematic

⁴³ Leyton, “Symetry”, 5.

⁴⁴ Leyton, “Symetry”, 478.

literature that requires the reader to bring the development of a thought to an end on his or her own account...”⁴⁵ All of these traits refer indirectly to asymmetry and memory as the drivers of urges to cohere environments that are in some way incomplete. The aesthetic pleasure depends on the observer’s ability to derive a sense of control, one that a baroque or a neo-baroque works challenges and even frustrates. In awareness that baroque and neo-baroque works are not the only ones that display asymmetry, it is vital then to establish that the neo-baroque does not just involve asymmetry but maximizes it. This maximization is what threatens the viewer’s ability to achieve symmetry or equilibrium.

In order to delve into asymmetry seeking as it manifests itself in a film like *Speed Racer*, it is crucial first of all to evaluate this notion of risk. As already established, the neo-baroque typifies qualities of complexity, asymmetry and chaos. Chaos is something that one can understand in terms of asymmetry, but it is not synonymous with the word. It is, by Leyton’s terms, the state whereby an environment has more asymmetry than an individual can explain (by means of process recovery).⁴⁶ When faced with chaos, the individual is bound to lose control and become overwhelmed. In fact, both Ndalianis and Lambert allude to the way baroque works impose a loss of control on the observer, but suggest that the experience can be pleasurable.⁴⁷ Regardless of whether chaos brings pleasure or pain, the baroque and the neo-baroque typify formal qualities that challenge comprehensibility with chaos.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Jose Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque : Analysis of a Historical Structure* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 169.

⁴⁶ Leyton, “Symetry”, 576.

⁴⁷ Ndalianis, “Neo-Baroque”, 88.

⁴⁸ Gregg Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (London: New York: Continuum, 2004), 17.

In *Speed Racer*, the asymmetry dynamic involving the virtual camera and compositional elements that it seeks out and captures represents the risk the viewer is faced with in the search to cohere visual information. The fundamental asymmetry is between the moving, adventurous camera entity and the racing cars and multiple other objects, including flying debris. The viewer identifies with the camera, first of all, by means of projecting symmetry, and, secondly, by engaging with the asymmetries made possible by the camera's fundamental struggle to recover symmetry between itself and represented objects. The effect is neo-baroque in the way confusion and disorientation are bound to dominate - but rather than occurring as a random assembly of nonsense, this is achieved by means of maximizing the viewer's urge for achieving equilibrium without completely depriving the viewer of visual coherence.

In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, the cognitive theory discussed here is applied with precision to a few recent Hollywood films. Thus, Chapter 3 explores in further detail conceptual mapping as a way of defining the embodied viewer of *Speed Racer* and Chapter 4 probes further into the viewer's desire for asymmetry in *Speed Racer* relative to two other recent examples of neo-baroque film style, *Cloverfield* (2008), and *Transformers* (2007).

Chapter 3 - Speed Racer and Automorphic Mapping

Studying symmetry projection in film viewing as conceptual metaphor is a means to analyze the viewer's embodied, immersive role in conjunction with neo-baroque aesthetics. Special effects spectacle films in contemporary Hollywood require film aestheticians to account for the neo-baroque compositional spaces that define much of current commercial cinema.

A close examination of the *Speed Racer*'s formal construction reveals that spectacle is represented as a projected phenomenon – a mirror world of observers positioned against an unstable represented space of the race. In this respect, *Speed Racer* nests its effects-laden excess within a diegetic world that coheres around the viewer's activity of perceiving and interpreting the film's imagery. Applying Mark Turner's insights on metaphoric projection of symmetry towards the study of *Speed Racer*'s aesthetics allows for a reconsideration of the camera's role in the spectacle. A construct for perception and engagement, the camera is a projection of the viewer's activity, cohering formally as an extension of the film's symmetrical, or automorphic, embedding of the spectacle.

Contrasted Worlds

The plot of *Speed Racer* is centered around the character of Speed, an automobile racer who comes into conflict with Royalton, a wealthy owner of a conglomerate, whose offer to represent the big business is refused by Speed. Much of the narrative revolves around this conflict – between the side of Speed/his family and the side of Royalton and the henchmen/racers who represent him. The differences between the two sides are

represented clearly in visual terms. The scenes of Speed's modest family life avoid the elaborate special effects predominant throughout the film's racing sequences as well as the scene in Royalton's headquarters. The thematic differences between the private and public world of Speed are constructed as polarities - the private world designating a stylistic approach of simplicity and stability, and the racing world depicted as deliberately hectic and chaotic. These thematic and compositional approaches provide deliberate oppositions – an asymmetry between stable and unstable realities. The polarities allow the viewer to grasp the significance of the racing world in at least one way – as an antithesis to the humble world of the Racer household.

The family scenes emphasize a relatively stationary approach to framing the events – the camera here is not designed to emphasize its presence in the scenes, instead typically limited to establishing, medium and close-up shots. It moves only slightly in places, with an occasional pan. Compositional complexity does not present itself in the scenes, emphasizing the family domain's basic difference to the racing domain. The visuals change dramatically in a scene where Royalton gives Speed and his family a tour of his industries. The unfamiliar realm of the large conglomerate is represented using deliberately confusing, effects-laden imagery. The headquarters represent a foreign world to Speed – an overwhelming congeries of simulacra of random patterns. Computer-generated effects work to create the effect of overwhelming bustle, revealing crowds of people, countless types of complex machinery and mysterious labs, as in the frame reproduced in figure 3.1. Depicted in the frame is an unexplained robot with large arms that moves objects from place to place, as well as a copious amount of racers

consumed in performing elaborate stunts. This overload of imagery works more to confuse than illuminate, and, indeed, Speed's family can do little but react with awe.

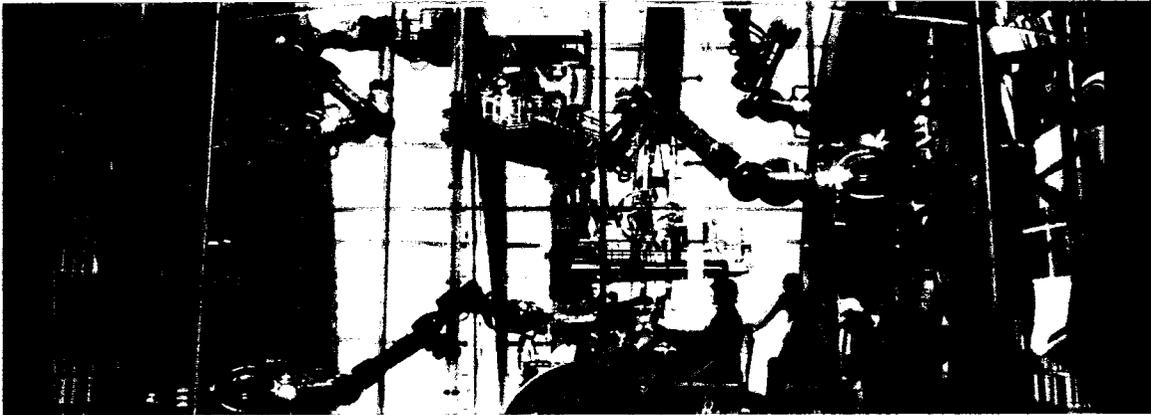


Fig. 3.1: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

The Royalton headquarters sequence thus serves to illustrate a recurring theme in the film of the inherent difference between two distinct worlds, that of Speed's private family realm and the corporate racing realm. This asymmetry gives this effects-laden film an agency and meaning stemming from its role in the narrative. In the headquarters sequence, asymmetry is always positioned against a set of observing eyes – it exists and is understood only when it is 'seen'. The resulting dynamic is that of a spectacle – a stable domain of audience and complex domain of a represented attraction. The fundamental asymmetry between the domains underscores their difference – one is stable and spectator-oriented, and the other chaotic and unfamiliar.

The Audience Within

In order to connect the camera to the ongoing discussion of symmetry let's first return to an illustration from Chapter 2. The hypothetical painting that tells a narrative about a group of spectators who observe a medium - an object or event – that constructs a

symmetry between the real-life spectator and the internal ones. *Speed Racer* constructs a similar dynamic by incorporating a “film-within-a-film” – the race – complete with its own set of observing parties. This embedding serves to ground a generic-level recognition of structures on the part of the viewer, following the logic of the metaphor. Mark Turner refers to this projection as a conceptual mapping or automorphism, whereby the viewer projects his or her embodied grasp of symmetry by effortlessly connecting his perceptual activity to that of the diegetic spectators.⁴⁹ The diegetic spectator here provides the anchor that allows the viewer to cross the conceptual boundary between him/herself and the film.

The spectators within the film are multiple. There are the characters connected closely to the protagonist Speed (the main racer himself), such as his family, friends and foes. In addition there are countless others – audiences that are vast and all-encompassing, whether at the track, in their homes watching tv, or observing from a flying helicopter (Figure 3.2).

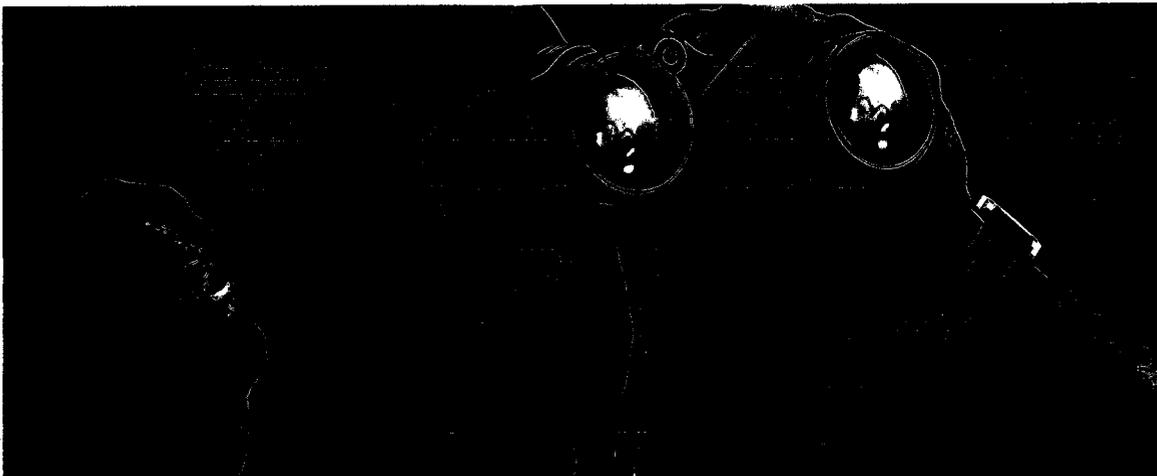


Fig. 3.2: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

⁴⁹ Mark Turner, "The Body of Our Thought (and the Thought of Our Body)." In *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 86.

The cheering crowd of the film serves a role that mirrors that of the real-life spectator or movie audience. Understanding why this mirroring works is crucial, because the effect itself is not self-explanatory. The mapping is seamless because of what research in cognitive science reveals about symmetry and metaphor, or, more specifically, about the way that human beings draw connections between domains of real life and fiction.

The represented race for all of its complexity is made comprehensible in one respect: the viewer is capable of grasping what takes place in some relation to what the diegetic spectators see or do. Regardless of the chaotic nature of the race's representation, the information that the viewer obtains from the observing characters lends some comprehension to the event. This dynamic works in part due to what we know about symmetry from the previous chapter – that all asymmetry in environments must be understood in relation to symmetry.⁵⁰ Even as the film's racing sequences pervade with asymmetries, these can be understood in relation to what is stable and ordered. Thus, the diegetic observer is our stable anchor and entry into the world of the film.

At the same time, a more complex symmetry can be seen at work here, along with a more dynamic type of mapping. The symmetry of “they see as I see” implied by the film can further suggest “they engage, as I engage”. While the automorphic mapping is just one simple means of achieving the effect, it does not provide the viewer with a seamless entry into the film-within-a-film – the race itself. The approach that *Speed Racer* takes to operating its camera in 3-dimensional space gives the audience – both

⁵⁰ I.C. McManus, “Symmetry and Asymmetry,” *Aesthetics and the Arts, European Review* 13, S2 (2005):159.

diegetic and real-life – a shared role in the spectacle. Spectatorship is not relegated to a passive role in the film, but is represented as interpenetrating, constituting the observer's ability to engage both outside of and within the race. This breach of the imagined boundary between the spectator and representation is achieved in the film by means of a flying-eye camera whose presence is felt in both the domains of the viewer and the race. The film's orchestration of symmetry becomes richer and more elaborate than the simple equivalence of structure-preserved elements. The equivalence becomes not that of what the elements are, but what they do and how they coexist between domains.

This "boundary breaking" is reinforced in the film with two narrative mini-episodes, to be mentioned a bit later, that illustrate the ways in which characters engage with film-like inner worlds, or dreams. Likewise, the races function at a comparable domain level of films-within-the-film – represented realities that are, at once, separate from the domains of the spectators, and yet still breached by means of the power of the seeing eye. This abstract but rich notion organizes the film's world – the diegetic spectators (and, by extension, the implied symmetry of us to them) matter because they engage as we engage. The race becomes ours to explore.

The particular neo-baroque quality of the experience lies in the ways in which asymmetry, as a compositional quality, becomes aligned with the viewer's perceptual role in interpreting the work with his or her gaze. Bernini's *David* is presented by writers like Ndalians to illustrate the shifting, unstable composition of a work that depends on the viewer's shifting gaze to cohere as an aesthetic object. *Speed Racer* places a similar demand on the viewer's visual activity and, furthermore, maps it unmistakably in the

film's formal organization. The camera therefore plays an indispensable role as the viewer's surrogate, thus allowing for a seamless, embodied aesthetic experience.

Separated Domains

It is possible to understand the baroque dynamic in the film as the two-fold reconciliation of a stable domain with a highly unstable one, subsequently manifest by an invasion of one into another. The role of the gaze is, in baroque aesthetic terms, two-fold – it exists at the level of the observer, but has the power to alter the represented work's meaning by existing in the domains of the observer and observed, both at once. In order to understand how this effect happens in *Speed Racer*, it is necessary to, first of all, note the way that the abstract difference between the domains is laid out and made clear to the viewer. Once this difference is established, the role of the camera as a boundary-breaking entity becomes apparent.

The stable domain in this case is the mapping of the viewer as spectator of the race, something that the film emphasizes in the opening racing sequence of the film. As characters watch, they engage emotionally and actively comment upon what happens in the race. Not a single major racing sequence of the film is devoid of sets of observing eyes. However these diegetic spectators always exist at a certain distance from the representation – they may be in the stands, the announcing booth, at home watching tv, or in various other locations. They are on a different level from the race and the film bares this abstract separation very specifically.

Making the abstraction apparent in *Speed Racer* is a clever use of style. An approach of “layering” a cut-out of a character's upper body and superimposing it on top

of an image of the race is used in several scenes to efficiently refer to both domains in a single shot. A frame of one such effect is provided here (Figure 3.3). The effect resembles that of a pop-up book, whereby images two-dimensionally fold over top one another to create an effect of separation. Here the layering emphasizes two planes – that of the observer layered and shifting from left to right, and the observed race underneath. Also emphasizing the difference between the domains is the unreal and cartoon-like nature of the track, the cars and the unstable motion of the race. It is apparent that the embedded ‘real world’ of the spectators differs exponentially from the extremities of the chaos that they see.

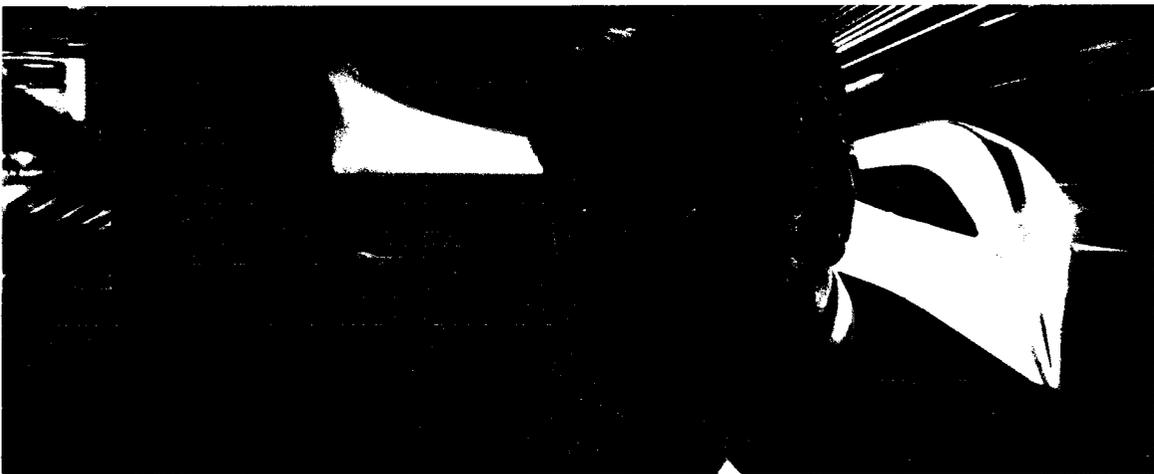


Fig. 3.3: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

Two non-racing sequences in the film abide by a similar visual logic of separating two distinct domains of reality. One such scene is that of Speed as a child, day-dreaming about racing. The other involves two of the film’s supporting characters, Speed’s brother Spritle and a pet chimp, watching an animated film and pretending to enter its diegetic realm. These two scenes abide by a mapping that is only superficially different from that of the racing spectacle, one that employs a similar kind of narrative and visual logic. In both cases the separation between the ‘real world’ domain and the ‘dream domain’ is

made explicit, only to be breached by the human players. These films-within-films imply the same distance from the characters as do the races. As characters watch films, dream and observe races they connect with that inner domain emotionally and personally.

The young Speed's dream takes place in the classroom, where the distracted boy is shown to be bored with his work, escaping into dreams of becoming a racecar driver. Speed's dislocation from reality is represented by means of an abstract separation of the two worlds. The dream begins as the classroom background recedes and morphs into a cartoon. While Speed's body remains 'real', the world around him changes into a rather crude and artificial-looking space that resembles a drawing – a child's dreamworld. As Speed 'races', his desk turns into a cartoon-like car, his body in stark contrast with the background of hand-drawn racers, track, spectators and stands (Figure 3.4). Speed is, as such, a spectator in his own inner movie, existing in two worlds at once and entering a distinct reality by way of his own insatiable appetite for the world of racing. The abstract separation is also maintained in the subsequent scene of Spritle, the chimp and the animated film.



Fig. 3.4: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

An identical distinction between a diegetically ‘real’ world and a crude fantasy world is apparent here. The characters watch a cartoon and become engaged with it enough to pretend to enter its space. The presentation of the boundary break involves, once again, a layering of their real bodies on top of a cartoony world. Unlike the scene of Speed’s dream, these two characters enter the other realm by means of their exposure to a movie – hence engaged by the power of their visual, perceptual qualities and, by extension, their imagination. While the separation of the domains is similar in both scenes, the animated film scene is more specifically tied to the film’s overarching automorphic spectacle due to apparent referencing of the role of ‘seeing’ (rather than just dreaming). The animated film sequence thus clearly refers to the dream sequence and expects the viewer to catch on to the dual-layer structure and relate it to the overall narrative structure.

The strategy of visually “layering” the domain of a spectator with that of a represented reality is maintained as a motif throughout the racing sequences. This “pop-up book” effect of having an observer’s upper body or head placed over top the action, gliding across the screen, emphasizes, at once, the engagement as well as separation of the characters from the show. Most commonly represented this way are the commentators who communicate their reactions to what they see. This layering allows the viewer to see both the commentator and images of the racing cars, a way of seeing both planes of action at once. The domains are therefore bared for the viewer.

The Prosthetic Eye

The handling of the virtual camera in *Speed Racer* operates to integrate the viewer's embodied engagement with cinematic representation, and is, as such, a means of projecting the domain of viewer onto that of the representation. Even though the conceptual mapping of the spectacle provides the viewer with a basic kind of entry into the diegetic spectator domain, the race itself is not automorphically breachable. It carries no metaphorical structures that one can relate back to the spectator. Rather the projection of the viewer into the race is achieved in the film by providing the camera with eye-like properties that function as an extension of the viewer's own gaze. The camera is life-like or "anthropomorphic" – rather than automorphic – displaying human characteristics in terms of the way it explores the diegetic realm. Moreover, it breaks boundaries by referencing its presence within and outside the race, denoting, by symmetry, the viewer's own inner and outer engagement with the film. The camera is therefore mapped precisely to exist in three levels at once – the race, the diegetic spectator space and the real-life spectator space. The camera gaze thus can be described as a neo-baroque entity in that it functions as a surrogate or a "prosthetic" of the observer and his or her stable environment.

The implications of a camera as an anthropomorphic entity is tackled by Jones, who references the superhuman frame of *Panic Room* as a self-aware presence that transcends boundaries of physical space.⁵¹ This camera operates in the film's diegesis with an omniscient and all-encompassing disregard for materiality, able to move through any opening or barrier at will. Jones explains that this ability points to the camera's role

⁵¹ Mike, Jones, "Vanishing Point: Spatial Composition and the Virtual Camera," *Animation* 2(3) (2007): 237.

not as a sight extension of a human entity within the space, but rather the sight extension of the space. In other words, the anthropomorphic camera is the very gaze of a space that sees itself - an embodied navigator that moves through the recesses of its own body.⁵²

Jones connects this non-material omnipotence of the camera to the viewer, citing its life-like characteristics and, at the same time, the camera's omniscient nature, alien to the realm of the diegetic space. The camera acts with a sense of immediacy and with its peculiar tendency to roam and curiously explore spaces, it becomes ideally suited to engage the viewer at a highly intimate level.⁵³

Speed Racer's camera is similarly curious in its navigation of space, but the viewer's immersion with its perspective is even more convincing due to the camera's role of extending the film's overarching motif of spectatorship. The camera represents the enthusiasm and fascination of the film's diegetic audience with the racing attractions and curiously searches for ways to create new and unexpected ways to see races. Rather than representing the point of view of any character in the film, the camera functions as the anthropomorphism of the entire audience space, a singular entity that corresponds to the presence and engagement of the diegetic observers. The camera is therefore a construct of the conceptual metaphor of the spectacle; an extension of the source domain of the audience, but more powerful than any single observer. It is a superhuman observer that functions as the manifestation of the diegetic audience's desire to achieve an intimate and immediate closeness with the represented space. While the camera is not explicitly connected to the real-life viewer of the film in a first person video game-kind of sense, it

⁵² Jones, 237.

⁵³ Jones, 238.

is nevertheless a cognitive construct that is attractive and suitable enough for the viewer to adopt as his or her own. Hence it can be understood as a “prosthetic”.

What is suggested here is not that the relationship between the viewer and the camera denotes some kind of magical transference; rather the camera is constructed and anchored such that the viewer accepts it as a natural extension of his or her visual engagement with the film. It is, firstly, anchored in spectacle, a symmetry every bit as natural as metaphor, and, secondly, it is given a role that grants its observation role a life-like, creative quality. By connecting the camera work to the conceptual metaphor of the spectacle, the viewer is bound to understand the relations between his or her world and the diegetic viewers and, subsequently, between him or herself and the camera that operates from the same target domain. The camera’s ability to breach the barrier between itself and the represented races by breaking rules of physical and spatial logic corresponds to the ideal of neo-baroque engagement - the viewer’s embodied entry into the work.

Let’s look at the ways that the camera accomplishes this effect of travelling between domains of the audience and the representation. The lengthy opening race of *Speed Racer* first introduces the dual domain dynamic and the observing, urgently curious camera gaze. This gaze engages closely with the race, never taking fixed positions and constantly shifting within and around the track. When positioning itself along the track, the camera gets itself dangerously close to the cars to the point where its objective becomes purely aesthetic – it does not illuminate upon the story, as much as it creates its own improvised variety of views (Figure 3.5).



Fig. 3.5: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

The camera's ability to carry itself to any point in cinematic space is complemented by its apparent flaunting of its mastery in the compositional realm. The camera dances around racecars, at times turning its head 360 degrees and taking pleasure in showcasing its desire to discover new creative visual angles on depicting the rapid action. It is able to meet a racecar head-on in full flight and track its body to all imaginable ends of the 360-degree spectrum, never in danger of encountering a boundary that would physically prevent its entry. This tendency is not just indicative of the camera's ability to consciously cross the imaginary line of the axis of action, but also its self-aware subversion of the traditional rules of cinematic framing. Able to transcend mechanical barriers, it becomes an entity whose visual immediacy is at odds with those other moments when it separates the viewer from the action.

Jones considers this unmediated quality as profoundly transformative, claiming that, in such cases, cinematic framing is functioning in an unusual way. The physical camera, he writes, is an apparatus that serves to 'mediate' the experience between the

viewer's space (or domain) and the diegetic world.⁵⁴ When faced with a physical camera the viewer is always one step removed from what he sees take place in the film.

Conversely, the omniscient, anthropomorphic camera that is not always bound by physical laws of the diegetic world eliminates the imagined medium and becomes a spatially constructed 'I' – a prosthetic entity that provides the viewer with an intimate and immediate access to the space. This eye or "I" as such operates to construct its own unique sense of visual asymmetry, but the resulting disorder is purely of its own making. While the viewer is bound to feel some sense of imbalance with what he or she sees, the camera nonetheless serves as a stable and autonomous entity that is grounded against the domain of the observing audience.

It is therefore clear how order and disorder are balanced in *Speed Racer*. The camera stabilizes the aesthetic experience while simultaneously complicating it. It is a tool for projection that provides the viewer with a degree of control over a disordered represented space.

In order to understand the difference between this means of projection and a more traditional approach to filming a high-speed sequence, it would be useful to refer to a scene from an earlier film that dealt with essentially the same subject as *Speed Racer* – *Grand Prix* (1966).

The Material Frame

Grand Prix is very much the *Speed Racer* of its time – likewise a story about racecar drivers, also involving lengthy sequences of racing. One of the more tangible differences between *Grand Prix* and *Speed Racer* concerns the way that the camera is

⁵⁴ Jones, 238.

used and how the narrative supports this use. This is most apparent in the lengthy and complex Monaco Grand Prix race sequence, which utilizes inventive stylistic techniques to capture the frenetic energy of the sporting event. In this opening sequence the various cameras are positioned in identifiable locations at the race track, creating framings that recur throughout the sequence. These locations serve as foundations for the way that the race is represented. These foundations include a moving aerial shot (most likely shot from a helicopter), a crane shot that is positioned noticeably lower than the aerial, a rooftop view, a driver's point of view shot, a shot from the stands and similar varieties on this, a view from the car's hood positioned towards the driver and a close-up shot of the drivers' faces. These camera positions predominate throughout the race and then repeat in varying order.

What is interesting is the way in which these foundations reference the camera's existence as an apparatus, as it is apparent to the viewer that the camera is at all times at the mercy of the physical laws that are imposed upon it by "real life". Ostensibly, the camera is not omniscient, but rather large and clunky - severely limited in terms of the way it can move in space. Of the shots provided, only the aerial view is entirely removed from the floor - all of the other camera positions refer to the camera's enslavement to physical constraints. Likewise when we see a close-up of a driver's face we do not expect the camera to move over top of the car and onto the other side. We know that it is firmly entrenched on the hood, such as shown in figure 3.6.



Fig. 3.6: Still from *Grand Prix* (John Frankenheimer, 1966).

The apparatus therefore can never be truly improvisational and, as such, cannot operate as a seamless extension of the viewer's perceptual faculties. Its limitations constantly reference its own separation from the viewer's domain of existence – its world is confined to a space and time of its own. The diegetic domain is therefore a closed-off space, while the physical camera is the medium that filters the visual information onto us. The domains are naturally at a great distance.

The omniscient, prosthetic entity of *Speed Racer* is every bit as undisturbed by the limits of this divide as it is for the laws and material tangibility of the diegetic space. It operates in virtual animated space and refuses to treat it as real, therefore not subjugated by any constraints. It invents its own laws as it moves, rather than imitating the mechanical camera apparatus. With no limits on where the camera can go, the boundary between the viewer and the representative space is thus undermined.

An example of the resulting visual inventiveness is the camera's ability to carry itself from place to place in the virtual space by moving through objects like screens and frames. However impossible in real-life space, this kind of movement makes sense in the

film because the viewer accepts that the camera is able to manipulate compositional elements to its own benefit. We can see this occur in the opening racing sequence of *Speed Racer* where a point of view shot of Speed from within his car shows a reflection of his tailing opponents on the speed indicator (Figure 3.7).



Fig. 3.7: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

The camera proceeds to make an “impossible” zoom in on the indicator, through it and out the space of the reflection. Notice that in figure 3.8 some of the graphics of the speed indicator are still visible.



Fig. 3.8: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

The physical logic of the camera's movement in space is subverted here by a new kind of logic whereby it can transverse space by going through openings and find itself in unexpected new locations. The constant reinforcement of openings and frames provides the visual experience with a sense of graphic balance by means of this constant guiding of the camera through passages. These include screens, rearview mirrors and the speed indicator. The consistency with which the camera breaks physical laws is not an arbitrarily stylistic decision but a deliberate means of establishing the camera's unique power to breach boundaries. The fact that it is not subservient to physical rules makes the immediacy of its presence that much more acceptable to the viewer and its role as a perceptual prosthetic more effective.

Sense of Play

What else can be said about the camera's anthropomorphic qualities in more specific terms? The notion of the gaze as a curious navigator can be explained by studying the camera's tendency to look for and recognize symmetrical relations in space. Faced with a highly unstable environment, the camera is not simply programmed to move about randomly, but rather to look for patterns and relations that it can mimic. These patterns allow us to understand what this particular sense of play is and why it coheres rather than simply flaunt a proclivity for random nonsense.

Sense of play as an anthropomorphic feature does not suggest aimless drifting, but an attitude that abides by some patterns of recognition. The camera eye's play engages the viewer's recognition of symmetrical relationships. Mimicry is a natural manifestation of pattern recognition and a desire to copy that pattern. It is a structure-preserved

mapping, or at the very least an attempt at a transference between one entity and another. The most apparent kind of mimicry in *Speed Racer* involves the camera positioning itself at the level of a racecar, along the track, such that its movements and engagement with the conditions are on the same basic level as the objects it copies.

This is apparent in the film's opening race where we see the camera zoom in on the track and then steer its way along the curvature of the track. As it involves itself immediately with the race, it conforms to the track's loopy, spiral-like, structure (Figure 3.9). It glides along the track's floor, providing a view identical to the perspective of a car, engaging the viewer with a more sophisticated sense of immediacy. Even if only for a split second, the viewer is transported into the race by temporarily engaging with the experience at the level of the drivers. The immediacy of this engagement is magnified in moments like those of the *Casa Cristo* race. As the conditions of the tunnel become bumpy, the camera engages itself in mimicking the racecars, likewise adjusting to the bumpy conditions of the road, moving unevenly.



Fig. 3.9: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008)

In conclusion, essential to the design of *Speed Racer* is a recurring symmetry that grants the camera its own sense of agency and meaning as an entity of projected

engagement. While not everything the camera does is entirely explainable, we can nevertheless establish why it exists and why it works the way it does. We can also explain why the camera is mapped in this particular way in relation to the viewer's involvement. The camera's gaze-like activity and metaphorical relation to the spectatorship space defines its role in the film and engages the viewer to immerse him or herself with the spectacle. The mappings that we see in *Speed Racer* are deceptively simple, but also extremely effective in dealing with a complex topic of neo-baroque virtuosity.

Chapter Four - Asymmetry and the Mobile Frame

Chapter 3 dealt with the ways that symmetry as a formal dynamic allows the viewer to anchor him or herself in a film by mapping information from distinct conceptual domains. But neo-baroque art is also be characterized by moments of aesthetic disorder extreme enough to challenge the viewer's ability to recover coherence. While the issue of controlling chaos was central to the previous chapter, this one is concerned with asymmetry (disorder) as an aesthetic component. In other words, the focus in this chapter is on disorder itself.

Current Hollywood cinema is an excellent area of study for this purpose because the Hollywood action-adventure blockbuster films tend to be highly stylized. Moreover, with recent advances in special effects, action films are becoming more visually elaborate and demanding of the viewer than before. One of the prevailing recent trends is the mobile frame – manifesting itself as the likes of the omniscient eye from *Panic Room*, the hand-held point of view cam and what we can call “shaky cam”. Contemporary cinema comprises numerous variations on essentially the same idea. Films are shot using a moving camera that emphasizes commotion of various sorts. A sequence featuring an unstable or chaotic environment may require that the camera magnify the effect of disorder through its own movement. Aside from the camera's role in obeying classical continuity, it is vital to clarify the immersive effects achieved by the camera's mobility and relationship to objects in space. Why is such an approach to camera work appealing in the aesthetic sense? Is it even appealing at all? How is the viewer engaged?

Analyzed herein are three films – *Transformers*, *Cloverfield* and *Speed Racer* – for the purpose of discussing the use of the mobile frame to convey asymmetry. Mobile

framing achieves asymmetry when it denies the viewer information about aspects of the diegetic space that have vital narrative importance. For the purpose of this chapter, these vital elements will be called “focal targets”. Drawing on the work of Michael Leyton, I will explain how the mobile frame, as found in the three films, is engineered to have a human cognitive makeup – it seeks out symmetries in environments and maximizes asymmetry within complex and unstable diegetic spaces. The mobile frame, in this case, moves in ways that corresponds to the human urge to recover visual clarity. Asymmetry as a manifestation of mobile framing can be understood in terms of the neo-baroque metaphor of the multicursal labyrinth whose multiple paths complicate the subject’s search for spatial comprehension. Lastly, these three films illustrate distinct approaches of organizing asymmetries – *Speed Racer* and *Transformers* privilege cuts to stationary framings as a way of balancing out the mobile frame, while *Cloverfield* utilizes the point-of-view, first person camera that is more heavily invested in communicating narrative information.

Disturbing the Equilibrium

Imagine a film in which an important event has to be shot in a way that gives it visual power. Let’s limit this to an event of the blockbuster variety – a race, a fight, an earthquake. It is important for the filmmaker to capture this event in such a way that it draws the viewer in, challenging the viewer’s desire to interpret the sequence’s flow of events. Asymmetrical approaches to mobile camera work are also neo-baroque in the ways that they achieve desired effects of rapid and complex disorder.

One approach to shooting a blockbuster scene would be to privilege stationary framing. In this case the camera is positioned to frame important objects and persons in the mise-en-scène such that they are readily visible and comprehensible relative to one another. The frenetically mobile camera complicates this sense of comprehension – when involved closely with the action the mobile frame disturbs the immediate delivery of vital information to the viewer. The viewer’s ability to make sense of what the objects are and the way they make contact with one another is challenged.

This characteristic use of the mobile camera is particularly jarring in the extensive action sequences that culminate in the final climax portion of *Transformers*. These sequences depict several computer-generated robot creatures fighting on the streets of a city, while human characters, including the film’s protagonist, struggle to survive amidst the chaos. The robots engage in a tussle, exchanging punches not unlike two boxers would in a ring. The camera work in the sequences is intentionally frenetic – rather than using a long or establishing shot and a series of medium shots and close-ups, the fight is captured almost entirely by a mobile frame. This approach avoids the comprehensibility of traditional camera placement, whereby the frame engages so closely with the action that it registers only partial information about the surrounding environment. The camera places itself at the level of the human characters without taking on their point of view, but what it sees is typical of the general feel of confusion one would expect from a human participant. As such, the frame’s distance between itself and the fighting robots becomes skewed and unclear. No longer is the viewer able to clearly follow what goes on and the camera’s disordered movement and pace contributes to the viewer’s inability to make coherent sense of everything that takes place.

The aesthetic focus of the filmmakers here is different from what one might expect in a traditionally shot scene of this kind. The mobile frame becomes a reactive conveyor of visual information and, unable to frame events from afar, it is overcome by the power of the fight. While it looks for new ways to see the action, it is ultimately never in control of the dynamics. The elements that convey important information about an ongoing conflict – the fighting robots and the human participants – are not always in the frame, and are seen often only partially. The resulting disorder between the frame and these important elements constitutes the fundamental asymmetry between the camera and the composition.

Chapter 2 presented the hypothetical illustration of the object-camera dynamic that conceives a situation in which a camera follows a compositional element with the intention of framing it to achieve coherent visibility. When the object of the camera's interest – the focal target - is in constant motion, the desired synchronization is never achieved because we know that the frame can only react to and anticipate the target's movement and is thus always a step behind. Conversely, when the frame is positioned to provide stable and clear framing of an important element in the action, the viewer is provided with an immediate grasp of vital information – a camera filming from a distance, in a long shot, provides a more stable view of the action; likewise with a camera attached to focal target, such as the apparatus fixed upon the hood of the car in *Grand Prix*. Shots that provide a stable framing of vital elements convey coherent information to the viewer – a temporary symmetry, or uniformity formed by the camera in relation to the object or objects of interest.

Symmetry thus can be understood as a sense of order achieved by the framing entity in regards to these vital objects. These objects are, in other words, focal targets in that they provide information that is most crucial to the narrative, and thus of greatest interest to the viewer alongside other elements in the compositional space. When objects or figures play a central narrative role – such as two boxers in a ring in a *Rocky* film – the viewer will look for some compositional clarity and salient framing that spurs the forward progress of the narrative. The camera’s denial of this information creates an asymmetry in terms of the way its lens avoids these focal points.

Asymmetry and Process Recovery

Michael Leyton’s work on symmetry is vital for investigating the aesthetic implications of the mobile frame on the viewer’s cognitive response. Leyton writes that asymmetry is the memory that processes leave on objects – such as scars, dents and scrapes.⁵⁵ By extension, asymmetries are characterized by processes that leave a “memory” – such as a scar forming on the skin as a result of a shaving accident. The present existence of an asymmetry thus originates from a past symmetry, separated by a process whereby something happens and causes the asymmetry. Asymmetries such as scars are also abnormalities in that they draw attention to the processes that created them – for example, the squeeze marks on an orange are abnormal to the general properties of the fruit. The process therefore constitutes the time frame that separates the present state of asymmetry from a past state of symmetry.

Leyton thus sees asymmetry as something that comes into being as a result of a process that disturbs a state of equilibrium. Similarly, Bencze’s notion of health as

⁵⁵ Michael Leyton, *Symmetry, Causality, Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 7

symmetrical abides by the same basic logic. Lack of health is asymmetrical to health, and is, by extension, considered abnormal.

The camera-object dynamic can be discussed using process recovery as a viewer-oriented cognitive drive. When a focal point, such as two fighters in a ring, is framed and visible, symmetry is achieved in as far as the viewer is provided with sufficient information about a crucial narrative element. When the camera turns its head and looks away, the symmetry is broken. At this point, the viewer is bound to realize that a process took place whereby the camera's act of turning its head disturbed a state of equilibrium. The viewer, having observed the camera's moves, also knows that the focal targets are still somewhere in the diegetic space and that the camera is a distance away from them. As long as the viewer is at least vaguely aware of the presence of the focal target, he or she will know that symmetry can be recovered and that the camera is denying him or her a sense of closure.

Teasing the viewer with a constant denial of visual information, the camera in *Cloverfield* is strictly hand-held throughout. This decision is justified in the film by having it play a diegetic role – the frame operates as if controlled by the characters. The introduction of a catastrophic event – an attack on New York city by an initially unseen monster – results in a series of faced-paced sequences wherein suspense and uncertainty is the key to engaging the viewer with the narrative.

The strictly point-of-view handling of the camera means that the viewer is always at the mercy of what the camera sees. At no point is there a clarifying long shot nor a convenient close-up to provide the events a sense of complete coherence. When the film's characters come to contact with a monster, the viewer is not empowered with

complete information about the dimensions of the scene and the frame's relation to other characters, such as the knowledge of where the creatures are in relation to the camera. The camera, operated for most of the film by the character Hud, nevertheless serves to seek coherence in a multitude of chaotic situations.

The camera's role of searching out information is first made apparent in an early sequence of *Cloverfield* at Robert's going-away party. When the party is suddenly disrupted by a loud sound and an electrical outage, the occupants of the building are seen rushing on top of the roof in order to find the cause of the disturbance. As Hud looks around, he doesn't simply rely on his set of eyes to seek out information, but rather looks through the camera. The frame is, as such, used in ways that simulates the eye's activity – it searches for focal targets, the causes of ambiguous activity.

A later sequence that shows a disembodied head of the statue of liberty fall from the sky and onto the street, is likewise set up to maximize the camera's efforts to seek out information. It reacts with a sense of confusion, shifts its attention onto the head, and then observes the reactions of the surrounding onlookers (Figure 4.1).



Fig. 4.1: Still from *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008).

This sense of discovery is maintained when characters look around the street and observe the rubble. The uncertain nature of the events spurs the camera to search out objects of interest, such as a burning ship and an ambulance.

Many of the focal targets throughout the film are partly unseen, such as the creature that wreaks havoc on the city. Its presence in most sequences is evident by the sound it makes, the reactions of the characters and the fragmentary views that we pick up of its body. Also constantly lost and found by the camera are the humans in the story – when the creature makes contact with the bridge that Hud and others cross, the camera temporarily loses track of the characters. Caught in the resulting commotion, the frame does not provide the viewer with a sufficient view of where it is on the bridge and in relation to other people. As Hud runs under a tunnel and away from the bridge, the camera begins to recover some of the other characters. So, even though this kind of sequence may seem merely chaotic, it is actually engineered to generate in the viewer an urge to recover a sense of order. By placing the camera directly within a scene of commotion, one expects that it will lose track of the focal targets around it and then gradually begin to recover them. Once the recovery is accomplished, the viewer is bound to achieve a sense of balance, normality and symmetry. The presence of the focal targets is crucial in establishing their distance from the frame; the distance becomes extended and more uncertain once some kind of commotion hits. This gives the viewer the knowledge that the camera is removed from those persons or objects by a process that it can travel. The uncertainty of the distance, but simultaneous awareness of the presence of the focal target creates the asymmetry that the camera attempts to correct.

Asymmetry is Appetitive

The moving frame as it is used in *Cloverfield* therefore appeals to the viewer's natural inclination to seek out asymmetries in environments. This cognitive response is studied by Leyton who proposes that individuals have an asymmetry-seeking drive.⁵⁶ In other words, we are attracted to noticing changes in environments, compositions and shapes, and seek to recover the processes that caused the change. The mobile frame, as utilized in *Cloverfield*, operates as both a generator of asymmetry and a seeker of symmetry. Its close proximity to the action results in its inability, and in part unwillingness, to perfectly frame the focal targets of action. By denying the viewer the desired framing of the focal target, the camera breaks the desired equilibrium achieved by the focal target and itself.

Leyton writes that aesthetic pleasure increases “with the greater amount of asymmetry that is found”.⁵⁷ When the mobile camera is positioned in the midst of a cinematic battle, it struggles to keep up with focal targets of the action, creating asymmetries that drive up the viewer's urge to see more than what the camera allows. At the same time, the viewer takes delight in the visual disorder, challenged by his or her inability to process information. The viewer's awareness of the target's existence simultaneously with the frame's denial of symmetry cues the viewer to desire a return to symmetry and rediscover equilibrium.

I.C. McManus expresses that pure symmetry in artworks is unexciting, possessing

⁵⁶ Leyton, “Symetry”, 478.

⁵⁷ Leyton, “Symetry”, 478.

qualities of being harsh, rigid and unlikable.⁵⁸ Persistent, unrelieved symmetry is, in other words, perceived by the observer as boring, banal, predictable and capable of holding no surprise, whereby the observer is left with little to do but admire the perfection of the construction. For the filmmaker and the cameraman, matters of framing are undoubtedly about symmetry in this respect, whereby they must decide what the mobile frame must do without leading to overt excess and, as a result, alienate the viewer.

Leyton theorizes that these appetitive qualities of asymmetry manifest themselves when process recovery is achievable.⁵⁹ Inability to recover history in an artwork renders it devoid of memory and thereby chaotic; the viewer is thus incapable of explaining its complexity. In cinematic terms, the viewer's awareness of the frame's distance from the focal targets is tested, and when this distance is unknowable and unrecoverable the asymmetry ceases to be appetitive. The mobile frame in a film like *Cloverfield* acts to periodically reward the viewer with fragments of information that generate a memory of the target, but constantly shifts in ways that avoid a comprehensive outlook. This give-and-take approach also characterizes the "imperfection" of the camera work in the action sequences of *Transformers*, giving them an unstructured feel and character. An early fight scene between two robots is organized to involve the camera in this very way.

Framing Asymmetry

The fight, like all the others in *Transformers*, is witnessed by some human characters who scramble to stay alive while endangered by explosions and flying debris. While the gigantic machines fight around them, the mobile frame is placed primarily at

⁵⁸ I.C. McManus, "Symmetry and Asymmetry," *Aesthetics and the Arts European Review* 13, S2 (2005):159.

⁵⁹ Leyton, "Symetry", 576.

the human characters' level and along the floor such that it reacts and sees things imperfectly. Positioned in this manner, the camera comes dangerously to the action rather than maintaining a safe distance. The camera operates in a reactive manner – moving as if not wholly certain about its next move; often losing its train of thought and always with a sense of anticipation about the movements of the robots. It gallops, shifts its head, sometimes falls flat on the ground and even loses track of the action. At one point, the camera falls on its side while “trapped” amidst the chaos (Figure 4.2).



Fig. 4.2: Still from *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2008).

Cloverfield's hand-held frame similarly involves a great deal of disordered spatial phenomena against which it reacts and searches for clarity. One scene for instance captures the characters as they are caught in the middle of a firefight between the military and the large monster. Hud, who handles the camera, and several other characters encounter the creature's tail several blocks up a street. From behind them, soldiers appear and fire upon the monster. As Hud ducks behind cars parked at the side of the road, his view becomes partially obscured and incomplete (Figure 4.3).

At this point the camera ends up seeing even less of the creature than the characters, who strive to get a glimpse of a monster partially obscured by buildings.

When the focal target is established, the camera's placement relative to the focal target is crucial, as the distance between the two drives the resulting asymmetry. The fact that the viewer does not have all information drives up the suspense and leads the viewer to draw hypotheses about what may exist just outside of the frame's grasp. The urge for closure is maximized and affirmed by the fact that the focal target exists on some level and within an identifiable distance from the frame.

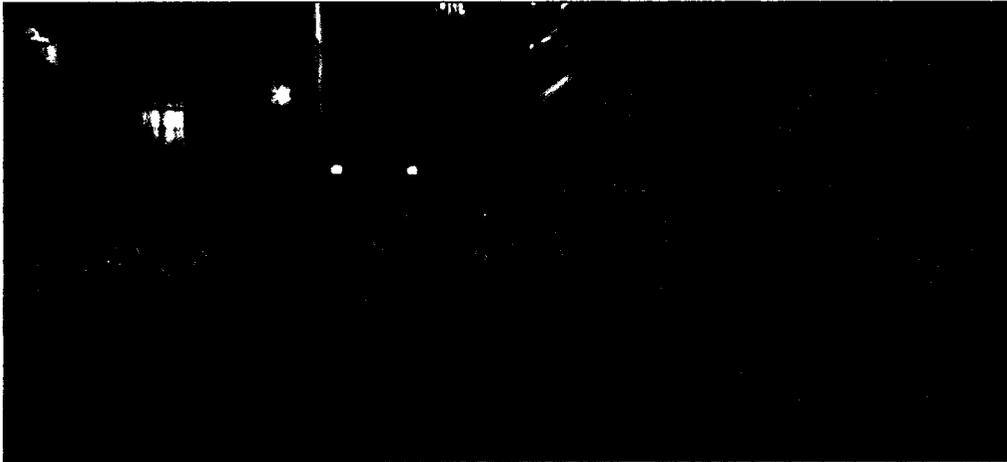


Fig. 4.3: Still from *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008).

Neo-Baroque Labyrinths and Disorientation

Asymmetry as a neo-baroque characteristic was explored in Chapter 2 with reference to the two statues of David. It was proposed that Bernini's work is more asymmetrical than Michelangelo's and that it has a distinguishable memory in the sense that it points to a past state that is recoverable by the viewing subject. However the film sequences analyzed to this point illustrate asymmetries that are potentially even more complex. Whereas the restless bodily extension of David in Bernini's work contrasts with Michelangelo's emphasis on stillness, the focal targets encountered in Hollywood works imply an even more demanding bind of process recovery.

The mobile, shifting focal targets of *Transformer* and *Cloverfield* create an unstable distance between themselves and the frame, which creates asymmetrical uncertainty. The resulting dynamic suggests not only that symmetry is denied in order to be recovered, but also points to the potential impossibility of complete recovery. Numerous other complexities can be distinguished, such as the fact that the camera can take multiple routes to the focal targets rather than just one, and the fact that it deals with numerous focal targets in human characters, machines/monsters and other elements that suddenly enter the scene.

This fundamental imbalance is neo-baroque in the sense that the viewer is required to decipher unstable simulacra. The role of the observer in actively cohering disordered compositional spaces corresponds to the baroque metaphor of the labyrinth which Ndalianis identifies as a central theme of the mind's desire to achieve closure by engaging with non-linear formations.⁶⁰ Ndalianis writes that the neo-baroque form is characterized by the concept of the multicursal labyrinth. The labyrinth is a design of planned chaos that is organized to challenge the subject, even leading to the point of disorientation.⁶¹ The multicursal labyrinth can be distinguished from the classical, unicursal, model, which offers the wanderer a singular path to its centre, an explicit destination that the subject must find in order to achieve equilibrium. The multicursal labyrinth is more complex and elusive in that it presents the wanderer with multiple paths and an unlimited array of choices for travel.⁶² The subject is thus presented with a series of options in his or her process of moving about the maze, in contrast with the prescribed

⁶⁰ Angela Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 81.

⁶¹ Ndalianis, "Neo-Baroque", 82.

⁶² Ndalianis, "Neo-Baroque", 83.

path of the unicursal labyrinth. Operating here is a kind of formal complexity wherein the individual is faced with an unstable environment and potentially infinite and multiplying ways to seek closure.⁶³ The neo-baroque theme of the spectator's engagement with complexity can be developed through the labyrinth metaphor, which suggests the way contemporary Hollywood action films achieve asymmetries by means of framing.

The virtual camera work in *Speed Racer* points to a similarly complex relationship between the frame and objects in an unstable diegetic space. Focal targets in the composition are in constant motion, which means that the camera's path to process recovery is constantly altered and renewed by the ways in which it reacts to movement. In other words, the frame actively makes choices in the ways that it reacts to and approaches compositional elements. The climatic final race of the film – the Colosseum Grand Prix – is illustrative of the camera's frenzied search for cohesiveness.

The race is focused primarily on Speed's racecar and the frame stays in close contact with it for the entirety of the race, as Speed struggles to survive in the rough-and-tumble environment of the track. Much of the asymmetry in this sequence comes from the fact that the race is animated to be extremely physical and violent. The frame, involved very closely, is presented with the challenge of following Speed's car as it constantly makes contact with the elements. This results in frenzied shots and unpredictable framings, as the car appears and reappears in sight. As the camera searches for the focal target (Speed's car), it often takes false paths in anticipation of the car's turns. So, in a multicursal manner, the seeking/wandering eye takes improvised routes by its own volition – when taking the wrong turn, it corrects itself and turns back to find the

⁶³ Ndalians, "Neo-Baroque", 84.

car. Its quest of approaching a target is repeatedly complicated by the impossibility of a singular attainable path.

However the camera does not operate in ignorance of this impossibility. Indeed, it plays self-consciously with the fact that it will not achieve symmetry. While keeping within close distance of its target, it nonetheless places itself asymmetrically to the focal target, thereby complicating its own task of recovery. In the event, the camera maximizes a sense of urge for coherence, but also avoids outright chaos – the frame retains a certain sense of control without having complete control.

An interesting exception to this occurs in the opening race of the film. The camera zooms from an aerial view onto Speed's rapidly approaching car and, as the frame meets the racecar head on, the car turns slightly to its left and slows its movements as if anticipating an upcoming turn. By shifting its head in this direction the car places itself right up to the camera, which tracks smoothly from left to right to provide an unrealistically centered view (Figure 4.4).

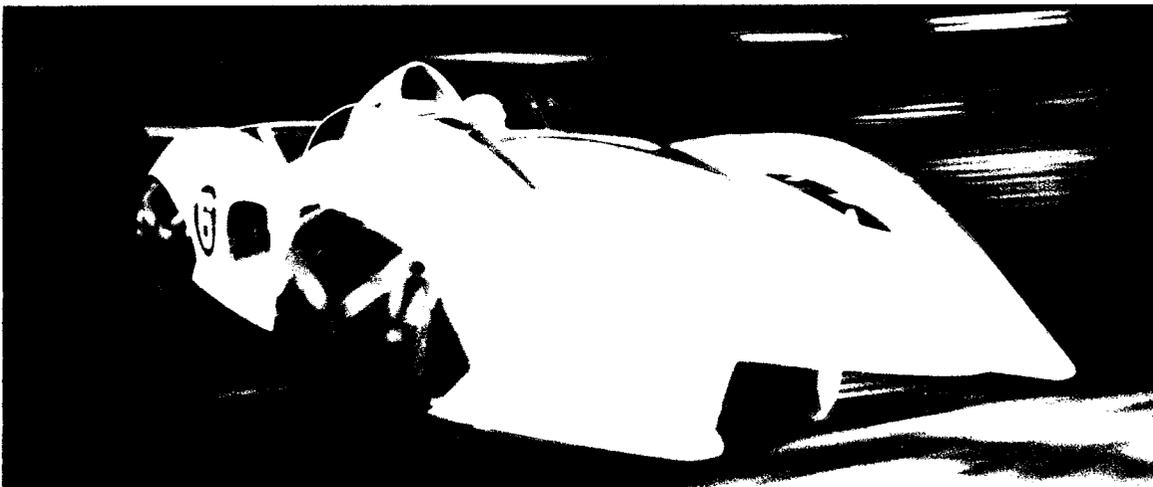


Fig. 4.4: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

This brief moment works in an apparent antithesis to the film's emphasis on

asymmetrical imagery, aiming to present the viewer with a brief and clear shot of the focal target before proceeding to deny that view for much of the film. An increased amount of asymmetrical risk in *Speed Racer* is found in the Casa Cristo race, which multiplies focal targets and problematizes the recovery of symmetry. Unlike the final Colosseum Grand Prix stage, this race features several participating riders who are important to the sequence. Aside from Speed, we also pay close attention to Racer X, Trixie, and Taejo who collaborate with one another in order to win the race. The race becomes even more visually complex, because a lot of the imagery emphasizes action that is not closely associated with the protagonist Speed. As a result, the frame follows a lot of racers at once (Figure 4.5). This multiplication of focal targets creates an additional element of risk to the viewer's ability to grasp symmetry. The frame often loses itself in downright chaotic action whereby cars jump, turn over and explode to the point where the viewer is bound to struggle to make sense of what takes place. The effect generates urge to recovery symmetry, but also creates risk in the way that the framing communicates information that is not salient nor asymmetrically recoverable.



Fig. 4.5: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

In this respect, *Speed Racer* takes its camera work closer to unrecoverable asymmetry than either *Transformers* or *Cloverfield*. However, keep in mind that the asymmetries in *Speed Racer*, although extremely complex, are also very brief and are complemented by cuts to clarifying and stationary framings of salient elements that drive the narrative forward.

Limits of Asymmetry

The three films discussed in this chapter all involve a mobile frame whose operations can be characterized as “asymmetrical”. It would be fair to say that audiences expect Hollywood blockbusters to thrill them by increasing asymmetry and testing the viewer’s ability to generate a coherent experience in spite of the challenges presented.

Speed Racer thrills the viewer by driving the asymmetry almost to the brink of chaos. I say “almost” because the film’s rapid cutting limits the mobile frame’s travel to only a few seconds. *Cloverfield*, conversely, is almost entirely mobile in its framing, which means that the camera’s role of process recovery is complemented by its additional role as a storytelling component. These two films therefore assign different aesthetic purpose to the mobile frame, unlike *Speed Racer*, whose camera does not always act to drive the narrative forward.

In *Speed Racer*, the mobile frame plays a key role in the aesthetic presentation of the races, but it seldom lingers for more than a few seconds before a cut takes the viewer to a stable framing of a salient element. The film therefore nests its neo-baroque virtuosity within an overarching classical emphasis on clarity and comprehensibility. Every mobile shot is followed by a cut to a stationary framing of a face or object that

emphasizes either an act or commentary upon the event, allowing the viewer to grasp the progress of the narrative. The asymmetries in *Speed Racer* are thus fragmentary, but recurring – the film establishes a balance whereby it teases the viewer by denying information and then very quickly cuts to a view that clarifies an action.

The Casa Cristo race has numerous examples of this “exchange”. In the desert portion of the race, a point-of-view shot from Speed’s perspective cuts to an extreme close up of his face for about one second, followed by a brief aerial shot that clarifies the car’s location relative to other objects, complemented by a cut to the mobile camera with its typically asymmetrical tendencies. After a few seconds, we see a cut to a split-second stable side-view of Taejo in his racecar, as he makes contact with another driver, followed by a cut to a close-up of his feet as they hit the break (Figure 4.6). The next cut is again to the mobile camera.



Fig. 4.6: Still from *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008).

This kind of exchange of balanced, stationary shots with unstable, asymmetrical ones is typical of the way that instability is contained in the film. In *Speed Racer*, complex asymmetries are constantly balanced out by some reinforcement of visual balance. Thus, the film’s racing sequences reinforce asymmetry seeking, but also limit it

to fragments that are carefully interspersed with shots that clearly emphasize information vital to the narrative (eg. feet hitting the brakes).

Transformers is also high on cutting, but more willing to allow its mobile frame to operate for a longer while before cutting to a stable shot. An early sequence of the attack on the military base incorporates a few long shots that are reestablished at the end of the sequence. The long shot frames the machines that attack the base, in order to provide concise information on their location relative to the surrounding elements, such as planes and tanks.

Cloverfield is devoid of such inserts, and the mobile frame is unperturbed. The asymmetrical effects of the camera work are complicated by the frame's role as a narrative component, in that it must get across a certain amount of information in order to effectively convey the story. This creates a problem whereby the need to convey a certain fact about a state of events requires the camera to move in ways that is more prescribed than the viewer is led to believe. In other words, the shots that we expect to be haphazard and accidental end up framing situations in unrealistic ways, breaking the verisimilitude that is so vital to the narrative.

The scene of Hud's death near the end of the film is an ideal example of this. Hud and his friends ride in a helicopter that crashes in a field. As they escape from the burning rubble, the creature attacks and kills Hud. Of course, all of these events are filmed from Hud's perspective – so we know that he is holding the camera as they get out of the helicopter. What follows is Hud's final encounter with the monster - we see the creature as it approaches and stands right over top of Hud, as he deems it necessary to

point his camera and film it. When the creature attacks, the camera goes flying, bounces around and finally lands besides Hud's lifeless face (Figure 4.7).

One could say that the sequence is absurd because it is not believable for a character to worry about the superficialities of filming when something much more important – his life – is at stake. A further problematic aspect of this scene is the way that the framing is achieved. When the creature attacks, the camera bounces around as if responding to the contact. Ultimately, however, the camera re-positions to reveal Hud's face. Here the camera communicates narrative information (Hud's death), but also possibly risks alienating the viewer by denying him or her the ambiguity of not knowing the result, or the potential of inferring the result by other means (such as by the reaction of the other characters).



Fig. 4.7: Still from *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008)

This is not meant to suggest that the decision by the filmmakers to use the camera in this way is a bad one. Rather by analyzing the framing as denial/reward, one can ponder the aesthetic implications of the decision and whether the aesthetics involved satisfy or provide too much information. One might ask whether the resulting symmetry

is too obvious, whether one sees more than one should, or whether the camera appears too arranged and deliberate.

In any case, the use of mobile framing as a way of generating asymmetry in diegetic environments provides an excellent example of the ways in which Hollywood special effects entertainment spectacles engage viewers with sequences of commotion and disorder. This is a topic that can lead to a variety of discussions about Hollywood aesthetics and the ways in which contemporary films challenge viewers.

Conclusion

The thesis has investigated claims in neo-baroque aesthetics about how contemporary action spectacle films achieve viewer immersion. My conclusion is that the discussed neo-baroque assessments of current cinema are true and can be shown to be true when we apply cognitive theory to study mobile framing in neo-baroque spectacles such as *Speed Racer*. These approaches emphasize crucial aspects of today's moving-image entertainment that tend to be downplayed or ignored in accounts that regard contemporary cinema as essentially classical. But I also believe that discussions of neo-baroque cinema require theoretical refinement as well as greater attention to the specifics of film form and style. I have argued that the insights of neo-baroque aesthetic theory can be made more relevant to film study when supplemented with cognitive investigations into symmetry.

To briefly summarize the important findings of the thesis, I have argued that an aesthetic investigation of the immersive effects of the mobile camera requires the study of the way the viewer relates to the work with his or her perceptual and embodied faculties. Two neo-baroque claims are investigated in depth: that the viewer is embodied in the neo-baroque work, and that the viewer engages with asymmetries that are inherent in the work's formal structure.

The analysis concludes that the embodied immersion of the viewer into the work is achieved through conceptual mapping, which is made possible by the nested role of the *Speed Racer* spectacle. This nested construction embeds an internal audience that mirrors the viewer's presence and, by extension, anchors the camera's gaze-like activity. The camera's anthropomorphic role metaphorically represents the visual activity of the

spectator space but, even deeper, signifies a shared spectatorial excitement of seeing the race in new and playful ways. For example, the role of the camera as a ‘mimic’ represents the way the camera takes on creative and unexpected views of the event.

Another fundamental feature of the neo-baroque spectacle is representational asymmetry in difference to classical order and unity. Fragmentary moments of framing in *Speed Racer*, as well as *Cloverfield* and *Transformers*, show that the viewer can be engaged with the camera’s activity of denying information about focal targets of importance. The resulting urges for coherence create tension, which is magnified in the ways that the films extend and complicate the asymmetries. We can therefore establish that the resulting risk of recovering symmetry is achieved when focal targets are multiplied and when the camera’s rapid give-and-take of denial-satisfaction is set in motion.

By studying the ways that these films create immersive effects by appealing to the viewer’s innate grasp of symmetry, we can establish that neo-baroque aesthetics provides a viable claim about a recent turn in Hollywood cinema and its effects on viewer immersion.

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