

# Apparatus, Genre, and Spectatorship in the Classroom

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When I observe my five-year-old grandson, Henry, navigate the levels of difficulty of a video game in which he chooses a hero who has to overcome obstacles and zap anyone who gets in his way, I wonder at his dexterity as he rapidly manipulates the control panel with ten fingers going all at once, his eyes glued to the images on the TV monitor, taking in the action he seems to be controlling. And I also wonder, almost aloud, what this all means in the formation of his inner world, of his attitude and perception of the outer world. Is the enthrallment he expresses a sign of a complete giving over to the game through his identification with the “hero” character and what he/she represents, or is it a sign of an active imagination and desire to affect the game’s outcome, to be himself, its hero? Or is it both—is he captivated and unruly all at once?

The instructions I give in my film studies courses do not include new media, of which video games are a big part. But a cursory glance at some of the critical literature on video games indicates a healthy, lively commentary on their effects on players as both spectators and participants, (see Bibliography). The source of my fascination with spectatorship and the effects of media derive from the long history of numerous and diverse critical commentaries on film (old media?) as a site for the formation of representations that affect the way we think of ourselves and others. In other words, film’s relationship to its audience is a conduit to explore the ways in which media exerts a powerful influence on the construction of ideology within the self and the larger culture.

A part of my film syllabus focuses on the relationship between media, identity, and ideology. In my introductory film course (ENG 363), I approach the issue developmentally, assuming that many of the students are unaware of the ways in which film exercises its power over the viewer. We first look at the basic elements of cinema and their functions—elements associated with cinema’s eclectic combination of forces: cinematography, editing, mise-en-scene, and sound—the technical elements of film and what

we term collectively, the “cinematic apparatus.” The next part of the syllabus looks at the systems that utilize these elements in their construction—the narrative systems of classic Hollywood and the art film, and generic systems like the western, the gangster film, the musical, film noir, and the woman’s film. One overarching schematic that links aesthetics with narrative and genre is the cumulative effect on the spectator.

## Aesthetics and Spectatorship One: Andre Bazin and the Shot in Depth

One of the ways to illustrate the relationship between the aesthetics of the apparatus and the audience is to focus on two elements of cinematography, the long take and deep focus, and to contrast their function with that of another aesthetic—editing and its various practices. The long take and deep focus are often used together, the camera presenting a scene without cuts and instead, utilizing camera movement like panning, tracking, or zooming, while also shooting in deep focus so that the spatial planes of the scene—its foreground, middle ground, and background—are all in focus. This presentation of the scene preserves the integrity of its space and time. On the other hand, presenting the scene through editing or montage violates its unity of space and also condenses or expands time, whether it be in the classical Hollywood style of establishment shot, medium shots, close-ups, and shot reverse shots; or in the Soviet style of collision and associational editing. Filmmakers, of course, combine the techniques of the long take and editing, but some emphasize one over the other. For example, Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* (2007) has many long take sequences (the long take is also called a “sequence shot,” because a whole sequence is presented by it), while Paul Greengrass’s *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) is constructed largely through editing and, in the action scenes, intense rapid-fire editing. Very early on in the history of film criticism, the great French critic André Bazin wrote on the aesthetics of the long take/deep focus vs. that of editing,

and he championed the former over the latter on the basis of their effects on the spectator. For Bazin, besides preserving the unity of space and time, the long take/deep focus shot enables the audience to be active in its viewing—it gives the spectator a choice to direct his/her attention to anywhere within the space of the scene; and given its openness and inclusiveness, it also makes possible the quality of ambiguity within the scene. On the other hand, editing or cutting up a scene directs the viewer's attention, thereby closing off the possibility of ambiguity. Bazin is very eloquent on these differences and on what, for him, are moral grounds for preferring the deep focus cinematography and the long take:

Well used, shooting in depth is not just a more economical, a simpler, and at the same time a more subtle way of getting the most out of a scene. In addition to affecting the structure of film language, it also affects the relationships of the minds of the spectators to the image, and in consequence it influences the interpretation of the spectacle...it implies, consequently, both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress. While analytical montage only calls for him to follow his guide, to let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, here he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice. It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives...montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression... On the other hand, depth of focus reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image if not of necessity... at least as a possibility. (Bazin 2004: 49-50)

Bazin used Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) as his primary example of the continuous use of deep focus to sustain spectator choice and its vision of the ambiguity of Kane's character and the diverse points of view offered in the narration. An early famous sequence in the film illustrates this technique. The boy Kane is centered in a deep focus shot in the background outside the window of his parents' cabin, playing on his sled in the snow. In the foreground of the shot are his mother and the banker, Thatcher, who are in the process of completing a transaction to hand over Kane as a ward to Thatcher. In the mid-ground is Kane's father who objects to this transaction but is silenced after Thatcher reads the terms of the agreement that provide a generous financial compensation. This shot allows the

viewer an opportunity to assign his/her attention to any part of the scene—foreground, middle ground, or background, but the three planes together reveal the ambiguity of conflicting agendas, including that of the innocent Kane, who is in the background and remains unaware that his future is being bartered by the adults. One of the many motifs of Welles's masterpiece is the centering of Kane in the background of several deep focus shots, his figure and stature playing off against the foreground action in context. For example, after Kane has solidified his publishing empire by luring the top journalists of his rival newspaper to work for him, he throws a party to celebrate the accomplishment. In a deep focus shot, he is seen dancing with chorus girls in the background flush in the excitement of his conquest, but in the foreground, his two best friends and associates, Leland and Bernstein discuss whether this newly gained power will distort his perspective and lead him to forget about his original publishing principles to speak out against corruption and help the common man. The inclusiveness of the shot, with the celebratory Kane in the background and Leland and Bernstein raising questions about Kane's character in the foreground, expresses ambiguity about Kane's success and suggests his future downfall.

A more recent example of a long take/deep focus sequence appears in Olivier Dahan's *La Vie en Rose* (2007), the biopic about Edith Piaf, and it illustrates the degree of sophistication and effectiveness of this technique, inviting spectators to take an active interest in a scene's conflicting and ambiguous elements. The sequence is set up by an earlier scene in which Edith Piaf is waiting in New York for her lover Marcel Cerdan, the middleweight boxer, to cross the Atlantic by plane from France to join her. He shows up in her bedroom, and Edith greets him with great love and serves him dinner in bed. The scene then cuts to the morning as Edith awakens to find Marcel gone from the bed. In a long take/deep focus sequence that uses the tracking and panning camera, Edith circles her huge apartment from room to room, frantically looking for Marcel. In the deep focus background are her agent, servants, and friends looking bewildered and helpless as she desperately cries out for Marcel. Finally, her agent gives her the fatal news that the plane carrying Marcel has crashed, killing him and everyone else on board, and she collapses onto the floor. In this pivotal scene, the tracking camera captures Edith's desperate and deluded desire for Marcel as she vainly searches her apartment, while

the deep focus registers the other characters as they watch her move from room to room. The apparatus privileges the viewer, who observes all of the action and its conflicting elements simultaneously, bestowing a contradictory resonance to the moment—the moment of Edith’s intensely expressed delusional desire for Marcel coupled with the concerned, devastated countenances of those around her who know that he is dead.

## Aesthetics and Spectatorship Two: Soviet Montage & Hollywood’s Continuity Editing

Bazin frames his discussion of deep focus cinematography in contrast to the Soviet school of montage and the classical Hollywood system of continuity editing. This contrast between the long take/deep focus and the two systems of editing practice demonstrates for students-as-spectators how the apparatus can limit agency on the part of the viewer since both systems of editing direct or manipulate viewer attention. Soviet montage affects a materialist ideology, while the classical Hollywood system aims to involve the spectator through patterns of identification with the protagonists. In the famous Odessa Steps sequence from Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), in which czarist soldiers slaughter civilians sympathetic to mutinous sailors in pre-Revolutionary Russia, Eisenstein utilizes several editing techniques—parallel editing, shot reverse shot, overlapping editing, dialectical editing, and associational editing to manipulate viewer sympathy for those being killed. An effective example of associational editing is the series that contrasts the soldiers to the people. The soldiers are presented as mechanically marching down the steps in a straight line, their heads cut out of the picture by the top frame; they are faceless and impersonalized as they shoot and kill. In contrast, the civilians are seen flowing down the steps in long shot, in full figure in medium shots, and as horror-stricken in close-ups of their faces. Eisenstein’s editing personalizes them. The audience views them as human beings slaughtered by the machine-like precision of the merciless czarist soldiers

The classical Hollywood system of continuity editing has institutionalized several techniques to draw viewers into the story world of the narrative. Some of these editing techniques involve constructing spatial and temporal continuity within and between scenes to provide a clear sense of the story world and its actions for the viewer, while other tech-

niques enable identification with the characters, thus drawing the viewer into the world of the narrative. When editing for spatial and temporal continuity, an establishment shot orients the audience to the whole scene before its space is cut up into medium and close-up shots; characters are more or less centered in the frame at eye level, and the camera films all the shots of the scene from one side of a 180-degree axis (the so-called “180-degree rule”). To convey continuity, in cuts within scenes, movement will be consistent from right to left or left to right; and in scenes, for example, that condense the action of a car trip from one location to another, movement of that car will be consistent from right to left or left to right within the frame. When editing to affect audience identification with the characters, the shot reverse shot and eyeline matches attach the spectator’s point of view to that of the characters, while parallel editing solidifies or intensifies that attachment

The shot reverse shot is often cited as the most used editing technique in mainstream cinema and is normally associated with the point of view of one or two characters—a shot of a character looking at something is followed by a shot of what he is looking at, or a shot of a character talking to someone is followed by a shot of the other character listening or responding. The effect of the shot reverse shot is to make the viewer identify with the character who is looking or talking. Meanwhile, eyeline matches are constructed through the shot reverse shot, over the shoulder shots, or through the camera panning from a character’s face to what he/she is looking at. Eyeline matches create a seam of significance within the frame to suture viewers into the moment of the narrative through their identification with the point of view of the characters.

Parallel editing or crosscutting, perfected by D. W. Griffith early in the history of cinema in such films as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), is an editing technique that cuts from one set of characters and action to another set of characters and action that are happening simultaneously. This technique is a staple in the construction of film narrative – it can crosscut among multiple narrative lines or alternate between one character and another in a single story line. Griffith used it famously in chase or “deadline” sequences to intensify spectator identification with the main characters. Crosscutting between two characters in such a sequence, the one rushing to save the other who faces imminent harm, builds suspense and heightens spectator involvement.

Because the intent of the Hollywood system of continuity editing is to draw the viewer into the story world with little confusion or distraction, it is often referred to as “invisible editing.” In other words, you don’t notice it. David Bordwell is more discreet in his analysis of this style of editing, calling it “moderately self-conscious” in contrast to the overtly self-conscious, reflexive styles of the art film and the experimental film (Bordwell 1985: 160). But the term “invisible editing” does make the point that this technique is not supposed to call attention to itself, but to the story that it is telling. The continuity style fits perfectly with the kind of goal-driven narrative that we associate with mainstream Hollywood cinema and its imitators. This kind of narrative presents psychologically defined individuals, who act as causal agents to solve clear-cut problems or to attain specific aims. It usually ends with a resolution of the problem or achievement or nonachievement of the objectives. Because of the “invisibility” of its style—its clarity, and its strong resolutions of conflicts—the classical Hollywood narrative is a highly satisfactory one for its spectators. And that is where the danger lies for spectators who are unaware of its influence on them, for in being “satisfied,” they implicitly buy into the representations within the narrative without explicitly questioning them.

After I have shown students how to become more informed and aware of the ways that film can influence an audience, I go on to discuss the representation of gender in popular culture and the role that film plays in influencing such representations. With insight from Laura Mulvey’s 1975 seminal essay in feminist film criticism, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” coupled with an analysis of the depiction of women in one particular Hollywood genre (film noir) students are able to develop a more critical awareness of cinema and its representations.

### **Mulvey and Film Noir**

Though Mulvey’s essay was published more than thirty years ago, her exploration of the female’s objectification and specularization for the male gaze still has great relevance and resonance in our present society. The main points of her classic essay have now become established fare for students of gender ideology and its construction by the cinematic apparatus. Building on psychoanalytic theory and the work of Freud and Lacan, Mulvey observes that the traditional role of men in classical Hollywood cinema is that of active

agent, while women remain passive objects of the viewer’s gaze. Moreover, the classical apparatus (the “camera” or the Hollywood system of editing) privileges the point of view of the male subject in mainstream cinema and induces the spectator to identify with his point of view. The apparatus is itself the bearer of a male gaze that mediates between the masculine desires within the spectator and the male protagonist in the film (Mulvey 2004: 841-842). And so, the man is the “bearer of the look,” while the woman is “coded for strong visual and erotic impact...to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 2004: 841). Mulvey identifies this particular visual pleasure that derives from the conventional cinematic situation as “scopophilia” or “the pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (Mulvey 2004: 840).

Mulvey also identifies a second visual pleasure that derives from narrative cinema, that of “narcissism.” She explains that this pleasure arises from the need for viewers to identify with the hero protagonist in a film and that this identification is an act of transference from the Lacanian mirror stage in childhood. During this stage, the child sees and recognizes itself in the mirror. But this recognition is “misrecognition,” for the child perceives this image as a body of full maturity. It is an image of self as plenitude, more complete than that of the child’s own body. The superior mirror image gives rise to the “ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, reintroduced as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others” (Mulvey 2004: 840). The transference of this process of identification in the movie-going viewer is his identification with the ideal ego figure on the screen:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. . . . The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor coordination. (Mulvey 2004: 842)

For Mulvey, both visual pleasures, the one scopophilic and the other narcissistic, are male-centered and privileged by conventional Hollywood cinema. There are two questions that naturally arise given Mulvey’s claims that in the

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Hollywood narrative female characters lack agency and that the apparatus spectatorially constructs a male gaze: 1) what about those films that have a strong female character as their protagonist, and 2) do women viewers identify with the male gaze and point of view that the apparatus constructs? Mulvey acknowledges that her essay doesn't take into account films that have women as their protagonists. Rather, she cites other critics like Pam Cook and Claire Johnston who argue that the female protagonist's agency is more apparent than real in a film such as *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* (Mulvey 2004: 842). She looks forward to future theorists tackling the problem, like Mary Ann Doane who argues, in *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, that the agencies of female protagonists in the 1940s Hollywood genre of the woman's film are ultimately constricted by the male satellites and by the traditional gendered roles of female protagonists—the wife, mother, mistress, daughter, girl in love, secretary, nurse, etc. (Doane 1987: 3-9).

Meanwhile, Mulvey addresses the sticky problem of the female spectator in another essay, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema': Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)." If narrative cinema privileges the male point of view and induces the viewer to identify with that point of view, does the "viewer" include female viewers? Mulvey contends that the position of the woman spectator as she watches mainstream narrative cinema only solidifies her secondary status in the culture. Mulvey sees two options for women viewers: they may either identify with the male camera and the male agent within the film (cross dressing) or they may identify with the female object within the film in a masochistic way. In either case, they are complicit in the construction of the dominant system of representation (Mulvey 1989: 35-36).

Mulvey's theories on visual pleasure in narrative cinema have remained at the forefront of discussions of gender politics in the media. They have spawned numerous commentaries that qualify, enhance, correct, reject, or complement her ideas. In modifying Mulvey's claims, these commentaries clarify the complicated agencies and subjectivities of female protagonists in the Hollywood film, and they illustrate the variety and complexity of responses that female viewers may have toward the depiction of male and female characters on the screen (See Bibliography).

A discussion of Mulvey's concepts in my film class, following as it does a discussion of the Hollywood system of

(invisible) editing and narrative, furthers students' awareness of how the cinematic apparatus constructs narrative by suturing the viewer into the point of view of the characters on the screen and naturalizing what those characters and their actions may represent. In the case of gender ideology, the cinematic apparatus privileges a male point of view and reinforces a male-empowered cultural system. To illustrate this lesson on gender ideology and cinema, we turn to a specific genre of film: film noir. Any Hollywood genre will do, but film noir is especially relevant since Mulvey herself uses it as an illustration of how the on-screen character of the femme fatale, a strong and independent woman, is ultimately punished for her challenge to male dominance and control. Again, we are speaking here of two kinds of control: the power of the look constructed by the apparatus and the power of the narrative and its resolutions. In the classic examples of film noir—John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1946), and Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1949)—the protagonist, normally a male figure (a detective, insurance investigator, lawyer, etc), holds the power of point of view or subjectivity. But there is a twist in film noir. Though he is apparently the agent of the narrative and the bearer of the look, the protagonist is, in fact, being manipulated by the *femme fatale*. Implicitly, she is controlling the narrative, either as an accomplice who betrays him or as a slippery suspect who raises doubts about her guilt. However, the mechanism at work in both the apparatus and the narrative is to overturn her control by establishing the shift in the male character's agency and look from *faux* to real. He discovers her guilt and/or web of deceit and exposes her, and by resolving the narrative in the traditional way, he punishes the *femme fatale*. She is killed or sent to prison.

Wilder's *Double Indemnity* is a good example of this narrative pattern. Walter Neff, insurance agent, tells the story in retrospect through voice-over narration. He is the subject and agent of the narrative. His story begins when he meets Barbara Stanwyck's Phyllis Dietrichson in her home to renew her husband's automobile insurance. When he first sees her, his gaze takes in her seductive physical beauty. Phyllis asks him to prepare an accident insurance policy on her husband without her husband's knowledge. He refuses at first, but he falls in love with her and agrees to be her accomplice in crime. Neff tricks Phyllis's husband Dietrichson into signing the accident insurance policy. And when Neff

and Phyllis kill Dietrichson, they set it up to look like a train accident, which activates the double indemnity clause on the policy. Up to this point in the narrative, Neff has supposedly been the one in charge, planning and executing the signing of the policy and the “accidental” death that follows. However, he discovers from Phyllis’s step-daughter Lola that Phyllis may have killed Dietrichson’s wife in the past in order to marry Dietrichson for his money, and that Phyllis is now seeing and arranging meetings with Lola’s own boyfriend Nino Zacchetti. Neff realizes that Phyllis, in true femme fatale fashion, has been playing him for a fool, and now may be seducing and manipulating Zacchetti to murder him so she can have all of the money. With his newfound suspicions, Neff confronts Phyllis. He rejects her efforts to seduce him one last time, “Sorry, baby, I’m not buying.” At this moment, Neff regains full control as he hovers over Phyllis, the camera in a high angle shot over his shoulder peering down on a vulnerable Phyllis as she looks pleadingly into his eyes. His own gaze, looking down into her eyes cancels her look as he shoots her. Though Neff’s voiceover amounts to a confession that he is dictating to the insurance company’s investigator, the confession is an act of his own choosing, just as he is responsible for saving Zacchetti from Phyllis’s deadly web and returning the young man to the innocent and wholesome Lola.

A more extended discussion of film noir takes students beyond the Mulveyan example of the strong independent woman and the threat of being undercut by the male gaze in classic films of the genre. A glance at more recent film noir, called “neo-noir,” gives students an awareness of the genre’s transformation over time as cultural attitudes have changed. Students see how the femme fatale has gained the upper hand in the period after the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Lawrence Kasdan’s *Body Heat* (1982) is a conscious revision of *Double Indemnity*. As we saw in the original, Barbara Stanwyck’s femme fatale seduces the male protagonist, lures him into killing her husband, and tries to frame him or have him killed in turn; but when he discovers her scheme, he kills *her*. In *Body Heat*, however, by the time the male protagonist Ned discovers his betrayal by the femme fatale (played by Katherine Turner), he is already in prison serving time for the murder of her husband. Meanwhile, she has escaped to the sanctuary of a tropical island. Through a dissolve, the cinematic apparatus transfers Ned’s look in prison when he discovers her deceit to *her* look

in a close-up as she lies on a beach sipping a daiquiri. The transference fixes her as the narrative’s true agency and the film’s ultimate bearer of the look—and the movie ends that way. Other neo-noir films with similar patterns of gender transformation include Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992) with Sharon Stone, John Dahl’s *The Last Seduction* (1994) with Linda Fiorentino, and Brian De Palma’s *Femme Fatale* (2002) with Rebecca Romijn.

After exploring film noir and neo-noir, I return to Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” to remind students of the role that cinematic apparatus plays in constructing point of view, subjectivity, and a form of representation that is ideologically gendered. Mulvey’s goal is to expose classical Hollywood cinema’s emphasis on invisible editing and push for a more reflexive, self-conscious aesthetic that makes the viewer aware of film as a construct and attain a kind of Brechtian distance. Only then will the narcissism and scopophilia, the twin male-centered visual pleasures of classical cinema (according to Mulvey), be broken and challenged:

Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged. (Mulvey 2004: 847)

One kind of film narrative that tends to expose the “cinematic codes” of the classical Hollywood style is the art film, which my students and I explore at the end of the syllabus to reinforce the experience of film as a construction and how it affects the spectator.

### **The Art Film and *Run Lola Run***

The art film emerged as a response and alternative to the Hollywood cinema. It includes the styles and narrative conventions that we associate with Soviet Montage and German Expressionism of the 1920s and 30s, Italian Neorealism of the 1940s, and the French New Wave of the 1950s and 60s, among others. Historically in America, the art film flourished from 1950 to the mid-1960s when foreign films, predominantly from Europe and Japan, played in US

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“art houses” and appealed to college crowds and culture enthusiasts across campuses and in metropolitan areas. As a genre, the art film refers to any film that includes several of these characteristics or a wholesale focus on one or two of them: a self-conscious aesthetic such that the viewer is aware of the film as a film; the focus on a social problem or issue that remains morally ambiguous; the development of complex characters and a central interest in human relationships; a non-traditional narrative structure that may be developed by a non-linear chronology or by a disconnect between time and space; multiple protagonists and narratives rather than the single-protagonist of the classical narrative; and an ending that is open-ended with little or no resolution, unlike the satisfaction of closure characteristic of the classical Hollywood paradigm. Many foreign films and independent films embrace these characteristics, and even Hollywood films have since appropriated them into the classical narrative.

In my class, I treat students to a traditional art film from the 1950s/60s like Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* (1957) or Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (1959). The former is known for its self-conscious *mise-en-scène*, its stunning black and white cinematography, and its complex theme of a struggle for faith in a seemingly godless universe. The latter is recognized for its disjunctive editing, highly reflexive style, and characters who talk endlessly about doing something but who never do anything. For more recent examples, I like to engage students with the multiple narratives, fractured chronology, and problematic endings of Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Amores Perros* (2000) or with the forking path narrative and in-your-face cinematics of Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run* (1999). The latter is especially effective in summarizing for the student the overarching issue of spectatorship and its relation to apparatus, genre, and ideology.

*Run Lola Run* employs many of the characteristics of the art film. The film opens with a quotation from T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”: “the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time.” Through a voiceover, the film purports to deal with a philosophical issue concerning existence: “Who are we? Where do we come from?” From the outset, the film poses questions and issues for the viewer to consider during the film, demanding a form of critical detachment. Over the course of the film, the question of existence remains

open-ended. Another consideration is introduced by the voiceover—that the film we are about to watch will be like a game—“The ball is round. The game lasts 90 minutes. That’s a fact. Everything else is pure theory. Here we go.”

*Run Lola Run*’s narrative is composed of three versions of the same basic plot and presented in spectacular cinematic style. The spectator is aware that the film is continuously being constructed and that the “same” story can be presented in three different ways with three different endings. Basic to all three versions is the fact that Lola must come up with 100,000 deutsche marks in twenty minutes to save her boyfriend Manni from the mob he works for because he accidentally lost that money in a drug deal. All three versions share other common elements, but they are tweaked to provide three different endings. The film utilizes a dizzying array of cinematic techniques to express the film as a game: animation, shaky hand held camera, whirling circling motions, parallel editing, split screen, fast and slow speeds, freeze frame, quick zooms in and out, black and white cinematography (for flashback sequences), a variety of angles and distances, a pliable soundtrack, etc.

Although these characteristics position *Run Lola Run* as an art film, it nevertheless is an interesting hybrid of an art film that has strong classical Hollywood narrative elements. Students recognize, for example, that it employs a work goal within a deadline; a romance goal (Lola must save her boyfriend); strongly motivated characters; a progressive, linear development; and in the final, third version of the story, a clear and happy resolution in which Lola wins the money through legalized gambling and Manni recovers the lost money anyway, at the same time. The film also uses identificatory editing techniques in the classical style so that the viewer identifies and races with Lola to obtain the money and save Manni. And so my students and I shift constantly between analyses of *Run Lola Run*’s reflexivity, which distances, and its classicism, which simultaneously engages the viewer. In the end, however, the film leaves us with many questions that serve the ultimate intentions of the art film: are the characters’ lives dependent on chance, accidental circumstances, or fate, or are they determined by their own motivations and desires? Or are their lives dependent on all of these factors at once? What do Lola and Manni learn in the first two versions that help them achieve the ending of the third version? Is the film just an exercise in the manipulation of its characters and their stories in order

to foreground the discourse or the *telling* of the story and not the story itself? Or are both the integrity of the story and that of the discourse preserved by the totality of the text? And what about the “philosophical” issues raised at the beginning of the film? And last, but not least, how does the film overturn traditional gender expectations? Who is the agent, subject, and hero of the film?

## Conclusion

Though we have come far from Bazin’s championing of the contemplative deep focus cinematography with its attendant long take to the narrative systems conjoined in *Run Lola Run*, a postmodern hybrid that assumes a spectator already savvy to the ways of the apparatus and its representations, we have also come full circle to the beginning of this excursion where I expressed wonderment over my grandson’s rapid fire engagement with his video game. For *Run Lola Run* is like a video game in its forking paths and narrative options. The multiple effects on the spectator engendered by *Run Lola Run*’s narrative—enthrallment, distancing, expectation, retardation, optional tracks, multiple endings, mixed media, pastiche, reflexivity—demand an active spectator, one who can choose to be immersed or detached, entertained or critically skeptical, or all of these at the same time. After exploring the work of the cinematic apparatus, genre and ideology, many of my students tell me at the end of the semester that they cannot watch a film in the same way, that they are now constantly aware of the apparatus as it constructs narrative and point of view. I reassure them and reply that the next step is to move beyond this divide between themselves and the film to where they can *choose* to be under the film’s spell and critical of it *at the same time*, to experience a double perspective in front of the screen imaginary and its representations. Though they are complicit, they *know* that they are and can break the spell at any time. My hope is that they can learn to do this both in the theatre and out of it as well.

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