Resisting the Psycho-Logic of Intensified Continuity

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Abstract: David Bordwell (2002) has described contemporary mainstream cinema as a cinema of intensified continuity. When we combine Bordwell's analysis with that of recent cognitive work on attention, especially with work on edit blindness, we discover some intriguing results. For example, the increased rate of cutting in contemporary cinema serves to keep our attention continually aroused, but, at the same time, that which arouses our attention—the increased number of cuts—becomes decreasingly visible. That is, the greater the number of cuts made in the services of continuity editing, the less we are able to spot them. If, while watching contemporary mainstream cinema, the attention of viewers is aroused but viewers are decreasingly capable of spotting the reasons why this is so (i.e., the cuts themselves), then does this also serve to make contemporary mainstream cinema "post-ideological," because it concerns itself only with "intensified" experiences? Or, as this article argues, does the sheer speed of contemporary mainstream cinema renew the need for the ideological critique of films?

Keywords: attention, cinema, cutting, ideology, intensified continuity

Recent cognitive studies of cinema have focused predominantly on the question of emotional responses to film (see Grodal 2009; Hogan 2008; Plantinga 2009). These excellent contributions have all drawn on recent neuroscientific and philosophical research (e.g., Damasio 1999; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; LeDoux 1998) that argues for thought to be seen as an embodied phenomenon that has its roots in emotions. That is, broadly speaking, these are works that concentrate on the *affects* of cinema (bodily responses to films), which are tied to human emotions (such as pleasure and disgust), and which in turn help to shape our conscious thoughts.

Toward the end of *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience,* Carl Plantinga says that "cognitive film theorists could do more to demonstrate the link between universal human capacities, culturally specific variation, and ideological concerns in the viewing and reception of films" (2009: 218). Plantinga endeavors to draw up a "neutral" definition of ideology in

his book, one that he differentiates from "Marxist ideology," which he defines as a system based on "false belief[s] or an inappropriate or misguided way of responding that is unthinkingly assumed" (ibid.: 199). Plantinga's "neutral" definition simply reflects "ideology as worldview," an admittedly limiting if also broad definition that allows him to sidestep precisely the way in which films can "confirm and alter the spectator's beliefs and ways of responding" (ibid.: 200). The questions asked in this article are: Might films indeed alter a spectator's beliefs? If so, in what ways are these alterations achieved—through what stylistic techniques? And should we try to be conscious about these alterations—should we try consciously to engage with films so that we can accept or reject the potential alterations or confirmations of our beliefs that a film offers?

To ask these questions is seemingly to head back into what has come to be termed screen theory territory, which has on the whole been rejected by cognitive film theorists—the idea that cinema spectators are passive entities who are prey to the political messages implicit in a film, which they wholeheartedly will endorse or adopt as their own and accept as if natural. However, in offering answers to the above questions, I do not propose that spectators de facto are passive (which to my mind would be an over-reading of screen theory anyway), but that the techniques of recent mainstream (and in this case American action) cinema potentially hide from viewers the important political messages they convey, and that viewers would do well to analyze these messages, whether they choose to accept them or not. In other words, I propose that contemporary film practice can (consciously or otherwise) diminish critical engagement with films, and I argue that this is a strong reason for viewers to buck this trend. I do so not through psychoanalysis, but by presenting a cognitive approach to cinema that draws conclusions from rates of cutting in contemporary cinema and from theories of human attention.

This theory is not to construct an ideal spectator, in that I am convinced that the viewing experience outlined in this article does not describe that of all film viewers. My argument seeks, after Plantinga, to marry cognitive and ideological approaches to cinema. That is to say, I must confess to an ideological position of my own: I think that through various techniques, but especially rapid cutting, films encourage viewers not to analyze their ideological content. I encourage viewers neither to accept nor to reject a film's ideological content as a matter of course, but consciously (or "not unthinkingly") to analyze and to choose to accept or reject as much or as little of a film's ideological content as they wish.

Intensified Continuity

Patrick Colm Hogan endeavors at length to put into practice what Plantinga calls for, by combining cognitive, cultural, and ideological approaches to film

in his book, *Understanding Indian Movies: Culture, Cognition, and Cinematic Imagination* (2008). He draws extensively on Indian cultural texts such as the *Ramayana* in order to ground his otherwise cognitive approach to a variety of Indian films from a range of periods and regions precisely in a culturally and ideologically specific framework. Hogan concludes that

> *We watch movies because they engage our interest, focusing our attention. Of course, this merely pushes the question [Why do we watch Indian movies?] back, for it leads us to ask just what engages our interest. But this is less of a problem. Cognitive research shows that a number of things excite interest. For example, novelty combined with comprehensibility appears to draw and sustain a pleasurable attentional focus. (2008: 250)*

Hogan here touches on what I see as a crucial aspect of film viewing: films arouse our attention through novelty and comprehensibility. Bordwell (1996: 97) has adopted a framework of "moderate constructivism" to argue that continuity editing, in particular the shot-reverse shot system, is comprehensible to the majority of viewers, meaning that it is more or less a universally comprehensible phenomenon, one that is both located within a historical context (as part of the history of film style, which means that continuity editing is, to a certain extent, "culturally constructed"), but which is also a "contingent universal of social intercourse."

Recent research into how infants learn (see Fonagy and Target 2007) would seem to support Bordwell's assertion that continuity editing relies on a "contingent universal of social intercourse" because it is through a system of a mutual gaze with their caregiver that infants come to gather information about the world: an initial gaze from the caregiver, met with the infant's gaze, cues the infant to follow the caregiver's subsequent change of gaze direction, and then to learn from the caregiver's reaction to the object viewed. Applied to cinema, this system of mutual gazes would seem reflected in the eyeline matches of continuity editing: we naturally follow the gaze of the character(s) on screen, and it would also be natural, therefore, to understand the next shot as being a representation of the object that the character is observing, followed by a reaction of that character, who conveys to the viewer information about (e.g., how to respond to) that object or person.

Although continuity editing may be natural or at the very least naturalized within the cinema, I want to concentrate on the arousal of attention through novelty. I do so not just by thinking about how viewers follow or comprehend the diegesis of a film, but by thinking about how film itself cues our attention. That is, I isolate film technique from content and look at how film presents novel visual stimuli to us. Film presents novel visual stimuli to us through various techniques, including movement of the camera, movement of objects on screen and, in particular, through cutting. As David Bordwell (2002) and Barry

Salt (2004) have made clear, it seems that there has been an increase in cutting rates in recent mainstream cinema. This is a cinema that Bordwell characterizes as displaying "intensified continuity": it features more rapid editing, bipolar extremes of lens length, more close framings in dialogue scenes (more close-ups), and a free-ranging camera that moves more "ostentatiously" than before. As Bordwell puts it: "Today's camera prowls even if nothing else budges" (2002: 20). In addition, as Plantinga (2009) and Geoff King (2000) note, mainstream blockbusters, action films in particular, feature "pronounced movement toward the camera," together with fast-moving objects and, during scenes of mayhem, unsteady/handheld camera shots.

If we accept the above description of predominant trends in contemporary film form, which seems corroborated by the evidence that Bordwell, Salt, Plantinga and King give from recent films, then it is important to establish why films that employ such techniques are popular and, in particular, why this intensification has taken place. In order to do this, we must look at the human processes of perception and attention so as to work out why our eyes might be drawn to the cinema screen.

Attention! Attention!

The human eye takes in light while also sorting through that light for recognizable groupings of colors and shapes that may or may not be in motion. We may consciously scrutinize a scene, but vision is predominantly based on unconscious and involuntary processes: we typically group together color and form to see objects, including other human beings, without consciously having to think about doing so. Furthermore, vision is also predicated on involuntary movement of the eyes called saccades, an "anarchic" eye reflex that allows for the more precise apprehension of phenomena, an apprehension that is more precise because anarchic as opposed to willed and ordered: "[visual] searching is free-running ('anarchic') because commanded, ordered deployment of attention is so much slower than anarchic deployment that it is faster overall to make many anarchic attentional deployments than fewer orderly ones" (Wolfe, Alvarez, and Horowitz 2000: 691).

In other words, saccades can be voluntary, but we can faster survey a scene when our eyes are allowed to run "anarchically." Saccades are based on movement over time (one movement, then another), while it is thought that color, form, and movement are measured at different rates and by different parts of our brain, such that we have a cerebral "chronoarchitecture" (Bartels and Zeki 2004). If visual consciousness is based on changing eye position/eye movement and the collation of different pieces of information received over time, then we can understand that perception is enabled by change (both in terms of the motion of the object perceived and in terms of the changing position of the eye) and by a linear chronology (change takes place over time, which is

monodirectional). This is important, because film cutting is also based on the idea of change over time, meaning that viewing cinema already reflects/functions in the same way as natural processes of vision (as opposed to paintings, which remain static over time; or novels, which similarly are presented to us "whole"—even if the convention stands that we read them one word at a time and from start to finish).

It is perhaps impractical to separate attention from basic vision, but, for the purposes of argument, it might be helpful to note that attention is a process that—like aspects of vision itself—can be both voluntary and involuntary. It is voluntary in the sense that we can choose to turn away from something if we do not wish to pay attention to it. But it is also involuntary in the sense that certain stimuli draw our attention automatically.

Movement is one such stimulus, as Oberman, Pineda, and Ramachandran (2007: 2) have pointed out. There does exist debate as to whether it is motion itself or the onset of motion that captures attention. Abrams and Christ (2006: 116), after extended published debate on this matter with their fellow psychologists Steven Franconeri and Daniel Simons (2003), conclude that if motion onset is not necessary for motion to capture attention, then it certainly provides a "substantial additional benefit" in capturing attention. Without becoming too waylaid in this debate, though, we might use Chun and Wolfe (2001) to argue that "cues facilitate detection of and response to stimuli presented at the cued location." They explain:

> *attention can be driven* exogenously, *[that is] by an external stimulus event that automatically draws attention to a particular location. This has been referred to as "bottom-up," stimulus-driven attention. The flashing lights of a highway patrol vehicle draw attention exogenously. Exogenous attention draws attention automatically and has a rapid, transient time course. . . . [Cues include] spatial cues and abrupt visual onsets (sudden luminance changes). . . . Abrupt onsets may capture attention even when the cues were not informative of target location and even when subjects were instructed to ignore them. (2001: 5–14)*

Although we can actively seek and process information, the involuntary workings of our brain during perception are working much faster than our conscious mind. For this reason, Chun and Wolfe (2001: 17) point out that "it is possible to extract meaning from visual stimuli at rates much faster than the speed with which these meanings can be stored in any but the most fleeting of memories." Similarly, Wolfe, Alvarez, and Horowitz (2000: 691) explain that "visual attention may be deployed quickly and automatically by the salience of stimuli. Deliberate, volitional shifts of attention, however, can only be executed much more slowly, explaining why observers instinctively search unsystematically. Anarchy is faster than order in this case."

In other words, it appears that movement, especially in the form of abrupt and visual onsets, can and often attracts our attention involuntarily. And in accordance with neuroscientist Vilyanur S. Ramachandran (Ramachandran and Freeman 2001: 21), there is an evolutionary-biological exegesis for this to happen: our attention is drawn to movement because we are trying to detect prey, predator, or mate.

It might be useful to think about attention in terms of arousal. Arousal is not just sexual arousal, but simply the arousal of attention via survival instincts. If brightness and motion arouse our attention, then it would stand to reason that the faster the motion and the brighter the color (and this is not to mention the louder the noise), the greater the level of arousal will be induced. Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999) might refer to this as the "peak shift effect," a term developed from the observation of animal behavior, whereby animals respond more strongly to exaggerated versions of shapes and colors that they encounter in everyday life.

Abrams and Christ (2003: 427), meanwhile, say that "[o]bjects that accelerate . . . are more likely to be seen as animate" and therefore will attract our attention—especially if they accelerate toward us, or if they are "looming," while Jeffrey M Zacks and colleagues (2006) say that fast-moving objects similarly induce a greater cerebral response.

The Need for Speed

Film theorists and philosophers of film have tried to understand the acceleration of cinema, or what Bordwell terms its "intensified continuity," in terms of politics. "Political philosophies of the cinema tend to treat it as an important machine of acceleration and reproduction, its temporalities and rhythms belonging to modernity and the logic of capital, not to those of nature. Modernity itself is placed outside of nature or in contradistinction to nature" (Smith 2004: 2). Such theories are undoubtedly important (for there might well be a broad cultural rationale behind the why of this "modern" acceleration). However, we can here reassess intensified continuity, an accelerated cinema, or what Maverick and Goose from Tony Scott's *Top Gun* (1986) might term a "need for speed," as arousing ever-greater levels of attention in precisely a natural way.

Within the special viewing conditions that constitute cinema, it is perhaps self-evident that our attention is dominated by the screen, while all around us there is only darkness. There is, in other words, a *cultural* aspect to cinema viewing, whereby we know that it is the screen that we have to be watching. However, there are also neurological reasons that make the screen the focus of our attention, and these are related to the brightness and salience of the screen in contrast to the surrounding darkness and the fact that, more often than not, the image is moving. I propose that the flashing lights that we see

on the screen can and often do cue our attention exogenously: the abrupt visual onsets that are movement within a single frame, together with cutting between shots, serve to attract our involuntary attention (even if our voluntary attention often or perhaps always follows).

When we consider these natural processes in the light of intensified continuity, then, we can understand contemporary cinema as allowing us to experience heightened moments of arousal, which can be associated with hunting, being attacked, and mating. The increased rate of cutting, the extreme nature of that cutting (in that we cut from long shots to close-ups, or between bipolar extremes of lens length), the fact that the camera is more or less consistently moving (prowling even when the objects being filmed are static), and the fact that there is pronounced movement toward the camera means that our attention is drawn exogenously toward the screen because of the abrupt visual onsets that these cuts entail and because of the looming nature of the objects on the screen. In other words, the acceleration of cinema, or the intensification of continuity, demands our attention in a natural way (even if we do not like what it is that we are seeing).

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The intensified continuity, the speed of the mainstream Hollywood blockbuster, and the fact that perceptual attention works faster when it is automatic as opposed to willed, would seem to support my argument that Hollywood films work hard for spectators *not* to engage critically or consciously, because too much of our attention/working memory is taken up simply by trying to take in the mass of information being presented to us. There is a succession of new stimuli (thanks to cuts, movement, looming objects, etc.), which divert our attention away from analysis.

The arousal of survival instincts may function as a pleasurable diversion in a world where such survival instincts are rarely brought into use (thus supporting the claim made by Torben Grodal [2009] that films are game-like experiences that allow us to train for real world situations). I contend that the potential critical disengagement that such an intensified cinema brings about possesses a political dimension, whether intended or not: intellectually disarmed, because concentrating too much on consistent change, we can be influenced by the film via its codified cultural messages.

Continuity Intensified

I have argued that constant change on-screen captures our involuntary attention at the expense of our ability for conscious analysis, but continuity editing seeks to hide the changes that we see on-screen. Indeed, we are often blind to even large changes that take place around us both in real life (see Rensink

2000; Rensink, O'Regan, and Clark 1997) and on-screen (Smith and Henderson 2008; Zacks and Magliano 2010). Not being able to detect changes or cuts suggests that our attention is not as aroused.

Adrian von Mühlenen, Mark Rempel, and James Enns (2005: 979) have said that "abrupt changes to the features of already-registered objects often do not capture attention," meaning that, when watching a film in which there is a cut within a scene, we may be less inclined to notice the change, because we can visibly recognize the same characters on-screen. In other words, we have already registered the features on-screen that are the characters, and so a reverse-shot, say, is not noticed and does not capture our attention.

Furthermore, Smith and Henderson (2008) and Zacks and Magliano (2010) report that certain cuts can go undetected during the film viewing experience. Cuts at scene breaks are or can quite easily be detected because these take place at moments that might constitute an "event boundary," or when one action ends and another begins, but cuts that follow the rules of classical continuity editing (cutting on blinks, or when our attention is diverted by the depicted narrative and related cues, such as characters looking off-screen), that is cuts that do not take place at an event boundary, can sometimes or often do pass unnoticed. Zacks and Magliano conclude that "continuity editing techniques are successful in perceptually smoothing over full field visual discontinuities and that scene boundaries require a break in action" (2010).

One of the proposed reasons for us not to notice these cuts is that the slight shift in attention during a scene, for example a reverse-shot that is still centered on the same action being played out before the camera, is the equivalent of slight shifts in attention that we undergo while carrying out tasks (within-task attentional control)—a theory that may indirectly find support from mirror neuron research, in that an observer's mirror neurons fire when perceiving goal-oriented actions performed by others (Oberman et al. 2007), and this is what occupies our attention more than a cut to the same action being performed but viewed from a different angle. That is, our attention is given to the film content, the action or task at hand during the scene, rather than to the film form, the cuts that take place while that task is still being carried out.

I propose another reason for our failure to notice cuts within a scene, based on a comment from Zacks and Magliano (2010): that is, "event representations [are] . . . simulations of the situations they represent." In her consideration of the "double consciousness" of art (double consciousness in that when we see a painting of a landscape, we know that it is a painting, but we also see the landscape), philosopher Jennifer Church has argued that

> *The simultaneous imagining of . . . contrasting perspectives is . . . intelli-*
> *gible . . . insofar as the different perspectives can be relativised to differ-*

ent perceivers or different stages in the perceptions of a single viewer—
which is to say, we must imagine various possible subject positions in
order to see the position of a single object (and vice versa*). (2000: 106)*

My suggestion, therefore, is that viewers form mental 3D models of the objects and spaces that they observe (what Church calls "imagining various possible subject positions"), and that this means that we ignore many cuts that we see within scenes in films—provided of course that the cuts are cuts to angles that conform to our imagined model or, in the words of Zacks and Magliano, the simulation of events that we have in mind.

However, aside from this suggestion, I would also argue that, while Zacks and Magliano use their findings to work toward a theory of narrative comprehension, cuts in films still form abrupt visual onsets that retain our attention, and that the more cuts—that is the faster the editing, especially in films that employ continuity editing—the more our attention is retained exogenously by the screen (which means that we may not like what we see—we may even feel nauseated by it—but in some respects viewing is compelling). This would seem to be supported by Robert Kraft (1986), who has argued that films with cutting are preferred by audiences to films without cutting, even if audiences do not remember or count the number of cuts within a film. That is to say, the cutting may not cause us to think that there has been an event boundary, and at least part of our attention may be taken up by thinking about the goal or aim of a particular scene, but the abrupt visual onset that is a cut still draws our attention to the screen—and in such a way that we are not consciously aware of the cut (we do not, perhaps cannot, count them).

Inasmuch as edit blindness is evidence of the success of continuity editing techniques in being hidden and in "forcing" viewers to focus less on form (cutting) and more on content (actions performed by characters), it might also suggest that viewers engage less in conscious thought and more in autonomic responses when watching films that not only have much cutting, but when watching films that combine continuity editing with intensified cutting rates. Although they do not put this forward as a hypothesis, Smith and Henderson's (2008) findings could be seen as indirectly supportive of this theory. They find that viewers are more prone to miss cuts in films featuring continuity editing (e.g., *Requiem for a Dream* 2000), while viewers more easily spot cuts in non-continuity editing films (e.g., *Koyaanisqatsi* 1982).

Requiem for a Dream is a film that conforms in many respects to the cinema of "intensified continuity" (fast continuity editing)—the sequence that Smith and Henderson showed to viewers has an Average Shot Length (ASL) of 2.8 seconds, while *Koyaanisqatsi,* they found, is a "slow," contemplative film marked by numerous long takes (with an ASL of 15 seconds). Viewers missed only 7.1 percent of cuts in the *Koyaanisqatsi* sequence, all of which were within

scene cuts, while they missed 30 percent of cuts in the *Requiem for a Dream* sequence, with most cuts missed being match action cuts (i.e., cuts made in the services of continuity editing; 47.3 percent), within scene cuts (37.5 percent), and gaze match cuts (28.6 percent). Among the other films that Smith and Henderson consider, Sergei M Eisenstein's *October* (1928) has an ASL of 2.7 seconds, but few of these cuts are made in the services of continuity (only 8 percent of cuts are match action cuts, and 3 percent gaze match cuts). Viewers missed only 7.7 percent of cuts while watching this sequence, all of which were match action cuts. Meanwhile, viewers of *Citizen Kane* (1941), which has an ASL of 6.4 seconds, missed 9.2 per cent of all cuts, the majority of which were within scene and match action cuts. In other words, neither fast cutting alone (*October* has a faster cutting rate than *Requiem for a Dream*), nor continuity editing alone (as typified arguably by *Citizen Kane*), provokes the highest number of missed cuts (though of those cuts that were missed, the vast majority were match action cuts). However, fast cutting during and alongside continuity editing provokes the most number of missed cuts.

My modification of Smith and Henderson's conclusion would be, therefore, that a high rate of cutting in conjunction with continuity editing causes increased edit blindness. And if we can take the ability consciously to report when a cut has been made as an indicator of the ability for conscious analysis during film viewing, then this evidence would appear to corroborate my argument that intensified continuity reduces viewers' ability consciously to analyze or ideologically to critique what they see.

Intensified continuity might mean that fewer cuts are noticed (i.e., the cuts are hidden), but not just the number but also the proportion of cuts missed seems to go up when intensified continuity is used as a (set of) technique(s). That is, when continuity editing is intensified, we not only remain blind to many of the formal characteristics of the film (i.e., cuts), but it is the increased level of these formal characteristics themselves that in turn seems to increase the level of blindness. The faster the rate of continuity cutting in a film, the more likely our brain is to be preoccupied with trying to sort through/follow the visual and aural data of the narrative that is being presented to us than it is with attending to the techniques used to bring about that change. In other words, a paradox seems to emerge in the case of intensified continuity: it draws our attention to the screen exogenously, but at the same time it also blinds us to the formal reasons *why* our attention is being drawn. Our mental capacities/cerebral bandwidth are more taken up with trying to work out what is going on (following the story/narrative), than with working out why we are so aroused. In evolutionary terms, we are trying to cope with and understand the rapidly changing and potentially threatening

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situation with which we are presented than in working out what it is that makes that situation change so rapidly.

Post-Ideological Cinema?

Figure 1 refers to what is arguably an important moment in *Black Hawk Down*, Ridley Scott's 2001 film about the Battle of Mogadishu (see also Hoberman 2001). The film is a kinetic experience almost from start to finish as we move in what seems like real time with a handful of American soldiers through Mogadishu, where they are constantly under threat from pretty much everyone around them, but especially a horde of unidentified (and all black) Somalis. It is an intense film in which there is looming or oncoming movement—both of people and objects (cars, collapsing walls, bullets, etc.) and of the camera (Figure 2). The camera chases after the characters, moving through space, and also shakes, because of its handheld appearance, in order to give the impression of "liveness" or news reportage. There is also much cutting within the film: a central 26-minute section of the film, which has at its center the downing of the titular Black Hawk, contains 675 cuts, creating an ASL of 2.31 seconds. The middle ten minutes of this section, which includes the helicopter crashing into the streets of Mogadishu, features 298 shots at an ASL of 2.01 seconds, easily qualifying the film as one of intensified continuity, not least because the cutting rate is combined with myriad close-ups, mixed with long shots (i.e., varying extremes of focal length) (Figure 3), much action, and much camera movement, the kinds of traits that Bordwell also associates with the style. It also qualifies because it makes us feel aroused on account of its visual onsets, often done in the services of continuity, that might exogenously attract our attention; and on account of its content (it is a war film that endeavors to place us in the middle of its intense and very loud action).

Figure 1. Black Hawk Down*'s McKnight (Tom Sizemore) saying: "Once that first bullet goes past your head, politics and all that shit just goes out the window."*
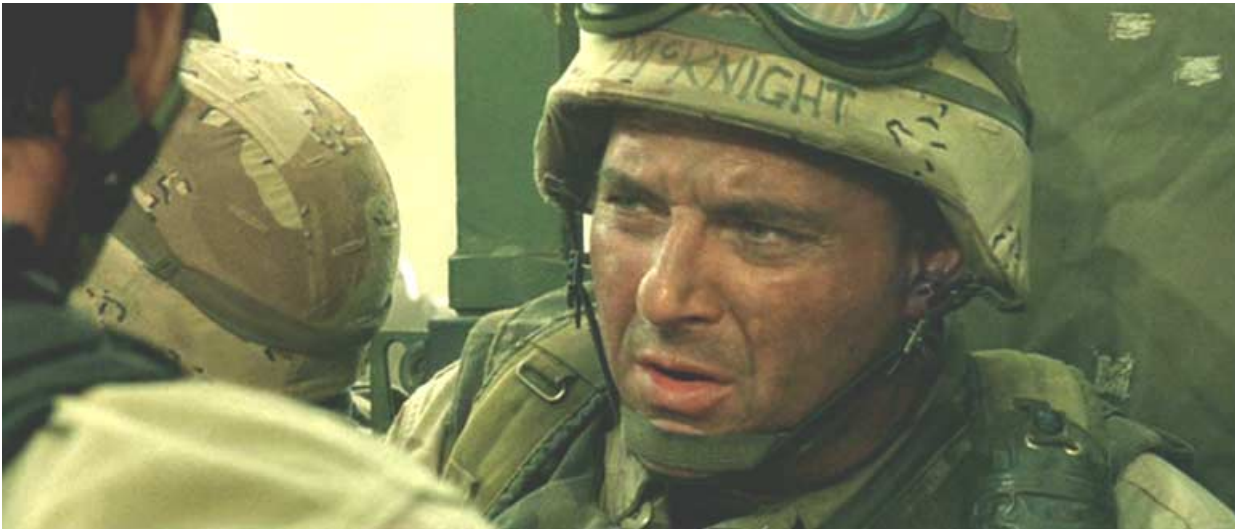
Figure 2. Blood splatters on the camera as an American soldier is shot. This is an example of fast-moving and looming objects coming toward the camera, which, together with motion blur and a fast rate of cutting, arouses our attention while watching Black Hawk Down.

Figure 3. As per Bordwell's definition of intensified continuity, Black Hawk Down *involves not only a fast-cutting rate, but also shots from extremely close and from extremely long ranges. Here is a long, aerial shot of the downed helicopter from which the film takes its title.*

Torben Grodal has suggested that the impact of narrative flow—which we might equate here with continuity—is "supported and enhanced by the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system acquired its name because it is normally 'autonomic,' that is, outside voluntary control: it regulates pupils, tears, salivation, heartbeat, stomach, bladder, vasoconstriction and vasodilation, the secretion of adrenaline and so on" (1999: 129). Grodal says that an autonomic response takes time to arouse—as can be seen in *Black Hawk Down* through the slow build-up toward the fateful battle—and that it also takes a long time to wear off (as might be conceptualized through the "stunned" feeling that watching the film can inspire upon leaving the movie theater). Using scenes from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982) as his examples, Grodal differentiates the autonomic mode of viewing from the telic and the paratelic:

*the telic mode occurs when we experience voluntary, goal-oriented ac-
tions and thoughts, as when we empathise with Indy [Indiana Jones] as
he pursues and takes possession of the lorry carrying the ark. Our atten-
tion, thoughts, and muscular activations are directed towards goals we
believe we have chosen freely. . . . [Meanwhile] the paratelic mode is
activated when experiences, actions, and thought take place without an
explicit goal, in relation to the protagonist's moment-to-moment expe-
riences. The purpose of telic actions is often excitation-reduction. . . . On
the other hand, paratelic situations enhance excitations, as when . . .
fast-paced action scenes increase pure excitement. . . . [Finally] the auto-
nomic is activated when characters become victims of external forces
such as history, nature, or fate, and are unable to affect outcomes.
(1999: 134)*

Black Hawk Down offers us a mixture of all three of these "downstream"
modes of experience. The film does have a teleology or goal, and thus involves
a telic mode: the marines involved seek to capture a Somali warlord, and, once
this mission has been scuppered, they wish to make it safely back to base. The
film also involves an autonomic response: the marines are victims of external
forces (swarms of Somalis), and they struggle against fate (not all of them
survive). Because the action in the film is so fast-moving or *intensified,* the
way in which it exogenously demands the characters' attention (the film is
what the lay critic might term an "adrenaline rush") causes in them responses
that are autonomic, that is beyond their immediate control (increased heart
rate, the attracting of our attention). Finally, the situation in which the
marines find themselves also demands a paratelic response. The explicit goal
(or the initial *telos*) of the marines' mission (to capture the Somali warlord),
like politics, goes out of the window, and instead the marines must cope
through a moment-to-moment fight for survival (shot at-shoot back-shot at-
shoot back-run to cover) (Figure 4). The marines find themselves in a situation
in which their mission is forgotten, and to which they simply react as best
they can. In other words, the removal of politics that Tom Sizemore's charac-

*Figure 4. An
American's POV/over
the shoulder shot of
a Somali shooting at
him in* Black Hawk
Down. *Given the
intensity of this
survival situation,
the film seems to
encourage a
paratelic mode of
response.*

ter (McKnight) describes can be linked here to the paratelic as Grodal defines it: with politics and "all that shit" out the window, the paratelic (just trying to cope with the situation/to survive) manifests itself, even if the autonomic and the telic exist alongside of it.

More particularly, I suggest that what is true for the marines in *Black Hawk Down* is also true for the film's viewers. They/we are with the soldiers and live through their experiences, in that they/we are with them trying to survive on a moment-to-moment basis. We respond autonomically to the action on screen (increased heart rate, aroused attention, maybe even flinching at incoming bullets), and we share with the marines their stated goal/*telos*, which is perhaps most simply stated as survival itself. We share this *telos* not least because the film gives us the point of view of the American marines more often than it gives us the point of view of any Somali warriors (which in the old currency of film studies we might equate to our being "sutured" into an American point of view). However, because the film "enhances excitation" via "fast-paced action scenes," *Black Hawk Down* might also be deemed to evoke a paratelic response—even if Grodal also characterizes very un-*Black Hawk Down*-like movies such as art films from the 1960s as portraying the paratelic mode of experience. We, too, forget about politics and "all that shit" and, even more than the soldiers who resort to telic coping, we just sit there in silence, stunned while looking at (being glued to) the action taking place on-screen. *Black Hawk Down*'s intensified continuity enhances excitation and we watch without any goal more explicit than simply watching (no politics, just arousal of attention).

This paratelic experience is most important when considering *Black Hawk Down*: we may extract some meaning from the film (in that we can recognize human characters performing or trying to perform certain tasks in a certain environment), but the film also makes it relatively hard for us to comprehend precisely what is going on as bullets fly from locations we have not seen; we cannot predict where or how the soldiers will survive, if at all (and this despite knowing from the history books that some of them will survive). Faced with this situation, the marines might resort, as does Indy in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), to telic coping and goal-oriented action, namely by killing their assailants and keeping on the move throughout the crumbling streets of Mogadishu. It is on account of the excitatory nature of the situation that McKnight can proclaim that politics and "all that shit" go out the window. But if, as I argue, on account of the film's intensified continuity, we similarly become so excited or aroused that we fail or do not have time to consider the politics of the film—because we too are caught up in the pseudo-experience of trying to survive what it is that we see— each new visual onset demanding us to start over again in our limited attempts to comprehend the action, then politics for us also goes out of the window. In effect, by recreating the battle

experience so precisely, *Black Hawk Down* (with no small amount of skill) tries to position itself as a post- (or perhaps better a pre-) ideological film: politics mean nothing in the face of pure arousal, excitation, and the drive to survive.

Black Hawk Down can and does work as an exciting action/war film, one that subjects its audience to the horrors and thrills of a virtual but utterly realistic combat zone. Furthermore, the film is not obliged to present us with both sides of the story (allowing us to see the Somali perspective on events). However, it is because the events in the film actually took place, because the Battle of Mogadishu is a historical event, that the film also calls for—or perhaps even necessi-

> *by recreating the battle experience so precisely, Black Hawk Down . . . tries to position itself as a post-(or perhaps better a pre-) ideological film: politics mean nothing in the face of pure arousal, excitation, and the drive to survive.*

tates—an active political reading. What the film seems to deny us—on account of its intensified continuity—is precisely our ability to engage with it in a conscious, analytical, or "upstream" manner. Without offering more than a brief ideological critique of this film, in which literally hundreds of anonymous Somalis are killed without so much as a suggestion that there is a genuine loss of life (every American death is tragic by comparison) (Figure 5), I suggest that the so-called post- or pre-ideological nature of a cinema of intensified continuity, one that plays on our autonomous responses to film by playing on our exogenous or involuntary arousal of attention, is deeply ideological in nature. By occluding the film's pro-American and arguably racist ideology under the post-ideological banner of action and the need for survival, politics goes out the window and the film very much tries to suggest that ideology no longer plays a part. By drawing and keeping occupied our attention naturally,

*Figure 5. In B*lack Hawk Down, *Somalis often are reduced to anonymous crowds in long shots, here associated with danger through the foreground fire (the heat waves of which also serve to blur the Somalis' appearance).*

the film should warn wary viewers that the need for ideological critique is actually reinforced by *Black Hawk Down,* because the call for us to abandon ideology reflects a privileged and deeply ideological stance: we are right to do what we do because those other crazy and incomprehensible bad guys, who happen to be black Arabs, are trying to kill us.

Black Hawk Down may seem like a cheap example (or an easy target) through which to make the point that political ideological critiques of films are still relevant. The film is aware enough of potential political readings to have McKnight verbally deny the importance of politics in a life-or-death situation. But to look at this film through the framework of a cognitive consideration of intensified continuity draws out the potential or the need for ideological critique of other films that adopt similar stylistic techniques while at the same time continuing to convey ideological messages that are, like the edits used to construct them, hidden from us during film viewing. Intensified continuity paradoxically heightens edit blindness, in that the very thing that might typically be thought to arouse our attention (abrupt visual onsets via cuts and looming phenomena) in fact diverts our attention away from those techniques and toward understanding the action on-screen. This may indeed seem like a rehash of old, Brecht-inspired, debates in film studies: namely that techniques that draw attention to themselves—that is do not conform to the norms of continuity editing—can help us consciously to think about the constructed nature of what it is that we are seeing, thereby giving us more room to engage in upstream analysis during film viewing. Perhaps with increasing research, we shall discover that the screen theorists were not as far off the mark as we currently seem to think.

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