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Abstract

This article argues that the computerization of audiovisual culture has led to a “cinemas of transactions.” Asserting that computer-generated image forms now function as a single currency across multiple audiovisual economies, this article posits a new understanding of digital attractions as constituting a cinemas of transactions. Neither a singular, unitary “cinema” nor a singular “transaction,” the cinemas of transactions constitutes a complex and multiply interrelated system of textual, technological, aesthetic, and economic developments whereby computer-generated attractions and promotional practices span many media and textual forms. Most importantly, however, the cinemas of transactions does not represent a radical break from past configurations of cinematic and audiovisual promotional history; rather (as the name suggests), it represents the continuation of a relationship initiated at the inception of cinema history.

Keywords

film, advertising, digital image, CGI, product placement, merchandising, cinema of attractions, train effect, audiovisual culture, digitextual, YouTube

In 1898 the Edison Manufacturing company produced and released an actuality called *Dewar's—It's Scotch*. The film, like many other early actualities, featured one subject, was filmed in one shot, and was presented to its audience (to paraphrase Gunning) as fascinating for its illusory powers alone (Gunning 1994). Running to about fifty seconds in length, the film featured four men in kilts dancing in front of a banner

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Figure 1. Gunning's 'Cinema of Attractions' becomes 'The Cinemas of Transactions'

that reads, "DEWARS SCOTCH WHISKY." Filmed at thirty-two frames per second (to be replayed in slow motion), the actuality acts as an early example of the assertion that the history of cinema is the history of the special effect (Cubitt 2004). But this early film was more than an attraction illustrative of Gunning's "cinema of attractions" or a special effect illustrative of Christian Metz's or Sean Cubitt's theories. It is also one of the surviving examples of an early filmed advertisement.

In her recent history of product placement, Kerry Segrave cites numerous films containing product promotion from as early as 1895. These were one-reel entertainment shorts that were funded by, and featured products from, Maillard's Chocolates, Columbia Bicycles, Piel's Beer and Hunters Rye Whiskey, Admiral Cigarettes, Lever Brothers, Nestle, Shredded Wheat, and Mellin's Baby Food (Segrave 2004, 5). Discussing these early advertising films, Segrave documents specific instances in which spectators queued up for the chance to see them:

They were shown on the roof of the Pepper Building at Herald Square, a site that was later occupied by R. H. Macy & Company. Reportedly, they were very popular with people and it was that success that led to their downfall. Crowds

lined up on the sidewalks to get in and overflowed into the streets, creating a serious traffic problem. (Segrave 2004, 5)

Though she does not couch her language and descriptions in terms of the cinema of attractions, Segrave's work nevertheless describes a symbiosis of advertised message and the cinematic attraction in early years. Segrave's account suggests that distinctions between advertising as an unwanted or tolerated audiovisual intrusion and filmed entertainment as a purer, sought-after attraction were absent in early cinema. Segrave points out that "on screen ads as we think of them today (running one minute or so in length and openly and obviously an advertisement) were close to nonexistent" (4). Instead, advertising took the same format as the nonpromotional films of the same period: "What advertising that did exist were mainly the one-reel ad shorts (generally running from a few minutes in length up to 10 minutes)" (4). Crucially, these adverts were promotional at the same time as they were attractions to be viewed for general entertainment.

These examples demonstrate (in both their textual specificity and the context of their consumption) that the emergence of film form as an attraction was deeply embedded in the expanding promotional practices of the early twentieth century. Situated between the emergence of cinematic technology in 1895 and the development of narrative in film by 1906, Gunning's "cinema of attractions" would, by its very nature, have straddled the transition from "quack" promotional processes of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fairgrounds and markets to the more large-scale systems of advertising that developed in conjunction with the industrialization of production.¹

During the early years of cinema, its status as an attraction rather than an art form meant that the presence of commercial advertising was irrelevant to a public eager to see the moving image in its own right. As Gunning (1994) demonstrates, the cultural position of film during those early years had not by any means solidified. In the present context the computerization of culture reconfigures traditional film forms under the logic of the database and the archive (Manovich 2001, 218). Favorite moments in film are uploaded and downloaded on YouTube to be viewed in short segments that correspond to the length of spot ads or the actualities that dominated early film history (themselves promotional forms in their own right). Cognizant of this, film makers construct set piece special effects sequences that can operate as digital attractions across a range of platforms that ultimately promote the feature film itself (Figure 1). What we are seeing, then, is the rise of a language of digital attractions that are not aesthetically unique to film or advertising but are in fact frequently common to both. This article seeks to map out a new way of seeing digitally constituted audiovisual attractions as integrated components of a broader promotional tendency toward what I shall call a "cinemas of transactions." The cinemas of transactions describes a system in which the computer-generated (CG) attraction is the audiovisual form both promoted by and promoting whatever textual form it is embedded within. For this reason I have grammatically constructed the phrase "cinemas of transactions" in the plural. It is not one singular, textually unified, site-specific cinema but a multiplicity

of cinemas that have emerged, and are continuing to emerge, as the CG attraction continues to develop in new domains.

From Attraction to Transaction: The Long Emergence of the Cinemas of Transactions

Addressing early audience responses to—and myths about—the new image form of the twentieth century, Steven Bottomore (1999) has extended Gunning's work on the cinema of attractions in his theory of the "train effect." Bottomore highlights the promotion and mythologization of early cinema as a spectacle of overwhelming realism in which spectators from screenings around the world were reported to have run hysterically from the cinemas in an effort to avoid the apparently deadly approaching onscreen train. This, he argues, led to a relationship between film forms (intended to shock, amaze, and attract audiences) and the ancillary forms of promotion such as newspaper comment, promotional posters, and advertisements (which reported on the shock and amazement caused by the new technology). At this moment of early cinema as an attraction, Bottomore argues that screenings were simultaneously entertainment and self-fulfilling forms of publicity for the cinematic apparatus and event. Citing Albert Smith who showed the film *The Black Diamond Express* in New York, Bottomore asks why the train effect would have been exaggerated so much before explaining that

the film, he claimed in his autobiography, *was so realistic* that at the second performance two ladies fainted, but Smith adds tellingly that "After that Pastor arranged for an ambulance at the entrance to rush overwrought patrons to the hospital, *which proved to be the best possible publicity for the picture.*" . . . *Publicity may indeed have been an important motive for the spread and, in some cases, the origin of such tales of the train effect.* (Bottomore 1999, 181, emphasis added)

Thus, Bottomore's work suggests that stories of the much publicized "train effect" were most likely exaggerated precisely because they served a promotional function that benefited all involved. Thus, films often operated as advertisements for the power of the cinematic apparatus. In a self-perpetuating circularity, film was not simply interconnected peripherally to the promotional apparatus that was itself undergoing expansion at the time that motion picture technologies emerged; film was a promotional apparatus for the experience of cinema as a spectacular attraction. The process of experiencing the attraction was a publicity generating event in which early film viewers queued, as much to participate in a shared, much talked about and publicized experience as to see specific films. Indeed, audience reactions of the time suggest an understanding of their own participation in the process as their apparent hysteria then fed back onto the promotional apparatus.² In this context we can see why the queuing crowds at Herald Square could have caused the closure of the Pepper Building and its advertising attractions. Such was the appetite for cinematic attractions of any kind, and such was the level of integration between the cinematic apparatus and the

promotional apparatus advertising it, that the exhibitors had started a positive feedback loop they could not control (and probably would not have wanted to even if they could).

Almost exactly one hundred years later the serious traffic problems and closure of the Pepper Building site caused by people queuing to see film ads were replicated in virtual form. In an uncanny repeat of the events a century earlier, BMW released a series of short films, free to view on the internet.³ Clocking up the highest internet ratings for visitors that year (apparently escalating from millions to tens of millions of hits in 2002; Donaton 2004, 101–3), the site received so much “traffic” from viewers keen to see the ad-films that it repeatedly crashed and eventually had to be shut down while servers were added to create extra capacity. In a further similarity with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century experiences of promoting audiovisual attractions, BMW created high demand for their attractions based on a self-reinforcing feedback loop. This relied on a now familiar formula: (1) free attractions generated (2) word of mouth (or in this case word of blog) and therefore huge demand, which in turn led to (3) the proliferation of news features that fed back into hits on the free attractions and increased word of mouth or blog.

The transition to digital imaging marks a new moment in which processes of imaging across all platforms and processes of promotion are both practically and discursively less determinate than they previously had been. As many new media theorists have recently argued (Miller 2001, 306; Caldwell 2000, 126; Jenkins 2006, 10–13; Manovich 2001, 50), the aesthetic and textual distinctions among media have diminished under digital imaging and distribution. Today, internet sites such as YouTube are filled with posts from enthusiasts who discuss their favorite digital attractions regardless of their original location in film, adverts, or television shows. A brief consideration of the comments and discussion group postings of these “transmedia textualists” (Jenkins 2006, 93) reveals some telling points. Anxiety surrounding the promotional status of adverts is minimal at the same time as knowledge of ad directors and creative teams and their relationship to film and gaming industries abounds. In this context, adverts (and especially digital attractions featured within them) are being discursively reconstructed by internet fan cultures as attractions worthy of the same attention they would receive were they featured in more “acceptable” forms of audiovisual cultural production. This is a far cry from the U.S. film fans of the 1990s who staged well-documented protests when spot advertising returned to the cinema for the first time in eighty years.⁴

Though Gunning argues that the arrival of narrative form marked the end of overt forms of the cinema of attractions, he makes clear that it did not disappear altogether; it merely went “underground,” surfacing in forms of avant-garde practice and as a component of narrative film (Gunning 1994, 57). Surprisingly, although Gunning identifies avant-garde practice as an arena in which the cinema of attractions has continued in the contemporary context, he makes no mention whatsoever of the promotional and advertising practices (so often set in opposition to conceptions of the avant-garde) with which the form was so intimately related. And yet the early audience experiences of the cinema of attractions—an illogical succession of unrelated,

nonnarrative acts—would not have been dissimilar to the contemporary viewing experience of a television ad break or a YouTube browser:

Film appeared as one attraction on the vaudeville programme, surrounded by a mass of unrelated acts in a non-narrative and even nearly illogical succession of performances. Even when presented in the nickelodeons that were emerging at the end of this period, these short films always appeared in a variety format, trick films sandwiched in with farces, actualities, “illustrated songs,” and, quite frequently, cheap vaudeville acts. (Gunning 1994, 60)

Thus, the material that early audiences were presented with, like their contemporary counterparts, was of a variety format not unlike contemporary ad breaks or the YouTube browsing experience. When the material was not of an overtly commercial nature, as indeed not all YouTube clips are today, it operated within a roster of attractions that was promotional in nature (whether for specific commercial products or for the purposes of the spectacular–promotional symbiosis described earlier). It is no surprise that YouTube was purchased by Google in view of the way it’s “variety format, trick films sandwiched in with farces, actualities, ‘illustrated songs’, and, quite frequently, cheap vauderville acts” (Gunning 1994, 60) offered such a lucrative opportunity to slot in advertising. In this sense Google has identified and capitalized on an opportunity that became apparent to industrialists and advertisers at the inception of modern film history in 1895. In the contemporary context, the relationship between the attraction and the advertisement is one that we can still see in action.

Gunning’s description of the cinema of attractions, which engages the spectators by providing a pleasurable visual spectacle “that is of interest in itself” (Gunning 1994, 58), could equally apply to the spectacular processes common to advertising.⁵ In fact, at points Gunning’s descriptions could be mistaken for those of an advert:

Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. *The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative.* (Gunning 1994, 58, emphasis added)

Though Gunning is actually referring to the early history of cinematic form, his claims point to more than just an alternative history of spectacle in film form. Spectacle, in all its many forms, *has long been* the means through which Hollywood advertised itself to its spectators before, during, and after the cinematic experience itself. Particularly notable is Gunning’s description of the way the energy of the cinema of attractions moves outward toward an acknowledged spectator rather than inward

toward its own diegetic reality. This movement outward toward an acknowledged spectator is a significant aspect of Hollywood spectacle that has never disappeared. Such a movement has also been long acknowledged as a central staple of advertising. The reflex toward imagined spectators is a nodal point of Hollywood film and advertising form that has repeatedly emerged throughout their shared histories. With this in mind, Gunning's description of the cinema of attractions, especially his description of its construction of psychologically superficial characters lacking personal individuality, is strikingly similar to Schudson's description of spot advertising:

The people pictured in magazine ads or television commercials are abstract people. This is not to say they are fictive characters. In a play or television series [or film], actors generally portray particular people with particular names who, in the fictive universe they occupy, exist in a set of relations with other fictional characters and have a range of meanings within that world. . . . An advertisement is not like this, it does not construct a fully fictive world. The actor or model does not play a particular person but a social type or demographic category. (Schudson 1993, 211–12, emphasis added)

For Schudson, traditional spot advertisements part company with more complex narrative forms (e.g., television series or plays) over the range and scope of dramatic complexity that they can utilize.⁶ Likewise, for Gunning, the cinema of attractions was qualitatively different from the more complex narrative forms that preceded it in the range and scope of dramatic complexity that it could utilize. We could go as far as to say that before the advent of digital imaging and distribution technologies, the cinema of attractions in its one-reel form also found one outlet (or in Gunning's words "surfaced") in the shape of television spot adverts.⁷ Like Gunning's variety format, trick films, and actualities, television spots have generally remained within the single-reel duration (if not the technological or exhibitive context of film itself) and focused on presenting "views" (rather than narratives) that are interesting to their audiences for their illusory powers alone. The endless line of consumer products promoted by television advertising over the years has been nothing if not a series of trick films with the endless promise of their transformative effects.

The relevance of Gunning's work to appraisals of digital imaging has, in recent years, provided new impetus for approaching Hollywood cinema and its CG attractions—to the point of raising calls that the concept of the "cinema of attractions" has become overused (Strauven 2006). The CG special effects interchangeably deployed in adverts, Hollywood films, and industrial promotional videos alike situate the viewer within the endless referential networks of promotional culture that are facilitated with renewed vigor under the reproductive processes of digital imaging (Wernick 1991). The CG attraction, its space, its object forms, even its aesthetic construction are converging with the product design-engineered object and the world of consumer manufacturing. This is not simply the case for Pixar-animated features, as I have argued elsewhere (Gurevitch 2009), it goes for reverse-engineered, CG representations of the Titanic,

gladiatorial coliseums resembling the virtual constructions that architects and engineers utilize in creating and selling new buildings, or even NASA simulations that sell space projects to the public like Hollywood sells big-budget science fiction films. The viewers of these separate but related image forms are involved in more than an act of spectatorship: they are implicated in a whole system of contemporary consumer manufacturing and consumption. It is in this sense that I use the word *transaction*.

Examples of the crossover between digital attractions in contemporary film and advertisements are not difficult to come by (Figure 2). In 1994 Guinness aired an advert on U.K. television produced by the agency AMV and almost entirely constructed from CGI. In the advert a “camera” started its journey in front of a pint of Guinness and tracked through the glass into the liquid to reveal a microscopic galaxy. Continuing to track through the galaxy, the “camera” came on a planet and descended through the atmosphere to a city (resembling the famous Hendrick van Cleve III painting *The Construction of the Tower of Babel*). In the city, the shot continued to track down to a building through a window and into a room with a table on which the same pint of Guinness stood awaiting the “camera” to continue the same cycle again. At the time of its release this advert was interesting for its illusory powers alone: the “camera” literally tracking through endless and impossible layers of special and visual magnification without ever stopping for an edit. In 1999, the CGI title credits of the film *Fight Club* repeated almost exactly the same sequence, this time starting at the microscopic level and tracking up and out of the galaxy of synaptic networks that constituted the main character’s brain to breach the skin of his forehead and reveal the opening (and closing) scene of the film. In 2001, Baz Luhrmann’s digital effects team on *Moulin Rouge* constructed a similar shot (from a composite of mock Eugene Atget photographs) in which a “camera” hovered far above an imaginary Paris before impossibly (for a conventional camera) descending through the streets and into the window of a flat of a bohemian in the Moulin Rouge. More recently, similar shots have featured in both *X-Men 2* and *Superman Returns* as credit sequences. While individually all of these examples mark an aesthetic of continuity, collectively they also constitute a continuity of aesthetic in which the spatial, technological, and even functional purpose and construction of the attraction are the same: to engage the viewer in the image as a form interesting for its illusory power alone.

The Guinness advert was not the only example in which visual effects first exhibited in spot adverts have subsequently been translated into comparable sequences for feature-length films. In 1999, Jonathan Glazer directed an advert titled *Surfer* that followed a group of surfers waiting for their ultimate wave. The climax of the advert featured white horses digitally composited into the image, emerging from the tidal wave, and bearing down on the surfers. Three years later, Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* film featured a sequence in which “ring wraith” horsemen attempted to escape the wave of a river flash flood. In an echo of the advert, white horses emerged from the water and bore down on them. At the beginning of 2000, Levi’s released an advert they titled *Odyssey* in which a man and a woman raced each other through a series of concrete walls before even more impossibly racing up an adjacent set of trees before reaching the top and flying through

the air. Later the same year, Ang Lee's film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* featured a scene in which a man and woman duelled with each other from adjacent trees in exactly the same gravity defying manner. Five years later still, a Francis Lawrence film, *Constantine*, featured a scene in which Keanu Reeves chased a friend through a series of concrete walls. In 2003 Lucozade commissioned an advert from M & C Saatchi called *Body of Water* featuring a CGI athlete made of water. Two years later, the blockbuster *Daredevil* featured a scene in which the blind hero "sees" the romantic interest by reconstructing an image in his mind from the sounds of the rain drops bouncing off her body. The image (a woman made of water) was strikingly familiar.

Finally, perhaps the most notable example to date of the concurrent utilization of CGI moments of attractions in both advertisements and feature film can be found in a 1997 advert directed by Michel Gondry (who has since moved into Hollywood himself) titled *Smarienburg*. In the advert, CGI allowed Gondry to manipulate the normally directly proportional relationship between the temporal flow and the spatial positioning of the camera. Through the use of multiple fixed cameras, Gondry's effects team "slowed" time while allowing the "camera" to track around its subjects apparently frozen in time. A year later, the same effect featured in both *Buffalo 66* and *The Matrix* (the result of which the technique was christened "bullet time") to become an endlessly parodied digital attraction.

The release dates of these films and advertisements are not necessarily important. Though it would be tempting to draw a chronologically motivated causal link between CG advertising aesthetics influencing film aesthetics, this would be both factually incorrect and to miss the point.⁸ A genealogical investigation of aesthetic influence is, in many ways, a moot point in the context of the operation of the cinemas of transactions. The focus here is on the transferable function of these digital attractions. It is with this transferable function in mind that we can now turn to a closer examination of the way in which digital attractions function as promotional forms within the Hollywood film.

From Cinematic Attraction to Digital Transaction

In the considerable quantity of event marketing that surrounded the release of *Titanic* in 1997, much was made of the budget and cost of the CGI sequences. One sequence in particular stood out for the way it was repeatedly featured in the prerelease promotional material and for the way images from it were used in the promotional posters for the film. The sequence featured a CGI "shot" of the ship which, starting from out on the water in front of the prow, met the *Titanic* as it sailed through the water before passing over the top deck in a smooth continuous aerial tilt and track.

The logic of the cinema of attractions pervades this sequence. The scene was deployed in the first third of the movie and was utilized as the signifier of the film's lavish production values and its pulling power as an attraction. In a manner reminiscent of Justin Wyatt's (2003, 16) assertion that contemporary "high-concept" films utilize bold images that reinforce "the extraction of these images from the film for the films

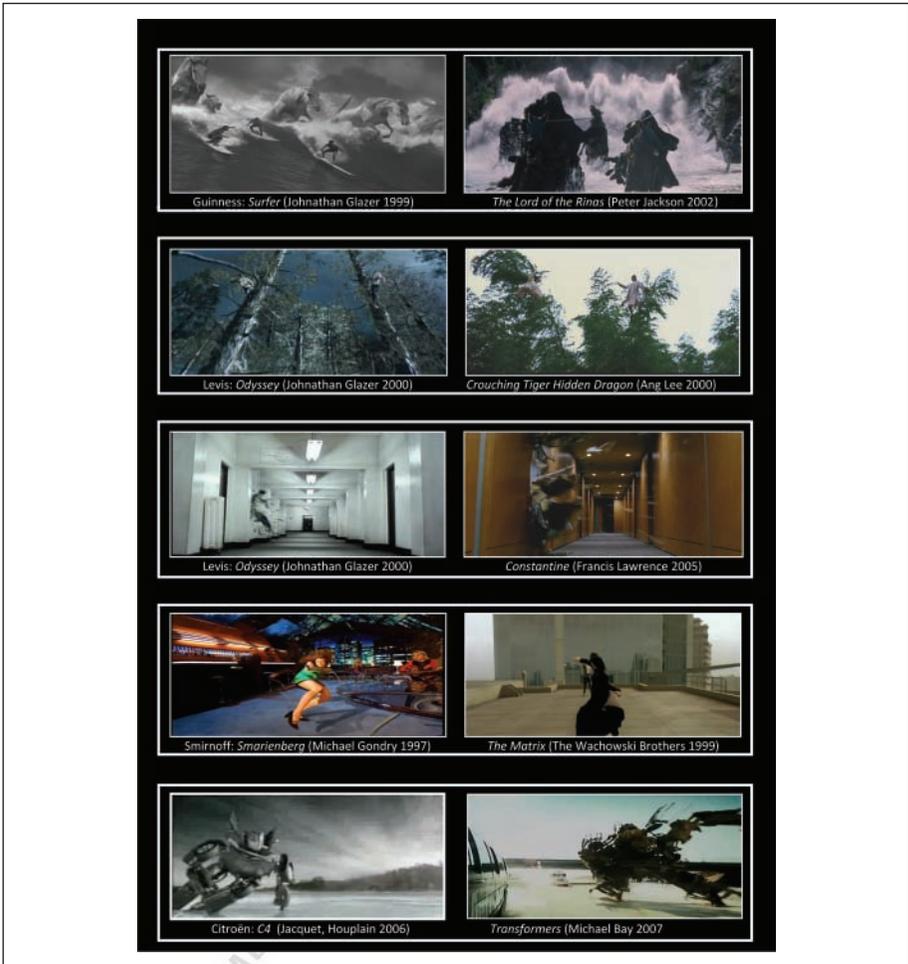


Figure 2. Just like the animators and directors who create them, CG attractions perform a transferable function, operating across industry

marketing and merchandising,” the CGI sequence of the *Titanic* approaching was deployed in all the posters, advertising, and trailers for the film as a signifier to potential audiences of the spectacle they could expect. At forty seconds long and costing \$1.1 million to create (a factoid endlessly returned to in the prescreening media hype and even quoted by Manovich 2001, 153), this scene was alleged, at the time, to be the most expensive single scene in cinema history. It was, both literally and metaphorically, the money shot of the film. What is most interesting, however, is not the expense but the correlation between the form of this shot as an attraction and the form of it as an advertisement. Discussing the construction of this shot, Rob Legato, head of the digital effects team Digital Domain, has described how his team approached the task:

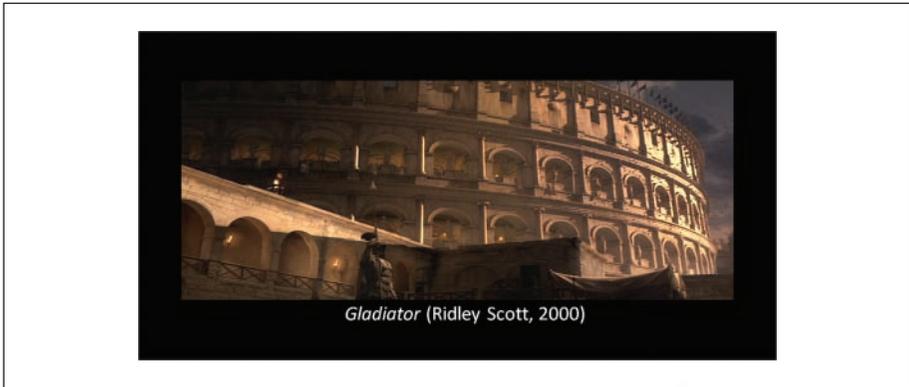


Figure 3. The digital attraction and the grandiose: 'selling' to the audience

We're doing essentially an advertisement for the *Titanic*, [to say] look how great it is to be on the *Titanic*. And how do you film a commercial like that now without actually doing it? The audience now is used to seeing these great sweeping helicopter shots and the grandeur of being out on the water. (Legato 1997)

Legato himself describes this shot as an advertisement for *Titanic*; the convenient ambiguity as to whether this statement refers to the ship or the film is perhaps no accident. Legato's description of this shot as an advert returns us very clearly to the interrelation between the cinema of attractions and the promotional process in which film operated simultaneously as an entertainment form and an advertisement for itself. Here is the cinemas of transactions: CG sequences that are constructed to operate across multiple textual forms as both attractions and advertisements simultaneously.

Watching this scene afresh, one is struck by the uncanny parallels (formally, stylistically, and functionally) between it and Lumiere's *Train Leaving the Station*. There is, in the *Titanic* sequence, exactly the same use of cinema presenting its audience with a scene that is fascinating for its illusory powers alone that Gunning describes. There is also the uncanny parallel of a shot filmed to maximize and emphasize Renaissance perspective for the sole purpose of impressing its audience. There is also the fact that both scenes are concerned with the power of an approaching vehicle, a man made symbol of modernity. Finally, both sequences present the viewer with a visually arresting spectacle and something they had not seen before. In the case of *Titanic* the shot mimicked a helicam shot with the difference that such a shot would have been entirely impossible in reality, even if a replica of the *Titanic* existed.

Many other examples of comparable digital attractions that hark back to the early attraction exist (Figure 3). In 2000 Ridley Scott, who like many of his contemporaries made his way into Hollywood as a director of advertisements, released *Gladiator*. Much of the prerelease publicity featured a CG sequence uncannily similar to the *Titanic* sequence in its stylistic use of grandiose sweeping shots, this time of the Coliseum in Rome.⁹

Here, as with the *Titanic* sequence, the CGI shots operate as advertising, this time for *Gladiator*: both the film and its diegetic subject. Of the twenty television spots cut for the prerelease and release of the film, every one used at least two of the four central CG effects shots, and most actually used all four shots (Scott 2000). Describing his approach to the construction of the CG shots, one of which featured the inside of the Coliseum, John Nelson explains that his digital effects team

were all tremendously game guys and we all got on that bandwagon. I think conceptually if you do that and *you sell* [to the audience the belief] *that you are in the Coliseum*. . . . It's sort of like knocking out the bully of the school yard. You know, I mean *you've got them for the whole rest of the movie*. (Scott 2000, emphasis added)

For Nelson the CGI acts as a kind of sales pitch, “selling” the diegesis of the film to the audience and securing their attention for the rest of the film. Here not only are Nelson and his team “selling” the film to already captive audiences, but also their effects shots for the film operate as a means of generating peripheral publicity and the possibility of greater audiences.

Similarly, Michael Bay and Jerry Bruckheimer have described the way in which they used initial stage CGI effects sequences to render the more complex effects shots of a yet unmade movie. Their explicitly expressed purpose was to “sell” the U.S. military on the idea of the film *Pearl Harbor*, for which they required the use of the base and as many army and navy extras as they could get. As Bay and then Bruckheimer explain,

Bay: We worked with satellite images of Pearl Harbor, we digitally made the battle ships, and we made the planes. . . . These planes would actually fly, we could fly around the base and we could create these huge epic shots.

Bruckheimer: We showed it to them [pentagon officials] along with these drawings that Michael worked with in illustrator of what he felt some of the action was going to be in the movie and I think they were overwhelmed by it. (Bay 2001)

Here we have an extraordinary but unacknowledged irony in the process through which this film was conceived for, promoted to, and “green lighted” by the military. *Pearl Harbor* features CG footage that simulates both military aerial shots of reconnaissance targets and airplanes in flight to promote a film project in its early stages of development. So two audiovisual technologies—airial reconnaissance and CG flight simulation—first developed by the military later found commercial civilian applications as promotional forms. These were subsequently utilized in the film industry by Bay and Bruckheimer to sell Pentagon officials their own ideas back to them. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the officials in the pitch were “overwhelmed by it” since both sides were talking the same audiovisual and technological language.



Figure 4. The digital transaction in action: CG image forms developed by the military are re-appropriated to promote the film to pentagon officials

We see how CGI effects worked in *Pearl Harbor*, just as they did in *Titanic* and *Gladiator*, as a promotional form on multiple levels that stretches out before and after the film itself is produced but that also constitutes the essence of the film as an attraction. The CGI shots mocked up to promote the project before it even went into production were then utilized as the spine of the central, forty-five-minute action sequence within the film itself before being recycled in the advertising and promotional material that surrounded the film's release (Figure 4). So in the case of *Pearl Harbor* the CGI operated as a promotional form to previsualize and pitch a film before production *and* to demonstrate to potential audiences the spectacular grandiosity and production values to be expected postproduction and prerelease. Finally, we could argue that they operated as forms of advertisements for the credibility of the diegesis within the films themselves.

It is interesting to consider the similarities between different directors and effects teams in their approaches to the CGI sequences as spectacle. In all cases the emphasis of their "sales pitch" is on an appeal to the "real." Describing his attitude toward the possibility of making *Pearl Harbor*, Bay claims he approached it with the attitude that "I have no idea if we can do this movie, I don't want to do it unless we can do it right and create the world as real as possible" (Bay 2001). Similarly, *Spiderman* director Sam Rami has stated in relation to the CG effects that "it was important to me that it should look real, if it looked bogus it wasn't going to work" (Rami 2002). Equally, Nelson and then Legato testify to exactly the same attitude pervading their CG work in *Gladiator* and *Titanic*:

Those are big shots that just, they look real, they don't look like CG and I am very proud of them and I think it is one of the many ways where we delivered our prime directive which was to make the big idea approachable to modern audiences because it's like, Rome is such a big idea, it's like the glory that was once Rome. It's big and massive and impressive and those shots really worked into the puzzle to try and deliver the goods. (Nelson 2000)

You've seen a ship on the water before and this is what it feels like so hopefully we'll make it more realistic. That was the idea with the people, we gonna shoot vignettes of people that are doing real life things so hopefully again the sum total of what you're seeing even in the periphery is something that is real life, and hopefully at the end of the day the sum total of what you've seen is something that feels correct, it feels real as opposed to completely artificial. (Legato 1997)

It seems that the aim toward grandeur and scale goes hand in hand with the desire to achieve the maximum level of "realism" possible. All parties from *Titanic* to *Pearl Harbor* are acutely aware of their audience and of the response to their creations. In each case they are not simply keen to construct something that feels real (and is astonishing for its verisimilitude)—this is the driving force of their work. Legato's approach is not just consistent with that of Nelson, Bay, and Bruckheimer in the expression of promotional function; like them he also expresses the same desire to create grandeur based on as close an approximation of the "real" as possible. This, it turns out, is not simply a recent phenomenon but can be tracked as a constant in the history of the audiovisual image. The comparisons previously drawn between digital attractions and early cinema can be taken further. With the words of Legato, Nelson, Bay, and Rami in mind, it is striking to return to Bottomore's exploration of audience reactions to early film forms.

Leaving aside the more exaggerated myths of mass panics, Bottomore argues that there were nevertheless genuine physical reactions of astonishment and pleasure from early audiences. He suggests that "such physical reactions seemed to occur in response to two types of films: those showing approaching vehicles and those depicting the sea or waves" (Bottomore 1999, 186), and in a note in the appendix Bottomore expands this with the suggestion that early spectators were often impressed simply by footage of "complex natural motion." Drawing on Méliès's observations, Bottomore suggests (in a continuation of his theme that ever new visual stimulus provided pleasure for audiences) that what impressed and pleased spectators was a feeling of "That's it exactly!" in relation to these images. The identification of natural phenomena such as lapping water rendered "realistically" yet impossibly on the space of the cinema screen provided visual pleasure to audiences. Here we are reminded of the adverts and films discussed earlier. In four cases, with the Guinness and the Lucozade adverts and in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *Daredevil*, digital attractions depict "water" manipulated in spectacular manners. It seems that the spectacular manipulation of liquid in new and unencountered ways holds, and always has held, a specific spectatorial pleasure for

audiences. In this context, it seems no accident that landmark moments in the use of CGI in films such as *The Abyss*, *Terminator 2*, *The Matrix*, and *Revenge of the Sith* all involve similar spectacular depictions of liquid in unusual states of movement. Such moments are deployed in adverts and films with a similar purpose of providing visual pleasure.

However, this form of visual pleasure extends beyond the bounds of new audience experiences involving water or moving vehicles. It is not these specific subjects that are important but the process through which spectatorial pleasure is gained in each new experience of beholding the apparently real, however impossible it may be. The CG imagery continues a special effects tradition that has characterized the audiovisual image from its inception when it awed and astounded audiences who beheld trains entering and leaving stations or waves lapping on a shore. The CGI Coliseum sequences in *Gladiator* do not utilize either vehicles or water effects, but the attempted result is the same: audience astonishment at a new visual stimulation. In fact, one can see in CGI sequences from most contemporary films an almost generic similarity in form and style of shot designed to create maximum effect. In such cases, wide, extremely long aerial shots are used to track and pan over the subjects: often feats of human engineering involving ant-like crowds of programmed people to provide a sense of vast scale. The level to which these CG forms can be seen to be inherently promotional in nature is demonstrated by another unmistakable parallel. For some years now industrial concerns from aerospace agencies to architects and car manufacturers have used CG sequences as a key promotional tool. In these contexts the CG sequence actually performs a more literal promotional function. Where digital attractions in Hollywood help promote a film to potential audiences, digital attractions in industry help promote an object or construction to potential investors before work has begun. In many ways such digital attractions are the industrial films of the twenty-first century, and what is striking is the similarity they bear to Hollywood effects sequences (Figure 5).

Like their early cinematic predecessors, the digital sequences of both Hollywood and manufacturing industry are not only attractions that seek to attract spectators through visual pleasure but also moments that transfer most easily to the logic of the promotion and the self-promotion. It should be no surprise that these shots should be the ones that are utilized most prominently in the publicity material and in the spot advertisements trailing the films. This is true not only for *Titanic* and *Gladiator* and *Pearl Harbor* but for nearly all contemporary Hollywood CGI features. Other films involving CGI shots of this kind that also heavily featured in the publicity campaigns demonstrate an ongoing trend.¹⁰ In each case CGI material occupies the majority of the advertising and publicity material that surrounds the release.

In all cases these effects shots do not simply feature in the publicity but are utilized as a means of embodying the essence of the digital attraction as a new visual stimulation: technically groundbreaking, spectatorially inspiring, publicly shared experiences of visual pleasure based on making the unreal appear real. There is a sense of déjà vu in reading Bottomore's description of



Figure 5. Digital attractions as the industrial films of the twenty first century

a number of pieces of publicity for the Lumiere cinematographe which used an illustration of a film show in progress, with the approaching train film on screen and a transfixed or shocked audience. The book *Light and Movement* reproduces two of these, one on a dining plate with the caption “One might believe it was real.” Similarly, I have found an undated advertisement for the so-called “scenimatographe,” a French film show (or possibly a projector) which depicts an audience apparently scattering before a projected film of a train, with the printed slogan “you’d think it was real.” (Bottomore 1999, 183)

In this context the poster campaign for *The Fellowship of the Rings*, featuring a CG shot of two gigantic ancient statues carved out of the mountain with the tag line “The Legend Comes to Life,” can be seen as a continuation of a process initiated in the early stages of the emergence of the cinematic apparatus.

In a twist of fate for the film and television studios that utilize such attractions, YouTube and its alternates have arisen at precisely the right time, not to challenge the dominance of their monopoly (something they feared film ad companies would do in

the 1920s; Segrave 2004, 26) but to function as the perfect promotional platform. As recent research suggests (Cheng, Dale, and Liu 2007) the viewing audience for YouTube content drops in direct proportion to the length of the clips on offer. Consequently, YouTube really does present the majority of users with the conditions of the vaudeville variety shows in which the first cinematic material made its appearance as both attraction and promotion. This is the cinemas of transactions: a relationship between audiovisual attraction and promotional reflex that stretches back to the inception of film history at the same time as it develops in a way that moves beyond the boundaries of film.

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Notes

1. A process that Raymond Williams (1961) in *Advertising the Magic System* argues took place between 1880 and 1914.
2. This is detailed by Bottomore (1999), who argues that the “train effect” was driven by mythologized “hysterical” audiences who created publicity and allowed real audiences to enjoy the self-reflexive consumption of the naïve viewer, setting up a dichotomy between a “sophisticated ‘us’ and an unsophisticated ‘them’.”
3. For these short films, BMW hired some of Hollywood’s leading star directors (Ridley and Tony Scott, David Fincher, John Frankenheimer, Ang Lee, Wong Kar-wai, Guy Ritchie, John Woo, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu) with the brief that they should make a series of short films (notably a similar length as the film ads made at the turn of the twentieth century) in which “the car was the star.”
4. Here we must make a distinction between spot advertisements screened before films (something that Hollywood blocked from the cinematic distribution circuit in the 1930s) and the system of product placement that continued throughout the century (under Hollywood’s control). For more on this, and for detailed examples of audience responses to the return of spot ads in U.S. cinemas (including booing, walk-out protests, and food and drink thrown at the screen), see Segrave (2004, 100–115).
5. Though this should be qualified with the proviso that such visual pleasure also seems to be dependent on a generational shift in audience perception. Anecdotally, many students now

- freely profess to tracking down adverts with their favorite CGI sequences on YouTube and watching them again, but more work is required in this area.
6. It is important to note that the degree to which narrative plays a part in contemporary and historical advertisements is a nuanced subject that requires further research: not least, the idea that advertising is the audiovisual antithesis of narrative form requires reevaluation. I have made a start with this (Gurevitch, forthcoming), but there is much work still to be done.
 7. Interestingly, Gunning (1994, 59) points out that during this period film (alongside the theatrical counterparts it was exhibited with) came under continual criticism from reformist groups because of its nonnarrative, variety format—a point worth bearing in mind in relation to advertising where the conditions of exhibition in televisual advert breaks reflect the variety format Gunning describes and which itself comes under continual pressure for its own contemporary reformist groups.
 8. In two of the paired examples (Smirnov/*The Matrix* and Levi's/*Crouching Tiger*) the production of these sequences took place in the same year, even though the release dates of the feature films meant that the advertisements were on public exhibition sooner.
 9. For an example of the early attractions that this shot harks back to, see the many films made in and around New York at the turn of the twentieth century.
 10. See, for instance, *The Lord of the Rings*, *King Kong*, *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter*, *Spiderman*, *X-Men*, and *Star Wars*.

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