Hyper-real Narratives: The Emergence of Contemporary Film Subgenres

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The scope of this paper is to investigate a number of emerging contemporary popular subgenres, namely that of “mumblecore film”, the “best-worst film” and “the gonzo documentary”. Unlike historical cinematic movements, these subgenres are the result of our techocentric culture and commercialism. In this respect these subgenres are less motivated by a collective ideology, but rather a cultural phenomenon resulting from increased access to popular culture, hypermedia devices, social media, and new marketing techniques. This paper investigates the displacement of traditional models of temporality through the metamorphosis of today’s audiovisual culture, outlining the subject’s embodiment of voyeurism and exhibitionism, ushering in a hyper-real era of self-myth making and consumption.

Keywords: hyper-real, mumblecore, best-worst film, gonzo documentary, transmedia storytelling, voyeurism, exhibitionism, popular culture

Introduction

With the advent of digital technologies and the constant shifting of moving image production, this paper explores the emergence of new feature film subgenres that don’t fit into traditional cinematic models of discourse. The scope of this paper is to investigate a number of emerging contemporary popular subgenres, namely that of “mumblecore”, the “best-worst film”, and “the gonzo documentary”.

The author poses that the emergence of subgenres as cultural phenomena are a direct result from increased access to popular culture, hypermedia devices, social media, and new marketing techniques. For this very reason, the author uses mumblecore film as the beginning point of this discussion as it is advent relies on a digital social culture and he moves through to the gonzo documentary to exemplify the embodiment of postmodern ideals, resulting from a techno-commercial culture.

The difficulty in discussing these forms lies in the inherent ephemerality and rapid metamorphosis of today’s audiovisual culture, which highlights a key issue surrounding contemporary cinema—the displacement of traditional models of temporality. As Paul Virilio (2010) pointed out, that as technology increases in a society, so does speed (as cited in Featherstone, 2010). This stands true for film production methods, the film’s narrative and the spectator. Contemporary stories are told inter-textually, play with time in ways never possible before and even traverse various mediums. The displacement of temporality even extends to the spectator experience of “nostalgia”, “cult”, and even their experience of reality.

These subgenres also disrupt traditional models of authorship, performance, and spectatorship. They

challenge traditional cinematic concepts by finding common ground in today's viral and hyper-textual culture and exemplify the embodiment of Baudrillard's concept of the hyper-real. The lines between storytelling, mythmaking, and the idea of "reality" are becoming one, through the advent of digital media, moving ever closer to describing a hyper-real cinema.

Mumblecore

The author wants to firstly discuss the "mumblecore" film, which has its roots roughly around 2002-2004 with the appearance of films like Andrew Bujalski's *Funny Ha Ha* (2002) and *Mutual Appreciation* (2005) at the South By SXSW (Southwest Festival in Texas). Bujalski is now proclaimed as the "grandfather" of the "mumblecore" movement. His unique style was characterized by a rough, raw, and minimalist aesthetic with evident low-budget localised DIY (Do It Yourself) production values. He would use real locations, available lighting, simple camera set-ups, and friends as actors, hand-held cinematography and minimal takes. These production methods along with a loose script and room for actor improvisation led to an "awkwardness" of the characters, which stylistically heightens the sense of naturalism and invoked a re-inventing of neorealist sensibilities. Scott (2009) identified that this subgenre is a celebration and exploration of the everyday and the banal, even deeming it as "neo-neo realism".

It is worthy to note that the myth of the etymology of the term "mumblecore" is attributed to the SXSW sound mixer Eric Masunga, when jokingly trying to describe this particular style of film (Lim, 2007). With the explosion of digital media devices, this new form of auteurship swept the film scene with filmmakers like Joe Swanberg (*LOL*, 2006), Aaron Katz (*Dance Party, USA*, 2006), Lyn Shelton (*Humpday*, 2009), and Duplass Brothers (*The Puffy Chair*, 2005), capitalising on the cheap and accessible methods of film production (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Baghead. Source: Adapted from J. Duplass and M. Duplass (2008).

When being looked at closely, "mumblecore" has evident stylistic influence from the improvisational directorial techniques influences of John Cassavetes and Mike Leigh. Also, the production methods also mirror those of the Danish cinema movement of *Dogme 95* (Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg) and even the

French New Wave. The scripts and characters of later “mumblecore” films such as *Humpday* (2009), share an affinity with the 1990’s style of Richard Linklater’s *Slacker* (1991) and Kevin Smith’s *Clerks* (1994), an influence which can be traced back to Andy Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls* (1966).

During the peak of “mumblecore”’s popularity, the author simultaneously witnessed these same stylistic and aesthetic tendencies in his students. Though, outside the scope of the set curriculum, they would have an interest in filmmakers who used quick and low-budget production methods. It was evident they were seduced by the perceived “freedom” of these works. They were drawn to the improvisational and cheap production values, the hand held camerawork, and general fashionable street credit that came along with digital media. Having been born into a digital world, it made sense, as expectations, attention spans and creative concerns were a response to the immediacy of technology. They did not want to spend two years on a script, two years on trying to get funding, then be bound by the parameters of the established industry to produce their film—they simply wanted to make their film now.

The affordability and immediacy of the digital medium has quickly established a strong filmmaking DIY culture as an alternative to established industry practice and infrastructures, lowering the demand for industry and regulation, ushering in a new era of exploitation/guerilla filmmaking practice. In this respect, the “mumblecore” movement is part of a large cultural trend of DIY and “lo-fi” culture, aided not only by the digital revolution, but also by the economics of recession (the lead up to Global Financial Crisis). The movement can be seen as an implicit outcome of economics and commentary on capitalism and the Western culture of waste, Maria (2011) aptly dubbing “mumblecore”, “a cinema of recession” (p. 1). Combining the cultural trend of “green” ideology and the ability to make a film with your friends for \$1,000 on a laptop and a digital camera—the advent of “mumblecore” is no mystery. Of course, the availability of affordable, user-friendly equipment is never itself wholly a determinant; “mumblecore” was spawned of necessity and inspiration. It was a convergence of new technology and disaffected filmmakers and artists, feeling that Hollywood was not representing their lives.

While there are some harsh critiques of the subgenre as being white, middle-class and nothing more than film festival hype stemming from Matt Dentler and blogosphere branding, the criticism does foreground the role of digital media (Taubin, 2007). It was born out of a disaffected digital generation, who found representation in “mumblecore” and easily won techno-savvy hipster credibility. A large part of these films’ popularity came from accessing alternative forms of micro/self-distribution through festivals, user generated online videos and marketing through social media and online networks.

This articulates a certain contemporary sensibility (social networks and the voyeurism/exhibitionism of YouTube) and even directors/producers acting in the film. As Swanberg (2007) comments, “We grew up in the age of the home video. We’re used to having our lives documented at every stage. Reality TV shows are an extension of that, and this is the next stage” (as cited in Hubert, 2007). “Mumblecore” reflects the implicit exhibitionism that lies at the heart of contemporary culture. Maria (2011) pointed out about that “mumblecore” “bespeaks a true 21st-century sensibility, reflective of MySpace-like social networks and the voyeurism and intimacy of YouTube” (p. 1). This was a period of time when web cameras, cell phones, and social media were just beginning to proliferating through Western culture and played a massive role not only in shaping the content of these films, but also in defining an audience for them.

Best-Worst Film

Another subgenre born out of this technocentric, social media driven culture is what some call the “so-bad-it’s-good” film or “best-worst film” (lifted from Michael Stephenson’s documentary *Best Worst Movie*, 2009). This subgenre is usually cantered on an auteur who is characterised by a passionate and earnest, idiot-savant filmmaking ability. The characteristics of these films diametrically oppose that of the Hollywood Blockbuster, by celebrating really bad acting and effects, elliptical dialogue, characters with unknown motivations and juvenile emotions and reactions to situations, plot lines that are nonsensical, bad editing, and bad sound. This type of “bad” filmmaking was traditionally instituted by the likes of Ed Wood (*Glen or Glenda*, 1953; *Plan 9 From out of Space*, 1959), Stephen C. Apostolof (*Orgy of the Dead*, 1965), Phil Tucker (*Robot Monster*, 1953), and Nicholas Webster (*Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*, 1964). However, becoming a cult director and fetishising these films as cult cinema only happens over decades of time, but with a Virilio-esque compression of time and space (Harvey, 1989) (via the digital revolution) cult-fetishisation now occurs in less than a decade. This new breed on “best-worst” contemporary cult director is best articulated by the likes of Claudio Fragasso (*Troll 2*, 1990), Tommy Wiseau (*The Room*, 2003) (see Figure 2), and James Nguyen (*Birdemic: Shock and Terror*, 2010).

Figure 2. The room. Source: Adapted from Wiseau (2003).

Though the best-worst films are a continuation of bad taste legacies in cinema, they are quite different from films such as *Mega Shark Vs. Giant Octopus* (2009), *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* (1988), and *Rock ‘n’ Roll Nightmare* (1987), which are somewhat self-reflexive and reference already established cult, camp, kitsch, and bad-taste aesthetics. So apart from the compressed temporality of the genre, what else differentiates this new era of “best-worst” films is the appearance of being “unintentionally bad” and the director setting out to have tried to make a genuinely good film but failed. Additionally, the anonymity and lack of a pre-established celebrity status of the director, combined with a lack of industry experience is also a major factor in the identification of this subgenre.

The subgenre's success is essentially a celebration of cinematic failure and the humour in the film is often pathos-driven. Audiences ritualistically watch these films purely to laugh at the film and to mock the filmmaker. In this scenario, and especially in the case of *The Room* (2003) and Tommy Wiseau, the traditional archetypes of author/performer/spectator, totally collapse. Both Bazin's auteurship and Barthes' "Death of the Author" apply simultaneously: Wiseau is mock-praised for his personal vision, yet it's the interactivity of the audience that completes the text. The audiences have rewritten the text in the experience of watching; the text is not structured to be comedy, it is actually filmic incompetence at its finest and it's only comedic when the audience communally deems it so. An example can be found in *The Room*, where audiences throw spoons at the screen whenever the framed pictures appear (that have the pre-fabricated pictures of spoons the set-designer forgot to replace in them).

The "best-worst" subgenre is one of the last true "cinematic" contemporary subgenres, mainly because it reinforces what cinema is really about—as Singer (1990) suggested that it is an active, physical, and communal experience (p. 52). This is the type of film you want to watch in a crowd and not just once, as the more you watch it, the funnier it will get. Watching it alone or even in a small group does not do it justice. This film really proves the idiom that laughter is contagious. The spectator/screen relationship has never been so active and affect based, so much so, that it breaks beyond the one screen. The spectator/screen relationship actually moves into a multiplicity of platforms and into various inter-textual forms, which digital media and user generated online video content has a major role in perpetuating. This also reveals the dark side of this genre as potentially violent and misanthropic, identifying mockery and cruel humour as driving factors in the popularity of these films. But the joke seems to be on anyone but Tommy Wiseau, because his film has been filling cinemas around the world for the past 10 years, not to mention the success of DVD (Digital Versatile Disc) and online sales. Claudio Fragasso, Tommy Wiseau, and James Nguyen actually turn a profit from their films and if you are an independent filmmaker, you will know it is near impossible in the current market.

Some savvy contemporary comedians/filmmakers have even tried to channel this idiocy and emulate these bad styles, but it usually contains an element of parody and self-reflexivity. However, what has been happening recently is closer to a pastiche referencing of elements found in the "best-worst" film genre, take for example *Tim and Eric's Awesome Show* (2007), where directors Tim Heidecker and Eric Warheim have recognized the comedic and commercial potential of actually using real "bad" actors, singers, performers, and comedians on their show. For example, David Liebe Hart was scouted for Tim and Eric's comedic entourage from *The Junior Christian Science Bible Lesson Program* (1994-2008), a public-access television cable program on which he would perform bizarre singing puppet shows.

The advent of such a rapid development of cult status and organic viral marketing potential owes much of its success to user generated online video content and social media, where anonymity give room for mythology and speculation to become actuality. For example, there is such a mythology around *The Room* and Tommy Wiseau as a person, that it has spawned many online viral narrative offshoots, effectively, creating an organic trans-media story placing Wiseau as a the central character in the inter-textual mythology of *The Room*.

This trans-media storytelling technique of telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies (Kinder, 1991, p. 38) is truly symbolic of our culture's embodiment of post-modern sensibilities and is currently being recognised as one of the most effective methods of generating sales.

The Gonzo Documentary

The other subgenre, which pushes inter-textual trans-media storytelling to another level, where the inability to distinguish the text as fiction or reality, is what we called the “gonzo-documentary”. This subgenre is particularly effective in perpetuating a bifurcation of online video and other social media forms, as the storytelling happens among the audience rather than from the author; it’s the rumors, myths, and little bits of other narratives rhizomatically spread over a compressed time and space that we put together and form our own narratives from.

Despite the widespread common usage of the term “gonzo”, as Martin Hirst (2004) expressed in his attempt to find the etymology of the term, there is no clear and definitive explanation of its linguistic origins, apart from Hunter S. Thompson’s particular brand of journalism (as cited in Hirst, 2004). Though you can find the established genre of “gonzo pornography”, where you have pornography that is filmed from a voyeuristic subjective point of view, which can be seen as having a cross over in terms of camerawork, but does not really much else to do with what the author is defining here.

Figure 3. Exit through the gift shop. Source: Adapted from Banksy (2010).

The “gonzo documentary” that the author is discussing is characterised by the filmmakers themselves rewriting reality: where the filmmakers add fictionalised elements into a documentation of reality, usually re-contextualising their own status as a celebrity. The filmmakers are the actors and act as themselves, but little or no other people know that they are acting. Examples of what the author is delineating here can be seen in the films: *I’m Still Here* (Affleck & Phoenix, 2010), *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (Banksy, 2010) (see Figure 3), *Francophrenia* (Olds & Franco, 2012). A key characteristic of this subgenre is the hijacking/redirection or even just exhibition of one’s own persona (or status as celebrity) on video and the inability for the audience and participants to distinguish what is real and fiction. In a Baudrillardian gesture, the writer is also the performer and manufacturer of hyper-real reception of the text.

The cultural significance of this subgenre is that it reveals the inadequacy between the way we consume media the pretence that any of it could be “truth”. These films are not merely mockumentaries or faux documentaries, but one could argue is the closest thing to a “real” documentary. What it documents is the way we consume and construct our realities based on marketing and commercialism, taking the marketing idiom of “perception is reality” to a whole new level. These filmmakers are simply taking something that never was real to begin with (their own status as celebrity) and fictionalised it. To paraphrase Baudrillard, the role of the simulation is not to hide reality or truth, but rather it is the notion of truth or reality that hides the fact that there never was one. The simulacrum is true (Poster & Baudrillard, 1988). The irony here is that Baudrillard’s quote itself though attributed to Ecclesiastes, is in fact fabricated and does not exist in the text.

The subgenre as “gonzo documentary” is the direct result of the immediacy of digital media and the ability to constantly re-image/re-imagine our subjective selves as a general process of social and cultural interaction. We live in a constant state of reality augmentation. We make ourselves, and others, spectacles, and/or objects of voyeurism and surveillance with the aid of cameras and social media infrastructures.

This significant cultural phenomenon, of being able to mediate our own self-image, signifies a new era or reality-mediation allowing us to rewrite our own narratives, cultural mythologies and become the characters in our own representation of reality to an endless audience.

Bringing it back full circle to the “mumblecore” and “best-worst” film: This is the 21st-century sensibility and these subgenres are outcome of a proliferation of digital technologies and user-generated online networks, promoting an era of gonzo exhibitionism/hyper-real narratives. Maybe “gonzo reality” is a more apt manner to describe this new era of image self-reproduction and cultural myth making and narrative control, where the boundary between fiction and reality is nonexistent, where we can control the way in which we represent our own image. “Reality” is no longer something we engage with, it is now something we are able create, re-create, image, and re-imagine.

Conclusions

In discussing the emergence of some contemporary popular subgenres, namely that of “mumble-core film”, the “best-worst film” and “the gonzo documentary”, the author highlights the role of technology in the spectator’s displacement of traditional models of temporality, embodiment of voyeurism and exhibitionism, and experience of “nostalgia” and “cult”.

Furthermore, these subgenres also disrupt traditional models of authorship, performance, and spectatorship. They challenge traditional cinematic concepts by finding common ground in today’s viral and hypertextual culture and exemplify the embodiment of Baudrillard’s concept of the hyper-real. The lines between storytelling, mythmaking, and the idea of “reality” are becoming one, through the advent of digital media, moving ever closer to describing a hyper-real cinema.

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