

The Cinema of Michael Bay: An Aesthetic of Excess

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fig. 1: An aesthetic of excess – the spectacle of destruction in *Bad Boys II*

Introduction

Michael Bay's films offer us some of the clearest examples of technically complex, emotionally direct, entertaining contemporary cinema. He has built up a substantial body of work; in addition to directing music videos and TV adverts and producing films and TV series, he has also directed eleven feature films since the mid-1990s with budgets ranging from \$19m to over \$200m. To date, these films have grossed over \$2bn at the box office and have a global reach, with his latest film, *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) outstripping *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) and *Red Cliff* (Woo, 2008) to become the highest-grossing film in China. Bay's filmic style so typifies mainstream US cinema that his name has come to function as shorthand for the distinctive form of 21st century big budget cinema. Bay's films are occasionally discussed in positive terms as instances of Hollywood cinema's technological sophistication, but more frequently they are invoked negatively as illustrations of Hollywood's decadence, its technical ineptness, conceptual superficiality and extravagant commercialism. As Jeffrey Sconce observes, for instance, discussing the emergence of a wave of self-consciously 'smart' American independently produced films in the 1990s:

they are almost invariably placed by marketers, critics and audiences in symbolic opposition to the imaginary mass-cult monster of mainstream, commercial, Hollywood cinema (perhaps best epitomized by the 'dumb' films of Jerry Bruckheimer, Michael Bay and James Cameron). (1)

In this article I argue that Bay's films do indeed epitomize contemporary Hollywood cinema and the cultural, technological and industrial field in which it is situated. However, rather than dismissing them as simplistic and inarticulate, through an examination of the director's systematic style and thematics in the 2003 film, *Bad Boys II*, I will consider the ways in which Bay's films can tell us a great deal about the emerging mainstream aesthetic of contemporary digital cinema (2).

Philosopher Alain Badiou writes of popular cinema that

This impure art is a Saturday night art, an art of the family going out, of teenagers, of cats on walls. It has always oscillated between the broad comedy of the cabaret and the colossal bravado of the fair, both the clown and the strongest-man-in-the-world [...] Like all that glitters and attracts crowds, it was propagandistic, to be sure, and promotional, and stupid. And, by virtue of a sort of inner purification of its unworthy materials, fleetingly capable of the highest purpose. (3)

The critical value of Bay's impure artworks, and a key reason for the distaste with which they are routinely received, is precisely that they anchor contemporary cinema to its historical roots as an aesthetically heterogeneous fairground attraction. The films are characterised by the systematic deployment of cinematic excess to the point where it has become an immediately recognizable authorial signature – one that is easily parodied. However, it is notable that, although it is very distinctive, when compared with contemporaries working on productions of a similar scale and technical complexity such as Kathryn Bigelow, Luc Besson, Ridley Scott, Steven Spielberg, Christopher Nolan or David Fincher, Bay's work has received relatively little critical attention. (4) There are a variety of reasons why this is the case extending from connoisseurial snobbery about the intellectual vacuity of popular culture (however that term might be defined) through to a politicized critique of mainstream spectacle cinema as a mechanism for the uncritical reproduction of reactionary ideological values. (5) Bay's films are distinguished from the work of directors like Nolan or Cameron by the ironic delight they take in their own preposterousness, but their extraordinary commercial success indicates that these films offer us a case study of the attractions of contemporary global cinema. A close examination of these films reveals the ways in which contemporary mainstream cinema is suspended in a play of perpetual transformation and continuity, continually adapting and recycling elements of popular cinema.

In their sometimes absurd extravagance, Bay's films demonstrate the way that certain modes of contemporary cinema are oriented round non-classical excess, those formal elements of the film that are not essential to, or which actively disrupt, coherent, 'efficient' cinematic storytelling. (6) Assemblages of elements drawn from action cinema blockbusters, low-budget science fiction films, silent slapstick comedy, musicals and music videos, TV drama and video games, Michael Bay's films embody what Sean Cubitt and Angela Ndalianis have described separately as contemporary cinema's 'Neo-Baroque' aesthetic: an exuberant profusion of repetitive, self-referential style and florid decoration that invites admiration for its technical virtuosity and formal complexity. (7) As Alain Badiou explains in a discussion

of the elaborate, ornamental style of certain examples of late twentieth-century cinema, whereas the classical aesthetic is organised around a principle of organic unity, with ‘the baroque esthetic [...] the whole is constructed on the basis of an intensification of the parts and not just on the basis of a subordination of the parts to the whole. Each part has to be intensified and it’s only on the basis of that intensification that it will find its principle of connection to the other parts’. (8) Rather than causal logic, generic, tonal or stylistic continuity, it is a consistent intensity and overstatement that is the structuring principle of the contemporary blockbuster or action film. This is evident in the complex, rapid editing of Bay’s films, for example, where classical coherence is occasionally supplanted by the strobing, abstract play of vivid colour and movement. It is demonstrated too in the architectural complexity of visual detail that is most evident in the fractally dense CGI animation of the *Transformers* films which present us with images that are far too visually intricate to comprehend at a glance (see fig. 2).

fig. 2: The baroque complexity of the digital cinema image.

Exemplifying this aesthetic of superabundant detail, Michael Bay’s cinema offers us a way of thinking about the characteristics of contemporary transnational special effects cinema as spectacular commodity form and experience. In a historical study of Hong Kong cinema, David Bordwell observed that the analysis of that populist, sensational cinema gives us a way of understanding the mechanisms of mainstream cinema:

Popular cinema probes a bounded range of options. Still, it does *probe* that range, revealing depths within what is too quickly dismissed as *cliché*. The action picture, thriving on vulgarity, carnality, and sensuous appeal, is a paradigm case of popular film. It is also manifestly an example of craft. If we want to understand the full range of what movies can do, we do well to pause over even a despised genre like the chop-socky or the gun-fest. Creating spellbinding entertainment out of dozens of well-judged niceties is no small undertaking. (9)

Similarly, a close study of Bay’s films can teach us a lot about the pleasures of popular cinema in the period of digital media production and convergence culture or, perhaps, a lot about how ‘*post-cinema*’ functions. (10) As Ndaljianis writes, for example, the emergence of a neo-baroque aesthetic in digital visual culture is ‘a result of technological, industrial and

economic transformations’, and so we might understand the distinctive aesthetic of Michael Bay’s films as the material trace, or even a rendering of the experience, of these transformations as digital production, post-production, distribution and exhibition become standard features of contemporary cinema. (11)

Authorship and transformation

‘I watched a lot of movies, Paul. I know what I’m doing.’ – Daniel Lugo (Mark Wahlberg) in *Pain and Gain* (Bay, 2013)

A study of the characteristic features of Bay’s films from *Bad Boys* through to *Transformers: Age of Extinction* reveals not so much the presence of an original and distinctive authorial signature, but rather the way in which these films are a concentration of stylistic elements that are visible in other film-makers’ work. (12) The director’s films are an assemblage of fannish borrowings from the Hollywood super-productions of James Cameron, Roland Emmerich, David Fincher, George Lucas, Ridley and Tony Scott, and Steven Spielberg, but also the more modestly budgeted films of Don Siegel, Walter Hill, Joe Dante, Roger Corman, blaxploitation films, Japanese monster films from the 1950s onwards, and Hong Kong action films from the 1970s and ’80s. (13) As the vessel for a diverse variety of cultural texts, Bay’s work embodies the condition of textual production conceptualized by Roland Barthes in which the author functions not as the originator of a text, but rather as the compiler of ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’. (14) Understood in this way, Barthes proposes that ‘the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them’ (Ibid.). As personified by the engineer Cade Yeager in *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, who builds robots from reclaimed junk, the authorial process consists of recycling and rearrangement.

fig. 3: The author as remixer – ‘Bumblebee’ in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*

Michael Bay is the very epitome of the author as *montageur*, remixer or compositor, and thus his narrative avatar is the battle-damaged alien robot ‘Bumblebee’ from the *Transformers* films, which is initially unable to speak except by piecing together sentences and phrases from snippets of dialogue taken from films, TV programmes, radio programmes and songs (see fig. 3). This hulking embodiment of recombinant cultural splicing is an appropriate sign

for Michael Bay's authorial practice of fragmentation, appropriation and recontextualization. In this respect at least, Roger Ebert's dismissive contemporary review of *Bad Boys II*, which proposed 'there is not an original idea in it', is correct, but it is the shifting modulation, reconfiguration and transformation of familiar cultural material that makes the film arresting, in its dynamic fusion of, for example, elements of the cold war techno-thriller, 1970s TV cop show, 'buddy comedy' and melodrama with the style and imagery of a music promo video. (15)

The figure of the shape-shifting robot is a perfect metaphor for this process of cultural reprocessing, or at least the fantasy of creativity that underlies it. The motif of the transformation sequence offers the viewer a virtuoso demonstration of the marvellous complexity of contemporary digital animation, as mundane vehicles such as cars, trucks, helicopters and fighter jets, dismantle and reassemble themselves to assume the dynamically complex forms of giant robots while retaining visible elements of their original form such as tyres, windscreens, bonnets and body panels, radiator grills and exhaust pipes. With this motif the films also demonstrate repeatedly an underlying techno-creative principle in which cinematic technology is imagined fetishistically as endlessly reproductive, magically animated, and intrinsically fascinating. The 'Autobots' and 'Decepticons' symbolize the cinema as autopoietic system, a hermetic self-perpetuating mechanism that produces endless organic variations upon a thematic base of technological components.

In filtering, synthesizing and re-sequencing pre-existing transnational cultural material drawn from TV dramas, spot ads, music promos, films, animation, graphic novels, children's toys and video games, these films aspire not to aesthetic 'progress', radical formal novelty or the generation of previously unseen imagery but to the production of a sensorially intense, pleasurable stream of familiar sounds and images. They appear to have been designed as a series of *clichés*; functional shots and sequences stripped of all extraneous information and composed with the glossy beauty of an advert for luxury consumer goods (or, perhaps, women's underwear (16)) until rendered to a point of near-redundancy. However, to observe that they aspire towards the *cliché* or the archetype is not to dismiss them as aesthetically or conceptually impoverished, but to recognize that these are texts designed for pleasurable consumption in full acknowledgement of their status as mechanically and digitally reproduced objects. (17) They are a crystallization of mainstream culture, rather than an attempt at intervention, subversion, or even aesthetic and ideological transformation. (18)

The argument here is that there is a systematic style associated with the ‘author-function’, ‘Michael Bay’. (19) This is visible from as early on as his first music video, produced for former child-star Donny Osmond’s 1988 comeback single, ‘Soldier of Love’. Several of the characteristic elements of Bay’s style are already in place, including atmospheric backlighting scattered through dry ice, coloured light and a restricted colour palette, long-lens shots, freeze-frames, glamorous female models and, most notably given the device’s prominence in his feature films, a carousel-like camera that circles continually around the performers. It is a commonplace that the styles of US directors from the 1980s onwards have become increasingly televisual, influenced by the comparative speed¹ and discontinuity of music videos, adverts, magazine programmes, news broadcasts and serial dramas (and the convergence of film and television financing, production and distribution) but Michael Bay’s career trajectory traces this relationship exactly. (20)

From the ‘Sirkian system’ to the ‘Bayian system’

In examining the authorial continuities running through Michael Bay’s work this article is not concerned with elevating him to the status of an *auteur*. (21) Instead it aims to identify the systematic, repetitive structure of the films. For instance, just as film theorist Paul Willemen proposed that there is a ‘Sirkian system’ detectable in the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography of the melodramas and genre films the German director Douglas Sirk made for Universal Studios in the 1950s, what emerges in an analysis of Michael Bay’s films is a clearly recognisable ‘Bayian system’. (22) Parallels between the two film-makers are not immediately obvious, particularly given the critical esteem in which Sirk is now held and the very different institutional contexts and media environments in which they worked, but both directors have produced highly commercial genre films (specializing in different genres but both producing war films), working for major Hollywood studios with limited independence as a consequence, directing films that received scant critical recognition at the time of their release, and developing a highly stylized, non-naturalistic aesthetic. (23)

In Willemen’s reading, informed by biographical detail such as Sirk’s background in experimental European theatre and Sirk’s articulate retrospective commentary upon his own work, the ‘Sirkian system’ was the means by which his films articulated an ironic meta-commentary upon Hollywood cinema and an ideological critique of complacent post-war US society. (24) In their allusiveness, their stylistic excesses, their awareness of their own comic absurdity, and their preoccupation with the intersections of corporate, state and military

power, masculinity and technology, I would suggest that Michael Bay's films allow a similar reading. We can understand them as ambivalent reflections upon late 20th and early 21st-century American society.

Willemsen suggests that Sirk's films establish a contradictory register through a selection of formal devices so that their excessive stylisation has a distancing effect upon the spectator while at the same time the highly emotive narrative elicits a strongly affective response. This contradictory mode of address:

allows Sirk to thematise a great many contradictions inherent in the society in which he worked and the world he depicted. It equally gives us the means to read Sirk's own contradictory position within that society and vis-à-vis that world. (25)

Sirk's techniques included the framing and staging of shots to emphasize the emotional repression of characters (by placing them behind screens or windows, for example, or reflected in mirrors), the use of 'baroque colour schemes' (evident in costume, set decoration and coloured light), 'the deliberate use of symbols as emotional stimuli' (such as a broken Wedgwood teapot that functions as a metaphor for the protagonists' relationship in *All That Heaven Allows* [Sirk, 1955]), and 'the use of choreography as a direct expression of character' as is seen in the dance sequences of different films. (26) The effect of these devices is to produce a discernible disjunction between the reality of the narrative worlds depicted in the films, and the stylized representational architecture of the film. The film's reality-effect is subverted as generic and stylistic conventions are intensified to the point of irony. Through the apparently 'deliberate use of *cliché*', for example, Sirk's films invite viewers to understand them as satirical or parodic. Thus, while the films can be received as straightforward examples of film melodrama, to viewers who recognize or reflect upon their stylistic excesses they can also be read as ideological critique. (27)

The filmmakers may have understood their own work quite differently but, nevertheless, drawing a parallel between the two bodies of work allows us to identify a similarly systematic approach to the organization and presentation of cinematic material. Bay's cinema comprises a body of accessible, melodramatic mainstream work that is characterised by stylization, irony and intensification. As with Sirk's films, Bay's cinema invites us to consider the ideological register of his films and to ask what they might tell us about the excesses of early twenty-first century American cinema, and the globalized cultural and political environment in which it circulates and which it helps to shape.

The key features of the system underlying Bay's cinema are evident in an analysis of his fifth feature film, the sprawling, violent and broadly comic *Bad Boys II* (2003). As his first sequel, it is the film where his commercial aesthetic becomes fully visible. Costing around \$130m, the film tells the story of Mike Lowry (Will Smith) and Marcus Burnett (Martin Lawrence), two Miami-based African-American police detectives working for the Tactical Narcotics Team (TNT), who are trying to close down an Ecstasy racket involving a narcissistic Cuban drug-dealer, Johnny Tapia, who is shipping drugs into the city from Holland and distributing them with the help of a Russian night-club owner, Alexei (see fig. 4).

fig. 4: Bad boys: Detectives Marcus Burnett (Martin Lawrence) and Mike Lowry (Will Smith).

Co-written by Jerry Stahl and Ron Shelton, the film's narrative is complex and difficult to follow. There is little exposition, minor characters are introduced and discarded abruptly as the film progresses, the tone shifts abruptly between wise-cracking banter, solemn melodrama and frantic activity, and there are some perplexing lacunae giving the impression that the film has been edited down drastically from a substantially longer rough cut. When Howard Koch, the co-screenwriter of *Casablanca* expressed his worries about the incoherence of the film's screenplay to Michael Curtiz, the director reportedly reassured him, 'Don't worry what's logical. I make it go so fast no-one notices'. (28) Michael Bay might well have offered the same reassurance to Shelton and Stahl with regard to *Bad Boys II*. The pace of the film and the rhythmic frequency of dynamic passages of action ensure that the viewer is not given pause to reflect on the disjunctions.

fig. 5: 'Blue power, motherfuckers': Mike throws off his disguise during the raid on the Klan rally.

Bad Boys II opens dramatically with a spectacular night-raid on a Ku Klux Klan rally in the Florida swamps, with Mike and Marcus both disguised in Klan robes (see fig. 5). The plot is structured around a series of progressively more sensational action sequences that involve car chases, illegal wire-taps, stake-outs, raids, vehicle pile-ups, and gun battles as the narrative frame expands from a local drug problem to an international incident. These action sequences culminate with an illegal cross-border incursion into Cuba to rescue Marcus's sister, Syd, an

undercover DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) agent who has been taken hostage by the drug dealer, Tapia; Tapia is demanding the return of his \$100m that was seized by the police. This rescue mission, tacitly supported by the police chief, sees Mike, Marcus and their colleagues join forces with the anti-Communist paramilitary group Alpha 66, and results in ferocious battles with the Cuban military, the demolition of Tapia's mansion, and the destruction of a hill-side shanty town (that also happens to be the site of a cocaine factory). The adventure concludes with a Mexican stand-off in the minefield surrounding the Guantánamo Bay US naval base during which Marcus shoots Tapia in the head.

Sequel, Genre and the inflationary logic of excess

Six of the eleven films directed by Bay are situated in series, and the serial status of *Bad Boys II* is a sign of the commercial logic of repetition-with-difference underlying its production – the serial film or the sequel, the remake and the technologically enhanced ‘reboot’ comprise the commodity form of contemporary American cinema. (29) Repetition is a marker of the film's generic status, an episodic text suspended in a play of redundancy and novelty. *Bad Boys* (1995), which was Bay's first feature and made a star of TV actor and rapper, Will Smith, was successful enough to prompt the commissioning of a sequel (that is in some respects is a remake), and *Bad Boys II* follows the premise of the first closely, like a successive episode in a TV series; both films involve the comically destructive but ultimately successful pursuit of organised criminal gangs led by murderous foreigners. Its status as a direct sequel provides a pretext for the scant exposition, but *Bad Boys II* is a sequel in a broader sense, sitting within a continuum of action cinema that ensures its familiarity and intelligibility. In this respect, the sequel remains the principal commodity form of contemporary American cinema, and Bay's films epitomise this formal logic. (30)

The play of repetition and difference in the relationship between *Bad Boys* and *Bad Boys II* is structured by a generic logic of excess. Exploiting the success and brand recognition of the previous film, difference is generated through escalation and inflation so that the second film is an expanded, and far more sumptuous, reiteration of the first. Running half an hour longer, and costing almost seven times as much (which is borne out in the extended sequences of destruction), it also extends the action beyond Miami and overseas to Cuba (although the world beyond the borders of the US barely registers in Bay's films, except as a spectacularly and uniformly dangerous space). This inflation of the *mise-en-scène* extends even to Will Smith's older body, which is markedly bigger than in the first film, pumped-up and gym-

sculpted after playing the boxer Mohammed Ali in Michael Mann's film *Ali* (2001), as well as to his character's transition from a Porsche to a \$300,000 Ferrari. (31)

If the Bayesian system involves an economy of 'inflation' from film to film, it also involves an aesthetics of excess *within* each film. This aesthetic encompasses a stylistic system of overemphasis and amplification in which formal features are continually foregrounded. For example, a colour scheme dominated by saturated, non-naturalistic colours is a prominent feature of the costumes, props, sets, and lighting within *Bad Boys II*. In particular there is an emphasis upon various shades of blue, yellow and green, a visual signature of Michael Bay's films just as much as blue is in James Cameron's, or red and white in Stanley Kubrick's. Although sometimes motivated by naturalism - so that the sunflower-yellow light occasionally appears to be generated by the warm 'magic-hour' glow of the setting sun for instance - in general this distinctive colour scheme is maintained throughout, regardless of location and time of day. For instance, in a chase sequence in which the detectives take to the air to pursue criminals in speedboats, shots of the helicopters silhouetted against a setting sun are intercut with shots of the boats skimming across the water in bright mid-day sunlight (see figs. 6-9).

figs. 6-9: Four successive shots from the same chase sequence

The dominant emphasis in this aesthetic system is upon visually intense images and this overrides a concern with naturalism or the 'invisible style' that characterises classical cinema. In the context of the frenetic chase sequence this discontinuity registers not as a sequence of jarringly obvious continuity errors but instead as busy, dynamically varied visual texture that exploits the material properties of the film-making apparatus: optical effects of different lenses and filters, shifting colour bias from shot to shot, and the variable light-sensitivity of film stock. Bay makes it go so fast that no-one notices. Interiors and exteriors throughout the film are bathed in artificial blue, green and yellow light and certain objects, such as the bright yellow Humvee driven by Mike in the final car chase, stand out (see figs. 10-14). While the symbolic significance of this signature colour scheme varies across different narrative contexts, in this film about drugs, excessive consumption and death, it establishes a sickly,

hallucinatory tone. It gives the sense that everything is mildewed and rotten in the humid state of Florida.

figs. 10-14: vivid colour: (from top) Tapia's mansion; The chief's front garden; the Haitian gang's hideout; Spanish Palms mortuary; the Cuban countryside

Overt stylisation of the *mise-en-scène* is enhanced further through a highly dynamic shooting style in which camera mobility (often enhanced with computer animation) is foregrounded. Bay's films also combine varying shot types in a striking fashion, so that an action sequence typically includes high-angled and low-angled shots (including the signature shot in which an aircraft passes directly overhead in slow-motion), fluid crane shots and helicopter shots (see figs 15 & 16).

figs. 15, 16: signature shots: a low-angle, slow-motion shot of a helicopter passing overhead, and a traveling aerial shot of a harbour or coastline.

One of Bay's most distinctive devices is the 'spinaround shot', a circular camera movement that is emphatically visible when the detectives raid the hideout of a Haitian gang. (32) While Mike and Marcus are in one room and the gang members are in the next, both sides shooting and shouting through holes in the dividing wall and the connecting doorways, the camera tracks back and forth between the two rooms tracing five complete circles. (33) (see figs. 17-24). This is not presented as a single shot since it is interrupted with close-ups and medium shots of the actors yelling and firing, but nevertheless, and in spite of the furious action, the mobile point-of-view of the circling camera grabs our attention.

The spinaround shot has a variable function in *Bad Boys II*. At some points it highlights a particularly spectacular action sequence, heightening its sensory impact, while at others it marks a progression in the narrative; the point at which Marcus learns of his sister's kidnapping, is emphasised as particularly grave by a slow-motion 'spin-around' shot, for instance. However, while this shot produces a sense of narrative tension and disorientation, these moments also provide an opportunity for experimentation with camera movement. The actor is less the focus of these shots than the trajectories traced by the cameras, and the

fetishism of technology evident within Bay's films is doubled by the director's fascination with the technology of film-making. (34)

Insistent camera movement of Bay's films also functions to reinforce a non-classical or 'neo-classical' continuity from sequence to sequence. For Alain Badiou, a central feature of 'neo-classical' cinema is 'the mobility of the camera which steps over the notion of the shot by aiming to join together, in a single movement, visible configurations which are disparate, or classically non-unifiable'. (35) The spinaround shot epitomises this attempt to combine distinct, dislocated elements through relentless, hyperbolic movement.

figs 17-24: the 'spinaround shot': in these frames, the camera arcs around Lowry, passes through the doorway on his left, through the adjoining room, and back through the doorway into the first room before repeating the movement

Discussing his approach to making films, Bay has commented that, 'I love musicals. When you talk about filmmaking, that was the first type of movie to really exploit film as a medium. Musicals give the viewer privileged angles, they break the walls and do a lot of unorthodox things'. (36) Attention to the medium's formal possibilities is very clear in the sequence discussed above. It demonstrates that *Bad Boys II* addresses the spectator in a dual register as both dramatic narrative, and as an abstract, affective and disorienting play of colour, movement and sound. Just as the musical numbers in a Warner Brothers backstage musical from the 1930s provide the pretext for an elaborately choreographed and photographed cinematic passage that temporarily suspends plausible naturalism and continuity conventions, so Michael Bay approaches the narrative of this film as a series of opportunities for formal experimentation.

Breaking the walls: Discontinuity and disorientation

'He's got space dementia' – Col. William Sharp (William Fichtner) in *Armageddon* (Bay, 1998)

A common observation of Bay's films is that they are characterized by spatial discontinuity. The line from *Armageddon* where one character comments upon the delirium of his astronaut colleague as they are working frantically to destroy the asteroid that is heading for earth, captures the standard accusation nicely: Michael Bay has 'space dementia', his films marked by a nonchalant disregard for spatial cohesion. For example, Steven Shaviro cites Bay as an example of what he terms 'post-continuity' cinema, a mode of international film style that has remediated the formal conventions from other narrative media such as video games (within the context of a post-modern, 'post-literate' culture), thereby abandoning the rigid staging and editing conventions of classical cinema and degrading the meaningful expressive relationship between style and storytelling. (37) For Shaviro, Bay 'is the new D.W. Griffith (or the anti-Griffith), as he mixes and matches shots with no concern for traditional articulations of spatial and temporal continuity'. (38) In general, any discontinuities in Bay's films tend to be regarded as continuity errors or misjudgements rather than as examples of the way in which the dominant aesthetic is continually shifting (a shift that these films undoubtedly contribute to), or of a radical rethinking of conventional film form. Within the critical frames of academic film theory, classical continuity is often regarded as a singular ideal model, a norm, rather than just one possible convention among many others to guide the organization of audio-visual material. In this context, Bay's films are frequently regarded as incompetent transgressions of the boundary wall between spatial integrity and incoherence.

In fact, close attention to *Bad Boys II* reveals that it actually follows continuity editing principles quite carefully in terms of the spatial orientation of the visual point-of-view and the movement of objects in spaces. That said, there are several features that make the editing of Bay's films potentially confusing for the spectator accustomed to more classically structured films.

The first is the speed of cutting. The action sequences in particular are cut very fast with many shots lasting a fraction of a second. The effect is that the film moves on before we have had a chance to orient ourselves visually. David Bordwell suggests one reason for this historical acceleration of the pace of cutting and the concomitant reduction in shot-duration is the adoption of digital editing technology. This drastically reduces the labour traditionally involved in trimming shots on tape or film, encouraging film-makers to compress sequences to the point where they become difficult to 'read'. As Bordwell observes, 'After cutting the

car chase from *The Rock* on computer, Michael Bay saw it projected, decided that it went by too fast, and had to “de-cut” it’. (39) Along with the use of emphatic camera movements, the prominence of the cut is another example of the way that Bay’s films lay bare the technical conditions of the medium that structure the form of the film. The status of cinema *as* technology is continually reinforced.

A second potentially disorienting feature is the absence of establishing shots, which enhances a sense of perpetual motion rather than producing the illusion of spatial stability. This destabilizing effect is heightened by hand-held and unsteady camera movements, crash zooms and whip pans, canted framing, the frequent insertion of out-of-focus and motion-blurred images, as well as the use of jump cuts. The film is only intermittently concerned with the depiction of a coherent, unified space. Instead it builds up the impression of a highly textured space through a constellatory assemblage or montage of shots from multiple, shifting angles. Bay’s practice of improvising while shooting action sequences, often operating the camera himself, rather than sticking rigidly to continuity scripts, storyboards and animatics, perhaps frees the film further from spatial coherence, although he has suggested he always shoots with a clear idea of how the shots will be used in post-production, effectively cutting in-camera:

One of my knacks is shooting for the edit, basically editing things in my mind. On *Bad Boys* I was working with a crew I hadn’t worked with before and they probably thought I was crazy because I was putting the camera in weird places: ‘it’s not going to cut’, people said. But I’m just not traditional. I detail storyboards for action scenes but I also like to do a lot of improvising to get things that just magically happen. (40)

A third, less immediately obvious feature of the films that may exacerbate a sense of disorientation is the inter-relationship of sound and image. Bay’s career as a feature film director coincides with the introduction of digital surround-sound systems in film theatres and home entertainment systems and like all of Bay’s films *Bad Boys II* has a digital surround soundtrack. As Mark Kerins observes in his study of contemporary film sound, the conventional audio-visual aesthetic that has developed since the adoption of Dolby digital surround sound as a standard reproduction platform in the 1990s has involved a reconfiguration of the traditional relation between film sound and image. *Bad Boys II* is mixed for high-volume playback and makes full use of the dynamic range of the digital soundtrack with complex, discrete layers of sound as well as almost physical volume and

visceral bass. In itself, this can have a jarringly spectacular effect, but Kerins argues that one of the key consequences of digital surround sound design is that the dominant classical principle of a continuous, unified sound field has been replaced by that of a dynamic ‘ultrafield’. (41) Conventional mono and stereo soundtracks were mixed at a steady volume so that while a camera might be wheeling around a set and the film cuts between long shots and close-ups, the soundtrack refrains from reproducing this scaling (by abruptly getting louder and then quiet to match the camera’s proximity to the action). Traditional film sound thereby stresses spatial continuity, but with multi-channel surround systems the opportunity to create a highly convincing illusion of spatial location by surrounding the viewer with precisely placed sounds at varying volume has led to a new audio-visual aesthetic in which changing sound quality from one shot to the next *does* reproduce what is taking place on the screen.

With a Dolby digital surround soundtrack, each time there is a cut to a new camera angle, the soundtrack will also typically cut to a corresponding point of audition:

the ultrafield-based soundtrack changes its orientation every time the image track cuts, constantly reorienting itself to viewpoint implied by the onscreen image. This creates the impression *not* of viewing the action from a distance, but rather of being *in the middle of the action* and looking around quickly’. (42)

Whereas the soundtrack of a classical film produces the impression that the spectator is observing the action from a fixed distance like a member of the audience in a theatre, surround sound creates the impression of immersion in the on-screen space. In turn, Kerins proposes that this developing convention has allowed film-makers to cut differently and to pay less attention to the ‘180-degree rule’ in staging and shooting scenes, since the surround soundtrack has taken over the burden of creating a convincing illusion of three-dimensional space from the image.

The sound design in the raid on the Haitian gang-house discussed above is typical. An electronic music track that consists of tense percussive rhythms, bass tones, and discordant sounds creates an ambient ‘bed’. This is distributed across all of the speakers, immersing the spectator/auditor in the sound-field and at one point the synthesized percussion actually moves around the surround speakers in a circular motion in an aural echo of the arcing camera. As the camera travels between the two rooms, the actors’ voices get louder and quieter and move from right to left, and there is a deep, synthetic ‘whoosh’ as the camera

swings past items of furniture and passes through the doors. During the frenzied gun battle we hear bullets whizzing past our heads towards and away from the screen and ricocheting around the room. We can hear gunfire and the sound of bullets splintering furniture, smashing glass and thudding into plaster-work in all directions, while the delicate sound of spent bullet casings and magazines dropping to the floor appears to come from all around us.

Typically the audio-visual surround-sound aesthetic in contemporary cinema is oriented towards immersion at the expense of spatial continuity, but for Kerins, ‘Ultimately, the point is not that in an ultrafield-equipped movie the visuals lose the *capability* to convey spatial information, but rather that the soundtrack frees them of the *responsibility* to do so’. (43) The function and significance of the film image is altered by the increasing prominence of film sound. In this respect, Bay’s films make the shifting spectrum of formal and technical possibilities offered by digital cinema visible and audible. Steven Shaviro cites a review of *Armageddon* that refers disapprovingly to Bay’s ‘anarchic, irresponsible vision’, but what that author is actually describing is the systematic substitution of new formal hierarchies for the audio-visual cinematic conventions that were standardised in the US and Europe in the 1930s and ’40s. (44) With flurries of hyperkinetic editing, ‘unchained’ cameras and dense, dynamically immersive sound-fields, Bay’s films demonstrate what digital cinema looks *and* sounds like.

Narrative excesses

In this article I’ve examined several ‘excessive’ formal visual and auditory features of *Bad Boys II*, elements of the film that detract from or interfere with the spectator’s absorption in the unfolding narrative. The next section will explore the ways in which this excessive stylistic aesthetic is paired with an excessive narrative economy structured by the redundancies and commercial logic of the serial film. Far from being gratuitous or superficial, however, this formal system is also the means by which the film explores the themes of excessive consumption.

The complex narrative weaves together two sub-plots, the police investigation into Ecstasy-dealing in Miami, and a DEA investigation into drugs and organised crime. These are linked through Mike’s affair with Marcus’ sister, Syd, who leads the DEA investigation. The narrative is interleaved with spectacular action sequences and, to some extent, the framing

narrative functions primarily as the pretext for these sequences. Kinetic passages of action are extended well beyond any story-telling necessity and in this respect the story structure resembles that of a slapstick comedy. Indeed, the tone of the film shifts uneasily between surprisingly nasty violence, thrilling action and tasteless farce - as in the car-chase where the detectives drive over corpses spilling from a mortuary truck, or the scene in the morgue where Marcus hides on a stretcher pressed against the naked body of a woman.

As Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins observe of Buster Keaton's films, they have a vaudeville-derived narrative structure that resembles an accordion whose bellows can be compressed or extended to insert additional gags without altering the structural integrity of the narrative, since it is not ordered by tight causality:

The opening and conclusion follow a familiar structure of action and reaction or prank and punishment, but the core of the narrative remains open to easy expansion or condensation, depending on the needs of the particular production. Whole units could be added or subtracted with no noticeable effect on continuity'. (45)

Bad Boys II duplicates this structure (as well as the modular structure of the film musical that transitions more or less seamlessly between stylistically distinct musical numbers and more naturalistic dialogue scenes). Causal progression is interrupted by progressive expansion, so that each action sequence is longer and more spectacular than the previous one. There is a narrative logic of accumulation from sequence to sequence across the whole film as they become progressively longer and more destructive, culminating with the raid on Tapia's Cuban mansion, the chase to the naval base and the final stand-off, a sequence that lasts around 18 minutes. However this inflationary logic also operates *within* each individual sequence as the action rapidly escalates - like the rockslide in Buster Keaton's *Seven Chances* (1925) - as an initially minor action or decision triggers a cascade of uncontrollable violence. In each sequence the specific action is largely narratively redundant - and narrative redundancy is an intrinsic property of the chase sequence, which is an infinitely flexible means of deferring narrative resolution - since the action sequences do little to move the story along. If anything, they are generally a consequence of the protagonists' loss of control of the situation. As a result, a key source of comedy is the bewilderment and apoplectic fury of their boss at the destruction wrought by Marcus and Mike in the course of their investigation.

The formal system described above incorporates a range of examples of textual 'excess' in relation to classical narrative cinema conventions - they address a divided or distracted

spectator who is absorbed in the unfolding of the complex narrative, while also taking pleasure in the film's baroquely exuberant style. Despite Bay's insistence above that he is not 'traditional', in its systematic deployment of excess, *Bad Boys II* is concerned not with a formally and politically radical counter-aesthetics, but rather an amplified aesthetic, a stylised, over-emphatic reworking of the dominant aesthetic conventions of US popular cinema that also draws on the formal devices of musicals, silent comedies, Hong Kong action films and other 'non-classical' traditions.

This double register, or textual excess, is situated within the context of a generic logic of excess and escalation – the commercial logic of product differentiation in which each successive film is bigger and better than the last. What is particularly clear with *Bad Boys II* is that formal excess is not a purely gratuitous stylistic display, but also articulates a thematic preoccupation with excess. The War on Terror, border security, immigration and surveillance are significant themes here. This is established by the opening sequence in which the US coastguard are mobilised when an AWACS aircraft spots a speedboat that is heading out to the Gulf of Mexico to collect the drugs delivered by a tanker from Holland. In this scene, which resembles the prelude to a cold war espionage thriller, the US is presented as a highly securitized state poised at hair-trigger alertness, deploying advanced and costly surveillance technologies to protect its militarized borders. In the following scene, a TNT policeman explains in a briefing that, 'since 9/11 we've gone high-tech over the water', and so the paranoid state of exception of the War on Terror is presented as the normalised political context within this crime story. Anxieties about terrorist attacks and infiltrations extend to smuggling and the international drug trade, and the global War on Terror is conflated with the US war on drugs, describing a martial state in a permanent state of readiness for disproportionate military response.

At stake in this investigation into drugs, then, is a concern not so much with the drugs themselves – a contraband MacGuffin - as with the transgression of national financial borders since, on the one hand, Ecstasy is being shipped in illegally from Holland while, on the other, Tapia's profits are being transferred illegally to Cuba. Anxieties about border-crossing are personified by the three immigrant groups tackled by the cops in the course of the film, the Cubans headed by Tapia, the Russians led by Alexei, and, to a lesser extent, the Haitians.

In one respect, *Bad Boys* and its sequel are exceptional among Hollywood action films in placing black actors in the central roles. In this context, the scene in which Mike and Marcus

lead a night-raid on a Ku Klux Klan meeting, might also be read as a boisterous metaphorical assault upon the historical elevation of *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) as a foundational text in the development and formal and ideological stabilisation of the classical America cinema (supporting Shaviro's tentative characterisation of Bay as the anti-D.W. Griffith). However, while this might appear to counter the racist characterisation encountered in so many films and TV dramas, this is a film shot through with ideological contradiction, and racism returns as xenophobic anxiety directed towards immigrants. Tapia's disintegrating Miami home is over-run with frantically reproducing rats, a symbolism that could scarcely be more explicit in its articulation of North American anxieties about unregulated immigration, especially from the South. Moreover, a running gag involves Marcus and Mike needling their Latino colleagues, Reyes and Vargas with crude and abruptly aggressive jibes. 'Isn't it low tide?', Marcus asks them at one point. 'Don't you have some relatives to pick up?' The Haitian gang are also ethnic caricatures, summoned for a heist by a figure blowing an antelope horn, with a loa shrine the centrepiece of their gang house.

However, anxieties about race and immigration are secondary to the film's central theme of excessive, pleasurable consumption - appetite and gratification. The drug being traded is a particularly powerful form of MDMA but, beyond the detail of an overdosing clubber, the film displays little interest in the physiological, psychological or social effects of drug-use. The problem with this 'souped-up X', the police captain explains, is that it is often cut with poisonous chemicals. In other words, the drug problem is a managerial problem, a matter of financial and administrative regulation. Indeed, by far the funniest sequence in the film comes when Marcus accidentally swallows a couple of Ecstasy pills while he and Mike search a mortuary, prompting a comic sequence in which Mike tries to divert the captain's attention from Marcus' increasingly intoxicated behaviour.

fig. 25: 'Ecstasy Lab' – the first shot of the film

Whereas the first film was concerned with heroin, the focus of a rather less glamorous sub-culture, Ecstasy has more anodyne associations (at least in its popular representation) with mainstream leisure activities. The film opens with a richly coloured montage sequence of an Amsterdam drug factory showing the industrialized manufacture, packaging and transportation of mountains of the Ecstasy pills that are being shipped to Florida. The first shot in the film (after the production companies' logos) bears the caption, 'Ecstasy Lab',

which could be a name for the modern film studio, an experimental workshop dedicated to the development, manufacture and distribution of sensorially stimulating and affecting media (see fig. 25). Sensation, disorienting pleasure or ecstasy is the addictive commodity mainstream cinema *deals* in across an international marketplace, and so contemporary Hollywood is no longer the dream factory (or ‘dream-works’), a designation that implies deferment rather than immediate gratification. *Bad Boys II* is thus a source of the ‘dangerous’, titillating, distracting and intoxicating pleasures of contemporary cinema, and, among its other registers, is also an allegorical representation of the system itself. The contemporary (American) film industry *is* the ecstasy industry, organised around the international trade of an addictive product that circulates through both legal and, increasingly, ‘illegal’ and unregulated circuits.

Narratives of waste, consumption and pleasure

Finally, one of the key sources of pleasure for the viewer in this film is witnessing the consumption of resources. One reviewer commented, upon its release, that *Bad Boys II* was ‘the cinematic equivalent of toxic waste’, and while this response is intended as exasperated commentary upon the film’s lack of worth, it is certainly true that the film glories in waste and the elaborate spectacle of destruction. (46) The production value of \$130m is realized in the laboriously staged and extremely costly sequences of bodies, vehicles and buildings being destroyed and culminates in the protracted obliteration of the drug lord Tapia’s vast mansion, the demolition of a shanty town and the violent deaths of dozens of minor characters. While as a medium cinema lends itself to the realistic depiction of destruction on a vast scale, what is significant about *Bad Boys II* is the integration of form and thematic content that invites us to understand the film as a case study in mainstream cinema’s location within a contemporary consumer culture that is characterised by *over*-consumption.

The film foregrounds the multiple senses of the term ‘consumption’ in its references to eating and digestion (in the narrative about drug-use), to purchasing and acquisition (in its promotional aesthetic and its *mise-en-scène* of lavish homes, vehicles and luxury consumer goods), and finally to the destruction, waste or expenditure of resources throughout. In its orientation around the Ecstasy industry, this is a film thematically preoccupied with over-consumption and the impossibility of regulating or restricting consumption in the context of neo-liberal capitalism’s moral opposition to legal regulation and restricted expenditure. As well as offering an account of over-consumption, then, this phenomenally expensive

entertainment also *constitutes* over-consumption in the most visible way and so invites us to understand contemporary spectacle cinema as a cultural practice of excessive consumption, expenditure or waste.

One way of conceptualising cinema as consumption in these terms is offered by Jean-Francois Lyotard in 'Acinema', an influential short essay from 1973. Lyotard conjectures a non-narrative avant-garde cinema comprising fleeting intensities, movements, and continual play, and constituted by films that are 'fortuitous, dirty, confused, unsteady, unclear, poorly framed, overexposed'. (47) The spectatorial pleasures offered by such films amount to a simple aesthetic delight in destruction and are derived directly from the spectacle of wasted resources. Lyotard draws a familiar distinction between a counter-cinema that resists categorisation or co-opting, and mainstream commercial cinema that belongs to the productive circuits of capitalism. The aesthetic of mainstream cinema, Lyotard suggests, is determined principally by its commercial function so that there are no formal elements of the film that do not contribute to the development of a satisfying story, no movements that are wasted. 'The only genuine movement with which cinema is written', Lyotard concludes, 'is that of value'. (48) By contrast, he suggests, a non-mainstream, 'acinematic' aesthetic might be organised around a principle of 'sterile motion' or waste, explaining the concept with an example that serves as a metaphor for film-viewing and film production.

A match once struck is consumed. If you use the match to light the gas that heats the water for the coffee which keeps you alert on your way to work, the consumption is not sterile, for it is a movement belonging to the circuit of capital: merchandise-match → merchandise-labour → power → money-wages → merchandise-match. But when a child strikes the match-head *to see* what happens – just for the fun of it – he enjoys the movement itself, the changing colours, the light flashing at the height of the blaze, the death of the tiny piece of wood, the hissing of the tiny flame. He enjoys these sterile differences leading nowhere, these uncompensated losses; what the physicist calls the dissipation of energy. (49)

Lyotard associates 'sterile differences' or 'uncompensated losses' with the commercially resistant aesthetic strategies of avant-garde film, whose formal configuration renders it unpopular and unprofitable by contrast with the carefully judged formal organisation of a mainstream film that is designed to reach as large an audience as possible. However, as I have argued elsewhere, Lyotard's concept of spectatorial pleasure describes very well the

attraction of those aspects of big-budget cinema that conventional film theory sometimes struggles to account for due to its privileging of classical narrative form as a norm. (50) The aesthetic spectacle of non-productive expenditure and ‘sterile motion’ that Lyotard identifies with experimental cinema, is also epitomized by the films of Michael Bay in their foregrounding of ‘excess’. For all their apparent incoherence, Bay’s films do not constitute an avant-garde intervention, although they certainly antagonize theorists concerned with tracing clear boundaries between culturally valuable and culturally worthless material. Nevertheless, to understand the appeal of these extraordinarily successful films, it is necessary to employ a critical frame that is not dogmatically oriented around narrative continuity, formal unity and internal coherence and instead acknowledges the way that these films are dynamic components of a heterogeneous popular cultural field that incorporates elements of trash, kitsch, and elite culture indiscriminately.

The Bayesian system – an aesthetic of excess.

Fig 26: The Bayesian system

Michael Bay’s films take certain formal conventions of mainstream narrative cinema and push them to a high degree of stylization and intensity. It is as if every moment, every shot in *Bad Boys II* is designed to produce an intense, disconnected, ecstatic affect. While it might be difficult to read the film as satire or explicit critique of contemporary American culture, nevertheless it is shot through with irony. The film’s ironic tenor, familiar from TV advertising, is especially evident in the way in which self-aware characters frequently remark upon the preposterousness or excesses of the films they appear in, as if addressing the audience directly, reminding them that these characters exist in a stylised cinematic reality structured by the narrative rules of generic verisimilitude. During a car chase when Mike is racing to beat a speeding train to a level-crossing, a panicked Marcus yells, ‘I seen this is in a movie once – they didn’t make it!’, and during the ensuing shoot-out he screams at his partner, ‘Are you trying to break the record for gunfights in a week?’ The device recurs across Bay’s work so that in *Transformers* (Bay, 2007) a soldier observes of an alien attack that, ‘There’s no such thing as invisible force-fields except in, like, comic-book stuff, right?’, while in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (Bay, 2011), the protagonist’s father observes of an earlier declaration of love to his wife, ‘Does that suck or what? It’s like a bad sci-fi film.’ This delirious confusion of reality with the fictional diegesis of cinema finds its clearest expression in the opening and closing scenes of *Bad Boys II* in which the protagonists

announce their entrance and exit by singing the theme tune from the previous film. Again, the film disregards naturalism for the principles of the film musical.

To conclude, the value of studying Bay's films is that they offer us a magnifying lens through which to scrutinize contemporary transnational Hollywood cinema and contemporary US culture. If the commercial aesthetic of classical Hollywood cinema expressed principles of industrial efficiency and formal unity, the commercial aesthetic of excess evident in Michael Bay's films is the expression of the principles of unregulated consumption, surplus expenditure, and formal heterogeneity. With Michael Bay we move from a restricted to an unrestricted aesthetic economy, from industrial to globalized capitalism. Films like *Bad Boys II* offer us a vision of globalised consumer capitalism as a field of carnivalesque, masculine, corporate-dominated, technologically fetishistic violence, articulated in the lurid, visually dense promotional aesthetic of mainstream cinema.

Endnotes

1. Sconce 2002: 351
2. *Bad Boys II* was shot on 'Super 35' 35mm film, and then digitized for editing and finishing. 35mm prints were then struck for cinema exhibition, so the film sits at the threshold of the move from analogue to digital cinema.
3. Badiou 2013: 136
4. NB, Bay began his career with Fincher as a co-founder of production company Propaganda Films
5. See Hall 1998, for a problematization of the concept of 'popular' culture.
6. See Thompson 1999, for a classic conceptualization of cinematic excess.
7. Cubitt 2004
8. Badiou 181
9. Bordwell 2000: 247
10. See Shaviro 2011 for a reflection upon the 'post-cinematic' status of contemporary cinema.
11. Ndaliansis 2004: 5
12. Five of his films have been produced by Jerry Bruckheimer (two of these by the partnership of Bruckheimer and Don Simpson, the possible originator of 'high concept' cinema), and so it is at least as plausible to locate the *fons et origo* of certain formal and thematic aspects of Bay's feature films with regular producer Bruckheimer as with Bay himself. Indeed, in a contemporary review of *Bad Boys*, Nick James observed that 'the promotional credits sheet [...] contains no reference to the director at all. He is credited on the film print itself, fleetingly, but even there the actual authorship [...] is clearly denied him. For this is a Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer film' (James 2000: 231).
13. The most direct acknowledgement of Bay's debt to Hong Kong action cinema – beyond the emulation of its non-classical episodic narrative model of accumulating

spectacle - is the reproduction in the final scenes of *Bad Boys II* of the car chase through a hillside shantytown in Jackie Chan's *Police Story* (1985). However, the influence extends to the choreography of fight sequences and editing patterns. See for example Adrian Martin's analysis of the influence of 'disintegrative montage' on Hollywood cinema, which 'can create some of the most glorious, sublimely euphoric moments of cinema' (Martin 2005: 182)

14. Barthes 1977: 146
15. Ebert 2003
16. For viewers in the US, TV spot ads directed by Bay to promote a brand of women's underwear are probably some of his most widely viewed work.
17. Indeed, as Umberto Eco notes in his analysis of *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), although 'the authors mixed in a little of everything, and everything they chose came from a repertoire of the tried and true', the effect of this wholesale use of conventional devices is profoundly affecting: 'When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us' (Eco, 1994: 264).
18. Although, it is notable that much of the negative critical commentary on Bay's films displays an anxiety about their contaminating, transformative effect on audiences and film conventions.
19. See Foucault 1980, for the conceptualization of the 'author-function'.
20. Although, as Barry Salt observes, 'the move towards faster and faster cutting in American cinema over the last 50 years has not been led by American television practice' but by film (Salt 2004: 69). Moreover, he proposes, comparative analysis indicates that 'film cutting rates have always been faster than those in television' (Ibid.).
21. One of the reductive features of *auteur* analysis is that it can overlook the collective labour involved in film production on any scale, and that is especially acute with regard to special effects films on the scale of Bay's. In so far as Bay he might be considered to be an *auteur*, this represents the subsumption of the *auteur* to the status of brand that is crucial to financing and promotion.
22. Willemen 1972
23. For example, Bay was apparently hired at the instigation of executive producer Steven Spielberg to direct *Transformers*, despite his objection that it would just be 'a stupid toy movie' (Chris Hewitt (August 2007). "Rise of the Machines". *Empire*. pp. 95–100). Like an *auteur* within the Hollywood studio system of the 1930s and '40s, Bay worked a director for hire on this film.
24. See Halliday 1997, a fascinating edited collection of interviews with Sirk.
25. Willemen 1972: 131
26. Ibid: 65
27. Ibid: 66. And certainly, it seems that Sirk himself assumed that much of the domestic audience for these films would be oblivious or resistant to the double register that Willemen identifies in the films. As he observed archly: 'Irony doesn't go down well with the American public. This is not meant as a reproach, but merely that in general this public is too simple and too naive — in the best sense of these terms — to be susceptible to irony. It requires clearly delineated positions, for and against' (Willemen 1971: 64).
28. Maltby 1996: 434
29. See Tryon 2013
30. Indeed, Jerry Bruckheimer has recently indicated that *Bad Boys III* is in development (See Hooton 2014).

31. Bay's film, *Pain and Gain* makes the ideological symbolism of the pumped-up body explicit. The protagonist Daniel Lugo explains in the introduction that it is 'unpatriotic' not to build one's body.
32. Visual Effects Supervisor, Rob Legato in 'Special Effects' featurette on 2004 UK 2-disc DVD. Legato explains the shot was a solution to the problem of how to show the actors on opposite sides of the same wall: 'What's the coolest way of showing them both, essentially simultaneously, without just resorting to a cut?'
33. NB: the shot is finessed with CG animation that allows the camera to pass impossibly through various obstacles such as a bedstead, an electric fan and the two doors, emphasizing its disorienting effect.
34. Among various points of comparison across the history of experimental camera mobility, such as F.W. Murnau's 'unchained camera technique', Busby Berkeley's dancing camera or Dziga Vertov's hyperkinetic '*kino-glaz*' documentary aesthetic, the spinaround shot recalls nothing so much as those structural/materialist films that make a central feature of sustained, mechanical, circular camera movement, such as Tony Hill's *Downside Up* (1984), Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971), or the opening shot of Straub and Huillet's, *Trop Tôt, Trop Tard* (1981). Whether or not Bay knows these avant-garde films (and as a former undergraduate student in film and literature he may well do), his films demonstrate that a preoccupation with the kinetically affective potential of cinematic technology is also very much at the historical centre of mainstream entertainment cinema.
35. Badiou 2013: 149
36. Cotta Vaz 1998: 38
37. Shaviro 2012
38. Shaviro 2009: 119. NB, This undecidability is a significant trope in writing on Bay; for example, a review of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* concludes, 'Bay is a dinosaur-like throwback to the 80s, trying to save a post-millennial cinema that he no longer understands – or perhaps understands too well – with his outsized spectacle, lumbering effects and small-brained narrative' (Bitel 2014: 105).
39. Bordwell 2002: 23
40. Cotta Vaz 1998: 38
41. see Kerins 2011
42. Kerins 2011: 107
43. Ibid: 101
44. Shaviro 2012
45. Karnick and Jenkins 1997: 65-6
46. Travers 2003
47. Lyotard 1989: 169
48. ibid 170
49. ibid: 170-1
50. See Bennett 2007 for an extended discussion of the aesthetic of non-productive expenditure or consumption in blockbuster films.

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