Immersed in Media

Telepresence in Everyday Life

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2010

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON
Chapter 2

Film
The Original Immersive Medium

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Introduction

It is already possible by ingenious optical contrivances to throw stereoscopic photographs of people on screens in full view of an audience. Add the talking phonograph to counterfeit their voices, and it would be difficult to carry the illusion of real presence much further. (The Talking Phonograph, 1877, p. 385)

From the opening titles I was mesmerized. The bright blasts of deliriously vibrant color, the gunshots, the savage intensity of the music, the burning sun, the overt sexuality ... the hallucinatory quality of the imagery has never weakened for me over the years. (Scorsese & Wilson, 1997, p. 14)

These quotes, separated as they are by more than a century—the century of cinema, as it turns out—denote the centrality of the phenomenon of presence to the evolution of the moving image through its entire history. The prescience of the first, by a Scientific American writer, was not unique at that time, as documented by additional published reports of a world-wide fascination with presence-inducing new media in the late 19th century. And the visceral, unbidden response noted by contemporary film director Martin Scorsese in the second quote clearly refers to the vivid experience of immersive presence in a fictional and unlikely world-on-film.

The two quotes bookend a stable trajectory of the pursuit of presence in film since its inception. Because of its photographic, time-based representation, cinema was the original medium of presence. The history of film as a medium is one of striving for an ever-greater level of presence through technological innovation, changes in aesthetic form, and developments in narrative structures and performance styles. That the filmic experience is based in a quest for presence has been acknowledged by film scholars, filmmakers, critics, and audiences for over 100 years. This
chapter will outline that history, after an initial consideration of how the construct of presence may best be applied to film.

The basic definition of presence as the perceptual illusion of nonmediation (Lombard & Ditton, 1997) when applied to film begs the question—mediation between a receiver and what? There are several viable answers as to what the “presence referent” might be: (a) the “real”; (b) a new filmic reality, i.e., the diegesis; and (c) an alternative form of representation of the “real,” one that may acknowledge the reality of spectatorship.

The first option fits most clearly the standard approaches to presence, and is most readily applicable to the viewing of documentaries and other reality-based film forms. The second option reminds us that the typical film experience is “transportation into a narrative world” (Green, 2004), a diegetic environment constructed by filmmakers. “When a movie is working, the viewer forgets everything else and becomes totally absorbed: there is now only the world of the movie” (McGinn, 2005, p. 139). This world of the movie, this diegesis, may be nearly, but not quite, representative of a physical reality, as in Alfred Hitchcock’s mild distortion of San Francisco geography in Vertigo (1959; Kraft & Leventhal, 2002). Or, the diegesis may be highly and often purposefully “unreal” (Armour, 2009) or dreamlike (McGinn, 2005). The diegesis may even be seen as emulating the interior landscape of the mind itself. Ultimately, as psychologist and early film scholar Hugo Munsterberg (1916) noted, film is a medium of the mind, not of the world.

The third option allows for the possibility that film viewers may be transported to another, mid-level reality, that of the spectator in a theater or other presentation venue (e.g., seated before a theater’s proscenium, viewing still photography in a gallery; Turvey, 2004). We might term this “theatrical presence.” Theatrical presence acknowledges and reinforces the status of the audience member as spectator. It is this type of presence that is sought by television producers adding a laugh track to a sitcom in the hopes of emulating the experience of co-viewing with a live audience (Butcher & Whissell, 1984; Lieberman, Neuendorf, Denny, Skalski, & Wang, in press; Neuendorf with Fennel, 1988), or by movie director Robert Rodriguez adding an “audience reaction [audio] track” to the DVD releases of his films (e.g., Sin City, 2005; Gilchrist, 2005). Theatrical presence might also be stimulated by techniques of reflexivity (Feuer, 1993; Stam, 1992), as when performers break the “fourth wall” in direct address to the audience. Woody Allen’s monologues to the audience in Annie Hall (1977) may remind the viewer that they are a film audience member, at this point joined by the filmmaker in a limbo territory between fiction and reality, perhaps engaged in a type of social presence with Allen. Another example is direct address by commentators on a DVD, in which spectators may join filmmakers in co-viewing the film.
Of the various types of presence studied to date by presence scholars, two seem particularly relevant to the film experience: Spatial presence or telepresence, and social presence or copresence (Zhao, 2003b). Both have been referenced as the principal types of presence by film scholars, filmmakers, and other commentators over the last several decades (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003). Telepresence was the avowed goal of many early film innovators; social presence has been a companion goal in many key cases. Both types will be referred to in sections below. A third type of presence, that of “self” presence (Lee, 2004), may come into play with regard to “theatrical presence.” In those situations in which the viewer’s own status as observer is clarified and reinforced by the film content, the viewer may gain an enhanced ability to “insert” him/herself into the mid-level reality (i.e., the place between diegesis and “reality”).

As we shall see, film scholars, practitioners, and audiences have demonstrated a clear understanding of the role of presence in film’s worldwide success as a medium. Presence scholars have been less likely to examine the case of film. In a rare application of the theoretic notions of presence to the film experience, Marsh (2003) builds on Boorstin’s three ways of watching film and applies them to early film examples. First, the “voyeuristic” viewing experience entails the sense of space/place engendered by the very early “actuality” travel films by the Lumiere brothers, seemingly a very basic type of spatial presence. Second, “visceral” viewing is that which seeks a strong sensation of the spectacle, and may be exemplified by audience thrill reactions to early films identified by Gunning (1999) as the “cinema of attractions.” This is foremost a seeking and finding of a high degree of telepresence. Third, “vicarious” viewing is motivated by a need to experience something through one or more characters, including an emotional empathy connection. This seems to correspond most closely to social presence; even the early narrative films of Edwin S. Porter and Cecil Hepworth would seem to appeal to this type of experience.

Ijsselsteijn (2003) identifies film as a vital component in media history that can give us an understanding of the role of presence in media evolution. He pinpoints French film scholar André Bazin as the harbinger, the first to draw attention to film inventors’ goal of reproducing reality with “absolute accuracy and fidelity” (p. 19). Further, he documents hardware innovations of the pre-cinema and early cinema eras (e.g., magic lanterns, persistence of vision toys, the Lumierés’ Cinematographe) and of the critical period of the 1950s (e.g., 3-D, Cinerama, Smell-O-Vision) that were clear appeals to the overt manifestation of presence.

Steuer (1995) has included film in his consideration of technological variables that influence presence (particularly, telepresence). He identifies the two independent dimensions of vividness and interactivity. While recent developments in the common mode of viewing films might bring a
modicum of interactivity to the process—e.g., DVD playback with chapter stops—the main forte of film resides in its vividness. Steuer defines vividness as the representational richness of a mediated environment as defined by its formal features, the way in which information is presented to the senses (p. 11). It is this element of representational richness that has been the goal of film, and of the modes of representation that immediately preceded film.

The Broad Recognition of Film as the Original Immersive Medium

The entire history of Western art may be seen as bound up with a fundamental pursuit of presence. Painting (or drawing) and sculpture can be seen as the twin bases of visual representation, both predicated on a desire to retain traces of past events or people through their depiction in a plastic form less vulnerable to the ravages of time or fading memory. The historical development of these art forms has exhibited movement toward greater accuracy—note the physiological detail of Greek and Roman sculpture, and the Renaissance innovation of perspective.

With the development of photography in the late 1830s, representation again took a decisive step towards greater realism. What had always been, even in the most photorealistc paintings, an interpretation of the subject now became a literal reflection of the subject itself, the iconicity of the image enhanced by the directness of the process, by its mechanics to be sure, but even more so by the objectivity of the representation. The photographic image still lacked the dimension of time to truly replicate the dynamics of lived experience that would be necessary for full telepresence.

Before the emergence of cinema, the goal of a “presence effect” was the domain of toys and multi-media spectacles. The Thaumatrope, Phenakistoscope, and Zoetrope were among the best known of many such amusements that synthesized movement based on persistence of vision (or the phi-phenomenon) through which the mind sees a series of still images shown in rapid procession as smooth motion.

At the same time, immersive spectacles were popular. Magic lantern shows, which used light-projected painted images that could be dissolved into the barest simulation of motion accompanied by music, narration, and often sound effects and pyrotechnics, had been in existence since the late 17th century, but only during the 19th century did they develop into a significant entertainment form. The magic lantern show, along with other multi-media spectacles such as the cyclorama (an enormous, scrolling, narrative painting accompanied by narration, music, and effects) and Wagnerian opera, attempted to render spectators so senso-
rily stimulated that they would lose consciousness of their surroundings and be absorbed into the performance.

Ironically, the origins of movies are interwoven with the efforts of chronophotographers to stop motion rather than recreate it. Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne Jules Marey were two of the main proponents of the study of live motion via the high-speed exposure, photographic capture of the activities of animals and humans. The intent was, in essence, counter-presence—the notion was to slice cross-sections of time, with high awareness of the mediated nature of the process. Other scientists and businessmen capitalized on the series photographs of running horses and flying birds as published by Muybridge in the 1870s (1955, 1957), recreating motion by exhibiting the images in rapid succession (Skalski, Neuendorf, Lieberman, & Denny, 2008). It was these visionaries—Edison in America, and LePrince, Friese-Greene, the Lumieres in Europe, and others—who saw the potential of recreated motion to attract audiences to an experience of physical immersion, and, just a bit later, to a social connection of audience and performer.

In 1895 the moment finally arrived for full telepresence, as the Lumiere brothers projected several short films in the Salon Indien of the Grand Cafe in Paris, among them *Train Arriving at La Ciotat* (1895), which might be seen metaphorically as the vehicle that carried aboard it the future of representation. Though reports of audience members running from their seats in fear, believing that the train was truly headed for them, are almost certainly apocryphal (Loiperdinger, 2004), reaction to the film is well-documented.

Famed writer Maxim Gorky, viewing an early Lumiere presentation, observed, “Carriages coming from somewhere in the perspective of the picture are moving straight at you, into the darkness in which you sit” (1960, p. 407). Film pioneer Georges Melies remarked, “the train dashed towards us, as if about to leave the screen and land in the hall” (as quoted in Bottomore, 1999, p. 194), and the French newspaper *Le courrier du centre* (July 14, 1896) reported that “spectators draw back instinctively, fearing they’ll be run over by the steel monster” (as quoted in Bottomore, 1999, p. 213).

Early on, there was much discussion of the motion picture’s ability to preserve great performances such as opera, and overcome death by preserving our loved ones forever. On a very basic level, the motion picture apparatus of camera and projector became the first method by which we could sample, capture, store, and share space and time. Many early films based their essential structures and appeals on the capacity for spatial/transportation presence—films like the Lumieres’ *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway* (1897), *The Georgetown Loop (Colorado)* (1903), and Pathe’s *Moscow Clad in Snow* (Mundwiller, 1909), brought spectators across
the globe images of distant lands and mechanized travel. It is interesting
that the notion of transportation is underscored by the fact that in two
of the above films the camera itself is mounted on a moving train, pro-
ducing a heightened sense of visceral dynamism and realism. Early nar-
ратive films brought the addition of social presence generated by plot and
characterization. Mary Heaton Vorse, writing in 1911, comments on the
enthusiastic response by naive audiences confronted with the innovation
of film, the “living picture book that has brought so much into the lives
City, Vorse noted the vocal reaction of a woman seated behind her, who
shouted warnings to film characters—“Oh, boy, take care, take care!
Those wild and awful people will get you!’ ... to the woman it was real-
ity at its highest ... it was happening for her now” (p. 51).

The industrial vision for film was always for this presence enhancing
trajectory of innovation. Edison observed in 1910, “The future of the
motion picture in the amusement line will be in the form of a combina-
tion between it and the phonograph,” further predicting the addition of
stereoscopic (i.e., 3-D) photography and color film (Who’s Who in the
Film Game, 1910, p. 64). Even earlier, a debate was started with the
1877 Scientific American article quoted at the beginning of this chapter,
which first identified the goal of “real presence.” In the next issue of
Nature (January 24, 1878), British inventor Wordsworth Donisthorpe
responded: “Ingenious as this suggested combination is, I believe I am
in the position to cap it. By combining the phonograph with the Kine-
sigraph I will undertake not only to produce a talking picture of Mr.
Gladstone ... but the life-size photograph itself shall move and gesticu-
late precisely as he did when making the speech, the words and gestures
corresponding as in real life” (p. 242).

Early film theorists Rudolph Arnheim (1957) and Andre Bazin, writing
in 1932 and 1946 respectively, both recognized a fundamental tendency
of the motion picture to strive towards an ever greater verisimilitude of
representation, hiding the marks of construction and engendering an
ever deeper sense of belief in the viewer. Although the two theorists had
polar opposite views about the effect of this teleological development on
the aesthetics of the medium, both understood, like Edison and Donist-
horpe before them, that the constituent factors of this collapsing dis-
tance between reality and image were color, synchronized sound, wide
aspect ratios that engage peripheral vision, and 3-D.

Bazin provides the first in depth discussion of the relationship between
cinema and presence in a section of his 1946 essay “Theater and Cin-
ema” subtitled “The Concept of Presence” (1967): “Everything takes
place in the time-space perimeter which is the definition of presence. The
cinema offers us effectively only a measure of duration, reduced but not
to zero, while the increase in the space factor reestablishes the equilibrium of the psychological equation” (p. 97). Bazin not only makes the first theoretic connection of cinema and presence but also offers one of the earliest significant analyses of telepresence as a distinct concept.

Other notable film scholars have explored nuances of the film experience that relate directly to presence. Siegfried Kracauer (1960) identifies film’s “obligation” to record, reveal, and “redeem physical reality.” Sergei Eisenstein (The Battleship Potemkin, 1925) proposes that the reception of film involves a synchronization of the senses, invoked through critical juxtapositions of images. “[T]he ‘montage elements’—touch literally every sense—except perhaps that of taste, which is, however, present in implication” (1947, pp. 72-73).

For a number of reasons, including a perceived need to compete with television, the 1950s saw the introduction of a variety of hardware innovations that were aimed at drawing audiences back into theaters with promises of presence (Ijsselsteijn, 2003). New widescreen film formats such as Todd-AO and CinemaScope were employed to maximize telepresence. Writer/director Gerard Alessandrini notes, “films had become so huge and so clear ... and three-dimensional looking ... it’s like looking at a big window ... Rather than coming at you, they sort of draw you in” (2006).

Thus, we see a recognition of the quest for presence throughout the development of the medium of film by a wide range of scholars, commentators, filmmakers, and technicians.

Although the experience of presence may best be thought of as a holistic phenomenon, a full understanding of its nuances requires a dissection of cinematic presence into its constituent elements. The factors that contribute to a sense of presence with film may be identified as falling into six categories: visual elements, sound, editing, narrative, performance, and exhibition. Certainly, these categories overlap, but may fruitfully be examined individually. It should be noted that our position is that the quest for presence has encompassed essentially all aspects of both film form and substance (Neuendorf, 2002; Zhao, 2003a), going well beyond the film production/exhibition apparatus.

**Exhibition**

Perhaps the constituent element most central to the audience’s perception of presence is the nature of film’s exhibition. Even the first large-screen exhibition of film by the Lumieres (almost instantly replacing Edison’s individual-view Kinetoscope) generated critical and audience response consistent with strong telepresence. Some historians contend that Thomas Edison was mistaken in his initial decision not to develop
a system suitable for mass spectatorship, noting that he should have learned from the long success of the magic lantern system (Bohn & Stromgren with Johnson, 1975; Mast, 1971).

The critical role of the exhibition process was recognized by early exhibitors, as manifested in their manipulations of the film, including re-editing the film, adding sound effects, or presenting a live narrative commentary. An extreme case was Hale's Tours, the largest movie theater chain prior to 1906 (Gunning, 1990). The films were footage taken from moving vehicles, and the exhibition space was constructed to resemble the vehicle itself—a train car with a conductor who took tickets, with the projection supplemented by sound effects of rail clatter and hissing steam (p. 58).

The introduction of sound, color, and higher quality and larger gauge film stock all contributed to greater immersive potential, as will be outlined later. Additionally, the nature of the exhibition space, both technologically and architecturally, has changed over the past century in ways that directly affect the viewer's perception of the image. As early as 1931, the Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers published specifications for the width of the screen with respect to the distance of the farthest seats (a minimum of one-sixth and a maximum of eight-tenths; Paul, 1996, p. 247). However, such recommendations were unevenly observed, especially given the dual purpose that most massive "movie palaces" served during the first half of the 20th century—most attempted to combine live theater with movie exhibition in a space that was ornately and exotically designed in ways that drew attention to the architecture (Allen, 2002), and screens often ended up a small portion of the proscenium space (e.g., Radio City Music Hall). Thus, many moviegoers were seated either too far away or at too oblique an angle to enjoy the full power of the projected film.

Then, with the 1952 debut of the short This is Cinerama, movie theater-goers were "suddenly plunged into one of the most visceral motion picture experiences ever created ... Cinerama put the audience in the front car of the roller coaster and surrounded them with eye-filling peripheral images which created an unprecedented illusion of depth" (Belton, 1992, p. 1). Onto a curved, triple-width screen were projected images from three projectors, accompanied by stereo and surround speakers. The film's introduction by newsreel commentator Lowell Thomas tags the film as the latest attempt by artists to "convey the sense of living motion" (as quoted in Belton, p. 1).

The introduction of widescreen technologies such as Cinerama and CinemaScope, according to Belton (2002), transformed the relationship between spectator and screen, redefining spectatorship as more participatory. In advertisements for Cinerama, explicit promises of spatial presence were made: "You won't be gazing at a movie screen—you'll find
yourself swept right into the picture ... Everything that happens on the curved Cinerama screen is happening to you” (as quoted in Belton, 1992, pp. 188–189). Similarly, 1950s ads for CinemaScope (a single-projector, flat-screen widescreen system, with an aspect ratio of 2.66:1; introduced by Twentieth Century Fox in 1953) promised that audiences would be drawn into the physical world of the film as if they were attending a live theater production, with pictures that “depicted audiences together with the on-screen spectacle ... as if there were an actual copresence between screen and spectator” (p. 192). For 3-D movies of the same era, the advertising appeal was reversed. Instead of promises of entering the world of the film, potential audience members were told that the film space would invade their own—you could expect, for example, “a lion in your lap” or “a lover in your arms” (p. 190). Paul (1993, 2004) has labeled this phenomenon “negative parallax,” or the emergence effect” (2004, p. 229), a feature that distinguishes 3-D from widescreen systems. Yet, Paul (1993, p. 335) also notes that both widescreen and 3-D technologies have “the common aim of breaking down our sense of the frame.”

Evidence of greater presence resulting from these technologies is only anecdotal. One systematic study of a 3-D movie (Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over, Rodriguez, 2003) failed to confirm greater sensations of spatial presence than for the 2-D version (Bracken, Lombard, Neuendorf, Denny, & Quillin, 2004). Research on the effect of widescreen aspect ratios is only now underway (Neuendorf, Lieberman, Ying, & Lindmark, 2009). Some research on television screen size supports the notion that viewing on a larger screen results in a greater sense of physical movement, greater feelings of excitement and enjoyment, and more physiological arousal (Lombard, Reich, Grabe, Bracken, & Ditton, 2000).

The introduction of color, sound, and larger and wider screens, have all proved to be lasting innovations, cumulative additions to cinema’s storehouse of technologies intended to produce presence. But in addition to 3-D, a number of other less-successful multisensory adjuncts have been attempted: Olfactory interfaces such as Odorama and Smell-O-Vision (Ijsselsteijn, 2003), and tactile add-ons such as Percepto were introduced and discontinued in the 1950s. A gimmick of Ballyhoo-meister William Castle, Percepto was the installation of vibrating devices in selected theater seats during the film The Tingler (1959)—persons who happened to be in these seats were given a surprise “shock” during moments in the film when the Tingler attacked, and the rest of the audience inevitably co-reacted.

Clearly, the contemporary extension of these post-war gimmicks is the 4-D movie. Defined as an entertainment presentation system that combines a 3-D film with synchronized physical effects in the theater, these films are currently found only in specialized venues such as amusement
parks and museums. In shows such as *Shrek 4-D* (2003; found at Universal Studios parks), *Pirates 4-D* (1999; found at Sea World installations), *Honey, I Shrank the Audience* (Kleiser, 1994), and *It’s Tough to be a Bug* (1998; both found at Disney theme parks), the audience is treated to such effects as water sprays that emulate character sneezes and termite “acid spray,” air jets that add to the illusion of fast motion, and a moving floor that simulates the effect of a giant dog threatening the theater (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4-D_film). In 2007, the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Maryland, converted its auditorium into a “4D Immersion Theater” showing short 3-D films with the addition of sensory effects such as mist, scents, and wind (http://www.aqua.org/). And, on the Mall in Washington, DC, the Newseum opened in 2008 with a 4-D theater that features “environmental effects,” including seats that move and air gusts (4D film at Newseum, 2008).

**Visual Elements**

The film stock itself is an important factor in the ability of the image to accurately represent a reality. Film gauge, or the physical size of the film, was standardized very early in the history of the medium at 35mm, introduced by Edison and his assistant W.K.L. Dickson as early as 1893. There have been various attempts to move to a larger gauge film stock in order to provide a more immersive viewing experience and thereby compete with television, notably in Hollywood during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, the image produced by the 55mm, 65mm, and 70mm formats used for such films as *Oklahoma!* (Zinnemann, 1955), *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean, 1962) and 2001: *A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968) had double the resolution of 35mm and was promoted as “More than your eyes have ever seen” (Twentieth Century Fox Trade advertisement for their Cinemascope-55 format) and to more directly evoke the notion of presence, “You’re in the show with Todd-AO” (advertisement for the 1955 world premier of *Oklahoma!*). Although a handful of films continue to be shot in large gauge formats, the primary contemporary venue for such films is IMAX theaters, which utilize the largest film image area of any film format in history. Acland (1998) writes that “The IMAX image astonishes with its vibrant colours and fine details ... it is easy to mistake the IMAX screen for a wonderful, varying window on to real and imagined worlds” (p. 430).

IMAX represents the pinnacle of cinematic presence due to its film gauge and corresponding reduced film grain. Film grain is defined as “the product of the human eye and brain working in combination when viewing clumps of small image particles, seen through the full thickness of the emulsion layer, often numerous layers. Thus, film grain is ‘perceived’ property rather than an actual physical ‘particle’” (Vitale, 2007,
p. 6). Absent empirical testing on the matter, film grain has generally been considered an impediment to perceived realism due to its status as an artifact of the photographic process and not a quality intrinsic to normal human visual perception.

There is an irony that a convention of the low budget "art cinema" is the notion that grainy black-and-white imagery may be considered more "realistic" than the relatively grain-free and color imagery of commercial productions. This apparent contradiction is in fact the clash of two different aspects of cinematic realism—the authentic visual representation of the subject and the authentic dramatic presentation of the subject. While the former demands low-grain, color images, the latter is more dependent on naturalistic setting and lighting which requires a faster film stock. These faster stocks are generally shot on locations where it is impossible to employ the artificial lighting that is the norm in studio shooting. The fact that the faster film stocks are also more grainy is in part responsible for the convention of considering grain as a quality of cinematic realism.

However, as film stocks have generally become faster, allowing for shooting in more authentic conditions, the primary film manufacturers (Eastman Kodak and Fuji) have also developed techniques for limiting grain, so as to preserve the photographic realism of the image. Eastman Kodak introduced T-Grain stocks which, according to Kodak Motion Picture Publication H-1, "improves film speed without sacrificing fine grain" (Eastman Kodak Company, 1999, p. 24). Technological innovation in the moving image is motivated in this case by reconciling two opposing qualities of realism.

Perhaps the most presence-relevant aspect of film stock is color, a visual element foreseen by almost all the early pioneers of cinema but not perfected for widespread use until the 1930s. While the three-strip Technicolor process used in The Wizard of Oz and Gone With the Wind (both credited to Fleming, 1939) is not "realistic" in terms of its intense color saturation and extreme emphasis on primary hues, it was the first time in the history of the medium that relatively true color reproduction (including roughly equivalent reds, greens, and blues) was made possible. It is fitting then that the very expensive three-strip Technicolor process was used primarily for musicals and fantasy films and not for more realistic dramas. With the introduction of single-strip Eastmancolor in the early 1950s, noted for its more authentic, muted color palette, other genres begin to shoot in color as well. Fueled by audience demand and the need to compete with black-and-white television, within a decade virtually all major American film releases were in shot in color, and black-and-white moved from being thought of as the more "realistic" film stock to being the more stylized and artificial approach embraced by B-movies, experimental filmmakers, and the European "art cinema."
Interestingly, research has shown that audiences do not always find color representations more “realistic” nor more present than black-and-white. Sherman and Dominick, in a study of audience reactions to film colorization (1988) found that colorized films were no more likely to be evaluated as “real” than were the black-and-white versions. Denny (2004) has shown that film footage from World War II is judged to be more real and more present when it is presented in black-and-white than when it is shown in color. One possible explanation for this is that audiences associate World War II with black-and-white film since that is the nature of their previous exposure, and so the color seems less authentic. The Denny experiment reveals that there is an effect of history, culture, previous exposure, and expectation on the evocation of cinematic presence, and thus it is not a phenomenon strictly determined by technological qualities.

There have been similar advances in lens technology that also contribute to the aesthetic movement towards greater presence, particularly in terms of the image’s capacity for a greater depth of field, defined by Bordwell and Thompson as “the measurements of the closest and farthest planes in front of the camera lens between which everything will be in sharp focus” (1993, p. 493). While numerous factors contribute to depth of field, the focal length of the lens is critical, with shorter lenses, referred to as wide angle because of their broader scope of view, having inherently greater depth of field. The resulting deep focus photography enables the director and cinematographer to compose their shots with action occurring on multiple spatial planes, a greater mobility of character and camera, and the potential for expressing dramatic relationships through differential and dynamic positioning of characters and objects in the frame. The use of wide angle lenses for these purposes was pioneered by cinematographer Gregg Toland (Lieberman & Hegarty, in press) in films including Wuthering Heights (1939) and The Best Years of Our Lives (1946), and even more notably in Orson Welles’ Citizen Kane (1941). Toland’s technique allowed the eye to freely explore the space by shifting from near objects to those further away, a freedom prohibited by the relatively shallow focus produced by longer lenses and traditional lighting. Andre Bazin saw this as “a revolution in the language of the screen [as] depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality” (1967, pp. 36–37). In this way we can see that there is an interaction between technology (of the lens in this case) and aesthetics (staging and composition in depth) that enhances the spectator’s sense of immersion in the diegesis.

This correlation of science and art for the purposes of producing a deeper quality of spectator engagement can also be seen in the area of camera movement. From the mounting of cameras on trains in the early days of cinema to the development of camera dollies (c. 1914) and cranes
(c. 1929, for early Hollywood musicals), there has been a steady progression of methods for moving the camera and thus the perception of the spectator moving through space. The mobility of the camera has been among the most steady areas of new product development in the film industry with constant improvements in the dolly and the crane as well as exciting inventions for image stabilization like the Steadi-cam in the 1970s and the doggi-cam in the 1990s, all resulting in a higher degree of representational realism. For film theorist Munsterberg, writing in 1916 (Langdale, 2002), movement (along with depth) is among the mechanisms that causes the viewer’s unconscious to become fused with the representations of the image, resulting in an immersive presence, while Panofsky writes (in 1934) that the spectator “is in permanent motion as his eye identifies itself with the lens of the camera, which permanently shifts in distance and direction” (1999, p. 296). In this way the motion of the image, of the camera, of the represented space becomes the movement of the viewer’s consciousness, of emotion and thought, into the world of the film.

Similarly, we can see how production design has moved from theatrical painted backdrops to the often beautiful but rarely realistic sets of the studio period of production (in Hollywood and around the world) and finally to the increasingly realistic location shooting and finely detailed sets of contemporary cinema. Lighting has followed a similar trajectory evolving from a theatrical, front-lit approach to the elaborate glamour of the studio period to the increasingly naturalistic illumination of today’s films. In every aspect of the image, the developmental pattern has been the same, with the ultimate goal being an enhanced belief in the representation and an intensified sense of presence.

**Sound**

By its very nature, sound may evoke a greater sense of presence than does the visual image. Extending queries by Soviet Montage filmmaker and scholar Vsevolod Pudovkin, Andrew (1976) muses, “Is sound more real than picture because it is the reproduction of an aural fact whereas an image is a representation in two dimensions of a [three-dimensional] visual fact?” (p. 9; also see Eisenstein, Pudovkin, & Alexandrov, 2004).

While nearly all “silent” films were accompanied by music, the critical moment for sound and film was the introduction of dialogue with 1927’s The Jazz Singer (Crosland). Within three years, all the major American studios had converted to sound production (Rickitt, 2007). There now would be the potential for the addition of not only dialogue, but also sound effects, and music that might be either integral or supplemental (i.e., “mood” music).
Even in the silent era, film exhibition was often accompanied by sound effects created live. Since film’s early sound era, almost every sound besides dialogue has been recorded separately and then mixed together in post-production. These sounds may come from a recorded sound effects library, be recorded by a sound technician from “real world” sounds, or be foleyed. Foleying is the addition of footsteps, doors closing, clothing rustling, and other (usually human-created) sounds to a segment of film by the physical performance of “Foley artists” in a “Foley room” equipped with various floor surfaces, doors, and props.

Music has been an expected feature of film-going since the inception of mass audience viewing. Although used in part to cover the sound of the film projector (Gorbman, 1987), live music also followed a tradition of melodramatic music cues in late 19th century theater (Darby & Du Bois, 1990). For silent films, the musical accompaniment ranged from a single musician on piano, organ, or violin in smaller venues, to full orchestral coverage in large, prestigious houses. While some silent films were wholly scored by a composer, most silent film music was generated by in-house musicians, often following cue sheets that indicated brief segments of music that would match the “mood” of a given scene (Pendergast, 1977).

With the introduction of sound film circa 1927, music could now be of two types: diegetic, music that emerges from within the film’s storyline (e.g., a musical number performed by a character), or non-diegetic, the more typical musical score that is not part of the diegesis (i.e., music the characters do not hear). The former should enhance a sense of realism, while the latter is more similar to the mood music played in silent movie houses, and traces its roots directly to concert music (Palmer, 1990). While both are intended to draw the viewer in emotionally (Tobias, 2003/2004), there is no empirical research evidence to establish how or to what extent this works. There is the sense among film composers that they spend their lives writing music that no one is supposed to hear, yet the power of non-diegetic music to involve and to lead an audience’s attentions is widely assumed.

The evolution of non-diegetic music to its current status is noteworthy. As Hollywood composer Max Steiner (Bride of Frankenstein, Whale, 1935) tells it, the Hollywood producers and directors of 1931 “began to add a little music here and there to support love scenes or silent sequences. But they felt it necessary to explain the music pictorially. For example, if they wanted music for a street scene, an organ grinder was shown” (Palmer, 1990, p. 17). Over time, audiences accepted the musical score as an integral component of the film viewing experience and the practice of grounding music with odd artifices ended. Many composers view the non-diegetic score as a mode of appending emotional weight to a film, giving the viewer “information that you wouldn’t otherwise know”
composer David Raksin, quoted in Morgan, 2000, p. 2). Timm (1998) identifies the key functions of film music scoring, including several that seem presence-enhancing: To either intensify or relax the pace of the film, to reflect emotion, to create “unspoken” thoughts of a character or unseen implications of a situation, to literally parallel or underscore the action, and to create an atmosphere of time and place.

Over time, technological advances in sound recording formats have changed the quality and fidelity of the soundtrack, giving more power to the filmmaker to manipulate precisely what the audience hears. Noise reduction technologies, beginning with Dolby’s system designed to reduce tape hiss (first used in film for A Clockwork Orange (Kubrick) in 1971; Belton, 1996), have increased fidelity. THX, developed at Lucasfilms in 1982, is a quality assurance standard that is aimed at generating a reliable soundtrack—i.e., so that a film’s soundtrack will sound the same regardless of exhibition venue. And, sound formats have moved from monaural to stereo to multitrack; there is some evidence of a corresponding increase in emotional response and sense of presence as a result of an increased number of tracks of sound (Vastfjall, 2003). The evolution of surround-sound systems (e.g., Dolby Surround, Dolby 5.1) adds the element of immersion within a 360-degree environment of sound.

The density of the soundtrack has generally increased over time, so that by the 1970s, the complex blend of dialogue, music, and numerous sound effects was delivered by a dedicated sound designer, an individual whose job it is to combine all auditory elements into a fully realized auditory experience (Ondaatje, 2002), and then parcel out this soundscape into, typically, six different loudspeakers in the theater. As Rickitt (2007) notes, “modern theatres have invested in state-of-the-art digital sound reproduction systems that can project a sound to any part of the screen or auditorium, creating a convincing three-dimensional soundscape that places the audience ‘within’ the action” (p. 340). However, it is possible that if this surrounding soundscape does not match the two-dimensional image, it might actually be a deterrent to a sensation of full immersion.

**Editing**

The very act of editing—that is, combining two or more bits of film—presents a problem in the maintenance of spatial and temporal continuity. Psychological research gives us some indication that viewers develop a “viewpoint-dependent mental representation” in a film’s first shot that is disrupted when followed by non-matching images (Garsoffsky, Schwan, & Hesse, 2002). Thus, we would assume, the generation and maintenance of spatial and temporal presence sensations are intricately linked to the editing process. While we might expect footage without editing to
elicit a greater sense of either spatial or social presence, this “long take” style is so rare and unexpected (MacDougall, 1992/1993) that it actually calls attention to itself. The norms of film editing have been established over a century of film production. Early editing to maintain continuity intended simply to follow a narrative line without making the viewer aware of the cuts, as in Cecil Hepworth’s Rescued by Rover (1905), in which the saving of a kidnapped baby by a collie is painstakingly documented in a series of static camera shots, with the dog running right to left. Each time the dog reaches screen left, the film cuts to another shot along his journey, with the dog entering screen right.

Building on this basic continuity cutting, throughout much of the golden age of the American Hollywood Studio System (the 1920s through the 1950s; Schatz, 1996), filmmakers further established a norm of editing that minimized viewer disruption, and therefore maximized a sense of presence. Marsh (2003) notes: “Central to the success of film and encapsulating transparency and continuity is the invisible style” (p. 540). This norm of “invisible editing” included maintaining a sense of spectator location by shooting from only one side of a line of action (the so-called 180-degree rule), using shot-reverse shot (after a shot of a character looking, the viewer is shown the subject of the look), the use of orientation cuts (in which the location of important elements in the frame is matched in adjacent shots; Ondaatje, 2002), and cutting on action (masking any small discontinuities by cutting while some motion is shown) (Thompson & Bordwell, 2003). Also important to this style is the use of the “master shot”—a relatively long shot that begins a sequence, establishing for the viewer the physical layout of the scene that will follow. All these techniques are designed to reduce distancing between the viewer and the diegesis.

Practicing editors take the perspective that the editor’s work “should remain invisible to the viewers in order to affect them successfully on deeper levels” (Oldman, 1992, p. 221). As editor Evan Lottman notes, “Editing should never call attention to itself. The experience of seeing a movie should be an experience that is divorced from its technique. Anything that suddenly pulls you out of the totality of the experience, a beautiful shot, a gorgeous piece of photography, even a tour de force performance, can hurt the overall effect” (Oldman, p. 232).

Editing may be used to manufacture a believable space or geography, a spatial construction that may or may not correspond to a “real” space. In The Birds (1963), Alfred Hitchcock used exterior shots from three different real locations over a 10-mile area to construct one contiguous sequence of children chased by crows from their schoolhouse on a hill down to the wharf. This “creative geography” (Levaco, 1974) is believable but entirely fictional.
Continuity/invisible editing was the established norm for commercial cinema throughout much of the 20th century, but its easy accessibility was viewed by some as inartistic. Echoing André Bazin’s “aesthetic paradox” (1999) that the “faithful reproduction of reality is not art,” critic Walter Kerr (1975) contends that art necessarily involves the deletion of portions of reality—“No painter or poet or dramatist in his right mind ever attempts to reproduce the abundance of life in toto... Stripping down is the preparation for art” (p. 3). In cases of purposeful obfuscation, the filmmaker as artist may intentionally set up barriers to presence.

For example, the 1920s Soviet Montage group of filmmakers, whose experiments with aggressive forms of editing (inspired by French filmmaker Abel Gance) challenged the notion of continuity editing, substituting an aesthetic of collision and synthesis. Several examples of key Soviet Montage editing techniques are: Elliptical cutting (i.e., jump cutting), which involves the compression of time by leaving out segments of action; overlapping editing, which results in the extension of time by repeating parts of action in subsequent shots; non-diegetic inserts, which create a metaphorical connection between the narrative and a shot taken from outside the diegesis (as in the insertion of footage of a cow’s slaughter into a sequence in which striking workers are massacred, in Eisenstein’s Strike, 1925). In Soviet Montage, the mechanism of editing is highly apparent, and for the viewer to engage in a construction of the diegetic world the film represents requires a certain degree of concentration and effort. This effort theoretically should work against any sensation of presence—the medium is too apparent.

On the other hand, a very obtrusive style might evoke a sense of presence in unexpected ways. Eisenstein evinced a concerted attempt to use rather obtrusive techniques to generate cross-modal, or synesthetic, responses across the human senses (Eisenstein, 1947). And 1960s French New Wave filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard (e.g., Breathless, 1960) and Alain Resnais (Last Year at Marienbad, 1961) used “violations” of classical editing rules to direct attention to the form of the film itself (d’Ydewalle & Vanderbeeken, 1990). Limited experimental evidence indicates that violations of the 180-degree rule result in greater visual activity by observers (d’Ydewalle, Desmet, & Van Rensbergen, 1998). The cognitive engagement stimulated by obtrusive editing might result in greater involvement, which has been posited by some scholars as a factor critical to the experience of presence, or alternatively as an actual separate dimension of presence (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003).

Ever-faster editing has become the norm in recent decades (Bordwell, 2002). There is some evidence that the pace of editing is related to audience response, both in terms of posing a challenge to cognitive
processing and recall (Watt & Welch, 1983) and in escalating the emotional outcome of a viewing situation (e.g., making a happy film happier, and angry content even less pleasant; Heft & Blodnal, 1987).

There is some experimental evidence, as indicated by reaction-time and eye-movement data, to support the notion that a recognizable narrative story line makes the viewer less aware of transitions from shot to shot (d’Ydewalle, Desmet, & Van Rensbergen, 1998; d’Ydewalle & Vanderbeeken, 1990). Thus, we ought to consider the narrative substance of film as well as its form.

**Narrative**

The element of narrative, defined most simply by Bordwell and Thompson as “a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space” (1993, p. 65), has been posited by Gunning (1990) as a dividing line in early film history separating the “cinema of attractions” period (c. 1895–1905), during which the very phenomenon of moving pictures was enough to capture the spectators’ attention, and the subsequent production of films that told increasingly clear and complex stories. Audience demand for narrative became the driving force for the commercial development of the industry. The power of narrative to create immersion has been widely recognized, beginning with the novel. As Ryan writes, “The literary features that create a sense of participation in fictional worlds present many parallels with the factors leading to telepresence” (1999, p. 117). These qualities include depth of character and narrative universe that Ryan correlates with the spatial depth of an image, and “the omniscient, impersonal narrator” (p. 118) that allows for a freedom and mobility of representation. Green (2004), in experimental work, has found that those with prior knowledge or experience relevant to the themes of a story report greater “transportation into” the narrative world. In film no less than literature, the ultimate desire of many spectators is to be transported into a fictional world, to experience a degree of cognitive involvement in a story that allows for the temporary “forgetting” of the real, physical world.

**Parallel Action** In cinema there have been a number of techniques developed for increasing narrative engagement. The earliest such technique was parallel action/editing, in which two lines of story material, such as a group of thieves escaping from a robbery and the posse of lawmen on their trail, are alternated, creating a question in the audience’s mind of how the two will resolve. The indeterminacy of dramatic outcome, the dynamism of time and space, the evocation of a story world that extends beyond the frame, all are ways in which
parallel action encourages immersion in the film’s narrative. This basic method for constructing cinematic suspense, usually attributed to Edwin S. Porter in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903; Musser, 1991) though it appears as early as James Williamson’s film *Fire!* (1901), exerted such a powerful effect on audiences that it helped transform the motion picture from a novelty into an industry.

Even greater spectator excitement was produced by D.W. Griffith’s subsequent innovation of triangulated parallel action in films such as *The Lonely Villa* (1909) which added a third term to the equation, so that, in its most famous (and clichéd) example, the film would cut between the “damsel in distress,” the villain or other threat like an oncoming train, and the hero rushing to the rescue. Griffith used this approach in a majority of the nearly 500 films he made between 1908 and 1912, leading not only to extraordinary commercial success but also to triangulated action becoming a fundamental convention of cinematic narrative. Following David Cook’s analysis of Griffith’s innovation of this technique (2004), triangulated parallel editing points to the idea that the way the story is told in cinematic terms, its enunciation in moving images and sound, is perhaps the most significant component in the creation of an immersive movie experience.

The construction of multiple lines of plot development is central to the workings of what might be the most addictive form of moving image narrative, the serial narrative or soap opera, in which the intertwining fates and problems of a large cast of characters are merged into a single story that becomes so real for many viewers that they are unable to easily distinguish between the fiction and reality. Allen (1991) accounts for the popularity of the soap opera in part because it “represents an ‘over-coded’ narrative form, in which characters and relationships are endowed with pluri-significative possibilities far exceeding that required by narrative function alone” (p. 521). The extensive story spaces of serial narratives help produce a sense of a larger diegetic world that goes beyond the scene, individual character, or episode to seem like a parallel reality, and that provides ample opportunity for the establishment of a level of familiarity that will engender greater presence (Green, 2004).

**Narrative Complexity and Construction** Increasing narrative complexity has, since the 1970s, been an important quality of the contemporary cinema. From the sprawling cast of characters in *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972) and the multiple story lines characteristic of the work of Robert Altman (e.g., *Nashville*, 1975) to the fragmented time frames of *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) and *Memento* (Nolan, 2000), filmmakers have used narrative complexity as a mechanism for engaging audience attention. There is always the potential danger of
complexity turning into confusion for the audience, which of course serves as an inhibiting factor to narrative immersion because of the way it calls attention to the construction of the story. Screenplay construction is oriented towards the creation of an engaging narrative, and such conventions as evenly spaced plot points that change the direction of the story in unexpected ways (Field, 1994), consistently rising action that presents escalating danger or threat to the protagonist, and a conclusive climax that resolves the story’s major conflicts in a moment of peak excitement, are all designed expressly to create the most powerful appeal to the spectator. At the same time, these elements must never seem artificial or predictable despite their structural necessity, because as with excessive complexity, obviousness of construction also changes the focus of audience attention from the story to the structure. This hidden architecture of the narrative works along with an invisible narration that makes the story appear to be just unfolding before the eyes of the viewer and so produce a cinematic believability, a visual verisimilitude, in the terms of the Lumieres, an actuality.

**Identification and POV** Character identification and point-of-view are other aspects of narrative that contribute to the evocation of cinematic presence. Character identification might be thought of as a desire to connect psychologically and emotionally with the characters, or often just the main character, of a film because of positive traits, common problems, or intriguing situations, and to imagine oneself in similar situations (as supported by Zillmann’s affective disposition theory; Zillmann, 1996; see also Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003). Point-of-view can be thought of in several ways including the attitude of the author(s) towards the issues of the film, the way a character sees the world in ideological terms, the actual gaze of a character (the showing of which is called a point-of-view shot), the perspective of the camera, and the physical and conceptual positioning of the audience. It is easy to understand how the point-of-view shot creates a heightened connection between spectator and film as the viewer looks literally through the eyes of a character in the drama. When Hitchcock consistently shows the audience what Jeffries (Jimmy Stewart) sees out his window in Rear Window (1954), he not only makes a visual connection between spectator and character but also motivates an acceptance of his way of seeing the dramatic situation as well as of his questionable ethics—he is after all spying on his neighbors. Though it works well in first-person-shooter video games, this type of audience positioning has its limitations, as the few experiments in making a film entirely from a character’s point-of-view such as Lady in the Lake (Montgomery, 1947) have met with little success critically or commercially.
There have been numerous attempts on the part of psychoanalytic film theorists to explain the relationship between point-of-view and the phenomenon of cinematic absorption. The fetish-based models of Christian Metz (1982) and Laura Mulvey (1975) build on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and more centrally, Jacques Lacan, to suggest that, through an interplay of gazes (the viewer’s at the screen, the camera’s at the characters, and the characters’ at each other), the image acts as a sort of mirror in which the spectator identifies with his own ego ideal, taking sadistic pleasure in the power dynamic of narrative (and often gendered) control. The concept of Suture (Oudart, 1969/1978; see also Dayan, 1974, and Silverman, 1983) represents a less psychosexual approach to the same issue of cinematic absorption. Suture works through positioning the spectator’s consciousness within the narrative construct by the structure of the shots and edits, particularly the narrative/editing figure of shot-reverse shot. Dayan writes “when I occupy the place of the subject, the codes which led me to occupy this place become invisible to me. The signifiers of the presence of the subject disappear from my consciousness because they are signifiers of my presence” (p. 124). Browne (1976) offers a more rhetorical explanation of point-of-view that challenges Dayan’s model by positing that, “identification asks us as spectators to be two places at once, where the camera is and with the depicted person—thus its doubled structure of viewer/viewed. As a powerful emotional process it thus throws into question any account of the position of the spectator as centered at a single point or at the center of any simply optical system” (p. 157). There have been numerous other theoretical attempts to account for the connection between the spectator, point-of-view, and the powerful presence of the cinema, but all such models remain speculative, lacking empirical testing.

Realism and Spectacle That cinema may evoke presence via a range of mechanisms is evident in the seeming paradox that both extreme realism and high spectacle can both lead to great immersion. The location shooting, naturalistic lighting, and authentic characters and situations pioneered in the Poetic Realist films of Jean Renoir (e.g., La Chienne, 1931) and developed into a conscious style by Italian Neorealists Roberto Rossellini (Open City, 1946), Vittorio De Sica (Bicycle Thieves, 1947), and Luchino Visconte (Ossessione, 1942) produce a level of believability that can transport the spectator into the film’s narrative. On the other hand, the patently unreal, yet undeniably effective special effects in films like the Star Wars or The Matrix series can also absorb the viewer into their synthetic worlds. Spectacle works by overwhelming the senses, by pushing the aesthetic of astonishment so far that the spectator can hardly believe his eyes, becoming completely absorbed in the presentation while not necessarily accepting the reality of the representation.
Performance

Performance is an aspect of the cinematic construct that might not immediately be apparent as a factor in the evocation of cinematic presence, but it is in fact at the very center of the phenomenon. While a full consideration of the evolution of film acting styles that have variously contributed to and detracted from a sense of presence is beyond the scope of this chapter, some key concepts are worthy of mention. Notably, the Hollywood Studio “star system” has had important implications. Ellis (1982) details “the photo effect,” which is dependent on the simultaneous presence and absence of a film’s star. The fact that the star is both present in the theater in terms of likeness, movement, and voice, but at the same time is literally absent from the space of projection, creates a psychological state of both idealization and identification, so that the spectator connects with the representation of the star and in doing so becomes part of the diegesis. Further, the “knowledge” of the star produced by the information presented in subsidiary media circulation (e.g., newspapers, magazines, television talk shows) gives the spectator a sense of knowing the star as a person, though of course this knowledge is completely manufactured. It is the desire for stars that drives the popular cinema and the dimensions of the stars’ personae that determine the nature of the stories told. It is this suspension, this middle ground between absence and presence that lies at the heart of the stars’ appeal.

The maintenance of an imaginary “fourth wall,” derived from the stage, assumes that the acknowledgement of an audience is a hindrance to the creation of a believable narrative. Thus, the norm in film from the earliest Lumiere actualities has been for performers to avoid looking at the camera. But as noted earlier, a type of “theatrical presence” may be created by the direct address to the spectator by the character on screen. So when Matthew Broderick in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (1986) violates the imaginary fourth wall, the effect is one that shifts the register so that the image is indeed a construct that addresses the spectator.

From the pantomime-based acting style that characterized the silent cinema to stage-derived acting techniques and highly stylized personae of actors like Humphrey Bogart, Joan Crawford, Cary Grant, and Greta Garbo, to the use of non-actor performers by the filmmakers of French Poetic Realism and Italian Neorealism, various attempts have been made to increase audience identification with the people who appear in films.

One notable attempt to assure the most authentic possible performance style was simply called “The Method.” Developed by Konstantin Stanislavsky (2000) in the Soviet Union early in the 20th century, the Method was imported to the United States by Jacob and Stella Adler for use by their Group Theater in the 1940s. The Method required that the
actor actually become the character, feel the emotions that the character in the drama would feel, and, in a sense, lose their own traits and characteristics. This technique asked the actor to know every aspect of his or her stage life, and also allowed for stuttered or mumbled lines, improvisational blocking, and other elements that added to the realism and believability of the performance. The success of Method acting on film by Marlon Brando and others led to an adoption of this more “present” acting style throughout the film industry.

The Current State of Film Exhibition

Despite technological advances in general theatrical exhibition, recent decades have seen a devolution of the theatrical co-viewing experience, with more than a third of Americans citing “rude and annoying people” as a top motivation for staying away from movie theaters (EW Online Poll, 2005). A majority report preferring to view movies at home, so long as they have a large screen TV and surround sound. As distractions in theatrical venues increase, contemporary audiences seek immersive experiences in the home. Krugman, Shamp, and Johnson (1991), in an early study of viewing movies in the home, found those with higher socioeconomic status (SES) treating the experience as more theatrical (with little food prep, talking, etc.), a seeming conscious attempt to emulate the immersive theatrical experience.

The reactions of the film industry to the devolution of theatrical viewing include the reintroduction of some “old gimmicks.” Prompted by fears of falling box-office revenues, DreamWorks executive Jeffrey Katzenberg has proclaimed that all his new animated features will be in 3-D (Maney, 2008). He is joined by an assortment of studios and producers who are creating new films, and repurposing old (e.g., re-releases of the first two Toy Story movies) in 3-D, banking on the outfitting of thousands of theaters to accommodate the new/old technology. Once again, filmmakers and distributors are betting that audiences will be drawn to the most extreme efforts to produce sensations of immersive presence.

Concluding Remarks

A case can be made for the relevance of film as a topic for consideration in presence scholarship, given its enduring popularity and recent developments, including surround sound, digital projection, immersive cinema technologies such as OmniMAX and IMAX, and the special case of 4-D movies. Though film remains largely non-interactive in an interactive age, recent developments show how it, more than any other popular medium, is taking advantage of the range of vividness cues
likely to contribute to a sense of presence. Additionally, film has served since its inception and continues to serve as a model for other moving image media (e.g., videogaming, VR) in both its form and content (Skalski et al., 2008; Marsh, 2003), an example of what Bolter and Grusin (2000) call “remediation,” the refashioning of new media from old.

A covering perspective of this chapter has been the notion that the audience’s sense of presence is an historically (and likely culturally) determined phenomenon, an evolving, dynamic system. Thus, history itself impacts the nature of the audience’s “presence reception.” For example, early audiences might have felt the Lumieres’ train as real, but within a few years The Countryman and the Cinematograph (Paul, 1901) self-referentially poked fun at an ignorant spectator who mistakes the cinematic image for reality. And, to the audiences of the 1930s the Hollywood cinema had an unprecedented force of presence, but now those same films are often rejected by contemporary viewers as the height of artifice.

The various techniques that draw attention to themselves, and thereby draw attention to the mediated nature of film, may be responded to differently by different audience cohorts. The dynamic complexity of the films of the Soviet Montage and the French New Wave might be challenging to the novice viewer, but may provide a sense of comfortable familiarity to aficionados. The current popularity of what Bordwell (2002) calls “intensified continuity,” which includes fast cutting, bipolar extremes of lens lengths (i.e., a dense mixture of close-ups and long shots), extreme close shots in dialogue scenes, and free-ranging camera, as well as obtrusive sound design, is jolting and invasive to many, but may become the expected form for those growing up within this music video-related aesthetic tradition (Vernallis, 2001). The unrealistic size of the human form in close-up on a large-format movie screen may detract from a sense of social presence for current audiences (Bracken, Neuendorf, & Jeffres, 2003), but not necessarily those of the future, who will have grown up with wall-size home theater screens. Further, stop-motion animation guru Ray Harryhausen hints at a changing receptivity to heavy-handed visual effects when he notes that historically, “the main purpose of any film was to tell a story and transport viewers into a world of make-believe. But now it would seem that knowing how a film is made only makes people want to watch it even more” (Rickitt, 2007, p. 6). Whether knowledge about the methods of generating moving image content is an enhancer or detractor for the sensation of presence is yet another empirical question yet to be answered.

A fundamental problem that prohibits full validation of the claims and critiques of cinematic presence by filmmakers and scholars over the years is the nearly total lack of empirical research in the field of
film studies (notable exceptions include Austin, 1989; Charters, 1933; and Dale, 1935). The study of cinema can benefit enormously from the influence of the social and behavioral sciences by moving into a more tangible, experimental direction that can attempt to answer the questions raised by our discussion in this chapter. Likewise, the community of presence researchers may profit from a consideration of the rich tradition of theorizing within film studies. Just as Klimmt and Vorderer (2003) have called upon presence scholars to expand their purview to include media psychology theories such as affective disposition theory and involvement theory, we also recommend a consideration of both theoretic notions and practical applications from the field of film for those studying the creation of and moderating impact of presence.

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