Hypothesis of *Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor* in The Transforming Digitization Era
– An Introduction, Delimitation and Overview of *Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor*

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of classic cinematic metaphors used to articulate technological advancements in film history, this paper highlights the Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor and its characteristics as being particularly appropriate for the transitional stage of filmmaking in the digitization era. Compared with traditional cinematic metaphors such as the kino-eye, camera-pen, window, mirror, and half-dream, which emphasize either production aspects or viewer experience, the Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor arguably combines production, distribution and reception processes to describe the whole of cinema as a diverse, flexible and interactive activity in the midst of digital dissemination. Starting with Man with a Movie Camera, this paper will exemplify the Cinematic Interface and investigate the Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor by analyzing two contemporary narrative films, Brian De Palma's Redacted (2007) in terms of production and viewing patterns and Paranormal Activity (Directed by Oren Peli, 2009) in terms of production and distribution discussions.

Keywords: Interface, Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor, cinema ontology, digitization, digital technologies

Introduction

In this paper, I will highlight the Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor and its characteristics as being particularly appropriate for the transitional stage of filmmaking in the era of digitization. Compared with traditional cinematic metaphors, such as the Kino-eye, camera-pen, window, window on window, mirror, and half-dream, which emphasize either production aspects or viewer experience, the Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor arguably combines production, distribution and reception processes to describe the whole of cinema as a diverse, flexible and interactive activity in the midst of digital technology dissemination. Starting with *Man with a Movie Camera*, I will introduce the framework of my research object and define the key words of this paper, Cinematic Interfaces, and then exemplify and investigate the Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor by analyzing two contemporary narrative films, Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2007) in terms of production and viewing patterns, and *Paranormal Activity* (Directed by Oren Peli, 2009) in terms of production, promotion, and distribution criteria. Finally, I will summarize the characteristics of Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor in the current transforming digitization stage based on above discussions.

Exemplified Introduction and Definition of *Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor*

The former Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov coined the word, Kino-eye, which becomes the earliest cinematic metaphor that intends to reveal what cinema exactly should be from the ontological level. In his manifesto published in June 1923, Vertov writes, "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it" [1] (Michelson & O'Brien, 1984). In his most renowned film, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Vertov approaches "every possible" shooting and editing technique of early cinema to suggest metaphorical connections between the camera as filmmaker's eye and the film showing the world through his eye to audiences. The last shot of the film in particular, in which one human eyeball is superimposed on a camera lens, enunciates the principal connotation of Kino-eye. Subsequent cinematic metaphors, such as, Camera-pen, Window, Window on Window, Mirror, and Half-dream, are all contrived by film theorists by analyzing specific films in different periods of film history.

My hypothesis of Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor will attempt to illustrate the cinema status quo during the transforming digitization era propelled by digital technology's ubiquity inside media industries and around our daily life. This is a transitional phase that D.N. Rodowick calls the analogical film's self renewal by absorbing digital algorithm in his book, *The Virtual Life of Film*.

He asserts, "Film has not died yet, though it may become thoroughly 'remediated'." [2] (Rodowick, 2007) I think this remediation procedure will take a long period of time and it is way too early to predict when the digital will completely replace the analog. Therefore, Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor is aimed to describe the cinema status in the predictable near future that the analog devices incorporate with digital technologies; meanwhile it will emphasize the fundamental mode-change of digital cinema because of the revolutionary impact brought by ubiquitous digital technologies applications.

Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor is based on existing theoretical discussions about *Interfaces*, primarily influenced by Lev Manovich's notion of *Cultural Interfaces*. In his book, *The Language of New Media* (Manovich, 2001), Monavich lists cinema as one of the three language forms making up *Cultural Interfaces*, alongside the printed word and the general-purpose human-computer Interface [3] (Manovich, 2001). He also states, "If the Human Computer Interface (HCI) is an interface to computer data, and a book is an interface to text, cinema can be thought of as an interface to events taking place in 3-D space." [4] (Manovich, 2001) Besides, in *Digital Encounters*, Aylish Wood employs multiple varieties of interface(s) in her discussions about digital representations. By analysis of digital effect movies, such as, *Matrix*, *Titanic*, and *Gladiator*, she describes technological interfaces as "a narrative agency" that can expand the time-space, or as technology itself (viewer agency) that can influence viewers on how we see the world in chapter 2. [5] (Wood, 2007) In chapter 3, interface as "multiple panels on a split-screen" is distinguished from a seamless screen and she also subheads a section – "Interface as architecture" [6] (Wood, 2007). So, none of the above applications of "interface(s)" signifies a common object to present the distinctive characteristics of cinema as a whole from the ontological sense. "Interface(s)" in her book have multiple meanings in different categories and fields when she employs it to address on different subjects about digital representations.

It is the same for Manovich's adoption with his interfaces, which have multiple meanings when addressing on different subjects. Moreover, both Manovich's and Wood's approaches of interfaces are concentrated on singular dimension screen and content analysis. My definition of Cinematic Interfaces will contain multiple dimensions of moving image making, which is included all production, promotion, distribution and reception procedures; because the rapidly ubiquitous digital technologies have pervaded throughout all these processes and fundamentally influenced on both creative and viewing patterns and the subsequent relationship between producers and spectators. [7] (Henry Jenkins's detailed discussions in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*) Hence, Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor, as I state earlier, will attempt to reflect and highlight the most vivid and distinctive characteristics of cinema status quo as whole as a diverse, flexible and interactive activity amidst the transforming digitization era. I will exemplify Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor with analyses on two digital narrative films, firstly *Redacted* and *Paranormal Activity* the next.

The main reason for the criticisms of *Redacted* on the basis of its perceived lack of realism is that De Palma juxtaposes different media formats to recount a "collage" story based on a true incident, which totally breaks up the Hollywood traditional continuity principle and thus intentionally generates the alienation effect to viewers, just as Ken Provencher describes,

> "…Watching the film is a uniquely odd experience…the viewer has no firm grounding in time or space, especially on first viewing. Every scene is a primary source clip, and every sequence edited by an unseen, unknown secondary source. Unable to control the digital image, the audience is locked into each scene's selection, duration, and transition to the next scene. Knowing that each and every clip will sooner or later switch to a different source, the viewer is constantly aware of the form; there is almost no immersion." [8] (Provencher, 2008)

The feelings of watching *Redacted* on our personal computers or seeing it in movie theaters are actually not very different. Even though we see it on big screen in cinema, the logos for TV stations and websites on the screen, times and dates on PFC. Angel Salazar's digital camcorder and army surveillance videos almost appear in every scene, that make us feel resembling the experiences when we click on different file icons and shift between different interfaces on our computer screen to check out a news story told by numerous media resources and personal links. The only difference here is that those news images in *Redacted* are clicked open for us by the Manovich described "pre-programmed, objectively existing" hands of the filmmaker instead of our own.

In this sense, cinema can be regarded not only as a huge "interface to narrative taking place in 3-D space" [9], but also as "an interface to all types of computer data and media" [10] (Manovich, 2001) Among these spontaneously opened-up interfaces, the main interface in *Redacted* is PFC. Salazar's HD camcorder-captured digital war diary, *Tell Me No Lies* in the first half and later it switches to the more official army surveillance videos in the second half of the film. In between, those secondary-source images in other interfaces often interrupt the above two main interfaces. This is pretty similar to our viewing experiences in reality through interfaces on a computer screen or other mobile electronic displays and this makes *Redacted* metaphorically represent the cultural characteristics in our digital era and also become a quintessential example of Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor.

Oren Peli's 2009 low-budget horror, *Paranormal Activity*, was also a digital film and entirely shot in his own apartment. Although *Paranormal Activity* is shot by digital device, it can indeed let audiences feel "time passing", which D.N. Rodowick once argues the different experience in time when watching analogical film and digital cinema. By analyzing Alexandr Sokurov's 2002 digital work, *Russian Ark*, Rodowick suggests that when watching digital image it is difficult to establish an experiential sense of time passing while film image can do so effortlessly.[11] (Rodowick 2007). But digitally-made *Paranormal Activity* easily establishes the past time experience for viewers, especially every time during the couple fall in sleep, the time code on the continuously filming camera screen sometimes automatically speeds up and fast-forwarding the image of the couple sleeping. This actually enhances audiences' sense of "time passing" and making them feel realistic, because this happens in reality so often amidst the ubiquity of digital appliance and audiences have been already familiar with it. In these fast-forward sequences, camera screen turns into a controllable interface, which is controlled by the filmmaker who knows what audiences really want to see and conspired by the audience who wants to skip the boring time durations and directly get to the exciting segments. Thus the audience feels more sense in time, then she will feel more scared after time code resumes normal advance, because she knows something scary is going to happen soon but just does not know when is going to happen. So, the time-code-fast-forward-and then-resume-normal tactic employed here is not only a horror effect generator but also a simulation of our real life experience that we watch things on our personal computer or other electronic interfaces controlled by our own hands. In this sense, the cinema screen becomes a huge "interface to narrative taking place in 3-D space".[12] (Manovich, 2001)

Paranormal Activity's contribution to Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor more demonstrates in the promotion and distribution respects. Peli builds up a fan-zone type of website and shows his film in this small circulation while he is working on his film. Unlike ten years ago *Blair Witch Project* shown online and then picked up by the studio, Peli only shows his film in the fan-zone website he builds and gets refreshing feedback from fans to revise his film; then he shows it again, getting feedback, reediting his film, and making this circulation repeatedly, until one day one fan proposes that this film should be distributed in movie theatres. This is a very unconventional filmmaking solution that is entirely based on digital technology provided convenience, flexibility and interactivity gathering and disseminating through multiple "interfaces" on Peli's and those fans' personal computers. For Peli as a professional graphic designer but novice filmmaker and his fans, film production and post-production becomes more accessible, participatory and approachable on "interface sense" than traditional filmmaking formula, which is much more complicated and remote from cinematic fans. Furthermore, this new kind of production pattern is simultaneously a promotion process. When more and more fans enter the "fan-zone" and contributing their ideas for Peli to improve his film, at the same time, they are promoting it to their friends with their "words of mouth". Then more people will join the "fan-zone" and more ideas will contribute and collect on the interfaces where Peli works on his reediting and then showing the updated version to his fans immediately or asynchronously. Consequently, the clear cut-line between production and promotion exists in the movie business blurs and fuses into one dynamic procedure. This kind of cinema we can call it "Interface Cinema", which is made by numerous interfaces around one main master interface. The interfaces here are not single dimensioned screens any more, but rather motivated and connected visual intelligences interact with each other and creating many mobilized, collective, and also innovative activities for cinema as a whole, where all the traditional borders between producers and spectators, authorship and viewership, professionals and amateurs, even the productions, promotions and distributions are obscured and blended. Thus, although it is still a very important component, showing films on huge interfaces in cinemas is only one segment of this dynamic activity. All above participatory and interactive activities taking place on numerous interfaces during this film's make and circulation make *Paranormal Activity* become another typical example to hypothesize Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor for the digitization era.

Characteristics of *Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor* in Digitization Era

In this section, exemplified with De Palma's *Redacted* and Peli's *Paranormal Activity*, inspired by Manovich's culture-conception terminology of *Culture Interfaces*, we may investigate and examine *Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor* that reflects and symbolizes the advancing film language amidst the worldwide transforming digitization process.

Both noble-fashioned industrial and populist-style indie filmmaking practices are moving toward digitization direction, so that film can survive by "remediating" digital new media.[13] With more and more film being shot with High-Definition digital cameras, unlimited long takes will be taken easily without limitations of film stocks, and some beautiful fake-reality long takes actually can be completely generated by computer graphics. And the most extreme case is that one can make a film entirely on his/her personal computers with animation design and editing tools. *Tin Tin* is just the most recent and fancy example from one of the Hollywood heavyweight filmmakers Steven Spielberg. Back to *Redacted*, every scene in it, except several sequences excerpted from the French documentary, strictly consists of one or two long takes, which is totally distinctive from traditional film editing rules and more like those individual visual clips posted online made by amateur video-makers. Intercut with the more regularly composed and edited documentary excerpts with yellow tonality seemingly filtered during the post-production, the film's unconventionally-cut-together scenes indicate duel standard trends – the usually roughly-shot documentary images may look very beautiful after being polished by digital appliances in postproduction; whereas, also with digital apparatus, the normally sophisticatedly-designed fictional imageries may appear very unprofessionally rough look. Therefore, the future of filmmaking will move toward total digitization direction for both noble-fashioned studio and populist-style independent productions. De Palma, as one of the major Hollywood filmmakers, is not even a pioneer to approach digital devices, but his make of *Redacted*, which is made digitally and "remediated" almost all the digital new media forms to recount the "true" story, is a perfectly symbolic activity for this digitalizing filmmaking tendency.

The traditional cinematic narrative perspectives have been extended to multiple storytelling resources with obscure perspectives. The traditional cinematic narrative perspectives are similar to literature story-telling devices, which are usually included of narration from the first-person (subjective) angle, the second-person perspective (seldom employed), and the third-person (objective) perspective. In *Redacted*, we cannot tell exactly from which single perspective the story is being told, because it is recounted by different "remediated" new and old media forms from multiple perspectives and this can hardly happen to this extreme extent in the pre-digitization age whereas it often takes place in the digital stage when numbers of new media have emerged and surrounding us. This kind of new cinematic narrative format is more acceptable and understandable for audiences nowadays in our "media-bombing" society, because it is more similar to our daily experiences of receiving a certain news story through multiple kinds of media around us and online, whose point of views may be similar to ours or different from ours. Likewise, in Peli's *Paranormal Activities*, when the protagonist's digital camera is set up and left on the tripod and keeps recording imageries without any human operations while the couple goes to bed and falls in asleep, the narrative perspective of the film suddenly switches from the his subjective angle to a vague one that is difficult to clarify.

The pattern of scenes juxtaposition is similitude to the "mental processes" of contemporary audiences based on interactive computer or other digital interfaces. As Manovich states in his book, "Before we would look at an image and mentally follow our own private associations to other images. Now interactive computer media asks us instead to click on an image in order to go to another image…"[14] (Manovich, 2001) In *Redacted*, the seemingly disordered scenes represented by different media forms straightly jump from one to another (some with digital transition effects); after all these images are floating through and being scanned by our brains, we as audiences eventually put the entire story together and draw our own conclusions on the cruel incident happened in reality. It is just like we opening up interfaces on our computers and getting access to different resources, such as, news websites, search engines, portal websites, visual clips, textual materials, forwarded links in our emails and virtual communities (social networks), in order to get general knowledge of news events in the real world. When we cannot maintain indifference any more to what we have seen, listened or read and jump into online forums and express our comments on the story, we suddenly become a participant of this storytelling procedure from an audience, just like the agitated American girl shouting condemnations to the incident in front of her camera and posting the visual clip on a video-share website in *Redacted*.

In *Paranormal Activity*, the entire movie is shot by the protagonist's digital camera and he reviews all the footage captured during earlier night everyday in the story; in one sequence, his wife holds the camera and shooting as well. Therefore, the two protagonists are both video capturers and the objects of the videos captured by themselves. This metaphorically enhances the interactive essence of digital culture based on computer interfaces, and along with this film's "interfaces sense" of production and distribution process discussed earlier in this paper, the core characteristics of Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor emerges and solidifying.

Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor is incorporated of film production, distribution and reception procedures as integrated as a whole, therefore it eventually reflects and symbolizes the blurred relationship between the producers/filmmakers and viewers/audiences. The early cinematic metaphors, such as, Cinema Magic, Cine-Eye, Camera-Pen, Window, and Window on the Window, are only focused on describing the creative element of filmmaking, because that is still the early developing stage of this "new" medium when those metaphors are invented. Following the cinema semiotics contribution to film theories by combining psychoanalysis and modern aesthetics, some new cinematic metaphors are introduced, Cine-drug, Film Mirror, Half-Dream, and the like, which switch to emphasize on audience viewing psychologies and experiences. Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor, shown in *Redacted* and *Paranormal Activity*, however, is concentrated on revealing both the producing process of filmmakers and audiences' receiving manners at the same time, so that it may demonstrate more accurately media producing/receiving and viewing/participating phenomena based on the interactive essences of digital technologies. Ubiquitous digital technology applications actually blur the explicit division between authorship and audience-ship in traditional film productions and consumption behaviors.

Nowadays, there are quite many news from new media outlets that make viewers believe they are true but actually they are falsely fictional. This general sense of digital culture derives from ordinary citizen participation of news-making based on digital and web 2.0 technology ubiquity as well as the consequently blurred relationship between viewers and authors. To De Palma, on one hand, he is the author of this remarkable film, *Redacted*; on the other hand, by approaching the device of telling the story with completely remediating media forms, he has to be a viewer first and redacting what he has viewed and then picking up his favorites from multi-mediated footages, exactly as the implication of the film's title represents. One typical example is the redacted agitated American girl condemning the incident, in which her words are actually from a real website[15] (Provencher, 2008). By doing so and designing the sequence as a YouTube type of popular video-share website, De Palma makes a clarified statement that he is a viewer first in reality who is concerned about what is happening in the Iraqi War; and secondly he becomes a film auteur by adopting the words from a realistic resource and representing them with a uniquely artistic format. Provencher's analyses of this "agitated teenage girl" makes this character meaningful and symbolic as well, "In *Redacted*, we see how new media escalate violence, and also how they sublimate violence, or at least allow for uniquely personal condemnation of violence."[16] (Provencher, 2008) Provencher describes new media's double sides of its functionality.

Following his above description, if we perceive the character as a symbol of the blurred definition between spectators and creators, we may discuss her double identities of two sides. When she is regarded as one of the characters in this film, she is both an object for viewers and an active creator – by recording her condemning words to a camera and uploading the imagery onto the video-share website; meanwhile, she may be observed as a spectator and consumer of the earlier war news the film depicting. When she appears to make her personal comments publicly on the preceding tragedy and participates the battle of the "virtual war", she converts to become both the author of her self-made video clip and one of the creators of the anti-war culture. The symbolic blurry relationship between authors and audiences in *Redacted* makes De Palma one of the pioneers who lead and launch the current movie industry trend of collapsing barriers between producers and consumers. De Palma, as a studio movie director, approaches independent filmmaking work style with unprofessional digital camcorder shooting and untraditional editing devices; while in his film, one of the main characters and much of the footage's "supposed" provider, PFC. Salazar, holds his consumer camcorder to document his visual war diary in order to submit it to apply to the famous USC film school that trains future professional filmmakers. This intriguing comparison may be De Palma's self-reflected and symbolic statement about the obscurity tendency between industrial professionals and unprofessional producers ongoing in the real world. "The widespread network/studio practices of planting fake personal videos by supposed 'fans' on MySpace and YouTube in order to virally market forthcoming features, or of harvesting antagonistic personal video 'mashes' on the same sites as part of anti-marketing campaigns, underscore just how much the line between producer and consumer has become blurred.

Producers generate faux-amateur content…"[17] (Caldwell, 2009) On the other hand, with Paranormal Activity's surprising market success and more and more real-amateur filmmakers' career breakthroughs amidst the digital technology pervasion, and IT industry propelling Cloud technology that will provide substantially more creative storage as public utility than before, in the near future Hollywood may be more willing to provide "amateur" authors resources to form creative teams and then develop their collectively-produced scripts or "draft" films into industrial standard products. Even if the industry would not act, "amateur" producers will easily discover their distribution outlets and attempt to succeed in market hits through numerous "interfaces".

Five years ago, the celebrated American filmmaker Steven Soderbergh announced that he would distribute his next contracted six films through movie theatre, DVD and online simultaneously. By doing so, to a certain extent he equalized the small outlet interfaces on personal computers and other electronic displays and huge interfaces in cinemas. Today, when we see more and more digital movies shown through digital projectors on "huge interfaces" in cinemas alongside real filmic presentations, while more and more filmmakers employ digital apparatuses to make films some "old school" fashioned filmmakers still insist on capturing their images on celluloid, Rodowick's assertion is absolutely right, "…Film has not died yet, though it may become thoroughly 'remediated'." [18] (Rodowick 2007) Bolter and Grusin claim nearly ten years ago, "…new technologies of representation proceed by reforming or remediating earlier ones, while earlier technologies are struggling to maintain their legitimacy by remediating newer ones…"[19] (Bolter and Grusin 2000) During this unpredictably long period of remediation, adding participatory and interactive elements into all the segments of cinematic activity might be one trend; then the Cinematic Interfaces Metaphor will be also self-renewed in terms of connotation gradations and dimensions in order to more vividly reflect and functionally symbolize the Seventh Art ontology in the transforming digitization era.

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