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Now, We Hear Through a Voice Darkly: New Media and Narratology in Cinematic Art

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Now, We Hear Through a Voice Darkly:
New Media and Narratology in Cinematic Art

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Ashlea Renée Ricci. Without her unending support, love, and optimism I would have gotten lost during the journey.

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I owe many individuals much gratitude for their support and advice throughout the pursuit of my degree. The completion of my degree could not have been achieved with the tireless support of my major professor Dr. Phillip Sipiora. As a mentor and intellectual father, his words, time and efforts have been countless. He has assisted me through every moment of my course work and dissertation, and when I left Florida he maintained a constant correspondence with me to ensure I stayed on track. I have the deepest gratitude for my dissertation committee, Drs. Hunt Hawkins, Margit Greib, and Victor Peppard, who provided me with feedback and advice throughout the entire course of my career as a graduate student. My dear friend and colleague Marisa Iglesias, who sustained me through constantly collecting signatures, tracking down committee members, and managing endless forms, this dissertation would never have come to completion without her. I would like to express my love and thanks to my parents, Charlie and Laurel Ricci. Their support, faith, and expectations ensured that I become the best version of myself possible. To all my friends and colleagues that are not mentioned here, please know that you are never far from my thoughts and I cannot thank you enough.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the intersection of new media and narrative, as it is presented through a cinematic aesthetic. The narrative language of film is analyzed through the theoretical framework of Bakhtin's concepts of Heteroglossia, Chronotope, and Dialogism. Bakhtin's ideas of classifying language act as strong tools for demonstrating how cinematic narrative can inform and alter the perception of its spectators. Lev Manovich's principles of New Media, specifically Variability, Modularity, and Automation are also utilized to demonstrate how cinema is a constantly evolving paradigm.

Chapter one focuses on the theoretical terminology, outlining the conceptual definitions and illustrating their relevance in precise moments of cinema. This chapter introduces the idea that despite the original conception of Bakhtin and Manovich's deriving from text and digital processes, their concepts are strongly present in contemporary cinema. Chapter two explores Manovich's concept of variability in the cinematic genre of Noir. The Coen Brother's *Miller's Crossing* illustrates how the use of pastiche and homage has paved the way for the classic Noir genre to evolve into the genre of Neo-Noir. The aesthetic of *Miller's Crossing* is examined in great detail to illuminate the comparisons between the variability of both genres. Chapter three also employs a Neo-Noir aesthetic. In Rian Johnson's film *Brick*, the language is as much a character as any of the actors on the screen. A detailed reading of film exploring Bakhtin's Dialogic concepts is established. The narrative of the film is examined with the idea that multiple meanings exist throughout individual units of speech. Chapter four continues the exploration of new media narrative concepts with a Science Fiction and Noir cinematic hybrid in

an investigation of Rian Johnson's film *Looper*. The basis of this analysis will be focused on fabula time and how the narrative of the film explores time travel, literally and metaphorically. In *Looper* the concepts of Chronotope and Modularity are both used to illustrate the director's stylistic use of narrative sequencing to explore the paradoxes of time travel. Chapter five illustrates Manovich's principles of new media as demonstrated in a biographical music drama. The documentary *20,000 Days on Earth* features 24 hours in the life of Noir rock musician Nick Cave. The use of Cave's music as a basis for the documentarians' artful biopic creates an interpretive grid for analyzing the views of the artist and the persona that he has created for himself. Representations of diachrony in Cave's reflective interviews regarding his evolution as an artist are also examined.

The goal of this dissertation is to provide academic consideration for theoretical concepts that have not been traditionally applied to the study of cinema. It should be of interest to scholars seeking to supplement their endeavors within the realms of film studies as well as new media. In the interest of nurturing an interdisciplinary space for literary studies to exist and inform other branches of scholarship, the topics of new media and narratology, when applied to cinema establish a juncture between historical linguistics, digital media concepts and film studies.

CHAPTER ONE: THE NEW ADAPTATION

OBSERVING CINEMATIC NARRATIVE THROUGH NEW MEDIA

In the dark of the cinema we arrive seeking transformation. The metamorphosis is seldom sought consciously; the desire drifts at the outskirts of our awareness. The time the viewer spends gazing upon the screen, absorbing the images and synthesizing the features of the narrative is precious. Distance between the sensory exposition of the film and its audience becomes defiant of standard conventions of space-time ratios. We are afforded the experience of timelessness; a variety of spaceless travel through an artistic weave of cinematic storytelling. The cinema audience is privileged. They admit themselves both individually and communally most often in the guise of finding entertainment. What they receive is a far richer outcome regarding the psychology of their awareness. No human being emerges from a film the same as before they witnessed it. This transformation is not limited to the standardization of cinematic genre nor is it shackled to the confines of viewer awareness. Repetition will not dilute it; even the same cinematic utterance will never be identical to the viewer no matter how many exposures are made.

The effort to understand the nature of every individual transformation that occurs when a film is viewed is a task that would demand a lifetime. Often individuals approach the films they see with a separate and distinct psychological frame that is informed by their own set of life experiences. A more reasonable task would be to investigate how the transformation occurs. When the methodology of what catalyzes the change in the viewer can be established, only then

can a greater understanding or how to negotiate the psychological changes within each individual occur.

In order to present an analysis of the aspects of cinema that can affect an individual movie audience's perception, specific concepts of New Media are considered. The articulation of this theoretical framing is vital in considering how cinematic genre can be analyzed using concepts not originally intended for film studies.¹ The ideologies of particular communication theories, Narratology, as well as New Media all serve to disrupt the complacency of film consumption.² These broad theories, when considered and applied by a film's spectator, will create a cognitive space that allows for reflection and analysis of the subjective truth-value of the film that is witnessed.

A unique application of understanding how film can transform the viewer can be implemented through the foundation of Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal essays in *The Dialogic Imagination*. The importance of the essays can be extrapolated by focusing on the concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia and chronotope. Dialogism is when multiple lines of speech³ in a text interact to create a new interpretation that differs when compared a single unit.⁴ Often dialogism is discussed in relation to the concept of heteroglossia. Heteroglossia differs from the concept of dialogism in that it examines variations of speech that are found within the same language. Tone, point of view, dialect, slang terminology, all are facets of heteroglossic analysis. The third aspect that Bakhtin illustrates is chronotope. Chronotope is featured when the language of a text is used to configure place and time. An author can use specific narratives to create flashbacks in a story; this would be an aspect of chronotope at work. While these sensibilities were initially established in the mid 1970s as an application to better conceptualize the language

of a novel, a contemporary implementation allows discussion for the nature of communication within a cinematic narrative.

When considering the relevance of a film's dialogue to the viewer, dialogism becomes opportunity of interpretation that enables a viewer to locate meaning in the narrative of the film. Of dialogism Bakhtin suggests, "The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way" (279). The way that this concept negotiates communication in cinema is not unlike how Bakhtin originally establishes its use in linguistic theory. The dialogue within a film, specifically the language spoken by the characters, is often the primary manner in which the audience can take meaning from what they witness.

While dialogism is used to analyze the spoken language of a film, heteroglossia assists in the recognition that within a thousand viewers of a single film there will exist an infinite amount of varied reactions. It is important for cinematic studies that there is the potential for varied interpretations of cinema. As an audience has so many different possible interpretations, it is vital to frame any cinematic discussion with regard to multivocality.⁵ Bakhtin further illustrates:

Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form... Therefore languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways. (291)

Audience members bring their own individual experiences to the film. There are infinite variations of psychologies that can potentially be present in a movie house of spectators. A film

about war will have a vastly different relevance to the battle seasoned veteran than it will to the nursery school teacher sitting two rows behind. Bakhtin's institution of heteroglossia provides a tool to analyze the common ground that the nursery school teacher and the war veteran may share in viewing the same film. Despite countless differences, there will always be moments of synchronicity within the audience of the cinema. Often the moments in a film that can be universally synchronized and agreed upon by a diverse audience will pertain to common factual intersections of viewers' perception. Dialogue becomes a multifaceted organism in this regard. The iconic speech from the ending of the film *Casablanca* exemplifies this idea. Rick states to Ilsa, "Where I'm going, you can't follow. What I've got to do, you can't be any part of. Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that. Now, now. Here's looking at you, kid." This dialogue is one of the most quoted in all of classic cinema. It can safely be assumed that millions of individuals have heard and can identify the source of this particular exchange. What we begin to understand through heteroglossia is that, despite the common recognition and timelessness of Rick's exchange with Ilsa, each viewer that bears witness to the dialogue is afforded the potential to interpret its meaning differently. Viewers will relate to Rick's utterance, "Here's looking at you, kid." However, the same words will mean vastly different contextual ideologies to one person to the next.⁶ What is found in the spoken language of cinema is that a film contains dialogue that simultaneously behaves as units of literal utterances, which all audiences cohesively agree upon, while also acting as interpretive utterances that will contain a varied meaning from one viewer to the next.

Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia encourages an understanding of how different viewers can interpret that same line of dialogue in different ways despite the literal words being spoken

by the character on the screen. In order to create a platform in which the audience focuses on dialogism and heteroglossia Bakhtin introduces a third aspect of negotiating language and meaning within artistic works known as chronotope. The chronotope of an artistic artifact acts as a representation of the space-time⁷ of a spoken dialogue. Chronotope is an invaluable tool in unpacking the individual's transformative potential when seeking the narrative truth-value of a cinematic piece. Bakhtin posits:

The Chronotope is where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements – philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate towards the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imagining power of art to do its work. (250)

The chronotope, is the third side of Bakhtin's triangle in *The Dialogic Imagination*, is deeply present in the interpretation of cinematic narrative. Once more, the linguistic relevance of Bakhtin's concept can also be transposed to the cinema. An audience is transported through the chronotope of a film's narrative. The audience (text metaphorically establishes a sense of time travel through the vessel of narrative language in film. This movement is invoked through the manner in which expository narrative creates a specific place and time for the audience via descriptive storytelling. When the audience recognizes dialogue describing location or time they are witnessing the effects of chronotope in the film's

narrative. Cinematic time and space specifically are implemented through the power of narrative suggestion and require the viewer to create an image of themselves in the cinematic reality being described. The viewer can look once more to *Casablanca* in an effort to demonstrate an example of dialogic space-time. The opening of the film initiates a voice over that creates a chronotope for the audience; they are transported through the description of the location:

VOICE OVER: With the coming of the Second World War many eyes in imprisoned Europe turned hopefully, or desperately toward the freedom of the Americas. Lisbon became the great embarkation point. But not everybody could get to Lisbon directly. And so a tortuous roundabout refugee trail sprang up. Pairs to Marseilles. Across the Mediterranean to Oran. Then by train or auto or foot across the rim of Africa to Casablanca in French Morocco. Here the fortunate ones through money or influence or luck might obtain exit visas and scurry to Lisbon and from Lisbon to the new world. But others wait in Casablanca and wait and wait and wait.

What is fascinating about this voice over is the emotional context that it establishes through dialogue. While the film does provide a specific montage of the locations contained within the litany, it is the narrative presence that truly transports the viewer into the dire circumstance of Europe during wartime. The audience can visualize a methodology of escape for refugees, the narrator does not specifically address danger but the urgency of escape is dramatically conveyed. The viewer is taken from the safety of the theatre into the desperation of moving through a war rattled European landscape. The exotic insinuations of Lisbon, Casablanca, and Paris all serve to transport the viewer into a foreign backdrop where they are not trying to live and prosper but rather to survive and return to the haven of the United States. The

finalization of the voice over focuses on repetition of the word “wait.” The audience’s escape is immediately halted and they are dropped into the alien background of the Moroccan city Casablanca, a location vastly different from the familiarity of the United States.

The chronotope is a vital tool for understanding the how cinema can affect the psychology of its audience. The viewer is afforded the chance to travel without moving, to engage voyeuristically with cultural conflicts of which they are not exposed to in their day-to-day lives. Movement through cinematic space-time gives the audience a chance to look into the lives of countless other individuals, and as they witness the trials of the characters in a film, the audience adopts the conflicts as their own.

The importance of chronotope in cinema is that it enables the audience emotionally invest the audience in the setting of the film. In his article “Toward a Rhetoric of Film: Identification and the Spectator” Gilberto Perez suggests, “Our identification with a character is never just with that character, never just with an individual for his or her intrinsic character. Our identification with a character always takes place in a context – the context of a story, of a setting, of a genre, the context the work establishes and the context we bring to the work. This context will involve other identifications” (17). Perez illustrates the nature of why the Chronotope is so effective in permitting the viewers to reach their own individual truth-value when engaged with a cinematic artifact. The audience approaches the character as a guide; the dialogue the character speaks or has spoken to them is the element that drives meaning and context to the viewer. A disembodied line of dialogue, without a context, will not provide any impact or growth to a viewer. Chronotope often creates an interpretive opportunity for the audience to visualize a context that exists in a particular place in time. This provision allows it to maintain effectiveness in transporting the audience to the precipice of the film’s driving conflict.⁸

Bakhtin's initial theories within *The Dialogic Imagination* enable the audience to better understand the rudimentary elements that are functioning in a film's narrative. In order to unpack a broader range of the canvas in which dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope are in effect, an examination of Narratology within cinema is relevant. The study of Narratology gained attention far before cinema studies were established.⁹ Vladimir Propp is credited with being one of the forefathers of establishing a cognitive theory of implementing a discussion of Narratology in literature in the 1920s. The theory was primarily used to discuss structuralism within written literary artifacts. As with Bakhtin, Propp's approach to Narratology is easily adapted to a contemporary discussion of cinema. Structuralism in Narratology provided the foundation for further analysis of contextual narratives.

The dialogue of a particular film can be given important context and definition when examined in a closed circuit in or out of cinematic space-time. In the 1920s Ferdinand de Saussure's text *Course in General Linguistics* helped to further establish working definitions of narrative dialogue. The terms diachronic and synchronic were implemented to define parameters of dialogue within a linguistic analysis. Diachronic refers to the change of linguistics over a specific length of time while synchronic refers to the manner in which linguistics are used at a direct point in time. The ideology of diachronistic and synchronistic linguistics is particularly useful in exploring the narrative of cinema.. Diachronic and synchronic dialogues are terminology tools that help to create the borders of time within the film in which dialogue is presented.

Danny Boyle's 1994 film *Trainspotting* offers a precise illustration of how diachronic and synchronic utterances can be applied to create wholly different meanings within similar application of mirrored dialogue over the course of the entire film. In an examination of the

opening and closing monologues the audience is given the same sequence of dialogue; however, given the context of the dialogue's presentation each monologue becomes varied in meaning despite the similarity of words being used in each. The protagonist Renton opens the film's establishing shot with a voice over narration:

RENTON: Choose a fucking big television, choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol, and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisurewear and matching luggage. Choose a three-piece suit on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked up brats you spawned to replace yourselves. Choose your future. Choose life... But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life. I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?

This opening monologue, when taken in the context of synchronic dialogue offers an establishing motif of the protagonist's primary conflict and an evaluation of his ethical code. The validity of synchronic dialogue is illustrated through this cinematic opening in that it demonstrates a tool of Narratology that psychologically transports the viewer; fusing the spectator to a volatile and unsafe guide. The audience is given an in depth calculation of Edinburgh in the 1990s through the perception of an addict. Narratively the method of approaching this monologue synchronically

enables the viewer to be transported directly into the psyche of Renton, allowing for a brutal understanding and a gripping sympathetic connection to be established with the main character. Through the course of the film the audience follows Renton through various conflicts and arcs, when finally arriving at the resolution of the film the Renton once more returns to the motif of his opening litany:

RENTON: Now I'm cleaning up and I'm moving on, going straight and choosing life. I'm looking forward to it already. I'm gonna be just like you. The job, the family, the fucking big television. The washing machine, the car, the compact disc and electric tin opener, good health, low cholesterol, dental insurance, mortgage, starter home, leisure wear, luggage, three piece suite, DIY, game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, nine to five, good at golf, washing the car, choice of sweaters, family Christmas, indexed pension, tax exemption, clearing gutters, getting by, looking ahead, the day you die.

When taken synchronically, Renton's closing monologue has only the minor revelation of a character looking forward to a future of conformity and adherence to an established community. The use of diachronic dialogue opens a much more complex and provocative understanding of the character's broader arc throughout the narrative. When juxtaposed within the framing of the entire film, the viewer is given an evaluation of Renton's growth as a character. The opening and closing monologues reflect one another thematically in referencing the character's perception of choice; both voice-overs make use of a mimetic litany. The monologues' are meant to be variations of the same core ideology. However, under the understanding of diachronic dialogue both monologues, while initially appearing as mimetic utterances shift into opposite binary points chronicling the complete arc of the protagonist. Initially Renton

demonstrated his awareness of social mores while explicating his resistance to conform to them through his focused and dedicated addiction to Heroin. By the close of the film Renton has overcome his addiction and is now eager to conform to the same communal institutions that he was against. Without the implementation of synchronic as well as diachronic dialogue, the audience would not be able to completely follow Renton through the course of his character's evolution. There is a high level of irony involved in the evolution of Renton's monologues. The same words previously spoken by the character have shifted completely from an anarchic to a conforming point of view. Also consider that synchronic dialogue transports the audience to a unique point in cinematic space-time while diachronic dialogue demonstrates the full breadth of the journey that the audience has taken.

The ability to move through narrative time via dialogue in a film is complimented by the cinematic technique of flashback and flashforward. In his 1980 essay "Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method" Gerard Genette establishes specific Narratology traits that complement and reestablish the cinematic ideologies of synchronic and diachronic dialogue, building on the Russian Formalist idea of fabula time initially found in the work by Vladimir Propp and Viktor Schlovsky. Scholar Jose Angel Garcia Landa tightly summarizes Genette's observations of fabula time, "Fabula time is pluridimensional, since a fabula is not a thin narrative line but a volume of relationships progressing in time. But a story presupposes the encoding of those events in a semiotic thread of signs. Simultaneity therefore will have to be rendered implicitly or through sequentiality. Study of narrative time can be described as study of how a pluridimensional phenomenon has been mapped on a limited semiotic system; or, conversely, of how a linear and sequential text manages to construct, to represent, the fullness of a lived temporality" (21). The theory of fabula time allows the audience to view a film within the

understanding that cinematic space-time exists on a three-dimensional plane rather than a two dimensional line of linearity.

Fabula time provides for a construct in cinema that allows for the examination of analepsis and prolepsis narrative; flashbacks and flashforwards. The consideration of narrative flash time is of great importance in the recognition of how a film audience is afforded the ability to move omnisciently through a cinematic narrative. The audience becomes unanchored when exposed to grand movements in screen time. A cinematic flashback or flashforward provides the viewers psyche with a rare form of time travel. A single frame of film can transport an audience hundreds of years in any direction from the present moment in time. Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* (2011) strongly exemplifies this concept. Throughout the opening of the film, Malick presents his audience with a visual tour of the earth's creation. The film presents the biologic construction of the oceans and landmasses. Early life is displayed evolving from single cell organisms to birds and mammals. Malick employs this landscape of fabula time in order to juxtapose the small period of time humankind has inhabited the earth with the epoch of the planet itself. The effect of this presentation instigates interpretative conclusions to be drawn by the audience. Suddenly the conflicts of the film's characters are placed in a broader spectrum. The perspective of the viewer is opened up to the insignificance of the human drama within the narrative, Malick employs this technique to suggest the pettiness that human beings are distracted by on a daily basis.¹⁰

Perhaps one of the most iconic instances of flashforward can be witnessed in Dennis Hopper's 1969 road film *Easy Rider*. In the context of the film the audience is traveling with Billy and Wyatt through an unstable American landscape, addled with cultural tensions and fueled by psychedelic drugs. A sequence that marks the latter half of the film is when the

protagonists arrive at a brothel in New Orleans. Wyatt looks at a plaque on the brothel wall that states, "Death only closes a man's reputation and determines it as good or bad." Directly following this close up is a flicker of a shot. The shot contains an aerial of a nondescript rural road. Along the side of the road the audience sees a glimpse of burning wreckage. In essence Wyatt is experiencing a premonition of his own death, which instigates the self-reflexivity inspired by the inscription on the plaque he read. The audience often responds in confusion to this sequence upon a first viewing. There are no narrative cues that allow the revelations of the protagonists' deaths to be indicated. The viewer travels briefly into the future to the point of Wyatt's death through the director's use of narrative prolepsis.

The implementation of analepsis and prolepsis in cinematic narrative alters the audiences' perception. The viewer is given the privilege of moving through the narrative's exposition, unhindered by the physical restraints of conventional space-time. Witnessing a flashback that presents insight into a character's past creates an opportunity for the audience to gain a greater understanding of the narrative as a whole. When the film employs a flashforward, the viewer then assumes a role of dramatic irony, understanding the outcome of the cinematic action to a much greater degree than the film's characters do themselves. We see this demonstrated in Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1998). As the titular character Lola rampages through the streets to save her boyfriend from a violent fate, she physically bumps into various characters. As she does, a still frame sequence flashforward of the individual plays out to the audience. The viewer sees a brief exhibition of what occurs in the characters' lives after coming into contact with Lola. Some find luxurious fortunes while others fall into spirals of addiction and depravity. As Lola replays segments of her adventure, the fates of these characters are in constant flux. Regardless of the contextual fate of each character, this cinematic technique is

used to demonstrate the randomness of Lola's encounters and that destiny can be altered within the setting of the film.

The conventions of Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* bond with classic tropes of Narratology to broaden the conceptions of how a film may change its viewer. There are specific traits of New Media theory that also serve in assisting to understand how the cinematic audience arrives at a particular truth-value of a film. When approaching cinema through a ~~lens~~ of New Media lens, the scope of a film's presentation opens widely. The contemporary film viewer can engage a movie in countless formats. The classic audience was shackled to a theatre when consuming a film; now audiences can utilize smartphones, laptops, game consoles and portable car players to watch a plethora of different materials. What does this mean for the way an audience is changed by film? How does watching a film with countless notifications, distractions, and social influences change the experience? In their text *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest that, "No medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural media." (55)

The concept that cinema can no longer be isolated in its consumption is a complex issue. The modern audience has arrived at a technological precipice in which multi-tasking is no longer optional. All films are viewed against a backdrop of social connectivity and engagement. When arriving at the movie theatre the audience is now faced with the option to view a film in 2D, 3D, and often 3D Imax. These choices all affect the viewer in different manners. Christopher Nolan acknowledges this circumstance during an interview before the release of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), he observes:

I wanted it to be stylistically consistent with the first two films and we were really going to push the IMAX thing to create a very high-quality image.¹¹ I find stereoscopic imaging too small scale and intimate in its effect. 3-D is a misnomer. Films are 3-D. The whole point of photography is that it's three-dimensional. The thing with stereoscopic imaging is it gives each audience member an individual perspective. (Nolan)

For Nolan, the various digitized methods of viewing a film speak to enabling an audience's perspective. The options at times seem triggered to overwhelm the senses of the moviegoer; perhaps these features are the film industry's response to a populace steeped in overstimulation. While these viewing options are all different from one another, they do share the commonality of providing multiple ways for an audience to interact with the film.

The interaction between a film and its audience is referred to as interface. There are several instances of cinematic interface that are established in film theory. In his book *Cinematic Interfaces: Film Theory After New Media*, Sueng-hoon Jeong institutes a vernacular that aids in assessing film through a lens of New Media. Jeong offers the concept of "interface" when examining the context of the audience's relationship with cinema. He applies the term once largely embraced in computer science as a methodology of addressing the space between the viewer and the film, "...*interface* means the communication boundary or point of interaction between two other parts or systems, while it becomes part of that system, influencing how two parties interplay with each other." (11) Here the bridge between the audience and the film, the symbiosis that occurs when the viewer watches film, and the manner in which the viewer is transformed by the film has been given precise terminology. With Jeong's use of the concept of interface, we see additional rhetoric of digital terminology being applied to film studies. A

precise and nearly universal interface that audience's share is often found in cinema that portray tragedies. The common cultural interface of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) is one that is explicated by pain and remorse. The film portrays a fictionalized account of the Holocaust, which universally inspires despair and heartbreak in audiences. The audience is transported to Auschwitz through the visceral imagery; they are able to emotionally interface with the slaughter and depravity that occurred within the camp, despite being physically removed from the literal violence.

The concept of interface is very broad. An interface that might be relevant for computer systems may not be as useful when it comes to understanding how an audience reacts to a film. In order to make use of interface as a concept for cinema studies, specific forms of interface need to be defined. Jeong goes on to unpack a deeper relevance with the term interface. He explains that there are three separate yet interrelated subsets held within the term. The first is cultural interface, "... cinema as a cultural interface leads a new life as a 'toolbox' for cultural communication, a culturally legitimated set of tools for the user's visual organization of data through abstract operations." (13) Beyond cultural interface there is the relevance of the viewer's literal gaze upon the film screen, this is known as perceptual interface, "... a permeable membrane that is not simply between reality and fantasy, that is, actual and virtual worlds, as in cinema, but between body and image, between image and data." (15) The third Jeong suggests, is an extension of perceptual interface known as embodied interface, "As some installation works translate digital information into visible images by virtue of bodily participation, the current interface aesthetics emphasizes that the material interface with digital code often remains meaningless until we access it through our physiological sensory organs." (15) An audience's

emotional participation in any form of cinema is always engineered by the combined application of these three forms of interface.

A contextual application of New Media interface, in its various incarnations, provides the audience with an additional tool in exploring the nature of how they engage and synthesize cinematic texts. When combined with a re-appropriation of Bakhtin's dialogic linguistics and elements Narratology a vast space is created in which cinema may be interpreted beyond its standardized conventions to analyze the manners in which it affects the psychology and cultural relations of the audience. There are undoubtedly moments in every film that can be processed and interpreted under the aforementioned criteria to find truth-value and instances of transformation. The genre of a cinematic artifact does not interfere with this textual assessment. When films from various genres are juxtaposed under this analytical lens, the audience is privileged to an understanding of just how far reaching and universal the effect of cinema is on the interpretive values of the viewer.

We exist in a dynamic universe: A perpetual flux of reorganizations, recalculations, and new interpretations. The continual change of our surroundings and the perceptions of those changes is acknowledged and identified through precise facets of New Media theory. Lev Manovich offers a strong set of New Media identifiers that explicitly articulates fundamental characteristics of New Media artifacts. Manovich states that, "...a new media object is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions" (36). What Manovich insights with this observation is that artistic artifacts, when perceived through a New Media frame, can be engaged and interpreted by an audience through countless different manners. The versatility of Manovich's approach to New Media interpretation opens a wide breadth of analysis for observations of cinematic Narratology and

genre aesthetics.

Manovich suggests there are five specific principles of New Media. Manovich's principles were originally presented as a construct theory for the digitization of media; however, a broader interpretation of the values unearths interpretive value in discussing cinema. These principles provide a foundation for recognizing the fact that cinematic narrative can be interpreted relevantly through New Media theory. The first principle that Manovich offers is numerical representation. A literal example of numerical representation in cinema is demonstrated in Wes Anderson's 2001 release *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Anderson sets up the narrative as a storybook. Each major scene change of the film is marked visually on screen with a title card and numerical chapter, as if the narrative of the film was being delivered directly from the text of a book.

As the most straightforward and technical variant of the principles, numerical representation is largely important in ordering a narrative sequence of a film. Specifically each frame of a film needs to be placed in an edited order. Manovich states, "All new media objects, whether they are created from scratch on computers or converted from analog media sources, are composed of digital code; they are numerical representations" (49). The specific linearity of a film's narrative plot, the standardization of each frame of film, the numerology of the director's storyboard; are all reliant on a numerical order. If the specified linearity of the narrative's sequence is ignored, then the plot will not make any sense to the audience. Most cinematic narrative is precisely deliberate. The production team agrees upon an established sequence of events, and the film structure is edited in a manner that accurately portrays these events in a narrative structure. Manovich's principle of numerical representation is the science behind the cohesive organization of a film's narrative structure. Once a film is placed in sequential order

through numerical representation, the audience can understand the deliberate order of the narrative.

The second principle of Manovich's New Media theory is modularity. Modularity is vastly important to cinematic analysis and evaluation. The ability that modularity gives the audience is to recognize various scenes of a film as units that can exist individually and at the same time as part of greater narrative structure. Anytime an individual refers to having a favorite part of a film, modularity is being employed. Modularity is also strongly represented in discussing the narrative sequence of a cinematic narrative structure. Manovich's specific definition suggests, "Media elements, be it images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are represented as collections of discrete samples (pixels, polygons, voxels, characters, scripts). These elements are assembled into larger-scale objects but they continue to maintain their separate identity. The objects themselves can be combined into even larger objects -- again, without losing their independence." (51)

If a film's plot is described as having a beginning, middle, and end, then it is being regarded as a modular plotline. Strong cinematic evidence of modularity is represented in Christopher Nolan's 2000 film *Memento*. The plot of the film garnered strong attention upon its release for presenting a plot structure that was exposed in reverse. The effect that the backward plot structure exhibits is modular in nature. Each sequence of the film must be viewed and synthesized with the audience as an isolated action. Once the specified action is viewed and understood by the audience, only then can the scene be incorporated into the film's story as a whole.

Manovich's third principle is variability. Perhaps the most dynamic and provocative of the new media principles, variability is defined as an artifact of media that is able to constantly

be reinterpreted as something new, updated, or evolved. The variability of cinematic narrative exists on many different levels. Manovich states, “A new media object is not something fixed once and for all but can exist in different, potentially infinite, versions.” (56) One level that audiences see constantly in terms of variability is cinematic genre. Many genres of cinema are being reinvented, remade, and blended with regularity. A popular representation of this concept can be found in Michel Hazanavicius’ *The Artist* (2011). The best picture winner of 2011, *The Artist* is a silent film. A format that ended in mainstream popularity in the late 1920s¹², was reintroduced with a single French film that garnered deep acclaim from critics and box office audiences alike. *The Artist*, is not a part of the “Silent Age of Cinema” but it definitely brought attention to the format and instigated popular appeal for the other silent films of the 1920s and 30s.¹³

There are very few original plotlines found in cinema, in order to invigorate originality into a script or storyline, screen writers and directors are constantly attempting to reinvent familiar narratives and cinematic conventions. Any Hollywood remake of an older film, television show, comic book, or textual adaption is a demonstration of new media variability in cinema. A precise example of this condition is exemplified in the 2015 film of George Miller, *Mad Max Fury Road*. With this film, Miller has taken a setting and character that rose to popularity over 40 years ago and reconditioned them to fit the desires of a contemporary cinematic audience. While the film is not a remake in and of itself, it does rekindle a new audiences’ awareness of a cinematic character that had fallen out of mainstream circulation for over 30 years. The rebooting of popular franchises is rampant in the Hollywood studio system. The summer blockbuster season is saturated with cinematic adaptations of comic books, Broadway musicals, and Golden Age sitcoms. Audiences’ enjoy the updated familiarity of nostalgia.¹⁴

Manovich's final principle of new media is transcoding. The term transcoding originally was used in reference to the digitization of various forms of media; the importation of newspapers to microfilm, the transference of 16mm film to VHS, the recording of a vinyl record to a digitized compact disc. Essentially any process by which an originally formatted material is introduced into a new medium. The way that transcoding can be applied to cinematic narrative is more of an abstract implementation than a literal physical transference of media from one medium to another. Though some literal relevance can certainly be applied. With cinematic narrative, transcoding can be largely demonstrated at the production level of a film. A film's narrative must first be written, and then transferred to storyboards, then the storyboarded narrative must be applied to film.

The process of physically transcoding a textual narrative to a cinematic narrative is rampant in contemporary Hollywood. Best selling novel adaptations and comic book reinterpretations are some of the hottest selling commodities in movie houses across the globe. From the avant-garde, such as David Cronenberg's 1991 cinematic adaptation of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* to the opposite end of the spectrum with the mainstream release of Sam Taylor-Johnson's adaptation of E.L. James' *50 Shades of Grey*, transcoding is found frequently in many facets of cinematic narratives.

There is a cultural interface to the process of transcoding as well. Manovich explains that to transcode a new media artifact bears a cultural significance on the artifact as well as the audience. Regarding transcoding he states:

Similarly, new media in general can be thought of as consisting from two distinct layers: the "cultural layer" and the "computer layer." The examples of categories on the cultural layer are encyclopedia and a short story; story and plot;

composition and point of view; mimesis and catharsis, comedy and tragedy. The examples of categories on the computer layer are process and packet (as in data packets transmitted through the network); sorting and matching; function and variable; a computer language and a data structure. (63)

Here we see a representation of the duality of cinema as a new media object: the cultural layer and the digital layer. Transcoding serves to bridge the gap between these two layers. The process by which cinema is digitized and brought to the screen is established through transcoding. The same concept is relevant for the process by which cinema affects the viewer. When the narrative of the film culturally interfaces with the audience it is also considered transcoding.

Cinematic history continuously repeats itself. The variability of genre is one such manner that audiences see archaic film genres transformed into relevant cinematic artifacts. The genre of Classic Hollywood Noir has been soundly sleeping¹⁵ but the variability of the genre has created a space in which many directors have been able to participate in the evolution of the genre by applying contemporary cinematic techniques to the original genre standards. The Coen Brothers' *Miller's Crossing* (1990) is a robust example of how the use of homage and pastiche demonstrate the variability of the Classic Noir genre resulting in an entirely new genre known as Neo-Noir.

Chapter One Notes

¹ Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism were originally intended to study linguistics while Manovich's principles of new media were introduced as a study of digitized media.

² The complacency of watching a film occurs at the point when an audience does not interrogate the process by which cinematic aesthetic is altering their perception. Many times an audience is

not made immediately aware of the affectation that transpires. The implementation of new media and narratological concepts are tools that will help the audience to recognize the influence of cinematic aesthetic on their perception of communication, time, and place.

³ A dialogue between two characters.

⁴ A single unit of speech would be the equivalent of a monologue. Monologism would be the analysis of single lines of speech.

² Bakhtin, illustrating the concept of multivocality regarding Dostoyevsky, states, "is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (Bakhtin 18).

⁶ The psychological grid that each member of an audience possesses is individually unique. There are literally countless factors that an audience contains that will shape their consumption of a film. For example, If a young man had a grandfather who loved *Casablanca* and they watched it every time they visited each other, the film will contain a strong nostalgic resonance for this individual. This man could be sitting next to a young woman who may have never seen *Casablanca* before, her reaction to the film will not contain the same echo of nostalgia as the young man. As a result these two individuals will have different interpretive reactions despite witnessing the same film.

⁷ The definition of space-time continuum is rooted in the study of cosmology. Space is modeled as being three-dimensional with time being added as a fourth dimension. Space-time in regard to chronotope is an illustration of how language is used to refer to time within a narrative structure.

⁸ A film's conflict will be apparent in terms of the structured plot of a film; however, audience members will perceive the conflict uniquely based on their own life experiences that they bring with them to the film.

⁹ Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* published in 1928 is considered to be Narratology's introduction into literary theory.

¹⁰ Malick's narrative in *Tree of Life* spans millions of years, across the formation of Earth, and well into the establishment of human existence. Malick's decision to chronicle the breadth of the planet's creation is an exercise in demonstrating the existential crisis of the film's characters.

¹¹ Nolan is referring broadly of the Dark Knight trilogy he directed. Nolan's critical success with his earlier work was deeply eclipsed by the overwhelming box office success of the Dark Knight trilogy.

¹² Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (1927), is on the vanguard of films using spoken dialogue and is often considered to mark the death of the silent film genre.

¹³ At the time of *The Artist* winning best picture, Netflix could not meet supply demands of other popular silent films such as Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925), *City Lights* (1931), and *Modern Times* (1936).

¹⁴ The strongest current example of this is the reboot of Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) in the form of Colin Trevorrow's *Jurassic World* (2015) which grossed a world wide box office sum of 1.6 billion dollars. Over twenty years later and cloned dinosaurs are still one of mainstream cinemas hottest commodities. I too attended this film in the theater, largely because of its nostalgic relevance to my childhood.

¹⁵ Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) is often considered the end of "Classic Noir" in Hollywood.

CHAPTER TWO – THE WET CITY

VARIABILITY OF CINEMATIC GENRE: THE PASTICHE NOIR AESTHETIC OF *MILLER'S CROSSING*

Contemporary cinema often focuses on the timelessness of previous successes. Hollywood primarily measures these successes in dollar signs. It should come as no surprise that the American film industry at its core is a business. Production studios, film crews, directors, they are all united under an artistic banner of creating cinema, but ultimately they are also responding to the common denominator of making a financially successful product. Today's film viewers require entertainment that is engaging, flashy, and familiar. Cinema is created in blended styles and hybrid genres. We may see a romantic comedy with moments of horror spliced in, or a historical biopic that has the tenants of a classic Hollywood musical. Audiences rarely see a singular genre of film being created anymore. When an audience does come across a film that embraces a specific cinematic genre, it is done through homage and pastiche. The ability to culturally identify film genre is often recognized through various cinematic techniques and sensory cues:

Bits of dialogue, musical figures, or styles and patterns of *mise-en-scène* are all aspects of movies that, repeated from film to film within a genre, become established as conventions. Conventions function as an implied agreement between makers and consumers to accept certain artificialities in specific contexts. In musicals the narrative halts for the production numbers, wherein characters break

into song and dance... Conventions also include aspects of style associated with particular genres. For example, melodrama is characterized by an excessively stylized *mise-en-scène*, while film Noir commonly employs low-key lighting (“Film Reference Encyclopedia”).

The mimetic qualities of cinematic homage and pastiche are articulated through particular theoretical aspects of new media. In particular, Lev Manovich employs a principle of new media known as variability. The idea of new media variability when applied to cinematic genre is that an original category of film can exist in new forms. New media variability, as it is applied in a cinematic context, essentially relates to making an old artifact new.

An old genre can be reestablished in new ways and traditional cinema can incorporate contemporary aspects to appeal to a new audience. Jerrold Brandell illustrates this point in his text *Celluloid Couches, Cinematic Clients*: “It is the variability of this wider cultural context, I submit, that makes legible the corresponding variability and historical changes that characterize or culture’s cinematic offerings” (99). Brandell suggests that a variability of a culture will directly result in a variability of cinema.

A particular genre that has exhibited a high level of variability in cinema is Film Noir. In the traditional ideology of Noir, the genre is no longer being produced purely in the manner that it was during the 1930s and 1950s.¹ The genre label Noir no longer exists in Hollywood; it has evolved into several other blended genres, the closest to its original form being Neo-Noir. Gilmore states that, “Neo-Noir is also something somewhat different from classic Noir. It is more general, more detached, more ironic, more philosophical than classic Noir. It involves a level of self-reflexivity² that classic Noir lacked” (290). The contemporary audience recognizes Neo-Noir to be a direct variation of the classic Noir genre with the added implementation of

current cinematic technologies that were not available during the popularity of classic Noir in Hollywood.³ Essentially the existence of Neo-Noir demonstrates the variability of the classic Noir genre. In his editorial “Revolving Versions of Film Noir Explore Today’s Uneasy Feelings,” Roger Ebert suggests, “[Neo-Noir] films come out of the way we live now. Just as 1940s Noir was generated by the sense that old values were crumbling, that good would not always win over evil, that men were weak and temptation was strong - so does neo Noir see the same helplessness and despair at work today” (2).

In order to understand how Neo-Noir as a genre can be recognized under the new media principle of variability, an illustration of how a Neo-Noir cinema mimics classical Noir is unveiled. The comparison of variability in cinema is illustrated in the text *Film Remakes as Ritual and Disguise: From Carmen to Ripley* by Anat Zanger:

The reading of various cinematic versions seeks on the one hand to describe the uniqueness of each version and, on the other, to discover what is common to them all. Whether it is the novella, the opera, some combination of the two, or a previous cinematic version... two factors participate in this dynamic: the attitude toward the particular version... as a cultural object and the spectator’s intertextual knowledge. (Zanger 34)

A spectator’s intertextual knowledge applies largely to the visual cues that specific genres of film are known for. In relation to Noir and its contemporary counterpart Neo-Noir, the audience will often find that newer films will create a deliberate sense of parody or pastiche of classic Noir tropes. The variability between classic Noir and Neo-Noir is revealed through pastiche.

There are many contemporary films that might address and attend to the possibility of a

contemporary Neo-Noir genre. The Coen Brother's 1990 release, *Miller's Crossing* achieves this circumstance with a pointed grace and verbal finesse that is scarce in most films, classical or contemporary. *Miller's Crossing* is a unique film in that it seems to reestablish and blend specific sensibilities from the Noir genre, rather than blatantly parodying or hyperbolizing instances of Noir stereotypes as such films as Curtis Hanson's 1997 *L.A. Confidential* or Norman Mailer's 1987 *Tough Guys Don't Dance* do. The Coen Brothers have stated in interviews that they did not want to create a revival of the Noir genre as much as they wanted to create a film that paid homage to the original Noir films and literature of the 1940 and 1950s. What they have come to create is a masterpiece in compositional integrity, visual structure and narrative storytelling. The Coen's were interested in applying the classical sensibilities of the Noir genre through several crucial stereotypes, including an archetypical classification of its characters, its plot and narrative structure, as well as through its symbolic representation. Each of these elements, when thoroughly exemplified through scenes in the film, help to establish *Miller's Crossing* as a pastiche of the classical Noir genre.

Of the Noir sensibilities found in *Miller's Crossing* one of the most prevalent is that of classical Noir character archetypes. The hero of the story is little more than an Irish mob boss's second in command. He drinks his meals and knows the ins and outs of the city as if he designed it himself. Tom Reagan, played by Gabriel Byrne, is the film's protagonist. He is at once the traditional anti-hero of the classical Noir genre. In his article "A Genealogy of Antihero" Murat Kadiroglu suggests, "The antihero, like the hero, has complex notion of being both unheroic and protagonist. If the protagonist does not comply with the traditional heroic traits, according to some views, then he is called antihero" (8). Leo is the right hand of the Irish kingpin Leo O'Bannon. As the lieutenant of a prohibition era mob boss, Tom is involved with many criminal

activities that run the gamut from bootlegging to racketeering. But as the tradition of the anti-hero dictates, while he is engaged with many aspects of lawlessness, he is not without connection to virtue. Tom's particular standard of morality is that he will not take another man's life. This virtue of Tom's comes to be tried over and over again throughout the plot. Tom maintains the physical characteristics of the classic Noir protagonist as well. He is often adorned in the traditional dark trench coat and fedora, and is never more than an arm's reach away from a bottle of whiskey.

Tom further exemplifies the role of a flawed Noir hero through his ability to negotiate the myriad criminal underworld of his city. His priority is to ensure Leo's control over the criminal enterprise they have built. Tom desires to keep Leo protected under all costs. Tom's protective instinct is one of the primary driving conflicts of the film. Leo begins a power struggle between himself and Casper, the leader of the Italians. This power struggle is, in essence, over protecting Bernie Bernbaum, the brother of Verna, the woman that Leo is in love with. This struggle only instigates the internal conflict within Tom as well, for he too is in love with Verna and prior to the film's start has entered into an affair with her. The nature of Tom's ability to negotiate the world he is in hinges on the direct conflict he is engaged with. He is a traditional antihero in that he is streetwise and roughed up by existing in a criminal underworld. He is saved by the fact that, at heart, he is a noble character, wishing nothing else than to protect the people around him that he loves. Tom's altruistic behavior is illustrated in the following dialogue:

LEO: I know, I know. Retreat to win. Give up.

Bernie. That'll solve all our problems.

TOM: It won't anymore, I'll grant that. Now it's either you or Caspar. But going toe-to-toe with a psychopath'll get you nowhere. It'll force everyone to choose sides just when you're looking shaky.

LEO: The hell I do!

TOM: Then where's the mayor? Why aren't there any police here? Why weren't there police at your place last night?

LEO: I didn't ask for any.

TOM: I did.

LEO: Mother hen, huh? What's the matter, Tommy, you think I can't take care of myself?

TOM: I know you can't. Here's the smart play, you lay back, give up Bernie, let Caspar think he's made his point. Wait for him to show you a weakness--

LEO: Please, Tom. . .

TOM: You're sticking on Bernie. Sticking your neck out for a guy who'd chop you off at the heels if there was two bits in it.

This conversation takes place after Leo was attacked in his home. Tom had originally requested police protection without telling Leo. The rival mob family put a hit out on Leo, which he was able to fight off with his own resourcefulness. Tom's request for additional support for Leo's protection is indicative of his protective nature.

While *Miller's Crossing* pays tribute to classic Noir tropes with its characterization of an antihero protagonist, it also recognizes traditional Noir, with the inclusion of a beautiful, manipulative, and dangerous femme fatale. Verna Bernbaum, played by Marcia Gay Harding, is the woman who is trying to protect her brother Bernie. Bernie has fallen into bad grace with the

local mob scene through a consistency of degenerate gambling debts and the sale of privileged information. In an effort to keep Bernie alive, Verna enters into a romantic affair with both Leo and Tom, in the hopes that their feelings for her will result in protection for her brother.

The nature of Verna in *Miller's Crossing* is a bit more complicated than that of the traditional femme fatale. As history in Noir cinema would dictate, the femme fatale is often only looking out for herself and attempts to manipulate the men that are attracted to her, often in the hopes of obtaining money and often at the expense of the death of the protagonist. Verna is a composite of this traditional femme fatale, though like Tom, retaining a sense of honor to her character nurtures her salvation.⁴ Verna does not manipulate Tom or Leo for money, she merely does it because she cares about her brother and does not want any harm to come to him. During the film's narrative Tom confronts Verna about the manner in which she is manipulating Leo for Bernie's protection. Tom tells Verna he knows her to be little more than a "con artist;" that she has no real feelings for Leo. What is admirable in the case of Verna is that she openly admits that she and Leo have an "arrangement" in order to keep her brother safe. She is not as deceptive as many of the femme fatales that came before her, though she does retain the Noir sensibility of being dirtied up and beautiful. Throughout the course of the film Verna flares her promiscuity openly with Tom, trying to convince him to admit his jealousy toward her relationship with Leo. Tom remains in control of his emotions throughout though, never allowing Verna to gain the upper hand emotionally.

Tom's ability to control his relationship with Verna is largely on account of the idea that, while Tom does care a great deal for Verna, his real loyalty remains with Leo's well being. Tom's affections toward Verna veer toward the pragmatic. The audience sees Tom and Verna together in highly intimate moments of the film.⁵ Tom and Verna are in a romantic relationship,

however; when the viewer moves beyond the emotional response of the two lovers a deeper motivation begins to surface. Both of these characters are guardians. Verna is protecting her brother and Tom is protecting his boss.⁶ It is clear that Verna is not above using Tom to ensure her brother's well being. She is openly lobbies for her brother's safety in several conversations between herself and Tom. Beyond his attraction for Verna, he never trusts her influence on Leo. Tom goes out of his way to try and persuade Leo to end his affair with Verna. This appeal can be interpreted as Tom truly being in love with Verna, and therefore not wanting to share her with another man, but his decision to ultimately execute her brother indicates that Tom's deepest affinity remains with Leo. Despite the underhanded nature of Tom and Verna regarding the nature of their affair, both characters retain a positive image with audiences.

An interesting feature of Noir films is that the viewer often looks past antisocial traits of certain characters as long as they are presented with amiable personalities. Leo O'Bannon himself, played by Albert Finney, is an important character that invokes several of the classic Noir sensibilities as well. He is benevolent in his demeanor and runs several bootlegging operations throughout the city in which he lives. What is indicative of the classical Noir style within Leo's character is the fact that he forces audiences to reassess their moral aptitude when engaging him as a character. Leo is a crime boss; he makes a living out of committing acts of illegality and he even murders when he feels it is necessary, yet viewers find themselves aligned with his character in the construct of the narrative plot. There is a desire for Leo to prevail against the conflicts that he is faced with; the viewer does not want harm to come to his character. He is a criminal; and he lives outside of the very law that the audience abides by in order to maintain safe and healthy existences. It is part of the Noir aesthetic that allows the audience to engage with criminals as protagonist throughout the plots and narratives. This is

illustrated classically in countless Noir films. Cinema such as *M*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *The Lady From Shanghai* all contain protagonists that maintain a criminal stature, yet the audience eventually connects with each of them. While Leo is not the primary protagonist of *Miller's Crossing*, he stands as a consistent illustration of the manner in which classical Noir sensibilities require contemporary audiences to face moral ambiguity through the construct of a character that is kind hearted and likable while also being a criminal. The viewer is blind to the unethical behavior of particular camps within the film's setting in order to favor specific characters. All of the players in *Miller's Crossing* are criminals, however; there is a clear establishment of "good" guys and "bad" guys in the narrative. The moral disregard that criminalizes Tom and Leo is based on crimes that go unseen on the screen. They make their living through bootlegging and gambling, but the violence of these actions are invisible to the viewer. As a contemporary audience, we only understand bootlegging as an abstract criminal activity; no longer an illegal activity. Gambling is embraced legally by current standards as well. The portrayal of Johnny Caspar as an antagonist of the film is represented by his desire to murder Bernie and pit Tom against Leo. These criminal actions are more relevant to contemporary ideas of lawlessness and vice.

The film's primary antagonist echoes the classical Noir villain in that he is unabashedly hateful, psychopathic, and sadistic. Eddie Dane (J. E. Freeman) is a henchman for the Italian gang leader Johnny Caspar. As Caspar's executioner, The Dane is the most feared element throughout the plot of *Miller's Crossing*. Caspar is Leo's rival for political and territorial control over their city. Eddie Dane is a character that contains no sympathy or mercy. He kills in cold blood and will listen to no word of reason beyond the command of his employer. The Dane is a character of complete darkness, without a shred of redemption. The audience experiences the

Noir sensibility at its most unrelenting and darkest hour with the character of Eddie Dane. As Casper's henchman, The Dane is an extension of the evil that exists in Johnny Casper in his selfish desire to gain control of Leo's bootlegging operations. Casper himself will not kill those who stand in his way; this, in essence, is the function of Eddie Dane's character. He is a sociopath and blindly abides by the commands of his commander. In many ways he acts as the binary foil of Tom's character; they both retain the same position socially in the criminal world and they both exhibit similar levels of cunning throughout the conflicts that arise over the course of the plot. Perhaps one of the most interesting elements of The Dane's character, one that sets him apart from nearly all other Noir villains that came before him, is that he is openly homosexual. In some ways, because of the era of the film's setting, this trait acts as a reinforcement of The Dane's antisocial behavior. He uses his sexuality in conjunction with his ferociousness to bully minor characters throughout the film. It seems that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, open homosexuality was considerably less accepted than it is by today's standards. By openly identifying as homosexual, The Dane shows subversive disregard for the mainstream behaviors of his community.

The plot of the film itself is also representation of the traits of classical Noir sensibility. The establishing shot of the film is of Leo's desk and a tumbler glass being filled with ice. This situation could be read as a symbolic introduction for the affairs of the film's start. The characters are engaged in business, as cold and as hard as ice, with life and death hinging on the decision of one man, Leo O'Bannon. The audience quickly learns the jurisdiction of the connection between Leo, his best friend Tom, Casper and The Dane. Casper wants Bernie Bernbaum dead due to the selling of information. Leo cannot let Bernie die because he is the brother of Verna, with whom Leo is romantically involved. Tom immediately tells Leo that he

should give up Bernie to Casper, that it would be bad for business to start a war over such a trivial detail, though Leo won't budge on the issue. What ensues from this conflict is a complex and deep web of manipulation, betrayal and moral abandonment. The narrative of *Miller's Crossing* is thick with dialogic exposition and heteroglossic word play between characters.⁷

The structure of the plot is linear, and involves no use of flashbacks, yet the composition nears overwhelming complexity. This complexity is a result of The Coen Brothers taking many pieces of the dialogue from Noir fiction.⁸ The transcoding of the text to the screen compresses the film's narrative. This compression results in characters being discussed before they arrive visually on screen, references to expository action that occurs outside of the narrative timeline, and important character connections that are only regarded subtly.⁹

The plot further complicates when it becomes apparent that Tom is also romantically involved with Verna and is having an affair with her behind Leo's back. This relationship creates tension between the audience and the triangle of Leo, Tom and Verna. It is evident that Leo's feelings are genuine toward Verna, so much so that he is about to risk his entire criminal empire in order to keep her happy and in his good graces. Tom's connection to her is shrouded in ambiguity, he claims to love her though treats her coolly when he suspects that she is trying to manipulate him. The possibility grows apparent that, while Tom may have feelings for Verna, his primary concern with keeping her close to him is so that he can monitor her actions with Leo. Tom's role in this love triangle could be read as an affair of damage control rather than one of the heart. Tom's genuine affection for Verna hinges largely on her involvement with Leo. If Verna had ended her affair with Leo, Tom would more than likely have maintained, at most, a fleeting interest in her. This interpretation is based on the coldness that Tom demonstrates toward Verna in their encounters. He is intimate with her, but he embraces his understanding of

her as a manipulator; Tom repeatedly tries to convince Leo of this belief. Due to Leo continually ignoring this warning he becomes an assassination target of Johnny Caspar.

Staying consistent with the classical Noir themes of danger and violence, the film reaches a pivotal climax when Casper, in an effort take control of Leo's power, sends two assassins to Leo's home in the middle of the night to kill him. Leo quickly outwits his would-be assailants and dispatches them both. The next day Tom arrives to Leo's office to ensure that he is safe. Tom eventually reveals the fact the Verna had been having an affair with him behind Leo's back. While this may appear to be cruel hearted, the audience is quickly made aware that the reason Tom entered into an affair with Verna was to alienate her and Leo from one another, so that she no longer had any control over him. This pivotal play on Tom's behalf begins his downward spiral throughout the second half of the film. From this juncture onward, Tom is utterly on his own with Leo writing him off on account of betrayal and Casper not trusting him on account of his ties with the Irish mob family. Tom must survive the city streets in complete isolation. He uses this rogue stature to his advantage, playing each mob family against the other until he finally achieves his ultimate goal of influencing both the Irish and Italian mob families.

Tom's voyage into rogue territory adds a deeper level of anticipation from the audience. The only information that the audience is aware of is what Tom himself has perceived during his encounters with the various criminals throughout the story. This narrative trait is not unlike the presentation of mystery in *The Big Sleep*. The same manner in which Marlowe acts as a vessel for the audience to gain further insights into the realm of the mystery he is trying to unveil is echoed throughout the narrative style of *Miller's Crossing*. The audience has no way of knowing what will befall Tom, they know only as much as he does. The lack of dramatic irony regarding Tom's manipulation of the rival mob family ensures a calculated level of suspense for the

audience. There is no way for the viewer to know if Tom has truly abandoned Leo and aligned himself with Caspar. The Coen Brothers wanted to achieve a level of ambiguity for Tom's alliance after his falling out with Leo over Verna. The role of Tom as a rogue player throughout the second act of the film is a highly symbolic aspect of the classic Noir antihero.

Throughout *Miller's Crossing*, there are several strong devices used that suggest the possibility of a symbolic representation of Noir sensibilities. The first and perhaps most saturated symbolic representation that takes place throughout the film is the timeframe of the setting. Much is left ambiguous to the viewer in terms of precise geographic location. The only specific trait of the setting's timeframe is that it falls sometime within the prohibition era, either the late 1920s or the early 1930s. The directors decided to maintain a nameless city for their film's setting which is an innovative decision that allows much freedom and personal investment on behalf of the audience. As opposed to having a direct recognition of a particular city, the viewer is free to create a composite space in their protecting Leo, and safely ridding the streets of Casper's power. The style of the narrative structure of *Miller's Crossing* recalls virtually any Noir city that has been encountered in past films. Now the audience can come to this film from a more pure space, they will not bring the experiences they have as individuals from specific cities that they have visited or read about to their impression of the city in *Miller's Crossing*. In other words, the personal psychological grid of the audiences' past urbane experiences may not come to be affected as strongly in terms of what the director requires of them. This city is nameless and we as the audience are allowed to place it wherever we would like in terms of location, size and organization.

The composite city of *Miller's Crossing* acts as setting for depravity and disorganization; combined with the fact that prohibition is in effect during this setting gives each character

involved in the plot an automatic and default level of corruption. Now every individual in the film that has a bottle in his or her hand could technically be considered a criminal. The virtuous Leo and Tom are dirtied up a little more if for no other reason than the very fact that their alcoholism is a crime; they require the consumption of alcohol in order to function.

Automatically, their addiction requires them to break the law to live. This element of the setting necessitates that crime be a way of survival, perhaps even more so than an accountable moral choice. The protagonists of the film are rendered physically and financially dependent on lawlessness. The audience becomes aligned with these characters and forgives the unlawful trespasses that they commit. The variability of classic Noir character portrayal is demonstrated through this allowance on the part of the audience. The protagonists of the classic Noir era always existed outside of social law.

While the setting may remain ambiguous and the time frame deterministically corrupting, an aspect that remains a clear indication of Noir influence upon *Miller's Crossing* is the representation of the political and law enforcement leaders throughout the course of the plot. As is the tradition in classic Noir cinema, the public officials in *Miller's Crossing* are utterly inept. The politicians and law enforcement are portrayed as foot soldiers, ready to commit to the needs of the highest bidder. Raids on the speakeasies of various crime bosses are motivated by the monetary gain of opposing mobsters, never by the will of the law to clean up the city. They allow themselves to be bought and controlled by whichever crime boss has the most power. The chief of police acts only as a pawn for Leo, shaking down whichever of Casper's casinos that Leo points his finger to. The mayor of the city is elected only because Leo has fixed the ballots, as Tom explains that he voted for the man six times during the last election. The true power within the city is negotiated by the mobster with the most muscle and power, which shifts

continuously throughout the course of the film. As the public officials of *Miller's Crossing* function largely as inept puppets for the crime syndicate, it is no wonder that, for any form of justice to be administered, it is left to the criminals to deliver it. The notion of 'rough justice' is one that has long since been established as a crucial trait of any proper Noir film. This trope is another sensibility of classic Noir that emerges symbolically through the direct actions of Tom toward the film's finale.

For justice to occur in the narrative of the film, Bernie must be taken out. He is instigator of all the conflicts that have developed over the course of the plot. The variability of classic Noir is once more demonstrated, this time by the rough justice of Bernie's execution. In the final moments of Tom's master plan to rid the city of Casper and Bernie, thus saving his former boss and friend Leo from harm, he negotiates a meeting between Casper and Bernie that leaves the Italian mob boss dead at the hands of Bernbaum. What proceeds is the first time in which Tom kills someone in the entire film. Bernie, on his knees, begs Tom to spare his life.¹⁰ Tom recalls the previous point in the plot in which he spared Bernie's life and how much trouble it caused and shoots him point blank in the head. What is significant about this action is that this is the only point in the film in which Tom breaks his ethical code of not killing anyone. The final moment, in which Tom hesitates, directly before pulling the trigger and ending Bernie's life, illustrates the completion of Tom's character arc within the film. The tragic flaw of Tom as a Noir antihero comes full circle; Tom's greatest strength was his moral code of not killing anyone, which ended up being his greatest weakness in that he could not kill Bernie sooner, ultimately leading to the death of countless other characters throughout the film.

It is intriguing and appropriate that Bernie, the man who was at the root of the conflict of the entire film, ends up being executed by the very man that was ordered to keep him safe.

Tom's revelation at this juncture is that, despite Leo's power and ability to govern his crime network, he becomes weak when involved emotionally. Tom takes this point figuratively when Bernie begs him to look into his heart and not kill him; Tom coldly explains that he has no heart. In order to achieve the rough justice that Tom seeks to resolve the conflict between himself, Casper, and Leo, he must abandon all emotions and rely primarily on cold and calculated logic. Tom is forced to disregard his code of not killing anyone. If Tom allowed his emotions to intervene, he would be unable to execute Bernie.

Through these various Noir styles and sensibilities that inform the nature of *Miller's Crossing* it can be safely suggested the film, at its heart, may herald a sub- genre of Noir in and of itself that could readily be applied as "Noir Pastiche." In his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson offers a juxtaposition of the terms parody and pastiche. He suggests that, while both ideas incorporate the use of a simulacra or mimicry of an already established style, they vary greatly in their individual execution and presentation. Parody, Jameson posits, is the imitation of a form of artistic style that is used to bring humor or satire to the original concept. Once the presence of the satiric impulse is removed then parody shifts into a mode of pastiche. Pastiche, like parody, makes a focused effort on imitation. However, what pastiche lacks from parody is the tongue in cheek humor that is meant to satirize the original concept. Pastiche is a direct imitation of a form of style that takes itself seriously. In his essay "Modules on James: On Pastiche," Dino Felluga posits:

In such a world of pastiche, we lose our connection to history, which gets turned into a series of styles and superseded genres, or simulacra: "The new spatial logic of the simulacrum can now be expected to have a momentous effect on what used to be historical time" (18). In such a situation, "the past as 'referent' finds itself

gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (19). We can no longer understand the past except as a repository of genres, styles, and codes ready for commodification (2).

To address and identify the idea of a Noir Pastiche in film, several cinematic concepts must be identified. Does the film of Noir Pastiche maintain similar sensibilities to the original genre of Noir? How are the visual cues that imply a connection to the Noir sensibility represented? The aesthetic of *Miller's Crossing*, which enables the film to be regarded as a Noir pastiche, includes the incorporation of a stylized dialogue that is direct, sharp and riddled in wit. The Coen Brother's explained in interviews that in writing the screenplay for the film they took a strong inspiration from the 1931 novel by Dashiell Hammett, *The Glass Key*. With the roots of the film's influence being found in the work of one of America's most notorious Noir fictionists, it is no far cry to suggest that this connection alone would be enough to earn the film the label of Noir. However, since *Miller's Crossing* was produced four decades beyond the life of historical Noir, the film can only be identified for its imitation of the Noir style. The use of dramatic chiaroscuro also demonstrates the mimetic qualities of Neo-Noir in *Miller's Crossing*.

The use of shadows and lighting to frame characters is a very important aspect of the film's imitation of the Noir genre. One of the strongest illustrations of the use of shadowing in the film takes place toward the conclusion of the story. Tom, through a myriad arrangement of double crossings and false information, manipulates a situation that allows Bernie to kill Johnny Caspar. Once Tom arrives at the scene and discovers Caspar's body he addresses Bernie and explains that he too will have to die. While Tom slowly moves toward Bernie, the shadows of the staircase they are on move across his face, masking his expression, physically symbolizing the emotional darkness his character is moving through.

The moment before Tom kills Bernie demonstrates the deepest conflict that Tom experiences throughout his character arc. The use of alternating light and shadow on the character of Tom suggests a physical manifestation of the inner struggle that Tom is engaging in during his decision to kill Bernie. Since Tom is a character that has resolved never to kill anyone, this scene is a moment of great significance to his development as a true anti-hero. He has to defy his own code of conduct in order to restore harmony within the universe that the film occurs in. In the final moments of the film, Tom is left standing alone in a graveyard. The symbolic significance of this moment is that since he has defied his own standards he has become completely alienated by the associates and colleagues that he once considered his friends. The only company he keeps during the film's final frame is that of the man he killed. He has chosen a self-perpetuated exile over the indulgent life he once had as Leo's second in command. This decision to exile himself that Tom makes is indicative of the Noir anti-hero. The common trait of the anti-heroes of the Noir genre is that they end up alone, often in prison or dead, in retribution of the crimes that they have committed. All of the relationships that Tom had at the start of the narrative have been severed.

A scene toward the close of the film features a powerful reflection of many classical Noir relationships. The sequence occurs between Tom and Verna, and marks the moment of their final conflict in the plot. Tom has set in motion an elaborate plan to have both Caspar and Bernie kill one another. This plan was instigated through information that Verna provided Tom, unbeknownst to Verna that Tom was planning on devising the murder of her brother. Verna eventually realizes that Tom double crossed her and meets him on a city street in the pouring rain. She pulls a small handgun on him and threatens to kill him for lying to her. Despite that pain she feels from the betrayal, Verna truly does feel something along the lines of love for Tom

and cannot pull the trigger. She walks away from him sobbing through the rain. The use of lighting throughout this sequence is also of some import. Both characters are shrouded in darkness, so much so that the viewer can only make out the profile of each character. The strength of this darkness exemplifies the point that this is the blackest moment, emotionally and psychologically for each of the characters' interactions with one another. There is a genuine affection between Tom and Verna, but it is eclipsed by deception and the self-centricity of each of their individual motivations. Their relationship reflects their core ambitions, the drive that brings their characters to life. Verna's ambition is to ensure her brother's safety¹¹, she leverages any and all advantages toward that end. Tom's motivation is to ensure that Leo is safe. Similarly to Verna, Tom's need of Leo's favor is vital to his livelihood. The love triangle between Leo, Verna, and Tom is one rife with deception and heartache. Despite the high level of emotional drama that is generated by this complex affair, the narrative never portrays any of the lovers with levity.¹²

Perhaps one of the most significant reasons that *Miller's Crossing* occurs in cinema as a pastiche and not a parody of Noir is that the film never attempts to satirize any aspect of Film Noir. The characters in the film do not hint at any moments of comic relief or of satire; the direct actions that each character engages in results in either their own destruction or abandonment. While the Coen Brother's are often cited for the use of comedy and parody within their work, *Miller's Crossing* is a crucial piece of cinema that does not use or exploit the sensibilities of classic Noir cinema to indicate any moments of levity throughout the film.

The nature of contemporary cinema seems so often to pull and piece various parts of successful films together, so much so that the idea of originality in filmmaking must be redefined to include ideologies of homage, pastiche and parody. The filmmaking industry of present day

Hollywood appears to be minimally concerned with the richness of what film is capable of as an art form while significantly preoccupied with box office numbers and financial relevancy. The Coen brother's appear to be able to walk a line of artistic integrity and financial success. *Miller's Crossing* may not be original in its design, but its concept as an homage and pastiche remains a fresh and welcomed extension to the classic genre of Noir. Through the construct of stereotypical Noir characters, such as the anti hero and the femme fatale, the plot and narrative structure, as well as the symbolic composites used throughout the film, *Miller's Crossing* stands as a work of cinematic art that has taken direct influence from the sensibilities of the Noir genre of classic Hollywood.

Chapter Two Notes

¹ The advanced technologies of filmmaking have resulted in the antiquation of classic Noir styles in cinema. For example the use of chiaroscuro (a vastly relevant feature in classic Noir) was at one time a by product of limited filmmaking technologies, now directors and cinematographers go out of their way to create effects that mimic chiaroscuro.

² The self-reflexivity that Gilmore attributes to the Neo-Noir genre may be a result of a contemporary audience searching for themselves in the films that they see.

³ Many schools of thought suggest that Noir as a classic genre cannot exist in the manner in which cinema is currently being produced. The use of digital film, advanced computer editing capabilities, and the adoption of high definition color palettes are just a few of the factors that see the Noir genre evolve into Neo-Noir

⁴ This is unique to the Neo-Noir genre in that the classical Noir genre presents femme fatales who rarely receive any redemption and act to destroy the anti-hero through seduction, compulsion and deception.

⁵ The audience spectates Tom and Verna in a highly voyeuristic nature. Their pivotal scenes are dominantly set in the bedroom, pre and post coitus; the dialogue that they share is some of the most personal in the film.

⁶ The relationship between Tom and Leo can be viewed thematically as that of a surrogate father and son.

⁷ One of the strongest moments of dialogism and heteroglossia in the film is an exchange between Tom and Vern when he confronts her in the woman's powder room:

TOM: Close your eyes, ladies, I'm coming through. Who's the war paint for?

VERNA: Go home and dry out.

TOM: You don't need it for Leo, believe me. He already thinks you're the original Miss Jesus.

VERNA: What the hell's the matter with you?

TOM: What's the matter with you? Afraid people might get the right idea?

Verna: Leo's got the right idea. I like him, he's honest and he's got a heart.

TOM: Then its true what they say. Opposites attract.

VERNA: Do me a favor and mind your own business.

TOM: This is my business. Intimidating helpless women is part of what I do.

VERNA: Then find one and intimidate her.

TOM: Leo's upstairs getting ready to shoot himself in the foot on your account.

VERNA: I don't know what you're talking about.

TOM: He's gonna go to the mat for your brother. And it's gonna hurt him.

VERNA: I don't know Leo's business, but he's a big boy.

TOM: He used to be.

VERNA: Look. What do you want, Tom? You want me to pretend I don't care what happens to Bernie? Well I do. He's my brother and I don't want him to get hurt. If Leo wants to help him out I'll step out with him, show him a good time in return. There's no harm in that.

TOM: There's a name for that kind of business arrangement.

VERNA: I'll do what I have to for Bernie and there's no reason for you to try and queer that. Regardless of what you think of me, Bernie's a decent guy.

TOM: A straight shooter, huh? A square gee?

VERNA: Yeah, sneer at him like everyone else. Just because he's different. People think he's a degenerate. People think he's scum. Well he's not.

TOM: Poor misunderstood Bernie.

VERNA: What is this about? You want me to stop seeing Leo? Why don't you just say so?

TOM: I want you to quit spinning Leo in circles and pointing him where to go.

VERNA: I forgot--that's *your* job, isn't it?

TOM: *I'll* do what I have to to protect Leo. I'm asking you - politely, for me - to leave him alone. I don't *have* to ask. If I told him about our little dance last night, your pull would dry up pretty fast.

VERNA: So would yours. I don't like being threatened.

TOM: I don't like being played for a sucker. That game might work with Leo but it won't work with me.

VERNA: You think last night was just more campaigning for my brother?

TOM: I can see the angles and I know if there was a market for little old ladies, you'd have Grandma Bernbaum first on line.

VERNA: You're a pathetic rum head.

TOM: And I love you, Angel.

VERNA: I suppose you think you've raised hell.
TOM: Sister, when I've raised hell you'll know it.

This verbal dance between Tom and Verna explicates the manner in which dialogism is used to convey wit, confrontation and narrative plot points. Heteroglossic relevance appears in the manner that this conversation create an interpretive landscape to compare Neo-Noir with classic Noir through dialogue.

⁸ The lion's share of which comes from Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key*.

⁹ Eddie Dane and Mink Larouie are involved in a homosexual relationship, this is vital information to the plot, but only slightly hinted at through dialogue. Also, the death of Rug Daniels is an important plot point that is never shown on screen; the resolution of which is addressed in only a single line of dialogue toward the close of the narrative

¹⁰ Bernie, like Verna, is a master manipulator. He beseeches Tom with an emotional appeal believing that Tom will surrender to the pleas and spare Bernie once more. This scene is a spiritual successor to the previous sequence when Tom took Bernie out to Miller's Crossing to kill him. The juxtaposition of these parallel sequences demonstrates Tom's abandonment of his code in order to eliminate Bernie and save Leo's life.

¹¹ As Bernie and Verna share a bloodline, her need to save Bernie can be seen as Verna saving an extension of her self. At one point in the film Bernie also insinuates that he and his sister had previously engaged in an incestuous relationship, as Bernie is pathologically dishonest, his account of this affair is unreliable at best.

¹² The directors never allow the romance to become the focus or the priority of the characters involved. The affair between Tom and Verna serves only to create more tension within the narrative. As opposed to nurturing support, companionship, or release through this romance, Verna keeps Tom perpetually off balance in his perception of her relationship with himself, Leo, and her brother Bernie.

CHAPTER THREE – FOLLY OF YOUTH
THE DIALOGIC NARRATIVE AND THE AESTHETICS OF NEO-NOIR IN RIAN
JOHNSON'S *BRICK*

When Johnson initially wrote the screenplay for what is now the motion picture *Brick* he was only 23 years old. It took him over six years to obtain funding for the project which was just over 450 thousand dollars. The result of Johnson's efforts was the blossoming of a film that no previous director had ever created in terms of style and effect. In an interview with Tim Ryan, Johnson explains¹ that the primary desire for the initial writing of *Brick* was found after having exposure to the literary contributions of detective genre fictionist Dashiell Hammett. While *Brick* was released in 2005 it registered as a contemporary Neo-Noir film by the sensibilities that govern the classic noir movement of the 1940 and 50s. The visual style and setting of *Brick* categorize it as a postmodern Neo-Noir much in the same light as Joel Coen's *The Man Who Wasn't There* or Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. These films all contain traditional imagery and characteristics of classic Noir style, but it is their focus on ethical ambiguity and implementation of disparate genre tropes that cause them to be postmodern.

The film moves along in the general structured fashion of many familiar Noir tales, containing a complex and violent plot, an antihero protagonist much like Humphrey Bogart's Philip Marlowe, and the calculated manipulation of femme fatales such as Mary Astor and Lauren Bacall. The establishing shots of the film also bear a reminiscent echo to the unique opening of *Sunset Boulevard* in that one of the main characters of *Brick* is murdered almost

immediately. The opening of *Sunset Boulevard*, depicts the character Joe Gillis floating face down in a swimming pool, while the opening of *Brick* features Emily Kostich face down in a stream of retention water. Segments of both narratives are later exposed through a series of flashbacks that enables the viewer to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the story.

At heart *Brick* is primarily a classic detective story, the conflicts and developments of which are all standard to traditional Noir narratives. The film makes an early introduction of a young woman named Emily, speaking frantically to her ex-boyfriend Brendan on a pay phone. Brendan is the film's protagonist. He initially tries to calm Emily down but the line goes dead just as the screen cuts to a shot of a jet black Ford Mustang racing toward the camera. Brendan, after inquiring Emily's last known whereabouts from mutual friends, discovers that she has been murdered and left in a drainage tunnel. After hiding her body, Brendan begins his own investigation, knowing that once the city police are involved, the real truth behind her murder may never be found. Brendan takes ownership of mystery surrounding Emily's death. This ownership is telling for Brendan's character. He does not believe that anyone else is able to conduct the investigation properly. He adopts the persona of a vigilante in the pursuit of her murderer.

The trope of the local police as inept in *Brick* is another reference to classic Noir cinema. Popular Noir films such as *M* and *His Kind of Girl* both portray local law enforcement as being careless and clumsy in their investigations. The inability of the police is illustrated in *Brick* through Brandon's dialogue with his associate The Brain,

THE BRAIN: What first, tip the bulls?

BRENDAN: No, bulls would gum it. They'd flash their dusty standards at the wide-eyes and probably find some yegg to pin, probably even the right one. But

they'd trample the real tracks and scare the real players back into their holes, and if we're doing this I want the whole story. No cops, not for a bit.

Once Brendan denies the involvement of local law officials he begins his own informal mode of investigation and quickly tumbles into a subterranean society of drug peddlers and hired thugs. The primary antagonist of the story is a drug pusher known as The Pin. Early in the film Brendan introduces himself to The Pin as a source of future business in an effort to get close enough to the dealer to determine whether or not he was the source of Emily's murder. Spliced throughout Brendan's sleuthing and interactions is a style of dialogue that is sharp, archaic, and alien. The otherness of the language that Brendan encounters throughout his sleuthing assists in creating an ambiance for the setting of the film. Brendan's lack of understanding of key criminal language terms parallels his lack of knowledge regarding Emily's community, establishing Brendan as character who exists largely isolated from his peers.

The vernacular of the characters in *Brick* is a strong demonstration of dialogism. Brendan's word choice throughout the film is comprised of underground terminology that is edgy and street worn; a verbal joust of wit and rhetoric.² Individuals in common society that are twice his age do not speak as he does, which suggests that the age of Johnson's characters was not a factor when considering the genre in which film would eventually belong. The film is presented to the audience through an anachronistic looking glass with the film's iconic, often times verbose, use of dialogue. The individual units of speech that are uttered by the characters offer a unique brand of puzzle for the audience to solve. Johnson appears fully aware of this challenge, so much so that he actually addresses the audience's dialogic conflict through the film's characters themselves. We see examples of this syntactical trial illustrated throughout the film via the protagonist's constant quest to discover the meaning behind the criminal

terminology he encounters. Johnson's interest in the gritty syntax of the characters is supplemented by his use of a nonlinear timeline within the narrative. The ambiguity of the language and timeline are both factors that reinforce Johnson's interest in Neo-Noir postmodernity.

Johnson use of a non-linear timeline in *Brick*'s narrative is established early to create a sense of timelessness and suspense with the audience. The first example of fabula time is established almost immediately. We see an establishing shot of Emily's arm. Adorned in blue bracelets, it lies motionless in a trickle of dirty water, leading the viewer to understand she is dead. The film then cuts to a shot of Emily's arm³ placing a note inside of a random locker. This moment is the first instance of cinematic analepsis in the film. The flashback allows the resurrection of the Emily for the sake of film's narrative. After Brendan receives the note, he contacts Emily via pay phone. The terminology that Emily uses in her discussion is foreign to Brendan.⁴ Neither the viewer nor the protagonist understands the vernacular of Emily. As a result, the audience is able to relate to Brendan's confusion and becomes emotionally invested in the pursuit of clarification. Emily's vernacular concerning the trouble she's in instigates an immediate investigation; in order for Brendan to solve the mystery of Emily's distress, he must first decode the meaning of the terms that she has unveiled to him. These terms are significant to the audience because they offer an opportunity to build a more empathetic connection with Brendan. As Brendan exhibits confusion from Emily's vocabulary, so too does the audience.

It is through this lack of understanding that we see an early instance of synchronic language in the film.⁵ The words have a hidden meaning; which initially carry very little explanation. At this point in the film, the narrative hinges on the secrecy of language. Brendan is seeking to crack the code of Emily's speech. Brendan's use of language sets a standard for

normalcy⁶ in the film's narrative; it is this normalcy that allows the use of ambiguous words to appear as a code of the criminal underground. In his essay "A Model of Language in a Synchronic and Diachronic Sense," Jiri Raclavsky illustrates this juxtaposition, "The nature of language as a normative system... is such that it produces or warrants this or that code. From another viewpoint, language as a code is something, which is abstracted or idealized from our communication by means of language as a normative system" (3). Once Brendan is able to decipher the code of the criminal vocabulary, he will be one step closer to completing his investigation. The implied revelation of decoding these words is that Brendan will be able to connect with the crime syndicate operating within the high school. For Brendan to solve the case he must gain acceptance from the parties involved, in order to gain acceptance he must first learn to speak their language.

While the ambiguity of Emily's underground terminology begins to rearrange Brendan's perception of the world around him, and his sense of normalcy is further weakened when they finally meet up and he steals her journal. Once the journal is in Brendan's hands, the terminology of Emily's secret life begins to marginally open up to Brendan and the viewer alike. Emily's journal is written in fragmented images. The clues that Brendan gleans from the text are little more than utterances that suggest a damaged and tormented psyche of a young woman on the brink of self-destruction. The fragmented nature of the journal is symbolic of the film's stunted narrative. As Brendan thumbs through the small book, a torn photo of himself and Emily flutters from the pages. It is a photo taken of them during the course of their relationship, a happier time. For a moment the camera pauses on the smiling couple; fabula time is once more engaged if only symbolically. As the photo flutters to the ground, Brendan quickly catches in midair, a strong symbol of the character trying to keep a firm grasp on the past. Once Brendan

begins piecing together the affairs of Emily's troubled life, he is led to encounters with two of the more eccentric characters in the film: the vampish school drama queen Kara and Emily's part-time lover and full-time street thug Dode. Brendan's interactions with these characters illustrate precise moments of dialogic narrative. Brendan's preliminary investigation leads him to the beautiful and devious Kara.

The initial encounter that Brendan has with Kara illustrates the heteroglossic word play that permeates the narrative. Kara is the drama club queen of the high school. She has a limited knowledge of Emily's affairs and the seedy underbelly of the drug world. Kara would make a strong femme fatale if not for the fact that Johnson only uses her character moderately throughout the film. She is not calculating enough or knowledgeable enough to be real hindrance to Brendan's investigation. Her language is heteroglossic through her use of word play and double entendres. Brendan comments on Kara's manipulation of younger students through seduction:

BRENDAN: Still picking your teeth with Freshmen?

KARA: You were a Freshman once.

BRENDAN: Way once sister.

The verbal exchange between Brendan and Kara demonstrates dialogism, the presence of which is important for the stylistic presentation of the characters. A dialogic interpretation of this scene gives the audience an understanding of the characters' back story that adds to the richness of the narrative setting. The dialogue between Brendan and Kara reminds the viewer that these are two people relate to each other in vastly different ways. The style of speech that the two characters engage is a verbal joust. Kara is a seductress and she looks at Brendan as sexual prey. The exchange also alludes to a past relationship between the two. Brendan's quip, "Way once sister"

is also an illustration of chronotopic language. His language regards a particular time and condition that no longer applies to his character in the present setting. Deeper into the narrative time of the film Brendan has another encounter with Kara, where further examples of dialogism are present. Brendan is attempting to siphon information regarding the whereabouts of the thug Dode:

BRENDAN: Pass it on to Dode anyway; maybe he'll have the sense to get out from under you before he gets hurt.

KARA: You didn't. Did you?

These lines of dialogue offer a double meaning for the characters. Brendan refers to Dode being under Kara's thumb, and that Dode still has a chance to escape her manipulation before he is harmed physically by criminal activity. Kara twists the phrase for a sexual meaning. Kara refers to Brendan being hurt as an emotional condition of their intimate relationship. The phrasing of Kara's dialogue indicates that she is a powerful character, and that the source of her power is derived from her sexuality. When looking at the full cast of characters within *Brick*, Kara is the only living player that seems to have held any type of control over Brendan in the past.

Brick's demonstration of complex and varied character types is further exemplified by a heteroglossic reading of the character Dode. Brendan's initial encounter with Kara furthers his investigation and he eventually tracks down Dode. The language that Dode uses is a reflection of the street life he endures, coarse and aggressive. He communicates using street slang. "Heel it now, dig?" means to "leave now, understand?" "She was tight when she called you, came to me in a freak, told me to shake you if you came by..." is interpreted as "She was scared when she contacted you, she came to me upset and asked that I get rid of you if you started asking around." Dode's use of language is often heteroglossic due to his social stature as a thug,

informing the manner in which he communicates. The words he uses are all part of the English vocabulary, but they are ordered and chosen in a way that negates a commonplace vernacular.

The introduction of The Brain offers further evidence of a heteroglossic interpretation of the film's unique treatment of language. Once the plot establishes the initial conflict of Emily's murder, Brendan begins his investigation into her death almost immediately. His primary counsel and advisor on the case is his best friend The Brain, who serves as an extension of Brendan's intellect. Often in the film, Brendan and The Brain are attempting to unravel the riddles of the investigation that Brendan has engaged. The dialogue that The Brain uses also bears representations of heteroglossia. During one interaction, Brendan inquires about who Emily has been eating with. On the surface, Brendan is asking a literal question about who Emily is having lunch with at school, but the deeper meaning behind this question opens up a complex social paradigm. The Brain responds that it is hard to keep track of whom Emily is eating lunch with, because lunch is a lot of things, that lunch is "difficult." The comment that The Brain makes regarding lunch being difficult is very telling. At this point the audience can ascertain that the idea of who someone is eating lunch with means the same thing as who they are connected with socially. The Brain, as a solitary character like Brendan, eats lunch alone. The troubled look on The Brain's face when he suggests that lunch is difficult indicates that he too is disconnected from the community of the school.

The interaction with The Brain also acts a foil to demonstrate how isolated Brendan is from his peers, a loner in the middle of deeply social environment. Johnson, in keeping with classic Noir sensibilities casts Brendan as an anti-hero, who understands that it is largely on his shoulders to solve the investigation. Emily remarks upon Brendan's solitude during one of their dialogues, where she laments, "What are you, eating back here, hating everybody? Who are you

judging anyone?” The loner is a common aspect of the Noir anti-hero. Jerrold Abrams observes this concept in his essay “Space, Time, and Subjectivity in Neo-Noir Cinema:”

But there’s more to it than that, something else that really signals the birth of the new noir. For, as centripetal space dissolved, so too did the locus of community. Everyone was moving around, leaving one place, going to another: jobs, education, travel as an end in itself, steady dissolution of the nuclear family, and, pretty soon, with all this centrifugal motion, traditional social bonds seemed quaint on a good day, oppressive on a bad day, and everyone agreed: things would never be the same. So, in place of the family, the community, the nation-state, or the church, a new king emerged in the form of the “self”: the self as the king of its very own mind. (27)

Here Abrams acknowledges that the antihero is completely without help aside from his own devices. The antiheroic trait of being able to negotiate an unethical landscape is one of Brendan’s greatest assets. Brendan’s actions illustrate this point throughout the entirety of *Brick’s* narrative. Despite the presence of The Brain as a sometimes side kick, Brendan’s only real resources are his own street smarts and drive to bring justice to Emily’s killers.

The film’s plot line weaves itself along as a standard and familiar detective story; the film’s innovation is a result of Johnson’s decision to set the action entirely within the realm of a southern California high school. Brendan and Emily are both Seniors, The Pin is a twenty something drop out, and the hired muscle that The Pin employs consists of high school bullies and thugs. Johnson’s film falls into the Neo-Noir cinematic genre largely because the behavior of the characters stays very honest to the reality that is imposed by the director. The characters are never placed in a position to be mocked or satirized; the actions and events in the film are

presented in ways that do not come across as tongue in cheek or as a deconstruction of Noir cinema in general. *Brick* takes the more gritty aspects of the Noir genre seriously and therefore requires an objective stance from the audience.

Some of the sensibilities that *Brick* pays tribute to in particular are character-based. The antihero detective and the deceptive femme fatale are both main characters in *Brick*. The presence of these archetypes shows the lineage of classic Noir in a Neo-Noir narrative. In his essay, “The Anti-Hero and Femme Fatale in Neo-Noir” Elvin Misimovic offers this concise observation, “Classic noir movies began a tradition of various movie elements and one of the elements is its character types. The most iconic of these are the anti-hero and the femme fatale. Gone were the righteous heroes and the smiling woman by their side and instead we were introduced to the morally ambiguous outsider and the beautiful but deadly woman” (5). We see this concept illustrated in *Brick*. Brendan is an 18-year-old, but his character should be taken as merely a vessel for the soul of a down and out investigator in the tradition of Philip Marlowe. Laura, the mysterious girl who moves romantically between The Pin and Brendan is also just a young woman in high school, but her actions and motivations throughout the film indicate the presence of a deep manipulation that was characteristic of the many cinematic femme fatales that came before her.

A Neo-Noir film that takes place in a high school removes individual visual indications that tether the idea of traditional Noir sensibilities to one specific typecast. The function of the high school setting also introduces a sense of nostalgic familiarity to the audience, a common sensibility that runs through Noir and Neo-Noir cinema. In his essay, “The Dark Sublimity of *Chinatown*” Richard Gilmore posits:

Nostalgia is about the hope of recovery of the lost thing. Nostalgia pervades film noir because it underlies the desperation and violence that pervade film noir. It is the hidden romanticism in film noir. Wild risks are taken because of a desperate faith that the game can be won, that the lost thing can be recovered. The “thing” in the idea of nostos is home or, more accurately for film noir, some romanticized idea of what would constitute a sense of finally being home... One longs for this precisely because one feels its absence. The feeling of not being where one belongs is the feeling of alienation. Alienation is the great theme of existentialism. It is a feeling that seems to have become pervasive with the rise of modernity. Home, however, is notoriously hard to achieve in the narratives of film noir. Those narratives are pretty consistently lessons on the moral ‘Beware of what you wish for.’ (Gilmore 131)

Gilmore’s observations resonate deeply in Brendan’s awareness of language throughout the film. The terminology that he is initially only aware of synchronically drives him to search for that which is unknown.⁷ Further conversations between The Brain and Brendan find them applying definitions to the ambiguous terminology of the local criminal underground. The audience is able to instantly identify with the characters through this conversation. The verbal acknowledgement that Brendan is seeking clarity of an ambiguous cinematic syntax mirrors the viewers’ need to understand the dialogue. As the utterances he investigates develop meaning, their definitions emerge diachronically. Suddenly “Brick” is terminology for narcotics, “Tugger” becomes a violent henchman, and “The Pin” is a puppet master. In Brendan’s efforts to save Emily, the knowledge he gains of the criminal underground she is a part of ensures that he can never return home⁸ again.

Brick is a Neo-Noir film that doesn't require the lead character to wear the traditional overcoat and fedora. The film allows its characters to be dirtied up in other ways than by saturating them with gin, rye, and divorce. What Johnson has created in placing this film in high school is a claim to his audience that what makes a film engaging in the tradition of the Noir genre, more than setting or time frame, is the language. Johnson openly admits to borrowing terminology from the literary works of Hammett and Highsmith, and the pacing of the characters speech is a definite nod toward Joel Coen's 1991 release *Miller's Crossing*. The fact that the characters are teenagers and school administrators serves to offer a unique illustration of authority figures as well. During a confrontation with Brendan and the high school vice principal Gary Trueman, the sequence plays out in the traditional format of detective getting yelled at by his police chief. The exchange is a compelling example of dialogic language:

BRENDAN: I was done here three months ago. I told then I'd give you Jerr and that was that, I'm not your inside line and I'm not your boy.

TRUEMAN: That's not very helpful...

BRENDAN: You know what I'm in if the wrong yeg saw me pulled in here?

TRUEMAN: What are you in?

BRENDAN: No. And no more of these informal chats – if you got a discipline issue with me write me up or suspend me and I'll see you at the parent conference.

TRUEMAN: Hold it, I could – hold it – could write you up for talking back to a VP. For looking at me in a threatening way. I'd exercise a little more tact, Mr. Frye. You can't pull a play like that unless I need you for something. So do I?

The dialogue between Brendan and Trueman is heteroglossic in its context and setting. The way this exchange plays out on the screen is very aggressive. Brendan resembles the rogue detective and Trueman the police chief that is trying to reel him in off the mean streets. If this discussion occurred in a police station, between law enforcement agents, there would be nothing compelling about it; in fact it would be a common cliché found in nearly any crime drama involving law enforcement. However, because it is an exchange between a student and a school administrator it becomes highly unusual. The uniqueness of these characters engaged dialogically in this setting allows the audience an opportunity to interpret this moment through a heteroglossic reading. The language between these two characters is ironic. Trueman takes the tone of a surrogate police chief with Brendan as his subordinate. The audience is teased with Brendan's past as an informant which reveals that he has always prioritized Emily's well being, even above his own business ventures. The dialogue between Trueman and Brendan also serves to demonstrate that, despite the fantastical elements of the film, Brendan is still operating within a very traditional power dynamic. This dynamic indicates to the audience that even if Brendan is smarter than the adults he is surrounded by, he is still social obligated to act in the role of a typical student when speaking with his principal. This sequence also demonstrates that most elements of youth and naiveté found within Brendan gradually vanish from his character. As his innocence depletes, his moral code begins to shift as well. As Brendan's morality grows more ambiguous, his character arc becomes more dynamic. Initially Brendan is portrayed as a resourceful (if not confused) teenager who is attempting to avenge the death of his ex-girlfriend. Once the scene in Trueman's office plays out, more of Brendan's checkered past is unveiled to the audience. The revelation of potentially unethical actions in Brendan's previous affairs adds another layer to his character and makes him seem more human.

Brendan's sense of moral ambiguity trends downward throughout the entirety of the film. In their essay "Saint Sydney," Donald D'Aries and Foster Hirsch examine anti-hero morality:

In contrast to the milieu of classic noir that the film evokes, in its restricted night world there is no possibility of a champion of the law coming forward to administer an ethical reprimand. Instead, suspended in a neonoir limbo, the characters must fend for themselves, and, in the absence of any visible authority... must negotiate the moral balance, tending to those he has chosen to protect and dispensing with intruders. (232)

Here D'Aries and Foster acknowledge that the Noir and Neo-Noir anti-hero adheres to an internal moral code. This code is often at odds with the morality of the society within the film's setting. Brendan's moral code is centered on bringing justice to the criminals that murdered Emily. Johnson uses wardrobe in order to portray this moral code within the film. Brendan eventually links Emily's murder to The Pin's henchman Tugger. In an effort to topple The Pin's drug operation Brendan plays Tugger against The Pin through subtle manipulation. The scene takes place in The Pin's office where The Pin is standing on the far left side of the shot and Tugger is on the right. Brendan is standing between them acting as a mediator for the conflict that he has created. What makes this shot interesting is the color schematic of the characters' wardrobe. The Pin is clad from head to toe in black, while Tugger is wearing a pristine white shirt, Brendan; standing between the two adversaries is wearing a grey jacket. This symbolically illustrates that Brendan's character is not entirely a part of either side, but a neutral player in the game he has spun.

The mise-en-scene in *Brick* provides an interpretive opportunity that examines a link between wardrobe color and character morality. Brendan is only seen once without his grey

jacket on, which is during a flashback scene. The analeptic sequence that offers the most revealing moment from Emily and Brendan's past takes place deep into the film's narrative. During the flashback Brendan is wearing a crisp white undershirt. Brendan and Emily are in midst of a confrontation regarding a close friend that Brendan sold out to the authorities. Emily berates him for betraying the friend, while Brendan explains he had to get rid of him in order to save Emily from harm. The white shirt that Brendan wears is symbolic of the traditional white knight characterization that is often applied to heroic protagonists. This wardrobe choice further exemplifies a time from the character's past in which he was innocent of the actions that he takes during the course of film. Once Brendan begins to engage in sifting through the underworld of The Pin and his associates, he slips from innocence into a realm of questionable morality and is adorned in grey from that point forward.⁹

A parallel also arises between Brendan and his nemesis suggesting a link to moral transformation as well. Both primary antagonists, The Pin and Tugger, suffer from varying physical deformations. The Pin has a club foot that forces him to walk with a limp and Tugger has a vicious scar running vertically down the side of his forehead. Johnson's effort to make the film's antagonists more monstrous than the other characters involved in the plot is clear. As Brendan interacts with The Pin throughout the film, he too becomes more physically altered. Brendan's physical transformations are not permanent however. They are the result of constant beatings that he receives from Tugger in an effort to reach The Pin throughout the story. By the final confrontation Brendan's face is beaten to the point of being unrecognizable. Abrams observes the link, physical or otherwise, between the hero and the villain as a common trope in Noir; he illustrates:

And, if you decrease the degrees even further by one, you get neo-noir as a third form. It's still a first-person narrative—and, like noir, it's still the detective who's doing the talking, but he's no longer looking for some mysterious villain in the city. He's looking for himself: he's looking for himself as an other. (29)

It is Brendan's interactions with a morally devoid world that has caused him to be altered physically, connecting his deformities to that of the very individuals that he trying to fight against. The physical results of the violence that Brendan has been a part of can be interpreted as the criminal toll that he has had to pay. Brendan's wounds may eventually heal, but he will not be unscarred from his experiences with Tugger and The Pin. He has learned the language of the underground world, he has earned the trust of the criminal community, and he eventually brings justice to the murdered Emily. The cost of these enterprises is mapped in bruises and cuts all over his body. Brendan has sacrificed much for the knowledge that he acquires. Nietzsche perhaps surmised it best, "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you" (39).

The film's final resolution places Brendan ahead of all his adversaries. Once Brendan has overcome The Pin and Tugger, he realizes that they were being manipulated as well. The source of this manipulation was found in the beautiful female lead Laura. The element of a gorgeous and highly sexual *femme fatale* is an arguable necessity in telling a Noir story, and *Brick* is no exception. Misimovich suggests, "Opposite to our anti-hero we have the femme-fatale which in Noir movies is portrayed in the more classical way of defining the femme-fatale. A woman that is incredibly good looking, charming with ability to snare lovers or anybody else from the opposite sex into somewhat compromising and dangerous situations. And as mentioned before, this could be explained as a catalyst from hell" (18). Brendan's awareness of Laura as

the true mastermind behind the fall of The Pin and the death of Emily signals a departure of the audience's alignment with his perception. Up to this revelation, the viewer's perception of Brendan's world was as ambiguous as it was to Brendan himself. As Brendan extrapolates the methodology behind Laura's machinations, the audience begins to slowly shift their perception of *Brick's* narrative; the realization that Brendan was a step ahead of the spectator becomes fully formed.

Johnson uses a series of jump cut montages to portray the conflict resolution of the narrative. The scene takes place in the aftermath of the violent evening at The Pin's house, Brendan becomes aware of the mastermind behind Emily's death. The final scene of revelation takes place at dawn on the high school football field. The time of day further symbolizes Brendan's stillborn rebirth as a character. The cuts on his face have already begun to heal slightly. He has victoriously overcome his dealings with The Pin, and the new day is ahead of him. Laura meets him on the field relieved that he is alive from the previous night's encounters. As she expresses her happiness Brendan finally determines the true depth of Laura's involvement in Emily's murder. He pulls her closely to him and whispers the details in her ear. The events that he describes are interjected through rapidly edited shots of each action taking place, making the viewer an actual witness through the final moments of Laura's incrimination.

The final moments of the film exemplify that there is no real salvation for Brendan's character. When Brendan finishes putting the pieces together Laura walks away from him, damaged and guilty. The final shot of the film shows Brendan standing alone on the field, watching Laura move further and further away from him. This resolution is also indicative of classic Noir plots in that the conflict within the actual story is resolved but the character's life changes negatively. Brendan is practically the same person at the close of the film as he was

from the beginning, only he is more damaged. There is no spiritual growth, only a fall from innocence through the knowledge that is gained over the course of the narrative. The viewer is left debating whether or not Brendan is any better off for having discovered the facts surrounding Emily's death, or if he will end up being even more tortured on account of having fallen in love with another woman who was never completely what she claimed. Johnson leaves the audience with a final moment of irony. When Laura is walking away from Brendan, after he has unveiled the solution to the mystery to her, and consequentially the audience, The Brain is shown in the background of the frame. Brendan watches Laura growing smaller in the distance, The Brain asks what it was she whispered to Brendan before she left. Brendan's response is "She called me a dirty word." Throughout the film The Brain has acted as a drawing board of possible interpretations of the vocabulary that Brendan has encountered. Now at the close of the film, Brendan has isolated himself even from his only ally. All of the words that the criminal underground used throughout the film could be interpreted as "dirty" in the sense that they belong to a lawless organization. Brendan's final decision to hide the word the Laura whispered into his ear is aimed at the audience just as much as it is at The Brain. Brendan has now taken complete accountability for the journey he has taken, no longer wanting to involve The Brain or the viewer in the finality of the vengeance he has taken on Laura.

As Johnson's directorial debut, *Brick* is a strong and gifted entry into the realm of Neo-Noir cinema. Under the interpretive lens of dialogism, the film displays a rich tapestry of character driven language that urges the audience to take part in deciphering the mystery of an underground criminal codex. The use of classical Noir tropes and dialogic narrative demonstrates that *Brick* is an important cinematic artifact that warrants attention from cinephiles and academics alike. Building upon the style and nuances of *Brick*, Johnson has created several

more films that are strong candidates for narrative analysis. Seven years after the critical success of his first film, he released his first high budget studio film. *Looper* is the first film of Johnson's that was met with wide mainstream success; a science fiction film that also echoes strong aspects of Noir cinema. *Looper* provides a strong foundation for analysis regarding the narratological concept of fabula time.

Chapter Three Notes

¹ At the time of *Brick*'s wide release, Tim Ryan personally interviewed Rian Johnson for the review aggregate website "Rotten Tomatoes."

² Some isolated examples of *Brick*'s anachronistic jargon:

BRENDAN: Go away. Look, I can't trust you. You ought to be smart enough to know that. I didn't shake the party up to get your attention, and I'm not heeling you to hook you. Your connections could help me, but the bad baggage they bring would make it zero sum game or even hurt me. I'm better off coming at it clean.

THE BRAIN: Big time. See the Pin pipes it from the lowest scraper for Brad Bramish to sell, maybe. Ask any dope rat where their junk sprang and they'll say they scraped it from that, who scored it from this, who bought it off so, and after four or five connections the list always ends with The Pin. But I bet you, if you got every rat in town together and said "Show your hands" if any of them've actually seen The Pin, you'd get a crowd of full pockets.

³ The identity is confirmed by the presence of the same blue bracelets.

⁴ Words such as "Brick," "Tugger," "Pin," and "Poor Frisco" are introduced to the protagonist as well as the audience.

⁵ The synchronic and diachronic construct of language throughout the film *Brick* is limited to the microcosm of the film's setting. As diachronic language examines the range of a language's history, for the sake of this examination, the history of the film's language will be limited to the characters perception of the language being investigated within the timeline of the film's narrative.

⁶ Normalcy in this circumstance is considered commonplace syntax. The juxtaposition of the commonplace vernacular that Brendan uses in his everyday communication is a foil to demonstrate the ambiguity of the criminal terminology he is investigating.

⁷ In this circumstance the Brendan's logic implies that once he unveils the meaning of Emily's words, he will then too understand how to contain her. The criminal jargon at this juncture becomes an obsession for Brendon. The narrative allows him to disregard the dysfunction of his relationship with Emily that is only hinted at through exposition. Brendan exhibits a form of denial in his initial pursuit of Emily's safety and then in his pursuit of vengeance. He is unable to reconcile his possible role in her emotional drift away from him, if he can understand the vernacular of her new community, then perhaps he can bring her back to him.

⁸ In this context Gilmore's use of "Home" is a symbol for a return to the self. The character's ability to return home is ultimately a measurement of how far along their individual character arc they have traveled. The movement away from innocence into knowledge often results in the transformation of a character's core. To return "home" would be analogous to a character unknowing or unexperiencing aspects of the narrative. Unless the author employs a condition of amnesia or some cognitive impairing condition, no character can ever return to their home at the close of a narrative.

⁹ It is worth noting that Brendan is always wearing the white shirt, only underneath a grey jacket. Symbolic interpretation could indicate that Brendan still retains his morality, and that his immoral choices are merely a costume he wears when dealing with the criminal underground.

CHAPTER FOUR – THE GOLDEN HANDSHAKE

NARRATIVE TIME TRAVEL EXPLORED THROUGH CHRONOTOPE AND MODULARITY IN *LOOPER*

Time travel has long been a fantasy in the realms of Science Fiction.¹ It is often a genre staple that has been explored in pulp comics and quantum physics abstracts alike. In Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012), the genres of Film Noir and Science Fiction are blended to create a cinematic artifact that is uncanny in its familiarity and unique in its presentation. *Looper* has precise opportunities for illustrating an interpretative framework of several new media and narratological concepts. The theoretical aspects of modularity, chronotopic language, and fabula time are powerful tools that open a discursive space of cinematic analysis exemplified repeatedly throughout the film. Bakhtin suggests that, "The type of transformation that occurs... unfolds not so much in a straight line as spasmodically, a line with knots in it, one that therefore constitutes a distinctive type of *temporal sequence*" (113). *Looper* explores the concept of time travel as instituted by a criminal organization in an effort to dispose of incriminating evidence. The narrative setup of the film introduces the concept of time travel as a highly illegal activity that has been adopted by crime lords of the future. The setting of the film takes place in the year 2044, an era in which time travel has not yet been invented. The use of time travel is employed when a mob wants to assassinate an individual in the future; the target is sent to the past to be executed and disposed of.

Analyzing *Looper*'s scenes individually extrapolate many instances of symbolism. Manovich's new media principle of modularity is a useful analytical function in interpreting

symbolism throughout the narrative. In order to examine modularity in cinema a specific scene is isolated and taken out of the larger context of the narrative. The focus on specific scenes individually offers the opportunity to focus meticulous attention on the mise-en-scene and framing of individual shots. The first instance of modularity that illustrates symbolic interpretation occurs immediately in the narrative. The establishing shot of the film is an open pocket watch, ticking loudly. The scratched gold framing and roman numerals indicate the watch is antiquated, from a time outside of the present. The symbolic relevance of the narrative opening with the shot of the watch face regards the overall motif of time travel. The viewer is engaging with time. The engagement of time for the audience creates the backbone of *Looper's* conflict. The protagonist is in a constant race against his own mortality, the secondary characters that he encounters are continually trying to change future and the past, and the antagonist has manipulated his own time line in an effort to save the woman he loves. Time provides a tension that is immediate and long lasting throughout the entirety of the narrative.

The focus on the movement of narrative time is important to the overall structure of the film in that it creates a sense of urgency with the viewer, giving way to anxiety and suspense. The loud ticking of the watch overwhelms the audio; we are unable to hear or see anything that is unrelated to the passage of narrative time in this singular instant. After several seconds the pocket watch is closed and Joe, the film's protagonist is shown to be the owner. Joe is a looper, a contract killer for the crime lords of the future, and the audience quickly comes to understand that Joe is waiting for his target to arrive in the past so that he can execute and dispose of the body. The pocket watch that Joe carries is featured frequently throughout the narrative; he consults it in moments of high distress and anticipation. The presence of the watch on screen

rapidly becomes pavlovian for the viewer. The ticking second hand becomes a symbol of dread, violence, and inevitability.²

While modularity is used to focus on visual cues of *Looper's* narrative to illustrate interpretive meaning, the concept of chronotope is applied in order to investigate how the narrative language establishes a sense of time and place throughout the film. Once Joe kills his first target, he speaks to the audience directly through a voice over monologue. The monologue is chronotopic in its syntax,

JOE [VOICE OVER]: Time travel has not yet been invented. But 30 years from now, it will have been. It will be instantly outlawed, used only in secret by the largest criminal organizations. It's nearly impossible to dispose of a body in the future, I'm told. Tagging techniques, whatnot. So when these criminal organizations in the future need someone gone, they use specialized assassins in our present called loopers. And so, my employers in the future nab the target. They zap him back to me, their looper. He appears, hands tied and head sacked. And I do the necessities. Collect my silver. So the target is vanished from the future, and I've just disposed of a body that technically does not exist. Clean.

The chronotopic use of language in Joe's opening monologue exists in order to introduce the audience to the setting and the manner in which criminal activity is conducted in the future. As a narrative device, Joe's voice over is disembodied from the action of the narrative, a non-diegetic explanation that speaks to the viewer directly. Joe's voice over illustrates the director's desire to present Joe as a character that is not anchored to a specific time or place within the narrative.

When Joe explains the actions of his profession, he is breaking the fourth wall of the narrative.³ The effect of this is that it directly involves the audience with Joe's character on a more intimate

level, as if he were an informal confidant of the viewer. Through this involvement, the character becomes attached and follows Joe as a protagonist despite the brutality of his work.

The diachronic modularity of Joe speaking French at the narrative opening of the film is significant in developing an interpretive abstract of who the protagonist is, and what motivates him. In addition to Joe's opening voice over, the audience hears that he is trying to learn French. This feature is an important aspect of understanding the dimensionality of Joe's character. The audience is introduced to Joe as a contract killer and he is essentially established immediately as a murderer. When the audience sees him teaching himself French, Joe becomes humanized. No longer is he simply just a killer, now he has become an individual interested in another culture enough to explore their language and with enough intellect to teach it to himself. Joe is a protagonist, who despite his murderous occupation, is attempting to better himself.

Joe's use of French provides the basis for further chronotopic language within the narrative as well. That Joe is learning French demonstrates that he is thinking about the future. He is planning on living a life that is in a different place and a different time than that of the narrative setting. In Joe's mind, French is a desirable language to learn and France is an attractive place. When the narrative provides aspects of what Joe finds appealing, his relationship with the audience becomes stronger. The character Abe (Jeff Daniels) is introduced as Joe's employer. Abe was sent from the future to supervise the activity of the loopers. Joe goes to Abe in order to turn in his assignment and collect his pay. Abe remarks that he noticed Joe was attempting to learn French. Joe acknowledges that when he finishes his career, he would like to retire in France. Abe states, "I'm from the future, go to China." This single line of dialogue represents chronotopic language. It refers to a future that Joe and the audience is unaware of, there is a dramatic irony that only Abe possesses. The implications of this passage of

dialogue are speculative and open to interpretation. Does China completely overpower the United States in the world market? Does France become hostile to ex-patriots? The audience is never given a direct conclusion; they are left only to guess at why China would be the best destination for Joe to retire to. The ambiguity of Abe's suggestion is an invitation to the audience to create their own impression of what the future will look like with China as a mainstream player in the global community.⁴

The colleagues and peers that Joe interacts with throughout the narrative further establish the Joe's conflicts. Seth (Paul Dano) is a close friend to Joe, and he is also a looper. With the introduction of Seth, the film institutes the concept of the TK gene.⁵ Seth's character is largely a narrative device to introduce the driving conflicts that permeate the narrative. The concepts of TK and of "closing the loop" are both initiated with Seth's character. In another voice over made by Joe, he explicates the eventual fate of all loopers:

JOE [VOICE OVER]: There's a reason we're called loopers. When we sign up for this job, taking out the future's garbage, we also agree to a very specific proviso. Time travel in the future is so illegal, that when our employers want to close our contracts, they'll also want to erase any trace of their relationship with us ever existing. So if we're still alive they'll find our older self, zap him back to us, and we'll kill him like any other job. This is called closing your loop. Eh, you get a golden payday, you get a handshake, and you get released from your contract. Enjoy the next 30 years. This job doesn't tend to attract the most forward-thinking people.

The audience finds evidence of chronotope at work in this voice over as well. Joe discusses his future, as well as the future of every looper he works with. The value of recognizing the use of

chronotope in this passage is that it allows the viewer a deeper understanding of the narrative setting. Suddenly the fate of Joe becomes predetermined. The suspense and possibilities of how Joe's existence will play out comes crashing down in the revelation that he will eventually kill himself.

The modularity of several key sequences of Seth's demise serve to provide a rich opportunity of symbolic interpretation following establishment of "closing the loop" in the narrative. Eventually Seth's future self is sent back for him to execute. Old Seth⁶ arrives to the past singing a lullaby that Seth's mother sang to him as a child. Due to this auditory cue Seth hesitates in pulling the trigger, and Old Seth escapes. Seth arrives at Joe's apartment, terrified of the ramifications of letting Old Seth flee. Joe agrees to hide Seth when Abe sends his gat men⁷ to find him and Joe is taken to Abe for questioning. Abe discusses Joe's past and how he came to be hired as a Looper. As an adolescent Joe was caught robbing a watch shop that Abe owned. The ironic location of Joe's larceny is not lost in symbolic relevance. Again the modularity of the watch image is recalled. Joe was attempting to steal watches, literally steal time. As a result, Joe is thrust into a career that guarantees his time will be cut short, and at his own hands. Joe eventually gives Seth up to Abe. When Joe returns home he looks in the floor safe that Seth was hiding in. The camera focuses on Joe wiping blood away from the stashes of currency he has stored in the safe. While audience infers the blood came from Seth's struggle when the gat men found him, modularly this sequence is a symbolic reference to Joe's wealth being blood money. The significance of Joe recognizing that he built his fortune on blood money is that it demonstrates spiritual growth in his character's arc. Joe realizes that his time is running out, and the moment when he wipes his friends blood away is self-reflexive. Joe is conscious that he is living on borrowed time, but he has yet to take action against the deterministic nature of his fate.

Joe's inaction at this point of the narrative is indicative of the stasis of his lifestyle. Joe is in a pattern of self destruction, literally indicated by his drug use and figuratively suggested by the inevitability of him killing his future self. The audience is brought to this point of the narrative understanding that Joe is a self-serving character. Joe's character arc demonstrates movement from him as a destroyer to a protector. The moment that he gives Seth's location to Abe illustrates the Joe's starting point in this arc as a destroyer.

Seth's grisly fate at the order of Abe demonstrates a brutal and immediate presentation of fabula time within the narrative. Once Seth is captured he is never seen on screen again; instead the narrative focuses on the attempted escape of Old Seth. Abe has his enforcers systematically remove parts of Seth's body. This morbid surgery is instantly reflected through the anatomy of Old Seth. Slowly his fingers and feet vanish from his body, making his escape impossible. The enforcers carve an address on Seth's arm, and it appears as an aged scar on Old Seth. Old Seth crawls desperately to the address that appears on his arm; upon arriving he is quickly executed. Through the visual implementation of Old Seth's physical deconstruction, *Looper* exhibits a form of proleptic body horror that represents a complicated form of physiological flashforward. In her essay, "Personal Time in Alternative and Time Travel Narrative: The Cases of *Groundhog Day*, *Twelve Monkeys* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*" Elisa Pezzotta posits:

In general, our concept of time and, in particular, our idea of story time, is challenged both in counterfactual history and time-travel narratives. Alternative history, playing with frequency and repetitions of story time, challenges our idea that time is unique, that a cause or set of causes is followed by determined effects, and that we cannot know how our present would have been, should we have acted differently in the past. Only a comparison of the different versions of the same

characters demonstrates that they are living in parallel realities that unfold in the same time. The viewer understands that she is viewing different versions of the same characters because, usually, the event that changes the course of the protagonist's life is repeated, each time provoking different effects (15).

Perzotta illustrates that two versions of the same character can only exist in the same timeline through a juxtaposition of the differences of each variation of character. The representation of Seth and Old Seth being connected through the physical results of Seth being surgically deconstructed illustrate this comparison. Through Seth's literal disassembly, fabula time is demonstrated physiologically rather than inter-dimensionally.

Fabula time is displayed through Seth's inability to kill Old Seth, by foreshadowing Joe's narrative development. Shortly after Old Seth is executed, Joe is sent his future self so that he can close his loop. Upon arriving to the present, Old Joe is unmasked, facing Joe. Joe makes eye contact with Old Joe and realizes he is looking at the older version of himself. Joe hesitates long enough for Old Joe to turn his back to escape. As Joe pulls the trigger, the bullet strikes the gold bars strapped to Old Joe's back. The gold bars blocking the shot from Joe's gun are a symbolic reference to the self-reflexive moment Joe had while he was cleaning Seth's blood from his money earlier in the film. A focused interpretation of the modularity of this scene demonstrates to the audience that the blood money, which would eventually result in Joe's death by his own hands, in this moment, has saved Old Joe from being killed by his younger self. Joe, realizing that he made the same mistake that Seth made earlier, attempts to flee the city. He is met at his apartment by Abe's gat men, and during a struggle falls from a fire escape and loses consciousness. The camera cuts to black, and the narrative resets to the moment in which Old Joe arrives to be executed. This time Joe pulls the trigger killing his future self. The action of

Joe killing his future self, and closing his loop, allows the narrative to present the audience with the process by which Joe becomes Old Joe, establishing the development of the film's antagonist.

Looper now establishes a divergent timeline, which demonstrates the most complex moments of fabula time throughout the entire narrative. The film now chronicles Joe after he has closed his loop. Through proleptic montage, the film depicts the advancement of years leading Joe throughout his life and eventually reintroducing him as Old Joe. The years pass at random intervals and their progress is exhibited through on screen numerical representation. Joe takes Abe's advice and retires to China. The montage depicts Joe depleting all of the savings he amassed and eventually resorting to a life of crime to sustain his lifestyle. The mise-en-scene throughout the montage reveals that Joe is addicted to intravenous drug use⁸ and that he eventually marries. Eventually gat men catch up to Old Joe and abduct him in order to close his loop. During the abduction Joe's wife is accidentally shot and killed. Before he is sent back to the present, Joe fends off his attackers and removes the hood from his head. He willingly proceeds to go back in time and arrives, unmasked, and escapes from being executed as previously depicted in the narrative. At this juncture the divergent timelines have reunited in a present setting where both Joe and Old Joe exist. In his text, *Narrative Theory*, Jose Angel Garcia Landa states:

This is an aspectual category, which requires a referential point from which the degree of unfolding is measured. The moment of enunciation is a central point of deictic orientation in narrative texts. There are, however, other possible "now"-points, which can act as a reference, such as the spatial/temporal position of the focalizer, and that of the characters as well. Both are logically subordinated to the

enunciative now-point. Their use as reference points is therefore not a necessity but a rhetorical figure. An action which is finished from the point of view of the narrator can be presented in the course of its development if we adopt the perspective of the focalizer. An event may be perfective for the focalizer, progressive for a character.

Through this passage Landa discusses the point in fabula time in which two timelines can simultaneously branch out into different narrative outcomes. The focalizer in *Looper's* narrative, would be both Joe and Old Joe. The iterations of Joe and Old Joe are only aware of their individual time lines at this juncture of the narrative. The audience has been privileged to witnessing both timelines the film has demonstrated, and has experienced the effects of fabula time on the narrative.

The narrative construct of fabula time is instrumental in developing the characterization of Old Joe. Initially, Old Joe has a single set of memories. These memories are established from the timeline in which, as a young man, he closed his own loop. However, once the divergent timeline of his escape is created, Old Joe's memories begin to alter. As Joe begins to escape from the city, the encounters and actions that he undertakes become new memories for Old Joe. During a face-to-face meeting between the two, Old Joe describes the sensation of his memories being overridden by Joe's actions during the divergent timeline:

OLD JOE: My memory is cloudy. It's a cloud. Because my memories aren't really memories. They're just one possible eventuality now. And they grow clearer or cloudier as they become more or less likely. But then they get to the present moment, and they're instantly clear again. I can remember what you do after you do it. And it hurts.

The description of Old Joe's memory evolution is chronotopic in that it creates imagery for the audience to establish an understanding of Old Joe's conflicted past recollections. Bakhtin posits, "Thus an image selected for comparison is worth just as much as the other member of the comparison, it has its own independently viable significance and reality; thus a comparison becomes almost a dual episode, a digression" (218). The digression that takes place is in the audience's perception of Old Joe's characterization. Old Joe is presented antagonistically in that he is at odds with Joe who is clearly the protagonist of the narrative. However, a complicated schism occurs when the audience begins to understand that Old Joe did not travel back in time just to save himself. In actuality he traveled back to the present in an effort to ensure the gat men sent to retrieve him in the future would not kill his wife. The recognition of Old Joe's motivation to rescue his wife is important to the viewer; it adds an additional layer of development to the character and complicates his moral standing. The narrative creates ambiguity for the viewer, now instead of having an obvious antagonist to root against, Old Joe becomes humanized and the audience gains sympathy for his actions. The audience's sympathy for Old Joe is complicated by his decision that in order to prevent the gat men from coming to his home in the future and murdering his wife, he must kill The Rainmaker. The Rainmaker is a crime lord in the future that has evolved tremendous telekinetic abilities and orders the death of the loopers. Old Joe's logic is that if he kills The Rainmaker in the present, while he is still a child, then he will not grow into the crime boss that sent the gat men to his home in the future. The face-to-face meeting between Old Joe and Joe results in a confrontation that ends with Joe taking one of the addresses that Old Joe believes could be the childhood home of The Rainmaker.

Looper's setting moves from a landscape of urban decay to the rustic pastoral countryside. This shift signals the symbolic rebirth of Joe's character from a killer to a savior. The address that Joe takes from Old Joe leads him to the farm of Sara and her young son Cid. The narrative depicts instances of chronotope in the establishing shots of Sara working the farm. The audience witnesses Sara chopping wood and tending to crops. Johnson ensures Sara is presented as a typical farmer, unkempt and rugged. The rural imagery is quickly treated chronotopically with the presentation of a robotic crop duster. Sara programs the machine and it quickly takes flight over her fields. The crop duster is a symbolic anachronism that indicates to the audience that despite the bucolic setting of the farm, the narrative is still concerned with the presentation of an unfamiliar future.

The pastoral landscape of *Looper* is instrumental in examining aspects of a chronotopic narrative. Sara and Cid, a mother and young child, are both symbolic representations of hope and fertility. Their home being a farm further bolsters this symbolic reading. In regard to the chronotope of these images, Bakhtin illustrates:

The unity of place brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave (the same little corner, the same earth), and brings together as well childhood and old age (the same grove, stream, the same lime trees, the same house), the life of the various generations who had also lived in that same place, under the same conditions, and who had seen the same things. This blurring of all temporal boundaries made possible by a unity of place also contributes in an essential way to the creation of the cyclic rhythmicalness of time so characteristic of the idyll" (225).

The cyclical nature of the idyll in Bakhtin's observations is reiterated in Joe's conflict with Old Joe, and is further exemplified in the conflict between Sara and Cid.

Joe's arrival to the farm presents the audience with several sequences, that when examined through modularity, extrapolate significant symbolic interpretations of characterization. Early on, the narrative establishes Joe as a drug addict⁹. When Joe escapes the city and ends up on the farm, he has been without drugs long enough to incite withdrawal symptoms. When Sara finally finds him, he collapses on her front porch, dehydration and detoxification both taking their tolls. In a moment of lucidity, Joe sees Cid approaching him from the door of the house. Cid carries a small thermos to Joe and gives him water. The action of Cid giving water to Joe resonates with deep symbolism. Here the audience sees a child bring water¹⁰ to an ailing man. Cid metaphorically presents Joe with an opportunity to be cleansed of his past violence. The narrative will later demonstrate that Joe becomes the protector of Cid and Sara, Cid providing water to Joe is the first moment that Joe begins his rebirth as that savior. The symbolism of Joe's path to redemption is further demonstrated through the mise-en-scene of when Cid later visits him in the barn. Joe is still recovering from his addiction and he is slipping in and out of consciousness. The camera takes on a first person point of view from the perception of Joe resting on a cot. The lens of the camera is unfocused on the barn door; it is ajar with sunlight pouring through into the darkness of the barn. The audience sees the image of Cid, silhouetted in the light, framed by the entrance of the barn. Here Cid takes on a messianic presence. The duality of this image is complex. The image of Cid shrouded in light symbolizes that he is the vessel that will allow Joe to find his salvation. It also foreshadows the idea that Cid's character is divine, that he is The Rainmaker and the possible harbinger of Joe's eventual destruction. The interpretive relevance behind these symbolic images in the narrative is that it

provides the audience with an understanding of the complex weave that Joe, Cid and Sara's characters will develop through the remainder of the plot.

Old Joe's narrative development, when viewed through modularity, also bears heavy symbolic weight for his character's arc. While Joe is recovering on Sara's farm, Old Joe is trying to track down the other children who may be The Rainmaker. Old Joe's solution to saving his wife in the future is to kill the children that might grow into the role of the crime lord. Johnson uses a montage to demonstrate Old Joe silently stalking and dispatching the first child. In this sequence when isolated from the rest of the narrative Old Joe becomes a deplorable child killer. Symbolically, he represents the destroyer while Joe becomes the restorer. The juxtaposition of each of these roles inhabiting the same character, even when represented by two different actors, is used to establish an intense internal conflict within the character of Joe. The audience is able to understand the duality of the character through the dramatically alternative outcomes of both Joe and Old Joe's ethical justifications. This understanding is important for the audience in order to recognize and analyze the complex turns that each character arc undergoes throughout the narrative.

A deep parallel between the character arcs of Joe and Cid is created through the implementation of chronotope in the narrative. Their connection is explored through the relationship each had with their mothers. Johnson creates a parallel between the two characters through the dialogue used to explore their relationships with their mothers. During a sequence in which the gat man Jesse is hunting for Joe, Cid comes and helps Joe hide through an underground tunnel leading from the farmhouse to an adjacent field. Joe and Cid watch Jesse from their hiding spot, at which point Cid asks Joe about his mother. Joe's recollection of his mother is revealed:

JOE: Where's my mom? She, uh, gave me up. I was younger than you. We were vagrants, and she was alone. I thought she was stupid for getting on the drugs she was on, but now I see she was just so alone. It's what she had. She sold me to a panhandle gang.

Cid and Joe establish a bond through this dialogue, Cid understands the harsh truth of Joe's childhood, and Joe gains his respect for being honest with him despite Cid's young age. After Jesse is accidentally killed by Cid's uncontrollable TK abilities, Sarah and Joe become intimate. During their encounter Sara explains how she and Cid came to be on the farm:

SARA: You know, when I came back, after my sister died, I remember seeing him for the first time in two years, just sitting on the porch. I drove up crying. I'd been at this party all night in the city when I got the call... so I was wearing this ridiculous party dress. All my ridiculous shit. And I don't know if he... even remembered me, but he looked at me... I abandoned him. I abandoned my baby.

When comparing these two sequences of dialogue the audience is able to discover that Joe and Cid had very similar life experiences regarding their mothers. The connection that is made between each of their childhoods creates a spiritual bond between the individuals. While the characters in the narrative never explicitly address this bond, the dialogue allows the audience to perceive it clearly. The implication of this bond in the narrative assists in developing Joe's character as Cid's protector, and ultimately as the impetus of change that allows Cid to become a version of The Rainmaker who will grow up avoiding a life of vengeance and violence.¹¹

In the final moments of the narrative Joe witnesses the film's most telling and climactic instance of fabula time. Old Joe finally arrives at the farm to confront Joe and execute Cid; this action is ultimately resolved through the use of cinematic fabula time. As Old Joe and Joe fight

at the edge of the cane fields, Sara and Cid are trying to stay out of the line of fire. Old Joe fires at Cid and grazes the boy's cheek with a bullet, wounding him superficially. Sara witnesses the bullet almost hitting Cid and steps between him and Old Joe to shield her son from being shot. In a proleptic vision, Joe sees Sara being shot and killed by Old Joe. Cid, motherless and abandoned would go on the run, harboring a deep hatred for the looper that killed his mother. The hatred that burned in Cid would lead him down a path of vengeance and brutality; ultimately turning him into The Rainmaker that would eventually call for the execution of the loopers. Joe narrates the prophetic vision, his words creating a chronotope of narrative:

JOE: Then I saw it. I saw a mom who would die for her son. A man who would kill for his wife. A boy, angry and alone. Laid out in front of him, the bad path. I saw it. And the path was a circle... round and round. So I changed it.

The use of language in Joe's description of the alternate future gives the audience a sense of gravity in the decision that Joe ultimately makes. As Old Joe lifts his gun to kill Sara, Joe turns his own gun on himself and pulls the trigger. Joe, mortally wounded, falls dying to the ground. An instant later, Old Joe disappears into thin air, the death of his younger self eradicating him entirely from the present timeline. Regarding the circular nature of Joe's conflicted timeline, Bakhtin states: "The mark of cyclicity, and consequently of cyclical repetitiveness, is imprinted on all events occurring in this type of time. Time's forward impulse is limited by the cycle. For this reason even growth does not achieve an authentic becoming" (210). The implications of chronotope in Bakhtin's quote draw a direct relation to the nature of Joe's vision. Joe witnesses the cycle of Cid becoming The Rainmaker. The vision persisted throughout each timeline in which Old Joe existed with the same results. In order for Joe to break the cycle, to avoid the timeless repetition of violence, he sacrifices his own life. The final sacrifice Joe commits

realizes his character arc in full. He has moved from the destroyer to the protector by his final altruistic action. In the final moments of the narrative, the audience witnesses a final scene with Joe's pocket watch. After Joe's sacrifice, Sara picks up the watch lying next to him. The camera then focuses on the face of the watch, the second hand ticking loudly. The watch is the final symbol of fabula time in the film; Sara clicks it closed indicating that Joe's time in the narrative has reached completion. With the action of Sara closing the pocket watch, the audience's relationship with the narrative has come full circle. The establishing shot of the film is revisited; the symbolism of the watch being closed represents the literal closing of the film's narrative. The watch also represents Joe's first foray into illegality, when Sara closes it the audience can further interpret that his life as a criminal has ended because of her presence in his life. With the involvement of her and Cid, Joe's movement from selfishness to altruism is achieved.

The narrative of *Looper* demonstrates many instances of fabula time and chronotopic dialogue. Time travel is a difficult and complex theme to explore. The negotiation of divergent timelines and the character driven symbolism represented by the modularity of specific sequences creates a unique portrait of one man's journey from murderous criminal to selfless savior. In addition to chronotope and modularity, Manovich's New Media principles of automation and transcoding are influential tools for interpretive readings of cinema. In Ian Forsyth and Jane Pollard's dramatic musical documentary, *20,000 Days on Earth*, the artistry of Noir rock musician Nick Cave is featured. The New Media concepts of automation and transcoding are utilized to illustrate complex approaches to Cave's music and his overall philosophy as an artist.

Chapter Four Notes

¹ *The Time Machine* written by H.G. Wells in 1895 is often considered to be the introduction of time travel to a mainstream audience.

² Joe's pocket watch is widely prevalent in the film's mise-en-scene. Whenever Joe is about to assassinate a target, he checks his watch. The audience later learns that Joe stole this watch during the first crime he ever committed. The watch is a direct link to Joe's initiation into the criminal underworld. As Joe continues to look at the time in anticipation of his mark's arrival from the future, the pocket watch also becomes a symbolic link to the ongoing pattern of Joe's criminal career.

³ *Looper* flirts with many postmodern concepts throughout its narrative. The intertextuality of the setting fuses together film noir and science fiction, while the demonstration of time travel insights moments of hyperrealism. The process by which Old Joe's memory is portrayed exemplifies fragmentation. The ethical ambiguity of Joe and Old Joe also shares a common ideology with postmodernity. The moments in which Joe speaks directly to the audience create a space for the viewer to engage with Joe's universe no matter how fantastic the setting may appear to be. The engagement of the viewer with Joe is vital in order to reconcile the immorality of his criminal behaviors and follow him narratively as the protagonist.

⁴ When examining China's role in current global economics, the viewer can easily infer that Abe's suggestion for Joe to go to China reflects Johnson's subtle commentary that the China will eventually gain even greater control of the global market through the climbing value of the renminbi.

⁵ TK is an acronym for telekinesis. In the setting of *Looper*, human evolution has established minor telekinetic abilities in select individuals by the year 2044. The advent of TK in *Looper* is presented as a genetic mutation that allows the inflicted minor telekinetic abilities. During an early sequence of the film, Joe and Seth are driving to a nightclub when the audience witnesses Seth levitating a small coin several inches above his hand. Joe comments that Seth's ability to levitate the coin is a tacky demonstration used as a trick to attract women.

⁶ The future versions of the loopers are referred to as "Old." For the duration of the analysis the young version of Seth and Joe will be referred to by their first names, the future versions will be referred to as "Old Joe" and "Old Seth" respectively.

⁷ A gat man is a mob enforcer. Abe is in control of the mob in the present day timeline and his gat men are the soldiers that he sends to carry out his bidding.

⁸ Most likely heroin, though the film never explicitly indicates. The drug is portrayed as a vial of liquid and is consumed orally as well as intravenously.

⁹ Joe's drug of choice is a liquid opiate that is taken orally via an eyedropper. The interpretation could be made that this drug use is symbolic in that Joe is trying to change his

perception by administering a mind-altering substance that directly affects his ability to see things. Johnson employs a visual effect within the film whenever Joe consumes the opiate. The frame of the action shifts to Joe's perception through a first person point of view. Images lose the sharpness and light sources create halos through a lack of focus. A prismatic feature is applied to the camera lens and Joe appears washed in euphoria.

¹⁰ Water is often employed as a symbol of healing, rebirth, and purity. In the case of this particular scene in *Looper*, a child gives water to a stricken man. When Cid is introduced into the narrative, Joe is in the throws of dehydration and drug withdrawals. Cid defies his Sara's command to stay away from Joe and brings him a cup of water. Johnson creates an ironic tension in this action. Cid, with his pronounced telekinetic ability, is destined to be The Rainmaker in the future. The Rainmaker is the individual that orders the deaths of the present day loopers. The irony arrives in the revelation that Cid will grow up to order Joe's execution, yet as a young boy Cid attempts to save Joe's life and soothe his suffering. For many viewers this revelation is made after multiple screenings of the film, there is not enough information about the characters to arrive at this conclusion during the initial viewing of the film.

¹¹ A sustained exploration of this connection could result in a treatment of Joe and Cid as the same person symbolically. The history of their individual childhoods, their affection toward Sara, and the reciprocation of saving each other's lives create an intriguing possibility for developing a deeper analysis of the characters.

CHAPTER FIVE – ALL THE CLOCKS HAVE STOPPED
NEGOTIATING ASPECTS OF NEW MEDIA AND NARRATOLOGY IN *20,000 DAYS*
ON EARTH

Where he moves the darkness follows. For even in the bright lights of the stage, shadows lust and lurch toward his every step. In that moment he is neither an entertainer nor a simple song and dance man; he becomes the wicked maestro, ambassador of the lunatic fringe. The crowd turns into a congregation, rabid for his countenance. His eyes are wolves teeth, every gaze devours. He approaches the microphone as the rough beast toward Bethlehem.¹ His voice is blood and fire. The rapture arrives in the form of a song. The world ends.

A new media reading to *20,000 Days on Earth* provides a robust framework for applying select principles of Manovich's new media language². Interpreting moments of numerical representation, automation, and transcoding give the viewer an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing a cinematic narrative. When these new media aspects are juxtaposed with the linguistic concepts of chronotope, dialogism, synchrony and diachrony, the film no longer exists as a simple rock music documentary. It becomes a composition of arranged narratives interested in memory, craft, and artistic interrogation. The importance of viewing *20,000 Days on Earth* is illustrated through an audience's ability to apply an interdisciplinary³ approach when interpreting cinematic aesthetic.

Filmmakers Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard⁴ created the quasi-documentary *20,000 Days on Earth* (2014) in an effort to offer a unique glimpse into a day⁵ in the life of Nick Cave. Cave is a musician whose art appeals to the darker aspects of the human psyche. His songs are often

character driven narratives steeped in the chaos of love, violence, addiction, and salvation. He is most widely known as the front man for the group Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, who have been steadily releasing albums since 1984. The thematic content and imagery of Cave's songs has earned his music the moniker of Noir Rock. Through the thematic use of the darker elements of society to portray common emotional connections such as love, anger, longing, despair, and hope, Cave has created a vast narrative landscape throughout his discography.

Despite his global popularity, Cave is often considered an enigma by his fan base. Famously difficult to interview throughout his younger years, there have been relatively few successful attempts to chronicle his career. The film is presented in documentary format, but is considered to be more of a creative sketch of Cave's persona as an artist rather than a formal biographical account of his career.⁶ The culmination of Forsyth and Pollard's cinematic presentation of Cave contains many illustrations of new media principles and dialogic narrative. The recognition and synthesis of these concepts provide an analytical opportunity for the audience to interpret Cave's persona as an icon and artistic character. Cave has often shied away from interviews and literal explanations of the meaning of his songs. *20,000 Days on Earth* is one of the first opportunities that his audience has had to experience a voyeuristic perception of the artist's assumed personal existence. The directors work closely with Cave in order to gain his approval of their presentation of his life. The result of Cave's cooperative collaboration is a biofictional⁷ film that gives his audience a perceived understanding of his work and way of thinking.

The opening title sequence of *20,000 Days on Earth* is a strong example of how the principles of numerical representation⁸ and transcoding⁹ are incorporated in implementing the tone of the film. The establishing shot of the film is a black screen with the sound of a baby

crying in the background. The crying infant marks the start of life, symbolically this child represents the birth of Cave. The viewer becomes aware that they are moving quickly through the timeline of Cave's existence. The crying child is quickly replaced by images of an adolescent Cave. As quickly as the child appears images of Cave discovering music in his late teens take over the monitors. The audience is quickly thrust into a cacophony of images and sound. The tumultuous energy that overwhelms the screen serves to destabilize the comfort of the viewer. Cave's life has been marked by chaotic performances¹⁰, addiction, and aggressive art forms¹¹. Multiple monitor screens continue to display various moments of Cave's life as a timer rapidly counts upward to 20,000. The numerical representation of the on screen timer symbolizes the speed at which Cave's life and career have blossomed. The constant barrage of images that take place on the multiple monitor system illustrate his existence transcoded into the screen. The camera is in constant flux, focusing on different monitors, individually as well as collectively. A sense of modularity is created as the camera features the monitors individually; isolated moments from Cave's career or representations of various artists who have influenced him demonstrate the versatility¹² of his artistic accomplishments. The entire sequence takes roughly two minutes to transpire. The day in which the audience is going to witness Cave's life is preceded by the chaos of his past. Footage of a violent audience rampaging across a stage represents the violence associated with early live performances. Images of fire and syringes depict Cave's struggle with heroin addiction. The flamboyant moments of the carnival of Brazil recall Cave's time spent living in South America. The opening montage serves as a device to make the viewer feel tension; this creates a sense of Cave's characterization being steeped in chaos and hostility.

The process by which the directors organize and present Cave's music is represented in new media by the principle of automation. In order to provide the audience with a voyeuristic tour of Cave's craft and belief system, Forsyth and Pollard utilize many of the artistic artifacts that Cave has created. Manovich states, "The creative energy of the author goes into the selection and sequencing of elements rather than into original design" (130). The implementation of automation in the creation of a documentary narrative such as Cave's is crucial. The directors' have chosen¹³ specific images, sound recordings, and interviews to compile in order to create the film. Their artistic presence is displayed in the editing and sequencing of the actual artwork of Cave himself. Through the presence of automation, the audience participates in two frames of narrative within the film. The first and most obvious is Cave's work as a musician; the second and subtler is the narrative in which the directors' wish to establish using Cave's mystique. Throughout the start of the documentary, Cave is shown constantly flipping through notes, and journal entries. The camera focuses on the pages, handwritten and scrawled upon. The decision to feature Cave's written words in such a high volume also represents automation. The cascading notebooks and written words create a symbolic vortex that demands the audience recognize the abundance of Cave's work. He is a highly prolific musician. In order for the viewer to gain a more intimate portrayal of the musician, Forsyth and Pollard prioritize representing Cave as a tireless creator.

Forsyth and Pollard are interested in presenting Cave as a self made character of his own devices; they often employ a voice-over technique that illustrates exposition. Cave describes where he currently lives, and in his description chronotopic language works to create imagery. Cave states, "I used to come down to Brighton years ago, and what I remember most is that it was always cold and it was always raining with a glacial wind that would blow through the

streets and freeze you to your bones. But you gotta drop anchor somewhere and somehow here I am.” The stark and visceral sketch of his home provides the audience with a setting for the basis of Cave’s creative process. The importance of this description is that it creates a locale for Cave, who also functions as the protagonist of the narrative. The imagery of Brighton being cold and inhospitable is a fitting setting for the dark mystique that permeates Cave’s music.

The interrogative nature of Cave’s discussions throughout the narrative takes on a form of heteroglossic personification¹⁴, examining his fears, interests, conflicts, and challenges. The directors’ stylistic application of Cave sharing one-on-one discussions with his friends and colleagues¹⁵ functions to peel back the layers of Cave’s personality, offering intimate and candid portrayals of the artist’s experiences. On one level, the candid interviews that Cave engages in exemplify the many branches of his work, on another the individuals that he speaks with can also be interpreted as facets of Cave’s mind. In one sequence he chauffeurs Kylie Minogue through the night while discussing the popular single¹⁶ that they created. Cave and Minogue reminisce about their duets. The placement of Minogue in the back seat of the car that Cave is driving could be interpreted as Cave looking backward at their shared experience. During another similar scene, Ray Winstone¹⁷ sits in the passenger seat of the car. Winstone and Cave discuss aspects of performing for an audience. Cave tells Winstone, “There's something that happens on stage where you are transported... time has a different feel and you are just this thing and you feel you can't do any wrong.” Cave’s discussion of time and place here exemplify chronotopic language; the statement offers a rare glimpse into the creative performance process of Cave as a musician. As Cave continues driving, there is a close up of Cave’s face, the camera cuts back out to a full view of the car and Ray Winstone is no longer there. Winstone’s absence in this shot suggests that his presence was possibly imagined by Cave.

Cave recalls the process of producing certain songs, which demonstrates the use of chronotopic language. The conversation that Cave holds with former Bad Seed guitarist Blixia Bargeld¹⁸ concerns the advantages of editing songs; this can be interpreted as a metaphor for the artist's use of memory. Cave acknowledges, "I love the feeling of a song before you understand it. When we're all playing deep inside the moment, the song feels wild and unbroken." This sentiment is further echoed during his dialogue with Bargeld in which they discuss past experiences of songwriting. Cave states,

I sometimes listen to the records we made and I really wish there was someone in the studio who [would] had have told me it's too long... and now I'm brutal with editing... And suddenly it's better than before. Suddenly...well, suddenly, it's a different song... Once you've understood the song it's no longer of much interest... some of those great songs that you do... you kind of become aware of new things over the years.

The awareness that Cave possesses of not being interested in a song once it is understood is telling in that it demonstrates Cave's attraction to the unknown. Cave's understanding¹⁹ of a song he has written depends largely on how he remembers it. His memory, when captured within the boundaries of a song he has written, is no longer interesting to him once he has analyzed its meaning. He goes on to further insinuate that the song's relevance will evolve and shift over time.

Cave's interest in memory is pronounced through a synchronic and modular discussion of his father. In an interview with psychoanalyst Darian Leader, Cave explores many aspects of his past. This recollection is synchronic²⁰ in that Cave focuses on how his father's words made him feel in the moment he heard them as a child. The modularity of the memory is established

because it was a singular isolated moment of Cave's childhood. When asked to recall a memory of his father Cave recalls that he read the opening of *Lolita* to him, when Cave was a young child,

NICK CAVE: You know, there must be earlier ones, he did actually take me aside one day and read me the first chapter of *Lolita*.

DR: Why that?

NICK CAVE: Because he said that within that chapter, great writing kind of existed in there on so many different levels and he kind of went through the alliteration and read it out loud and said, "See what happens here?" And you know... that was a very powerful thing for him to do for me, because the way that I saw him become around that kind of stuff....

DR: What did he become?

NICK CAVE: You know, a...a greater thing.

The scene of Cave's recollection of his father reading to him is dialogic in nature, as it involves the literal voice of his father reading the text, the voice of Cave examining the memory, and the interrogative voice of Leader discussing the memory's relevance to Cave as an adult. After Cave regards literature turning his father into a "greater thing" the narrative shifts to Cave and his band in the studio rehearsing a song. The juxtaposing of Cave talking about his father's transformation from literature with Cave creating his own art exemplifies Cave himself becoming a greater thing through his music.

The language of Cave's responses also demonstrates chronotope, which is indicated during the continuation of his therapy session. Cave's discussion of memory is consistently

wrapped in the imagery and specific settings of his childhood. The specific language that Cave uses to describe his childhood creates a rich setting for the audience,

CAVE: Well, the Ovens River ran through Wangaratta and that's where I spent my childhood, just down by that river. All the kind of cool stuff that I got up to as a kid.

LEADER: What kind of thing?

CAVE: Kissing girls. Jumping off the, er...the railway bridge that went over this river. I mean, we would put our ear to the tracks and listen for the train and hear it vibrating on the tracks. Then we would run towards the train, along the tracks into the middle of a bridge and the train would come around like this and we would run and then we would leap off the, uh.. leap off the bridge into the river.

Leader continues his conversation by asking Cave what his biggest fear is; Cave recognizes that his fears are largely related to memory,

NICK CAVE: My...biggest fear, I guess, is losing my memory. It does worry me at times that I'm not gonna be able to continue to do what I do and reach a place that I'm satisfied with.

DARIAN LEADER: In what sense?

NICK CAVE: Because memory is what we are, you know, and I think that your very soul and your very reason...to be alive is tied up in memory. I mean, I think for a very long time, I've been building up a kind of world through narrative songwriting. It is a kind of world that's created about those precious, original memories that define our lives and those memories that we spend forever chasing after.

Cave's internal examination of his childhood and his fears creates a powerful texture of his persona that reveals elements of his disposition as an artist. Cave offers the viewer an insight to his character as a musician, describing aspects of his childhood that inspired happiness and the subjects that fuel his fear. The audience is able to identify with Cave's language and his interpretation of memory. The elusive persona of Cave becomes more grounded, more traditional in the sense that he is not speaking to Leader as a rock star, but as a regular man with fears and memories not unlike any other human being. The ability to present Cave beyond his celebrity is a feature of the narrative that Forsyth and Pollard employ to establish sympathy, identity, and pathos with their audience.

There is an evolution of Cave's fear of losing his memory. Ironically²¹ the act of forgetting is vital for his performance as an artist; the diachrony of language demonstrates the progress of Cave's discussion of memory. His language regarding not being able to recall memory shifts from fear to empowerment. The modularity of his language in describing the emotional transformation that occurs while performing is exhibited by the isolated moment in which each song he performs allows him to achieve artistic transcendence. Cave recognizes this isolation and states, "If you can enter into the song and enter into the heart of the song, into the present moment, forget everything else, you can be kind of taken away... and then you're sort of godlike." Cave's abandonment of all memory during his performances represents a diachronic shift in language from the importance he placed on retaining memory in his previous discussions with Leader. The necessitation of forgetting is further exemplified by Cave in the narrative. Cave again recalls how his father became a greater version of himself when reading *Lolita*. The impact that Cave's father had on him when reading the novel is evident. The exposures to works of powerful literature, such as *Lolita* appear to have informed Cave's predilection for literary

arts. In Cave's perception, his father transforms into something greater when he reads the text, this can be interpreted as Cave projecting his own transformation that takes place during his performances. In an effort to identify with his father's transformation Cave and Leader discuss the nature of forgetting,

CAVE: You know, I don't know how it is for other people, but I think on some level we all want to be somebody else, and we all look for that transformative thing that can happen in our lives and I think most people find it in some way or another and that's a place that they can forget who they are and become somebody else.

LEADER: By forgetting who they are?

CAVE: Yeah. By forgetting who they are. And I think maybe that's what I'm talking about with my father reading *Lolita*. I noticed that about him you know, that he was doing something. He was only reading this, but he was engaged in this on a different level and was thrilled to read this to his child.

The dialogic exchange between Leader and Cave provides an interpretive opportunity for the audience to recognize the diachronic evolution of Cave's relationship with memory throughout the narrative. The conflict that arises within Cave's persona is based on the fear of losing memory coupled with the need to forget in order to transcend as an artist. This complex negotiation creates a style of tension between the audience and the narrative. The viewer of the film must negotiate the subtlety of Cave's language as its meaning changes and evolves throughout the various interactions and discussions. In order to identify to the artistic persona of Cave, the viewer must allow the synchrony of his language to transform, shift, and at times contradict diachronically throughout the duration of the interview. When the audience is able to track

Cave's language, extrapolating meaning from his words through synchronic and diachronic analysis, they are able to chart the evolution of his thoughts. The understanding of Cave's language is necessary for the audience to create a meaningful narrative regarding Cave's life.

Cave's voiceovers throughout the narrative continue to illustrate diachronic language. Cave states,

Who knows their own story? Certainly, it makes no sense when we are living in the midst of it. It's all just clamor and confusion. It only becomes a story when we tell it and retell it. Our small precious recollections that we speak again and again to ourselves or to others. First, creating the narrative of our lives and then keeping the story from dissolving into darkness.

Cave is speaking directly to the audience during this passage. Cave suggesting that a story becomes a story through its retelling is an important factor regarding the identity of Cave. With this revelation, the audience has the opportunity to recognize the artist's ability to reinvent themselves through language. Understanding that Cave is a character within the fiction of the documentary as much as he is a real artist is crucial for the interpretive value of the film's narrative. Cave's relationship to memory, and to maintaining a sense of mystery concerning his celebrity persona is based indefinitely on his ability to retell his story in ways that remain engaging to his audience.

A symbolic retelling of Cave's musical story at this juncture of the documentary is represented through the narrative mise-en-scene depicting computerized technology and applications that are now used to record his work. Forsyth and Pollard appear sensitive to Cave's need to retell his story; the automation of his music throughout the documentary entertains a certain symbolism for the audience. At one point during rehearsal the camera slowly

focuses in on a producers table, covered in levers, switches, and knobs. The camera then slowly pans upward to focus on Cave and his band performing. The focus of the production table shifting toward the musicians implicates the process by which music arrives to the audience. For Cave's music to be reached by a contemporary audience, the compositions must be digitized and transcoded to a computer. The retelling of Cave's musical story can be traced throughout the 1980s, when the primary vessels for music were audiocassettes and vinyl LPs. The 1990s continues the evolution with compact discs after which digital music becomes and stays relevant. The manner in which Cave's music is technologically presented to his fans is symbolically represented through the cameras focus of new technology. Through this representation the audience is made aware of their role in Cave's musical history.

Cave's regard for the subject matter of his songs can be interpreted as modular²²; this provides a referential frame for the listener to understand the complexity of the songwriting process. He does not regard the presence of a muse in his craft; he is primarily interested in musically representing specific people during precise and isolated moments of time. The narrative qualities of his musical narratives become an exercise in modularity in that they represent a closed narrative that has no bearing on the any other song or artifact that he has created. Cave expresses,

The word "muse" I often feel reluctant to use, because it feels like the muse is something ethereal and out there. It's not for me. The songs are very much about people and it's these people that kind of prop up the songs. If I sing a song like "Deanna"²³, it's very much three minutes or whatever with the memory of that person. Not that I have any interest in the way that that person is now, but I have

a huge interest in the memory of that person. The mythologized, edited kind of memory of that person.

Once more the presence of memory is a defining factor in the creative process of Cave's songwriting. There is a unique symbiosis within Cave's craft that becomes relevant with this divulgence. Cave considers a successful performance as transcendence through forgetting²⁴, but each song performed is an isolated remembrance. Cave's negotiation of remembering and forgetting is complex, and provides a wide possibility of interpretations from his fan base.

Cave's discussion of his wife Susie Bick with Forsyth and Pollard depicts language that is chronotopic in its syntax. Cave's songs are often occupied by strong female presences. Throughout his career he has revisited the female form in many different variations. Women are the heroes and villains of his narratives; they are the saviors and the destroyers. Cave regards the first time that he saw his wife²⁵ as a moment of spiritual significance to his song craft. He expounds,

The first time I saw Susie was at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and when she came walking in, all the things I had obsessed over for all the years - pictures of movie stars, Jenny Agutter in the billabong, Anita Ekberg in the fountain, Ali MacGraw in her black tights, images from the TV when I was a kid, Barbara Eden and Elizabeth Montgomery and Abigail, Miss World competitions, Marilyn Monroe... all the endless, impossible fantasies ... all the continuing, never-ending drip-feed of erotic data came together at that moment in one great big crash-bang and I was lost to her and that was that.

Cave's litany of attraction overwhelms the audience chronotopically. Each individual woman that he mentions is accompanied on screen by her image. The movement through space and time

through this montage takes the audience on a tour of Cave's lusts, desires, and loves. As each model is featured throughout the montage, the viewer is transported to an alternative time, a time when that model was considered to be the highest standard of commercial beauty. The implication of this montage is that beauty must be cultivated and maintained through memory and Cave achieves transcendence by meeting his wife and forgetting the previous infatuations of his life.

The finality of the film illustrates aspects of Cave's memory diachronically. During the opening moments of the narrative, the camera focuses on an entry in one of Cave's notebooks. The words "One day I will tell you how to slay the dragon" are scrawled in his handwriting. When taken synchronically the viewer may interpret this line of text as a peripheral song lyric or story idea that Cave is working through. During the conclusion of the narrative this line is revisited during a voice over. The audience is now reminded of the words, through diachronic presentation of the same line, which were written in a notebook shown early in the narrative. The same notebook contains Cave's thoughts that are not revealed until the close of the documentary. Cave declares, "The song is heroic, because the song confronts death. The song is immortal and bravely stares down our own extinction. The song emerges from the spirit world with a true message. One day, I will tell you how to slay the dragon." The audience is now given finality to Cave's musical ambition; every song becomes a beacon of immortality. The dragon symbolizes the death of the artist, a death that Cave hopes to live beyond through the presence of his music.

When viewed through a lens of New Media and Narratology, Forsyth and Pollard's *20,000 Days on Earth* offers an intimate portrayal of one of rock music's most enigmatic artists. Chronotopic language provides the audience with a unique understanding of Cave's regard to

memory and songwriting, while the application of automation and modularity establish a presentational paradigm for the directors' exploration of Cave's music. The viewer's ability to interpret the use of Cave's language synchronically, while following the trajectory of his discourse diachronically imparts the rich interpretive possibility of peeling back the mystery of Cave's persona.

Chapter Five Notes

¹ Referencing "The Second Coming" by Yeats, "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (21-22).

² Numerical representation, automation, variability, modularity, and transcoding.

³ The combined disciplines of Linguistics, Narratology, New Media, English, Musicology, Film Studies, Psychology, and Interpersonal Communications can all be found in analyzing *20,000 Days on Earth*.

⁴ Forsyth and Pollard began their relationship with Cave when they were chosen to direct several music videos for the album *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!*

⁵ During an interview with the directors, Cave states, "This day is both more real and less real, more true and less true, more interesting and less interesting than my actual day, depending on how you look at it" (20000daysonearth.com)

⁶ An excerpt taken from an interview with Billboard conducted by Joe Lynch:

JOE: This is hardly your first film: You've scored films before and you've written scripts, but what made you think it was time to do a documentary?

CAVE: I didn't think, at any time, it was time to do a documentary. I still don't think it's time. [Forsyth and Pollard] approached me with an idea that seemed exciting and about something beyond myself. So slowly I got involved.

FORSYTH: Nick remains reluctant and disinterested in the biography side of documentary making, and he was keen to not make a film like that. As soon as he understood it wasn't just about cameras following him and quizzing him, he was interested.

CAVE: The only fly-on-the-wall stuff in the movie is the recording studio. The idea was that everything in *20,000 Days on Earth* was filmic. We used sets. Nothing is real. We felt I would

be able to be more free and myself in a constructed scenario than I would be if they came bursting into my house with a camera, which never would have happened. I would have no interest in doing that. I just don't see the point. I don't see how it benefits anybody -- certainly not the person watching the film, because all they're seeing is a deconstruction of the people they think are special. They're being made ordinary. And why would they want that to happen?

⁷ In her text *Auto/biography in Canada: Critical Directions*, Julie Rak offers a definition of biofiction as presented in the works of Regine Robins, "In Robin's literary works, this cosmopolitan social condition is represented by the complexities of literary genres in her writings. By combining autobiography and fiction, biography and her experiences, she invents a new genre is Quebecois literature: 'biofiction' as she describes her second literary work..." (237).

⁸ In her essay "The Five Principles of New Media, Or Playing Lev Manovich," Madeline Sorapure offers a summery of numerical representation, "Because all new media objects are composed of digital code, they are essentially numerical representations. That is, all new media objects can be described mathematically and can be manipulated via algorithms. According to Manovich, the key difference between old and new media is that new media is programmable. The closest we can get to the 'materiality' of a new media object is to talk about the numbers and formulas that constitute it. In new media compositions, the opposition between visual and verbal is bridged in the sense that both are code—both image and text are programmed and programmable" (1). The explanation that Sorapure provides is very thorough. In the case of *20,000 Days on Earth*, numerical representation is a literal portrayal of numbers on the screen. These numbers, when presented are the coded representation of the days that Cave has lived.

⁹ Sorapure summarizes Manovich's concept of Transcoding as well, "Technically, transcoding refers to the translation of a new media object from one format to another (for example, text to sound) or the adaptation of new media for display on different devices. Broadly, transcoding designates the ways in which media and culture are being reshaped and transformed by the logic of the computer" (5). Transcoding is ever present in *20,000 Days on Earth*, most abundantly through the digitized production and reproduction of Cave's music.

¹⁰ Cave began rising in popularity with his band "The Birthday Party." The live performances of The Birthday Party were quickly regarded as affairs of violence, anarchy, and aggression. This regard is summarized in a review of one of their concerts by Barney Hoskyns: "The shows were as much about the possibility of chaos and catastrophe as they were an opportunity for the band to play their songs. By sacrificing their own performance to the intensity of the engagement, they exerted a degree of control over the fate of their own success. But while Cave and the band pushed to intensify their performance – often doing so right out into the audience with their own fists – the violence and confrontation became synonymous with the experience of a Birthday Party concert" (rocksbackpages.com).

¹¹ A common aesthetic of Cave's novels and screenplays is brutal violence. His novels *And the Ass Saw the Angels* and *The Death of Bunny Munro*, both contain protagonists who are psychopathic. *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989) is a southern gothic that sees its protagonist

obsessively driven toward seeking revenge against a family and community that abused him. *The Death of Bunny Munro* chronicles its protagonist's downward spiral into addiction against a background of a serial killer's rampage through Brighton. Cave's screenplay for *The Proposition* (2008) is an Australia western set in the 1880s, a brother must choose between the deaths of one of his two brothers. The film portrays the violence of the outback in graphic detail. Also written by Cave was the screenplay for *Lawless* (2012) that chronicles a family of bootleggers in 1930s Appalachia. The film contains a vast amount of brutality as the family fights against local and national law enforcement to save their business. Cave addresses his interest in violence during an interview with "The Herald Scotland," "I'm interested in our capacity for violence," Cave says. "We live in civilized societies where we live civilized lives, all of us. We can all sit down and communicate with each other but inside each one of us is the potential for untold violence and evil, given the right or the wrong situation."

¹² Beyond Cave's involvement in the bands The Birthday Party, The Boys Next Door, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, and Grinderman, he has acted in films as well as written several novels, screenplays and cinematic scores.

¹³ Throughout *20,000 Days on Earth* Cave is clearly involved in a constant dialogue with Forsyth and Pollard regarding his memory of specific images and recordings. On several different scenes through the film, the directors are seen on camera handling photographs and letters from Cave's past in white gloves, as if they were curators in a museum. Cave is frequently questioned and consulted regarding where photos were taken and when recordings were made. It is clear to the viewer that Cave was extremely present and well consulted during the composition of the documentary.

¹⁴ Individuals from Cave's past represent Heteroglossic personification in the narrative. Heteroglossia is the presences of many voices building toward an interpretive value. The personification of the Heteroglossia in this circumstance represents the fact that the voices are not disembodied or nebulous, that they actually belong to a specific person. The mise-en-scene throughout the narrative alludes to the possibility that the presence of these individuals may or may not be imagined by Cave.

¹⁵ On the documentary's website, Cave comments, "I hadn't really seen Blixa for some years before I sat in the car with him and we started talking. I had never asked him why he had left the Bad Seeds, for example. Kylie was similar. These scenes just found their own dramatic tension. In the Kylie scene there is something rather lovely going on as we can't see each other's expressions but the camera can" (20000daysonearth.com).

¹⁶ "Where the Wild Roses Grow" is the first single from Cave's album *Murder Ballads* (1996). When interviewed for *Fifty Years of Rock in Australia* Cave states, "'Where The Wild Roses Grow' was written very much with Kylie in mind. I'd wanted to write a song for Kylie for many years. I had a quiet obsession with her for about six years. I wrote several songs for her, none of which I felt was appropriate to give her. It was only when I wrote this song, which is a dialogue between a killer and his victim, that I thought finally I'd written the right song for Kylie to sing. I sent the song to her and she replied the next day" (Jenkins). Cave's description of writing the

song further illustrates the constant themes of desire, obsession, and violence that are rampant in his narratives.

¹⁷ In the role of Captain Stanley, Winstone is a supporting actor of *The Proposition* (2005) a film Cave wrote the screenplay for. Captain Stanley captures notorious outlaw Charlie Burns and offers him a proposition: to deliver his older brother dead to the authorities, or allow his younger brother to be executed.

¹⁹ Cave's understanding of a song is recognized by the complexity of the memory that the song establishes instigates. He states throughout the documentary that a song looses emotional impact when he fully understands the nature of his motivation for writing it.

²⁰ The application of the term synchronic for the narrative of *20,000 Days on Earth* represents how precise utterances of language affected Cave in isolated moments of time. Cave's memories are often viewed through a lens of synchrony in that he focuses on specific memories and what they represented to him at singular points in time. Diachrony is applied to discuss how Cave's reaction to language and memories has changed throughout his life, over a wide spectrum of time.

²¹ During Cave's interview with Leader, he states that his greatest fear is losing his memory. Further into the narrative Cave explains that his best performances occur when he forgets everything outside of the song being performed. It is an ironic turn that Cave's greatest fear (forgetting) is the very thing that he feels is required to give his best performance.

²² Modularity, as defined by Manovich involves the combination of individual objects (pixels, images, sounds, text) that are combined to create a new object (a film, a website, a book). Cave's position on songwriting can be viewed as modular because he combines many individual pieces of information to create a musical narrative. Memory, instrumentation, production, performance, lyrics, cadence are just a few of the individual artifacts that are combined to create a single song.

²³ "Deanna" is the second single from Cave's album *Tender Prey* (1988).

²⁴ In order to confirm this notion we must revisit Cave's statement from earlier in the film, "If you can enter into the song and enter into the heart of the song, into the present moment, forget everything else, you can be kind of taken away... and then you're sort of godlike."

²⁵ Cave married English model Susie Bick in 1999. She is the embodiment of many of the female presences in Cave's later albums. Her physicality: long black hair, pale complexion, and elegant features are echoed throughout the narratives of Cave's songs.

CONCLUSION – FOLLOWING THE VOICES

In an effort to contribute to the growing body of interdisciplinary studies within English departments, New Media and Cinema Studies are both strong vehicles for maintaining the relevance of literary scholarship. The four films examined throughout this dissertation are only a brief glimpse into the possibilities of creating new spaces in which we can examine old texts. Part of the nature of new media is to exercise an understanding of the dialogue that is created between technology and text, and how the manipulation of such allows for emerging art forms to be created. Cinema offers a popular cultural medium that, when viewed through the frame of new media studies establishes a bridge between the literary arts and evolving technologies. The application of Manovich's five new media principles and Bakhtin's dialogic concepts hopefully provides a textured rendering of how cinema can be approached from historical and contemporary theoretical vantage points.

The use of Film Noir as a platform for examining dialogism and heteroglossia establishes an interpretive connection between older written texts and newer cinematic narratives. The rich dialogue of Noir has proven to be timeless in its use and unfettered by the limitations of expired genre labels. As seen with the Coen's *Miller's Crossing* and Johnson's *Brick* the language of both maintain an homage to the literary texts that they were derived from while becoming a new art form altogether under the Neo-Noir genre. Bakhtin's idea of Chronotope as presented in *Looper*, demonstrates that the concept is still deeply relevant when examining contemporary films. These films create an undeniable link between theoretical linguistic concepts, nearly half a century old, and cinematic artifacts that are presently being produced.

While the use of Bakhtin's linguistic concepts is to take a look backward at theoretical framework, the idea behind incorporating Manovich's five principles of new media is to look forward. New Media is one answer as to how a written narrative can be germane to a quickly advancing technological society. In an effort to unveil a pattern of possible future analysis in cinema studies, the incorporation of the five principles of variability, modularity, automation, numerical representation, and transcoding are valuable tools. Forsyth and Pollard's *20,000 Days on Earth*, is perhaps the most current, and perhaps relevant, example of how these concepts interplay through cinematic production. The presence and incorporation of these concepts in the documentary creates robust demonstration of how intertwined new media is at present with cinema.

It is the intent of this dissertation in full to contribute to the ever-expanding dialogue between literary theory, cinema, and new media. The aesthetic of film will only continue to grow as a vital subject within English departments. As scholarship moves forward and new spaces are created to illustrate the importance of the literary arts, scholars will need to maintain focus on the increasing demand for an interdisciplinary approach to the arts. It is my deepest hope that this dissertation will prove to be a useful supplement for future scholarly pursuits of this nature.

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APPENDIX A

PERFORMANCE LYRICS

This appendix contains Cave's lyrics from the featured performances throughout *20,000 Days on Earth*. These lyrics assist in illustrating Cave's thematic focus as a songwriter.

Give Us A Kiss

Childhood days in a simmer haze / GIVE US A KISS / In the blue you whisper into the music / And the feel underneath the foam bush / GIVE US A KISS / Hold me over, passing down / Pass the blood factory and the town / Come on, GIVE US A KISS
One that will sip, sip, sip / Before you slip, slip, slip away

Yeah, I'm still hanging out in your blue tunes / In your sizzling shoes in my dreams
GIVE US A KISS / One little sip, sip, sip / Before I catch, catch, catch / I'll find, I'll be a good girl / And it burns / Kiss

You want me to burn away / You want me to burn away / You want me to burn away / If you want me to burn away

Higgs Boson Blues

Can't remember anything at all / Flame trees line the streets / Can't remember anything at all / But I'm driving my car down to Geneva

I've been sitting in my basement patio / Aye, it was hot / Up above, girls walk past, the roses all in bloom / Have you ever heard about the Higgs Boson blues / I'm goin' down to Geneva baby, gonna teach it to you

Who cares, who cares what the future brings? / Black road long and I drove and drove / I came upon a crossroad / The night was hot and black / I see Robert Johnson, / With a ten dollar guitar strapped to his back, / Lookin' for a tune

Well here comes Lucifer, / With his canon law, / And a hundred black babies runnin' from his genocidal jaw / He got the real killer groove / Robert Johnson and the devil man / Don't know who's gonna rip off who

Driving my car, flame trees on fire / Sitting and singin' the Higgs Boson blues, / I'm tired, I'm lookin' for a spot to drop / All the clocks have stopped in Memphis now / In the

Lorraine Motel, it's hot, it's hot / That's why they call it the Hot Spot / I take a room with
a view / Hear a man preaching in a language that's completely new, yea /
Making the hot cocks in the flophouse bleed / While the cleaning ladies sob into their
mops / And a bellhop hops and bops / A shot rings out to a spiritual groove
Everybody bleeding to that Higgs Boson Blues

If I die tonight, bury me / In my favorite yellow patent leather shoes / With a mummified
cat and a cone-like hat / That the caliphate forced on the Jews / Can you feel my
heartbeat? / Can you feel my heartbeat?

Hannah Montana does the African Savannah / As the simulated rainy season begins
She curses the queue at the Zulus / And moves on to Amazonia / And cries with the
dolphins / Mama ate the pygmy / The pygmy ate the monkey / The monkey has a gift that
he is sending back to you / Look here comes the missionary / With his smallpox and flu /
He's saving them savages / With his Higgs Boson Blues / I'm driving my car down to
Geneva / I'm driving my car down to Geneva

Oh let the damn day break / The rainy days always make me sad / Miley Cyrus floats in a
swimming pool in Toluca Lake / And you're the best girl I've ever had / Can't remember
anything at all

Push The Sky Away

I was ridin', I was ridin', oh / The sun, the sun, the sun was rising from the field

I got a feeling I just can't shake / I got a feeling that just won't go away / You've got it,
just keep on pushing and, keep on pushing and / Push the sky away

And if your friends think that you should do it different / And if they think that you
should do it the same / You've got it, just keep on pushing and, keep on pushing and
Push the sky away

And if you feel you got everything you came for / If you got everything and you don't
want no more / You've got it, just keep on pushing and, keep on pushing and / Push the
sky away

And some people say it's just rock 'n' roll / Aw, but it gets you right down to your soul
You've got it, just keep on pushing and, keep on pushing and / Push the sky away

You've got it, just keep on pushing and, keep on pushing and / Push the sky away

You've got it, just keep on pushing and, keep on pushing and / Push the sky away

Jubilee Street

On Jubilee Street there was a girl named Bee / She had a history but she had no past
When they shut her down the Russians moved in / Now I'm too scared, I'm too scared to
even walk on past

She used to say all those good people down on Jubilee Street / They ought to practice
what they preach / Yeah they ought to practice just what they preach
Those good people on Jubilee Street

And here I come up the hill, I'm pushing my wheel of love / I got love in my tummy and
a tiny little pain / And a 10 ton catastrophe on a 60 pound chain / And I'm pushing my
wheel of love up Jubilee Street / Ah, look at me now

The problem was she had a little black book / And my name was written on every page /
Well a girl's got to make ends meet even down on Jubilee Street / I was out of place and
time and over the hill and out of my mind / On Jubilee Street

I ought to practice what I preach / These days I go downtown in my tie and tails /
I got a foetus on a leash

I am alone now / I am beyond recriminations / Curtains are shut / Furniture has gone / I'm
transforming / I'm vibrating / I'm glowing / I'm flying / Look at me now / I'm flying /
Look at me now

Stagger Lee

It was back in '32 when times were hard / He had a Colt .45 and a deck of cards
Stagger Lee / He wore rat-drawn shoes and an old stetson hat / Had a '28 Ford, had
payments on that / Stagger Lee / His woman threw him out in the ice and snow / And told
him, "Never ever come back no more" / Stagger Lee / So he walked through the rain and
he walked through the mud / Till he came to a place called The Bucket Of Blood /
Stagger Lee / He said "Mr Motherfucker, you know who I am" / The barkeeper said, "No,
and I don't give a good goddamn" / To Stagger Lee

He said, "Well bartender, it's plain to see / I'm that bad motherfucker called Stagger Lee"
/ Mr. Stagger Lee / Barkeep said, "Yeah, I've heard your name down the way
And I kick motherfucking asses like you every day" / Mr Stagger Lee / Well those were
the last words that the barkeep said / 'Cause Stag put four holes in his motherfucking
head / Just then in came a broad called Nellie Brown / Was known to make more money
than any bitch in town / She struts across the bar, hitching up her skirt / Over to Stagger
Lee, she starts to flirt / With Stagger Lee / She saw the barkeep, said, "O God, he can't be
dead!" / Stag said, "Well, just count the holes in the motherfucker's head" / She said,
"You ain't look like you scored in quite a time.

Why not come to my pad? It won't cost you a dime" / Mr. Stagger Lee / "But there's
something I have to say before you begin / You'll have to be gone before my man Billy
Dilly comes in, / Mr. Stagger Lee" / "I'll stay here till Billy comes in, till time comes to

pass / And furthermore I'll fuck Billy in his motherfucking ass" / Said Stagger Lee / "I'm a bad motherfucker, don't you know / And I'll crawl over fifty good pussies just to get one fat boy's asshole" / Said Stagger Lee / Just then Billy Dilly rolls in and he says, "You must be / That bad motherfucker called Stagger Lee"

Stagger Lee / "Yeah, I'm Stagger Lee and you better get down on your knees / And suck my dick, because If you don't you're gonna be dead" / Said Stagger Lee
Billy dropped down and slobbered on his head / And Stag filled him full of lead
Oh yeah.