

Confronting the limits:

Renditions of the Real in the Edge of the Construct Film Cycle.

Kate Greenwood

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Abstract

This thesis examines the fragile perimeter that separates an illusory reality from the supposedly more authentic Real it conceals, which forms a key focus of Slavoj Žižek's work, and in this thesis I offer a study of the relations between this aspect of Žižek's work and film theory. In particular, this thesis is an elaboration on and interrogation of Žižek's employment of the Lacanian notion of the Real in critiques of the inadequacy of 1970s and 1980s film theory and its widespread adoption of a Lacanian model of film-spectator relations

By way of illustration, I consider the microgenre of films released between the years 1998 to 2000 that includes the *Matrix* trilogy, David Fincher's *Fight Club*, Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, and Alex Proyas' *Dark City*, which are all similarly fascinated by the border between a fake reality and an ostensibly more genuine real. However, I also argue that this cycle of films does more than illustrate a fascination with that which is in excess of signification: this cycle of films equally participates in the reappraisal of this important phase of film theory.

This thesis proceeds from a consideration of Žižek's assertion that Lacanian psychoanalysis is missing from the dominant field of film theory. To assess this claim, I re-examine the era of political modernism. From this it becomes clear that what Žižek is noting is not the total *absence* of Lacanian psychoanalysis, but, rather, an absence of the version of Lacan to which he is drawn. This thesis considers aspects of the Real that contaminate the form and matter of these films, in addition to the thematic exploration of the shadowy world beyond reality.

In pursuing this investigation, this thesis utilises the insights of the deconstructive work of Jacques Derrida, to consider the terms 'form', 'content' and 'matter'. These words are ubiquitous in film studies, and I aim to explicate not their final meaning, but the way in which the Real interrupts the very stability of vocabulary used in film studies.

I interrogate the concepts of gaze and voice as privileged instances of the way in which the Real can rupture the symbolic in narrative film. Without seeking to reject these aesthetic figures, through critical readings of key theories of embodiment, the grotesque and the abject (such as those of Marks, Shaviro, Sobchack, Bakhtin and Kristeva), I suggest how the body and its representation provides a more sustained motif where the Real leaves its trace in these films. This thesis proposes that it is above all through such representations that these films offer a response to the themes with which politically modernist film theory has been historically concerned. The Edge of the Construct films achieve this in their evocation of an intolerable namelessness at the centre of the human subject and the social world it inhabits.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Kate Greenwood.

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