

# POSTMODERNIST FILM: A CINEMATIC GENRE



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## Abstract

The essay addresses the problem of locating postmodernism meaningfully within contemporary developments in film theory. The argument is tripartite: the semantic confusion surrounding the definition of the term postmodernism is delineated; discursive parameters are established in terms of a representative body of cinematic works matched against a set of stylistic and structural elements characteristic of the postmodern aesthetic; the findings of this analysis are used to construct a hypothesis that postmodernism in film constitutes a generic critical category or cinematic genre coordinate in many respects to *film noir*, the theoretical status of which is similarly contentious.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Film kuramı, postmodernizm, anlam bilim, estetik, tür.



## Postmodernist Film: Bir Sinema Türü

### Öz

Makale, film kuramlarındaki çağdaş gelişmelerin içinde postmodernizmin yerini anlamlı bir şekilde belirleme sorununu ele alıyor. İddia üç parçalı: Postmodernizm teriminin tanımını çevreleyen anlamsal karışıklık tanımlanmış, postmodern estetiğe özgü bir dizi biçimsel ve yapısal elementlerle karşılaştırılmış sinema çalışmalarını temsil eden bir örnek yığını incelemek amacıyla söylemsel parametreler oluşturulmuş; bu analizin bulguları, "filmde postmodernizm, birçok bakımdan kuramsal durumu da aynı şekilde tartışmalı olan *film noir*'a benzeyen kapsamlı bir eleştirel kategori veya sinema türü oluşturmaktadır" hipotezini kurmak amacıyla kullanılmıştır.

**Keywords:** Film theory, postmodernism, semantics, aesthetic, genre.

## 1. Definitions

The term postmodernism is “protean”, “mercurial”, “elastic and nomadic”, “slippery and polysemic” (Hebdige, 1986, p. 78; Brooker, 1997, p. 1; Stam, 2000, p. 299). Definitions abound but the definitive remains elusive. Armed with the indefinite, critics do battle on their chosen territories: identity and the postmodern, ethnicity and the postmodern, historicity and the postmodern, gender and the postmodern, the subject and the postmodern, the narrative and the postmodern. Academic works employing the term, in any of its forms, are prefaced by warnings of lexical imprecision, semantic ambiguity or critical partiality. To Gellner, postmodernism is a “movement” or “an ephemeral cultural fashion” (Gellner, 1992, p. 24); to Jameson an “aesthetic” or “a unified theory of differentiation” (Jameson, 1991); to Fuery “an intellectual project” (Fuery, 2000, p. 2); to Stam “a discourse...a conceptual grid” (Stam, 2000, p. 300); and to Friedberg, “a stylistic cliché” (Friedberg, 1993, p. 10). The first emergence of postmodernist traits has been detected in cultural productions of the 1950s (*A Bout de Souffle*) or the 1960s (*Cul-de-Sac*) or the 1970s (*Grease*). Hebdige stated as early as 1986 that postmodern had become nothing more than a “buzzword” (Hebdige *op. cit.*); Noel Carroll argued that postmodernism in film is more usefully understood as “post-structural film” (Carroll, 1998, p. 300); Friedberg declared that postmodernism was a “worn and trivialised discourse” and recommended that it be “dropped from our vocabularies altogether” (Friedberg, 1993, p. 11).

The last is impracticable. Even if mistaken or misapplied, the term remains indissolubly linked with a period of critical discourse, besides lending its name to a number of key theoretical texts. In the development of this discourse, the relationship between an aesthetic style (postmodernism) and its socio-historical context (postmodernity) has emerged as one of the few stable elements, even if the two terms have frequently been conflated and confused (perhaps due to the rendition in English of the French term *le postmoderne*, which does for both, as postmodernism). The key to the relationship between postmodernism and postmodernity according to Jameson was “an immense dilation” in the sphere of culture, which had become part of “the sphere of commodities” [Jameson, 1991, p. x]. Similarly, Sobchack describes postmodernism as “a logic that emerges from and informs all aspects of those cultures based on and homogenized by multinational capitalism and its new technologies of production, consumption and communication” (Sobchack, 1997, p. 116). This generally accepted hypothesis implies that the emergence of the

“cultural logic of late capitalism” was a feature of the times and places where the process of homogenisation was most acutely experienced, namely in the major cities of the West during the 1980s, and rather later, to different degrees if at all, in urban environments elsewhere. Both “late capitalism” and “postmodernity” refer to a socio-economic stage of development rather than to a specific historical period. The characteristics of this stage –rapid technological change, notably in the sphere of digital telecommunication, and the attendant commodification of culture– are beyond dispute. Simply put, what is referred to is the age of the internet, the Walkman, the digital video recording, the mobile phone and the ubiquity of the electronic image.

It is clear that the impact of this technology, and of its attendant cultural phenomena, was restricted in the first instance to, and has penetrated most deeply in, cities of the western world, which therefore provide the context for this study. The effects of postmodernism in the case of Third Cinema raise different issues. To an extent, the distinctions between western cinema and Third Cinema are dissolving. The Mexican filmmaker González Iñárritu has insisted that the film that made his reputation, *Amores Perros* (2000), should be categorised as “non-western cinema” (Pérez Soler, 2001, p. 30), but his subsequent works *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006) –starring respectively Sean Penn and Naomi Watts, and Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett– indubitably belong to the mainstream western tradition. Yet Taylor's comment in his essay on Black Cinema remains valid, and not only for blacks: “Blacks can only dubiously be post-modernists since they were never permitted to be modernist in the first place” (Taylor, 1988, pp. 102-103).

Postmodernism is posited not only as marking a break with modernism, but as constituting a challenge to the pre-existing theoretical and aesthetic order. Among the elements of postmodernist dissent, according to Hebdige, are: “an anti-teleological tendency within epistemology [...] the replacement of unitary power axes by a pluralism of power/discourse formations [...] the collapse of cultural hierarchies” (Hebdige, 1986, p. 78). Involved here is an amplification of the initial modernist/ postmodernist division into a more profound opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism. As Tredell expressed it, postmodernism claimed that “the era of grand narratives –and by implication, grand theories– was over; that these were false, potentially oppressive, totalitarian. Christianity, Hegelian philosophy, Marxism and structuralism were all consigned to a dustbin of a history that had effectively come to an end” (Tredell, 2002, p. 205). In its critique of essentialism, postmodernism became aligned with post-structuralism, postcolonialism, culturalism and pluralism, expressions of a relativist tendency in theory which had developed independently of the specific postmodernist concerns. Gellner has described postmodernism as a “contemporary specimen of relativism” (Gellner, 1992, p. 24), but it might be more accurate to suggest that postmodernism has usurped the status of an all-encompassing theory of dissent, an abrogation brought about by the conflation of the terms postmodernism and postmodernity. In other words, postmodernism has come to represent the theoretical tendencies of an age (postmodernity), with which it is not, and can never be, consonant.

## 2. Films, Structures, Styles

The ambiguities of semantic definition impinge also on the issue of categorisation. By what criteria can a film be determined as postmodernist if the term itself has no agreed definition? As Walsh points out:

With the burgeoning of analyses of the postmodern, analysts have a great range of criteria at their fingertips. Some criteria can be produced in some cases while being held in abeyance in others. One film, for instance, can be held to be postmodern through its use of pastiche, another because it dismantles fictional subjectives, a third simply because its commodity status obscures the relations of production it represents (Walsh, 1996, p. 489).

Films as different, thematically and stylistically, as *Something Wild* (Demme, 1986) and *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986) are categorised as postmodernist for their “nostalgic” attitude to the past; *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978) and *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) for their element of pastiche; *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Seideman, 1985), *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Frears, 1985) and *Zelig* (Allen, 1983) for their depiction of multiple or ambiguous identities; *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Reisz, 1981) for the uniqueness of its narrative structure; *Memento* (Nolan, 2000) for its exploration of dimensions of time and perception; *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1982) for its convoluted narrative and hallucinatory images; *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) for its apocalyptic vision of a polyethnic, polyglot future of urban decay; *Dune* (Lynch, 1984) and the *Alien* films for their visceral fascination with the human body; *Fargo* (Coen, 1995) for its unconventional heroine and its “deadpan sense of irony” (Neale, 2000, p. 204); *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994) for its examination of dispassionate violence and the blurring of the line between crime and celebrity.

The key characteristics of postmodernist film are: intertextuality, pastiche, parody; episodic, interrupted or digressive narrative structure; a concern with hybrid identities; radical juxtapositions reflecting an unconcern with cinematic convention and to an extent, with conventional morality. What is equally clear is that films labelled as postmodern may exhibit only one of these features, resulting in a corpus of so-called postmodernist works of great thematic and stylistic variation and sharing no recognisable ideology. In his recent study of Hollywood postmodernist film, Booker includes in his analysis all the films of Lynch, Cronenberg and the Coen brothers, certain films of Tim Burton and Brian De Palma, as well as selected films of Woody Allen (Booker, 2007). Booker's main criteria for the designation of “postmodern” are narrative fragmentation, nostalgia (signalled especially by the use of “nostalgic” soundtracks) and pastiche. His examination of the last of these involves a detailed study of referentiality and self-referentiality (film itself as the object of representation). In the case of De Palma, the borrowings from Hitchcock films provide the key narrative element of much of his work – *Body Double* (1984), for example, is based squarely on a combination of the plots of *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*. Burton, Cronenberg and Lynch, more subtly but still self-consciously, mingle generic styles and motifs from science fiction, horror and *film noir*. The consequent dismantling of genre conventions, and the highlighting of their

limiting effect on narrative and character, according to Booker, is one of the most distinctive of postmodernist hallmarks (*ibid* Ch. 3). His argument is, perhaps, a logical development of the critical analysis of pastiche, but it results in the unusual inclusion in the postmodernist canon of directors such as Burton and de Palma. As for Woody Allen, most critics of postmodernism consider only *Zelig* among his works, for its comment on the instability of identity, whereas Booker would include also such films as *Stardust Memories* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* on the basis of cinematic self-referentiality.

Other critics draw attention to the phenomenon of the explicit depiction of ultra-violence as a feature of postmodernist film, labelled by Paul Gormley as “the new brutality film” (Gormley, 2005). The violence is usually perpetrated by males, for example in *Blue Velvet*, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999), causing some feminist film critics to see in this a regression to the typical Hollywood patriarchy. For Alexandra Juhasz, *Fight Club* indicates that “the postmodern condition is a fundamentally male condition involving nothing more than the loss of masculinity” (Juhasz, 2001, p. 211). Yet postmodernist films such as *Natural Born Killers* also locate contemporary violence in female characters and, as Roberta Garrett points out, the works of filmmakers such as Tarantino lack “the reverential, quasi-mystical stance towards masculinity” characteristic of 1970s films that celebrated male heroism and toughness –she mentions in particular *Taxi Driver*, *The Godfather*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* (Garrett, 2007, pp. 44-45). Rather than viewing the increasingly explicit screen violence as reflecting a loss of masculinity, it may be truer to see it as reflecting what Jameson famously called the “waning of affect” in postmodern society, which has made possible a detached and almost humorous attitude to screen violence, typified for many viewers by certain scenes from *Pulp Fiction*.

Some useful parameters for postmodernist film may be established by comparing its two most celebrated exemplars, *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). The first of these, *Blade Runner*, was described by Brooker as “the *sine qua non* of postmodern cinema” (Brooker, 1997, p. 56) and by Garrett as “an early postmodernist classic” (Garrett, 2007, p. 169), while Friedberg argues that the film “posits Los Angeles as the quintessential postmodern city” (Friedberg, 1993, p. 151). In *Blade Runner*, according to Harvey, “the chaos of signs, of competing significations and messages, suggests a condition of fragmentation and uncertainty at street level that emphasizes many of the facets of postmodern aesthetics” (Harvey, 1997, p. 63). Indisputably, it is the sense of anxiety or paranoia conveyed by this “decrepit landscape of deindustrialization and post-industrial decay” (*ibid*), inhabited by an ethnic melange (predominantly oriental) speaking a mongrel “city-speak” language that provides the dominant mood of *Blade Runner*, and the conjectural vision of a post- postmodern future that provides the most enduring images of the film. Yet there is little evidence in *Blade Runner* for the irony, parody, nostalgia, wit or detachment supposedly characteristic of postmodernist cinema. The overall tone of the film is sombre, the violent episodes are far from playful, the narrative structure is orthodox. Ideologically, the film is marked by

ambiguities. The primary opposition is between the persecuted, marginalized replicants and the all-powerful corporation, but the portrayal of the replicants is unsympathetic (because they are inherently non-human). In addition, the studio's insistence on a familiar "happy ending" served to defuse the ideological tension the narrative might have generated.

The other text most frequently included within the postmodernist canon is Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. In this case, we can identify all or almost all the "typical" characteristics: a heterogeneity of style and allusion; juxtaposition of the comic and the catastrophic; an apparently casual attitude to violence and drug abuse; an episodic, digressive narrative; a freedom from cinematic convention. The film is practically the embodiment of Homi Bhabha's brief and straightforward summary of postmodernism: "a celebration of fragmentation, *bricolage*, pastiche" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 238). Yet a comparison between *Blade Runner* and *Pulp Fiction* reveals as many contrasts as similarities. The former provides a bleak vision of an imagined future, the latter a playful pastiche of the immediate past. The former is a science fiction movie with an iconography developed from the pessimism of *film noir*; the latter a parody of gangster thrillers. The postmodern category, whether discursive or cinematic, is obliged to accommodate both these films, even if they emerge as its extreme or polar coordinates. The key question, therefore, is what the films have in common. I propose that there is essentially one element: the consciousness of a historical moment marked by radically new conditions in terms of the existential subject and brought about by the decay, or imminent demise, of the political, social and economic system dominant in the West at least since the First World War. The aesthetic implications of this consciousness are translated in an exploration of the margins of identity, a pluralism of codes and signs, and a deconstruction of the recent past in one case and of the imagined future in the other.

The stylistic devices employed in postmodernist films are not in fact new to film. Avant-garde directors had experimented with narrative fragmentation in the 1960s, for example in Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* and Fellini's *La Strada*. The technique has even earlier precedents in literature, where an interrupted or episodic narrative structure is representative of modernist work at least since the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922. *Finnegan's Wake*, by the same author, starts in the middle of a sentence and ends with the beginning of the same sentence, in a circular structure reminiscent, to a degree, of *Pulp Fiction*. What is new is the introduction of this approach into mainstream cinema, a reflection, no doubt, of the multiplication of separate images in video clips and television programmes and on the internet. Booker points out that referentiality or allusionism –which provides the basic material for pastiche– also has its roots in the modernist era, drawing attention to the central importance of self-referentiality in Fellini's *8½*, and to the "seemingly incongruous juxtaposition" (of a Homeric epic and the world of contemporary Dublin) in Joyce's *Ulysses*, which "initiates a subversive challenge to the authority of the epic and to the authority of the literary past as a whole" (Booker, 2007, p. 145). In this regard, what above all has changed in cinema is the increasing filmic experience of audiences, what Garrett refers to as "an extension of genre-

spotting snobbery from a cine-literate elite to “ordinary” viewers via the wider availability of old films though cable and video, the proliferation of film-appreciation websites and so forth” (Garrett, 2007, p. 157).

### 3. Instinctive Semiotics

In its title alone, *Pulp Fiction* advertises its antecedents and cultural milieu. Tarantino declared: “I made *Pulp Fiction* to be entertaining. I always hope that if one million people see my movie, they saw a million different movies” (*The Guardian*, 30 January 1995). It is a quintessentially postmodernist remark: ambiguous, playful, exaggerated. It was clearly not meant to be taken as a literal truth, but it serves as a reminder that the response of viewers cannot be ignored as an element in cultural productions, notably for films which are seen as representing a challenge to the distinction between “high” and “low” art.

The problem for critics in this respect is the lack of empirical evidence for the public reception to a given film apart from the box-office returns. One might speculate that audiences appreciated *Pulp Fiction* because it was slick, witty and shocking (sometimes all at once), *Blade Runner* for its innovative, disturbing vision of the future, *Fargo* for its offbeat heroine and *My Beautiful Laundrette* for its tender, unconventional love affair. A degree of support for such speculation can be found in journalistic reviews, occupying as they do the largely uncharted territory between academic critics and the ordinary viewer: “Sharp, sassy, profane dialogue [...] acute, funny references to pop culture [...] sudden lurches between humour and violence” (Geoff Andrew on *Pulp Fiction*); “cutting, compassionate and sometimes hilarious” (Richard Rayner on *My Beautiful Laundrette*); “Scott succeeds beautifully in portraying the LA of the future as a cross between a Hong Kong street-market and a decaying 200-storey Metropolis” (David Pirie on *Blade Runner*) (from entries in the *Time Out Film Guide 2009*).

The way in which a commercially successful film endures in the popular imagination is encapsulated in a limited number of cinematic moments within that film. To put this simply: the act of recalling a film involves an unconscious selection of memorable lines or images which in combination produce a palimpsest of the whole work. In the case of *Pulp Fiction*, Peter and Will Brooker suggest that “what viewers respond to most immediately are ... above all scenes like the opening car ride, Vincent's dance at Jackrabbit Slim's 50s retro restaurant and the Wolf's clean-up campaign at Jimmie's house” (Brooker, 1997, p. 91). It may be argued that these scenes share one essential characteristic, namely the shock of the unexpected, produced by an unconventional relation between context and content. Gangsters on their way to a shootout are conventionally silent or monosyllabic, preoccupied by the solemnity of their business. A man arriving to clean up after a bloody murder does not ordinarily arrive in a suit, go about his business with military efficiency or make flirtatious conversation with the woman who runs the wrecker's yard. Three separate conventions are subverted in one scene: an inappropriate costume, an unexpected authority and a woman running “a man's business”.

Also common to the three scenes is the cinematic intertextuality, the element of pastiche. The success of the episodes depends on the audience's familiarity with existing filmic conventions, otherwise there can be no surprise. Not only must they be aware of how gangsters behave in cars in conventional detective movies, but they should also be familiar with the screen histories of the players –Harvey Keitel as Mister White in *Reservoir Dogs*, John Travolta dancing in *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*. It is reported anecdotally that when the dance scene for *Pulp Fiction* was shot, the whisper ran round “*John's going to dance!*” and the entire crew gathered to watch (<http://www.pulpfiction/trivia>). The dance scene is not, as the Brookers suggest, “too controlled, a set-piece without sufficient improvisation” (Brooker, 1997, p. 98). Travolta's restrained performance works because of the *knowingness* of the viewers. They are aware what Travolta is capable of as a dancer and he needs to do no more than hint at it.

What I wish to highlight here is what Phillips has called “a complicity between filmmaker and spectator”, which he describes as “a hallmark of postmodern film” (Phillips, 1996, p. 136). Such complicity, clearly, is also a feature of all commercially-oriented genre film, depending on the three-sided relationship that according to Ryall and others lies at the heart of genre theory: “The master image for genre criticism is a triangle composed of artist/ film/ audience” (Ryall, 1975, p. 28). Postmodernist works are therefore not unique in this regard, but the element of complicity is more overt. Whereas most filmmakers attempt in each new film to re-invent the personality of their well-known actors –through different hairstyles, clothes, accents, make-up– *Pulp Fiction* intends that audiences should recognise the Willis of *Die Hard*, the Keitel of *Reservoir Dogs*, the Travolta of *Grease*. In the last case, the association is reinforced by having Travolta dance in a retro-style bar, where emblems of the 1950s (the setting for *Grease*) are mixed with those of the 1970s (when the film was released). The Brookers' essay records many other cases of what might be called “complicit intertextuality” in *Pulp Fiction*: Vincent Vega in *Pulp Fiction* has a cousin or brother in *Reservoir Dogs*, Jimmie of the former film is essentially Mr. Brown of the latter. According to Sharon Willis, Christopher Walken, who gives Butch the golden watch as a souvenir of the father who died in Vietnam, is reprising his well-known role in *The Deer Hunter* (Willis, 2000, p. 283). In all of his films, remarkably, Tarantino has maintained a record of casting at least one actor from Scorsese's 1973 film *Mean Streets*. It is hard to conceive of a more recondite example of allusionism in film, one that could only become widely known through the kind of internet site mentioned above.

In the *Kill Bill* films (2003/4), Tarantino relies even more heavily on his audience's familiarity with cinematic precedent, borrowing from genres such as Japanese animé and Asian martial arts films as well as the French New Wave, film noir and the many Hollywood revenge movies. It is assumed that viewers will recognise the referents and consequently expect certain narrative and iconographic conventions, which the director generally upholds. According to Keith Booker, the *Kill Bill* films are “largely a collection of clichés borrowed from the movies ... postmodern pastiche with a vengeance” (Booker, 2007, p.



96). The subversive element is in the playfulness, the stylistic heterogeneity, the refusal to take anything seriously, including –and especially– the extreme violence of much of the action.

In several of David Lynch's films (*Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart*, *Lost Highway*), the director utilises fast-tracking shots of a highway seen from a speeding car. The shot is a cinematic cliché, familiar from many US road movies. Given the complexity and intricacy of Lynch's narratives, his purpose in recalling a genre whose conventions the film by no means respects is clearly ironic. Unlike Tarantino, his intention is more subversive than nostalgic. Similarly, Cronenberg in *Crash* explores “our culture's mutually implicated fascination with sex, violence and technology” (Booker, 2007, p. 108). These three elements comprise the typical ingredients of much contemporary cinema viewing but are approached in a highly unconventional manner, involving an intimate relation between sexual stimulation and bloody traffic accidents, which discourages sympathetic identification on the part of audiences. The familiar ingredients are present but the recipe is very different.

In general terms, the intellectual divide between film critic and “ordinary” filmgoer is narrower for postmodernist works just because of the deliberate blurring of distinctions between “high” and “low”. The critic is obliged by the nature of the subject of study to move closer to the populist view. A simple illustration of this can be found in the popularity of the words spoken by Samuel Jackson (as Jules) in his trivial but celebrated conversation with John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*: “Royale with Cheese”, a brief line of dialogue that was voted as among the 100 best movie lines in a poll in *Premiere* magazine (<http://www.imdb.com>). The line is used for the concluding remarks of the Brookers' essay on Tarantino's work: “Royale with Cheese *says it all*” (Brooker, 1997, p. 99; my italics), an indication that Jules' casual comment acts as a signifier to critics and audiences alike. To both, it signifies the surrealist touch of the postmodern. In the words of Umberto Eco, filmmakers and viewers of postmodern films have become “instinctive semioticians” (Eco, 1988, p. 454).

#### 4. Postmodernism and Genre

The contention of this essay is that films of the last quarter of the twentieth century commonly labelled “postmodernist” are most usefully considered as a cinematic genre. Postmodernism in film should be approached neither as a discourse, an aesthetic, a theory, a style or a conceptual grid but as a genre. The generic characteristics are: thematically, an exploration of identity, with an emphasis on hybridity; stylistically, a rejection of film convention, especially in terms of the juxtaposition of opposites and a heterogeneity of styles made possible by a complicity between filmmakers and audiences; ideologically, an implicit or explicit challenge to distinctions between high art and mass culture. The recognition of the genre is only possible retrospectively –a category of this protean, mercurial nature can hardly be recognised during the stage of its becoming, any more than film noir was recognised as such at the time of its heyday.

The evidence is that the “heyday” of postmodernist film has passed. The possible reasons for its demise are too complex to detail within the scope of this essay. It is arguable that the catastrophe of 9/11/2001 and its geopolitical repercussions tended to suppress a certain superficiality and playfulness in American cultural productions, especially where acts of violence were concerned. Equally, it seems likely that the financial crisis of 2008/9 and the ensuing economic recession is forcing a re-evaluation of the economic and financial relations of late capitalism. The polarisation of politics during the Obama presidency is unmistakable. It is possible, too, that the internal dynamics of genre noted by genre theorists such as Jauss – the generic tendency towards imitation, hybridization and, ultimately, dissolution (Jauss, 1982, p. 106)– are operating in this case. For example, the increasingly convoluted effect of chronological fragmentation and displacement appears to have reached an apogee in the work of directors such as Christopher Nolan (*Memento*, 2000) and Mike Figgis (*Timecode*, 2000), and it is hard to see how much further it can be taken without the narratives becoming incomprehensible or the films unwatchable.

The proposal that postmodernism in film should be regarded as a cinematic genre raises certain issues pertaining to genre theory beyond that of the mere inclusion or exclusion of particular films, which is a subject for debate in all cinematic categories. More important is whether it is possible, or legitimate, to conceive a genre based on the mingling and subversion of generic characteristics –it might be argued that such a category would be more in the nature of an “anti-genre”. There are however precedents in genre history. According to Rick Altman, generic development has frequently involved the reconfiguration of genres through borrowing from, and mingling with, other genres (Altman, 1998), and Garrett points out that the only real difference in terms of postmodernist film has been “the way in which metagenericity is foregrounded as part of the aesthetic design” (Garrett, 2007, p. 169). The blending of sci-fi and film noir in *Blade Runner* is given as an example, although horror and nostalgia in *Blue Velvet*, gangsterism and comedy in *Pulp Fiction*, horror movie and children's film in Tim Burton's *Beetle Juice* (1988) or sci-fi, horror and film noir in numerous other postmodern films, would have served as well.

In this context, it is necessary to highlight the distinction between primarily “commercial” genres, such as the western, the sci-fi movie, the horror film or the musical –for which the function of genre “branding” is in the appeal to particular audiences– and “critical” genres such as melodrama, the woman's film or the road movie, which serve primarily to establish the parameters for comparative critical analysis. The mingling and subversion of genre cannot be expected to act as the basis for commercial appeal, but from its first appearances in the context of cinema, the term postmodernism has been utilised to describe a critical category rather than as a commercial catchphrase. Perhaps the most instructive of inter-generic comparisons for a proposed “postmodernist genre” is with film noir. Like postmodernism, film noir is variously defined: “a cycle of films, a tendency or a movement” (Cowie, 1993, p. 121), “a screen style, a

perspective” (Tuska, 1984, p. xv), “a chronotope” (Sobchack, 1998, *passim*). Neale devotes a chapter to film noir in his book *Genre and Hollywood*, but finally argues that it might be more usefully described as a cinematic style (Neale, 2000, p. 153).

Film noir has consistently been noted for its departures from cinematic convention and for “its essential difference to earlier American films” (Belton 1994, p. 190). Belton also saw in it “a subversive strain of behavioural deviance” and linked it with the “fear, alienation and both physical and psychological dislocation” (*ibid*) of the period of the Second World War, the Korean War and the McCarthyite witch-hunt.

It is true that the noir aesthetic is in many respects dissimilar to that of postmodernism –the one dark and pessimistic and the other witty and superficial. The characteristic narratives of film noir, although often complex, were structured chronologically and there was no hint of parody or pastiche. Yet between these two innovative, subversive cinematic phenomena, there are marked semantic and heuristic similarities. In line with the commercial/critical distinction noted above, Neale points out that film noir was a category with a “corpus [that] can only be established by means of critical observation and analysis” (Neale, 2000, p. 153). Žižek suggests that *film noir* is “a kind of anamorphic distinction affecting different genres”, and argues that the “proper” detective noir “realises its notion only by fusion with another genre” (Žižek, 1993, p. 200), a hypothesis which might readily be applied to postmodernism in its relation to science fiction. Sobchack, for example, writes of “the contemporary SF film's latent and manifest representation of the cultural logic of postmodernism” (Sobchack, 1997, p. 127). If the postmodern aesthetic may convincingly be argued to have caused an “alteration of form” (anamorphosis) in science fiction, a cinematic sub-genre may readily be envisioned, to which *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* and *Aliens* would belong.

All cinematic genres are seen as having roots, experimental or innovative beginnings, development and decline. Booker has proposed that the roots of postmodernism in US film should be sought in the sci-fi films of the 1950s (Booker, 2001), which appeared in an earlier period of “psychological dislocation”. (For the relationship between genre and historical context in the 1950s, see my article on the Hollywood disaster movie [Çelik-Norman, 2008, pp. 151-153]). Booker's thesis tends to militate against any startling “newness” of the postmodernist canon of the 1990s and to strengthen the notion of a cinematic development of postmodernism, in which films of the 1970s such as *American Graffiti* (1973), *Eraserhead* (1977), *Star Wars* (1977), *Grease* (1978) and *Superman* (1978) can be seen, in their separate ways, as the forerunners of postmodernism in film, at a time preceding the technological advances associated with postmodernity.

Especially in a historical era remarkable for the acceleration of technological and social change, cultural production is continually in a state of flux, and nothing static is to be expected. The gap of twelve years between the release of *Blade Runner* and that of *Pulp Fiction* meant that the two films were products of markedly different historical and cultural contexts. The years

1982-1994 witnessed in the international arena the Chernobyl nuclear incident, the implosion of the Soviet empire and the first US invasion of Iraq, and in the US the Los Angeles race riots and the Waco massacre (in which 80 people were shot by the police), as well as the massive proliferation of the adjuncts of communication technology: mobile phones, internet access, video stores. In Hollywood cinema, films released included the *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Platoon*, *Schindler's List* and the *Aliens* trilogy. Tarantino, a director known for his absorption in contemporary film culture, was able to learn from, and borrow from, a range of cultural experience unavailable to Scott in 1982. What is suggested here is that there was a fairly typical generic development or elaboration of postmodernist film in the twelve years in question, quite apart from the differences of mood and style between the two films.

In addition to the proposal that postmodernist film is most usefully approached as a critical genre echoing the position of film noir in the cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, it may also be proposed that critical approaches to postmodernist film have been handicapped by the application to a cinematic phenomenon of a term more appropriate to the socio-economic conditions of late capitalism, which affect not only culture, but lifestyle and strategies of survival. This phenomenon, as we have seen, hinges largely on narrative fragmentation, ahistoric nostalgia and a playful, mildly subversive attitude to film history, yet it has abrogated a term which unmistakably suggests an entirely new cultural epoch, with a status equivalent to modernism itself. The problem is that few aesthetic or ideological elements can be identified in the work of the pre-eminent postmodernist filmmakers that cannot be found, individually or severally, in the work of pop artists such as Warhol, Lichtenstein and Pollock or avant-garde directors such as Fellini, Godard and Bunuel. Pastiche is not new, or *bricolage*, or non-linear narratives or the subversion of established conventions. The last of these is indeed the prerequisite of all radical change in aesthetic values. Warhol intended his work to be subversive, as did Pollock and Godard.

This in turn begs the question as to the validity of the distinction between modernist and postmodernist art in terms of aesthetic style and ideological intention. I have argued that the one significant difference lies in the recognition of a unique historical watershed with its attendant conditions, linked by definition to a specific chronological period with beginning and end. Frederic Jameson, who for many critics has established himself as the foremost authority on the nature and significance of postmodernism, suggests precisely this in the subtitle to his major work: *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. One does not have to determine an exact chronology for the emergence and demise of the postmodern condition to appreciate that a cultural phenomenon linked to a specific socio-economic period is by its nature limited by and dependent on factors which stand outside pure aesthetics. The same cannot be said of the history of modernism, which although strongly influenced by socio-economic factors, has also been the site of an internal dynamic of artistic development. Similarly, the long history of classical realism persisted throughout a number of distinct socio-economic periods, surviving even the advent of industrialism and

urbanisation which in the West comprised a social and economic revolution at least as influential as the “information revolution” of the late twentieth century.

Postmodernism may or may not be a misnomer for the phase of “late capitalism”, depending on whether there will be further phases of capitalism with distinctive conditions, but certainly the term appears unhelpful in describing a cinematic phenomenon. It seems likely that postmodernism in art will eventually come to be seen as a phase of modernism, with strong links to pre-existing features of relativist expression and destined to be replaced by other phases. The term *post*-modernism suggests the first but appears to deny the second. An inappropriate finality is conveyed by the term –“post-postmodernism” would be a semantic absurdity.

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