BLOG   UCLA'S JOURNAL OF CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES   **MEDIASCAPE**

What My Knees Knew: Cinematic Action, or Milla Jovovich in the Flesh

Posted on February 27, 2013 by Professor Chon Noriega and Matthias Stork

In a recent email correspondence, Professor Chon Noriega and Matthias Stork discussed the merits of Resident Evil: Retribution (RE5), The Expendables 2 (E2), and other films.

Matthias Stork
I am sorry that you did not enjoy *RE5* but I am truly elated that you seem to be familiar with the entire series. I still hold that the newest entry in the franchise is interesting and thought-provoking (even though I might be channeling my 14-year-old self). And it is even better than *Dredd*, which was extraordinary.

Chon Noriega
Dredd? Any better than the original, which today looks more like an '80s film than actual '80s films…? The *Total Recall* reboot was a real bomb. Like *RE5*, it suffered from an inability to imagine or represent a diegetic space that made any sense (let alone resonate with Verhoeven's critique of the elite-media-industrial-state complex). *RE5* seemed to borrow more from *Cube* than game narratives per se, but even that seemed like little more than a slight pretense for set pieces featuring Milla Jovovich with leather and guns. Alas, that franchise has become more about a family pension plan than nudging 14-year-old boys into the imponderables of life through sci-fi–action narratives. 😟

Matthias Stork
I will offer a few thoughts on the films here. I completely concur with your assessment of the recent *Total Recall*, a true disappointment that lacks the critical edge of Verhoeven's eponymous film (and I offer the explicit engagement with violence and robotic technology as the crucial component of the elite-media-industrial-state complex critique).

Dredd is an entertaining action film with a few interesting references to game logic.

But *Resident Evil: Retribution* is an accomplished film, I feel. It offers an intriguing

vision of our contemporary mediascape. I would argue that it constructs a diegesis that is modeled on the notion of digital gamespace. Yes, it does not explicitly remediate game narratives (an impossibility given cinema's—not lack of, but different—understanding of interactivity). But it does envision stories that take place in interrelated level structures (think of the series's patented computer visualization of 3D-rendered model space and the transitional dissolves from the real to the digital sphere). Furthermore, the characters are presented as programmed versions of former beings (consider NPCs in video games).

But this is not what makes *RE5* an interesting and compelling film. What makes it compelling is that it reflects the logic of digital gamespace (not only in relation to video games but to digital media in general). Consider the opening scene: a slow-motion reversal of a past event. The film presents itself as a mediation right from the beginning. And then it reverses the motion again, indicating that what we see is a construction (which can playfully be manipulated, transformed, repeated). The subsequent scene then is a recap of the previous four films. How is the recap staged? It is a database! A multitude of virtual displays moves us through an array of interrelated events, spatially arranged. And, interestingly, the dialogue and the "screened" images are occasionally out of sync, emphasizing the arbitrariness of digital aesthetics. [Lev] Manovich's database logic comes to mind (also a key feature of YouTube pastiche culture).

Finally, the set pieces are, in addition to being exquisitely staged in 3D, indicative of the new aesthetic logic of digital cinema (what we might tentatively call post-cinema). We move beyond traditional continuity (think of Steven Shaviro's post-continuity), rejecting classicism, to approximate the hyperkinetic effects contemporary video games are able to generate (through different means, of course). These scenes channel not the aesthetics of games but the visceral rush they aim for.

Chon Noriega

Well, I will grant that you may be right on a technical level, although I'm not sure I would place the out-of-sync portions on the aesthetic (or intentional) side…. Last night I saw *The Expendables 2*, and I have to say that a movie has not made me feel happier and more fulfilled since *The White Ribbon*. In some ways it achieves what you are arguing for in *RE5*: the knowing gestures to another diegetic universe. If *RE5* gestures to the digital gamespace, then *E2* does so to the broader universe of low-budget action to which the aging actors and the late-spring chickens Stratham and Jovovich all belong. It achieves the meta that *RE5* desires. I would argue that *E2* is more knowing, playful, and respectful about the utter lack of spatial coherence, plausibility, acting skill, and narrative. Any disruption in the Classical Hollywood Cinema expectations can quickly be explained by the arrival of another aging action star—*stella ex-machina*. Not since *Godzilla* et al. has this device been used so well…. What *E2* adds is the set piece of each person taking a turn at "acting" by telling a sentiment-laden back story while the others stand around attempting something on the order of a reaction shot (misery-en-scene?). The original *Expendables* had one such scene—with post-*Wrestler* Mickey Rourke—in which his puffy, ring-encrusted fingers signaled the import and consequence of the back story. Here, everyone takes a shot, building an affect for the narrative by sheer aggregation. These scenes are what song-and-dance numbers were to the CHC musical. Interestingly, *RE5* and *E2* share a commitment to the idea that everyone except the star is expendable—they are what one could call "expendable residents," with all that implies within the corporate and colonial fantasies of each franchise. *E2* goes one step further and reverses the Oedipal drama, here the father (Stallone) lovingly and admiringly killing off the son (Helmsworth), as if to say, "You will succeed me, but not in my film, Billy…."

Matthias Stork

While we disagree on *RE5* (referencing movie genre tropes is easier than incorporating the immaterial sphere of digital gamespace, I feel), we completely agree on *E2* (though I find the film's use of graphic violence appalling and exploitative…nothing more than a heightened, computer-generated reference to '80s excess; it works but I am a bit squeamish about it). Your overarching reading of the film, I think, is brilliant. I especially like that Arnie has three returns to the

big screen. For a bigger-than-life action star, one dramatic reveal is not enough! Essentially, the film registers as a theater performance, with action icons entering the stage to enact a short skit. It mobilizes all these memories, intentionally playing with cine-nostalgia and cinephilia. But does that not make it a fanboy movie, to put it derisively? I wonder whether it knowingly deconstructs genre or simply glorifies (and commercializes) personal histories and former glory. Is that not an even more overt grab for post-retirement revenue? I agree with your assessment of the film but I do think it is subject to the same criticisms you leveled at *RE5*.

Plus, I was a HUGE Chuck Norris fan when I was 12, watching his films and concurrently demolishing my parents' living room trying to do karate. But I have only seen his films in German. *E2* revealed his true voice, as an actor and...he sounds like a child! Frankly, I was shocked! I had expected to hear more virility here.

As for the expendable star in *RE5*, I believe the film emphasizes this notion quite explicitly in its sweeping shot of the clone factory towards the end.

Chon Noriega
I'm intrigued that you feel *E2* uses graphic violence, but *RE5* does not...body count, please. In any case, these films partake of the both/and: cine-nostalgia is fueled by ironic self-awareness—the glorification is itself the deconstruction. If only *RE5* could reach that level, but I am afraid only *RE8* and above will do so. As for Chuck Norris, for me, he has always been a handful of chest hair blown into the air by Bruce Lee.... His entrance into *E2* was thrilling only insofar as it confirmed the method to their madness, and in the process made him into a cine-cipher. I mean, he is anchored by two action references that have nothing to do with him: Ennio Morricone's theme music for *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and Arnold's character calling him "Rambo." In other words, his appearance occurs under the "star signs" for Clint Eastwood and Sly himself.

Matthias Stork
RE5 is less graphic in its depiction of on-screen violence than *E2*. And, furthermore, its body count is significantly lower (about 250 dead characters, mostly zombies and game clones, as opposed to the 489 kills in *E2*; in this regard, the film certainly tops its generic antecedents).

"As for Chuck Norris, for me, he has always been a handful of chest hair blown into the air by Bruce Lee." I wholeheartedly agree with you. Frankly, I am not sure whether he could withstand the force of Bruce Lee's breath. I like your notion of the cine-cipher, especially in relation to the two (in)appropriate references. To me, it proves that the film excessively exploits the iconography of action, and while the effect is, overall, satisfying for fans and meta-analysts, I also find the sheer "madness," as you put it, a tad uninspired. This is shotgun pastiche but it lacks the transformative quality some postmodern works are able to engender.

I concur with your view that *RE5* is less self-reflexive than *E2*. But *RE5*, in my opinion, is not concerned with self-reflexivity. I argue that it transcends this traditional practice and rather embraces "remediation." *E2*'s referent is cinema, the '80s action film in particular. *RE5*'s reference is digital media culture, video games specifically. To put it differently, while *E2* revels in nostalgia and genre semiotics (and quite effectively so), *RE5* engages with our contemporary mediascape. *E2* is about the lost era of cinema. *RE5* is about the current era of post-cinema.

Interestingly, Sly does not kill off the most bad guys in *E2*. It is Statham...is that the action genre's "passing of the torch" (in the narrative, his role is not as prominent)?

Chon Noriega
I think that you are making two distinctions that bear some questioning. First, the representational fallacy: that game violence is less "real" (or more post-real?) than on-screen violence. Second, the equal-weight fallacy: that body count is separate from the scale within which it occurs. (Borrowing here a term from investment methodologies that presume an even playing field relative to market capitalization....).

On the first point, one consequence of your investment in "remediation" is to bracket *RE5* from the codes for realism—upon which it relies extensively, albeit refracted through the game screen in order to be projected onto the silver screen—and thereby posit a cinema-versus-post-cinema distinction. Having lived through the critical euphoria of "postmodernism," I am perhaps skeptical about grounding discussions of the changes that are in fact happening through periodization. Despite all the posts to the contrary, one still encounters the impact of colonialism, modernism, nationalism, and Fordism. Change, yes, but it's complicated....

On the second point, may I note the following with regard to body count:

Alice: 271 (using *RE: Afterlife*, for which figures are available)
Lee Christmas: 163
Barney Ross: 70
Lone Wolf: 61
Hale Caeser: 50
Bennet: 35 (also *RE:A*)

So, even though *E2* doubles the body count from *E1*, Alice still kills nearly as many people as the top three characters from *E2*. The second-deadliest character in *RE:A* would rank 5th on the killer list in *E2*. Sly is more prominent in one sense: he is the only male character with something that could almost be called a romantic interest (and she kills 25 people, thereby establishing an interesting "mirroring" based on gender between *RE* and *E* franchises).

Don't you think the *RE* franchise engages nostalgia, the nostalgia of gaming—that no matter how repetitive the scenarios, you never want it to end? And it does.

Matthias Stork

To your points, I find your critique valid. But I do need to add some clarifications.

First of all, I am afraid I did not articulate my viewpoint on violence accurately. I did not mean to imply that game violence is less "real" than on-screen violence. In fact, game violence is the epitome of on-screen violence (it is created within the screen, as opposed to projected onto it). The discourse that surrounds video game violence is a controversial issue that is fiercely debated (studies on the links between gaming and violence remain inconclusive, although there is extensive evidence on the link between gameplay and aggression; interestingly, this link has recently been extended into reception, as studies have demonstrated that children watching others play violent games are just as, if not more, prone to aggression than the players—if you are interested, I can send you a "link" to an analytical roundup). Personally, I am of the opinion that game violence is just as real as on-screen violence. Indeed, the gamic violence in *RE5* might even become more "real" as it is filtered through the cinematic screen (though it depends on the code of reception, since for many young digital citizens gaming may have become the essential cultural interface, replacing cinema; in this regard, the degree of interactivity involved in game violence has to be considered as well).

As for my notion of post-cinema, I am not arguing that it eradicates the code of the real that cinema is grounded in (although I am sympathetic to David Rodowick's eulogy of analog film that has lost its former indexicality through the emergence of digital video; I also think of Steven Shaviro's notion of a new cinematic materiality and the growing shift in mainstream aesthetics in the digital era). Post-cinema, to me, is digital cinema's relation to our contemporary mediascape, a medium that thoroughly engages with the real as it captures the mediatized network that is the real today (complex? convoluted?). In *RE5*, we experience the fusion of cinematic and post-cinematic aesthetics, a clear visualization of remediation (which, to me, is one of the defining aspects of the real today).

As for periodization, I completely see your point and I apologize for expressing my view so narrowly. By post-cinema, I do not mean to imply that change is clear-cut (and I am not at all advocating for a teleology of technology here). I do not mean to argue that cinema (and the discourse that surrounds it) is dead...far from it, actually. As you say, it is complicated. I would really like to learn more about your opinion on the issue of periodization (maybe when we both have time for a long

face-to-face conversation...I can bring chocolate and German beverages).

Ah...the body count from *RE: Afterlife*. I see your point (although *Afterlife*'s body count far exceeds that of *Retribution*, if I am not mistaken...maybe that should form part of the "cinemetrics" database as well). I think the mirroring issue is interesting, though. Sly and Alice can be seen as foils (romantic interest, revenge motif, regeneration through violence).

As for nostalgia, here I am frankly quite dubious. I see your point. These films can be read as evoking the nostalgia of gaming. But, and here I might be biased, they do not do that for gamers. I would rather situate them in the franchise model of action films. Mere repetitiveness (or variability of digital media, as Manovich calls it) is not enough to capture the gaming experience (since the *RE* films are entirely different from the games, aesthetically and narratively). But they do evoke the nostalgia of gamespace (maybe not playing the game but being under the impression of being in one...I might have to think it through more but I believe there is a distinction to be made between the phenomenology of gameplay and "being" in a reconstructed—remediated—gamespace).

Chon Noriega
I may have further questions about the remediated gamespace. Sounds a bit like the "new" Randy Quaid of 15 years ago, and we know where that went. Besides, *RE5* does not seem to venture beyond the FX heights of *Tron*.... Yup, OT (Original Tron). In any case, I suspect the answer may reside, in part, in our generations' frames of reference—arghhh, reception! But seriously, drawing upon Vivian Sobchack, I would contrast your excellent point about the phenomenology of gameplay (versus that of gamespace) with what my body knew watching both films. I say this as someone whose body is much older than yours. One of the reasons *E2* was so satisfying for me is that I identified with the actors' aging bodies. As you know, I bear a striking resemblance to Dolph Lundgren, albeit at a different scale. But more to the point, I could feel the actors' efforts and achievement—the "I still got it, but I'm going to be very careful where I place my feet" that one saw in Madonna's halftime performance at the 2012 Super Bowl—and I also know how they felt the next morning. Yes, one may be a mercenary, but at a certain age one begins thinking about both money and menisci. It is here that the line blurs for me—as viewer—between the actor and character—and where the mercenary personae of the latter becomes a metaphor for the continued viability of the former. Of course, this is nothing new—*The Over-the-Hill Gang* was one of my early favorites. But now the mercenary signals not so much a series of binaries (self/other, male/female, white/black, individual/society, and living/dead) as a transnational and multi-racial individualism poised against, yet ultimately reinscribing, a national or corporate ethnos. In contrast to *E2*, *RE5* induced torpor. I was bored. You mentioned Rodowick regarding cinema's loss of indexicality through the emergence of digital video. Here, we have screen bodies that have become identical with the choreography that passes as narrative, bearing no trace of the contingencies of performance, aging bodies, or some other "real" from which the film takes an imprint. This is less about indexicality per se than it is about the "game logic" you noted at the start of our exchange. What happens is what is supposed to happen for reasons completely outside the narrative. Alice is neither avatar nor character; she becomes the *deus ex machina* incarnate. I bring up the "body" here not as a trump card. I am not using the body to claim greater authority (dare I say, seniority), or to re-establish character and plot as necessary coordinates of the real. Instead I bring it up as a question about the digital gamespace that *RE5* imagines and from which it structures the diegesis. At least that is what my knees knew....

Matthias Stork
Personally, I think we should attribute our difference of opinion to my impassioned yet perhaps not clearly articulated viewpoints 😬 And, yes, I am also a prematurely socialized gamer (my parents still rue the day they purchased that SNES).

As for *Tron*, I see your point, but in my frame of reference the film explores a rudimentary vision of computerized space, whereas *RE5* (and other films) explore the concept of gamespace more explicitly.

I think we can agree to disagree again when *RE6* and *E3* come out.

Chon Noriega
Or perhaps there will be a merger between *RE* and *E* à la *Alien vs. Predator*! As for German drinks and chocolate, as with the anticipated sequels and franchise mergers, "Bring it on!"

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