The aesthetics of flow and the aesthetics of catharsis

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Abstract

Today's media culture can be characterized by a productive tension between two aesthetics: catharsis and flow. Popular, narrative film aims to provoke catharsis, an emotional release through identification with a main character, while videogames and other contemporary cultural experiences aim through repetition to induce in their audience a state of engagement that the psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has named "flow." The two aesthetics compete and cooperate in media culture. The aesthetic of flow, however, constitutes the end of desire, as it has been represented and enacted in the culture of catharsis at least since the nineteenth century.

keywords: interactive narrative, social media, film, television, flow, catharsis

Introduction

Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) is a blend of Hollywood genres: science fiction, action-adventure, and "heist film." It centers on a criminal team, whose task is to break into the dreaming mind of an Australian businessman and plant an idea. The planting or

inception of an idea can only be accomplished by inducing an intense emotional release, a catharsis (the film's term), in the subject's mind. Like many recent Hollywood films, *Inception* makes reference to videogames in substance and style. The team has to operate simultaneously on three dream levels, like the levels in a first-person-shooter, each of which has its own architecture, set of obstacles, and anonymous assassins. There are goals on each level and puzzles to solve along the way, and the film ends with an instantaneous "leveling-up" that ostensibly brings both the characters and the audience back to the world of waking reality.

Inception is not only a genre film, but also one that reflects on the nature of filmmaking in an age of digital media. Hollywood has obviously been promoted for decades as a cultural "dream machine"; in this case the film is premised on a technology that makes it possible to share dreams, and it repeatedly shifts between a world characterized as a dream and the waking world. Hollywood film and television dramas are understood as vehicles for eliciting appropriate emotions in the audience through their identification with the characters in the drama. They are cathartic in the sense that they promise an emotional climax, and catharsis is what *Inception* both represents as its goal and offers to its audience. Classic Hollywood films may deal in dreams, but they do not need to present the dream technology in the film itself: the camera remains behind (or rather in front of) the scenes. In *Inception* the dream box is visible, and it does not look or function like a film camera. A box with leads that are connected to the wrists of all the dreamers, this technology looks suitably medical or forensic, like a lie detector. It must certainly have computer technology and may remind some viewers of, for example, the game box in *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg, 1999). As in *eXistenZ*, the dreamers tunnel into a shared dreamworld that suggests the ultimate 3D videogame. One of the member of the team, Ariadne, has in fact 'designed' all the levels of this dreamworld. Her act of design can refer to the mis-en-scène of traditional film, but in today's culture of game engines and first-person-shooter, it also refers to 3D game design. Once the team gets into the dream world, it spends much of its time in firefights and chase scenes that action-adventure films now share with videogames. The anonymous shooters threaten the success not only of the team's mission but of the film itself, because they threaten to block the cathartic ending that the team and the film aim for.

Inception invites an allegorical reading—as a film that stages the anxiety of traditional filmmakers at the cultural reception of new dream-machine technologies, such as the videogame. The allusions to scenes from classic films —including Vertov's folding city at the end of *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)and the enigmatic final scenes of *2001* (Kubrik, 1968)—suggest that we read *Inception* as standing for the tradition of film at this moment of its reconfiguration in digital culture. In its anxiety of the digital, *Inception* is the latest in a series of films since the 1990s, including *Strange Days* (Bigelow, 1995), the previously mentioned *eXistenZ*, and the *Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999). Those other films focused on the danger posed by the Virtual Reality or videogames to our grasp of reality, and that theme certainly remains important in *Inception*, although it is figured in a somewhat different way. The dream technology threatens our perception of reality and the authenticity of our emotions, our ability to experience the catharsis that film promises. *Inception* may borrow stylistic and thematic elements from contemporary FPS videogames, but it is ultimately a film.

On the other hand, Nolan is not a reactionary filmmaker. The film's presentation of dreams as an embodied experience and its interest in the tactile and aural as well as the visual dimension of dreaming suggests that Nolan understands how our media culture has changed since the classic days of Hollywood cinema in the middle of the twentieth century. Contemporary audiences encounter film differently than in the past, because they are now accustomed to receiving media in what has been called a "polyaesthetic" fashion. (See Engberg 2010) Nevertheless, *Inception* does affirm the aesthetic function of traditional film: to evoke a cathartic response in the audience though a climactic narrative. The main character, Dom, has his own cathartic moment at the end of the film, although this moment seems particularly contrived. A spinning top at the film's end suggests that the familiar Hollywood traditions for manipulating the audience's emotion through narrative may themselves be unstable.

Inception exposes an important tension in contemporary media culture—between an aesthetic of catharsis and one of flow. If Hollywood film, television drama, and most theater (as well as some popular music and fiction) are all characterized by narrative techniques that aim at catharsis, videogames and other contemporary culture forms aim instead to evoke a feeling that the psychologist Mihaly Csiksentmihalyi has named 'flow.' These two aesthetics (catharsis and flow) cooperate and compete in today's

culture: both remain vigorous. WIth its relatively long tradition in popular media forms, however, catharsis may now appear somewhat old-fashioned. Flow is the aesthetic of first-person shooter games and techno and ambient music. Flow is the state induced by selecting one short YouTube video after another or by monitoring Twitter and Facebook feeds for minutes or hours on end. Catharsis aims at the achievement of a desired emotional state, whereas the state of flow wants to continue forever, with minor variations in the intensity of involvement. Flow is the negation of desire, as it has been represented in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative and drama, because it does not move toward its own repletion.

I am not suggesting that the dichotomy between catharsis and flow can completely characterize today's media culture. Our culture is best described as a plenitude, in which almost every understanding of the relationship between media and content and between art and entertainment, is still supported by some community in the developed world. The communities may vary in size from thousands to millions, or ten of millions of viewers, users, and writers, but there is no cultural center that can succeed in marginalizing the other communities. Among writers on digital media today, modernist assumptions about creativity and the function of art have been particularly resilient. At the same time these writers are willing to modify or distort these assumptions, usually to prescribe what the future of media should or will be. A good indication of both the tenacity and flexibility of modernist assumptions can be the found in all the various uses of the term "avant-garde" today, whose meaning now ranges from radical disruption in the sense of the historical avant-garde to successful commercialization of new digital technology.

Precisely because our culture's ideas about media today consist of a jumbled excavation of historical layers, it is useful to start with this simplifying dichotomy. I draw this distinction between catharsis and flow in order to create endpoints against which we can map the aesthetics of different media forms. If catharsis characterized the aesthetic goal of popular media in the twentieth century, the aesthetic of flow promises to be even more important for digital media in the twenty-first.

The aesthetics of catharsis and flow

[Suggested music to accompany the reading. This characterization of catharsis could be accompanied by the soundtrack to any of hundreds of dramatic Hollywood films, especially those in the classic orchestral tradition. Among recent films, the score of Agora (Amenábar, 2009) by Dario Mariniello is a fine example.]

Nolan's film addresses the status of film in an age in which the dream machine is changing. For the past century, dreams were projected on a screen in a darkened theatre; now for many viewers they are also generated by a small box filled with electronics. *Inception* invokes the term catharsis, whose history from Aristotle to the present is long and complicated. I will use the term to describe a set of assumptions about the function of popular narrative forms in the twentieth century. The aesthetic of cathartic narrative in my sense is captured in popular screenwriting manuals, such as Dan Decker's *Anatomy of a Screenplay* or Syd Fields' *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. These manuals aim to be utterly conventional. Their authors claim that their vast experience (they have read thousands of film scripts and participated in the making of Hollywood films) allows them to codify successful practice into a set of conventions. A successful film tells a story in three acts: the first act establishes the main character and sets up the conflict, the second develops this conflict toward a climax, and the third resolves it. The resolution brings about an emotional release in the audience, which has identified with the main character and become involved in his or her dilemma. The Hollywood style is also transparent: what is happening on the screen is a sequence of possible or at least coherent events.

Twentieth-century narrative film derives these aesthetic principles from theatrical melodrama and the nineteenth-century novel and has passed them along to so-called "serious" television drama: e.g. *The West Wing* and *Mad Men*. Film and television therefore frame the viewer's desire as a longing for narrative closure and emotional release. Formally, this is a desire for immediacy (as the erasure of mediation)—to be drawn into the action and the space of the film. The elements of the film should conspire to make the visual world of the story seamless. Hollywood film avoids unconventional editing techniques, breaks in the logic of the story, and unbelievable characters. There defamiliarizing techniques of are what mark a film as 'experimental': they constitute the difference between an 'art film' and a serious popular film. Popular film comedies, on the

other hand, are allowed to use such distancing techniques because they are not expected to promote the same emotional identification in their audience. Even serious films can sacrifice some degree of visual transparency and narrative logic for 'emotional truth.' Developed over the past hundred years of film, these practices remains compelling in today's popular culture. James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) and the 'serious' films of Steven Spielberg draw audiences whose size should astonish us even in the age of cultural plenitude.

[The reader is now invited to switch to music appropriate for flow, such as the minimalism of Philip Glass or the ambient music of Robert Rich's Somnium.]

Although videogames have a shorter history than film, they have developed considerable diversity in the past thirty years. Genres (each with player bases in the millions or tens of millions) include: puzzle games, platform games, role-playing games, first-person shooters, and others. Many of the most popular genres continue to be single-player games. If the paradigmatic situation of film (now complicated by television, the DVD and Internet delivery) was an audience seated in a darkened hall watching a large screen, the paradigmatic situation of the videogame (now complicated by the Internet and mobile phones) is still a single player seated in front of a personal screen engaged in a loop of play. As digital writers constantly remind us, videogames are 'interactive,' which means that through her participation the player is subsumed into the procedural circuit of the game. Interactivity promotes a different form of identification from the catharsis of popular film, for the player experiences the games as a flow of events, in which she participates. In a first-person shooter, such as the *Doom* series, the player falls into a consistent frame of mind for relatively long periods, as she moves along each level and engages and dispatches enemies. A game may offer some variety between levels—for example, with cinematic "cut scenes" in action-adventure games, some of which are based on films— but such scenes are felt as breaks in the flow that is the principal attraction in playing. The elaborate photorealistic shooters are not the only games that pursue the aesthetic of flow. Two-dimensional platformer games (such as the venerable, absurdly-named Super Mario Brothers series) or even puzzle games (Tetris, Bejeweled) also insert their players into a potentially endless event loop.

Games designers understand the importance of this loop and the psychological state it induces. Designer Jesse Schell notes that '[i]t pays for game designers to make a careful study of flow, because this is exactly the feeling we want the players of our games to enjoy.' (Schell 2008: 118) The key is to manage the player's sense of flow. 'Flow activities must manage to stay in the narrow margin of challenges that lies between boredom and frustration, for both of these unpleasant extremes cause our mind to change its focus to a new activity. Csickszentmihalyi calls this margin the "flow channel."' (Schell 2008: 119) Schell is referring to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the psychologist who as early as the 1970s appropriated the term 'flow' to describe this state:

"I developed a theory of optimal experience based on the concept of *flow*—a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." (Csikszentmihalyi 1991: 4)

Critics of videogames point to this intense, autotelic engagement as a problem, even an addiction. For Csikszentmihalyi, however, it constitutes the essence of the experience of a variety of the most enjoyable and meaningful human activities. Csikszentmihalyi does not mention videogames himself, instead pointing to traditional games and sports as flow activities. Designers and writers, including Schell, have applied Csikszentmihalyi's term and description to digital versions of games.[1] As generators of flow, videogames may have a winning state, but winning itself is not the point, especially in a single-player game. Many videogames are designed to be repeated after a win or a loss; in others, the player simply resets the game and starts over. The point is the player's engagement in the activity itself.

What Csikszentmihalyi describes is not a new phenomenon. Flow can be evoked by activities that are common to many ages and cultures, and the flow state has someting in common with states induced by forms of meditation or religious experience. But it does seem that our current cultural moment is pursuing the aesthetics of flow with special

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[1] Brian Schrank is studying the phenomenon of flow in videogames, particular in relation to highly creative and unusual 'avant-garde' games. I am indebted to him for making me aware of the importance of flow in games today. See his dissertation: "Avant-garde Videogames: Play Beyond Flow." (Atlanta, Georgia: Georgia Institute of Technology)

enthusiasm. Videogames are such important exercises in flow because of the status that these games (in contrast to earlier games or forms of play) now enjoy. In the past two decades the economic importance of videogames has led to a rising cultural position. Videogames are no longer a pastime only for adolescent boys; some genres—for example, online 'casual' games such as *Bejeweled*—are extremely popular among women over 30. Game studies is now a recognized academic discipline. Videogames have also become 'serious': they are used in education and training, in the communication of health issues, and in politics for propaganda and for motivational purposes. (Bogost 2007)

The dichotomy of catharsis-flow, like all such analytic dichotomies, is valuable in that it serves as a starting point. Although Hollywood film definitely aims for catharsis, and videogames seek to achieve flow, many form of media culture today pursue these aesthetics in some combination. The remediating relationships between videogames and film, for example, involve cooperation as well as competition. Action-adventure films often include game-like action sequences, which continue for minutes at one tense emotional register. Such scenes recall, if not they do not entirely recreate, the flow of first-person shooters and seek to appeal to the much same audience as videogames. At the same time, videogames based on films (such as the *Lord of the Rings* games and the James Bond games) try to imitate the catharsis of film, although the attempts are generally half-hearted. As mentioned above, the cut-scenes and trailers for videogames do evoke the dynamic emotions of film, which is the reason why such scenes seem alien to the experience of the gameplay itself, and why hard-core game-players and game studies writers tend to be critical of cut scenes. The remediating chains of the contemporary media industry often blend the two aesthetics. If the Matrix films are primarily cathartic with some significant but veiled references to games, the Matrix 'series' also includes short animated films called 'The Animatrix,' some of which were first released on a web site, where the viewer was encouraged to adopt a relationship to the material that is better characterized as flow. There have been three videogames: *Enter the Matrix, The Matrix: Path of Neo* (two single-player action games), and *The Matrix Online* (a massively multiple online role-playing game). Although the films enjoyed larger audiences, certainly most of the game players would have seen the films, which suggests that the same viewer/player can appreciate both aesthetics.

If television drama is, like Hollywood film, cathartic, today's television as a whole is a complex mix of styles, and many programs (infomercials, music-video channels, the weather channel, and so on) want to flow. Csikszentmihalyi regards flow as an active state: a person is doing something that induces the feeling of flow. In this sense, channel surfing is still perhaps one of the most common flow activity in our culture. The sociologist Raymond Williams used the term 'flow' decades ago to describe the programming of (American) television, which abhors a break in the steady stream of sound and image. (Williams 1974) For Williams, the flow of programming, however, induced a passivity in the viewer over whom this stream washes. We could argue that experience of watching television is a blend of the two aesthetics, because inside this flow of programs and commercials the viewer may be watching cathartic dramas. At any rate, the experience of television viewing is becoming more hybridized now, because viewers can choose among many different ways of consuming television programs: watching them live (or when broadcast), recording them on dvrs for later viewing, choosing programs on demand from services on the Internet, and so on. Each of these modes changes the flow of the viewing experience. Finally, nascent forms of interactive television often convert cathartic programs into flow experiences, as they divert the viewer's concentration from the narrative and encourage her to develop her own rhythm in moving between the narrative and the additional materials (games, background information, product purchases) on the Internet.

Like television, popular and historical music illustrates the dichotomy of catharsis and flow as well as its complications. The reader who followed the musical suggestions and has listened first to film music and then to ambient music will have noticed the contrast between the emotionally dynamism of catharsis and the monochromatic quality of flow. Cathartic film music inherited the affective conventions of what we call in English 'classical music,' where catharsis was dominant between 1750 and 1900 (and for some styles much later). This music establishes a tonal center, moves away, and then returns in a gesture of cadence. Each cadence in classical music is a tiny catharsis, which contributes to larger music structures and more significant catharses. The Romantic symphonists of the 19th and 20th centuries explored dissonance and delayed the return to catharsis as long as possible, and this Romantic tradition dominated Hollywood in the mid-twentieth century through the work of such composers as Miklos Rozsa, Franz Waxman, and Bernard Hermann. Orchestral film music lost favor in Hollywood in the

1960s and 1970s, but was revived in the era of Spielberg, particularly by John Williams. Film music now is quite eclectic, but the romantic score is still favored for dramatic Hollywood blockbusters, such as *Titanic* and *Lord of the Rings*). If the classical style is cathartic, Baroque music could be said to flow: a Baroque fugue could in principle continue forever with the endless variations of the fugal subject. To appreciate flow in music, we can also appeal to recent styles: minimalist music in the 1970s, techno and ambient music today, all of which reject catharsis in favor of a continuous affect or emotional state (they are like Baroque music in this sense only). Techno and ambient music never need or want to end. The background music of most videogames too is endless, even when it borrows orchestral color from Hollywood action-adventure genre. Such music cannot have larger structures or rounded forms, because it is impossible to predict the progress of the game, which the music is presuming to track. These are only general characterizations, however. Music can combine flow and catharsis: for example, Ravel's *Bolero* is characterized by minutes of repetitious flow before reaching its bombastic catharsis.

Although the history of music suggests that flow has long been available as an alternative aesthetic, videogames and other digital forms have nevertheless helped to make that alternative important in popular media culture today. If films such as *Titanic* or *Avatar* with their carefully calibrated dynamics of identification and emotional release continue to engross audiences, millions are also drawn to the endless crescendo of games such as *Halo 3* and *Tomb Raiders*. The aesthetic of catharsis frames desire in the historically familiar terms of a lack to be filled both for a main character as the audience's proxy and for the audience itself. Flow is emotionally monochromatic, and there is no lack to be filled: all the user wants is for the current state of satisfaction to be prolonged.

Catharsis in contemporary media culture

In popular culture, catharsis is usually associated with narrative or drama, as the film manuals by Decker and Fields, mentioned above, indicate. The manuals are secure in the conviction that character defines plot and that the shape of the plot involves the change (enlightenment, dissolution, etc.) of the main character. These manuals codify a widespread cultural assumption that all of our lives are constituted as 'stories that we tell one another'—an assumption apparent in the way 'ordinary' people are presented as

subjects in the American morning shows, each with his or her own story of injustice or triumph. The assumption is also apparent in the unquenchable public interest in auratic film stars and other celebrities, whose lives are supposed to have the same dramatic shape as their films. Almost everywhere we look in media culture, we can find the trope 'life as cathartic narrative'—in every 'human interest' story on television news, every self-help manual of the kind that truly top the bestseller lists, and for that matter in the contemporary readings of at least the American versions of Christianity and Judaism.

It is more surprising that in recent decades philosophers and psychologists have sought to affirm the truth of catharsis culture, by arguing that storytelling is essential to the human condition. The psychologist Jerome Bruner suggested that '...narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. "Life" in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as "a narrative" is.' (Bruner 2004: 692) The philosopher Daniel Dennett has claimed similarly that we are all novelists who seek to give our lives the shape of an autobiography. (Dennett 1988: 1029) In *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre went farther and asserted that the unity of life " is 'the unity of a narrative quest . . . [and] the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria for success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. A quest for what?...a quest for the good...the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man.' (MacIntyre 1981: 203-204) In his article 'Against Narrativity,' Galen Strawson cites these and others as he sets out to disprove the idea that everyone must see his or her life as a narrative (Strawson 2004). But the fact that he can find so many on the other side indicates how powerful this cultural trope still is, even among academic humanists (though not necessarily among literary scholars).

An increasingly popular variation on this trope is that storytelling is not (or not only) a psychological or moral imperative, but a biological one. A number of writers with varying science credentials explain storytelling as a Pleistocene-era adaptation conferring a selective advantage: poor storytellers died out leaving only us novelists. (Boyd 2009 ; Dutton 2009; Pinker 1995). For Boyd, storytelling is a kind of cognitive play that sharpens the mind in various ways. More specifically for Dutton, '[s]tories encourage us to explore the points of view, beliefs, motivations, and values of other human minds, inculcating potentially adaptive interpersonal and social capacities' (110). (In fact, only certain kinds of psychological narrative aim at this intersubjectivity; wherever else this

technique may have developed, it surely comes to us though the modern novel.) The point of such Darwinian arguments is to insist on the universal nature and power of narrative. By framing their definition on the basis of recent popular narrative, the adaptionists vindicate catharsis as a universal aesthetic experience.

All of these writers are operating under the literary assumptions of what we might call the 'industrial age of print,' the period (roughly 1800 to the recent past), in which the printed novel developed from a (relatively) elite literary form into a series of popular genres, codifying certain forms of climax and catharsis. Dennett's claim that we are 'novelists' cannot help to recall for us the tradition from Austen to the twentieth century. And when Marya Schechtman speaks of a 'narrative self-conception' (cited by Strawson 2004: 447), she is depending on her readers' shared understanding of organic plot and development of character inherited from the German Bildungsroman and the Victorian novel. These notions of coherence and transparent representation were exactly the ones that the avant-garde throughout the twentieth century challenged in their repeated rejection of narrative forms of painting, literature, and film. Postmodern writers and artists also obviously challenged them in less strident ways from the 1960s onwards.

Is catharsis still possible in digital media forms? The plenitude of media culture should warn us not to be categorical in denying that possibility. For one thing, films can be remediated in digital technology, most obviously by being streamed in various forms. If I watch *Titanic* on my Ipad, I may still have a cathartic experience. But some who are committed to this popular tradition go much further and insist that catharsis must be the teleology of digital media, as it has been for film. In 2004 Hollywood directors Steven Spielberg and Robert Zemekis attended the opening of the Electonic Arts video game lab at the University of Southern California: the topic of the evening was bringing videogames and film together as an entertainment form:

"Discussing the coming fusion of games and film, they said video games are getting closer to a storytelling art form – but are not quite there yet. 'I think the real indicator will be when somebody confesses that they cried at level 17,' Spielberg said." (Breznican 2004)

In the same year, Spielberg announced that he would work with Electronic Arts to develop emotionally engaging games. Given his success as a filmmaker, it is not surprising that Spielberg would assume that film is the standard to which games must rise. There is also a community of writers and computer specialists who work on 'interactive narrative,' and they too take cathartic narrative as their model. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Janet Murray claims that the computer constitutes the next great narrative medium, after drama, the novel and cinema. Because it is "participatory" and "procedural," the digital medium makes possible a new form of storytelling. In a novel or a film, the reader or viewer can be intimately involved in the story, but she cannot intervene to affect the outcome. In Murray's vision, the player will participate in a simulation that is immersive and responsive (like the Holodeck in the Star Trek series), becoming a character in the 'storyworld.' Murray imagines that this ultimate cyberdrama can evolve from current genres of videogames. (For related views, see Ryan 2006 and Crawford 2003.) For Murray, who is an essentialist like the adaptionists or the philosophers mentioned above, interactive narrative would unite the essence of the digital medium with the essence of the human storytelling. It would be radically new and yet affirm the continuity of human nature, the universality of human storytelling.

The interactive narrativists are really seeking to remediate the power of Hollywood popular film in a videogame form. For them, today's games at best only point the way to a new expressive form that will ultimately give the player an emotional experience similar to that of film and literature. Yet if the narrativists are waiting for the for the game that will make the player cry at level 17, there are reasons to think that they will have a long wait. The diversity of videogames today makes it foolish to predict their future, and it is possible that a genre will develop, presumably from role-playing games, that imitates the narrative form of Hollywood film. But in order for such games to become the 'cinema of the twenty-first century,' they will have to reconcile the interactive freedom of the player with the constraints of a narrative arc and emotional climax. There is little evidence that game developers know how to do this or are even working in this direction. The proposals for interactive narrative by computer specialists and digital media writers are prescriptive rather than descriptive; their goal is to secure the new digital media for traditional catharsis culture.

Flow culture

The manifestations of flow culture seem more novel than those of catharsis culture, not because flow is a new phenomenon, but rather because digital media forms have helped to elevate the status of flow practices and extend them to communities of almost inconceivable size and economic importance. Some of the most prominent and popular social media forms, such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, seem to appeal to their tens of millions of users precisely through the promise of flow.

YouTube remediates television and video for the World Wide Web and in the process refashions an interactive version of the experience of flow that Williams described for television decades earlier. A typical session with YouTube begins with one video, which the user may have found through searching or as a link sent to her through email or perhaps Twitter. The page that displays that video contains links to others, established through various associations: the same subject, the same contributor, a similar theme, and so on. Channel surfing on traditional television can be addictive, but the movement from one channel to another is more or less random. The YouTube's lists of links and its invitation to search for a new videos give the viewer's experience more continuity, with the opportunity for repetition or endless minimal variation. In *The Language of New Media* (2001) Lev Manovich argued that the digital era presents us with an alternative to narrative film: 'database cinema,' in which video segments can be selected from a larger repository and put together in a particular order:

> After the novel, and subsequently cinema, privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate—the database. Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end… Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other. (218)

YouTube is the realization of 'database' video or cinema and is now both an alternative and a companion to the cathartic experience of the Hollywood film.

The microblogging sites, of which Twitter is the most popular, also offer a flow experience, in which a personalized stream of sms-length messages is delivered to each

user. The stream depends on whom that user has chosen to 'follow,' including personal friends, celebrities, news organizations, universities, companies, and so on. If she follows enough sources, her stream of messages will change as fast as she can refresh her screen. And she can contribute to her own stream and those of her followers. The resulting stream of 'tweets' is an unexpected combination of public and private communication. Sms texts were intended to be very short private messages between two mobile phone users, but Twitter interleaves the messages from all the sources so that there is no coherence between consecutive messages and no need for the process ever to end. Those who are educated in traditional writing practices find the individual tweets and the stream almost meaningless. But for millions of Twitter regulars, the constant rhythm of short texts seems to be satisfying in its own right. When we look to other participatory social websites (such as Facebook, MySpace, and Orkut), we find another, yet similar version of the flow aesthetic. A user's Facebook page consists of a series of channels that she can monitor: a wall forTwitter-like posts to and from friends, a private message service, a photo-hosting section, and repetitive games and contests in which the user is constantly challenged to participate.

Social media such as Facebook and YouTube are often said to be exercises in online identity construction. The slogan of YouTube, for example, is 'Broadcast Yourself,' which suggests not only that the user has the opportunity to distribute her own broadcasts, but also that she can create a version of her own identity through these short videos that she sends into cyberspace. The original genre of YouTube video, and still one of the most common, is the talking head, in which a user faces a webcam and delivers an ad-lib or prepared presentation. There must be millions of such videos on the site (out of a total of over 100 million). Some users create their own YouTube channels and become YouTube personalities on the obvious model of television personalities on the day-time or late night talk-shows. Facebook began as a site where college students presented themselves for flirting or friendship with other students, and these roots are still apparent. Each user creates a profile, which includes such information as whether he or she is 'in a relationship' and which can be changed at any time. The Facebook channels (texts and images) are information flows that present facets of the user's personality, activities, and relationships. The character that emerges from a Facebook page is a mosaic of these channels, each of which is constructed according to templates provided by the Facebook interface. The user's identity develops according to the flow of slightly varied images and

posts, and the whole format works against the presentation of a climactic and singular life story. In its framing of user's identity, Facebook offers nothing like the structure of the Bildungsroman or biopic.

We have defined flow as a cultural aesthetic, but for Csikszentmihaly, somewhat surprisingly, flow is has a more important cultural purpose. In our secular and hostile world, flow gives individuals a feeling of control in their own smaller domains (games, hobbies, work activities). Flow becomes 'the process of achieving happiness through control over one's inner life.' (6) Csikszentmihaly's flow culture is one in which individuals aim at nothing more than personal satisfaction. The psychology of flow does not encourage them to think of ourselves as actors in a larger social or political drama. At least since the Renaissance, such a drama would be by definition cathartic: the movement toward a resolution through victory or defeat. At least from 1800 to the middle of the twentieth century, politically aware citizens were encouraged, if not compelled, to see their own history as marked by the same dramatic curve as that of his state or nation. Flow culture takes no such view. Instead, the identity constructed on Facebook and YouTube is homeostatic:it does not see itself participating in any larger history or driven by any collective destiny. Instead, its modest goal is to keep itself within bounds, within the channels provided by a Facebook page.

Reflective culture as a third way

The dichotomy between catharsis and flow can be presented as a contrast between traditional media (film) and new (videogames), between older audiences and younger players, or even between an older and newer understanding of human identity and social engagement. But these are only first approximations. For one thing, flow and catharsis can blend in the same media experience, as they clearly do in many forms of popular and even traditional music. Analyzing the blending of the two aesthetics can give in fact us insights into the peculiar appeal of certain films and digital artifacts. The seemingly endless chase scenes in action-adventure films are an intrusion of flow aesthetics into film, just as the use of cut scenes introduce cathartic elements into videogames. In addition, the audience for cathartic films and television series may tend to be older than the player base for action-adventure games, but the success of *Titanic* or the Harry Potter

books and films indicates that young audiences can still be won over to traditional narrative forms.

Finally, we have left out of consideration many cultural practices that do not fit on the spectrum of catharsis and flow. Catharsis and flow both describe totalizing aesthetics, in which the ideal is to command the viewer's complete attention. Csikszentmihalyi makes this focus a condition of a true flow experience, and catharsis is also understood as an encompassing experience. Murray, a champion of catharsis, claims that immersion is one of the essential properties of the digital medium. An interactive narrative will immerse the player/viewer both perceptually and emotionally so that she is absorbed in a storyworld that she experiences as real. We recognize the aesthetics of immersion in popular film, television, and fiction: the movie that the audience does not want to end (but it must end), the pageturner that the reader cannot put down, and the addictive television series. Such immersion in compelling narrative forms has been a characteristic of popular twentieth-century forms, and for that very reason experimental art throughout the twentieth century has generally aimed to be reflective rather than immersive. We could offer this as one possible definition of avant-garde art in the twentieth century: that it rejects transparent representation and the immersion of the viewer in a storyworld. Formal avant-garde art encourages the viewer to adopt a critical distance from the work itself or at least to become aware of the process by which the work was created. And what Peter Bürger and many others call the 'political' or 'historical' avant-garde (such the Futurists and Dada) want the viewer to critique the function of art in culture. (Bürger 1984) Brecht of course drew a contrast between cathartic, Aristotelian theater and his own 'epic theater.' In Aristotelian theater the viewer became involved in the story and identified uncritically with one or more of the characters; the techniques of epic theater were calculated to encourage in the audience a critical distance from the characters and the action. (Brecht 1964) Following Brecht, Augosto Boal is perhaps even more explicit in condemning the politically reactionary ideology of Aristotelian theater (Boal 1985) Similarly, film theorists in the 1970s and (to some extent) experimental filmmakers themselves argued against Hollywood film, which is narrative and immersive (and therefore capitalist and sexist), and for structuralist film, which compels the viewer to confront the process of its own making. (Rodowick 1994) Postmodern theory and practice, in literature as well as the visual arts, take the reflective nature of art as a given,

though in different ways from high modernism and with a different relationship to popular culture.

In the era of high modernism, reflective practices were understood in opposition to the aesthetics and politics of mainstream culture. In today's media culture, however, this reflective aesthetic can also be hybridized—not only with its traditional nemesis, catharsis, but also with popular expressions of flow. We can envision a triangle with flow, catharsis, and reflection as the vertices and place various popular and experimental forms along the edges or in the interior of the triangle, as they combine elements of flow, catharsis and reflection. An obvious case is the music video, which appropriates filmic techniques that were once regarded as avant-garde to create a fragmented and associative visual experience that serves as a background for popular music (which is itself a combination of catharsis and flow).

In acknowledging this third aesthetic, we are also acknowledging the troubled distinction between popular and elite culture. Catharsis and flow aesthetics often belong to forms that have been considered popular in the twentieth century, while reflective art is usually positioned as elite (in spite of the fact that the avant-garde often attacked the conventions of high art). This distinction has become increasingly unstable since the middle of the twentieth century and has almost (but not quite) lost its meaning for contemporary media culture. At the same time, although the aesthetics of catharsis and flow still seem to be overwhelmingly more popular and economically important than reflective art today, neither catharsis nor flow can function as an undisputed cultural center. Catharsis may be associated primarily with film and television; flow with games and social media. Yet digital culture hybridizes forms easily and eagerly. So it is possible to watch entire Hollywood films that have been (illegally) uploaded and divided into ten minutes segments on YouTube. Cathartic Hollywood personalities like Oprah Winfrey have Facebook pages and millions of followers on Twitter. There is little evidence that the aesthetic of catharsis will disappear, just as there little evidence that videogames, social media, or any new digital form is evolving toward a teleology, a single aesthetic principle, as many popular writers on digital media seem to assume.

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