# THE SPLIT-SCREEN AESTHETIC: CONNECTING MEANING BETWEEN FRAGMENTED FRAMES

by

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# DEDICATION

To Caren Rabbino, for guiding the form and relishing the content.

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# ABSTRACT

The split-screen is a multi-frame technique used in film, television and video. Recent advances in digital technology make it easier to incorporate the fragmented frame into visual narrative strategies. I argue that properties inherent to the split-screen technique (including simultaneity, symmetry, visual irony, omniscient view and visual style) also emerge as attributes of a split-screen aesthetic. The split-screen aesthetic transforms a technical contrivance that has long provided an alternative to parallel editing, into a powerful narrative tool that facilitates the construction of visual stories in a spatial context. I trace the history of the use of split-screen by describing its function in selected visual works, including a medieval triptych painting, a 20th Century art installation, two films and a contemporary television program. A close analysis of a dual-screen video art installation helps characterize elements of the cinematic split-screen aesthetic. I also provide an account of the application of a split-screen design in my own experimental short video. As multi-screen formats continue to evolve, they invoke the split-screen aesthetic to shape the stories emerging from new spaces.

# INTRODUCTION

In a speech to spectators of his 1927 film *Napoleon*, Abel Gance made the following statement regarding the use of his multi-screen technique, Polyvision:

> I speculated on the simultaneous perception of images, not only of a second's duration sometimes of an eighth of a second, so that the clash of my images against one another would cause a surge of abstract flashes, touching the soul rather than the eyes…It will become a universal language if you make the effort to try to read the new letters which, little by little, it adds to the alphabet of our eyes." (Brownlow 164-66)

Gance was not the first filmmaker to divide the screen but his radical use of the form clearly demonstrated the aesthetic potential of the split-screen device.

Multiple frame imagery appears in medieval polyptych paintings featuring densely layered micro-narratives that connect spatially across the borders of individual panels (Manovich 322). Early cinema experimented with the segmented screen by devising methods for visualizing simultaneity like vignetting multiple images into a single picture or connecting phone conversations across disparate spatial sites (Davis, *Digital Spaces*). Split-screen has never disappeared but few well-known films explored its utility as a narrative tool during the first half of the twentieth century. One early film prior to Gance's *Napoleon* that employed split-screen as a storytelling element was *Suspense*, directed by Phillips Smalley and Lois Weber. A unique triangular division of the screen depicts three characters and two intertwined plot lines to effectively establish mounting tension (Branco). Eventually, mainstream cinema came to favor the transparency inherent in continuity editing and a style of filmmaking that discouraged the

use of techniques like split-screen that call attention to the frame and highlight the mediated nature of the image (Hagener).

A resurgence of split-screen use in mainstream fiction films occurred in the 1960's and 1970's but the difficult, time-consuming and expensive process of optical printing limited its development as an expressive narrative element (Talen). Nevertheless, films produced during this period employed the split-screen creatively by linking simultaneity with causality and frame size with prevalence of relationships (Branco). In Brian DePalma's *Carrie*, a dual-frame split-screen maintains spatial relations by reflecting Carrie's image relative to the direction of her telekinetic power as she adjusts her alternating gaze from left to right (Branco). The nonfiction film, *Woodstock*, varied frame size rhythmically in time with musical performances (Hirsch). Multiple frames functioned as ironic commentary and served to compress narrative (Ebert).

Television news and live sportscasts began incorporating split-screens to emphasize simultaneity of experience by presenting alternative views of action during a game, or uniting geographically distant guests of a news program (Chamberlain 17). Exhibitions involving multi-screen projections proliferated during an avant-garde movement toward an "expanded cinema" that began in the 1960's (Marchessault 6). Venues included international expositions that merged screen architecture with performance and art galleries that provided a home for multi-projection film/video installations. Canada's centenary celebration, Expo 67, displayed multi-screen, multi-image films through diverse means (Shatnoff). *Diapolyecran* (1967) played across 112

separately directed, moving screen-cubes (Manovich, 323); *Labyrinth* (1967) featured large wall and floor screen projections embedded within a tear-shaped auditorium essential to the film's visual and emotive power (Shatnoff).

Today, fragmented frames and multiple screens appear routinely in film and television. Advances in digital technology and non-linear editing systems make it easier to split the screen (Talen) and incorporate the form into visual storytelling strategies. In addition, pervasive multi-frame image sources direct the evolution of the moving image toward increased modularity (Manovich 140). From highly mediated television news graphics (Davis, *Digital Spaces*) to multi-window computer environments, consumers of visual media encounter greater opportunities for exposure and acclimation to spatial narrative formats (Manovich 140, 324). As a result, producers of mainstream cinema appear to have abandoned their exclusive adherence to continuity editing and are less afraid of calling attention to the frame by incorporating split-screens into their films.

The split-screen technique offers filmmakers alternative storytelling options while challenging spectators to assimilate more information in a single viewing. "The total effect on the audience is wonderful, because it makes them work" (Richard Fleischer cited in Anon). Single-screen cinema adheres to the linear sequential narrative, an assembly line of shots that appear one at a time and privilege the temporal development of the moving image (Manovich 157). Split-screen emphasizes the spatial dimensions of multiple moving images compelling viewers to connect, correlate and seek order from competing simultaneous inputs (Shatnoff). The non-linear structure of the spatial narrative requires active engagement in a form of mental editing that takes into

consideration split-screen simultaneity and spatiality. Lev Manovich refers to this process as spatial montage (158). Split-screens establish a more complex relationship between spectators and the moving image in ways Bazin observed for the techniques of deep focus and the long take (Bazin 35-6). Filmmakers utilizing the multi-screen form continue to direct meaning between images despite viewer contribution to the spatial editing process. In Mike Figgis' *Timecode*, four separate and unedited story lines unfold simultaneously in real time across a divided screen. One critic remarked, "it induces a serious case of sensory overload that left me drained and edgy" (Arnold). Split-screen use suggests a more active collaboration between filmmaker and audience, one that relies on spectator participation to achieve new aesthetic heights.

Despite its long history, literature on split-screen is relatively sparse (Bizzocchi). Renewed interest and application of multiple frames warrants an examination of the form in order to define the expressive elements of what amounts to a split-screen aesthetic. Understanding how the split-screen aesthetic connects meaning between frames can help guide application of the multi-screen device across all film genres. Nonfiction films, in particular, feature few well-known split-screen examples despite the fact that documentaries, like dramatic fiction, rely on narrative continuity and can benefit as well from split-screen enhancement.

In this paper, I apply the art history technique of formal analysis to a diverse selection of visual works that incorporate the split-screen. In each case I describe the multi-frame structure and reveal elements of the split-screen aesthetic. Elements of the split-screen aesthetic include simultaneity, symmetry, visual irony, omniscient view and

visual style. The selected works I discuss emerge from the fields of painting, video art, cinema and television, and include a medieval triptych painting by Joachim Patinir; the 1927 silent film, *Napoleon*; the 1950's comedy, *Pillow Talk*; a dual-screen video art installation from 1999 entitled *The Third Memory*; and the contemporary television series, *24*. In an effort to characterize attributes of the split-screen aesthetic acknowledged in the formal analysis, I provide a close study of the video art piece, *The Third Memory*. No single example of split-screen use demonstrates the form's complete utility as a spatial narrative tool. The initial survey of *The Third Memory* in this paper includes an analysis of the film's split-screen mechanism and a brief description of how that mechanism serves the artistic goals of the piece. Each selected visual work is analyzed in this fashion; however, isolation of split-screen aesthetic properties requires a deeper level of engagement. The detailed examination of the use of split-screen in an individual work serves to define the contribution each aesthetic element makes to the construction of narrative and theme. This process ultimately illuminates the nature of the split-screen aesthetic.

I chose to closely analyze *The Third Memory* over the other selected visual works, for the role its dual-screen format plays in the expression of abstract concepts and an unconventional narrative. The dual-screen arrangement in *The Third Memory* was originally part of a video installation that included additional material (e.g., displays of newspaper articles and video footage related to the historical event on which the installation was based). Despite its dislocation from the installation context, the dual-frame structure of *The Third Memory* operates as a split-screen and as such, invokes a

multi-frame aesthetic. *The Third Memory* employs properties of the split-screen aesthetic in ways that can be applied to other visual media, including mainstream film and video formats.

Finally, I detail an account of the application of a split-screen arrangement in an experimental short form video I produced as part of my MFA thesis.

As filmmakers continue to explore the creative possibilities of multi-screen use in film, television and video, the split-screen aesthetic emerges in support of an evolving form of spatial storytelling. Elements of the split-screen aesthetic comprise the foundation for this renewed narrative form, ultimately contributing to the universal language that Abel Gance spoke of, one that adds, little by little, to the alphabet of our eyes.

# THE SPLIT-SCREEN IN SELECTED VISUAL WORKS

There are numerous examples of split-screen use in visual works throughout the history of film and television. While the technique can be applied reliably for reproducible functional purposes from film to film, (e.g., as a method of depicting on-screen phone conversations), there is a wide diversity of forms. Multi-panel images that employ the split-screen aesthetic to tell stories that connect meaning across frames existed long before mainstream cinema and popular television. Analysis of these works provides an historical basis for existing forms of split-screen expression as well as an indication of the creative possibilities of the spatial story form.

## *The Penitence of Saint Jerome* (Joachim Patinir, ca. 1518)



Figure 1 – *The Penitence of Saint Jerome*, Joachim Patinir, ca 1518

*The Penitence of Saint Jerome* by Joachim Patinir is a sixteenth century triptych designed as an altarpiece (Figure 1). In the painting, Patinir, a renowned landscape painter, portrays an expansive version of the world including pastures, forests, rivers, mountains and ocean. He employs a three-color scheme that transitions from brown in the foreground, to bluish-green, to pale blue in the background (Devisscher). Influenced by Italian Renaissance painters and contemporary religious iconography, Patinir emphasizes Italianate architecture and foregrounds sacred figures in each panel. The triptych stands nearly four feet high by five feet wide and ideally requires a viewing distance of approximately four to five feet in order to examine the work in its entirety and discern its impressive level of detail. From this vantage point one cannot help notice the gradual but progressive connection of scenery beyond the foreground and across the dividing frame of each panel as the landscape advances toward the horizon. The painting ultimately presents an undivided worldview in which three separate foreground narratives actually occupy the same connected landscape despite their discontinuous physical borders and historical asynchronies.

Patinir's naturalistic figures anchor the foreground and stories conveyed in each triptych panel: the baptism of Christ in a river; Anthony the Hermit shown with the monsters that assailed him; and, in the central panel, a penitent St. Jerome bearing a stone he will use to beat his chest in punishment for loving secular learning too much. The banks of the river behind the Christ figure and John the Baptist reveal a group enthralled with a speaker, perhaps a prophet, while God the Father casts His blessings from above in the form of visible gold rays and the Holy Spirit as a white bird hovers between father

and son completing the depiction of the Holy Trinity. God's heavenly perch is dark and ominous and endowed with Old Testament severity. Black clouds in the center panel threaten to engulf a bank of red clouds that may reflect the hell and damnation of this world's lower realm. In the center sphere, scenes of pastoral life and devotion manifest in the form of a church, a figure kneeling in prayer and through images of a donkey and camel, two beasts of the desert wilderness where St. Jerome sought his penitence. The remaining panel traces a path from coastal city to open field and forest, and to Anthony and his tormentors. The wing narratives appear to connect spatially by virtue of Anthony's gaze across the central panel to the Christ figure whose raised hand mirrors an identical gesture in the Hermit. Patinir combines sacred historical figures and events in order to convey their relationship across time. The painter's dramatic use of scale mediated by the simultaneous segregating and unifying effects of multiple frames provides the observer with an omniscient view of a secular *and* symbolic world.

Spatial narratives played a prominent role in European visual culture for centuries (Manovich 322). Sixteenth century polyptych paintings reflected a popular pictorial storytelling form by presenting linked sequential narratives (Mellinkoff 2). The narrative in *The Penitence of Saint Jerome* is more symbolic than sequential but shares the process of inferring connection across a guided revelation of events (Allen). The wooden frame of each panel in Patinir's triptych brings to mind the black borders of a divided motion picture frame. They isolate individual images while connecting them in a unified space. The technique of dividing image space yet sustaining connection across panels enables Patinir to imbue the work with a visual and narrative dynamism beyond that achieved by

a single frame depiction. The piece derives its expansiveness from the painter's use of distancing effects like gradual color changes and the grouping of certain objects like rock outcroppings to suggest depth (Devisscher). Dividing an otherwise unified scene among three frames augments this effect, broadens an omniscient view and guides one along borders that imply continuity across foregrounds while patently connecting in the distance. By a similar means, the three historically disparate religious narratives each achieve prominence within the boundaries of their own frames yet ultimately coalesce in the abstract if not temporally.

Multi-panel paintings such as *The Penitence of Saint Jerome* present two or more things as related despite existing in separate spaces at separate times. Applying this concept to individually framed stories ultimately set the stage for incorporation of the split-screen technique into the art of early cinema.

*Napoleon* (Abel Gance, 1927)



Figure 2 - Triptych format in *Napoleon*

Abel Gance's five-and-a-half-hour 1927 silent epic *Napoleon* (reassembled and restored by Kevin Brownlow in 1981) features stunning displays of visual experimentation through "a profusion of optical effects – mask and superimpositions, distorting lenses and pulled focus" (Armes). Gance also employed a widescreen format technique called Polyvision that tripled the width of the screen through the simultaneous projection of three film reels (Kaplan 46). He reserved the use of this triptych technique for the climax of the film when Napoleon enters Italy embarking on an important early victory in his career.

Prior to the climactic triptych transition, a single screen image reveals Napoleon's troops on a mountain top redoubt in Italy where the French army prepares for battle. Riding horseback, Napoleon reviews his troops during a scene in which the full frame image reduces in size in a slow and gradual motion. Throughout this transition, the camera pans left and the scene changes to a long shot of the troops en masse waving hats in jubilation. The transformation of the frame to a fraction of its size involves a dynamic image reduction that has the counterintuitive feel of a telescopic zoom as the black borders surrounding the frame progressively widen and the image window gradually closes down. Unlike a zoom function, however, there is no image magnification during this process. The single, reduced frame hangs momentarily amidst a sea of black border, contained like a matted photograph, when suddenly the music soundtrack and screen composition shift abruptly. In an instant, the spaces to the left and right of the central image fill with screen images of equal size, culminating in the fully formed triptych projection (Figure 2).

The screen action across the panorama of frames is continuous and the collective image holds momentarily allowing one to revel in its magnificence, until the center frame suddenly darkens to reveal an intertitle with dialogue. The remainder of the film features dynamic and variable incarnations of the initial triptych form, including: the juxtaposition of disparate images; the simultaneous use of superimposed and differentiated imagery (with the addition of rapid montage editing within each frame during climactic scenes); the presentation of either identical or mirror images in the right and left frames set against a differentiated central frame; identical imagery across all frames; and the use of colored filters over select frames with the effect of reproducing the colors of the French flag across the triptych.



Figure 3a



Figure 3b



Figure 3c

In a series of telling triptych sequences, Napoleon in close-up looks out from the center frame flanked by images of clouds and sky (Figures 3a - c). Gance's personal conception of Napoleon was filtered through a nineteenth century romantic view of the artist (Armes). Consequently, he depicts Napoleon the hero as an artist who created a new France. Situating the artist-hero with his head literally in the clouds, Gance presents a god-like version of Napoleon. Shot from a low angle, he looks down over his empire from a lofty vantage with the French army, the tool of his creation, at his disposal. Gance uses the variable arrangement of parallel, multi-frame imagery to endow Napoleon and, consequently, the viewer, with an omniscient view of his world and creation.

Like other early cinematic works, *Napoleon* took the precedent of medieval multi-frame storytelling one step further by animating simultaneous narratives in a triptych arrangement. When *Napoleon* was produced, filmmaking was in a state of flux. Mainstream cinema had not yet solidified its engagement with the linear story form above any display of technique (Davis, *Digital Spaces*). The return of the split-screen in the sex comedies of the 1950's may have had more to do with Hollywood's response to competition from television than a desire to explore alternative narrative styles (Bizzocchi).

## *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959)

Michael Gordon's *Pillow Talk* employs the use of split screen formats in the form of both triptych and diptych arrangements.

The triptych format involves the reduction of a single, full size color frame that narrows along top and bottom borders while retaining full width. The on-screen character remains centered in the frame as the reduced screen splits into three triangular frames with distinct borders (Figure 4). The left and right frames each present a new character in medium shot to match the focal length of the center frame. The color scheme across frames appears balanced for reds and blues that feature prominently in the side frames but contrast with the dominant white tone of the center frame. When the center frame jumps to a close up, each side frame follows suit thus maintaining uniform focal length. The restitution of the center frame to its original proportions reverses how the triptych was formed at the beginning of the movie.



Figure 4 - *Pillow Talk* - Triptych

The diptych format is the prominent split-screen device employed in the film. It provides a practical means for presenting the many phone conversations between the lead

characters that comprise the first half of the film. In the story, Jan Morrow (Doris Day) shares a telephone line with composer (and playboy) Brad Allen (Rock Hudson). Brad constantly blocks the phone line while seducing his many love interests and the conflict with Jan escalates. The telephone split-screen contrivance frees the film from engaging in numerous and complicated parallel editing scenarios by presenting two separate images in a single frame (Hagener). As the story unfolds, Brad discovers Jan's identity and pretends to be a southern businessman, Rex Stetson, who proceeds to seduce her while Brad's antagonistic phone line conflict with Jan continues. Ultimately, Jan discovers Brad's true identity and the couple unite.

The split-screen phone scenes serve to highlight the couple's dissonance but also their complementarity. The color schemes, mise-en-scene, even the physical movements of the actors across the partitioned frame align to such a degree that one cannot help sense the underlying parity between them. In one particular phone exchange, the characters appear in mirror image bathtub scenes divided into two separate frames in a notable symmetric arrangement (Figure 5).

The split-screen foreshadows Brad and Jan's union by showing how well they fit together as a couple before they ever meet and, ultimately, demonstrates their equality with respect to their mutual desire for a fulfilling relationship. The split screen device mediates the couple's personal symmetry and by the third act renders itself unnecessary as the characters work out their destiny in the same space within a single frame (Figure 6).

Analysis of split-screen use in *Pillow Talk* demonstrates its utility beyond empty spectacle or gimmick despite associations with other techniques of the period like Cinerama and 3D. Split-screen as narrative device made a minor comeback in Hollywood during the 1960s and 1970's while video artists during the same period adapted multi-channel and split-screen designs to explore alternative narrative formats (Lovejoy 142-45). Unburdened by mainstream cinema story conventions, video art continues to incorporate multiple frames into linear, non-linear and hybrid storytelling strategies.

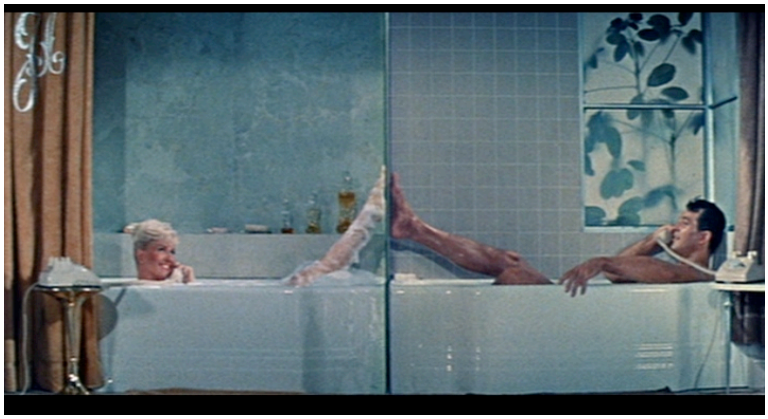

Figure 5 - *Pillow Talk* - Symmetry



Figure 6 - *Pillow Talk* – Single-frame resolution

*The Third Memory* (Pierre Huyghe, 1999)

*The Third Memory* is a nine-minute double projection video art piece recorded in color with sound, originally designed as a museum installation featuring several editions of variable dimensions (Figure 7). The project juxtaposes Hollywood's fictionalized *Dog Day Afternoon* with an account of the true event of the bank robbery it was based on as related by the former bank robber himself.



Figure 7 - *The Third Memory* - video installation (edition 2/4)

Each version of the exhibit displays two wall-sized projected frames of identical proportion, connected end to end at a central point within the projection field. Unlike a movie theater experience, people are free to walk around and view the piece as they would a painting in a gallery. Each frame bears a separate projection and images never connect in a continuous manner across the central divide, a feature that emphasizes the two-channel nature of the presentation. The frames remain independent entities each progressing at a separate pace and rhythm, neither repeating imagery nor simultaneously projecting the same image across screens.

Contrasting footage from the film, *Dog Day Afternoon* with scenes from the reenactment of the actual event comprises only a small portion of the dual screen interaction. The majority of on-screen material derives from the staged recreation. Juxtaposed footage of the reenactment focuses on the bank robber-narrator, John Wojtowicz (paroled in 1979). While one screen shows him barking orders to actors or recounting an event, the other screen reveals actors carrying out his orders, or displays the speaker from a different perspective (Figure 8).



Figure 8 - Alternative perspectives in *The Third Memory*

The staged nature of the recreation is never concealed and is indeed, central to the theme of the piece. The use of artifice attempts to demystify the cinematic process in order to disclose elements of identity and memory not evident (nor intended) in the film based on the real event (Rush 170). Exposing the constructed nature of the filmmaking process is a recurring motif for Huyghe who's *Remake* (1994-95) draws attention to the structure of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. In that work, Huyghe features actors who can't

remember their lines and behave in ways that completely destroy the tension of the original movie (Rush 170). By exposing the film's structural artifice, Huyghe undermines the rules of the mystery fiction genre in order to extract some underlying truth. In *The Third Memory*, Huyghe continually probes the integrity and veracity of the image through ironic juxtapositions of appropriated footage from *Dog Day Afternoon* and images of Wojtowicz' constructed reenactment. Huyghe employs the dual or split-screen to question the personal and fictionalized versions of John Wojtowicz' identity and narrative, in addition to suggesting that there is literally more than one way to view a person or event.

By merging mainstream and experimental film elements, *The Third Memory* represents a hybridization of forms facilitated in part, by digital technology. The avant-garde finds its way on to mainstream movie screens and what once appeared in conventional movie theaters is appropriated into multi-channel video installations in art galleries (Rush 125). This cross-fertilization has also influenced contemporary television programs that successfully adapt multi-frame story forms to the small screen format.

## *24* (Television Series, 2001 - Present)

The television series *24* routinely incorporates split and multi-screen formats into the structure of the program. Screen divisions primarily mediate the depiction of phone conversations, however, the use of multiple frames also facilitates the simultaneous presentation of real-time events outside the featured exchange (Figure 9) in addition to presenting alternative perspectives of a particular scene (Figure 10). Despite its

videographic qualities including a hyperactive pace, layering of talking heads and embedded textual graphics, *24* flaunts a cinematic style augmented by multi-frame formatting (Chamberlain). Shot on 35mm film and framed for 16:9 widescreen presentations, the show employs high value production elements such as chiaroscuro lighting and masking shots (Chamberlain). Split-screens juxtapose vivid images in a variety of patterns and frame-size combinations, ultimately contributing to the program's distinct visual style.



Figure 9 - Simultaneity in *24*



Figure 10 - Alternative perspectives in *24*

The transition from full screen to multiple frames can occur spontaneously or via gradual frame reduction and displacement to virtually any location within the screen space. The switch to multiple frames is sometimes accompanied by an element of the soundtrack (music or sound effect). Multiple frames can depict varying camera angle perspectives of the same image. Often times, the degree of perspective change is minimal and scene duration brief. Frame size, quantity, composition and border widths vary widely. In addition, while the timing of the appearance of multiple screen presentations is somewhat predictable, (e.g., in the case of phone conversations), the nature and progression of screen arrangements is too variable to anticipate.

The structural conceit of *24* is the depiction of real-time action. Multiple plot lines unfold simultaneously within the span of a single hour in a season of twenty-four one-hour episodes. The subject matter revolves around a government anti-terror unit involved in around-the-clock surveillance through a network of electronic monitors and field agents. The majority of on-screen interactions involve telephone communications between headquartered personnel and embedded operatives. As in *Pillow Talk*, the split-screen technique in *24* resolves the cinematic challenge of visually mediating phone conversations without resorting to excessive parallel editing.

Conventional parallel editing in film and television generates tension and dramatic contrast by volleying back and forth between events occurring in two or more spaces at the same time (Jermyn). Split-screens effectively reproduce the parallel edit by organizing dynamic tension within a single frame (Lury 171). The use of split-screen in *24* enhances the baseline suspense and tension acknowledged by the show's ticking

clock-driven premise. When, for example, we witness the lead character in the series, agent Jack Bauer, in close up in a frame juxtaposed with an image depicting his kidnapped wife and daughter, the split-screen intensifies the perceived anxiety in the characters involved in a race against time (Figure 11). In this way, the split-screen format transcends its economic function by evolving into an active and expressive storytelling element that layers its depictions with meaning beyond the image. Split-screens in *24* create a unique visual style and manage narrative connectivity among relentlessly forward-moving storylines that develop simultaneously in a real-time context.

In *24*, the split-screen becomes an integral part of the storytelling process but also embeds the form with the themes and issues of the show's subject matter: terrorism, urban paranoia, political urgency and surveillance (Jermyn). Periodic fragmentation and repositioning of moving frames reminds viewers of the program's own constructed nature. Like Huyghe's, *The Third Memory*, *24* questions the integrity and truthfulness of the image through the conceit of the split-screen, which ultimately connects the intimacy of television with the conceptual possibilities of video art.



Figure 11 - Split-screen as storytelling element in *24*

## THE SPLIT-SCREEN AESTHETIC IN *THE THIRD MEMORY*

The art world has long been a source for unconventional storytelling forms. Video artists in particular possess the freedom to explore narrative strategies well outside the range plied in mainstream cinema (Lovejoy 144). Multi-screen video installations provide a means for the design and expression of spatial narratives (Van Assche 86). These alternative story forms integrate elements of the split-screen aesthetic to construct meaning out of diverse screen arrangements.

Pierre Huyghe (b. 1962) is a conceptual artist known to incorporate Hollywood films into his work. An atypical appropriator of cinema, Huyghe re-creates films with his own actors, sets, cameras and other means (Rush 170). In *The Third Memory* (1999), Huyghe employs a dual-screen video installation to explore modes of representation and identity that emerge from the re-telling of an historical event. The dual-screen device helps Huyghe process and integrate abstract ideas through elements of the split-screen aesthetic.

### Background

The basis for *The Third Memory* is the robbery of a Brooklyn bank in 1972 by a former bank clerk, John Wojtowicz, who needed money to help his lover, Ernest Aron, obtain a sex-change operation. One of the first crimes captured live on television, the event turned into a protracted fourteen-hour hostage crisis that ended in Wojtowicz' arrest and the death of his partner, Sal Naturale. The media sensation created enough of a

stir to temporarily eclipse Richard Nixon's renomination at the Republican National Convention. The spectacle was the subject of Sidney Lumet's film, *Dog Day Afternoon*, with Al Pacino as Wojtowicz. In the late 1990's Huyghe tracked down Wojtowicz, who was paroled in 1979, and invited him to Paris to direct amateur actors in a reenactment of the crime as he recalled it. Huyghe videotaped the proceedings on a reconstructed version of the movie set from Lumet's film where "the crime was *performed* in some form for the third time through the hazy lens of a very mediated history" (Rush 172).

## Structure

*The Third Memory* mixes visual material from three sources: film footage from the movie, *Dog Day Afternoon*; video from the reenactment; and news footage from the actual event in 1972. Wojtowicz narrates throughout the piece either in voiceover or through direct address. The nine-minute double projection video limits Wojtowicz' discussion and reenactment to a few incidents from the actual crime. Dual screens juxtapose alternative views of these activities or contrast the reenactment with scenes from *Dog Day Afternoon*.

## Rationale for Dual Projection in *The Third Memory*

According to Huyghe, his attraction to Wojtowicz' story reflects his interest in the relation of the citizen to the representation of the citizen by different kinds of media and in different kinds of public space (Estep). How does an individual reconcile identity filtered through an image and how active is a person in constructing an identity that

conflates associations with fiction and nonfiction (Estep)? Wojtowicz is exceptional in having been identified through representations in both media and entertainment realms, but Huyghe seems to speak to all of us when he refers to public space as a kind of "image in a very large sense" (Estep). The dual screen arrangement in *The Third Memory* is a conceptual strategy that enables Huyghe to interrogate ideas about representation, identity and memory through the juxtaposition of competing visual interpretations of Wojtowicz and his story.

## Elements of the Split-Screen Aesthetic in *The Third Memory*

### Simultaneity

Near the beginning of *The Third Memory*, Wojtowicz proclaims in voiceover that he is "the real Sonny Wortzik…the one you see in *Dog Day Afternoon*." Concurrent with this narration, footage from *Dog Day Afternoon* appears in the right frame revealing the opening credits, "Al Pacino in" followed by the movie title. In the opposing left frame, the written statement from the beginning of *Dog Day Afternoon* appears claiming that "what you are about to see is true" (Figure 12). In the movie, the truth claim *precedes* the opening credit sequence, however, this juxtaposed presentation combined with Wojtowicz' voiceover revelation provides an insight facilitated through the use of split-screen simultaneity: spatial and acoustic proximity of the movie's introductory truth claim, opening credit imagery and Wojtowicz' declaration of authenticity set the tone for Huyghe's interrogation of truth and identity (Rush 172). The sequence contrasts a

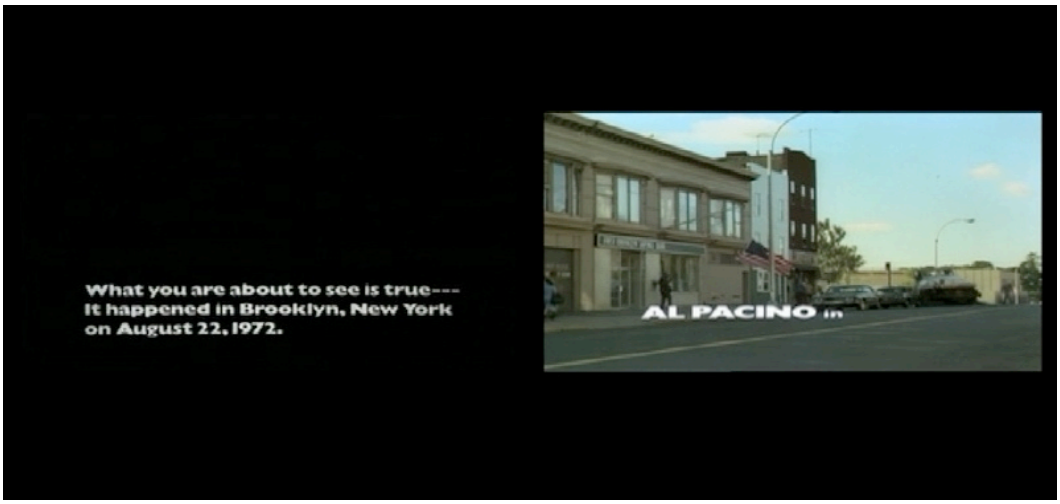


Figure 12 - Simultaneity (0:35 min)

written statement upholding the veracity of the Hollywood production with the appearance of a famous actor's name in print. This immediately casts doubt that a Hollywood production is truthful. Wojtowicz' insistence that he is the real Sonny, "the person you see in the movie," further undercuts the idea of truth as presented in *Dog Day Afternoon* while also identifying if not equating the real bank robber with a movie character.

The dual-screen apparatus also facilitates the depiction of Wojtowicz telling his story (through voiceover narration or direct address) while simultaneously directing the reenactment (Estep) (Figure 13). Huyghe relies on split-screen simultaneity to demonstrate Wojtowicz' authority over his version of history while at other times, during contrasts with scenes from *Dog Day Afternoon*, uses it to challenge Wojtowicz' ownership of an identity originating from somewhere in-between dueling representations (Obrist).

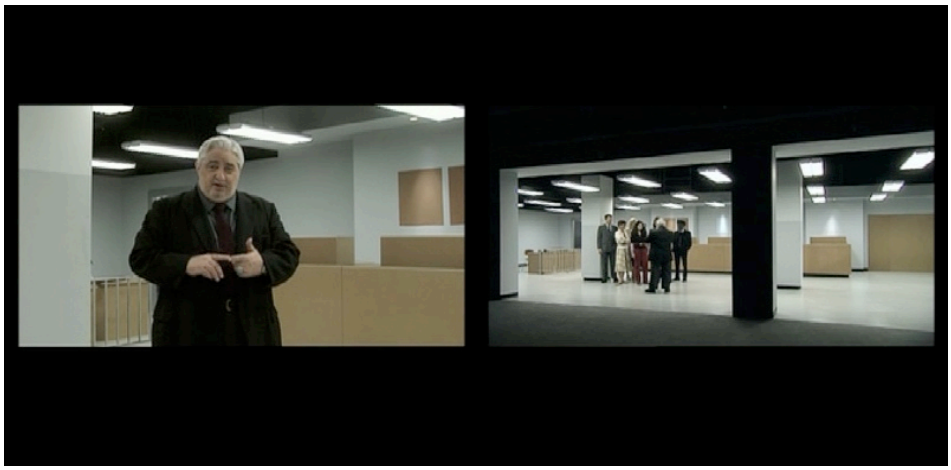

Figure 13 - Simultaneity (3:47 min)

Symmetry

There is a point in *The Third Memory* where a scene from *Dog Day Afternoon* parallels the same scene in the reenactment. The action concerns Wojtowicz' attempt (and concurrently, Al Pacino's character's attempt) to collect money from the bank vault (Figures 14 - 15). The symmetry of action is nearly perfect as a parody of a parody ensues prompting the question, exactly whom parodies whom in this scenario?



Figure 14 - Symmetry – *Dog Day Afternoon* in Right Frame (3:04 min)



Figure 15 - Symmetry – *Dog Day Afternoon* in Right Frame (3:23 min)

How one translates the story of an event interests Huyghe more than the event itself (Estep). Juxtaposing interpretations of the bank vault scene indicates the common connection each translation has to the actual incident and to each other. Huyghe concedes that the fiction of *Dog Day Afternoon* colored Wojtowicz' memory of the event and by extension his account of history:

> I decided to ask him to explain how it happened, but what is interesting today is that, of course, his memory is affected by the fiction itself. He had to integrate the fiction of *Dog Day Afternoon* into the fact of his life. He is always shifting between these two things, the memory of the fact and his memory of the fiction (Dannatt).

Huyghe also acknowledges the subjective nature of the frame through which each version of the scene unfolds and believes that one makes choices between possibilities that shape translation. In his view, events transformed into stories emerge as "moments of translation" filtered through subjective and malleable narrative frames (Estep). The dual screen device underscores the obvious parity of movement and story between competing

images of the bank vault scene, but also exposes less obvious symmetries of subjective interpretation that any given moment of translation could alter.

Visual Irony

In Huyghe's video installations, the use of film serves as a platform from which he poses a question or an argument (Estep). He used it to question time and the role of the actor in *L'ELLIPSE* (1998), where he imagined and filmed a version of what might have happened between the ends of a jump cut in Wim Wenders' film *The American Friend* (Hobbs).

Film clips from *Dog Day Afternoon* and video from Wojtowicz' reenactment supply the raw material for dual projection juxtapositions in *The Third Memory*, but Huyghe remains indifferent to any associations these portrayals may have with either fiction or nonfiction. His focus concerns the value these resources hold for him as "stories" of an event (Estep). Furthermore, his emphasis on the gaps between these interpretations and the actual event (Parfait) supports an investigation into that which is *not* represented by either the movie or reenactment but ultimately links to both (Hobbs). In *L'ELLIPSE* this idea refers to the missing narrative within the jump cut, whereas in *The Third Memory* it alludes to the narrative gap between scenes from *Dog Day Afternoon* and Wojtowicz' reenactment (Hobbs).

In an effort to de-emphasize the filmic elements, Huyghe exploits and directs attention to the more abstract goals of the piece. He purposely unmasks the artifice of film production to effectively "break the mirror and the illusion" (Estep). Throughout

*The Third Memory*, images of the reenactment expose camera equipment, lighting and crew as well as Wojtowicz' rehearsals with actors. Huyghe employs the dual screen design most effectively in this regard when he marries intact scenes from the reenactment with reveals of production equipment (Figures 16 - 17). He evokes an ironic tone from these juxtapositions, relying on the dual projection format to move his narrative beyond visible frames toward the schisms in Wojtowicz' fluid and elusive identity.



Figure 16 - Visual Irony (2:20 min)



Figure 17 - Visual Irony (6:06 min)

Omniscient View

By refashioning *Dog Day Afternoon* as a dual-screen video installation, Huyghe removed it from its single-screen movie theater context and effectively extended the narrative space of the film ("Pierre Huyghe"). This conceptual strategy helps him merge fiction and nonfiction (Dannatt), but also enables him to invoke the split-screen property of simultaneous perspectives to advance his spatial narrative.

Despite his claim that the fiction of *Dog Day Afternoon* mediates Wojtowicz' memory of the event (McDonough), Huyghe created *The Third Memory*, in part, to give voice to Wojtowicz' narrative and allow him to be an actor in his own story (Dannatt). Critical consensus refers to the project as one of emancipation:

> an enterprise (an attempt) of reappropriating the representations that speak in our place and name, an enterprise where the subject represented—or figured—is invited to take back his place at the very heart of the spectacular machinery that has dispossessed him of his own identity. . . . An invitation to comment on his own gestures and deeds, to reappropriate them, to speak up once again, to regain his own image (Van Assche 95).

French art critic, Nicolas Bourriaud echoes this notion:

> Reality takes revenge on fiction…we must stop interpreting the world, stop playing walk-on parts in a script written by power. We must become its actors or co-writers (*Postproduction* 51).

Huyghe employs multiple cameras to contrast a variety of perspectives on select scenes (Rush 172). He skillfully projects Wojtowicz' authority across frame borders encompassing an expanded narrative landscape. Wojtowicz strides with palpable confidence toward a group of actors awaiting instructions while simultaneously directing

the same actors in a separate frame (Figure 18). He delivers a definitive account of the event directly into camera while an actor appears suspended in mid-action awaiting his command (Figure 19). Much like Patinir's sixteenth century painting, these views offer spectators a "godlike" vantage (Bordwell 187). The spectator is empowered by the additional information – the totality of vision – of dual screen projection (Figure 20).



Figure 18 - Omniscient View (0:44 min)



Figure 19 - Omniscient View (1:49 min)



Figure 20 - Omniscient View (0:54 min)

Visual Style

Despite having been shot on digital video, *The Third Memory* has a distinct cinematic feel. This has something to do with the video quality but also with Huyghe's attention to elements of mise-en-scene, which he claims interact to provide "a transportation to an elsewhere" (Baker). Huyghe's "elsewhere" in *The Third Memory* involves a set illuminated by a bank of intense fluorescent lights otherwise enveloped by total darkness. Complete darkness often surrounds the light in Huyghe's work, serving to intensify the framed image particularly when viewed from a distance (Bourriaud, *Reversibility*) (Figure 21). It pours in through rifts in the walls and the vast rupture of a missing ceiling, infusing the inchoate décor of the reconstructed bank with an aura of dreamlike fragmentation (Lutticken).

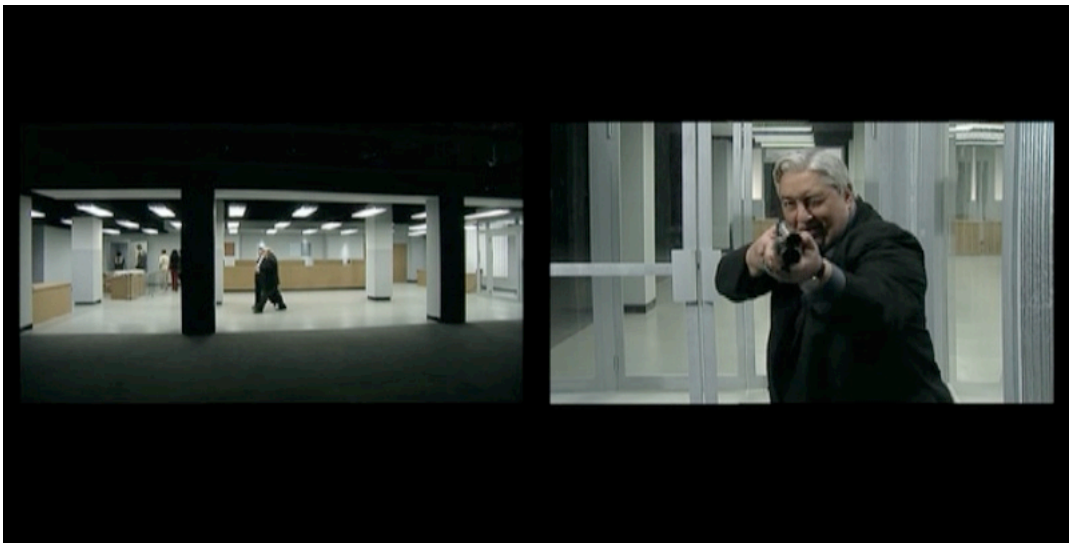

Figure 21 - Visual Style – Darkness surrounds set in left frame (4:17 min)

Huyghe also exploits the extended narrative space of the dual projection to play with time through spatial montage. In several instances, he reveals images in one frame that anticipate subsequent action. Figure 18 presents Wojtowicz in a left frame tracking shot approaching a group of actors while simultaneously situating him at the left frame destination. In Figures 22a - b, Huyghe holds on an image in the right frame while action in the left frame "catches up" temporally. Further along in the reenactment, Huyghe emphasizes Wojtowicz' static speech to the hostages in the left frame, while impending action unfolds on the right (Figures 23a - c).

The visual style in *The Third Memory* owes its uniqueness to the interplay of classic mise-en-scene elements such as lighting, camera movement and set design. By situating the piece in a dual projection installation, Huyghe makes use of expanded spatial properties to experiment with strategies that frame abstract and ideological concepts. The unique choices he makes for his unconventional narrative, from the

specific geometry of the dual-screen apparatus to the vague and generic features of the reconstructed bank set, relate directly to the ways in which he employs the split-screen aesthetic. Huyghe adapts universal properties of the split-screen aesthetic to the details of his narrative format, demonstrating a methodology applicable to all filmmaking genres, including the short form video.

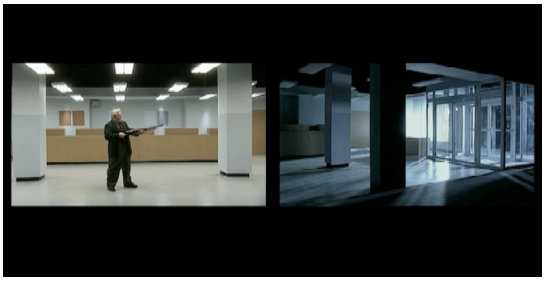

Figure 22a - Visual Style (7:10 min)



Figure 22b - Visual Style (7:22 min)



Figure 23a - Visual Style (7:39 min)



Figure 23b - Visual Style (7:44 min)



Figure 23c - Visual Style (7:47 min)

## THE SPLIT-SCREEN AESTHETIC IN THE EXPERIMENTAL SHORT VIDEO, *URBAN RATS*

Pierre Huyghe was masterful at applying elements of the split-screen aesthetic in *The Third Memory*. The dual projection format suited the conceptual goals of the piece by enabling Huyghe to embed Wojtowicz' split or hybrid identity within the two-sided structure of the split-screen. The split-screen device becomes an abstract manifestation of Wojtowicz' constructed memory and a means for applying split-screen elements to a challenging non-linear narrative. Huyghe continues a long tradition involving the diverse application of universal split-screen properties in film, television and video. Digital technology and cross-fertilization between visual mediums has reestablished the spatial story form as a viable narrative device. Artists like Huyghe demonstrate the creative potential of the spatial narrative, continuing a pursuit that began with Renaissance painters and groundbreaking filmmakers like Abel Gance.

In *The Third Memory*, Huyghe merges elements of fiction and documentary filmmaking to produce something that transcends both genres as a fully realized work of art. Huyghe is especially interested in the documentary form and admits that it was his "starting point as an artist" (Baker). As a documentary filmmaker interested in the split-screen form, I am drawn to the potential Huyghe's techniques hold for enriching the impact and experience of nonfiction films. In my MFA thesis film, I apply the split-screen device in an experimental short form video entitled, *Urban Rats* (2009).

## Background

*Urban Rats* focuses on the relationship between humans, rats and human-generated garbage. The narrative emerged from a video record of a community board meeting in November 2008 concerning rat infestation in a New York City neighborhood. Representatives from the Departments of Health, Sanitation, Environmental Protection and the head of the city's Rat Task Force presided. Community residents attended and were given an opportunity to address the panel of city agents. Video and audio content from the meeting provides narration for the piece. Excerpts of interviews with several city residents and footage of rats and garbage comprise the remaining raw material of the video.

My motivation for incorporating a split-screen structure was the visual style of the form. I envisioned a triptych design that would enable me to synchronize striking image compositions with a music soundtrack. I adopted a triptych format but subordinated linking image with soundtrack to the interplay of talking heads that comprised both the narration track and narrative arc.

## Elements of the Split-Screen Aesthetic in *Urban Rats*

The primary function of split-screen in *Urban Rats* is to generate an ironic tone. The fundamental split-screen property of simultaneity allowed me to juxtapose multiple images in the same space for different purposes:

- To underscore the parity between humans and rats with respect to their mutual success as adaptive mammals, I contrast close up images (Figure 24);
- To "interact" one image frame with another for unexpected associations, e.g., when one woman nods approvingly over her shoulder to a rat turning her way (Figure 25);
- To link one taking head with another through their comments, e.g., when one speaker poses a question and another speaker in an opposing frame addresses the issue while the image of each speaker holds momentarily in the same space (Figure 26);
- To surround the Sanitation Department representative with images of garbage in adjacent frames (Figure 27);
- To depict a rat expert contradicting his own statements regarding rat control during a satiric moment facilitated by split screen (Figure 28);
- To combine one speaker's reference to catch basins as an "easy in, easy out" with an opposing frame featuring a rat exiting a catch basin with great difficulty (Figure 29).



Figure 24 (3:32 min)



Figure 25 (2:17 min)



Figure 26 (2:56 min)



Figure 27 (3:14 min)



Figure 28 (5:17 min)



Figure 29 (6:31 min)

The split-screen juxtaposes ironic images and acoustic excerpts that expose the contradictions, humor and tension accompanying the social interactions at the community board meeting. The pace of image changes across shifting frames also reflects a degree of tension underlying the subject matter, which alludes to the overcrowded nature of urban environments as one of its themes.

The few instances of symmetrical image displays in *Urban Rats*, amount to little more than augmentations of visual style that also serve as interstitial links between

sequences. In each case the right and left frames reflect mirror images surrounding a center frame speaker. In one exception, depicted in Figure 28, the speaker himself becomes the subject of a symmetric representation. The symmetric images are neither identical nor the products of alternative camera angles on the same scene. *Urban Rats* was a solo endeavor shot with one camera. This eliminated the possibility of obtaining alternative perspectives on simultaneous action required for the depiction of omniscient view. To provide symmetry for the ironic portrayal in Figure 28, I used sequences recorded at different times. This manipulation of images facilitated by the split-screen form adds another layer of mediation to the inherently mediated split-screen device.

The split-screen form provides opportunities for displays of multi-frame visual style in *Urban Rats*. Unlike *The Third Memory* where elements of mise-en-scene are highly manipulated, manipulation of images in *Urban Rats* occurs strictly in post-production during the editing process. Split-screen provides stylistic enhancement through dynamic frame shifts and dissolves that actively contribute to the rhythm of the piece in conjunction with the music and narration soundtracks. One example includes the creation of an effect in which action moves across frames that alternate dissolving images. In Figures 30a - b, a garbage truck advances across frames from right to left.



Figure 30a (4:48 min)



Figure 30b (4:50 min)

The split-screen structure supports narrative strategy in *Urban Rats*. Narration in the video involves a rhythmic volleying back and forth between speakers. Spatial montage permits the simultaneous presentation of talking heads while acoustic queues direct viewer attention. This effect approximates that achieved during phone conversations in *24* but achieves greater intensity in *Urban Rats*, which attempts to impart a good deal of information within a short format. This results in a fairly rapid exchange among speakers that establishes the video's rhythm but also reflects the cacophony of voices from the actual community board event. This style of narration represents an alternative to the conventional documentary voiceover and owes its compelling dynamic to split-screen design.

The use of split-screen in *Urban Rats* enables the ironic interplay of images required by a narrative strategy that links information from multiple narrators with the video's premise. The split-screen aesthetic elements, simultaneity and visual style, support the visual irony that defines the piece. The video operates through an associational form common to the experimental film genre that sometimes groups images with no immediate logical connection (Bordwell 363). The split-screen develops these associations in a spatial context that may demand closer attention to detail than that already required through parallel editing. Employing the novel aesthetic contributions of the split-screen device is one way to challenge viewers to greater levels of engagement, as well as a means to a more enriching nonfiction film experience.

# CONCLUSION

In the text of his 1967 lecture, *Of Other Spaces*, Michel Foucault wrote: "We are now in an epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed…." Foucault recognized a level of interaction in society that we now experience routinely in the form of hyper-mediated news graphics and the multiple window environments of the computer's Graphical User Interface (Manovich 63). The "epoch of juxtaposition" recalls a previous era when artists created highly descriptive paintings endowed with layers of dense pictorial information that told multiple stories within a single, unified space. This spatial mode of storytelling was ultimately replaced by a sequential version that came to dominate narrative style in Western culture and reflected an assembly line production process of ordered activities that follow one after another (Manovich 322).

Modern mainstream film practice also adopted the sequential narrative form. It rejected techniques like split-screen that draw attention to the constructed nature of a scene by distancing viewers from the kind of deep engagement called for by dramatic narratives (Davis, *Media Space*). The resurgence of split-screen use in recent years indicates a gradual acceptance of the form as an active storytelling component and stylistic device, one that can draw viewer attention to the image as object and still augment narrative (Davis, *Digital Spaces*).

Properties of the split-screen aesthetic that define the split-screen form can be applied to visual narratives in diverse ways that adapt to both mainstream and avant-

garde media forms. They provide the tools that embed split-screen function and shape narrative. As spatial storytelling continues its rebirth in the epoch of digital technology, the split-screen aesthetic will shape the stories that emerge from new spaces.

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