Spectatorship of screen media; land of the zombies?

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates spectatorship of screen media. Early screen media is often thought to necessitate passive spectatorship, with thinkers such as Siegfried Kracauer (1987) and Walter Benjamin (2004) focusing on film. Such theories are later supported by critiques such as those by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2003) on the mass media, and Laura Mulvey's (2004) text on the gaze in film, along with ideas around the flaws of the Cartesian position as spectatorship formulated in aesthetics. More recently, with the advent of digital media, spectatorship has been re-formulated as more active in terms of meaning making. Following earlier theorists, I argue here that screen spectatorship is not in fact as active as it now appears to be, and that spectators are often performing dialectical zombie-like spectatorship; appearing active when spectatorship is more distracted than before. Overwhelming spectacle catering to the 'eye lust' (Gunning 2004:871) and interactive elements convince spectators that they are acting with agency, but as I aim to show, also lead to an exacerbated collapse of contemplative distance, which paradoxically often renders spectatorship uncannily zombie-like. When spectatorship reveals itself as a strangely passive activity, it may be understood as uncanny in the manner that Freud (1955) formulated it.

Keywords: Uncanny, Zombie, Active spectatorship, Passive spectatorship, 'Curiositas', Interactivity,

Active and passive spectatorship of screen media

Early film has been historically critiqued by authors such as Siegfried Kracauer (1987) and Walter Benjamin (2004), as leading to spectatorship of distraction, as opposed to the absorption associated with the spectatorship of art (Gunning 2004:871). Critical thinkers of the Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2003), as well as feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey (2004), later critiqued both film and television as facilitating a passive mode of spectatorship, in a sense imposing representation on spectators in a way which did not encourage them to question such representations. On the other hand, contemporary spectatorship of screen media is also often seen as more active, with spectators participating in the process of constructing meaning from representation. This supposedly challenges the model of the passive Cartesian[1] spectator of art history, to whom the world is administered through ready-made representation. There are many theories on how digital media allows the spectator to become an author and how meaning is created in a more interactive manner (Daly 2010:81-98; Haraway 1991; Mitchell 1992). The spectator or user is thought to participate in a process rather than to receive an end product, because the digital medium allows for input at many stages of spectatorship. Spectatorship is thus often seen as having shifted from a passive position through the 'decentering' of the Cartesian subject in various strategies employed by digital screen media (Oudshoorn & Pinch 2003:1-14). 'Decentering the subject' is not limited to the spectatorship of screen media, it is extensively theorised in the spectatorship of contemporary art, found in numerous postmodern interpretations of spectatorship including those relating to semiotic models, and many deconstructionist and critical approaches to understanding the visual world; challenging the modernist notions of Cartesian rationalism (Kando 1996). Stuart Hall (1973), John Fiske and John Hartley (2003:1-20) and David Morley (1993) have argued for the active spectatorship of visual culture (which includes but is not limited to screen media). Thus the notion of spectatorship is much wider than the spectatorship of screen media and it is entrenched in and often struggling against aesthetic notions of the Cartesian subject.

Throughout this article reference is made to screen-based media or screen media, as well as spectatorship related to these categories, which are to be understood as including projected screen media, analogue or broadcast screen media such as television, and digital screen media of many kinds, such as digital televisions, computer displays and mobile phones, and the newer touch screen phones and 'tablets'. Often spectatorship of screen media is seen as participatory, or active, implying agency and even authorial aspects. In this article this is implied when the words participatory or active are used. Passive spectatorship refers to a model where the viewer receives fixed and manufactured meaning, such as the Cartesian position implies.

Contrary to some of the positions I have mentioned above, which advocate active spectatorship of screen media, I would like to argue here that spectatorship is not as emancipated as it would seem in the context of various 'new media', and that many of the points made by Benjamin and Adorno remain more valid than they are generally thought to be, although these authors were not writing about digital screen media. Spectatorship seems to be less about the spectator actively making meaning, than him or her being sensually overwhelmed and distracted, although these devices allow him or her to feel active. A dialectical approach, such as the one followed by Kracauer and later Adorno, allows one to think of screen media spectatorship as potentially uncanny. While the concept of the uncanny is usually linked with new (strange) technologies of looking, such as Benjamin, according to Miriam Hansen (1987:179-224), Hansen and Tom Gunning (2004:36-60) do, or with the content of screen media, such as horror films (Allen 1993:21-48; Mitchell 2005:55), I want to argue that aspects of screen spectatorship as practice may be seen as uncanny. A popularised fear of screen media is that they dehumanise spectators (Williams 1988:381-394), or turn them into 'zombies'.[2] Even though digital media appear to refute that fear and allow for an overall spectatorship that is more participatory I aim to show that the result is often the dialectical opposite, which is passive or zombie-like spectatorship.

Figure 1: Screen shot from *Night of the living dead*, directed by G Romero. 1968. (Wikipedia 2013).

The zombie is an uncanny motif and as such is useful for explaining how a viewer performs spectatorship. Such a zombie is not based on African voodoo or Santeria, but on popular screen culture, beginning with George Romero's (1968) films. The motif is currently very popular in films and television series, such as *The walking dead* (Darabont 2010), and other media including phone applications and the like. This article is not an account of the horror genre, but I apply the zombie as a metaphor, to spectatorship of screen media in general. Ironically, screen spectators may often find themselves looking at content on screens that are about zombies in the horror genre, such as those examples mentioned above. This makes for an interesting parody of their situation in those cases, but this article is not about those cases either. The argument is rather focused on the passivity of spectatorship of screen media. Despite the fact that there are aspects of spectatorship that appear active, as a zombie appears alive or even human, spectatorship seems to remain a set of automatic and 'programmed' reactions.

Although I have mentioned the uncanny above, this aspect of spectatorship is only revealed in the moment the spectator sees himself as passive, notices he is passive, and becomes conscious of his passivity. Such a moment is not conceived of as part of spectatorship, and it only occurs by mistake. In this moment of spectatorship (or the interruption or rupture thereof) there is repulsion from one's physical body, from the programmed brain which seems not to belong to oneself, from the screen as an object, and from the passive body as an object. In order to avoid this confrontation with oneself behaving like a zombie one needs to be distracted from it. Cinemas (and other screens) create the conditions necessary to avoid this moment. The irony is that these conditions such as darkness, sitting still, looking and listening rather than moving, the suspension of disbelief and so forth, in turn enhance a more passive mode of spectatorship. These conditions are therefore hidden by other effects, such as affective spectator response brought on by extreme sensual stimulation (Gunning [2004:862-876] calls this 'curiositas'), and interactive interfaces, allowing for choices in spectatorship. The viewer is not encouraged to consciously consider their effects as there is a lack of contemplative distance between the spectator and the screen (Virilio 1997:29-32). Many films and television series even go so far as to deconstruct the notion of authorship, revealing plot structure, making editing visible, or supplementing the film with websites, blogs, and even mobile phone applications (Daly 2010:81-98). These rather postmodern devices (Kando 1996) simulate spectator participation to an extent, allowing the spectator to feel empowered, but I would like to argue that these devices often result in a more passive mode of spectatorship.

Which screens?

Screen media are diverse and as Andrew Darley (2000:188) points out there are distinct differences between the kinds of spectatorship they engender. What I aim to investigate here are the things that they have in common, namely the passive aspects of spectatorship. Cinema or film screens, which are projected, as well as analogue television screens, and the current proliferation of digital screens all engender a spectatorship which appears in some aspects more participatory than passive, but which I argue, conceal the fact that the spectator is expected to behave in very specific ways, quite automatically and distractedly, within the limitations of the medium or the context of the content represented.

The argument here is not one which seeks to individually discuss each of the media mentioned before. Nellie Oudshoorn and Trevor Pinch (2003) begin to do so, and Friedrich Kittler (2012) writes about the evolution of what he calls 'optical media', and the power relationships they facilitate, create or are influenced by. This paper does not consist of such a detailed analysis, but I rather focus on the nature of seemingly participatory spectatorship which applies in part to most screen media. Many media reference each other in their appearance and content. Kittler (2012) and Anne Friedberg (2004:914-926) both argue that the content of each screen medium is really another medium, referring to Marshall McLuhan's 'the medium is the message'. Lev Manovich (2001) also discusses digital screen media as referencing film, and film referencing theatre. In this manner it has been argued that television, and digital screens, reference the projected screens of cinema, and to my mind the spectatorship it engenders follows suit.

Felicity Colman (2009:1-3) writes about the cinematic condition in society which shapes experience and forms of knowledge. She applies this condition to many technological forms that are screen media, such as mentioned above. While one cannot generalise a condition of spectatorship to all of these screens, as I have said, it is important to note that there is a contemporary 'screen-ness' even in representations that are not displayed on screens. Paul Virilio (1997:45) writes about this condition as related to kinematic energy; or image energy. He says that images transmitted through electro-magnetic means have altered reception of both analogue and digital media. For him digital screen media have changed the conditions of perception as a whole. In concurrence with this my understanding of spectatorship of screen media is that it is influenced by and influences non-screen based media in turn, and that it exists as a condition of perception which is related to passive spectatorship.

A dialectical approach

As mentioned much has been made in the study of visual culture, aesthetics and new media studies, as well as in postmodern theory, of authorial autonomy, spectatorship and a move towards interpreting spectatorship as a role imbued with some agency. Oudshoorn and Pinch (2003:1-28) discuss how one needs to see spectatorship (or users) as neither fully active nor passive, but along a continuum between these two positions. Such an argument does not understand spectatorship of screens as a contemporary 'condition', and fails to interrogate the simulated character of spectatorship. While there undoubtedly appears to be more agency in interacting with screens than Kracauer, Benjamin and Adorno foresaw, this spectatorship does not seem to be founded upon agency, but upon the simulation of agency. The closest model for understanding how this works, is to apply Jean Baudrillard's[3] (1984) theory of the simulacrum. His theory is often applied to the content of screen media, to the medium itself, and here, to the spectatorship it demands. This spectatorship is an act that is itself simulated, it is lodged in repetition and programmed responses, not in authenticity (Benjamin 2004).

Adorno and Horkheimer's (2003:31-41) well-known argument around the dialectic of the Enlightenment is that the Enlightenment was thought to lead to the liberation of people from the so-called enslavement of mythological ignorance; the enchanted world of nature and religion. Instead, the thinking of the Enlightenment created a 'second nature', an administered world, which enslaved people anew to their own reason and knowledge of the world. I apply this manner of argument to spectatorship of screen media, in that spectatorship aims to be participatory but really succeeds in becoming more passive; it is a dialectical relationship, and not one which occurs along a continuum of development towards either more or less passivity or participation. While I am not arguing that spectators are ignorant dupes (Allen 1993:21), mindlessly absorbing ideological content they are given, or mistaking reality on screen for reality itself, this is mostly because spectatorship conceals its true dynamic and simulates agency.

The uncanny

Before discussing how participatory spectatorship may be simulated in screen media it is useful to briefly clarify my interpretation of the uncanny. Steven Johnson (1997:30) writes that screens are so much a part of contemporary life that to question their legitimacy would be to question the laws of physics. Screens are an inevitable part of contemporary existence. This familiarity is interesting in the context of the *unheimliche* as Freud (1955:1-4) discusses it. He theorises the uncanny as something familiar, which becomes unfamiliar. His discussion of the notion centres upon the word *heimlich*, which refers to all that is homely, familiar, and comforting. This environment also, strangely, has connotations of things that are private, secret or hidden, and should not come to light. These things could be shameful or even abject. As such the word *heimlich* has connotations which refer to things that are familiar and comfortable – but also things that are contrary or dialectical to that, strange and monstrous – and should be kept hidden. *Heimlich* and *unheimlich* are thus similar in meaning.

The uncanny is the unfamiliar and strange lurking within the familiar and banal. One could argue that the familiar becomes uncanny because in its familiarity it was transparent or invisible. Only when it appears as legible does it appear uncanny or strange. Examples of this include things that are inanimate that seem to be alive, or things that are alive but seem dead, such as zombies; dead human bodies that behave as if alive. Screen spectatorship is a familiar activity. It is so familiar that spectators easily react automatically towards screens (Introna & Ilharco 2006:57-76). One knows that they are for looking at and one is used to expecting specific information from specific screens. One is not overly aware of performing this recognition and the behaviour it calls for – but one may enter into spectatorship without second thought. Only when spectatorship becomes ‘strange’ does one see its uncanny aspect – that one is not the interactive, engaged and discerning spectators one thinks, but rather resembles a passive zombie.

Are zombies uncanny? Yes, in short, they were mentioned by Freud (1955:13) as the return of the dead, and also occur in the horror film and television genres as such (Allen 1993; Mitchell 2005:55). Because a zombie used to be a human being; it used to be one’s neighbour, mother or even eventually oneself, it is the familiar that has become monstrous and strange. As such one could argue that all things familiar (*heimlich*), contain the potential to become *unheimlich*, as Freud explains. To my thinking it is this familiarity spectators have with screen media that allows them to slip into spectatorship so easily, and without a thought. A rupture needs to take place in this familiarity, and the seamlessness between the illusion on screen and lived reality off screen. Only such a rupture may make the spectator aware of his behaviour as un-familiar, not normal but strange, and indeed even uncanny. How this rupture may take place is discussed in the next section.

‘Curiositas’ and the collapse of contemplative distance

Gunning (2004:862-870) writes about film in the late nineteenth century, such as the screening of Lumière’s *Arrival of a train at the station*. He investigates the popular notion that people reacted as if a real train was arriving in the cinema, coming to life from out of the screen. He argues that this is not in fact naïveté that underpinned spectator response but rather there was a climate of awe and astonishment around new technologies. As such what probably caused spectators to react in this manner was their astonishment at the movement of the image. He argues that in the nineteenth century technologies of representation catered to an appetite for astonishment, which allowed spectators to be enthralled by films that had little narrative depth or meaning. He applies the theory of ‘curiositas’, written about by Augustine in the fifth century (Gunning 2004:871). This ‘lust of the eyes’ draws the spectator towards things that are not necessarily beautiful, but which might be fascinating, even morbidly, such as a depiction of a corpse. This is a lust for seeing for its own sake. Gunning calls this the ‘aesthetic of attractions’, and argues that early short films were technically dazzling spectacles of little meaning or depth of engagement. He posits them

Figure 2: Screen shot from television series *The walking dead*, produced by F Darabont. 2010. (amctv 2013).

as engendering a spectatorship completely opposed to the modern notions of artistic reception, which relied on detached contemplation (such as the Cartesian model formulates). This theory roughly correlates with Benjamin's (2004:797-798) theory of aura and its destruction in reproducible media such as film, which according to Benjamin were produced for 'exhibition value', to be viewed en masse, rather than to be contemplated.

Many contemporary films could be argued to employ this appeal to the spectators' lust for spectacle. Special effects and post-production, IMAX theatres and 3D cinema are but a few examples. Although I cannot argue that all screen media are merely reliant upon an aesthetic of attractions, this aesthetic seems to be enabled by 'new media'. The instantaneous and overwhelming thrill often in turn allows the historical and contemporary spectator to feel a very heightened response, bringing him closer to the 'action'. Gunning (2004:873) argues that the need for heightened reactions was a result of the overwhelming nature of modern urban life in nineteenth century society. Gunning cites Kracauer (2004:873) as writing about modern loss of fulfilling experience. Kracauer (1987:91-96) discusses 1920s picture palaces (film houses or cinemas) as displaying fragments of sense impressions, snippets of spectacle to be consumed. Kracauer (1987) writes about this manner of film spectatorship as one of distraction, and this is later developed by Benjamin (2006:800-811) in his discussion of the loss of the aura of authenticity in film representation.

Film, television and other screens also anticipate the viewer's reactions. This happens through genre, cinematography, direction, and programming, whether of software, interface or content. In the case of film, for example, the text is composed to elicit certain responses from the viewer. The viewer in turn feels his responses to be unique and genuine, although in truth, they only feel authentic. Film as medium is constructed to elicit or create affective responses in viewers (Tarkovsky cited by Grau 2003:153). In this manner film predicts and even constructs audience response. Specific and regulated response is required in order for this mass medium to be successful (Manovich 2006); spectators should laugh at comedic films, and feel fear in horror films.

Spectatorship of film furthermore engenders a relationship to its illusionism which Richard Allen (1993:40-42) terms 'projective illusion'. This form of illusion entails that the spectator projects himself into the 'world' on the screen. The device allows the viewer to feel as if he or she is genuinely interacting with the screen. It corresponds to the suspension of disbelief – but also amounts to the suspension of reality outside the screen. This means that parts of physical reality are consciously ignored in order for the viewer to participate in the projective illusion on screen. It is this device which happens in a distracted manner, automatically. Film does not require the viewer to ponder it. As the image is continuously changing the viewer has no time to contemplate individual images or indeed the act of spectatorship itself. The viewer's thoughts are continuously directed by the visual input. Manovich (2006) also discusses how film allows large groups of spectators to share the same 'thoughts', as depicted in the films they are collectively seeing as audiences. Kafka (cited by Virilio 1997: 91) says that watching a film is like pulling a uniform over one's eyes. It is lack of awareness of this process which allows spectatorship of contemporary screens to seem 'new' and active, compared to spectatorship of older screen media such as early film.

Considering the metaphor of the zombie for contemporary screen spectatorship one may argue that the 'curiositas' of the aesthetic of attractions is comparable to the lust zombies have for living human flesh. Zombies automatically devour all living beings they stumble upon. The automatic consumption of screened images may be compared to this bloodlust which satisfies no real hunger in a zombie. One may find oneself watching a screen even though one has no specific need to, it happens without conscious consideration. Adorno and Horkheimer (2003:37-39) argue that in the cycle of consumption of the aestheticised world through mass media, audience response is automated and desire is simulated – it is a parody. They refer to canned laughter as an example of the false satisfaction promised by the medium in the genre of the television sitcom. One could understand this through the dynamic of the gaze – pivoting around the power and desire experienced by the spectator in looking through the manufactured gaze of the film (Mulvey 2004:833-844). The desire is never met by the representation on screen, and as Adorno and Horkheimer (2003:37-39) say, the spectator must be satisfied with 'the menu'.

Adorno and Horkheimer (2003) also argue that film encourages the viewer to see the world outside of the film representation as a continuation of what is depicted on screen. The more technically convincing the reality on screen is, the more this is achieved. Screen media are constantly improving the credibility of representational quality, approaching and even transcending the credibility of reality. An example of this is High Definition television and CGI effects, allowing the representation to be seen even more closely than the naked human eye could perceive in life. Paul Virilio (1997:50) writes about visual technologies altering and biologically invading the human eye, seeking to eradicate the distance between the eye and the screen. He writes about lasers being projected into the corneas of pilots' eyes, and laser technology correcting errors in eyesight. Benjamin (2004:795) writes about the urge of contemporary (then 1930s) audiences to bring things closer. The aesthetic of attractions feeds this urge, which persists in spectatorship of contemporary screen media.

Virilio (1997:22-32) writes about the contemporary collapse of distance between spectator and representation beyond what it is to aesthetic distance, as a conditions affecting perception as a whole. He uses the metaphor of a sky diver, free falling towards earth. He refers to the account of one such a sky diver, who recounts his visual impressions of earth as it appears to rush up to meet him during the free fall. At one point, the diver says that the horizon appears to rush upwards so fast that it splits apart, and perspectival distance makes no more sense, but rather disintegrates into distinct impressions rushing past. For Virilio (1997:44-45) the advent of the transmission of representations via electro-magnetic media marks a new paradigm of perception, where Alberti's window and Renaissance perspective no longer apply. He argues that the instant transmission of visual representation allows for distance to collapse in effect, as distance from an object no longer affects vision. Via television for example, one may see a live ('real time') representation of something on the other side of the globe. As such, distance has radically shrunk, and vision 'travels' at the speed of light. This extreme collapse of distance is implicit not only in screen media or digital screen media, but has affected perception to the point that distance is always potentially instantaneously traversable. It makes sense that contemplative distance, as it belongs to the Cartesian subject, thus also collapses in contemporary spectatorship. The concern that arises from this is whether a spectator confronted with such a complete inundation, or swallowing of distance from the represented world, may be thought of as active or meaningfully engaging with representation. Virilio (1997:22-34) thinks of this spectator as the ultimate sedentary type, who controls his world as if he is disabled, without physically moving. If Benjamin's theory of the collapse of distance is applied here, it would seem that such a spectator could only be more distracted, as the screen moves from 'in situ' to 'in vivo', coming closer and closer until it enters the body (Virilio 1997:92). For Virilio (1997) vision has become so ubiquitous that he says it is industrialised, and he also uses the term Gunning uses, 'eye lust'. For Virilio vision is not a choice, but it is also not something one is forced to experience, it happens automatically.

Rupturing spectatorship

Like nineteenth-century cinema audiences, contemporary spectators of screen media expect to be dazzled. Gunning (2004:36-48) also writes about old technologies seeking to make themselves new or uncanny in order to break the cycle of them becoming 'second nature' and ordinary. The modern association of technology with things that are novel or innovative, inevitably ends in these technologies becoming banal. The concept of 'second nature' is indicative of how technologies become 'normal', and also of how they form part of the 'administered world', or culture industry as theorised by the Frankfurt School (Adorno & Horkheimer 2003). According to Gunning (2004:42) all modern technologies become familiar at some point, and astonishment subsides into an automatic relationship with these technologies. Technologies may challenge this familiarisation, and become strange again. Mitchell (2005:26) refers to Bruno Latour who says that modern technologies (such as screen media in my interpretation) have not liberated us from mystery; rather, they are complex new life forms full of mystery, 'they have made communication seem more transparent, interactive and rational', but they have also ensured that we are ensnared in their matrices and networks of images, objects, identities and rituals. Spectatorship is more zombie-like now than it was thought to be even for early film's audiences, because contemporary spectators feel themselves as having overcome that earlier passive spectatorship. This false sense of agency is thanks to postmodern ideas around spectatorship, but which are to my mind not fully realised in contemporary screen media spectatorship.

How does the uncanny aspect of spectatorship then come to light? If it does take place at all it may happen through a rupture in spectatorship as I have mentioned. There are times when screens manifest as objects rather than as screens. In touch screens such as tablets this may happen more easily in the course of interaction. When one notices the surface of the screen itself it becomes a strange object. In interacting with a tablet its own 'objectness' interferes with its illusionistic functions. As its surface manifests as tangible it becomes a film dividing two realities, as a window divides two spaces. The window is not supposed to be visible as a barrier, but rather a transparent opening 'into' representation. If the screen is covered in fingerprint smears for example, the spectator may experience a sense of being trapped by this film, as a bird that flies into a window.

In order to prevent a rupture in spectatorship screens are always attempting to hide themselves as objects. They become flatter, more transparent, and frameless. Their surfaces have even become integrated with key pads in touch screen phones and tablets. Screens also become 'visible' when they do not function correctly. Heidegger (cited by Gunning 2004:45-46) made the same argument with reference to tools as technologies that hide themselves. When a phone malfunctions it becomes a useless object, and this is what Gunning refers to as uncanny. I take his argument further, for in that moment not only the phone, but also the user, become strangely useless. The spectator is performing pointless motions of spectatorship, or is attempting to. Any screen is potentially doing this with any spectator or user. It is possible to extend the argument to spectatorship as a whole. The moment of malfunction, or any moment which interrupts spectatorship, when the lights are switched on in the cinema, or when an advertisement interrupts a television broadcast, ruptures the distraction brought about by spectatorship of screen media, and its dialectical aspect may be revealed. Supposed activity may then reveal itself as passivity. Perhaps the physical body of the spectator itself encroaches upon so-called participative spectatorship, because the body is often (though not always) required to be ignored or to behave passively or repetitively. I am not implying here that interruption in spectatorship can make it more active, but that 'rupture' reveals spectatorship as uncanny, rather than 'natural'.

Interactivity

Kristen Daly (2010:81-95) argues that contemporary cinema allows the spectator to play a more active role in the construction of meaning from film than when the medium was first theorised by Kracauer and Benjamin. She asserts that film narrative for example, is deconstructed in such a manner that in contemporary film much of the narrative meaning is (re) constructed by reference to external sources such as websites, DVDs, music, other films and so forth. Her argument is that this allows the spectator of film to be active - an author of sorts, rather than a passive viewer. I disagree with her fundamentally, since it is the simulated aspect of the interaction with the screen medium itself, as well as the construction of the film content in editing and directing, which results in the passive spectator, regardless of the number of platforms over which this is distributed. While making meaning by using external references seems interactive, it is a formulaic simulating of interactivity. The viewer cannot but obey the cues of the medium, regardless of the number of screens encompassed.

Daly (2010:82) expands on her argument by referring to the ideas of David Rodowick saying that contemporary spectators of digital electronic media are no longer passive viewers, but alternate between reading, looking and immersive viewing. These are, according to him, overlapping ways of interacting with media, and he asserts that digital users have been trained by their dealings with digital media to interact with, and participate in all that they consume. As I have mentioned previously, I agree that screen media spectatorship has altered the manner in which spectators consume other representational media which are not screen-based. Daly (2010:81-98) goes on to interpret Rodowick and Thomas Elsaesser's ideas around the notion of game play as spectatorship of digital media. Elsaesser writes about a 'new' form of cinema which allows the spectator more interactivity, based on play and the construction of non-obvious relationships between things. Daly argues that narrative is now waning in favour of a form of cinema where navigation, inter-textual links and 'figuring out the rules of the game 'are more important than a narrative structure. She calls this form of the medium 'Cinema 3.0' (Daly 2010:81).

Figure 3: Screen shot from television series *The walking dead*, produced by Darabont. 2010. (amctv 2012).

Part of this new cinematic condition (to apply Colman's terminology), are seemingly postmodern devices (Kando 1996) such as the notion of re-mix, intertextuality, and things being left 'unfinished'. Daly writes about the spectator as participant in a community of 'fans', often forming their own groups and online discussion groups or blogs around the films and television series they are engaged in. *The walking dead* (Darabont 2010), a series based on a post-apocalyptic America brought about by the outbreak of a zombie virus, is a good example of how this works. While I reiterate that this paper is not a case study about the series and its depiction of the zombie motif, it serves as a relevant example of the form of spectatorship Daly refers to.

The series has been airing on the American channel AMC. Several factors distinguish the spectatorship it engenders from television series prior to the advent of digital media. The series is supplemented by a large and very engaging website. The site provides many things for 'fans' to engage with; press releases, interviews with the actors from the series, and importantly, many high definition photographs from the shooting of the series. Special effects make-up is revealed and aspects of the plot are discussed. There are also ‘trailers’ for upcoming seasons and ‘teasers’ about episodes. Spectators may download high definition wallpapers for computer or mobile phone as well. With such a myriad activities and modes of engagement, as well as the revelation of some of the construction of the series (such as behind-the-scenes photographs and interviews), it seems that Daly’s argument is perfectly applicable, although I question it.

There is certainly more expected of this spectator, having to make intertextual links, finish parts of the narrative for himself (or herself), and create his own version of the future plot to an extent. Spectators also get ‘closer’ to the series than ever before, being able to download photographs, and have them as wallpapers on their computers and phones. An aspect that I did not mention above, which complicates spectatorship even more is the phenomenon of downloading films and television series from torrent websites. This allows fans to download and watch series in succession, for example, without the weekly delay of television broadcasting. This manner of engaging with media is illegal, but it is a reality, and adds another level of ‘agency’ to screen spectatorship.

While I do not disagree that the strategies employed by television producers and by spectators themselves has broadened the range of spectatorial modes for digital screen media, and by default even analogue or projected screen media, there are aspects to this argument that are of concern. Darley (2000:156-173) writes about the spectatorship engendered by computer games, as a form of screen-based spectatorship. He discusses the notion of interactivity as the spectator having agency in affecting or being affected by what occurs in the representation on screen. He argues that screen media spectatorship is always dependent upon the parameters of the content. This is pre-programmed as a limited set of options available to the user, which translate differently across media platforms. Films are limited in that the spectator has no control over playback, for example. The film cannot be paused at any point. Television allows the spectator some control over the lighting in the space, the volume of the set and so forth. One may also change the channel, but one cannot watch episodes on demand. Computer games offer many more inputs, but always subject the user to ‘rules’ or limitations of the game. No matter how interactive the medium appears, it remains subject to a set of programmed limitations. According to Darley (and I have been making a similar argument above), these limitations are disguised by what he terms vicarious ‘kinaesthesia’ (Darley 2000:155-157). The viewer feels sensually overwhelmed and involved, and as such is unaware of the limitations he accepts as part of spectatorship. I have discussed ‘curiositas’ or eye lust earlier, which may be compared with Darley’s argument using ‘kinesthesia’ here.

While many contemporary screen media representations strive to heighten the sensuality of the encounter with the spectator, through higher definition of the image on screen, super slow motion photography, simultaneous camera angles and so forth, this does not entail semantic intensification. In game play on digital interfaces, interactivity does not entail in-depth involvement in the game play either, but rather an expansion of superficial involvement, which echoes the aesthetic of attractions. For Darley (2000:167-168), who also attempts to write about more than one screen medium, all these media have in common that they seek to provide direct visual and corporeal stimulation. Visual treatments of digital images have become rife. It is possible to apply filters and effects even to photographs taken on smart phones through applications like *Instagram* and *Hipstamatic*. These gradings or filters are also applied to television series and films, and any digital images. This reinforces Darley's notion that content is often less important and, little interpretation or semantic resonance takes place. Spectatorship is less an activity of hermeneutic meaning making, than one of a sensual stimulation and distraction.

One may return to Benjamin's (2004:795) notion of film allowing audiences to bring the world closer through representation, collapsing the distance engendered by the spectatorship of the Cartesian position, which required the viewer to contemplate what he saw. The interactive spectator thus does everything but contemplate, he or she is far too busy being distracted by all the options offered. Although the spectator may now be expected to perform roles of authorship, all of these are programmed, in turn 'programming' spectatorship.

The programmed aspect of media also constitutes the simulated aspect, since media conceal that aspect of themselves from spectators. Parts of the programming may be revealed, such as mentioned above in the example of behind-the-scenes makeup shots of actors in the series *The walking dead*. This is a foil, however, for far more remains concealed, especially regarding the process of spectatorship. The existence of the website that accompanies this television series predicts that viewers will visit the website, and so 'expand' their engagement with the series in a manner directed by the medium. Elseasser (cited by Daly 2010:98) warns that expansion across platforms often serves as a far broader base from which to market commercial offerings such as television series, rather than developing a more 'active' spectator.

Conclusion

I have argued above that digital media, and by extension screen media of different kinds are often thought of as engendering a particular form of spectatorship which is active and lends some agency to the spectator. Many theorists draw links between digital media and older screen media such as projected film, such as Virilio, Daly and Darley. For these authors it seems that spectatorship has changed from the time of nineteenth century cinema. My argument above has been that spectatorship and perception, have indeed been altered by a cinematic condition in society (Colman 2009:1-2). This condition is not as liberating as it seems to be however, for spectatorship remains rather programmed and passive in its relation to meaning making, and in this way is not so different to historical cinema spectatorship. The contemporary spectator is overwhelmed and stimulated by screen media, and expects to be so, leading to a distracted form of spectatorship, rather than a sense of agency. This distraction is exacerbated by the extreme collapse of distance between the spectator and the screen in the broadcasting and instantaneous nature of digital screen media (Virilio 1997).

While a spectator of contemporary screen media may feel sensually stimulated, and challenged to make some links of his or her own between various screen platforms, he or she has no space or time to contemplate the performance of spectatorship. As such, the Cartesian position of spectatorship is subverted, but it does not result in spectatorship which is more emancipated than that. Instead the spectator becomes zombie-like, performing automatic reactions and interactions with screen media. Although he is free (in a postmodern sense) from the constraints and flaws of the Cartesian position, he is only free to act within specific and predictable parameters.

The spectator is not only limited, but is also not aware of that fact. Only when the performance of spectatorship is interrupted may the spectator recognise himself as a stranger, in an uncanny moment. This moment is avoided at all cost by screen media, resulting in a dialectical play of spectatorship, where more 'activity' and interactivity leads to less active spectatorship, through more kinaesthetic stimulation, or 'curiositas' (Gunning 2004:871-872). As stated above, my argument does not write spectators off as victims of the media, but rather sees them as simulating an active spectatorship that is often assumed to be already established and flawless. In this manner spectators are zombie-like, in that their supposed interactive activities are to some extent as programmed and as reliant on sensual over stimulation as the antiquated 'cinema of attractions' was.

NOTES

1 The Cartesian position was formulated by thinkers such as Kant, as embodying Enlightenment thinking around the unified subject. The latter understands the world around him through employing logic and empirical knowledge. The Cartesian position also allows for art or in fact an object of any kind, to deliver a 'truth' or decisive message to the spectator, who is merely the recipient of the message, as created or formulated by an author in the vein of the Romantic genius. As such this view is often criticised in postmodern theory, for neglecting the viewpoints of those 'Othered' in modernity, such as women, or racial minorities. Tom Kando (1996:3-33) succinctly summarises the major movements addressing the problematic aspects of this position. Kevin Hart (2004) also summarises postmodern theory, explaining that the very nature of reality is questionable in postmodern contexts, since the rational Cartesian world is called into question. The Cartesian position sees the world in a totalitarian manner, as logical, knowable, and subject to human faculties. It relies on critical or contemplative distance, allowing the viewer or subject to objectively observe what he is looking at, through conscious contemplation.

2 Williams discusses the fear of technology as a fear of the dehumanisation of people in a technological world, with reference to the film *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (1982). The film problematises the humanity or lack thereof of human characters in a fictional future, where humans are being manufactured through genetic manipulation. In the film the human characters lack vigour and indeed compassion, and appear quite zombie-like, going through life rather automatically.

3 Baudrillard (1984:2) writes extensively about the orders of simulacra. He argues that simulacra do not attempt to posit themselves as real, but call reality into question. Baudrillard's orders of simulacra are summarised by Michael Camille (1996:39) as follows. Simulacra first reflect the 'real', then mask it, and finally substitute themselves for the real. When something is simulated it means that it bears no reference to an original it is a copy of, thus one may simulate being ill, without having an illness.

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