Getting Hung Up on Continuity: Noisy Space in Michael Bay's Transformers Series

By Laurence Kent

Making sense of the *Transformers* series (Michael Bay, 2007-2017) might seem a senseless task. The action sequences in these films present impossible and incomprehensible spaces, often hovering at the limits of our ability to make sense. Bay has stated that he does not "get hung up on continuity", arguing rather that the "intensity of the action on screen doesn't allow [the audience] to keep track of all these details".[i] Thus, instead of spatially orienting the spectator in a scene, these films aim for a maximum of action and affect, a cacophony of movement and metal where space once was. The notion of continuity itself, and its purpose for the spectator, comes into question.

This article will stage the debate between the idea that Bay's techniques are a form of "intensified continuity" – a term David Bordwell coins while analysing shortening average shot length of Hollywood films after 1960 – and the possibility that jettisoning the rules of continuity portends a favour of excessive affect.[ii] This latter position is developed by Steven Shaviro, who analyses "post-cinematic" films such as *Gamer* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2009). The crux of this terminological dispute is the status of continuity and the role it plays in the spectator's engagement with a film – what kinds of sense and understanding do these films offer despite the speed of shots and broken trajectories of movement? Do we need cognitive traction on space to engage with the narrative, or are these films completely ignoring the basic tenets of classical Hollywood editing conventions, whereby the narrative becomes superfluous?

A clearly defined spatial sense forms an understanding of characters and identities that inhabit these spaces. With classical continuity editing, space is formed alongside the actions of characters on screen. Space is dictated by the whims and wiles of players in the drama, their attentions and vectors of intention; as André Bazin describes, a man awaiting his executioners directs his fear onto the door of his cell, and the subsequent close-up onto its handle is "justified psychologically by the victim's concentration on the symbol of his extreme distress".[iii] When the space of the film is haphazard and noisy, what does this mean for character psychology, the identities they attempt to forge in these messy spaces? My article will analyse this spatial noisiness in Bay's films, figuring noise as a certain inaccessibility, a block to our normal ways of thinking and perceiving. When the editing is orthogonal to the psychology of

characters there is an overload of information, whereby what is meant to be meaningful is not demarcated clearly by the film. This is what I am calling noise, and I will use its genealogy in both aesthetics and scientific discourses to argue for new ways of approaching the seemingly senseless nature of Bay's films.

Against the proposition that Bay's films index a general "dumbing-down" in society, it is important to emphasise that, as Michel Serres states, noise is "a sign of the increase in complexity".[iv] Cecile Malaspina, in her recent work on noise as a problem of knowledge in the face of increasing complexity, expands on this by tracing the ambiguities of the concept of noise in information theory and cybernetics. Eschewing the urge to place noise on the negative side of a Manichean dichotomy, Malaspina focuses instead on the "constitutive role of noise in the formation of knowledge", arguing that "noise can become possible information".[v] Thus, instead of seeing the lack of spatial continuity in the *Transformers* films as a mistake or an aberration from good filmmaking, this article will read the noisiness of *Transformers* as a kind of information. If noise is a form of possible information, then perhaps Bay's noisy films are indicative of future identities and modes of social reproduction. Encountering the groundlessness of noise and finding signal is the way "reason emancipates itself with acts of self-grounding", contributing to a violent form of learning that this article will interrogate.[vi]

What is that Noise?

Noise is typically, in the analogue arts, denoted by the intrusion of the medium itself into the content of the work, it is the material basis of the form that makes itself heard or visible. With photography and cinema this entails a disruption of the indexicality of the image, as the content (that which was there in front of the apparatus) is haunted by the malfunctions of the machinic medium. Demarcating noise is thus a case of working out what was there and what the apparatus has added to this index. This is complicated when the digital conversion of light into 1s and 0s produces a form of pure information, a nonindexical ontology of images where noise cannot be so easily marked. This leaves an interesting position for noise in the digital paradigm.

Noise as an aesthetic technique has a long history in analogue arts, from Luigi Russolo to Stan Brakhage. As Juan A. Suarez evocates in the realm of structural film of the 1960s, there is often a fascination with "the dust, scratches, and lesions that the passage of time leaves on the strip".[vii] He posits this as a direct opposition to mainstream film practices that

sought to eliminate these forms of noise. Indeed, experimental filmmakers from Peter Gidal to Bill Morrison and Peter Tscherkassky have built their works around the intrusive side-effects of the film strip, the noise of the medium becoming the content. Tscherkassky's *Outer Space* (1999), for example, applies these aesthetic techniques to the already-existing film *The Entity* (Sidney J. Furie, 1982) in order to bring out latent psychological trauma by confusing content and form, the threat to the characters on screen becoming an attack of the film strip itself. As Michele Pierson writes, the film "turns all the aggression that the cinema is capable of against its source material, but not without having to acknowledge this aggression as its own."[viii] There is thus an inevitable grappling with the medium of film itself and its ramifications for the content being screened. These practices have also influenced art house cinemas from David Lynch to Gaspar Noé, who both utilize actual sonic noise for its disquieting effects, but also draw attention to mediation. Noise is thus engaged with for its modernist distancing effects and meta-cinematic properties.

Noise thus embodies a more fundamental aspect of communication in socio-cultural practice writ large. This is explored by Michel Serres in his 1980 work *The Parasite*, which plays on the multiple definitions of parasite in French: a biological intruder, a spatial demarcation (*para-site*), and static noise. Serres commits to a "rigorously fuzzy" evaluation of this term, emphasising noise as that which adheres in every interaction, the background which is always invisible.[ix] Importantly for my later analysis of the *Transformers* series, Serres emphasises the perspectival nature of noise, where "noise and message exchange roles according to the position of the observer and the action of the actor".[x] Despite holding true to the messiness of communication, the pitfall of Serres' approach to noise is precisely its lack of precision, making it an unwieldy concept. In Serres' text *Genesis*, noise becomes a full-blown metaphysical principle, "the ground of our perception".[xi] This is mirrored in Greg Hainge's philosophy of noise whereby, like the universal orchestra depicted by string theory,[xii] noise is thus everywhere: "since all matter naturally vibrates in an elastic medium – a vacuum not being a natural earthly phenomenon –, all matter produces sound, its vibrations propagating vibrations in the medium surrounding it, creating sound waves".[xiii] *Noise is everything*.

This approach can be hugely useful for conceptually solidifying analyses of invisible aspects of discourse, and indeed reality, as it was vital as a modernist art practice in bringing to the fore mediation. However, the evocative use of noisy and fuzzy conceptualization, and the often-haphazard way the concept is said to bridge the aesthetic and scientific domains, can lose its discursive efficacy in a similar sense to how Eugenie Brinkema depicts and criticises the turn to affect in the humanities.

Brinkema evocates this theoretical obfuscation thus:

“Affect,” as turned to, is said to: disrupt, interrupt, reinsert, demand, provoke, insist on, remind of, agitate for: the body, sensation, movement, flesh and skin and nerves, the visceral, stressing pains, feral frenzies, always rubbing against: what undoes, what unsettles, that thing I cannot name, what remains resistant, far away (haunting, and ever so beautiful); indefinable, it is said to be what cannot be written, what thaws the critical cold, messing all systems and subjects up.[xiv]

This is not to imply, of course, that analyses of noise ignore form, or that they use their concept with little concern for its epistemological boundaries. However, it is imperative that noise not become too mysterious as a concept; whilst admitting and embracing aspects of the conceptual noisiness that it implies, it is important not to allow noise to simply become a synonym for transgression. Noise can also often become a merely pseudo-scientific concept, but it is the tension between its scientific and aesthetic manifestations that creates the epistemological motor of the concept’s efficacy. Instead of using noise to ignore disciplinary boundaries and to homogenize concepts from an inevitably limited perspective, noise as a paradigm can create contradictions between ideas and fields that need to be engaged with. Along these lines, Malaspina posits that “to accept metaphorical warping […] must not mean to accept the intrusion of concepts coming from other fields of knowledge uncritically or without precision”.[xv] Noise can be resonant across the different fields that are incorporated, but the dissonances that arise through this messy metaphor and its analogical application must be appreciated. The paradigm of noise can be a mediating concept in the relations that pertain between practices, as long as it is not presumedo be a master key for conceptual clarity. Noise as evoked in aesthetic practices can be read alongside its formation as a concept in information theory in order to explore the resonances between these disciplines, and it is precisely the advent of digitality in cinema that makes this possible.

As opposed to noise as the flaws of the material, manifested by the analogue medium itself and revealing hidden aspects of discourse and indeed metaphysical reality, digital mediation does not add noise to the signal in the same way; it is “totally free of any imperfections”.[xvi] As the digital image becomes pure information, it is the *epistemological* problem of noise that will be my conceptual foothold for understanding the digitality of the *Transformers* series. If, as Dai Vaughan suggests, the indexical photograph is defined by a relation to its object which is a “necessary rather than a contingent one”, then the digital image is an introduction of further contingency into the image, it is the difficulty of separating the real and the fake.[xvii] Maintaining an epistemological framework for approaching this ontological ungroundedness of the digital

is of utmost importance, even more true when we understand the notion of information as a phenomenon that pervades contemporary life. This leads us to the political imperative of studying these images, which, as Tiziana Terranova posits, become “types of bioweapons that must be developed and deployed on the basis of a knowledge of the overall informational ecology”.[xviii] Thus, understanding digital cinema as information requires placing it in the context of the so-called information age in which we live.

Cinema provides a set of images that interact with other images that flood the contemporary citizen from myriad screens and interfaces. As William Brown posits, with this “neverending information flow” we are required to “never be offline, always to be on call, always to be ready for work/action, even if we can never truly overcome the Sisyphean tasks beset us”.[xix] An information fatigue, coupled with the labour it necessitates, is a state where demarcating the line between the informative and the noisy is even more vital. Indeed, how we define information in the first place becomes of critical political importance, as its often naïve association with certainty leads to incoherent parroting of “facts”, “data” and “statistics” that ignore the constructed nature of these realities, and indeed the dogmatic image of thought which filters information through contingent mechanisms of demarcating information from noise. As Malaspina argues:

It is thus necessary to remain vigilant of the conflation of information and *data* especially in light of today’s culture of socially networked personal confessions, paired with the means for statistical data mining and hyper surveillance, which become all the more sinister when information is treated as a *given*, when *data* are treated as *facts*, and when information effectively eclipses uncertainty. We have the carelessness of rhetorical persuasion to thank for, if the era of ‘post-truth’ can fall back on the brandishing of statistics.[xx]

These political logics of information and the digital find a new dimension in modern culture through images, cinematic and otherwise. Using notions of noise developed by information theory in relation to the growing presence of the digital will allow new epistemological means of understanding the information stored in these proliferating images.

The birth of information as a concept can be traced to mathematician Claude Shannon. During the Second World War, Shannon was a cryptanalyst, and utilized research on code breakers to further his work on the “analysis of some of the fundamental properties of general systems for the transmission of intelligence”.[xxi] He discovered that “a secrecy system is almost identical with a noisy communication system” and this work thus fed into a broader creation of a mathematical theory of

information.[xxii] Shannon's insight was to divorce information from meaning, defining information, according to Warren Weaver in his introductory essay published alongside Shannon's, as "a measure of one's freedom of choice when one selects a message".[xxiii] With this notion of information comes the possibility of noise in a system: something added to the message in the process of its mediation through channels. Noise here is the opposite of information – when trying to decode and decipher information, it is the extraneous noise that needs to be eliminated. However, this process of deciding information from noise, signal from distortion, is far from simple, and meets conceptual difficulties when the definition of information – as freedom of choice – is examined more closely.

This is indeed what Cecile Malaspina has done in her recent book on the topic, *An Epistemology of Noise*. Malaspina analyses how, for Shannon and Weaver, information is a measure of uncertainty, as higher levels of uncertainty in a system means a larger freedom of choice for the one selecting the message. Noise is actually an adding of further uncertainty in a message which paradoxically produces more freedom of choice in a noisy system. Weaver explains it thus:

If noise is introduced, then the received message contains certain distortions, certain errors, certain extraneous material, that would certainly lead one to say that the received message exhibits, because of the effects of the noise, an increased uncertainty. But if the uncertainty is increased, the information is increased, and this sounds as though the noise were beneficial![xxiv]

The problem of deciding noise from information is complicated when both are measurements of uncertainty in a system. Malaspina declares that the result of this is that Shannon "prepared the ground for a philosophy of noise that evades the Manichean opposition between information and noise".[xxv] Weaver attempts to escape this conceptual bind through a concept of intentionality, whereby "some of this information is spurious and undesirable and has been introduced via the noise. To get the useful information in the received signal we must subtract out this spurious portion."[xxvi] However, Malaspina argues that intention "pertains only to semantic communication, where some form of consciousness can be presumed. But information theoretical concepts of information and noise have proven their relevance in fields that far outstrip problems of intentional communication."[xxvii] For Malaspina, this means that deciding and dividing information from noise takes on new resonances, arguing that "the distinction between information and noise is a problem of ground or foundation of knowledge".[xxviii] This fundamental challenge to knowledge and epistemology that noise presents will be vital in understanding the *Transformers* series, which revels in the excessive

and the noisy.

Identity in Noise

The first film of the *Transformers* series was released in 2007, followed by *Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), *Dark of the Moon* (2011), *Age of Extinction* (2014), *The Last Knight* (2017) and most recently a spin-off prequel *Bumblebee* (Travis Knight, 2018). Unusually, all these films, except the most recent, have been directed by the same person, Michael Bay. The films are based on action figures created by Hasbro in the 1980s, and they are the 13th-highest-grossing film series, totalling $4.3 billion. Despite a plethora of online video essays and criticism, there is little sustained academic engagement with the franchise, with Steven Shaviro and William Brown most notably touching on the films briefly in their discussions of digital cinema, as well essays on the series in the special issue of *Senses of Cinema* titled “The Cinema of Michael Bay: Technology, Transformation, and Spectacle in the ‘Post-Cinematic’ Era”. For Shaviro, *Transformers* is typical for its channelling of post-cinematic affect, eschewing narrative and continuity in favour of the onslaught of technological speed. For Brown, *Transformers* seemingly contains avant-garde cinematic techniques, and he argues that the film’s use of strategies of movement and abstraction of colour make them examples of thought-inducing cinema. I will analyse both Shaviro’s and Brown’s perspectives on the films, before taking their arguments further to propose a way of approaching the series through the framework of information and noise. First, however, it is vital to understand how Bay’s films do break continuity rules, and how the impossible spaces of his scenes operate.

An early action sequence in the first *Transformers* finds the protagonist chasing his car to an old junkyard. The scene begins with an establishing shot of Sam Witwicky’s (Shia LaBeouf) family house, the camera in motion as it cranes diagonally down to the right whilst tilting up fractionally. The movement continues into a shot of Sam’s new car, the motion reversed as the camera peers into the driver’s seat revealing no-one behind the wheel. The noise of the car wakes Sam up, and a ceiling shot reveals him in bed as the camera moves again in the opposite direction to the last shot. A frenetic hand-held camera tracks Sam through his house as he makes it to the balcony to observe his car driving away, cutting to follow him getting to the top of the stairs, before cutting again to Sam exiting the door of the house to retrieve his bike. We watch Sam chase the car down the street, and the 180-degree rule of editing is adhered to. Sam is on the phone to the police and is travelling to the left across the screen, whilst a cut to the car he is pursuing shows the vehicle

travelling frame right. As Sam rides his bike onto the road there are cuts between medium shots of him riding whilst on the phone, and a close-up on the back wheels of the bike travelling away from the camera. Despite the relatively hide speed of cuts in this sequence, the space of the action is understandable; they are travelling down the suburban road at a medium speed.

There is then a cut to the junkyard, and this is where the editing starts to ramp up. The car enters the frame from screen right, the back wheels beginning to spin. A cut takes us to the other side of the car, its direction flipped as the car revs up further, this shot lasting around 1 second. The car begins to move towards a closed gate as there is another cut, the direction of the car now away from the camera which is positioned behind the vehicle. The car hits the gate after an edit that places the camera on the floor looking up from the right of the vehicle. The gate opens away from the camera, but there is an immediate cut to a position on the other side of the gate as it is now opening towards us, the car moving right across the screen in a full shot partly obscured by the wire of the gate. Completing this 9-second sequence of the car that began with the establishing shot of the junkyard, the camera is then positioned at a high angle as the car moves diagonally upwards to the left of the screen, narrowly missing an oncoming freight train; it is the sixth shot in this short sequence. A jarring shift to a camera attached to the back of Sam's bike then follows him as he enters the gate, the following shots ignoring the 180-degree rule of action as he approaches the train from the right, before reversing this as he moves from the left to wait for the train to pass, a high-angled shot showing Sam crossing the tracks and moving from frame right to frame left. The pace of the shots does in fact slow down at this point as the car turns into a robot in the distance, the camera closing into Sam's face of awe as he reacts to the situation. In the action that follows, the space of the junkyard becomes less cognitively navigable and the speed of cuts increases. The dogs on guard in the junkyard chase Sam to a dome-like structure before seemingly disappearing as the car rescues Sam, who is then arrested, completing the scene.

The speed and movement of these sequences is nearly constant. This chase scene can in a sense be justified in its chaotic techniques through the psychological perspective of the character, although of course there is a disproportionate amount of these films spent in action sequences of this kind. What is even more telling is the use of such kinetic editing techniques with less psychologically motivated narrative framing. The sequence that follows – after a brief excursion into the military reaction to the ongoing situation with the transformers – presents this clearly. An establishing shot of the police station where Sam is being held is a low angle shot with slightly canted framing. The camera moves frame right

across the building, a flare of light from the sun creating a further sense of motion. There is a cut to Sam being interrogated, and as with the beginning of the last sequence, the motion of the camera is reversed as we move to the left before reaching an over-the-shoulder shot of Sam. It seems that it does not matter what the content of the frame is for Bay, but that the continuation of motion is the sole concern.

As we have seen in this chase scene in the first *Transformers*, a coherent sense of space is confused by the breaking of classical continuity rules. Matthias Stork has shown the difference between these forms of, what he calls, "chaos cinema" and earlier action films such as *Ronin* (John Frankenheimer, 1998) that, even in high speed car chases, make the space in the frame cognitively navigable.[xxix] Stork points to the use of sound in chaos cinema as that which allows sense to be made, but generally bemoans what he evaluates as the slipping standards of the action film genre. Stork does however analyse the use of chaotic cinematic techniques in films such as *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008) to argue for its possible positive uses. Kathryn Bigelow in this film uses chaos cinema in a psychologically motivated way, "to suggest the hyper-intensity of the characters' combat experience and the professional warrior's live-wire awareness of the lethal world that surrounds him".[xxx] Stork argues that Bigelow "immerses viewers in the protagonists' perspectives".[xxxi] What Stork does not explore are the effects and corollaries of these spatially noisy films when it is not motivated by perspective.

Space in a film is clearly connected to character psychology, and the close-ups and cutaways of classical Hollywood are almost always employed to aid the development of on-screen identities. As Douglas Pye opines, "movies not only present a dramatic world but equally create and interpret it."[xxxii] Spatial awareness is a factor in what Pye analyses as "point of view", whereby the location of characters and place of the camera are important techniques for immersing the spectator in the fictional world. The editing of space was thus always a question of perspective, forging and putting into tension the points of view of filmic characters.

If the first half of *Transformers* can be said to have been the furthest Bay delved into character development, the following films shake off these concerns, and an analysis of how space is created in these films is vital for the understanding of these non-characters of the later *Transformers* films. William Brown argues that "characters in digital cinema no longer stand out as unique agents against the space that surrounds them, but instead become inseparable from that space", and we can see this at work in *Age of Extinction*, the first of the franchise after Shia LaBeouf left the role as protagonist, replaced by Mark

Wahlberg.[xxxiii]

Along with the idea of noisy space comes the creation of noisy identities, or rather characters who cannot take control of a situation which is always *too much*; it is their inability to properly react to noise that defines their identities. As Brown posits, “the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster does not really involve characters that willingly perform actions in pursuit of particular goals”.[xxxiv] Instead, there are only reactive characters, as can be seen by the series of events that befall Wahlberg’s protagonist, Cade Yeager. From the awakening of Optimus Prime, crashing through Cade’s house with him barely able to contain the situation, to the intrusion of government backed K.S.I. Industries soon after, where he, again, has to watch while exterior forces – including Optimus who makes an appearance just in time to save Cade’s daughter – run the show. When Cade does try to take matters into his own hands, infiltrating the K.S.I. Industries’ headquarters to gather information, he is captured and again the transformers come to the rescue.

Wahlberg’s character, defined mostly in relation to his daughter through the trope of the protective father, is purely reactive. Whereas films build character action and intention through psychologically motivated editing of space, the high speed of shots and resulting whir of frenetic movement leaves no space for character identity. Cade’s perspective is rarely grasped through editing, he can only react to changes and not develop his own agency or causal efficacy in the action sequences of the film.

This is true for all the characters in the *Transformers* series, as evidenced by the way other identities in the films are forged. Throughout the series, big-name actors are used, playing one-dimensional characters often riding on clichés and stereotypes. An example of this includes John Malkovich’s character in *Dark of the Moon* as an excessively ridiculous over-bearing boss-type. This is even more true of the transformers themselves, and the recourse to racial stereotypes that the films display. This ranges from robots that mimic caricatured “black” speech patterns, a samurai transformer, and a “Vietnam vet” robot voiced by John Goodman – a seeming reference to his character in *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998). Due to the nature of the CGI effects that form the transformers, they are often hard to tell apart. Imbuing these robots with racist caricatures is a way of trying to distinguish them without the character development that would result from psychologically motivated editing. Thus, along with the senselessness of space in these films comes a lack of characters. If Michael Bay does not get hung up on continuity, he also does not get hung up on character development.

If continuity is available for directors to present the perspectives of their characters, when no such point of view is available in the onslaught of

noise, the question becomes if this is indeed a form of heightened continuity or something else altogether. We can argue that, although the films in the *Transformers* series are often confusing as narratives, there is in the end some semblance of story being developed. Intensified continuity thus contains within it the continued development of narrative elements, and indeed the possibility of, as Bruce Isaacs analyses, a reading of Bay's series as inscribing a form of experiential and phenomenological continuity despite its breaking of obvious continuity rules.[xxxv] The notion of intensification thus acknowledges the intrusion of excessive spectacular techniques into continuity. In this regard, Stork argues that chaos cinema "seems to mark a return to the medium's primitive origins, highlighting film's potential for novelty and sheer spectacle". This allusion to Tom Gunning's cinema of attractions brings with it the difficult relationship between spectacle and narrative. Drawing from the extensive literature of spectacle and narrative in cinema, William Brown concludes that "there is no absolute distinction between them", and that narrative was always important even for early cinema.[xxxvi] Connecting continuity to this notion of narrative thus leaves little place for a "post-continuity" within narrative film – there must be some continuity for there to be any story at all. For Shaviro, the overriding focus changes with post-continuity, where "a preoccupation with immediate effects trumps any concern for broader continuity – whether on the immediate shot-by-shot level, or on that of the overall narrative."[xxxvii] But this leads to a conceptually muddy means of analysis, that of weighing up if a film seems to be placing more emphasis on spectacular and excessive editing for affective purposes, or on techniques that further the plot.

Since, as we have seen, continuity is necessary for a sense of on-screen identity and psychology, then character creation can be one parameter for working out this distinction. In this sense, post-continuity could define a form of "post-agency" or "post-character". Post-continuity indexes the difficulty of demarcating signal from noise that classical continuity intended to make clear but invisible, and the inability for characters to cope with an overload of information thus becomes their sole defining identity trait. This means that aspects of post-continuity have been present throughout the history of cinema, especially what Gilles Deleuze terms the "time-image," which includes characters who lose agency: they stop being "doers" and become "pure seers".[xxxviii] The reactive nature of characters in the *Transformers* series means they lack a fundamental agency. In the noise of Bay's spatial incoherence, we thus find a different kind of signal. If the heroes of these films cannot react, this itself is something we must navigate as a symptom; agency is a problem, and the films dramatize a lack of agency through noisy spatiality. The overload of technology, both *in* the films with the constant invasions of alien robots, but also *of* the CGI-laden films themselves, are a ground that swallows

the figures of the film. But we must ask what this means for a notion of spectator agency.

Information in Chaos

It is the place of the spectator in the *Transformers* series that can explicate the effect of the impossible spaces and characters of the films, asking how to make sense both affectively but also cognitively whilst engaging with the screen, and how this can be subsumable in the boundaries of reason. Shaviro takes the notion of post-continuity to suggest a surpassing of reason whereby it is merely an affective level at which these films work, and "editing no longer *signifies*". For Brown, however, this amounts to a 21st-century sublime: "once the body is pushed to its cognitive limits, so too is reason left struggling to keep up. And yet it is only by having reason challenged that thought can move beyond its 'automatic' functioning and we actually come to think."[xxxix] Thus, the importance of this intensified form of continuity is the ability for reason to re-ground itself; this section will expand on Brown's assertion of these films as thought-inducing by applying the framework of information and noise, emphasising the ability to reappraise this boundary as the founding act of reason.

Whilst the characters in the *Transformers* series always only react to situations outside of their control – a corollary of a psychologically unmotivated sense of space formed through editing – it is here that the spectator finds a higher faculty at work. Noise is not a block on reason but an increased disorder which means a higher freedom of choice in the message; the films present us with too much to make sense, but it is precisely this that allows different kinds of sense to be deciphered in the noise – this is the way the films *force us to think*. Whilst we have analysed a lack of character agency, a lack of identity beyond stereotypes and star vehicles, it is thus a notion of spectator agency that will allow us to understand the kinds of thinking that these films produce. Added noise means more uncertainty; although this threatens to make the films "senseless" – in terms of space but also narrative and character as we have seen – it also paradoxically means greater possible information.

Through this understanding of new forms of spectator agency we can escape the simplistic assertion that films such as the *Transformers* series are merely "bad", or as Stork opines on chaos cinema in general, "lazy, inexact and largely devoid of beauty or judgment", where instead of engaging the audience "it bludgeons you until you give up".[xl] Shaviro takes issue with the evaluative approach that Stork adopts, arguing that "it is inadequate simply to say that the new action films are merely vapid

and sensationalistic".[xli] The place of the spectator here is more interesting than a merely passive receptacle for mayhem; as Bruce Reid posits: "We the audience practically become co-creators of the film, which is so poorly constructed that organizing the disparate elements is left up to us."[xlii] It seems that with noisy and chaotic space, we have to find the information, or as Aylish Wood argues in relation to digital imaging and innovations in screen culture, there is an emergence of new forms of agency: "The competing elements of interfaces offer a different mode of experience and perception, one in which agency can be gained through the process of making sense of the fragmented images."[xliii] Instead of allowing Bay's films to bludgeon us with affect, there thus becomes space for a different sense to be made.

This kind of sense that we can glean from *Transformers* thus moves beyond the purely affective register. For Shaviro, the excessiveness of post-continuity editing is an affective mapping of the future, a kind of aesthetic training, which entails accepting fate in relation to the runaway feedback loops of technological encroachment: "Intensifying the horrors of contemporary capitalism does not lead them to explode, but it does offer us a kind of satisfaction and relief, by telling us that we have finally hit bottom, finally realized the worst."[xliv] This is darkly and ironically mirrored by Bay's own announcement on the DVD extras of *Armageddon* (1998) that "I had to train everyone to see the world like I see the world."[xlv] However, the framework of noise entails an epistemological function of information, where training can be understood as a form of learning. Noise as an epistemological paradigm is based on reason's capability for self-grounding; an important aspect of the process of learning is the ability to forge a distinction between information and noise. The first step therefore in this labour of reason is to disrupt what is held commonly as an assumed demarcation between information and noise; the noisy space in the *Transformers* is a kind of possible information that we can decipher by re-grounding reason. We do not just feel the future, but these futural messages make us think differently.

The *Transformers* series presents its spaces and characters as much on the surface as possible, from the speed of its adrenaline-fuelled editing, to its caricatured one-dimensional characters. This also holds for the films' ideological positions, that, without the invisible editing of classical Hollywood, must also remain on the surface, as opposed to being subsumed within the common-sense psychological motivations of the perspectives created partly through spatial orientation. In this way, it becomes possible to *ignore* Bay's incessant championing of military forces, objectification of female characters, and insufferable flag-waving nationalism. In the noise of these problematic aspects, different signals can be found, and reason can be re-grounded.

This thus becomes a question of how we can cope with an overload of noise. For Shaviro, the mayhem of post-continuity films is felt as a cognitive catastrophe, a future shock that we can mostly *feel*. These films become prophecies for a progression into an inhuman capitalist world, affectively and cognitively mapping "the contours of the prison we find ourselves in".[xlvi] Bay's future is clearly seen in *Transformers* as it basks in the commercial extravagance of society, enacting even further technological development by envisioning this progression as an alien force; technology is divorced from a notion of human agency, and the alienness of the transformers dramatizes a world where technology is thinking about itself, with its own interests often orthogonal to ours. However, this thought can be pushed further as the process of cognitive mapping is a re-grounding of reason that needs to be explicated. These films do not just help us feel around in the dark cell of late capitalism, but this epistemic trauma is itself a vital aspect of learning. Malaspina elaborates on the parallels between learning and mental states of noise involved in anxiety-related conditions, stating that "noise is, like disorder, an inconceivable freedom of choice". Whilst the information age demands a damaging passive form of openness to excessive stimuli, watching *Transformers* can be an intentional encounter with an anxiety-inducing freedom of choice in a message teaming with the increased uncertainty of noise.

What I am arguing for is not merely an "open-minded" approach to these films, or a meagre bromide on the importance of reading them against the grain. It is a form of *willed* openness to trauma that these films require, such that, as Malaspina opines, "in order to maintain one's health one has to risk one's health."[xlvii] Making sense of *Transformers* is indeed a senseless task, an activity in dissolving one's boundaries of self and sense, embracing a vertiginous freedom of choice precisely as a catalyst for reason's self-grounding. The affective rush of the films cannot be an end in itself, but a progression into emancipating reason, redrawing the lines between information and noise. Coping with *Transformers* becomes an exercise in finding signal in noisy excess, a flexing of reason as a politically radical act, affirming agency over the reactive identities of the films' characters. *Transformers* certainly contributes to a maddening overload of noise for the spectator, but it is precisely this epistemological state of noise that can keep us sane.

Notes

[i] Quoted in Frederick Tilby Jones, "Beyond Continuity – 3. Post Continuity Cinema: Technology and Television," *Medium.com* (August, 2013) [Accessed October 31, 2018].

[ii] David Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film,” *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2002): 16–28.

[iii] André Bazin, “Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation,” in *What Is Cinema?* (Montreal: Caboose, 2009), 228.

[iv] Michel Serres, *The Parasite* [1980], trans. Lawrence R Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 67.

[v] Cecile Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 9, 50.

[vi] Malaspina, 217.

[vii] Juan A. Suarez, “Structural Film: Noise,” in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Redrobe and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 69.

[viii] Michele Pierson, “Special Effects in Martin Arnold’s and Peter Tscherkassky’s Cinema of Mind,” *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 28, no. 2–3 (2006): 29.

[ix] Serres, *The Parasite*, 57.

[x] Serres, 66.

[xi] Michel Serres, *Genesis* [1982], trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 7.

[xii] “With the discovery of superstring theory, musical metaphors take on a startling reality, for the theory suggests that the microscopic landscape is suffused with tiny strings whose vibrational patterns orchestrate the evolution of the cosmos.” Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1999), 366.

[xiii] Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.

[xiv] Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), xii.

[xv] Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise*, 96.

[xvi] Leo Enticknap, *Moving Image Technology – from Zoetrope to Digital* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 204.

[xvii] Dai Vaughan, *For Documentary: Twelve Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 182.

[xviii] Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 141.

[xix] William Brown, *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), 92–93.

[xx] Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise*, 142.

[xxi] Quoted in James Gleick, *Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 215.

[xxii] Quoted in Gleick, 216.

[xxiii] Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), 9.

[xxiv] Shannon and Weaver, 19.

[xxv] Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise*, 18.

[xxvi] Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 19.

[xxvii] Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise*, 63.

[xxviii] Malaspina, 26.

[xxix] Matthias Stork, “Chaos Cinema: The Decline and Fall of Action Filmmaking” (Video Essay, 2011), [Accessed October 30, 2018].

[xxx] Stork.

[xxxi] Stork.

[xxxii] Douglas Pye, “Movies and Point of View,” *Movie* 36 (2000): 3.

[xxxiii] Brown, *Supercinema*, 2.

[xxxiv] Brown, 92.

[xxxv] Bruce Isaacs, “The Mechanics of Continuity in Michael Bay’s *Transformers* Franchise,” *Senses of Cinema* 75 (June 2015).

[xxxvi] Brown, *Supercinema*, 86.

[xxxvii] Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 123.

[xxxviii] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Gala (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 41.

[xxxix] Brown, *Supercinema*, 138.

[xl] Stork, "Chaos Cinema."

[xli] Steven Shaviro, "Post-Continuity: An Introduction," in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, ed. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (Falmer: REFRAME books, 2016), 53.

[xlii] Reid, "Defending the Indefensible."

[xliii] Aylish Wood, *Digital Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2007), 79.

[xliv] Steven Shaviro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 44.

[xlv] Quoted in Bruce Reid, "Defending the Indefensible: The Abstract, Annoying Action of Michael Bay," *Film Quarterly*, July 6, 2000.

[xlvi] Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 137.

[xlvii] Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise*, 185.

Notes on Contributor

Laurence Kent is an LAHP-funded PhD candidate in the Film Studies department of King's College London. Under the supervision of Professor Sarah Cooper, he is currently researching the metaphysics of Gilles Deleuze's film-philosophy.

Bibliography

Bazin, André. "Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation." In *What Is Cinema?*, 215–49. Montreal: Caboose, 2009.

Bordwell, David. “Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film.” *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2002): 16–28.

Brinkema, Eugenie. *The Forms of the Affects*. London: Duke University Press, 2014.

Brown, William. *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Caleta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Enticknap, Leo. *Moving Image Technology – from Zoetrope to Digital*. London: Wallflower Press, 2005.

Gleick, James. *Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*. London: Fourth Estate, 2012.

Greene, Brian. *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1999.

Hainge, Greg. *Noise Matters.* London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Isaacs, Bruce. “The Mechanics of Continuity in Michael Bay’s Transformers Franchise.” *Senses of Cinema* 75 (June 2015).

Jones, Frederick Tilby. “Beyond Continuity — 3. Post Continuity Cinema: Technology and Television,” *Medium.com*, August 2013. Accessed 31 October, 2018.

Malaspina, Cecile. *An Epistemology of Noise*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

Pierson, Michele. “Special Effects in Martin Arnold’s and Peter Tscherkassky’s Cinema of Mind.” *Discourse* 28, no. 2–3 (2006): 28-50.

Pye, Douglas. “Movies and Point of View.” *Movie* 36 (2000): 2–34.

Reid, Bruce. “Defending the Indefensible: The Abstract, Annoying Action of Michael Bay.” *Film Quarterly*, July 6, 2000.

Serres, Michel. *The Parasite* [1980]. Translated by Lawrence R Schehr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

———. *Genesis* [1982]. Translated by Genevieve James and James Nielson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Shannon, Claude E., and Warren Weaver. *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963.

Shaviro, Steven. *Post-Cinematic Affect*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010.

———. *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

———. “Post-Continuity: An Introduction.” In *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*. Edited by Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, 51–64. Falmer: REFRAME books, 2016.

Stork, Matthias. “Chaos Cinema: The Decline and Fall of Action Filmmaking.” Video Essay, 2011. Accessed 30 October, 2018. .

Suarez, Juan A. “Structural Film: Noise.” In *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*. Edited by Karen Redrobe and Jean Ma, 62–89. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008.

Terranova, Tiziana. *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.

Vaughan, Dai. *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Wood, Aylish. *Digital Encounters*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Filmography

Armageddon (Michael Bay, 1998)

The Big Lebowski (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998)

Bumblebee (Travis Knight, 2018)

The Entity (Sidney J. Furie, 1982)

Gamer (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2009)

The Hurt Locker (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008)

Outer Space (Peter Tscherkassky, 1999)

Ronin (John Frankenheimer, 1998)

Transformers (Michael Bay, 2007)

Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen (Michael Bay, 2009)

Transformers: Dark of the Moon (Michael Bay, 2011)

Transformers: Age of Extinction (Michael Bay, 2014)

Transformers: The Last Knight (Michael Bay, 2017)