Hyper Attention Blockbusters
Christopher Nolan's *Batman* Trilogy

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Abstract
In this article, I outline a theory of attention for 21st-century blockbusters, emphasizing the coevolution of attention in what N. Katherine Hayles has distinguished as deep and hyper attention. Furthermore, I elaborate on this theory with a discussion of kinetics as an embodied sensation integral to blockbuster, drawing examples from Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy.

Keywords affect, attention, Batman, kinetics, sensation, superhero.

Introduction
In this article, I wish to examine the intensity of sensation in the recently concluded Batman trilogy as exemplary of how blockbuster movies generate affect and apprehension in their audiences. Particularly Tom Gunning has been instrumental in proposing the notions of aesthetics of attraction and astonishment as part of how early cinema developed. He has also maintained that contemporary cinema inherits a fascination with attraction and astonishment, what other critics have termed spectacle. While narrative logic dominates contemporary cinema, it is not the only part, and Geoff King maintains

that spectacle remains a significant element of all movies, although certain genres depend on them more (King, 2001). The action movie is one genre where spectacle plays an integral part, and in the case of recent superhero blockbusters, it is evident that kinetic movement has taken up a central role. Consider, for instance, the vertiginous trip shot in subjective point of view in the latest Spider-Man installment, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012). Although an impossible feat, this scene does not suggest a displacement of the body or an incorporeal approach to the spectator. Instead, it reveals that we are moving into an image regime where we are attracted to what can go beyond the human body. Blockbuster movies are the locus of this transformation, where a form of what Scott Bukatman calls kaleidoscopic perception (delirium, immersion, and kinesis) takes us away from the merely human and into the posthuman (Bukatman, 2003, p. 114). This new perceptual mode correlates with a kind of post-attention state, where the movies reconfigure our attention according to new ways of seeing.

I will argue that these new ways of seeing are part of a larger shift in attention, a shift which N. Katherine Hayles calls hyper attention pointing to the co-evolution of the brain's synaptic connections in media-rich environments (Hayles, 2007, p. 188). It is this reconfiguration of attention which I will discuss in relation to blockbuster cinema, pointing out how the embodied affective engagement with these movies suggest that watching movies is no longer simply a matter of paying attention. Instead, we literally pay with attention in Hardt and Negri's conception of affective labor. The cinema of attraction and aesthetics of astonishment thus give way to the affect, dissipation, hyper attention, and disorientation; the ADHD of contemporary blockbusters.

The Culture of ADHD

The presence of attention disorders is a result of changes in our contemporary media-rich environments, where boredom can always be staved off, but actual attention comes only with great difficulty. Newspapers and magazines are full of debates on attention deficiency disorders of varying degrees, and how it affects a culture. In 1994, *Time Magazine* wrote that as many as 5% of children under 18 suffered from ADHD, although the condition was essentially unknown 15 years before (Wallis, 1994). In 2013, *New York Times* dis-

cussed a study indicating that as many as 11% of children now suffered from ADHD (Schwarz and Cohen, 2013). Out of the many different forms of attention deficit disorder, ADHD is considered the most severe form, with hyperactivity making it impossible for children to remain still. It is important to keep in mind that ADHD does not mean that one cannot be engrossed in an activity for hours, it simply means that one is more distractible, more impulsive, and constantly in motion. Any sensation may trigger a shift in attention, despite good intentions. Also, while ADHD is often associated with children, the condition does not go away in adulthood.

Although ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition, it is important to recognize that this condition is also cultural. Its presence has increased (although one could argue that doctors have become better at diagnosing the condition) and is more prominent on the US East Coast than the West Coast. This is not the place to enter a sociocultural argument about the reason for this divergence, and suffice to say that the historical and regional variation suggest a complex assemblage of reasons, extending from media environments, different parental outlooks, the presence of pharmaceutical companies and the use of such companies' products, along with a host of other reasons. What is clear is that ADHD is a debilitating condition and that ADHD's growing presence in contemporary culture leads not only to media scares, but also to different ways of adapting to a media-saturated environment. Here Hayles's hyper attention argument is a strong non-judgmental point which frees us from thinking in binary terms of distraction being a negative condition; rather, hyper attention becomes a way of dealing with intense and overpowering information flows, and although hyper attentive behavior may come off as ADHD to older generations favoring deep attention, the situation is in fact reverse. Hyper attentive people are much more adept at navigating media-saturated environments than are deep-attentive people. What all this suggests is that our attention is not simply a static perceptual tool, but rather a developing, evolving sensorium deeply tied to a period's visual culture.

"To look is to labor;" so succinctly put is Jonathan Beller's description of our current visual culture (Beller, 2006, p. 2). Earlier critics also pointed out the relation between cinema and our sensorium, employing the term "distraction" to note how audiences were affected by cinema. For Siegfried Kracauer, distraction was the

needed compensation for a full but unfulfilling work day. Since this dissatisfaction stems from the work place, the compensation can only take the same form, and so distraction takes the form of business — or rather, busy-ness which indicated the same accelerated movement found in the city (Kracauer, 1995, p. 325). Walter Benjamin never finished his theory of distraction, leaving behind only scattered notes, but we know from his artwork essay that cinema encourages the spectator to enter into into a state of distraction, resulting in "profound changes in apperception" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 41). Furthermore, Benjamin considers distraction to be a physiological phenomenon, thereby connecting the notions of spectacle, cinema of attraction, aesthetics of astonishment, and embodied perception unfolded in this essay (Benjamin, 2008, p. 56). Although it may at first seem counterintuitive, distraction and attention are correlated concepts in the way that our attention is commanded when we are distracted.

Jonathan Crary has shown that the modern period (from the 1800s onward in his Foucaldian optics) has been increasingly interested in commanding attention from it subjects. As he puts it, "Part of the cultural logic of capitalism demands that we accept as *natural* switching our attention rapidly from one thing to another. Capital, as accelerated exchange and circulation, necessarily produced this kind of human perceptual adaptability and became a regime of reciprocal attentiveness and distraction" (Crary, 2001, pp. 29–30). The advantage of Crary's model is that it introduces history into the phenomenological and affective framework of film theory. While there is little doubt that distraction was what the salaried masses sought out in the cinema of attraction, the surfeit of kinetics and affect evident in today's blockbusters reveals more a state of disorientation and a strain upon traditional attention. Here, it is useful to draw on work by N. Katherine Hayles, who distinguishes between deep and hyper attention, where we are currently undergoing a shift towards a greater degree of hyper attention (Hayles, 2007, p. 187). Hyper attention, argues Hayles, "is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom" (187). It may seem that contemporary blockbusters are primarily related to deep attention but in fact the hectic flow of images combined with the extensive use of kinetics

reveal that the blockbuster depends on hyper attention. Bukatman's kaleidoscopic perception of delirium, kinesis, and immersion is replaced by dissipative perception, which favors trance, acceleration, and disorientation; all sensations which stave off boredom, thus being eminently suited for an ADHD culture.

Movement and Sensation

The exhilarating sensation of movement is the cornerstone of action movies, sometimes seemingly to the exclusion of any other concerns. Geoff King suggests in his book *Spectacular Narratives* that spectacle and narrative may peacefully co-exist and have in fact done so ever since Hollywood began: "From the very start, throughout the 'classical' era, and today, narrative and spectacle have existed in a series of shifting relationships in which neither has ever been entirely absent. The relative absence of coherent plot or character development in specific instances, even, does not entail an evacuation of underlying narrative themes and oppositions of a structural kind" (King, 2001, p. 3). What is evident, however, is a waning of narrative, while spectacle has become more dominant in blockbuster culture. The clearest expression of this is found in the transformation of movement.

Yet at the same time, there is a certain reluctance within scholarship to accept these transformations of movement. Bordwell clings to narrative as a totalizing structure when he in *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (2006) argues that "every action scene, however 'spectacular,' is a narrative event" only to go on to discuss the thrills and indulgences of Hollywood action movies (Bordwell, 2006, p. 104*ff*). Bordwell stacks the cards further when he points to *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) and *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994) as examples of spectacle movies with classical narrative structures; these movies are more than a decade old by the time Bordwell writes about them. Considering Bordwell's prominence, it becomes evident that most scholarship of blockbusters has been dominated by narrative approaches and the *longue durée* of classical-era storytelling.

Movement has always been significant for movies, not only because movement distinguishes movies from photography but also because movement allows for spectacle. As Richard Maltby points out, "American fiction movies have stressed movement from the outset, with early chase films providing the first synthesis of narra-

tive and the attractions of spectacular movement" (Maltby, 2003, p. 372). Tom Gunning also locates spectacle in the chase film, as part of a dialectics of spectacle and narrative: "The chase film shows how towards the end of this period (basically from 1903-1906) a synthesis of attractions and narrative was already underway. The chase had been the original truly narrative genre of the cinema, providing a model for causality and linearity as well as a basic editing continuity" (Gunning, 1986, p. 68). So, while a chase sequence provides a sense of astonishment and wonder due to hectic movement, it is also a mini-narrative of cause and effect and continuity. The spectator must understand where the vehicles are in relation to each other, the direction vehicles are moving in, and so forth. Movement becomes paramount to solicit the spectator's attention.

Cinematic movement has always been tricky to define since there are so many ways of achieving it. The movement of objects within the frame is the one which comes most readily to mind but this refers to objective movement and keeps the spectator in her seat. David Bordwell, in an older article, discusses the use of camera movement and points out that "The ability of subjective movement to endow static arrays with depth is usually called the 'kinetic depth effect.' As camera movement, the kinetic depth effect operates to some degree in panning, tilting, and all other rotational movements around the axis of the camera itself. But the kinetic depth effect achieves its greatest power to define space through the traveling shot" (Bordwell, 1977, p. 23). It is the camera's plunge into space that allows for the greatest sensation of movement, and while Bordwell does not discuss the cinema of attractions (always preferring to stay within narrative cinema), the sensation of movement through kinetic depth effects belongs properly in the aesthetics of astonishment as outlined by Gunning as an experience of assault (Gunning, 1995, p. 121).

Consider about an hour into *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), the vertiginous visual assault when Flass (Mark Boone Junior) is grabbed by Batman (Christian Bale) and pulled up to the rooftop. The camera spins and lifts up, giving the impression of a subjective point-of-view from Flass, while also completely disorienting the spectator. Since the camera movement is not a plunge forward but a plunge backward, we have no information about what we might crash into, making for a gut-wrenching shot. Bordwell, perceptively,

notes that "we can hardly resist reading the camera-movement effect as a persuasive surrogate for our subjective movement through an objective world" (Bordwell, 1977, p. 23). While this is overwhelmingly true, it also marks the limit of Bordwell's theoretical horizon, because he refuses to take the necessary step into spectator experience, discussing only the formal properties of positive or negative parallax (movement towards or past the camera), thus depriving us of a significant element of understanding these films.

The force of this experience of camera movement is that we move into the zone between our own look and the camera's look, as Bordwell rightly points out, but he fails to recognize that this is a zone of immersion where we do not simplistically identify with one character but identify with the force of movement. The zone which blurs camera and spectator is precisely what Jennifer M. Barker identifies in her concept of apprehension, where "This constant feeling of being pulled and yet pushed leads us to the unique way we experience chase and suspense films, which is with a great sense of *apprehension*, in many senses of the word" (Barker, 2009, p. 107). All cinematic experience shares in this sense of mingling of our body with the cinematic body, existing in the zone between camera and subject, also referred to as spectacle. As Scott Bukatman argues, "Spectacular displays depended on a new mode of spectatorial address — essentially, *you are there* (even though you are not) — linked to new technologies of visual representation" (Bukatman, 2003, p. 89). He goes on to argue that this spectatorial address depends on kaleidoscopic perception "comprised of equal parts delirium, kinesis, and immersion" (114), which allows for a particular kind of "perceptual activity, kinesthetic sensation, haptic engagement, and an emphatic sense of wonder" (115-116). We are, in other words, pulled along by the movie, if not exactly into the movie.

The vertical axis of cinematic movement has itself been intensified in contemporary blockbusters, in part because vertical movement suggests power and control but also because it suggests movements we human beings cannot perform. This becomes a form of disorientation, as evident in the case of Flass, but also in many of the movements Batman performs. As Sara Ross points out, "soaring through space [ ] has historically been associated with progress and mastery, both literally and metaphorically, and thus can be used to structure the overall journey of a heroic protagonist"

(Ross, 2012, p. 211). This runs parallel to arguments put forth earlier by Kristen Whissel, who states that verticality is a technique for visualizing power (Whissel, 2006, p. 23). That Batman can pull Flass vertically up visualizes Batman's superiority and when Batman can also survive spiraling jumps to the ground, we can all see that he is beyond our capacities. These moments are spectacles which cannot be reduced to narrative structure without missing the point – audiences long for the masterful disorientations which these superheroes can perform. Although these spectacles fit within a larger narrative structure, our *experience* of the movement cannot be ignored at the expense of narrative.

Being pulled along by the movie is what I will term kinetics rather than kinesis. Kinesis is Greek for motion, while kinetics is the study of relations between motions of bodies and the forces acting on them (*Oxford English Dictionary*). We are worked on by the motion and force of the movie, which is what produces sensations in us. As Barker points out, "the film is to our bodies like car is to the driver: we live through it vicariously, allowing it to shape our own bodily image" (Barker, 2009, p. 110). In the vocabulary of film phenomenology, body image designates our sensation of our body and not its visual image. Instead, a movie actually takes us for a ride which connects quite distinctly with Gunning's aesthetics of astonishment and its presentational mode, with direct spectatorial address as sensual and psychological impact. Kinetics align us with the movement of the film's body, creating the spectacle of movement which throws us into the midst of things. These effects work as a form of direct address, engaging us directly and bodily in the intensities of affect.

Opposed to the dominant narrative cinema which privileges a rational (and often disembodied) spectator capable of recognizing cues and synthesizing actions into storylines, the moments of kinetics are moments "where the viewer is not recentred but is continually open and opened by movements (sensations) that pass through him/her and on which s/he is unable to attain the perspective of a disembodied consciousness capable of rational synthesis" (Walsh, 2004, p. 178). When, in *Batman Begins*, James Gordon (Gary Oldman) gets into the Bat tumbler to control it, the tumbler mostly takes control of him. That is the perfect image for many of the action blockbusters in recent years, where the movies take over and pull us along for the ride. The greatest transformation in these newer

blockbusters and their kinetics is how the emphasis on continuity has slowly dissipated in favor of more immediate payoffs. Kinetics allow us a way into understanding why movement becomes more important than narrative coherence.

Kinetics

When the Bat-Pod is introduced in *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012), it is through a traveling shot from behind and below Batman, while Lower Wacker Drive is cast in darkness, so only a very slight silhouette of the vehicle can be seen. As the lights come back on, Batman slows the Bat-Pod to a halt, as we pull up behind him. Starting up again, the movie cuts to a close-up of the front of Batman from below as he starts driving, cutting to a shot from below and behind Batman, which then cuts to a reverse shot of the front of Batman from below. All these shots are traveling shots moving at high velocity with the Bat-Pod closing in. Shot from below, Batman towers over us as the Bat-Pod either closes in on us or moves away from us. The kinetics are clear: Batman is in complete control of his vehicle and the movie is in complete control of us. We are pulled along the mounted camera with a smooth, self-assured confidence in the motion, although the objects flying past us left and right make us truly apprehensive. These vehicle-mount shots remain stable, smooth, fluid, and balanced which ends up infusing us with the same sensations. Although the scene is tense, Batman and by extension us as spectators feel in control, exuding the intense confidence of Batman. This is a body that can do anything.

Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy is interesting in the landscape of superhero movies precisely because of this self-assured cinematic body. While all superhero movies show superhuman deeds performed by the characters, Nolan's movies are the only ones shot in the IMAX format, which makes the cinematic body super-cinematic in comparison. Despite the bulkiness of IMAX cameras, Nolan decided to strap them on a Steadicam mount and use the IMAX for the biggest action sequences. Providing a deeper and more intense experience, despite the necessity of reducing the film to 35mm in most cinemas, the detail and sharpness of the image is not entirely lost. The action sequences of *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* are thus not only superhuman performances,

they are also cinematically superior: sharper, deeper, richer; they present in all ways a cinematic body which is beyond the capacity of other superhero movies.

At the same time, Matthias Stork's two-part video essay "Chaos Cinema" argues for a new style of blockbuster film making which throws classical continuity style editing and even Bordwell's intensified continuity (Bordwell, 2006, p. 144*ff*) out the window in favor of excess, exaggeration, and overindulgence (Stork, 2011). Spatial coherence is lost, camera movements are no longer motivated, editing speed picks up for no reason, framing is tighter, and focus is usually shallow. Often the same event will be shown from different angles in order to intensify the moment. Many critics have picked up on this notion of a decrease in narrative coherence in favor of audiovisual intensity. At almost the same time as Stork, Steven Shaviro proposed post-continuity as a different term for much the same development, although Shaviro's term aligns with the tradition of continuity editing and the post-classical tradition. Speaking specifically of *Gamer*, Shaviro defines post-continuity as

> a continual cinematic barrage, with no respite. It is filled with shots from handheld cameras, lurching camera movements, extreme angles, violent jump cuts, cutting so rapid as to induce vertigo, extreme closeups, a deliberately ugly color palette, video glitches, and so on. The combat scenes in Slayer, in particular, are edited behavioristically more than spatially. That is to say, the frequent cuts and jolting shifts of angle have less to do with orienting us towards action in space, than with setting off autonomic responses in the viewer. But even in their non-action sequences, Neveldine/Taylor usually avoid traditional continuity-based setups. (Shaviro, 2010, p. 124)

Nolan's Batman movies are more restrained than that, even if some of the action scenes do have a rapid editing pace. Favoring the Steadicam over the handheld camera, the Batman movies move at a breakneck pace but rarely completely break continuity style. Instead, Nolan's trilogy gives us surprisingly fluid, assured, and self-contained movements when Batman is in his different vehicles, despite the superhuman movements these vehicles perform. This is in

contrast to the barrage Shaviro identifies in *Gamer, Domino* (Tony Scott, 2005), and other movies. Where *Gamer* is jerky, nervous, and turbulent, the Batman movies are fluid, assured, and stable. Furthermore, although neither Stork nor Shaviro really go into detail with this issue, there is also the fact that these post-continuity scenes are moments of spectacle rather than narrative. Continuity editing is traditionally employed to articulate narrative and coherent space, and Nolan remains within the narrative tradition in his trilogy except for the action sequences, where he is willing to move into a form of superhuman spectacle, making us feel what it is like to be Batman in his vehicles.

Certainly this superhuman sensation is one of the biggest draws of Nolan's movies and is fully experienced in the flight sequence with the Bat. As the Bat descends to pursue Bane's minions in both the truck and the stolen Tumbler, the camera movement is again smooth and continuous. The kinetics of the movie plunges us into a headlong pursuit of these vehicles. Parallel editing is used to alternate between the Bat pursuit, Catwoman's pursuit on the Bat-Pod, and the confrontation between Blake and the police officers, raking up the tension. The Bat shots are always assured and smooth, even when dodging missiles or buildings, moving in long traveling shots, weaving between buildings while also exploiting the vertical axis in a total mastery of space. This contrasts with the shots from inside the pursued vehicles, where Miranda, Gordon, and other characters are shaken and jolted while their vehicles lurch and tilt. The kinetics could not be any more different: The Bat is in control (and, parathentically, so is Catwoman on the Bat-Pod), while the regular humans are very much out of control. Considering the extreme vehicular movements, Nolan's IMAX images in smooth motion provide a sumptuous contrast; we are pulled along by the movie but always feel in control, never destabilized, and so we are content to leave our bodies in the hands of the movie, much like we leave our bodies to roller-coasters. The alternating shots between Batman and Catwoman versus the regular humans clearly align us with the superheroes — those are the shots where we feel safest, and by extension, where we feel at home in the zone created between camera and spectator. We are Batman in those shots: self-assured, in control, and courageous.

The superhuman control we feel in these situations comes from the use of nonhuman camera point-of-view's performed by vehicle-mounts and digital effects. Through extreme spectacle combined with balanced, authoritative kinetics, sensations flow through us that we could never otherwise feel. As Barker beautifully puts it, speaking of contemporary action films in general:

> Here again, the camera placement combines with rapid-fire editing to make us feel in our muscles every hairpin turn and near miss. By alternating shots taken from inside vehicles with those taken from cameras mounted on them, these films force us into movements that aren't meant for humans, only for machines. In these moments, we go where not even fearless drivers and pilots would dare to go; we are riding without seat belts, without windshields, without any protection at all. The film throws us out and gives us nothing to hang onto. (Barker, 2009, p. 113)

To boldly go where no one has gone before is the premise of super-hero movies and provides a spectacle that is very literally out of this world. We relish these moments of sheer delightful terror because there is in fact something to hold onto: the superhuman cinematic body. Barker is right when she argues that we go where no driver or pilot would ever go; that is why we watch these movies. The fascination of feeling more than oneself, to be taken beyond (but not out of) one's body for a little while, while still safely in one's seat is the adrenaline rush of the 21st century. Why else are 3D movies being pushed by studios, alongside larger screens, louder sound systems, and more outrageous CGI effects? It is austerity's answer to 20th-century tourism — be moved without moving, without the expense.

Attention and Affect

While Nolan's trilogy teeters on the edge between continuity and post-continuity, it shares with other contemporary blockbusters the abundance of affect in its kinetics. It is this affect which is converted into what Hardt and Negri have termed affective labor (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 108). Where Kracauer's salaried masses would be compensated in the form of distraction, the compensation of the multitude is to work even during their compensation. Entranced by

the blockbuster's flow of images, an abundance of embodied affect is created, which, on the one hand, makes us feel what it is like to be superhuman through cinematic kinetics, while on the other, demands us to participate in the attention economy. Sensory overload was always the strategy for giving people the busy-ness they wanted after a full day of unfulfilling work, but for contemporary blockbusters, we can trace a move towards an overload of affect through the insistence on kinetics and a super-cinematic body, which provides us with vertiginous excitement and passion.

We are drawn to these movies because of how they make us feel, but at the same time, we do not realize that watching these movies in fact constitutes work. Our affects, excitements, passions, and sensations are thus capitalized on, as we willingly commodify our cinematic experience. The work does not begin or end in the cinema but before and after, as we "like" and share trailers, previews, reviews, alongside our own experience of the blockbusters on social media sites. Such reactions occur naturally within the affective states of the movie, and we promote those that move us, while ignoring the ones that leave us inert. All these experiences are caught up in a web of affect, dissipation, hyper attention, and disorientation; a swirling state which does not leave time to reflect on the significance or meaning of a movie, only its impressions and spectacles. Cinematic movement is thus not only about kinetics and affect, but also the movement of attention, so that enough value can be gleaned from our engagement with the movie. As the ADHD structure of these movies suggests, classical modes of relating to movies are no longer sufficient and only a small amount of the necessary work needed to better understand contemporary blockbusters has been done here.

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