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The Possibilities of *Sort Of*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

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By Jesse Robinson, MFA

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Major Director: Michael Jones McKean
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Simultaneity and conflict are incessant qualities one is confronted with when looking at things. Shifting from familiar to foreign, from present to implied. There seems to be a tendency, if not necessity to embrace this multiplicity. Using the film theory construct of extra-diegetic and relative qualifier *sort of* to investigate *Pulp Fiction*, Bose Wave CD player, *Sunset Boulevard*, American Apparel, and The Uncanny.

Pulp Fiction

In film theory as well as other disciplines including theology there is a concept diegesis. The concept makes a distinction between what is maintained within the narrative, within the parameters of the film (diegetic) and what extends beyond these parameters (extra-diegetic). A classic example is the use of music. In a film if one of the characters turns on a radio and music begins to play it is diegetic, however, if an orchestral score begins to play to heighten an emotional tone, that is extra-diegetic. The distinction is based on what is contained within the internal world of the film and what filmic devices are added to enhance that experience.

To widen the scope of this model to include reference/self-reference, pastiche, and devices that are indirectly present; I offer this example to help clarify my point.

In the Quentin Tarantino film *Pulp Fiction* (1994) there is a scene when Vincent Vega (John Travolta) and Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) enter a dancing competition at a fifties themed diner. Much of the pleasure one has when watching this scene is rooted in elements that exist outside of the narrative.

In this film John Travolta is cast against type, meaning that his role as a junkie hit man runs counter to many of his previous roles and to his image as an actor in popular culture. This move is hardly a new tactic in filmmaking; however, it is employed here with a great skill and effect. The relationship between the character Vincent Vega and John Travolta suggest a kind of juxtaposition, and yet what this character is juxtaposed against is implied, or understood, rather than actually present.

As we watch this character dance we vacillate between the diegetic and extra-diegetic, between junkie hit man and the rebellious protagonists he has played in the movies like *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*. The commonalities are dancing, which has a rich history in cinema, and speak to a bygone era of elaborately choreographed early Hollywood films. The use of this filmic trope highlights the incongruities. The tone created relies, in part, on the clash between the idealized 50's and 60's American experience with a new experience built on pastiche, irony, and the collapsing of morality. As we view this film we pick up on visual cues and signifiers that relate to or disrupt conceptions held about popular culture and history.

Extra-Diegetic

We tend view the diegetic world of a narrative or a piece of visual art as incomplete, short sided, or even misleading. Being the inheritors of a world only known through the lens of post-modernism, single insular narratives are looked at with skepticism.

“We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original blend and clash.”¹

The insular narrative has been replaced by a multitude of other intersecting narratives such as perspective, connotation, and cultural specificity with which narratives are constructed. The disappearance of the singular author, as Barthes claimed, also marked the disappearance of the possibility to arrive at a fixed stable meaning. When the reader

displaced the author, and a text became disembodied, the author ceased to serve as the “final signified.”² This suspicion of a single voice has caused us to look for other points, extra-diegetic points, from which to measure and construct meaning.

This shift has resulted in meaning being less and less contingent on the diegetic. That is not to say that the narrative has lost its meaning or that *Pulp Fiction* is only a collage of desperate cultural sources and popular citations. I see it more as a widening of the boundaries the narrative, resulting, arguably, in a more complex and nuanced form of storytelling. An example of what I mean by ‘less contingent on the diegetic’ is the location and time where character development takes place.

In the film *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) directed by Billy Wilder, ageing actress Gloria Swanson plays a character that was in part ‘developed’ outside of the film. The character Norma Desmond played by Swanson is a silent film star whose popularity has waned with the advent of the talking motion picture. In contrast to John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*, Swanson’s role in *Sunset Boulevard* is closely allied with her biography. To underscore this diegetic/extra-diegetic ambiguity Erich von Stroheim³ plays Max von Mayerling, Desmond’s caretaker. In addition to countless references to Hollywood, Cecil B. DeMille makes a cameo playing himself.

Both *Pulp Fiction* and *Sunset Boulevard* build narratives that are fully developed within the scope of diegetic film, and yet are also positioned within a larger meta-

¹ Barthes, Roland, translated by Miller, Richard *Image-Music-Text* (New York, NY, Hill and Wang,) page 146-7

² *ibid*, page 147

³ Erich von Stroheim was a silent film director who directed Gloria Swanson in the 1929 film *Queen Kelly* before being ousted from the project due to disagreements with Swanson.

narrative⁴ that critiques film and culture. These films blend and clash fiction with biography. Though these films are intricately self-reflective they also tell very compelling stories.

I don't aim to make the line separating diegetic and extra-diegetic, but rather think of them as two ways to look at something, two sets of information superimposed. The lead characters in the two films mentioned above are built in a way that undermines the distinction between the internal and external worlds. Both of these qualities exist at the same time in the same space. As we look at a film or a piece of art we understand it in multiple ways.

Vacillating between the diegetic and extra-diegetic has become the common mode of looking and thinking. The adjusting our perceptual frame, shifting perspective and reevaluating are the ways we look. Just as the object of our gaze is important, so is what surrounds it.

To move away from the narrative and more towards objects I am curious to see how this model can function. It seems as if there are two things at play when either making or viewing a piece of art. First, that there is something present, something that you are seeing, hearing, experiencing or touching. And second, that there are other things at play which are not quite present, but are inferred, referenced, cited, both intentionally and unintentionally.

⁴ Meta-Narrative, not in the way Lyotard meant it as a Universal Narrative (Truth etc) but as a narrative that extends beyond the scope of the medium as it is presented.

American Apparel

Coming to prominence in the early 2000's American Apparel has created a brand at the intersection of politics and fashion. The clothes bare no logos or words of any kind and are only subtly recognizable to the trained eye. This company's politics and risky advertising have made it symbolic of an experiential brand.

This company imbues its clothing with progressive politics including worker and immigrant rights. Obviously these items have a style, but what differentiates them from other, similar, items is the companies business practices. In addition to vertical integration the company also pays double minimum wage, subsidizes employees' health care, provides meals, free English classes,⁵ paid time off, and on-site masseurs.⁶ The company is also environmentally friendly offering employees free bicycles, on-site bike mechanics, and bus passes⁷ as well as a line of clothes that are organic.⁸ Dov Charney (founder, CEO) set out to prove that a company can thrive while maintaining ethical standards.⁹

Many intuitive business strategies are cast aside in favor of an identity based in opposition and the currency of the 'underground' or the 'hip'. These products at once seek to undermine the homogeneity of global Capitalism,¹⁰ and yet revel in the ubiquity of

⁵ New York times By ANDREW Ross Sorkin and Michael Barbaro Published: December 19, 2006

⁶ # ^ Linda Baker (2004-02-11). Made in the U.S. of A.?. Salon.com. Retrieved on 2007-11-25.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ www.americanapparel.net

⁹ Louise Story - The New York Times - January 18, 2008

¹⁰ The company intentionally creates retail stores that assimilate to their environment. They often open stores in areas that are economically depressed, which also tend to be where artists and musicians live. The stores aren't in shopping malls.

the monochrome T-shirt. The ‘invisibility’ of these products is what makes them creditable. To a generation that is critical of branding and being marketed to, absence is seen as a subversive action.

I’m interested in how the content (ethical labor practices, immigrant rights,¹¹ and other traditionally Leftist causes) sits in relation to the objects themselves. What makes these clothes unique is almost invisible, and the brand is marked by a set of visually absent ideological principles.

This relationship pushes the boundaries of the diegetic/extra-diegetic binary. The relationships are so abstracted, and yet so integral to the objects themselves. A connection between what is present and what is implied exists, but the circuitry of meaning is complex and circuitous. What these clothes ‘mean’ is inextricably linked to information that is obscured, or even consciously subverted.

The piece of clothing does not broadcast the information that makes it unique, and this is precisely what makes it unique. The reductive and neutral style may suggest an oppositional stance towards a culture that places readable content onto almost every surface, however, that is only part of the meaning of these items. The other meaning is derived from sources not clearly evident in the products themselves, such as their website, advertising, retail stores, news articles. The access to this information is not direct and because of this we can only understand this brand from a frame of reference that is much larger and more complex than a signifier/signified relationship.

¹¹ Louise Story - The New York Times - January 18, 2008

We are familiar with a plain blue collared shirt, but at the same time there is something else going on, something subtly telling us that the implications of this shirt are far greater than mere fashion. The content of the shirt is the shirt itself. The signifier and the signified are superimposed upon one another; the piece of clothing actually describes the piece of clothing. The markers that suggest this exist; for example the stitching on a polo style collared shirt is a different color, thereby making it subtly more apparent. The actual making of the shirt is highlighted thereby recalling the conditions it was made under. Operating in the clothes produced by American Apparel is an element of the uncanny, in that the thing is familiar and yet foreign.

Uncanny

In the Freud's essay *The Uncanny* he breaks down the phenomenon into two main categories: the first originating from repressed infantile complexes and the second from outmoded beliefs appearing to be true. He differentiates between the 'real' uncanny and the 'fictionalized' uncanny, noting that 'fictionalized' uncanny is more pronounced and more frequent.

Though Freud's uncanny is a touchstone in the evolution of the idea, the uncanny has been adopted and changed by contemporary philosophy and theory. This expanded definition speaks more directly to the subject at hand.

There is an uneasy pleasure in this uncanny shifting back and forth between what we think we know and what we are confronted with. We feel that we 'know' John Travolta's personality based on the characters he has played. At least we understand his

persona, which is made up of a combination of all the type of characters he has played, (the leading man, the good guy, the rebel etc). All of this is subverted in a way that makes us try to reconcile what we know with what we are being shown.

“The uncanny, if understood to be a state of paramnesia, or a subjective flux akin to déjà-vu, structurally mimics Lyotard's linguistic paradox - past and present become confused in an experience of the uncanny just as they do in Baudrillard's "switching screen" of postmodern schizophrenic consciousness.”¹²

As we calibrate our perception we seem to look to the extra-diegetic as a place to structure and ground our understanding of the thing in question.

From his youth, Marcel Duchamp saw the way that his father, a notary, authenticated documents. A notary being emblematic of an abstracted structure of meaning, one in which relies on a protracted network laws, rules, and signifiers that are almost totally independent of the document itself. Authenticity is distilled to a small symbol applied after the fact, retroactively to fundamentally alter meaning. It seems as if Duchamp located originality in a set of connections and conventions totally outside of the object. Looking at Duchamps ready-made objects we are forced to do the same.

This type of looking is marked by conflict and simultaneity of information coming from within and without the object being studied. We have come to understand things through Post-Modernism, which has replaced absolutism with subjective point of view, culture, class, history etc. In speech the use of relative qualifiers is way to position ideas

¹² Arnzen, Michael, The Return of the Uncanny, <http://paradoxa.com/excerpts/3-3intro.htm> Introduction to Vol. 3, No. 3-4 (Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon)

as approximations or comparisons, as well as act as a verbal short hand. In this context, *sort of* has become a reflection or better yet a recapitulation of this way of thinking.

Sort of

There is a way to describe things in terms of *sort of*. One may say that one thing *sort of* resembles another. *Sort of* is a way to bracket and understand an idea. In the written word *sort of* can be replaced with a, sometimes extensive, explanation of point of view or position. In speech, however, this complex relativist point of view has been distilled down to a two-word phrase.

“When we say: ‘Every word in language signifies something’ we have so far said *nothing whatever*; unless we have explained exactly *what* distinction we wish to make. (It might be, of course, that we wanted to distinguish the words of language from words ‘without meaning’ such as occur in Lewis Carroll’s poems, or words like “Lillibulero” in song.¹³

It is important to distinguish *sort of* from other phrases most notably *like* and *um*. The later two words function to fill space or prevent interjection. *Like* and *um* help to maintain the flow of speech. In this context *like* is not used as a way of saying “similar to,” it has almost no meaning and may not refer to the subject at hand, in fact they may fit into the category along with Lillibulero.”

We have access to a large shared database which to draw from and redeploy at will. The way we communicate transcends genres, times, class, histories, and cultures. Sort of is

¹³ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Philosophical Investigations, (Oxford, Uk, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1953) page 7

a way by which one specific vocabulary can be used to talk about something outside of it, to bracket speech in a way that makes it more useful.

For example it can be said that something is *sort of* tie-dyed; that statement is shorthand for many qualities including: multicolored, dyed, semi-pattern, swirls, with a specific pallet. *Sort of* tie-dyed is more efficient way to convey a set of characteristics; sort of tie-dyed effectively replaces the above list. Allowing for the phrase ‘tie-dyed’ not to be used not in its entirety, in that it distances itself from the connotations of the 1960’s, counter-culture, hippies, music, drugs etc. It claims only a portion of the word’s meaning. Sort of tells us that it has shared qualities, but that it is not that thing.

Sort of allows for openness, and a generosity of meaning that a label without this qualifier would not allow. This phrase implies that the thing being referred to is in a state of change, not locked to a sole signifier. It can be agreed upon that language changes. Though the rates of change may differ, change remains constant. Placing *sort of* in front of a descriptor at once acknowledges that fact, and actively participates in that act of change.

There are two kinds of shorthand here operating simultaneously. First, being the one addressed above, a way to access a great deal of information efficiently. The second being a way which articulates the post-modern relativism that allows this type of thinking in the first place. *Sort of* is a way of thinking or speaking that enables a kind of interdisciplinarity.

This use of the phrase *sort of* may appear to be a lazy way of using language. Just as all language can be misused, I agree that *sort of* can be misused as well. This way of thinking and constructing meaning is one strategy among countless others. It’s a specific

kind of looking that has the ability to provide avenues of inquiry that may be unavailable to other ways of looking.

Just as *sort of* can be seen as lazy so can the use of a language that relishes in exactitude and precision at the expense of accuracy. A language that privileges clarity of thought over the thing being described. An unfairly precise, solidified language can gloss over flexibility and not account for the changeable dimension of a work of art. It can be lazy in that once language is assigned, the thing is contained. It is no longer active, we no longer need to negotiate with it, it is understood. Language can be used to flatten or pacify things, make them manageable. *Sort of* is a way to make available a poetry that accounts for change and a multi-dimensional way of understanding.

How can we reconcile the conflicts within an object. An art object is composed of cues and shifts that create nuance and complexity. The stability of these characteristics depends on perspective. The stereo company Bose, for me, exemplifies complex meaning. Looking at their products as well-engineered machines that carry with them the ancient promise of a better life through technology and design. Bose has a sublimity of form and function that perpetually teeters on the brink of bankruptcy. At the same time it epitomizes not only a gluttonous consumption, but also a willful projection of grand ideas onto a shiny plastic CD player that comes in a cardboard box. And yet it sounds amazing.

Sort of is a way for language and thinking to come closer to the properties that objects and art have. Bose is an object that can hold so much inner conflict and relate to things in an out of art. My relationship to this object is composed of many *sort of's*, which allow for these conflicting ideas to exist simultaneous.

There is something to be said about trying to use the available language to its limits, however, the result may be thinking only to the limits of language.¹⁴ *Sort of* becomes a way of thinking that is constantly forging new connections and expanding old usages. Some works of art ask to be viewed from a multitude of angles, and are activated by that play, and interplay. *Sort of* is a way to look obliquely at something, to look through many different lenses with the understanding that there is not a correct one, and that the act of looking and re-looking, understanding, and re-understanding is active and engaged.

¹⁴ Orwell, George, 1984 (London, Uk: Secker and Warburg, 1949)



Pulp Fiction still



Pulp Fiction still.



Sunset Boulevard still.



Gloria Swanson



Sunset Boulevard poster



American Apparel online store ads



Bose Wave CD player

VITA

Jesse Robinson was born on May 10, 1983, in New Rochelle, New York, he is an American Citizen. He graduated from Los Angeles County High School for the Arts in 2001. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art from University of California, Los Angeles in 2005.