

On April 26, 2001, the North American division of German automaker Bavarian Motor Works, otherwise known as BMW, launched a World Wide Website featuring a short film directed by Hollywood film veteran John Frankenheimer entitled *Ambush*. Four other short films soon followed, forming a collection called *The Hire*, with each short film directed by one of the world's foremost filmmakers including Ang Lee's *Chosen*, Guy Ritchie's *Star*, Wong Kar-Wai's *Follow*, and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Powder Keg*. The series quickly inspired discussion about the nature of 'advertainment' for its unique blend of advertising and entertainment not only in the films themselves, but also in the very design of the Website. Indeed, the BMW Film Series foregrounded the changes taking place in the entertainment industry with regard to narrative and new media. In this sense, *The Hire* serves as an excellent case study of how contemporary entertainment narratives are redefined within the terms of interlocking media, particularly cinema, advertising, and the Internet.

Like the Internet, television can be considered a site for "interlocking media" because of the variety of separate mediums it contains. In "Television and Postmodernism," Jim Collins argues that commercial television in particular invites the viewer to "oscillate" between poles of identification based on its fragmentary nature as a medium. Using David Lynch's short-lived series *Twin Peaks* as an example, Collins argues that the encompassing of several genres within one show provides a space for diverse viewers to engage in the pleasures of the text:

Although this oscillation in tonality is undeniably a characteristic of Lynch's more recent [film] projects, it is also reflective of changes in television entertainment and of viewer involvement in that entertainment. That viewers would take a great deal of pleasure in this oscillation and juxtaposition is symptomatic of the "suspended" nature of viewer involvement in television that developed well before the arrival of *Twin Peaks* (347).

Twin Peaks, like much of television programming in the 1980s, works by never clearly adopting one viewing or subject position, but by creating a world in which several distinctive elements merge into a (incoherent) whole.

Because of the fragmented nature of the *Twin Peaks* serial (and much of television programming), Collins describes this particular text as postmodern. A postmodern text exhibits “hyperconsciousness”—“a hyperawareness on the part of the text itself of its cultural status, function, and history, as well as the condition of its circulation and reception” (335). As a “hyperconscious” text, *Twin Peaks* addresses its own need to mean multiple things to multiple viewers in order to attract their attention from the diversified entertainment spectrum that surrounds contemporary consumer culture. “Hyperconscious” texts attempt to situate themselves apart from other texts by incorporating elements that make up varying subject positions. By addressing the viewer’s own fragmented identifications, “hyperconscious” texts echo the postmodern condition:

If the postmodern condition is one in which we as individual subjects are constantly engaged in the process of negotiating the array of signs and subject positions that surround us, *Twin Peaks* and other forms of hyperconscious popular culture address themselves directly to this condition, *situating themselves exactly in the arcs and gaps that result when these positions don’t coalesce*. By taking the array as their “setting” and redefining “narrative action” in terms of the exploitation of the array, these texts redefine the nature of entertainment in contemporary cultures (348-49; emphasis mine).

Thus, Collins argues that postmodern texts like *Twin Peaks* work by positioning themselves within the openings created between genres or media, being neither one nor the other. They address an audience whose multiple identifications by gender, class, race, or sexuality (not to mention interests) necessitate a polysemic text capable of addressing their various needs and desires.

If *The Hire* series acts as the “first high-profile, big-budget, celebrity-laden Internet marriage of advertising and entertainment,” as one critic called it, it certainly

follows in the footsteps of other postmodern texts like *Twin Peaks* which never fully adopt the conventions of one genre or medium over others (Vagnoni 12). By being simply neither one (advertising) or the other (film), the BMW Films emerge as both, therefore reconstituting themselves as advertainment. As such, the series brings up several questions in terms of narrative structure: Does this merging of advertising with cinema erase their (staunchly defended) boundaries? Or does it further reiterate their inability to do so within the realm of entertainment? Does it challenge traditional definitions of narrative cinema? What does this series tell us about the condition of the postmodern text within contemporary Hollywood filmmaking?

If the narrative structure of a postmodern text works as an amalgamation of various subject positions for the consumer and of multiple codes for understanding, it follows that some confusion would surround what the text means, what it does, and why it does it. If contemporary cinema and television are to function as sites for both entertainment and advertising, postmodern texts must address the multiple media forms of which they are part. By “exploiting” the distinctions made between media formats, postmodern texts “redefin[e] ‘narrative action’” in order to “redefine the nature of entertainment in contemporary cultures.” Postmodern entertainment, in this regard, functions as an interplay between media forms, melding them together into an incoherent whole. Rather than simply compete with other media forms, postmodern texts absorb aspects from the myriad entertainment texts that prevail in consumer culture. In this essay, I will look at how narrative functions within the BMW Film series. I will address how *The Hire* series works as a postmodern narrative that continually foregrounds both its commercial (advertising) and entertainment (cinema) aspects. As such, the BMW Films not only challenge notions of classical Hollywood narrative structure, but also help redefine contemporary entertainment narratives within the terms of interlocking media.

THE FUNCTION OF THE HYPERCONCIOUS NARRATIVE IN *THE HIRE* SERIES

The BMW Film series may not have been commissioned by one of the current Hollywood studios, but it nonetheless exhibits some of the same attributes with regard to narrative that other films produced within the contemporary studio system display. Although the principles of classical Hollywood cinema are not dead, the BMW Film series offers an excellent vehicle for discussing how contemporary filmmaking practices alter notions concerning the function of the film narrative. Given the corporatization that Hollywood has undergone (and continues to undergo) since the 1960s whereby studios became just one arm in an extended entertainment-producing conglomerate, aesthetic norms and the economic mode of production do continue to reinforce each other. But not with narrative occupying the same role as it did in the studio era. Certainly, postmodern texts foreground the intermingling of advertising and content that contemporary Hollywood blockbusters and television programming, in particular, virulently exhibit, but they tend to present the advertising *as* entertainment by refusing to separate their boundaries. Likewise, the intertextual nature of the series alludes to relationships with other media texts—both within the film world and outside of it—in order to blur the traditional borders. Finally, with its five separate films, *The Hire* integrates various genres within each film and within the series as a whole, again annihilating the margins between them. In this regard, the BMW Film series functions as a postmodern narrative by emphasizing its multiplicity as an entertainment text within a highly saturated consumer culture.

Given the primacy of the narrative within the classical paradigm, each of the films in *The Hire* can function on its own as a classical text. *Chosen* opens with the driver receiving a gift from the boy monk. Although the viewer does not know what is inside of the box, he or she can guess that its contents will be revealed by the end of the film (which it is). *Ambush* features a three-act structure where information is revealed (the

passenger has swallowed stolen diamonds), a complication arises which leads to an ultimate climax (the gunmen try to get the diamonds but the driver refuses, thus resulting in a chase), and a short resolution ties up all of the unanswered questions (the diamonds were actually in the passenger's suitcase after all). *Powder Keg* follows the three-act structure, as well, and uses titles to convey narrative information and dissolves to simulate a change in time and location. *The Follow* and *Star* each center on a protagonist who, literally, drives the narrative through making critical decisions: Do I continue to follow the wife now that I know she has been abused? Do I take the verbal abuse from the "Star?" Each film, in this regard, can be seen to follow several aspects of the classical Hollywood narrative style outlined by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson.

Kristen Thompson, in her book *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, claims that the film narrative is still classical, regardless of any "extra" products associated with the film: "Set all those ancillary markets and products aside, however, and the film experience itself involves a remarkably coherent narrative" (348). While the films themselves may follow a classical narrative structure (as the five BMW Films seem to do), Thompson's model relies on the film as the primary aspect of contemporary filmmaking instead of focusing on the film as one aspect of an entertainment chain. When texts such as BMW Films emerge, they certainly challenge the notion that the primary interest of contemporary filmmaking lies in the narrative and that the film narrative, by itself, constitutes the entire text. Against the hegemonic model of classical Hollywood cinema, I suggest that the postmodern aspects of a series such as *The Hire* may shed some light on how contemporary Hollywood film narratives function. If a film is just one aspect in a chain of entertainment possibilities ranging from video games to tie-in toys to books based on the film's characters, the role of the narrative does not occupy just the two-hour running time available in movie theaters—or, in the case of the BMW Films, their five- to ten-minute running times. Describing Hollywood films as an example of "commercial

intertextuality” whereby films open themselves to other entertainment venues, Richard Maltby describes the contemporary studios’ filmmaking efforts as a focus “more to the pursuit of synergy than to that of narrative coherence” (26). In this regard, the stress on the film narrative as prime vessel of meaning like in the classical framework no longer addresses an entertainment-producing world that does not practice classical methods of filmmaking, but instead adheres to more postmodern notions where film narratives reflect the polysemic attitudes and identities of its viewers and creators.

While BMW Films may not be the first advertainment campaign, even on the Internet, it has certainly been one of the most successful. MTV’s reliance on music videos bridged the gap between advertising and entertainment much earlier, and the success of Websites devoted to movie trailers and ads (including sites featuring commercials solely shown during the Super Bowl) continue to blur the line between the two. Clearly, consumers seek out advertising as a source of entertainment. When done well, “the sense of kudos and cool will generate such interest that consumers will seek it [the advertainment] out” (Bonello 11). BMW Films, with its arthouse luster and comprehensive marketing strategy, offered a delicate balance between the two media forms. If the series is an attempt to define and showcase the BMWs as automobiles, how does that aim affect the narratives? How does the mixture of entertainment and advertising cohere?

The BMW Film series uses postmodern narrative strategies much like New Hollywood cinema does, particularly with blockbuster movies. Foregrounding intertextuality, *The Hire* relies on the audience’s cultural knowledge in order to make connections with other influential products and texts. For example, John Frankenheimer’s *Ronin* served as the influence for the overall series, and several shots from that film are re-used and re-appropriated. Likewise, the synthesis of different genres throughout the series and within each film acts as a comprehensive amalgamation in order to attract viewers with varying tastes, since no demographic is a homogenous

mass. By combining the action film, comedy, detective fiction, mysticism, romance, chase films, and war films, *The Hire* not only refuses to accept one vision of the automobiles, but also creates a space where these genres can intermingle coherently, without privileging one specific genre over others. Finally, like blockbuster movies, these films are one part of a textual chain, becoming vehicles for other ends—selling cars, selling directors, selling a brand image. As such, each text cannot be understood in isolation from the others or from the various other texts informing their meanings—the sub-films, the director’s commentaries, the behind-the-scenes films, and the links to the cars that are all present on the Website. In this regard, the postmodern narrative aspects of each film and the series as a whole act to extend the meaning beyond any one item itself, allowing entertainment, art, and advertising to commingle into a cohesive entity.

In many of the reviews, critics remarked on how little *overt* product placement occurs in the narratives of the five films—although, to be sure, it certainly is there. In Frankenheimer’s *Ambush*, for example, the BMW logo is prominent every time the 740i sedan is shot from the back and in Ritchie’s *Star*, the spoiled celebrity played by Madonna chooses the 530i sedan over an awaiting limousine. Yet, the films are generally more subtle in terms of their goal to showcase the cars—the films, ultimately, have storylines that, while involving the cars, are not simply *about* the cars as one likely would find in a more typical commercial. In Lee’s *Chosen*, for instance, the driver picks up a Tibetan boy at a dock where they are subsequently chased by three other cars. The chase sequence, however, occupies less than half of the overall film—the rest takes place at a suburban home where the boy is again threatened, this time by an imposter monk. The car does not play a role in the second half at all. Yet the set-up of the site promotes each automobile as an integral part of the entertainment choices. On the side bar, the viewer can click on the featured machine or information on the director in a seamless mix of information, advertising, and entertainment. Each film’s aim as both an advertisement for BMW and as entertainment for viewers constructs the narrative in such a way that not

only questions classical Hollywood structure, but also addresses the role of the text within an entertainment-producing spectrum where the film acts as a vehicle for further consumption.

Intertextuality in postmodern texts suggests that the viewer needs to consume other culture products if he or she is to fully appreciate the narrative of the film, much like the ties to advertising promote further consumption. Collins describes intertextuality as “a hyperconscious rearticulation of media culture by media culture” (335). For example, the celebrity-status that surrounds Madonna as a singer and as a film star directly informs the role she plays in *Star*, not to mention her marital status to director Ritchie. Elvis Mitchell of *The New York Times* describes her role in the film thusly: “Madonna plays a snarl of a singer who wants what she wants when she wants it—it could have been called ‘The Wife’” (E1). Likewise, Lee’s play with the Incredible Hulk band-aid works twofold within the narrative: “The punchline, both [as] a plot zinger and a nod to his next project. . .poetically patches up the story” (Robischon 93). By referencing his own future film project so directly, Lee plays to the audience’s knowledge of his career. In addition, the BMW Film series acknowledges its direct ties to James Bond (having advertised in and cross-promoted with three of the series’ films). On his director’s commentary, Ritchie describes the driver as a “James Bond-type character” (*Star*). Clive Owen (the actor who plays the driver) had received substantial press for being a possible replacement for Pierce Brosnan as James Bond until earlier this year when another actor was finally named after years of speculation (Barnhart E1). In this regard, the intertextual aspects of the series foreground cultural consumption and the degree of knowledge each consumer brings inform how he or she will see the films.

As an oscillation between cinema-driven entertainment and advertising, *The Hire* series is not only a synthesis of references to different media texts, but also a synthesis of genre approaches to filmmaking. If *Twin Peaks* and other postmodern texts succeed with audiences because of their emphases on different genres, as Collins suggests, the

popularity of the BMW Film series may be, in part, due to the different approaches taken by each film. Kar-Wai's *The Follow* is more in the vein of detective narratives with its reflective voice-over and film noir undertones whereas Frankenheimer's *Ambush* suggests the action film through its reliance on spectacularly staged stunts. *Powder Keg* looks and feels more like a documentary with its political subject matter and gritty photography, while Ritchie's *Star* emphasizes the comedic aspects of working as a driver for hire. Part of the emphasis on different genre styles may have to do with attracting what Collins calls "coalition audiences"—an amalgamation of differently identified audiences in order to draw a larger viewership (342). By using a variety of genre approaches to the series, BMW-NA hoped to attract people with varying interests.

With its high-profile launch, *The Hire* series received publicity from mass-market press such as *CNN* and *USA Today*, industry journals such as *Variety*, and interest-targeted media such as *Automotive News* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Not only did the films exhibit a wide range of genre styles, but the press that surrounded the series also differed in terms of audience. Described by Anthony Vagnoni in *Advertising Age* as "a promotional mechanism that's not easy to describe, despite being the center of more media attention than any marketing story since the death of the Sock Puppet," the series did indeed receive widespread attention from a variety of venues (12). What this points to is the increased heterogeneity an entertainment text must supply in order to attract a substantial audience. The BMW Film series, through its different genre approaches, used this synthesis as a means to draw attention to itself within a heavily competitive world of entertainment choices. Collins describes the television landscape as "a proliferation of maps" where various channels "don't coalesce into one big picture but rather a composite of overlapping views that visualize the terrain of contemporary life in reference to its specific uses" (340). Like the nature of television programming, *The Hire* series works as an array of maps that, together, define BMWs as automobiles. This array, however, does not work unless several narratives are tied together through one vehicle—the

Website. As such, the texts coalesce to form a meaning not so much through their individual iterations, but through the collective nature of the series as a whole.

The linkage of advertising with entertainment promoted in the series, the intertextual nature of the films, and the employ of genres as an attraction to heterogeneous audiences, all worked together as a postmodern approach to *The Hire* in general. By questioning the primacy of narrative as reinforced by the mode of production, the BMW Film series not only challenges the classical Hollywood style outlined by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson and adopted by many critics as the standard for feature filmmaking, but also articulates how postmodern narratives can offer a variety of pleasures to consumers. By addressing the multiple needs consumers have with regard to their use of media, and by addressing the multiple but linked aims of commercial media within a saturated consumer culture, the BMW Film series demonstrates how contemporary American films—whether they be blockbuster features or corporate-sponsored Internet shorts—may address the conglomeratization of the entertainment market through a new configuration of the narrative. The narrative no longer functions by itself; instead, its status within the corporate chain is dependent upon its links with other media—either directly through advertising, like the BMW Film series, or indirectly through the myriad tie-in products that continue to develop the narrative outside of its two-hour showcase in the theater.

As Jim Collins suggests about postmodern texts, the BMW Film series exhibits a hyperconsciousness in terms of its knowledge of its cultural status—in this case, as functioning simultaneously as an advertisement and as entertainment. By attempting to be both advertising and entertainment (fueled by the art-house filmmaking espoused by its directors), the focus of BMW Films lies not in the coherent narrative structure supported within classical Hollywood filmmaking, but within the fractured narratives created within a postmodern culture. *The Hire* series is concerned with the primacy of

consumption through its complex interplay between an entertaining narrative and an advertising campaign.

Jeff Gordinier, a writer for *Entertainment Weekly*, claims that a new generation of filmmakers uses the diversity of media forms available in consumer culture as a base to reconstruct how a story is told. Describing these filmmakers as the “Play Station Generation” after the popular video game system created by Sony, Gordinier asserts that these directors “mess with narrative in new ways. . .mess with time, with space, with the laws of physics and the structure of story” (Wood USA1). He claims that these directors “bring to their movies the cut-and-paste sensibility of video games and the Internet” (Wood USA1). As this series of Internet shorts demonstrates, the function of the film within the entertainment chain has rapidly changed.