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The Flare of Semiosis

This paper explores a dialectic of indexicality variously theorized in different semiotic theories as enunciative praxis (as in Paris School semiotics) or the total linguistic fact, indexical orders, and enregisterment (as in North American linguistic anthropology), extending these concepts to think about the historical process by which different types of textual coherence (iconic/aesthetic, indexical/interactional, and symbolic/denotational) are virtually mediated and sedimented as cultural models (viz. as aesthetic styles, registers, and narrative genres). As a case study, I look at the historical fate of “lens flare” in American cinema. Lens flares are the result of the refracting of light within the lens of a camera that leave streaks on the image. Once considered an imperfection in the 1940s aesthetic of Hollywood studios, the anti-mainstream “New Hollywood” filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s seized upon lens flare – among other aesthetic techniques – as markers of a more authentic realism. Later directors wedded this live-cinematographic aesthetic with science fiction genres and spectacular special effects, citing this *aesthetics* or *style* in contexts where, in fact, no lenses were used. Now the dominant “tradition”, lens flares live on in video games, animated films, and digital special effects. Tracing this history reveals the emergence, stabilization, and transformation of virtual semiotic norms via realized entextualizations of them, a dialectic between the “invention of tradition” and the “traditionalizing of invention”. To account for this requires us to discern the interplay of these semiotic dimensions (aesthetic textuality and its stylization, interactional/pragmatic textuality and its enregisterment, denotational/narrative textuality and its generification); in particular, I argue that the driving engine of this dialectic are social indexical processes of enregisterment, that is, that indexicality serves as the gateway of the iconic and symbolic, possible and general, virtual and realized.

Keywords: Indexicality, Style, Register, Genre, Lens Flare, Cinema, Linguistic Anthropology.

1. Introduction

Semiosis unfolds as always already, never yet before, actually singular and virtually conserved, difference with repetition; or, to echo this issue’s theme, as “coming in” (*in-venire*, invention) and having been “given across” (*trans-dare-*, as tradition). These appositions are two Janus faces, one looking forward, the other backward. In linguistic anthropology, this dialectic has been theorized in various ways: Silverstein’s notions of the *total linguistic fact* (1985) and *indexical orders* (2003) and Agha’s (2007) discussion of *enregisterment*.

A citation of Mauss citing Durkheim, Silverstein's *total linguistic fact* refers to the non-resolving dialectical relations between linguistic structure, practice (which realizes and refracts structure), and ideology (conceptualizations that construe and rationalize the structure-practice nexus): structure mediates practice mediates ideology, which in turn mediates practice mediates structure. These are three vertices of a genuine semiotic, wherein subtracting any one (which mediates between the other two) collapses the plane of semiosis.

The related notion of *indexical orders* captures the process by which the usage of any n-th order indexical sign is co(n)textualized with other signs, thereby generating (or entextualizing) innovative n+1-st order indexicalities which may themselves become iterable and conventionalized *across* contexts (and thus compete with or replace earlier forms)¹.

Building on these concepts, *enregisterment* describes the historical process through which cultural models of pragmatic meanings – e.g., “ways of speaking”: dialects, speech registers, jargons, etc. – are articulated to repertoires of sign forms which can thus enact such the stereotypes associated with them. As Agha (2007) has insisted, registers – as virtual models – only live in the singular events in which they are invoked; and yet every such event, of necessity, involves co-occurrence between register tokens and signs that exceed the register in question, giving rise to novel meanings in context. These may resediment over historical time as higher-order indexical norms themselves.

We might translate these concepts to the terms of continental semiotics, where we can – at the welcome risk of catachresis – link them to what has been called *enunciative praxis* (Bertrand 1993; Fontanille 1998). Enunciative praxis describes that semiotic movement across “modes of existence” where virtualizations of various sorts are convoked in realized actualities (events of usage), and in being so enunciated become re-virtualized, rendered potentialities of future usages, a movement that builds upon Benveniste's rearticulation of *langue* and *parole* as the appropriation of a virtual system in an act of discourse, and vice versa.

In all these accounts, semiosis is *dynamized* as a temporal *process*, a rhythmic flux made possible by the play of the enchronic and achronic, the singular and general, the tenuously stable pattern and what dynami-

¹ A familiar case is the English second-person plural *ye/you*, which eventually replaced the second-person singular *thou* as usage of the latter became, over historical time, a second-order index of a social type of person: backwards, provincial, “rude”, but also Quaker; these indexicalities, as objects of negative value for most of the speech community led to the form's avoidance, not only undoing the form's lower-order indexicalities (as sign of intimacy, equality, informality, deictically denoting addressee), but also leading to the form's eventual disappearance and subsequently, the reorganization of English's grammatical category PERSON.

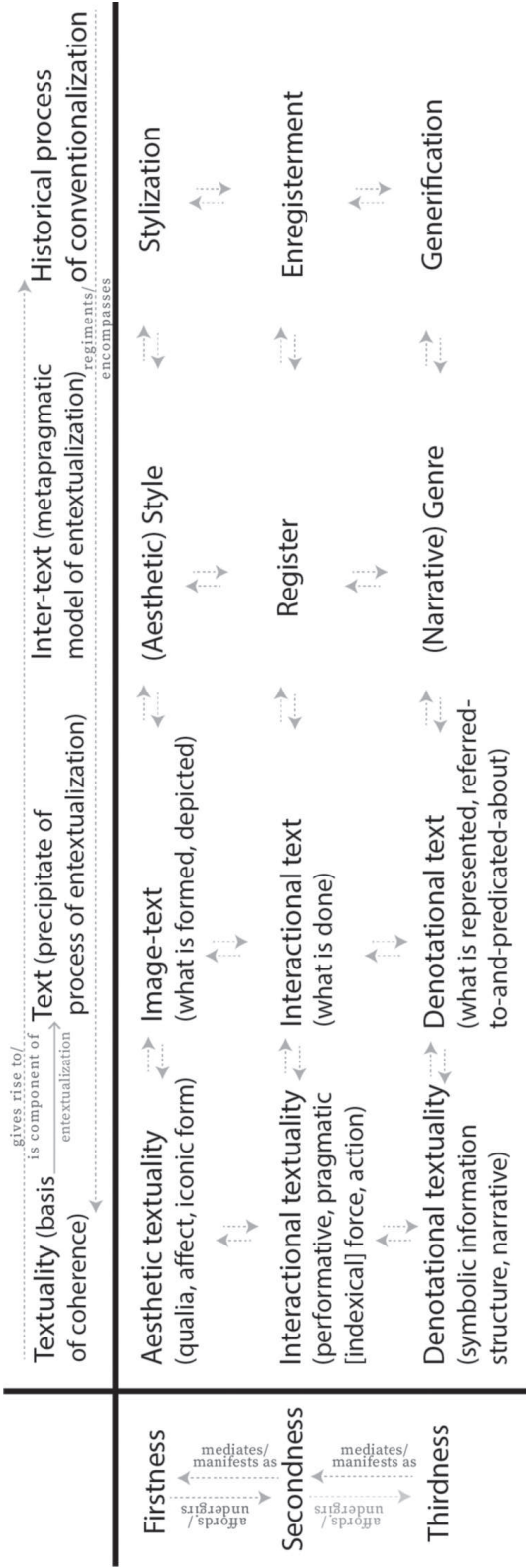
cally disrupts it. To unlock this dialectic requires that we see that at its heart is a particular semiotic ground, what Peirce called *indexicality*. An indexical sign relation turns on an “existential”, “real” connection of a token-sign and its object. Yet, Peirce noted, indexical grounds are not discrete but always implicated with – by being built out of and exapted to build – other grounds: namely, the iconic and symbolic (the possibility of likeness and the generality of conventionality, respectively). Indexicality is the mediating gateway between the two, for every icon (as a-contextualized possibility) and every symbol (as de-contextualized general) must be *embodied* in some event in order to signify. As such, every sign process partakes of indexicality, either by “pointing” to “objects” in the “world” (the universe of discourse the sign presupposes/entails) or by the sign’s spatiotemporal juxtaposition with *other* signs. Signification unfolds through such indexical co-occurrences, propagated as ripples across *textures* of sign forms (the warp and weft of semiosis being indexical relations), textures whose *coherence* gives rise to recognizable, iterable forms (*texts*; Silverstein and Urban 1996), virtualities that in being *entextualized* (rendered *as* text) are de-contextualized *and thus always* also re-contextualizable/contextualized (Bauman and Briggs 1990), set adrift again in the fluvial flux of social life. This movement of entextualization/contextualization is the engine of enunciative praxis, enregisterment, indexical orders, the total linguistic fact, the movement from particular to general, chaos to order, and back again.

To speak of signification is thus to speak of indexicality. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire, or perhaps we should say, *flare*. The noun *flare* denotes both a blaze used to signal and an unsteady, explosive release of light. To *flare* is to burn brightly for a moment, only to return back to a dimmer, steady state. Flares from the sun are ejections of energy, conversions of (virtual) magnetic fields to (realized) kinetic motion that release force in a volatile moment. They are discharges that breach the boundary of the sun by extending it, even as they are inherent to the “system” of the sun and its satellites (like Earth).

Following this metaphor, we might say indexicality implicates (because it produces) the *flaring of signification*, the necessarily possible eruptive contingency of semiosis, the (re)production of meaning. Such flaring is intrinsic to a system of meaning that is always inventing while “giving across”, always forming tradition by folding and forgetting its innovations within itself. The flare escapes signification by already being at its heart, eruptions and emanations across the plane of meaning that are dynamically recouped into it (something of the flare falls back to the solar surface) but never fully, some its energy floating off into space, escaping from its origo, drifting into and ensnared by other “systems”.

With this metaphor in mind, below I discuss the relationship of *enunciation* and *indexicality*, situating both in relationship to the dialectic of *entextual-*

TAB. 1. Three types of textuality, texts, inter-textual metapragmatics, process of conventionalization.



ization/contextualization. I discern three types of entextualization – *aesthetic*, *interactional*, and *denotational*; three inter-textual principles that regiment such entextualizations – *aesthetic style*, *register*, *narrative genre*; and three historical processes of the conventionalization/institutionalization of such intertextual principles – *stylization*, *enregisterment*, *generification* (Table 1).

I exemplify these by discussing “lens flare”: the effect of refraction of light within the lens of the camera that produces streaks or blotches in the image. As an aesthetic element in various Euro-American cinematographic styles and genres (viz. traditions), lens flare has changed over time. Various processes of enregisterment (re-inventions) have driven its enunciative praxis, imbuing lens flare with social indexical values that have propelled its social life. As such, lens flare offers a fruitful occasion to reflect on what Sahlins (1999) once called the “inventiveness of tradition”, which we identify as an intrinsic dimension of the enunciative praxis of semiosis.

2. Enunciation, indexicality, entextualization/contextualization

Indexicality and *enunciation* are linked concepts, historically and intellectually. From the perspective of Peircean semiotics, enunciation is founded on a fundamentally indexical relationship wherein a symbolic ground is anchored to the event of its happening, what Jakobson (1960) discussed as “speech events”. Following Silverstein (1976), we may reread Jakobson’s speech event as a model of indexicality, wherein each of Jakobson’s “factors” is a potential indexical target for some message (a “text”). Here, the questions become: What can a text *index*? And what are the (*meta-indexical* or *meta-pragmatic*) “functions” that make that indexicality possible? It is clear that for signs like personal pronouns, one constitutive function is the denotational code in question. Without knowledge of English, /'aɪ/ and /'ju/ cannot fulfill the referential function of indexing speaker and addressee. Similarly, cultural norms of politeness metapragmatically regiment the “appropriate” and “effective” usage of pronouns and other address forms, most obviously in languages with honorific pronouns.

But beyond such virtual normative metapragmatics, indexical relations are, as we noted, underdetermined outside of an event of use; more precisely, outside of co-occurring semiotic elements, their “co-text”. Hence, in the above sentence that I wrote – “without knowledge of English, /'aɪ/ and /'ju/ cannot...” – neither token functions deictically (even if the preceding “I” does). Indeed, these tokens operate in a “mention” mode: co-occurring signs – the IPA notation, metalinguistic topic of the discussion, the genre (academic article) – collectively *frame* the signs so as to “shift” their indexicality elsewhere; in fact, nowhere in particular! In short, *texture* is an always at play metapragmatic function regimenting indexicality. This

generalizes Jakobson's (1987[1935], 1960) *aesthetic* or *poetic function*, where indexical juxtaposition forms iconic patterns, a "fitting" together or coherence that figurates higher-order semiotic relations, what we've been calling *texts*. Such text(ure)s emerge from the unfolding time-bound rhythm and resonances of token-signs even as they, in turn, regiment the indexical values of the parts that make them up.

As we noted, linguistic anthropologists refer to the real-time, emergent process of such coherence relations as *entextualization*: the forming of *textuality* and its binding as iterable *text*. *Texts*, thus, are virtual patterns that, while emergent, are themselves achronic, precisely in that, once so congealed, they are repeatable types (legisigns) that are continually being (re)contextualized. Every such *contextualization* (as a process of actualization at the level of realized sinsigns) is a moment of potential inventiveness and innovation, of the self-differentiation of the text as it is set into a context that exceeds it. One special case of invention is the reiteration of the norm. Yet this is only one possible effect, and (re)contextualization just as often produces novel configurations and meanings. As the Russian formalists long ago noted, every meter, every pattern, every text constitutively enables a "turning" away, a *tropos*; and yet every such break is itself iterable, entextualizable as a stable pattern in itself, another norm yielding novel topic possibilities.

As this implies, entextualization is always the (re)drawing of the boundaries between text and context, where what is generated though contextualization (the pragmatic effect of the text-in-context) may come to be internalized as part of the norm of the text itself (the text re-invented). Something of the event and its context becomes part of the text that is (re)produced and circulated through the semiosphere.

3. Coherence, textuality, metapragmatics

If entextualization is the real-time process by which co-occurring signs cohere qua text(ure)s, what does it mean to "cohere"? What kinds of coherence are there?

Jakobson's (1960) poetic function homes in on one dimension: the *iconic* resonance of the qualia of signs. Let us call these *image-texts* (Nakassis 2019): diagrammatic pictures drawn through the iconic qualities of sign vehicles that take recognizable iterable form, the "what is formed" of discourse (see Table 1, Row 1, Column 2).

Halliday and Hassan's (1976) discussion of cohesion homes in on another dimension: the "fitting" together of bits of propositional language; more generally, how representational forms compose a coherent world of discourse, a *narrative* made up of referents that have logical and episodic

relations of various sorts. These are *denotational texts* (Silverstein 1993): coherences of symbolic meanings, the “what is represented” of discourse (Row 2, Column 3).

Linguistic anthropologists have pointed to another dimension of coherence: of indexical or pragmatic values. These are *interactional texts* (Silverstein 1993), where what is entextualized is not a representational meaning (a narrative) nor a sensible pattern (a picture) but *social action* (Row 2, Column 2). An interactional text figurates what is *done* in discourse in/ by representing or imaging.

These dimensions are not exclusive (Nakassis 2023b): every denotational text is also part of an interactional text: every narrative is embedded in some social action, just as every interactional (and denotational) text is born by material signs that have an aesthetic textuality. And vice versa: every image in discourse is part of an interactional happening, sutured into and contributing to a narrative/denotational text². An important question is how these different dimensions interact with each other in real- and historical time – amplifying or defeasing or diffracting each other – so as to (re)organize social life. My suggestion is that enunciative praxis and the problematic of the “inventiveness of tradition” can be productively seen as consisting in these textual dimensions in relation to each other.

Yet this itself raises a problem, a sort of chasm whose edge begins at the edge of the semiotic event itself: how do real-time semiotic processes that happen “in” particular events enter into historical processes *between* events? What is the process by which any singularized text-in-context, any innovative trope, comes to be *repeated*, where the potential virtuality of the emergently actual is realized as a semiotic general such that *this* event mediates later events (e.g., where a new indexical order becomes an operative norm regimenting social life)? What kind of semiotics do we need to characterize such inter-textual relations?

4. Stylization, enregisterment, generification

Put otherwise, how are the grounds of *textual* coherence themselves (meta-semiotically) grounded? What makes some set of juxtaposed forms cohere, even be seen *as* juxtaposed, as relevant to each other’s semiosis on *that* dimension (and not some other)?³

² Here, the notion of narrative should not be taken in the technical sense developed in continental semiotics, in particular in relation to “narrativity” (most commonly defined as an act of configuration of meaning through actions and passions [P. Fabbri]). I thank the editors of this issue for encouraging me to clarify this potential *faux ami* in our efforts to form genuine intellectual bonds across our different semiotic traditions.

³ In asking this, we extend Peirce’s notion that a sign is a “genuinely” triadic relation

There are many such meta-semiotic principles that regiment coherence⁴. I'd like to focus on three historical processes – three dimensions of enunciative praxis – that mediate these three dimensions of textuality (aesthetic, interactional, denotational) as they unfold in and *across* semiotic events (of entextualization/contextualization): *stylization* (whose precipitate are aesthetic *styles*), *enregisterment* (whose precipitate are semiotic *registers*), and *generification* (whose precipitate are *narrative genres*) (Table 1, right-most column)⁵. Styles, registers, and genres operate as metasemiotic models regimenting different ways of cohering. They are *inter-textual* metasemiotics in two senses: (1) they are trans-evenemential generals; (2) they serve as the basis for the coherence of any particular text insofar as that text is coherent with the inter-textual series the model holds together.

To begin, let's discuss *register* and *enregisterment*. Sociolinguists understand speech registers as varieties that for speakers count as “different (indexical) ways of saying the same (denotational) thing”. While for early sociolinguists (Halliday 1964), the concept of register captured how different repertoires were understood as appropriate to, and thus correlating with, particular activities, occupations, or social contexts, more recently linguistic anthropologists have theorized registers as “cultural models” of action (Agha 2007). Here, registers like legal speech, medical jargon, or youth slang are duplex phenomena: they consist of *ideological conceptions of speech* (and its variability) that contrastively organize *repertoires of signs* based on their ability to convergently enact (“index”) some pragmatic value in their context of use. Enregistered repertoires of forms thus share a non-referential indexicality in that such forms can be used, under conditions of entextualization, to invoke some social meaning or stereotype *and* enact it

between a *representamen* (a First) and some *object* only insofar as this relation (the *ground*, a Second) is mediated by a Third, an *interpretant*. The interpretant, thus, is a meta-semiotic sign: it construes the ground in some respect, that is, as a type of sign (Gal and Irvine 2019).

⁴ The first, as already suggested, is the simple fact of time-space contiguity, though this is only a possibility (a firstness); the fact of juxtaposition itself is not enough to account for *indexical* relations (too many things – *all* things, in fact – are juxtaposed). Linguistic codes are a meta-semantic principle on the formedness of the building blocks of denotational text, and structuralists of various sorts have problematically extended this insight to propose universal narrative structures. Natural language also provides a wide array of metapragmatic vocabulary to typify social actions of various sorts, and “ordinary language” philosophers have problematically extended this fact to propose universal typologies of pragmatic action. Our biological capacity also provides affordances on our sensorium, and thus on images, though these cannot explain the resplendent variety of sensible semiosis as we find it. And in this is the nub of the issue of invention and tradition: the problem of differentiation, diversity, and dynamic change and its irreducibility to static, universalizing, and reductive biological, cultural, or linguistic approaches.

⁵ Here, *style*, *register*, and *genre* are technical terms whose senses are developed below. I don't intend this discussion to illuminate our everyday senses of these terms but instead to provide analytic tools to explore a particular semiotic problem.

some here-and-now in and by their use. This relation is *non-referential* in that these social meanings (“different ways”) do not differentially contribute to the referential, or propositional, content of the denotational text (“the same thing”). Further, these social meanings (or stereotypes), by being “shifted in” to their context of use, characterize aspects of the event of enunciation with such stereotypy, and in that sense are *metapragmatic*.

A speech register, moreover, never comes in the singular. It is always part of diagrammatic contrast relations. Enregisterment, thus, is not the historical process by which *a* register comes into social existence but by which a *field of variability* is culturally and ideologically organized (Gal and Irvine 2019). Further, every register token is itself always one among many signs, realized within a co(n)textual envelope of other co-occurring partials with which it is intercalated. Some such signs may be pragmatically congruent with the register token, some not. To speak “in” register, or to “break” register is to juxtapose indexical signs that are, respectively, congruent or non-congruent in their metapragmatic stereotypy.

What this means is that registers are not simply ideological models of the variability of speech but that, as ideological models, they are models *for the entextualization of interactional texts*. They are the basis for the coherence of pragmatic action, conditioning how we socially hear speech. Registers make possible the poetic patterning of non-referential indexicalities that “paint” a picture of the activity of their use. Again, this is coherence not on denotational grounds nor based on sensible aesthetic qualia *but on the grounds of their non-referential indexicality*.

We can extend the same approach, *mutatis mutandis*, for *aesthetic styles* and *narrative genres*. *Aesthetic styles* are inter-textual metapragmatics for the entextualization of aesthetic textuality (image-texts) via conventionalized repertoires of aesthetic signs (that conform to that style). *Narrative genres* are an inter-textual metapragmatics for the entextualization of denotational textuality (narratives) via conventionalized repertoires of symbolic signs (that are all birds of a storied feather). And recall that just as every image implies, because it can project into, an interactional text, which can be swept into a denotational text, and vice versa (every narrative is part of a social act which has a sensuous poetics), every *genre* traffics in particular *registers* (but is not bound by them) and manifests in particular *styles*; and vice versa. This corresponds to the fact that the repertoire forms of genres include registers and styles (or elements of them), just as stylistic features bear enregistered indexical meanings and are associated with particular narrative motifs, structures, and the like.

In sum, *styles*, *register*, and *genres* are the historical precipitates of inter-textual links between events of semiosis, themselves comprising a dialectic of entextualization and contextualization, norm and trope; they are virtual models of aesthetic sensibility, pragmatic action, and narrative structure



FIG. 1. Example of lens flare, from Hullin *et al.* (2011). “Physically-Based Real-Time Lens Flare Rendering”, in *ACM Transactions on Graphics* vol. 30, n. 4 (Proceedings of SIGGRAPH 2011).

which are always realized in *particular* events with unique configurations that potentially alter the very models they put into play, (potentially) incorporating elements of those singular events in *later* iterations. And because these different orders of (inter)textuality are always entangled with each other, the enunciative praxis that propels their motility (their reproduction and transformation, emergence and disappearance) – processes of stylization, enregisterment, generification – also involves complex relations *between* them.

I would further assert that the gateway that mediates the relations between such intertextual metapragmatics is enregisterment. Against structuralist visions of autonomous narrative (denotational) textual permutation (Levi-Strauss) or art historians’ aspirations to find the autonomous entelechy of styles (Warburg, Focillon), the driving force of enunciative praxis is *social indexicality* (interactional textuality, enregisterment). Just as every image, in order to realize its possibility, must become a hypo-icon and be indexically tethered to some event of interaction (Peirce 1931-1958, v. 2: §276), and just as every symbol, in order to actualize its generality, requires an index to touch the ground of reality (*ibid.*: §249), every denotational and image text is always already borne by an interactional text, and thus every genre and every style by some register. Processes of enregisterment mediate processes of stylization and generification. To explore these propositions, let us turn to *lens flare* in the history of the Euro-American cinema.

5. Lens flare

Lens flares are aniconic visual artifacts created in a photographic image due to the refraction of light that has entered a camera via its lens. In the studio-era of “classical Hollywood”, lens flare was considered a cinematographic “mistake”, an “imperfection” of the image, the camera lens, or the cinematographer. As Turnock (2012: 161) writes, «in studio lighting conventions of the classical era, lens flares were generally prohibited». Cinematographers avoided flare by controlling lighting sources, by using certain kinds of lenses⁶, and by shooting indoors on sets. Lens flare, thus, was part of a negative repertoire of “classical” Hollywood”, its value determined by the era’s aesthetic style by *not* belonging to it (except as a “mistake”). In general, «the studio’s aesthetic ideal was unobtrusiveness: all elements appeared in proper perspective in the frame and blended seamlessly with the live-action cinematography and *mis-en-scène*» (Turnock 2015: 21). This aesthetic avoided elements like lens flare that drew attention to the (enunciative) act of filmmaking and the image’s mode of production. Instead, it opted for techniques that backgrounded the image’s materiality, favoring a seamless, transparent realism. This cinematography produced – for those of the era – a “professional” image with smooth contours and clear access to its object of focus (Webb 2019). Camera work was typically static, utilizing stable camera mounts (cf. mobile, hand-held cameras), producing images that tended to stay still rather than shake, violently pan, or shift focus. Editing worked to create seamless cuts (cf. jump cuts) within the diegetic construction of a continuous space and time. Fill lighting and a soft, diffused lighting (typically used to glamorize actors, typically in heavy makeup) made for a “slick” or “pretty” image. Further, special effects like rear projection provided a distinctive look for certain scenarios (e.g., driving a car).

These choices, thus, historically emerged as a particular *aesthetic style* – a repertoire of diverse techniques (editing, lighting, camerawork, special effects) that were used to entextualize images whose qualities, through their conventionalized association and professional formalization, resonated iconically with each other in and across particular film texts. In a word,

⁶ The interest in producing flareless images is not unrelated to the technological development of lenses (i.e., the infrastructure of cinema). As Salt reports, «the first practical anti-reflective coatings were applied to camera lenses in 1940, and they came into general use from 1941. These ultrathin coating cut reflection light loss at each lens surface, and also reduced lens flare» (Salt 1977: 48). Salt further notes, «the use of coated lenses [...] made possible sharp black and white images in “against the light” filming situations such as the scene in the projection room at the beginning of *Citizen Kane*. In this case, with earlier lenses the figures silhouetted by the strong arc beam from the projection booth would have been turned from crisp black to grey by a wash of flare, and their edges would have been blurred» (*ibid.*: 49).

they produced the typical “look” of a “classical”, studio-era film. This aesthetic, while not determined by the particular mode of producing such images, developed alongside and was tailored for it. Indeed, by calling this style of the “studio-era” we identify with this aesthetic a particular *economic organization* (studios) and *location* for image production (sound stages).

Not every film of the era conformed to this style or was shot in studios, of course. Yet this style was a recognizable aesthetic standard against which films were evaluated and interpreted (i.e., entextualized). It was relative to this style that things like lens flares; grainy, shaky, blurry images; and discontinuous montage would be typified as “ugly” “unprofessional” “mistakes”, or perhaps as “documentary” or even “European”⁷. This style, thus, mediated the *feel* of films, the entextualization of their images, whether they abided by this norm or deviated from it.

Notice that the above typifications are not strictly aesthetic evaluations. Mixed up in them are also narrative-based, generic judgments (“documentary” *vs.* “commercial”) as well as a host of *metapragmatic stereotypes* that point beyond the screen or the world on it. That a particular aesthetics is “unprofessional” or “European” (vs. American), for example, implies that riding on such (first-order) aesthetic forms are (second-order) non-referential indexical values. That is, the aesthetic and denotational textuality of such filmic texts also harbored indexicalities pointing to the social context of these images, be it the national origin of the films (or the filmmakers), the professional qualifications of its makers, their artistic aspirations (as avant-garde or mainstream), and the like. Such a *style*, in other words, was also *enregistered* and *engenred*.

5.1. “New” Hollywood

This semi-stable configuration of aesthetic style, register, narrative genre – as well as the technological and production assemblage involved, to say nothing of modes of exhibition and reception, distribution and financing, film criticism, and training that went along with it – this “tradition” of filmmaking (“classical Hollywood”) began to come under pressure in the late 1960s. It eventually gave way to an innovative, novel configuration that resignified and in many ways replaced it: what came to be typified as “New Hollywood”.

This transformation emerged across multiple dimensions, central to which was the move out of the studios to location shooting. This tran-

⁷ Location shooting was part of post-World War II filmmaking, both in Europe (e.g., Italian neorealist films and later, the Nouvelle Vague in France) and the United States (e.g., *Naked City*, 1945; see Salt 1977), just as viewers and filmmakers would have been familiar with the aesthetic feel of war-time documentary and news reels (Webb 2019).

sition was quickened by a crisis in the Hollywood film industry in 1969-1970, where studio films were flopping. Webb (2019: 128) writes that, as a result, «the studios were forced to recalibrate their relationship with the audience and to reassess the profitability of particular types of material». The result was more cautious studios who halved their output, providing a space (in theaters) for “independent” features, many of which were themselves financed and distributed, but not produced, by the studios (who diversified their activities by becoming a «command-and-control center from which filmmaking might be outsourced» [Webb 2019: 129]). New technologies – lighter, handheld cameras (Arriflex, Panaflex) that allowed for easier movement during location shooting, new types of film stock that were more photosensitive (and could be used in low-lit, outdoor situations), mobile logistical units (Cinemobile units) – abetted the movement out of the studios.

In this situation, low-budget, location-shot films (e.g., *Midnight Cowboy* [1969, dir. John Schlesinger], *Easy Rider* [1969, dir. Dennis Hopper], *Badlands* [1973, dir. Terrence Malick], *Nashville* [1974, dir. Robert Altman]) featuring non-star, unglamorous actors and helmed by a new generation of filmmakers emerged with critical and financial success. Such filmmakers mainly came from outside of Hollywood’s studio system (and its guild-like apprenticeship training). They arrived as European émigrés (Vilmos Zsigmond, László Kovács, Néstor Almendros) or came from documentary backgrounds. An important and influential number of them – the so-called “movie brats”: Scorsese, Coppola, Lucas, Spielberg, DePalma – were trained in film schools, where they cut their teeth on European cinema verité and avant-garde art films and were exposed to “auteur” film theory (Turnock 2015; Webb 2019: 131).

This new kind of filmmaking – rooted in a distinct mode of production and political economy, technological assemblages, aesthetic sensibility, generation, and political ethos – was, at one and the same time, an innovation in style (aesthetic forms), register (non-referential social indexicalities), and genre (modes of narrative organization). Moreover, it was reflexively understood by its practitioners and its audiences *as* a «break with tradition» (Webb 2019: 132), a *rejection* of the previously dominant mode of filmmaking (Turnock 2015: 25). Such filmmakers were explicitly attempting to re-configure cinematic praxis *through* a semiotics of differentiation from what came before, to do away with the «artificial, set-bound look of large studio sound stages» and «strip away perceived Hollywood artifice» (*ibid.*: 22). This differentiation – as an explicit project «that crystallized into a period style» (Webb 2019: 134) – operated at both the level of *filmic repertoires* (figure 2) and their enactable *metafilmic stereotypes* (figure 3).

Note that most of these aesthetic and narrative forms have nothing necessarily to do with being on location (whip pans, jump cuts, handheld

- *Shooting, lighting, mise-en-scène*
 - Location shooting;
 - Using available light, flat lighting, light with a “harsh” quality, “hard directional sunlight” (Turnock 2012: 162);
 - Looser approach to blocking and staging that allowed people or objects in the mise-en-scène to come between the camera and what it filmed;
 - Avoidance of rear projection and composite backgrounds (done in studios); “by the late 1960s and early 1970s the technique [of rear projection] began to become an emblem of outdated studio filmmaking” (Turnock 2015: 39), i.e., a negative shibboleth.
- *Camera work*
 - Handheld camera work, shaky images (rather than mounted cameras and static images or smooth movements);
 - Telephoto and zoom lens work;
 - Whip pans;
 - Rack focus.
- *Image quality*
 - Grainy images (“roughened look of surfaces; Turnock 2012: 162);
 - “Photographic imperfections such as lens flare” (Webb 2019: 134);
 - Muted color palette.
- *Editing*
 - Long takes;
 - Jump cuts and other irregular editing patterns.
- *Casting*
 - Anti-glamorous actors with unmade faces (vs. glamorous stars with heavy make-up).
- *Narrative style, characterization*
 - “Loosely narrated anti-style”, “as a rejection of Classical Hollywood storytelling” (Turnock 2015: 110);
 - Open-ended narratives;
 - Ambiguous characters.

FIG. 2. Some repertoire elements of “New Hollywood”.

camera work, rack focus can all be done in the studio) – or even with each other (there is no necessary relationship between open-ended narratives and telephoto lenses). They came, however, to be conventionalized as of a piece over this period. As Webb (2019: 134) suggests, non-studio work in the 1960s and 1970s – by rejecting classical Hollywood and its own contingent bundling of aesthetic techniques – enabled these elements to come together *as* a style in this period, and thus serve as an index *of* this period, i.e., to be deployed together in ways that came to be seen as aesthetically cohering, as “fitting” together because they were felt to belong together.

One function of these elements was to draw attention to the process of filmmaking itself. Turnock (2012: 161) writes:

Taking cues from *cinéma vérité* and low-budget, independent location shooting, a primary goal of New Hollywood 1970s cinematography was to renounce studio-bound slick professionalism and instead call attention to the fact that what was in front of

"Classical Hollywood"	: "New Hollywood" ::
studio production	: "independent" production ::
big-budget	: small-budget ::
commercial mainstream	: artistic counter-culture ::
"illusionist", "slick", artificial	: realist, immediate, "authentic" ::
"old-fashioned"	: contemporary, new ::
older generation	: younger filmmakers and audiences ::
reactionary, conservative	: progressive and politically aware.

FIG. 3. Diagram of (metafilmic) stereotypes indexable by enregistered styles of filmic representation (see figure 2), voiced from the perspective of New Hollywood.

the camera was being filmed. This approach had the paradoxical effect of feeling artless and spontaneous (and therefore comparatively naturalistic) while at the same time reminding the viewer of the camera operator behind the lens. A prominent mark of this approach is the use of lens flare.

Once a "mistake", now a fashion, forms like lens flare were freed up to take on new aesthetic, pragmatic, and denotational functions. Conrad L. Halls, the famous American cinematographer, commented on how, in this period, with lens flares he was able to communicate important diegetic elements like intensity while also giving "authenticity" to his films⁸. As Benson-Allot (2011: 10) writes, «during the 1970s, New Hollywood began to treat lens flare as flair, an artistic effect conspicuously conveying filmmakers' awareness of their basic material: light». "Conspicuously conveying" this "awareness", this form of filmmaking drew attention to the lens's physical properties and the presence of the camera (indexing the moment of shooting). In doing so, such films aesthetically broke with the transparency (or more disparagingly, the "illusionism") of classical Hollywood realism *while* also thus making a claim to a newer and better kind of realism that was more "honest" and "authentic" (Webb 2019: 135).

In sum, what drew together such forms and made them cohere together *as* a style was, on the one hand, their contrast to, and rejection of, *other* styles and, on the other hand, their iconization (Irvine and Gal 2000) as felt embodiments of "authenticity".

Lens flare along with other semiotic resources (figure 2) thus came to be "fit" together in a kind of semi-symbolism, i.e., they became usable as elements to make image- and denotational-texts ("films") that fit with a recognizable style and genre: "New Hollywood". Further, this style was mediated by non-aesthetic, non-narrative metapragmatic stereotypes (figure 3). This style pointed offscreen to a new generational consciousness and associated qualities of youthful personhood ("progressive" and "counter-

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IesAvesFUo.



FIG. 4. Sun flaring the camera in *Easy Rider* (1969, dir. Dennis Hopper).

cultural”); a new kind of filmmaker (a “post-hippie” idealist “auteur” with a signature “style” that expressed “their own personal vision”; Turnock 2015: 2, 94); and a particular mode and ethos of production (less hierarchical, location focused, more spontaneous and responsive to the timespace of filmmaking, etc.), among other things. This style, in a word, was *enregistered*.

At the level of individual “New Hollywood” films, all three dimensions of textuality worked in concert. An element like lens flare not only contributed to a particular film’s aesthetic feel; it also pragmatically enacted the identity of its maker (and its spectator), just as it performed – in films like *Easy Rider* (figure 4) – a particular narrative function (Webb 2019: 136): for example, to sensuously embody the ethos of the diegetic world and its characters (a countercultural world of bikers). In any particular film, stylistic sign like lens flare (among many others) came, thus, to be taken as symbolizing forms of generational, cultural critique (an enregistered model of filmmaking) that were emplotted in the diegesis (as part of a new genre of films)⁹.

⁹ This bundling also seized upon race as a narrative element with authenticating pragmatic force and aesthetic qualities. Consider a quote from the opening address to the Conference of Motion Picture and Television Unions, 1973, by Robert Hyle: «Today’s stories call for in many cases the so-called documentary feeling, the urban background, the streets and houses of cities and black communities. Symbolically speaking, the backlot of Hollywood has given way to the backstreets of the cities» (cited in Webb 2019: 125). Here, blackness itself is swept up into the repertoire of forms (along with techniques that give a “documentary feeling”) that “go together” in order to indexically bathe a film in racialized authenticity for a white spectator.

In sum, a particular norm (clean, smooth images edited in seamless continuity, etc.) became grist for the production of new tropes of authenticity and realism (grainy, “ugly” images). Such tropes operated precisely by pointing to the enunciative act of filmmaking (and thus the auteur filmmaker) and their young, sophisticated audiences. Through this, an *n*-th order indexicality – lens flare as an unprofessional “mistake” – gave way to, and indeed, *was replaced with* an *n*+1th order indexicality – lens flare as sign of immediacy, with the honest whiff of progressive, socially aware filmmaking, the counterculture, a new generation, etc.

This had the dialectical effect of not only producing new social meanings but also of re-signifying existing filmic forms and their functions. It is not only, thus, that a new style(-register-genre) emerged, but that “older” styles(-registers-genres) took on new, negative and tabooed, social values. Consider in this context, a quote from American film critic, Charles Champlin, writing in the *Los Angeles Times* in October 1971: «Going to real locations for movies has grown so popular that the idea of shooting a feature film on a sound stage in Hollywood or elsewhere *has come to be as rare and reactionary as wearing sleeve garters or spats*» (cited in Webb 2019: 124, my emphasis). Here, a mode of filmmaking is analogized to the out-of-date fashion of garters or spats, not only “rare” and “out of fashion” but now “reactionary”. You are, in other words, how you film.

5.2. 1970s *Sci-Fi Blockbusters*

Every norm, as a virtuality whose reality lives through its actualizations, gives itself over to its tropic recontextualization and re-normalization. Every style, register, or genre – and more importantly, their tenuous bundling (viz. “Old” or “New” Hollywood) – is, thus, a contingent historical outcome, a seemingly static “tradition” in a dynamic process of continual re-invention. Important to stress is that while these distinct dimensions (aesthetic, interactional, denotational) are always entwined with each other, in their specificity (as *this* style, *this* register, *this* genre) they are also always detachable from each other. While bundled in some normative way or other, each such dimension can always be cited and recontextualized in novel ways that dis- and re-entangle them in new tropic formations, re-stylizing them, re-enregistering them, re-genericizing them (Nakassis 2019).

By the second half of the 1970s, “New Hollywood” was already on the wane. Yet its aesthetic style lived on, if repackaged with other aesthetic elements, set into other genres, and associated with altered indexicalities. As Turnock (2015) shows, while the filmmaking style of 1970s cinematographic live-action was designed to, among other things, index the mode of production of its images and thus authenticate itself *as* realist, in the late

1970s the stylistic elements that carried this indexical function began to be deployed independently of any such mode of production or political sensibility, in effect, *citing* realism to produce a “reality effect”.

This was most noticeable in the science-fiction blockbusters that burst onto the scene in the late 1970s. George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1979) and Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) featured spectacular and fantastical diegetic elements (aliens, spaceships, etc.) depicted with precisely the aesthetics of the New Hollywood films from earlier in the decade, *as if* those fictive denotata had been shot with a co-present camera. Elements like lens flare, shaky handheld camerawork, and motion blur (all indexes of the camera’s encounter with profilmic reality) came to function as a higher-order (citational) index of a particular mode of filmmaking. Lens flares, Turnock writes, had “now evolved into a stylistic cue *associated* with or prompting a sense of immediate docurealism” (2012: 161), picturing “how it [what the image depicted] would look as *photographed*” (*ibid.*: 162). Such films invoked qualities of immediacy, authenticity, and realism associated with “New Hollywood” films while depicting diegetic worlds which were anything but real, authentic, or immediate. In this context, filmic signs like lens flare came to be imbued with new indexical value, precisely by riding on “lower” indexical orders. Such signs were used to produce new tropic effects: authenticating fantasy, allowing the spectator to immerse themselves in a “galaxy far, far away” by aesthetically bathing their sensoria in signs of photorealism (making them “feel” “real”), despite the knowing artifice of the whole endeavor (as achieved by post-production special effects)¹⁰.

As Turnock (2015: 69) has shown, George Lucas was influenced by New Hollywood, auteurist new waves in Europe, West-Coast experimental animation (which he encountered in film school), and Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which he brought together with a “used future” aesthetic and “candy neon” graphic style (taken from popular advertisement and comic books) and which he emplotted in mainstream Hollywood genres (the epic, the Western). In doing so, Lucas created what Turnock calls, after his postproduction studio, Industrial Light and Magic, the “ILM style”. While innovative and an experimental in its time, ILM’s ability to standardize and make more economical the melding of postproduction optical special effects with a “location aesthetic” eventually made its style of photorealist fantasy *the* dominant standard for Hollywood productions in the half-century since.

¹⁰ Webb (2019: 150) writes: Whereas studio-era films had frequently strived to make locations look like studios, the converse was now true, in that the soundstage and optical effects work of the late 1970s and early 1980s was designed to blend seamlessly with the location aesthetic. Location shooting was not so much displaced, then, but rather reintegrated into a transformed, high-tech filmmaking process with new priorities and production values.

Yet if in the ILM style the indexical effects of authenticity rode on spectacle and vice versa, the indexical orders involved also led to the atrophy and transformation of certain elements of the New Hollywood assemblage. As Turnock observes, part of this process was the assertion of a new form of control over the image (cf. Nakassis 2023a), itself a continuation of the auteurist urge of New Hollywood, for which live-action naturalist cinematography was a way to “express” a “personal vision”. As auteurs, special effects, location shooting, and the like gave the (sci-fi) director «total control of all the elements of the frame» (Turnock 2015: 24) rather than being limited by studio conventions, studio producers, or the contingencies and exigencies of shooting locales. While this moved film production further from the shooting spot and into post-production, the selective merging of a naturalist aesthetic with an innovative set of optical special effects itself enregistered this novel style with innovative textual functions/values: for some, serving as an index of a specific production house (“ILM”), and by extension, the personage George Lucas; for most, however, lens flare and other elements have arguably taken on the particular aesthetic look of the *genre* of Lucas and Spielberg’s breakout hits: science fiction. Lens flare has become part of what the otherworldly and sci-fi future “look like”.

This is most apparent from the use of stylized signs of photorealism in purely digital animations like *The Lego Movie* (2011; dirs. Chris Miller and Phil Lord; see Ball 2017) or *Wall-E* (2008, dir. Andrew Stanton; figure 5 – left), as well as video games of various sorts (see Towell 2012; figure 5 – right). Such non-photographic texts liberally use lens flare to produce a particular feel, to stitch themselves into an intertextual history of photorealist style and spectacular science fiction and fantasy genres. Maddock (2018) reports that the director of *Wall-E*, Andrew Stanton felt the need to introduce the “imperfections” associated with live-action filmmaking (lens flare, pincushion and barrel distortion, chromatic aberration) to get a “documentary aesthetic,” something he felt was missing in other animated films which are too clean, too perfect, and thus “inauthentic”. Here, an

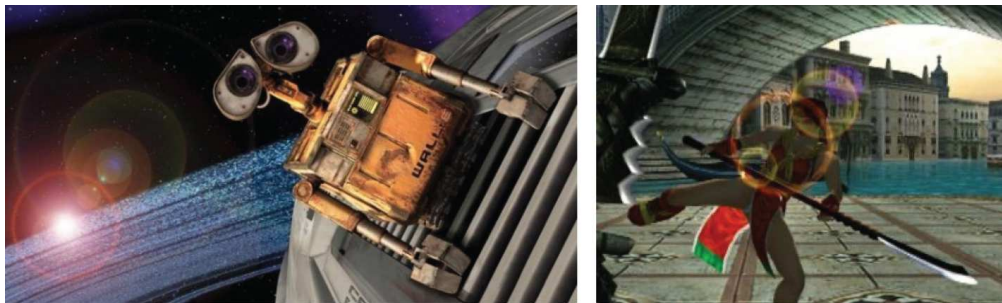


FIG. 5. Lens flares in *Wall-E* (2008, dir. A. Stanton) and video game *Soulcaliber I* (1998).

animation where no lens was used recreates a “virtual hand-held camera operation and virtual light flaring into a virtual lens” (also McQuire 2000; Mullarkey 2009: 54; Gaut 2010: 66-67; Crippen 2019) so as to make it look like it had been photographed on location.

5.3. *Lens flare as shifter*

If lens flare has become widespread in contemporary cinematography, it persists as a potentialized resource for innovative processes of stylization, enregisterment, and generification. Part of the reason for this lability and motility is because lens flare is, and has always been, a *shifter*, an indexical sign radically underdetermined in its (intensional) meaning. As an aniconic artifact of light, lens flare is always part of, contiguous with, and embedded in visual arrays that co-textualize it; it is always, in other words, intercalated with and laminated on other signs (denoting some diegetic world, emplotted in some narrative, etc.). In this sense, the function of lens flare is radically contingent on the *textures* in which it participates.

Above, I discussed how, post-1970s, lens flares came to have an epistemic function: to mark what they co-occur with as having authentically happened in front of the camera. Yet it is clear that lens flares have a much wider range of textual functions. Benson-Allott, for example, notes how Spielberg’s early blockbusters like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.* (1982) «benefited from lens flares whose flourishes helped to blend themes of familiar estrangement, loneliness, and alienation with highly commercial storytelling» (2011: 10); how *E.T.* used light «to convey spiritual as well as physical illumination» (*ibid.*), or simply functioned as «melodramatic punctuation» (*ibid.*). By contrast, in *Close Encounters* «aliens appear only as incandescent blazes, streams, and auras» (*ibid.*). Or, consider a more recent television show like *Saving Hope* (2012-2017), whose premise is about a doctor who comes back from a coma with paranormal abilities to see and communicate with the spirits of his incapacitated patients. While in early episodes, lens flare is used in many kinds of shots and scenarios (to «emphasize the subtle, supernatural elements of the show», as a fan put it [Mae 2012]), after the main character Charlie comes out of his coma, it came to be systematically used to epistemically mark sequences seen from Charlie’s clairvoyant perspective (figure 6 – left). By contrast, sequences where spirits are not involved are shot without lens flare (figure 6 – right).

While this textual function draws on some of the meanings noted above (in particular, of the sci-fi genre), *Saving Hope* tropes on these normative meanings to narrative ends peculiar to it. Any and all such tropes are germs of further norms, of course, moments in emerging new styles, registers, and genres, even if most simply remain potential, that is, stay confined to their particular instances and grow no more.



FIG. 6. Lens flare in *Saving Hope*. Left image: paranormal diegesis co-textualized with lens flare – Dr. Charlie (right) with patient’s spirit (left) and her unconscious body (center); Right image: normal diegesis with no lens flare – Dr. Charlie with the patient in the “normal” world.

5.4. *Lens flare as rigid index*

Earlier, I noted that the photorealist “location aesthetics” of the 1960s and 1970s was connected to, and in part driven by auteurism, that is, to the attempts by directors and critics to enregister particular styles of filmmaking to the *person* of the filmmaker (as the film’s enunciating subject). Such auteurist, person-indexing registers (Nakassis in press) presumably expressed the “vision” or unique identity of the director and did so through a *generalized* style (“location aesthetics”) that included lens flares. Yet even if lens flare was one semiotic tool available to such auteurs, it was not, in itself, indexical of (i.e., didn’t function as a shibboleth of) any particular individual.

In the 2000s and 2010s, however, lens flare came to be rigidly associated with director J.J. Abrams, the commercial science-fiction director of the television series *Fringe* (2008-2013) and films such as *Mission Impossible III* (2006), *Star Trek* (2009), and *Super-8* (2011). While many directors in the 2000s used lens flare with a range of aesthetic, interactional, and denotational functions, the sheer density and, to many viewers’ minds, excessive usage of lens flare in Abrams’s texts drew reflexive attention to his use of the technique. Eventually it came to be seen, for some social domain, as a rigid index of Abrams’s own auteurial style (figure 7).

Lens flare have various *n*-th order functions in Abrams’s films: for example, Benson-Allott (2011: 10) reads Abrams’s usage of lens flare in *Super 8* as echoing Spielberg’s «link between light, grief, and hope» where «lens flares repeatedly signal a nostalgia for 1970s filmmaking». Lens flares thus function «as a visual metaphor for grieving», to «mourn the outmoded sincerity of their [*ET* and *Close Encounters*’s] technique as well as the camaraderie of adolescent *Super 8* productions», to express both «trauma and therapy», to «remind[] us of and assuage[] our alienation», as well as to «signal moments that suggest a possibility of cinematic salvation» (2011: 10-11). By contrast, his 2009 *Star Trek* «supplements cosmic realism (the



FIG. 7. Lens flare in *Star Trek* (2009) and *Super 8* (2011), directed by J.J. Abrams.

atmospheric glow around stars and moons) with exaggerated streaks of glare meant to express the boundless possibility of science fiction» (2011: 11). Benson-Allott quotes Abrams as saying, «I love the idea that the future was so bright it couldn't be contained in the frame», conveying «the sense that, just off camera, something spectacular is happening» (*ibid.*).

Viewers and critics, however, critiqued Abrams for unduly using flares (reportedly by having flashlights shone directly into the camera), complaining that they intrude on the image and obscure the image, «producing spectacle instead of nuance» (Benson-Allott 2011: 11; also see AVS Forum «Lens flares – will this fad go away soon?» [22-27 July 2012] for grievances, especially against Abrams, for overusing the “visual gimmick”).

A quick inspection on YouTube, reveals a number of meta-filmic commentaries, largely parodic, of Abrams's usage, from long compilations of lens flares in Abrams's films¹¹ to the short, 42-second parody film, *Lens Flare: The Movie* (2011; figure 8)¹².

Littered with lens flare, this satire's title card announces, in a ponderous voice-over: «From acclaimed producer, J.J. Abrams». We see lens-flare filled shots of two people looking to a light source and we hear a voice, «when-ever you're around light they seem to shine so much brighter», a seeming allusion to Abrams (the “you” in the dialogue?) that emplots lens flare as a narrative actant within the parody's diegesis (the meta-cinematic universe of Abrams, as it were). After a cut back to the title card, announcing, «And from visionary director, J.J. Abrams», we see an agitated man yelling at another man at a gas station: «I don't know what it is, but it's making the lights brighter!». The image cuts to a hand-held, extremely shaky shot of the two men running, the image riddled with flares, and then a low-shot of four people (including the two men); one says, dramatically over melodramatic music, «Look, there is something out there and it's killing everyone. I mean, the military's here, but they're not helping any of us!». After we hear a screeching sound in the background over a completely black image (the sound, as one commenter in the comments section notes,

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALHiJaSPrns&t=21s>.

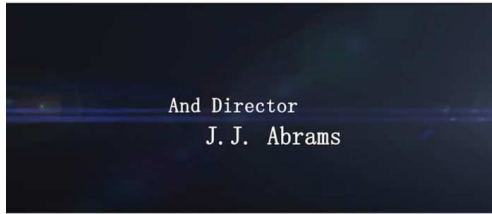
¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHqjmlM3kxs>.



Voice-over: "From acclaimed producer, J.J. Abrams"



"Whenever you're around light they seem to shine so much brighter"



Voice-over: "And from visionary director, J.J. Abrams."



Man on right: "I don't know what it is, but it's making the lights brighter!"



Man in center: "Look, there is something out there and it's killing everyone. I mean, the military's here, but they're not helping any of us!"



Woman: "Do you see it coming?"

Man on left: "I can't see a goddamn thing!"



FIG. 8. *Lens Flare: The Movie* (2011).

comes from *Super-8*), the image cuts again to the four characters. The flare in this image is so extensive that you can't fully see the character on the left. The woman says, «Do you see it coming?», ambiguously referring to the killer lens flare (or its cause: Abrams!), as the agitated man of the left meta-cinematically exclaims, «I can't see a goddamn thing!» (Commenters on the video found this line – the dramatic and comedic climax of the lampoon – the film's most hilarious moment). The film ends with a cut back to a black image smeared with lens flare, as the title of the film, *LENS FLARE* appears.

Metadiscourses like this both reflect on and participate in the ongoing enregisterment of lens flare's indexicality: not (only) as a generalized aes-

thetic style (a “location aesthetic”), not (only) as indexical of a social type of personhood (post-war countercultural youth) or even a genre (science fiction, the paranormal), but rather as the preserve of the lampooned individual¹³. Even while functioning through these indexical orders, in this moment lens flare is also indexical of Abrams, whose personage thereby hovers over all other such “lower”-order indexicalities. Consider the following commentary in an article about the cinematography of *The Lego Movie*:

Flares were also added to images, sometimes using plugins in Nuke or elements created in other software but more often added in DI. The flares were either added for reasons of photographic fidelity e.g. to emulate what happens when a bright LED light source is visible in the framing of a shot with an anamorphic lens (*such as the clichéd anamorphic flares that J.J. Abrams actually apologized for over-using all over the place in his movies*), or to contribute to dramatic reveals in a thematic sense, for example in the reveals of Wildstyle/Lucy where a playful visual sense of the ridiculous coupled with a musical motif underscored a recurring gag (<https://www.expandedcinematography.com/the-cinematography-of-the-lego-movie.html>; my *italicization*).

The intensity and publicness of critique – the negative counter-enregisterment of lens flare to Abrams – was enough that Abrams, as the article alludes, eventually apologized for his excessive usage and abandoned the form¹⁴. Reportedly, he «confessed that there were so many lens flares in early cuts of *Star Trek Into Darkness* that he hired special effects house Industrial Light & Magic [NB: George Lucas’s postproduction house!] to erase some of his signature embellishments from the film»¹⁵.

In sum, lens flare, through such parodic tropes, is presupposed as an index of Abrams even as it is also simultaneously recontextualized as iconizing absurd excess, a quality that itself is returned, via the form’s rigid indexicality, *back* to the figure of Abrams as a kind of infamy. Further, this double indexicality (presupposing a referent while entailing a characterization of it) itself resulted in a reconfiguration of how Abrams used lens flare *and* framed its usage: on the one hand, he apologized for over-using it while, on the other hand, reducing it in his films. As we suggested earlier, enregisterment proceeds through indexical orders – a dialectic of norm/trope, entextualization/(re)contextualization – and thus propels an enunciative praxis, one that dynamically produces new virtualities and new

¹³ Of course, Abrams’s career and “personal style” is itself made up of citations to all of the above (including to the auteur figures of Lucas and Spielberg, in whose cinematic footsteps Abrams is framed as following), this citationality stitching Abrams both as an individual auteur and as part of a longer intertextual history of cinema.

¹⁴ <https://www.polygon.com/2016/3/11/11206910/jj-abrams-lens-flare-stop-star-trek-into-darkness>.

¹⁵ <https://www.theverge.com/2013/9/30/4788758/j-j-abrams-apologizes-for-his-overusing-lens-flares>.

actualizations, potential ranges of meanings that users enact and deploy to invent *new* texts, *new* norms, further grist for other semiotic mills.

Indeed, Abrams's own association with lens flare is built upon layers of social meanings that lie as presupposed conceptualizations, as potentialities to be redeployed in tropes upon it. Hence, as commenters on the *Lens Flare: The Movie* YouTube page debated Abrams's merit as a filmmaker, one user concludes, «jj is about as deep as a wading pool... him and his cohorts know how to make it seem like they have different and interesting ideas but they turn out to be hackneyed and derivative». The presupposition in comments like this is that while lens flare might normatively be taken as the sign of a director who is “deep” (not shallow), “different and interesting” (not hackneyed and derivative) – precisely the stereotypes enregistered over the 1970s and 1980s – Abrams is anything but. Similarly, in the AVS forum devoted to grievances against lens flare and its abusers (primarily Abrams), one commenter, oink sarcastically writes, «Yes [pointing a flashlight into the camera is “NOT natural”], but JJ says it's “cool”». Oink later writes, «Lens flair [sic] flare, like shakey cam, is being used as a gimmick (“look at me, ain't I avant-garde!”)». Here, oink voices the director with a speech act indexical of children's speech, “look at me, look at me!”, figuring lens flare as a childish way to simply get attention. Notice, further, that what the voiced figure of the immature director wants is to be seen as “avant-garde”. And yet the speech register in the rest of the utterance is voiced as relatively non-coherent with the figure of the artist, both because of its childishness and because of its non-standardness (“ain't” *vs.* “are not”; also note oink's earlier use of “cool”). Each element of this represented speech construction – as a metapragmatic gloss of the pragmatics of lens flare – thus projects different enregistered figures: a child, the non-standard lumpen, the avant-garde artist. The composite tropic effect is an absurd chimera, a gauche poseur “as shallow as a wading pool”. If lens flare is an index of the auteur, Abrams, these comments bring him down a notch as just another derivative token of a “hackneyed” social type, the paragon of the wannabe artiste¹⁶.

¹⁶ This is, of course, only one take on Abrams. Comments also reveal those for whom the lens flare was not bothersome, and who appreciate Abrams's stylistic flourishes. Further, Abrams's use of lens flare can also be observed as a positive touchstone for other media texts. For example, in the fan blog of *Saving Hope* discussed earlier (Mae 2012), the author praises the show and laments it being cancelled, writing: «It's not that *Saving Hope* is especially creative in its premise or themes. It's essentially the Denny plotline of Grey's Anatomy crossed with Mercy, with a dash of the reaper plotline from Supernatural, *and it looks like it's directed by JJ Abrams* thanks to an abundance of artistic lens flares (which nicely emphasize the subtle, supernatural elements of the show)» (my *italicization*).

6. Conclusion

To paraphrase the late Marshall Sahlins, the dialectic of similarity and difference discussed in this paper is a “normal mode” (1999: 411) of semiotic production; and to quote him, it is one characterized by the «permutation of older forms and relationships, made appropriate to novel situations» (*ibid.*: 408), a movement of *norm* and *trope* carried by the winds of *entextualization* and *contextualization* in the light of processes of enregisterment, stylization, and generification, that is, by the *flaring* of semiosis. This “inventiveness of tradition” is the *norm* of semiosis; to appreciate this requires that we do not swing back and forth with the pendulum that drives this mechanism, comprehending this dialectic as the oscillation of opposites. Rather, we must see this dialectic as a coordinated movement, or better, as two *dimensions* or *aspects* that are not ordered in time per se, not phases or steps exactly, but instead two sides of the same ripped page (to recall a metaphor from Saussure). Not appreciating this may lead us feel we have to “choose” sides; and it was this that Sahlins, in his own inventive defenses of the tradition, warned against in declaring that a “fear of structure” (or, *mutatis mutandis*, event) was unproductive, for choosing a side is to moralize and avoid understanding (even explaining) what we have set ourselves to. Sahlins arguments may not have carried the day in the discipline (many anthropologists have abandoned the two or three things he knew about culture), even though, or rather especially because, his critique was so insightful and incisive, as relevant then as now (*plus ça change pas, plus la meme chose ...*); yet if Sahlins did not carry the day, this was not for lack of sound argument but because of the power(!) of a certain cultural logic(!) of the time; in the interim, other (related) traditions – semiotics and linguistic anthropology – have invented new tools to comprehend this tradition, this dialectic of culture, as a (meta)pragmatic semiotic process, as a tussle over the *enregisterment* of the indexical baggage of cultural concepts; in Sahlins’s case, as a case in point, over the culture concept (and the wider repertoires it anchored).

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