It was sometime in November 2000. I was walking along an Arabian street, taking in the rhythms of the arabesque decorations and the spectacular, multi-colored buildings; being entertained by the exotic street musicians; and occasionally being lured into various bazaars that offered the temptations of products ranging from Persian rugs and glassware, to Versace gowns and DKNY accessories. At one point, I found myself at a pier. I looked up at the sky and, while soft, fluffy clouds punctured its blue (yet somewhat solid) surface, it seemed like it was going to be a beautiful day. But what do I know? No sooner had I thought this than the rumbling sounds of thunder vibrated through the air and flashes of lightning lit up the now-transformed dark and ominous clouds. And the rain came pouring down, creating restless ripples in the previously still waters near the pier. So I left Arabia and walked across the road to Lake Como, where I took in the sights of the palazzo Bellagio as it stood majestically in the background. Initially, the enormous lake reflected the palazzo in its tranquil waters, then thousands of small tubes began to puncture its surface, and the first bars of music suddenly filled this vast space. I recognized the tune—Frank Sinatra’s “Lady Luck”—and it was, indeed, a toe-tapper. As hundreds flocked around balconies overlooking the lake, the lake’s water began to magically take on a life of its own: spurts of water swayed left and right, back and forth in perfect unison with the rhythms of Sinatra’s crooning. And the audience continued to look on, mesmerized by the spectacle they witnessed, astounded by the rhythmic motions of water, which included stretches of up to fifty meters erupting to heights that exceeded one hundred meters.

Confronted by such wonder, I found it very difficult to wipe the smile off my face. And just as the smile began to subside, it would reemerge making the muscles in my face hurt. Why? This was Las Vegas and in this space so much was within my reach. Cities: Arabia (at the Desert Passage/Aladdin), New York (at the New York, New York), Ancient Rome (at Caesar’s Palace), Venice (at the Venetian), Egypt (at the Luxor), and Lake Como (at the Bellagio). Technologically produced spectacles: the digitally created
storms that erupt from the trompe l’oeil ceilings at the Desert Passage, the computer generated dancing water displays at the Bellagio, the animatronic (robotic) fight of the gods for Atlantis at Caesar’s. Blockbuster art exhibitions: the Philips art collection at the Bellagio, and the planned Guggenheim collection soon to grace the interior of the Venetian. 3-D simulation rides: the Race for Atlantis at Caesar’s, the Search for the Obelisk at the Luxor, and the multitude of game arcades (which include simulation rides) that are now a prerequisite for all hotel/casinos. And if this variety of visual stimulation wasn’t enough, it was always possible to catch a film at the mega- and multi-screen Cineplex next to the MGM Grand.

As a spectacle city—a Spectopolis1—Las Vegas (since the dominance of 1980s multimedia conglomerates) stands as a paragon to the ways in which our city environments are transforming, reflecting our era’s fascination with visuality and sensory encounters that have become interwoven with entertainment experiences.

In the last two decades entertainment media and our leisure spaces have undergone dramatic transformations. The movement that describes these changes is one concerned with the traversal of boundaries—a traversal that shares a concern with the spectacular possibilities of entertainment forms. Effects such as the water display at the Bellagio, the animatronic Fall of Atlantis at Caesar’s, and the interior storm in the Desert Passage are constructed by effects crews that traditionally belonged to the realm of the cinema. In the film The Matrix, film technology combines with computer technology in order to construct the highly kinetic effects that were integral to the film’s success. The Jurassic Park films, Terminator films and the Spiderman comic books find new media environments in the theme park attractions Terminator 2: 3-D Battle Across Time, and The Amazing Adventures of Spiderman (all three at Universal Studios, Los Angeles and Orlando). Computer and console games like the Tomb Raider and Final Fantasy series cross their game borders by incorporating film styles, genres, and human-like forms into their digital spaces. In turn, these games are reborn as cinematic spectacles. Furthermore, these potent visual entertainment forms invade our cultural spaces, shaping and informing the structures of our cinema complexes, shopping malls, casino complexes, and museum and gallery spaces. We are living in a time when our entertainment spectacles insert themselves into our urbanscapes in spatially invasive ways.

We tend to view the digitally reliant visual effects that populate our social arenas as products that are particular to our postmodern age and, indeed, they are. However, a great deal is to be learned about our contemporary fascination with spectacle by relating it to the history of media cultures. It isn’t contemporary media alone that are competing and inter-
acting with one another on the level of spectacle. This fascination with and saturation of the visual is a phenomenon that has older historical roots. Specifically, this essay investigates ways in which late twentieth-early twenty-first-century entertainment spectacles have witnessed a re-emergence of baroque form, reflecting the baroque’s metamorphosis into a more technologically driven method of expression of the neo-baroque.

In recent years, a number of theorists and historians, including Calabrese, Deleuze, Perniola and Maravall, have explored the formal, social, and historical constituents of the baroque and neo-baroque. Deleuze understood the baroque in its broadest terms “as radiating through histories, cultures and worlds of knowledge” including areas as diverse as art, science, costume design, mathematics, and philosophy (Conley in Deleuze 1993, xi). Likewise, in his historical and cultural study of the seventeenth-century Spanish baroque, Antonio Maravall has observed that it is possible to establish certain relations between external, purely formal elements of the baroque in seventeenth-century Europe and elements present in very different historical epochs in unrelated cultural areas . . . [Therefore] it is also possible [to] speak of a baroque at any given time, in any field of human endeavour (1983, 4–5).

Concerned with the seventeenth-century, Maravall’s interest is in the baroque as a cultural phenomenon that emerges from the specific historical situation of that century. However, Maravall also privileges a sense of the baroque that escapes chronological confines. His approach is a productive one. While exploring eras that are separated by over two hundred years—and which have cultural phenomena particular to their specific historical situations—it is, nevertheless, possible to identify and describe a certain morphology of the baroque that dominates in both eras.

In his book The Life of Forms in Art—originally published in 1934—Henri Focillon makes a significant observation with regard to the formal properties of art. Despite his strictly formalist concerns, significantly, Focillon understood form in art as an entity that was not necessarily limited to the constraints of time or specific historical periods. Quoting a political tract from Balzac, he stated that “everything is form and life itself is form” (1992, 33). For Focillon, formal patterns in art are in perpetual states of movement, being specific to temporal confines but also spanning across them. He states:

Form may, it is true, become formula and canon; in other words, it may be abruptly frozen into a normative type. But form is primarily a mobile life in a changing world. Its metamorphoses endlessly begin anew, and it is by the principle of style that they are above all coordinated and stabilized. (1992, 44)
While the historical baroque has traditionally been contained within the rough temporal limits of the seventeenth century, to paraphrase Focillon, I suggest that baroque form still continued to have a life — one that recurred throughout history, but which existed beyond the limits of a canon. The seventeenth and late twentieth/twenty-first-century nurtured cultural climates that permitted the baroque to "become formula and canon": both epochs reflect wide-scale baroque sensibilities that, while being the product of specific socio-historical and temporal conditions, reflect similar patterns and concerns on formal and aesthetic levels. Both epochs underwent radical cultural, perceptual, and technological shifts that manifested themselves in similar aesthetic forms. While specific historical conditions differ radically, a similar overall formal effect was achieved. Social crisis and change "created a climate from which the baroque emerged and nourished itself" (Maravall 1983, 53). While the cultural transformations are beyond the scope of this essay, through a comparison with seventeenth-century examples of the baroque, I will explore aspects of the neo-baroque aesthetic that are manifested in contemporary media spaces. In particular, I will introduce a central feature of the baroque and neo-baroque in the context of a seventeenth and late twentieth/early twenty-first-century shared fascination with spectacle, illusionism, and the formal principle of the collapse of the frame: specifically, the (neo)baroque architecture of vision.

**Classical and Baroque Form**

Deleuze’s analysis of baroque vision is an appropriate interpretative tool here. He suggests that the baroque offers an "architecture of vision" that situates the viewer in a spatial relationship to the representation (Deleuze 1993, 21). The spatially invasive nature of (neo)baroque spaces instigates participatory spectatorial positions through dynamic compositional arrangements. With borders continually being rewritten, (neo)baroque vision provides models of perception that suggest worlds of infinity that lose the sense of a center that is traditionally associated with classically ordered space. Rather, the center is to be found in the position of the spectator, with the representational centre changing depending on the spectator’s focus. Given that (neo)baroque spectacle provides polycentric and multiple shifting centers, the spectator, in a sense, remains the only element in the image/viewer scenario that remains centered and stable. It is the audience’s perception and active engagement with the image that orders the illusion. Rather than providing a statically ordered perspectival arrangement, the ‘center’ continually shifts, the result being the articulation of complex spatial conditions. The notion of the ‘passive
spectator’ as voyeur collapses when media experiences immerse the viewer in spectacles that aim at perceptually removing the presence of the frame.  

Classical systems are characterized by closure. Such closed systems—which have traditionally been associated with the Renaissance—remain centered, ensuring narrative clarity and symmetry of organization. Raphael’s mural decoration of the School of Athens (1509–11) reflects such a classical attitude to narrative and visual form. The architectural arrangement recedes into the background, centering the two key figures—Aristotle and Plato—while a series of other philosophers flank them on either side. The fresco is dedicated to Philosophy and, while each of the other philosophers—including Socrates, Pythagoras, Ptolemy, Heraclitus, Diogenes—are depicted in unified groups, “each group is tied to the whole by some detail that serves as a hyphen that relates the details, through compositional arrangement” to the central narrative concern focused around the figures of Aristotle and Plato (Murray 1986, 41). Aided by the use of one-point perspective, the representation aims at perceptually extending the two-dimensional wall space through architectural and figural arrangements that lead the gaze of the spectator into the depth of the composition. The overriding sensation of the compositional and narrative arrangement is of the framing of the main protagonists within a closed and focused narrative and representational scenario, a feat achieved by the rigid, painted architectural framework.

Reflecting the capacity to “rationalize vision through mathematics” Raphael put into practice the Renaissance classical system that was earlier theorized by Alberti in his Della Pittura of 1435. The mathematical clarity of perspective was employed to “produce the illusion of a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface” (Ackerman 1991, 60). According to Ackerman, perspective, in combination with lighting and color, became “the paradigmatic invention of the Renaissance, in that it literally brought all perceived space under rational control” (Ackerman 1991, 61). The effect is one of a representational reality that is contained within the frame. Depicting a represented reality that effaces its construction through rational means, the spectator looks into this space as if looking through a window beyond which another world exists.

It is worth noting the parallels that film theorists and historians have established between the categories of Renaissance art and the classical Hollywood paradigm. Combining Renaissance art’s reliance on one-point perspective with the more powerful mimetic system of photographic realism, classical Hollywood cinema has also been viewed as producing a representational space that similarly attempts to be transparent “like a window onto the real” (Bazin 1967, 29). Andre Bazin, for example, viewed the photographic realism of the cinema as containing the “characteristics of the ripeness of a classical art.” In
particular, Bazin focused on classical form and themes that were also highlighted by Alberti in his Della Pittura: an art that has perfect balance, narratives that stress dramatic and moral themes, and a realism that is self-effacing. As will be discussed below, contemporary effects films and related entertainment media complicate classical form by imposing a baroque logic upon it.

According to Martin Jay, the “baroque ocular regime” is one often associated with a delight in visual spectacle. The baroque is an order that calls upon systems of classical or Renaissance perspective in order to overturn, investigate, or complicate their rational, self-contained visual and narrative spaces. The baroque example of Pietro da Cortona’s ceiling painting of The Glorification of Urban VIII (Rome, 1633–1639) in the Palazzo Barberini is, in many respects, a paragon of baroque attitudes to spectacle and illusionism—to the baroque ocular regime. The single, immobile viewpoint of the classical spectator is transformed into a dynamic process that changes as a result of its three-dimensional capacity to actively engage the spectator in spatial terms. The Renaissance ideal of a perspectively guided representation (evident in Raphael’s School of Athens) is replaced by a baroque concern with complex, dynamic motion and multiple perspectives that are dependent on the position of the viewer in relation to the work.

Henri Focillon views classical forms as remaining encased in a space that “keeps them intact.” Baroque forms, however,

pass into an undulating continuity where both beginning and end are carefully hidden. . . . [The baroque reveals] “the system of the series”—a system composed of discontinuous elements sharply outlined, strongly rhythmical and . . . [that] eventually becomes “the system of the labyrinth,” which, by means of mobile synthesis, stretches itself out in a realm of glittering movement and color. (Focillon 1992, 67)

The baroque’s difference from classical systems lies in the refusal to respect the limits of the frame. Instead it “tend[s] to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all its possibilities” (Focillon 1992, 58). The lack of respect for the limits of the frame is manifest with intense visual directness in baroque attitudes towards spectacle. The impact and meaning of Cortona’s ceiling painting depends on the interaction and combination of multiple, shifting viewpoints and narrative perspectives—all of which operate to collapse the classical function of the frame. The frame is present so that its function can be undermined. Open systems typical of the baroque permit a greater flow between the inside and outside, and operate according to a polycentric logic.
Rather than reflecting a classical concern for the static, closed and centralized, the baroque system is dependent upon dynamic forces that expand, and often rupture borders (Calabrese 1992, 66). Differentiation, polycentrism and rhythm are central to baroque storytelling strategies and, as will be argued below, neo-baroque entertainment media of the late twentieth /early twenty-first-century also introduce “a taste for elliptical form provided with real centres and multiple potentials” (Calabrese 1992, 44).

Cortona’s ceiling painting reveals precisely such a polycentric organization. Whereas Raphael contains his narrative by framing it within a hemispherical border that rigidly encloses the composition, Cortona uses the frame in order to escape its limits. In a sense, by multiplying and layering classical form, Cortona has divided the vault of the ceiling into five parts, each dealing with separate narratives that are demarcated by painted stucco frames. A personification of Divine Providence floats in the central panel offering support for Pope Urban VIII’s worthiness of immortality (Wittkower 1985, 252–253). Despite the seemingly distinct narrative segments, Cortona is not concerned with a narrative limit such as that present in Raphael’s painting. In the cornice that intersects with Minerva and the Giants, for example, numerous figures and swirling clouds tumble and float in front of and behind the painted stucco frames with the result that the narrative from one panel literally spills into the narrative of another. In addition, the impression is such that, in order to spill into the next visual and narrative space, the figures and objects perceptually appear to enter our own space within the Palazzo Barberini. A strictly classically aligned composition would, instead, have enclosed and kept discrete the separate narrative borders.

While the scene in the center of the vault depicting the glorification of Urban VIII is important, the viewer is also invited to follow serial paths that lead to other representational centers. The depiction of each narrative suggests a dynamic space and open attitude, one that aims at and produces “an unlimited space continuum” (Wittkower 1985, 252). Indeed, baroque spectacle often serves a dual function. It operates on the principle of co-extensive space—a space that illusionistically connects with and infinitely extends from our own (as seen in the central panel of the Barberini ceiling where the solidity of the vault appears to be punctured and perceptually extends to the heavens), and it constructs a labyrinthaline space that produces an expansive network of spatial formations that appear to connect with our own (as witnessed by the figures who threaten to tumble into the space of the spectator). It therefore draws the gaze of the spectator “deep into the enigmatic depths and the infinite” (Perniola 1995, 93) while also rhythmically recalling what Focillon labels the “system of the labyrinth.”
Neo-Baroque Architectures of Vision

Our own neo-baroque spectacles similarly reflect Deleuze's articulation of the architectural dimension of baroque vision. Two recent examples suggest the extent to which this dual articulation of the "architecture of vision" embodied by the infinite and the labyrinth has become ingrained in Hollywood effects cinema, primarily as a result of computer generated special effects.

The opening scene of Contact (Zemeckis, 1997) literally (at least, in visual terms) makes the spectator become "lost in space." Computer effects create the illusion of the longest zoom-out shot in the history of the cinema as the camera appears to travel ever outwards through infinite space, continually relocating its center, from planet to planet, solar system to solar system. We are confronted by an infinite vision, one that ultimately deceives us as it shifts from outer space to inner space—while placing equal emphasis on the infinite.

Event Horizon (Anderson, 1997) again plunges the audience’s vision into an infinite zoom-out. In one sequence, the camera (or the computer effect mimicking a camera motion) centers on the view of a figure through a window. The figure appears to be hanging upside down but, as the camera pulls out it also rotates and recenters the spectator’s view to one that encompasses a larger view of a space station which includes further figures seen through windows situated at different angles to the original figure. Again, the camera zooms out and, as it rotates, provides an even longer shot of the station. So it continues, until this dizzying ‘architecture of vision’ reveals the massive polycentric and labyrinthine structure that is the space station, which is itself situated within a boundless space. All the while, the spectator’s vision becomes the locus for multi-centered viewpoints.

A neo-baroque logic pervades both scenes, one that turns traditional monodirectional perspective on its head. In the construction of a co-extensive and labyrinthine space, "a" center is no longer present. The continual and multiplication of relocation of the center creates a spatial disorientation that emphasizes kinetic motion. In these instances, via the camera (and computer that produces the digital effects) our vision often appears to be violently thrust into the space and representation on the screen. In Event Horizon and Contact the combination of film and computer technology create a spectacle of kinetic motion, one that intensifies the seventeenth-century baroque’s fascination with movement and the "turning-eye" (Kemp 1990, 212). Once the frame illusionistically collapses, traditional perspective, which relies on the frame and a static viewpoint also collapses. An illusion of infinity itself is placed before the
spectator and an invitation is extended to engage with the spectacle in spatially and architecturally disorienting terms.⁹

In her discussion of contemporary science fiction cinema, Vivian Sobchack suggests that Jameson's articulation of postmodernist space finds expression in post-1977 science fiction films. Special effects spaces present themselves as "total spaces" that "stand for, and replace all other space"; the special effects environments of science fiction cinema also "celebrate hybrid expression, complexity, eclecticism, and 'variable space with surprises'" (Sobchack 1987, 255).¹⁰ The special effects spaces of science fiction cinema—and, I would add, effects-driven cinema, theme park attractions, and spectacle cities like Las Vegas—play on precisely such complexities and spaces that surprise, calling upon the (neo)baroque concept of the great theatre of the world where the world and theatre, reality and performance blur. Contemporary entertainment spectacles greatly expand upon techniques of co-extensive space that drive the illusionistic traditions that dominate in the seventeenth-century baroque—where the fictive and the real appear to merge. The art that emerges, then and now, is concerned with perceptually (and sometimes literally) escaping the limitations of two-dimensional space.

It is theme park rides like Star Tours at Disneyland, the Back to the Future and Terminator 2: 3-D attractions at Universal Studios, and the recent Amazing Adventures of Spiderman 3-D roller coaster at Universal's Islands of Adventure in Florida, that further expand the potential for realizing a neo-baroque complexity of space. Theme park attractions evoke a spatial indeterminacy that thrives on kineticism and intense sensory engagement. Often using hydraulically powered motion simulators combined with film and digital technology, the participatory and invasive nature of these spectacles produce such an intense sense of the architectural dimension of sight that many an audience member literally suffers the effects in the form of nausea.

This is the realm of baroque spectacle as theatre of the world: once invited beyond the proscenium, and beyond the frame, the frame perceptually disintegrates embroiling the viewer in a series of baroque "folds," to use Deleuze's term, that present the possibility of a limitless scope of vision. The outside becomes inside and the inside out (Deleuze 1993, 34). The baroque phenomenon of border-crossing is best expressed by Deleuze:

If the Baroque establishes a total art or a unity of the arts, it does so first of all in extension, each art tending to be prolonged and even to be prolonged into the next art, which exceeds the one before. We have remarked that the Baroque often confines painting to retabiles, but it does so because the painting exceeds its frame and is realized in polychrome marble
sculpture; and sculpture goes beyond itself by being achieved in architecture; and in turn, architecture discovers a frame in a façade, but the frame itself becomes detached from the inside, and establishes relations with the surroundings. . . . We witness the prodigious development of a continuity in the arts, in breadth or in extension: an interlocking of frames of which each is exceeded by a matter that moves through it (1993, 123).

Theme park attractions (which stand at the center of the most “cutting edge” developments in the entertainment industry) take to new limits the baroque “unity of the arts.” While played out overtly in contemporary effects films and the entertainment spaces of Las Vegas, the polycentrism and spatial ambiguity inherent in neo-baroque architectures of vision finds its most intense form of expression in contemporary theme park attractions. Where effects cinema interweaves the represented frames of computer-generated, filmic and architectural realities, theme park attractions often take the ambiguity of the frame further still. Insides and outsides are continually rewritten, and multiple media and lived realities are continually reframed. The proscenium that demarcates audience space from the performance is blurred, and the audience becomes a participant in an enveloping entertainment spectacle.

The Amazing Adventures of Spiderman and the Unity of the Arts

The Amazing Adventures of Spiderman, a multi-media attraction at Universal Studios’ Islands of Adventure, Florida, is typical of the unity of the arts that populates current entertainment forms. Screen action using computer, video and film technology combines with live action in the form of a roller coaster to produce an exhilarating, participatory entertainment experience.

In the Marvel Superhero Island—one of the lands of the Islands of Adventure—the groups of adventurers enter the Daily Bugle, the newspaper complex that is the workplace of Peter Parker, alias Spiderman. Once inside, and as we pass through the room that displays a portrait of J. Jonah Jameson (the Bugle Boss) we walk through the ‘bowels’ of the newsroom. The offices of Peter Parker and other reporters are experienced both as architectural environment and as sculptural space where objects like desks, newspapers, computer terminals, photographs, discarded food, and clothing appear as if frozen in time as a three-dimensional realization of a comic book world. With the exception of the attraction-adventurers who file through the offices, the workstations are abandoned and television screens overhead provide the clue as to the en masse exit: reporters (in animation form) inform us of the catastrophic events that have occurred in New York City.
Dr. Octopus—Spiderman’s archenemy—and his group of villainous accomplices are wreaking havoc on the city and have stolen the Statue of Liberty, holding it for ransom.

We’re thus primed for the next space, a larger auditorium where Jameson himself greets us—as mediated through a large screen. Jameson informs us that Dr. Octopus and his group of hools, including Electro, Mysterio, and Hobgoblin (all of whom we’re introduced to onscreen), are at large. It’s our job, says JJJ, to act as stand-in reporters and bare witness to the chaotic events occurring in the city. With our mission clear, we move into the next room, a “subway station” where we enter a “scoop”—a roller coaster buggy—and head off on our reporting job.

Armed with our protective goggles (3-D glasses), our journey in the scoop takes us through the streets of New York (à la Marvel Universe) which appear as architecture, painted sets, and sculptured environments. As we plummet through the city—at times being swirled around in multiple 360-degree spins (a fact that disturbs the centered vision associated with classical form)—at various intervals we’re strategically placed in front of 3-D-filmed images projected onto domed and wide screens. These larger-than-life filmed animations place us further in the middle of the action. Spiderman, for example, introduces himself by “leaping” onto our scoop car—causing our car to rock—then somersaulting back into one of the film screens. Informing us he will be our protector, he nevertheless fails to spare us the shocking sensations of being electrocuted by Electro or torched by Dr. Octopus. Likewise, he’s nowhere in sight when our scoop-mobile plunges downwards at a 45-degree angle and we appear to fall from skyscraper-height and into an IMAX-constructed illusion of a New York pavement as it speedily approaches us. Admittedly, Spidey does save us from the fate that awaits us by setting up one of his trademark webs below us, but this only sends us rocketing back upwards. With barely enough time to check out the status of our innards we continue on our ride, witnessing the Statue of Liberty being hoisted above us (in sculptural form) and experiencing numerous other 3-D villain attacks (in 3-D animated, widescreen form) until, finally, Spiderman saves the day by battling the supervillains and trapping them in his web.

In this attraction, the reality of the audience’s presence within Universal’s Islands of Adventure melds with the fiction of the Spiderman comic book universe. Like many of the effects films and attractions that preceded it, the Spiderman attraction has pushed film technology and amusement park rides to new limits by unifying previously self-contained media forms. Likewise, operating according to the logic of the “unity of the arts” rides such as Spiderman not only draw upon the formal aspects of other media, they actually incorporate multiple media formats into their structure—in the process, engaging with
as many senses as possible in order to heighten the illusion of the collapsing frame. Superheroes and supervillains are now placed within a 3-D context, and the illusionistic outcome is not only technologically groundbreaking but phenomenologically new. All the while, audience members sit in their seats, their emotions vacillating between a childlike joy and a state of wonder at how these illusions are possible.

Neo-baroque entertainment spectacles like Spiderman may provide alternate technological and multi-media dimensions to audience encounters, but the essence of this experience relies on familiar media forms. As the song goes: "Everything old is new again." In their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest that all media, no matter how "new," rely on a media historicity. New media always retain a connection with the past in an effort to continually remediate, redefine and revitalize their own form by drawing upon other media. They state: "Both new and old media are invoking the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy in their efforts to remake themselves and each other" (1999, 5). Like the traditions of painting, architecture and sculpture, which have a longer history to draw upon, contemporary media forms such as the cinema and theme park attractions "remediate" or refashion other media forms, adapting them to their media-specific, formal and cultural needs. In short, "No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media" (1999, 15). The fascinating morphological and experiential facets of many contemporary media examples, however, are found in the way they remediate and merge media forms, the outcome being the production of a neo-baroque aesthetic.

Entertainment forms like the Spiderman theme park attraction engage in such a complex and excessive level of interaction and remediation that it becomes increasingly difficult to untangle one media form from another. Does Spiderman, for example, belong to the realm of the cinema, television, computer technology, sculpture, architecture, the theatre, the comic book, the animated cartoon, or the theme park attraction? A neo-baroque "fold" informs the logic of these remediated spectacles: all of these multimedia 'realities' intermingle with and fold into one another; characters from within the screen appear to enter the space of the audience; and the space of the audience appears to become one with the space of the screen. 3-D images, theatrical effects, computer graphics, animation, widescreen technologies, digital sound, and roller coaster engineering combine to construct the illusion of a breakdown of spatial boundaries that separate the audience's reality from the representation: the end result is that—while immersed in the exhilarating kinetics and illusions of the ride—it becomes difficult to fix the boundaries that frame the illusion and distinguish it from the space of reality.
The total unity of the arts that Deleuze discusses occurs through extension, invoking the motion of the fold: like the fluid media and figural transformations of Cortona’s Barberini ceiling, one space extends into another, one medium into the next, the spectator into the spectacle, and the spectacle into the spectator. However, extending the baroque spatial dimension of sight, such neo-baroque attractions employ multi-media technologies to produce virtual trompe l’oeil effects. Introducing motion, sound, and other sensorial encounters to spectacle, the neo-baroque articulates the perceptual collapse of the frame more powerfully, and in ways not witnessed before.

Adding the “new” to the “old” media experiences, this multiplication of remediated forms—which stand as paragon to the baroque unity of the arts—also serves to heighten the greater emphasis that the neo-baroque places on the involvement of multiple senses. The combined effort of all of these innovative effects makes the experience seem and feel ‘real’. For example, when the animated version of Dr. Octopus blasts the audience with fire, the animated fire ruptures its film boundary and enters the architectural interior that we inhabit, appearing as ‘real’ fire whose heat we feel and whose smoke effects we smell—and even taste. Additionally, the surround sound systems that wide screen cinema first introduced as a five-speaker format in the 1950s (and which were given new life with the release of Star Wars in 1977 and in the era of surround-sound entertainment cinema that followed) are now replaced with new digital audio effects by the Soundelux Entertainment Group that comprise over two hundred audio tracks and hundreds of speakers that are littered throughout the attraction, thus providing an auditory illusion that matches the visual.

State of the art digital effects, the digital sound system, roller coaster technology, revamped widescreen and 3-D cinema formats combine with the theatrical effects such as fire and smoke to produce an immersive and sensorially entertaining experience that engages all our senses—from the haptic, gustatory and the olfactory, to the auditory and the visual. Revealing the dynamic nature of form, our own era has taken baroque games of perception to new limits. This fact necessitates a rearticulation of Gilles Deleuze’s concept of a baroque “architecture of vision” and Martin Jay’s “baroque ocular regime.” When discussing the neo-baroque we also need to consider an architecture and regime that engages the sensorium.

Remediations and Neo-Baroque Virtuosity

A central feature of contemporary effects films and theme park attractions lies in the spectator’s state of uncertainty while in the midst of these games of perception. A neo-baroque ambivalence lies beneath the spectacle. The special effects illusions—whether
it be the maniacal Dr. Octopus torching our car, or the perception of our scoop plunging down a New York skyscraper—impinge upon the audience in the way they invite us to experience the fantastic in such 'real' terms. The tricks have always been there, but the technology has now changed. Contemporary entertainment forms employ a variety of technological means to achieve this shift in perception. In the process, current effects cinema and theme park attractions also perform and compete with prior effects traditions, continually attempting to technically out-perform previous effects technology—and, along with it, the perceptions of reality these technologies delivered. Indeed, underlying Bolter and Grusin's statement regarding the concerns for immediacy and hypermediacy lies the possibility for a baroque logic: in "their efforts to remake themselves," current entertainment media often display a baroque obsession with virtuosity and the grand theatricality of illusionism. By seeking to remove the proscenium arch current entertainment spectacles like _The Amazing Adventures of Spiderman_ also insist on the eventual revelation of the process of mediation.

_The Amazing Adventures of Spiderman_ reflects the inherent virtuosity embedded in many contemporary entertainment media. The attraction lures the audience into various layers of 'reality' by displaying a variety of technologically conjured effects—in the process, setting itself up as a new kind of techno-spatial experience. A condition of the audience embracing the immediacy of the illusion as perceptually real is that we also (eventually) recognize and applaud the complexities involved in its construction. Indeed, by remediating 3-D cinema, animated cartoons, comic books, television, and the roller coaster, Spiderman also stakes its claim for out-performing these media. The result is that an interplay occurs between old and new traditions, one that suggests that the remediation of prior forms in Spiderman, the ride, has "improved" or "advanced" the audience's encounter with older media experiences.

Framing itself within its own historicity, therefore, underlying Spiderman is a virtuoso concern, one that results from its flawless articulation of an illusion that invades the audience's space in such deceptively real and immediately experiential ways. Throughout the entire attraction, the spectacle maintains an undeniable sense that this convincingly real representational space is also being displayed in order that the audience may admire it as a multi-technological feat of illusionism. The visual and sensory games that entertainment technologies articulate flaunt their capacity for making a reality out of an illusion—or, rather, for making the fantastic enter our world in such immediate and sensorially invasive ways.

Increasingly, and through their own media-specific methods, entertainment media
strive to obliterate the frame that demarcates a distance between reality and fantasy. The cinema relies on widescreen formats, computer-generated special effects, and surround sound experiences. The entertainments of Las Vegas rely on fantastic architecture and effects splendors. Theme park attractions draw upon a variety of methods including Imax and Omnimax screen formats, widescreen images, 3-D, simulation rides, and theatrical experiences. The future journeys that neo-baroque spectacles will take us on will be limited only by the technologies that drive them. Where these journeys will take us, one can only guess. However, one thing is certain: I will definitely go a long for the ride.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Alison Inglis for devising the term “spectopolis.” Given the visual assault our senses were exposed to during our research adventures in this sensorial city, we decided that the invention of a new term was required—one that could adequately convey the sensations evoked in these astounding spaces.

2. The negative ideological implications of spectacle in the contexts of the seventeenth and late twentieth/early twenty-first-century cultures have been issues of debate for numerous historians and theorists. Perniola, for example, cites the post-68 ‘society of spectacle’ popularized by Guy Debord as instrumental in assuming that postmodern spectacle is riddled with “deception and secrets” (Perniola 1995). Baroque spectacle of the seventeenth-century faced a similar fate: the function of spectacle has been understood to function as optical persuasion that serves an ideological purpose. While not denying the ideological function underlying (neo)baroque spectacle, symptomatic interpretations dealing with the ideological function of spectacle offer but one perspective on the nature of audience/media relations. On the ideological implications of seventeenth-century spectacle, see Beldon Scott (1991), Martin (1965), and Wittkower (1985). For the ideological function of spectacle in Hollywood cinema see Britton (1986), Collins (1995), and Corrigan (1991). For accounts of the historical development of such theoretical traditions dealing with the function of spectacle see Best and Kellner (1991), Jay (1994), and Stafford (1994, 1996).

3. Such a position radically alters the psychoanalytic spectatorship models that were the basis on film theory in the 1970s and 1980s. In the Althusserian/Lacanian tradition of film spectatorship theory the spectator remains in a passive and static relationship to an image on the screen. The spectator is placed in the position of voyeur and driven by unconscious psychic and ideological processes. The world beyond the frame or world reflected back by the screen as mirror, in turn, framed the spectator: it framed their understanding of gender relations, their place within patriarchy, and the construction of their subjective selves. For detailed accounts of the psychoanalytic tradition of film spectatorship see Baudry (1981a, b), Heath (1981), Metz (1974), Mulvey (1975). For overviews and critiques of this tradition, see Carroll (1988) and Mayne (1993).
4. The fresco is part of a series of paintings that Raphael was commissioned to paint in the Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican. See Levey (1975), 51–53.

5. Raphael's painting adheres closely to Leon Battista Alberti's treatise Della Pittura (1435–1436). Here Alberti stresses the significance of "istoria," a term that carries with it notions of history and story. Reflecting concerns that were later remanifested in discussions of the classical Hollywood paradigm, Alberti stresses the importance of a centered pictorial composition that supports clarity of narrative presentation. Above all, Alberti emphasizes the need to "avoid excesses" (John R. Spencer in Alberti 1966, 23).

6. Expanding on a model first applied to Hollywood cinema by André Bazin, in the seminal study The Classical Hollywood Cinema, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson (1985) defined Hollywood cinema of the pre-1960s according to classical forms related to the Renaissance model. They state that classical aesthetic norms dominated the industry of this period, norms that reflect a closed attitude to form through centred framing, narrative progression and resolution; the visual and auditory style remains at the service of narrative unity, refusing to exceed the purposes required of story action. The causal narrative structure and centered compositions create the effect of an enclosed story world, one that rationally frames a visual, auditory, and narrative representation that the spectator passively observes. The effect of this classical ordering has traditionally been viewed as one that "effaced itself before reality" (Lapsley and Westlake 1988, 160).

7. Jay (1994) argues that the baroque scopic regime has co-existed with two other visual systems. The first, that aligned with the Renaissance tradition, depends on Cartesian perspectivalism, and a "monocular static point of beholding" (1994, 60). This tradition also demands narrative clarity and order which impacts upon the visual articulation of narrative events. The second regime is that of the tradition of 'empirical descriptivism' and is characterised by the Dutch painting tradition which emphasizes a world of description "mapped in two dimensions" (Wollen 1993, 9). While all three regimes can co-exist, during different points in history, one ocular regime may dominate others. Periods dominated by a baroque order of vision interrogate "the privileged scopic regime of the modern era" that is dominated by "Cartesian perspectivalism aligned with Renaissance spatial order" (Jay 1994, 60).

8. The four other scenes on the vault are allegories that reflect on the Pope's attributes and works: the first, depicting Minerva Destroying Insolence and Pride in the Form of Giants, symbolizes Urban's battle against heresy; in Silenus and the Satyrs, Urban's piety is seen as overcoming "lust and intemperance"; Hercules driving out the Harpies allegorizes Urban's justice; and in The Temple of Janus his prudence ensures peace (Wittkower 1985, 252).

9. The shifting perceptions of the baroque are well expressed by the seventeenth-century philosopher Leibniz whose writings reflect the dissipation of the privileged omniscient view point that ordered classical systems as a view controlled by a single view point and a self-contained universe (Crary 1994, 50). Leibniz's baroque perception of the world suggested that the central, omniscient viewpoint was replaced by a world of multiple viewpoints. "The
monad became for Leibniz an expression of a fragmented and decentered world, of the absence of an omniscient point of view, of the fact that every position implied a fundamental relativity that was never a problem for Descartes” (Crary 1994, 50).

10. Also see Jameson 1984.

11. The other lands are: Toon Lagoon, Jurassic Park, Lost Continent, and Seuss Landing.

12. The classical paradigm associated with pre-60s Hollywood cinema, and its associations with narrativity and the ‘passive’ spectator (a model that persists to this day in film theory in relation to contemporary cinema), no longer seems viable given new entertainment experiences concerned with spectacle, multimedia formations, and active audience address and participation. Spectacle engulfs the audience in invasive, spatial, and theatrical terms, producing participatory and sensorially engaging experiences. Indeed, film theorists such as Noel Carroll (1988), Jim Collins (1995), Judith Mayne (1993), and Vivian Sobchack (1992) have queried whether the “passive spectator” model was ever viable.

13. Las Vegas’s Luxor Hotel/Casino is another case in point. Not only does this space offer visual and auditory experiences in the form of architectural spectacles that reconstruct ancient Egypt, or IMAX and simulation rides by Douglas Trumbull that digitally transport us back and forth in time, but on opening the doors to the hotel, the visitors’smell and taste is bombarded with the aromatic aromas of herbs and spices.

14. For an analysis of a similar virtuoso performance in relation to the Terminator 2: 3-D attraction at Universal Studios, see Ndalianis 2000.

References


