

Suspension of Disbelief: An Analysis of Special Effects as They Relate to Narrative and Theme
in Film

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Abstract

Film is – at its basest – a storytelling medium. Whether they are flocking to the movie theater to catch the latest entry in their favorite blockbusting franchise, or relaxing at home with a quieter filmic affair, audiences love to digest stories. Over the many years of the film industry, as technology has allowed filmmakers to do more, special effects – those mystical visual and aural qualities of a film that allow filmmakers to tell stories beyond the bounds of reality – have consistently become more complex. This paper asks if this complexity in special effects can impact a film's story or themes with any significance. Over the course of this paper, two specific films are analyzed. Looking specifically at *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, it is determined that special effects can potentially have an impact on the narrative of a film. Whether that impact is positive or negative, though, depends on how well a film uses its effects. It is also determined that while narrative might be impacted by special effects, the thematic elements of a film – or what allows us to relate to a story – are not necessarily affected by them. Finally, despite the finding that general theme of a film is not hindered by special effects, it is found that some films may require the use of special effects in order to properly 'sell' their theme to an audience, at least within the context of the film in question's story.

Keywords: film, visual effects, special effects, theme, rhetoric, storytelling

Over its century-long history, film has gone through many evolutions. William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, commissioned by Thomas Edison, built the first modern motion picture camera – called the Kinetograph – in 1890. From there, Edison and Dickson built the Kinetoscope, the first motion picture machine to be patented and used for commercial purposes. In the following years, these primitive films lacked spoken dialogue – something we may often take for granted. That changed when, in 1927, the first full-length ‘talkie,’ *The Jazz Singer*, premiered to audiences, altering the landscape of film and cinema forever.

Before even *The Jazz Singer*, audiences were introduced to *The Lost World* in 1925. Directed by Harry O. Hoyt, *The Lost World* featured then-groundbreaking special effects in the form of stop motion animation by Willis O’Brien. Stop motion animation is an example of an early visual effect that allowed for the telling of fictional stories that are more grandiose in nature than what could conceivably occur in our own world.

Despite *The Lost World* releasing first, audiences most likely will remember *King Kong* as the prime example of early stop motion animation, as well as early visual effects in general. Releasing in 1933, and directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, *King Kong* also featured the pivotal stop motion animation and effects from Willis O’Brien. In addition to this, *King Kong* also saw O’Brien’s protégé, Ray Harryhausen, working on the film with him.

From *King Kong* forward, films have continued to evolve and change what it means to engage viewers. New ways for filmmakers to tell their stories are consistently introduced and expanded, and one major element in that endeavor of the film industry is special effects. As something as early as even *King Kong* demonstrates, special effects – or ‘movie magic,’ as some might call it – allow stories to be told that are not explicitly possible with just a camera. With the clever forced perspective techniques in shooting the miniature figures used to create the

titular Kong, as well as the stop motion expertise of Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen, audiences of 1933 and beyond were treated to a story that featured a nearly-50-foot tall ape at its center. Visual effects and their importance in film have grown immensely in the 80-plus years since *King Kong* and *The Lost World*. In 2017, audiences are treated to high-adrenaline, explosive blockbusters which feature such fantastic visuals as men in suits capable of flight, or shrinking and enlarging the wearer at his whim (Iron Man and Ant-Man, respectively); and 350-foot tall nuclear lizards (2014's *Godzilla*); and all of these enhanced visuals are now created with effects generated on a computer.

As important to many as the aforementioned visual effects are – viewers and producers alike – there is another element to filmmaking, and storytelling in general, that must not be ignored: theme. All stories serve a purpose, and if the thematic or rhetorical elements are lacking in a particular film, it can be left feeling hollow and meaningless. This is a criticism that is often called out to films that heavily utilize special effects, and some filmmakers are even notorious for it (read: Michael Bay). It seems, then, that if a film is to use special effects in any capacity, that it should be properly balanced with the narrative, in order to avoid this fate.

Despite the proposed balance between visuals and story, many films require the use of special effects to convey what the director is trying to say. You can't tell a story about a giant ape without finding a way to put a giant ape on the screen, and being the central plot of the story, that giant ape will appear often. In films like this, there is a unique emphasis placed on the dichotomy of story or theme and visuals. This paper hopes to examine that dichotomy, and, in looking at previous research on storytelling, theme, and visual effects in film, analyze how the visual effects of any given film might actually enhance the storytelling and thematic elements of it.

Literature Review

In researching this paper, articles that focus on one or more of several main subjects were examined. The primary topics that were looked at in articles for the purposes of this paper are film, narrative in film, visual effects in film, thematic elements in film, and viewer and scholar response to film. It is these topics that have been deemed essential to understanding the meaning of visual effects in film, both to each individual film, as well as to the viewers of a film.

Literature on narrative

Aronstein (1995) discusses the first three Indiana Jones films, calling the trilogy ‘Arthurian.’ Aronstein focuses her article on making a case for this, and says that while Steven Spielberg and George Lucas owe much of their inspiration for Indiana Jones to the action/adventure serials from their childhood, “the films’ Arthurian roots are also essential to an understanding of both the films’ political and ideological agenda and how they function as a story” (pp. 3). Aronstein likens Indiana Jones to Chrétien de Troyes’ story of Perceval, who was the original Grail knight (Indiana Jones recovers the Holy Grail in *The Last Crusade*). The opening scene of *Perceval* introduces a hero “who knows nothing of and cares nothing for [the Arthurian] court’s values” (pp. 13). Aronstein concludes by elucidating *The Last Crusade*’s purpose in the *Indiana Jones* trilogy, saying, “*The Last Crusade*, with its emphasis on lost tradition and lost values, both concludes Lucas and Spielberg’s Arthurian trilogy and cancels out the two earlier films, as do all Grail quests” (pp. 25). As the *Indiana Jones* franchise and its themes are explored in the present paper, Aronstein’s research on the original trilogy is invaluable.

Dick (1975) endeavored to prove that film has a greater narrative potential than literature, “because it maintains a closer connection with myth.” Dick furthers this point by putting forth the notion that “it is film, not literature, that truly deserves to be called mythic or archetypal” (pp. 124). To sell his opinion to the reader, Dick stakes his claim that the language of myth is one with the language of dream, and is a language in pictures, not words. Dick concludes his article with a quote that reads, “The possibilities of film are unlimited; and so are the possibilities of film narrative” (pp. 130).

Mann (1989), in her article, succinctly defines what story means for us. Offering three separate definitions, as follows. First, “The content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting).” Second, “The succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and their relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc.” The last definition of story in Mann’s article reads, “The narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events” (pp. 17). Specifically, her article focuses on *The Terminator*, and she looks at the ‘narrative entanglements’ of having multiple timelines present in the story of a single film. Through the course of her article, Mann discusses the relationship between Kyle Reese and Sarah Connor, and the entangled narrative that potentially results from that relationship. She also compares Kyle Reese to Michael J. Fox’s character in *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly, as he goes back in time to save the future.

Literature on special effects

Blackmore (2007) argued in his article that visual effects, particularly those of a certain frenetic nature, have gotten to the point at which they induce a visual and sensory overload for viewers. This argument suggests that films that are too heavy on special effects, especially when

combined with fast jump cuts, contain too much visual data for our eyes – and in turn, our minds – to comprehend. The article contains detailed descriptions of scenes from various films that Blackmore accuses of these ‘speed death of the eye’ effects. Discussed prominently throughout is the Wachowski’s *The Matrix* from 2000, as well as particular scene from the lesser-lauded *Stealth* from 2006. In this scene, “The camera shakes erratically... The camera zooms in for impossibly clear, full color close-ups that are then repeated as shadows scatter everywhere. The screen goes deep red and...faces and names stutter across the screen, overlapped by...a plethora of digital information...These are not concerns for an audience that has long surpassed the leisurely graphic displays in *Blade Runner: Speed means Real*, and less information, the tactic used...to force the audience to stay with, if always a little behind, the story, gives the scene a sense of jittery visual reality” (pp. 370). The tone of this description suggests that Blackmore takes issue not only with the high rate of visual effects seen in many films, but also the camera work used in conjunction with said effects, as well as the way the scene is edited and pieced together. Blackmore concludes his article by claiming that the results of such visual overload are predictable, and include “nausea, panic, vertigo, and the urge to ‘prevent’ reality by shutting one’s eyes” (pp. 371). He also makes the claim that special effects are no longer special, but normal, and in fact, required to make an event onscreen feel more real.

Davis (2014) examined the modern state of digital effects in film. More specifically, he looked at “dichotomies between the miniature and the vast or gigantic in recent films with narratives of scalar difference” (pp. 128), suggesting that with access to computer-generated effects, or CG, the sense of scale in effects-heavy films has grown. Davis hypothesizes that the representations of scale in such films hint at a commentary on the digital technologies used to create them, ultimately serving as allegory for containment and excess, control and the

uncontrollable, as pertaining to digital imagery and technologies. The author concludes by writing that with the digitization of so many facets of human life, “the digital becomes gigantic” (pp. 135), while the user becomes small. In effects-heavy films of a particularly large scope, Davis suggests a running theme of the ‘digital’ being symbolically contained by the users, or us. While a somewhat unique approach, it offers a look at how digital effects in film might be perceived by the audience, a running theme in much research on visual effects.

Dixon (1995) centers his focus on digital effects. Having been written in 1995, digital effects were relatively new when this article was first published. Even then, Dixon could see that film was being changed dramatically by special effects. While the assertion has been proven false with time, Dixon posited a future in which films are made with no physical elements at all, with no cameras or actors involved. Despite that, many things – worlds and fictional locations, namely – are created in film with nothing more than a green screen in a studio to serve as the backdrop for actors. As such, when looking at digital effects in film, it’s important to remember Dixon’s article.

Griffiths (2010) chose to open her article with a question. It reads, “What are the nature and power of special effects that induce such strong reactions in cinema spectators, and is it possible to find an analog to this contemporary fascination in the visual culture of the Middle Ages” (pp. 163)? Griffiths’ article looks to research that question, and in doing so, she suggests that there is a chance that spectators during the medieval period responded to fantastical, supernatural, or spectacular images with a similar sense of awe and wonder that more contemporary film viewers have when they witness cinematic special effects on the screen. With this particular article, the assumption by the author is that the allure of special effects in film goes far deeper than the experience of cinema, and that ‘image-makers’ were “exploiting the

embodied modes of viewing offered by special effects far earlier than the invention of motion pictures” (pp. 163). To make the case for this argument, Griffiths points out that images in the Middle Ages, such as works of art, were often concerned with the power of vision, and she offers examples such as representations of saints and angels offering instruction in the art of seeing, as well as material objects possessing hyperrealist qualities. Griffiths also equates certain Christian art to popular blockbusters for devout believers of the time. Griffiths concludes her article by writing that there is much to be gained from exploring alternative interpretations for such familiar visual practices as cinematic special effects, even in academic fields that are separate from film studies. At the very least, for the purposes of the research in this article, Griffiths offers a look into the history of cinematic special effects outside of cinematic history itself, a unique approach that should not be ignored.

Manovich (2012) attempts to define digital cinema in his essay, and in the process, offer some examples of what digital cinema is capable of accomplishing. “As traditional film technology is universally being replaced by digital technology, the logic of the filmmaking process is being redefined” (pp. 4). Manovich offers several principles of digital filmmaking. These include the notion that it is now possible to generate film-like scenes in a computer, rather than filming ‘physical reality;’ that live action footage now serves as material for further compositing, animating, and morphing; and that while editing and special effects were at one point separate activities, “the computer collapses this distinction” (pp. 5).

Prince (1996) writes about film theory and the perceptions of it as it relates to digital images in film. In this article, Prince says that because the nature of film is changing so rapidly, and that digital effects offer so many creative possibilities, “its effects on cinematic representation and the viewer’s response are poorly understood” (pp. 27). He laments that film

theory has not yet come to term with these issues, and asks the question, “How might theory adapt to an era of digital imaging” (pp. 27). Using the phrase ‘perceptual realism,’ Prince claims that film theory has “construed realism solely as a matter of reference rather than as a matter of perception as well” (pp. 28). Prince offers his thoughts on how this can change, and by the end of the article, concludes that this perceptual realism becomes not just the glue between live action and digitally created environments, but also the foundation “upon which the uniquely transformational functions of cinema exist” (pp. 36). This is important, as cinema, and the effects used in cinema, are ever-changing.

Rubey (1978) looks at all things *Star Wars* in his comprehensive essay on the film. While he covers a range of topics, from the film’s connection to medieval romance to racism, but he also touches on the visual effects in the film. It is this aspect of the essay that can be applied to the research in the present paper. In this section, Rubey equates the science fiction action and technology of the film to war. Rubey points out that the space battles of *Star Wars* conjure images of World War II dogfights. Further, Rubey makes the claim that the technology of *Star Wars*, such as “computers, missiles and lasers, the flashing space-age control panels, [and] the beeping radar gun-sights,” reflect the technology used by the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam. These assumptions help support a hypothesis made later in the present paper regarding theme and visual effects.

Spielmann (2003) also looks at the special effects in film from the angle of machines found in them. Specifically, she examines *Terminator 2* and *The Matrix*. Spielmann points out that the machines in these films are characterized as evil, and – taking a different approach to it than other scholars of film – makes the assumption that this sentiment is also a part of cinema’s response to new media. Spielmann suggests that “the struggle about space in both films

transgresses the generic tradition of science fiction and responds to general disturbances in the temporal-spatial order in electronic culture” (pp. 56). The author ultimately finds that *Terminator 2* offers some kind of discourse, and “confirms the ambivalence between regression and high-tech in ‘cyberphobic cinema’” (pp. 69). By contrast, Spielmann says that *The Matrix* turns regressive in its Christian themes amidst the technological backdrop of the film.

Turnock (2012) chose to study the aesthetics of recent digital effects in relation to 1970’s cinematography in film. Turnock offers the suggestion that “contemporary effects aesthetics allude to a specific time period – the look of certain aspects of 1970’s cinematography” (pp. 158). Focusing specifically on Industrial Light & Magic, Turnock believes that repetition allows us as viewers to accept this aesthetic as perceptually real, despite the fact that so many things created via special effects could never be real in our own world. Turnock concludes her article with the explanation that deconstructing this ‘ILM version’ of photorealism reveals the role special effects play in forming a more contemporary notion of photorealism over the course of cinema’s history. “This argument has important consequences for how we judge the rhetorical truth value of what is presented to us, and accept it as visually realistic” (pp. 158-159), she says.

Wood (2002) examines what she calls ‘the great divide’ between spectacle and narrative in film. Wood opens the article asking if digital effects add anything more than detail to the narrative in contemporary Hollywood films. Pointing out that it depends on the ways in which effects are used in the generation of a narrative, Wood says that critical responses to digital effects in film have largely revolved around action or science fiction films that are often driven by these effects, as opposed to the invisible effects seen in films of ‘smaller’ genres. Wood moves on to the specific focus of her article: the relationship between time and space. Wood expresses an interest in the potential digital effects have to “introduce a spatial progression to

narrative...Digital effects produce spaces with the ability to transform, or which have a temporal quality, thus adding an extra dimension to the narrative progression” (pp. 371). Throughout the article, a separation between the spatial and the temporal is discussed prominently. In this comparison, space represents the spectacle of a film, while time represents the narrative. Wood determines that space – spectacle – is a subordinate aspect in film, because it is only there to support, unify, and give rise to the place in which changing events occur. Moving from that basis, Wood says, “Digital effects, however, most specifically when they extend the duration of spectacle or give extended movement to spatial elements, introduce a temporal component to spaces” (pp. 373).

Literature on theme

Donald (1991) studies the themes he sees as being commonly found in popular war films. The author stresses that it is not an exhaustive list of Hollywood’s war and antiwar themes, but he does specify that the themes he does offer have “the distinction of frequently turning up in popular war films distributed in America.” Donald’s first proposed theme is that “the soldier is a pawn of the power elite: governments and/or military-industrial complex” (pp. This defines a perceived expendable status of the soldier. The second theme is the corrupt institution of the military. The third theme is the focus on the “many ways soldiers suffer physically, mentally, and spiritually in war.” Finally, “In contrast to U.S. war propaganda, the enemy, although of a different culture, is in many ways quite similar to the soldier.” That last theme, in particular, is important to what is discussed in the present paper. (pp. 78)

Gravett (1998) examines the deeper themes of *Blade Runner* in her article. Stating that it has often “eluded precise critical definition,” she writes that it is not strictly a science fiction film, but rather, it incorporates a number of genres, including detective drama, horror, and film

noir, in addition to science fiction. While many discussions have focused on this mix of genres, Gravett perceives a lack of focus in discussions regarding the film on one important element, which is the film's religious subtext. Throughout the article, Gravett compares *Blade Runner* to the book of Genesis in the Bible. Concluding her article, Gravett says that viewers must be able to discern the issues of the film in all of their complexity. Simply stating that the replicants in *Blade Runner* are evil, while the humans are good, is not enough, and ignore the deeper meaning of what the film is about. Gravett's look at *Blade Runner* serves as an important example of how a film can be about much more than what is initially perceived. This is key in any discussion regarding themes in film.

In his article, Lev (1998) centers his attention on the science fiction genre, a genre that prominently features a broad range of special effects, both practical and digital. Specifically, using *Star Wars*, *Alien*, and *Blade Runner* as his examples, Lev posits that because the science fiction genre is one that is less concerned with the structure of our own reality than other genres, science fiction films have the ability to focus attention on the "deep structure of what is and what ought to be" (pp. 30). Lev points out that all three of his sample films are renowned for the quality of their visual effects, differences between them being that *Star Wars* creates an "ideologically conservative future," and *Alien* and *Blade Runner* create futures more closely related to "liberal or socially critical ideas." Lev continues by explaining why he thinks *Star Wars* was such a successful film, and pointing out the optimistic approach it takes in telling its story. With the intent of looking at a juxtaposition between science fiction films, Lev looks at his other two examples, both of which were directed by Sir Ridley Scott. In these films, *Alien* features what Lev calls "a stunning variant on a 1950s science fiction cliché – the malevolent alien creature," as well as a company that is concerned more with profit than human life, and

Blade Runner features a “more complex version of *Star Wars*’ worldbuilding project by creating a physically and emotionally convincing Los Angeles of the year 2019” (pp. 32). Both of these films by Scott focus on darkness that is ultimately reminiscent of our own world. *Alien* and *Blade Runner* both display a distrust of sorts of authority, where *Star Wars* “advocates a return to heroism and traditional morality” (pp. 36). Lev’s article is a complex look at the thematic elements in three science fiction films, and given the degree of special effects often utilized by the genre, is an important piece of research preceding the present paper.

Levy (1991) studies the theme of family in his article. Specifically, the author analyzes a perceived decline, and later comeback, of the theme in popular film. “Notions of appropriate family structures and values are transmitted not only by the family, peer group, and formal schooling, but also by the mass media” (pp. 187), Levy says. Levy claims that there are six cycles of the family film in the 20 years preceding the writing of his article. In chronological order, they are: “the decline of the family in the late 1960’s; the attempt to substitute the nuclear family with alternative family structures in the...early 1970’s; a cycle of films about white suburban families in the mid and late 1970’s; a cycle depicting tormented and troubled families in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s; a cycle of youth-oriented films in the mid 1980’s; and...a return to traditional family values in the late 1980’s” (pp. 190). Levy concludes the article by explaining the different approaches to the symbolic treatment of family by the various mass media. For example, where theater had, at the time, stuck largely with the typical nuclear family in stories, film has presented a “greater diversity and variation in its treatment of family” (pp. 202).

MacDonald (1988) examined a genre of film that is somewhat less defined than science fiction, and open to more interpretation: the avant-garde, or experimental, film. Avant-garde

films challenge what a film is traditionally believed to be or do. MacDonald, with a certain fascination for the genre, places his focus on cinema as discourse, particularly in the academic setting. MacDonald argues that the potential for film as discourse has not yet been realized, and looks to avant-garde films as having the experimental and thematic nature best suited to such conversations as those that take place inside of academe. MacDonald makes an interesting point regarding genre – and in many ways, theme – in concluding his article by writing that “each genre discourses with other genres: a horror film is a horror film precisely because it is not a musical, a comedy, a western, or a film noir” (pp. 42). The use of MacDonald’s article in the present paper is ultimately due to poignant underpinnings of theme such as the aforementioned quote found throughout it.

Literature on viewer response

While research on viewer response to film is not precisely on what the present paper focuses, the present paper does focus on concepts that could hinge on viewer response. As such, the following articles on response to film are intended to fortify the later discussions on narrative and theme in film.

Baetens (2006) titled her article simply “Screen Narratives.” In it, Baetens attempts to define the word ‘screen,’ and desires “to show that screens do not exist per se, in themselves: we ‘make’ them, although not in the narrow, material sense of the word” (pp. 2). Baetens posits that this screen ‘construction’ has consequences for the way viewers narrativize what they see. Using Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* as an example, which allows the author to suggest that windows, floors, and other reflective surfaces can all become screens in the context of a narrative, Baetens offers three points. First is the fact that anything can be a screen, and thereby, the “opposition of natural and artificial screens does not play an important role.” The second

point is that because a screen can perform all types of actions and functions, “screen theory will have to deal automatically with contradiction.” Lastly, Baetens says that “screens can never be separated from certain ways of looking and being looked at” (pp. 3). Baetens focuses on this last point, and wishes to widen the interpretation of a screen beyond its material interpretation. To her, “The notion of screen should function more as a ‘container-concept’ for all types of interactions between the triad surface/medium/sign on the one hand and the dyad beholder/context on the other” (pp. 7). In this, Baetens suggests a deeper method to the semiotics of film, which could offer a new means to analyzing the smaller or more invisible details of a film.

Cartwright (2002) studied the convergence of film studies with visual studies and other various media. Whether than focus on any specific film or film idea, this article focuses strongly on the idea of film studies, and how film scholars should approach such studies. Three research questions were raised, and they are as follows. “How did visual studies emerge with film studies in its purview? How does the digital, an aspect of late 20th-century visual culture which emerged roughly simultaneously with visual studies, figure into the field? What happens when film studies is embedded in or combined with visual studies” (pp. 7). Cartwright suggests that if film has become interlocked with the more general idea of digital media, then scholars need to rethink precisely where and how they take up film as an object of study. Cartwright also points out that film studies has always been “as much about the experience and conditions of duration, spatiality, perception, attention, and sound...as it has been about film images and texts” (pp. 10). While Cartwright’s article doesn’t specifically look at anything that is the focus of the present article, her musings on film and visual studies serve as an important example of how viewers might approach film.

On opposite side of Cartwright's article, where she looked at how scholars look at film, Corbett (1998) looked at the history of movie-watching as a social act. Written at a time when entertainment media, including film, were transitioning to a more digital format, Corbett suggests that the resilience of the theatrical motion picture industry "may have as much to do with cultural values and the meanings movie audiences ascribe to/construct from movie-watching as it does with efforts by the film industry to attract and hold audiences" (pp. 34). For his particular study, Corbett interviewed 14 different couples to see how they viewed films and the act of film-watching. All of the couples were middle class, but were of different age groups and their relationships were of various durations. All of the couples reported having at least some college education, and most of them had completed a bachelor's degree. Corbett found that the men and women of these couples generally prefer different genres of film between them, with most men leaning towards action-adventure and some horror, and most women leaning towards dramas or romance films. Despite that, Corbett also found that most couples viewed films as a convenient means to spend time together. Ultimately, Corbett admits that his article and research does not present the 'missing history of movie-watching,' as he calls it, but rather, it "shows that, by incorporating ethnography, we can begin to see how audiences construct the meaning of movie-watching" (pp. 45). While he doesn't place any focus on story or theme in film, an important aspect of those qualities is how a viewer perceives them, or how they construct meaning from them, and as such, Corbett's article can serve as an important example of that for the purposes of the research in the present article.

Hakemulder (2007) examined foregrounding theory, which was developed for the purpose of "understanding responses to both literature and film" (pp. 125). Hakemulder points out that at the time, empirical research had strictly focused on reader response. His goal was to

change that, and determine if literariness in film causes the same effects as those established in literature. His research involved two experiments, and in each, participants were shown a scene from a film adaptation of a Shakespeare story. These scenes were chosen as either being high or low in foregrounded elements, or elements in literature and film that are chosen to stand out from everything else, thereby indicating some importance of them. Hakemulder had hoped to reveal differences in the levels of foregrounding effects between the scenes by showing them twice. Hakemulder calls this practice the 'rescreening paradigm.' After these scenes were shown to participants, they were asked to indicate their level of appreciation for them. Another method of exploring foregrounding was used, in which it is assumed that the foreground elements are dependent on background elements. In other words, as a viewer becomes more aware of what is perceived as conventional, deviations in that formula become more apparent.

To conduct the research, participants were randomized and split into two groups. Each group was given a synopsis of the plot to *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. One group was shown the first scene of *Prospero's Books*, a film adaptation of *The Tempest*, while the second group was shown the same scene from BBC's own adaptation of the play, also called *The Tempest*. The scenes were each shown twice, and afterwards, the participants completed a seven-point Likert scale designed to examine their appreciation of the scene. While it was hypothesized that the answers would differ based on which adaptation participants saw, this was not necessarily the case. Both groups had a greater appreciation for their respective scene after a second viewing. Despite that, viewers of the scene from *Prospero's Books* had a greater awareness of foreground elements after a second viewing, whereas this number stayed relatively constant between the first and second viewings of BBC's adaptation. Like Corbett's,

Hakemulder's research is an important look at how audiences watch film, and what they gain from it.

Prince (1993) looks specifically at film as discourse in "The Discourse of Pictures: Iconicity and Film Studies." Prince ponders the idea that film might be viewed as text, similar to literature, that "such reading activates similar processes of semiotic decoding" (pp. 16), and asks the question, does it? He states that this method of examination has had consequences for the way film studies has framed questions about visual meaning and communication, and says that the purpose of his article is to see how well those consequences "square with the observable evidence about how viewers perceive and comprehend cinematic sequences" (pp. 16). Prince concludes his article by stating that "only by knowing where cultural considerations shade off into what may be more properly termed physiological or cognitive capabilities are we likely to be able to apply cultural analyses in fruitful and relevant ways" (pp. 26).

Defining Special Effects

While many casual moviegoers may only think of digital effects – relatively new by film's standards – when they think of them, special effects are not new in the film industry. Were one to ask someone what images they conjure when they think about special effects, it's highly likely those images would primarily be of things that appear hyperrealistic, yet are still fantastical and impossible in some sense. These images have no weakness in their presentation, no cords hanging from the ceiling of the set, and no missed frames in their animation. This is because these images were produced digitally with a computer. As Dixon (1995) put it, "Digital special effects have transformed the landscape of the visual in film, transporting the viewer seamlessly beyond that which is real into a synthetic world where computer animation, morphing, and digital effects blend the actual with the fantastic...Digital effects films...do not

seem – at the first glance – to contain any effects at all” (pp. 55). Indeed, there is something to be said about the digital effects landscape of today (and that quote from Dixon was written over 20 years ago). Movie watching is, after all, intended to be a leisurely activity, and one would assume that if creators can achieve such a great level of immersion as to believably transport their viewers into worlds completely separate from our own, then why shouldn't they? Because of this level of immersion that digital effects allow films to achieve, it's hard to blame someone for jumping to images of any given superhero from their favorite 'cinematic universe' when you ask them what they think about when they think of special effects. Despite that, special effects were around long before the advent of computer-generated, digital effects; and long before computers, for that matter.

While current trends in the film industry make it easy to think that special effects are defined strictly by computer-generated effects, or CG, it's worth noting that to truly define special effects requires a much broader look at the concept, and to put a strict definition on them is not a simple task. As Griffiths points out to us, “Special effects in the visual arts...have always defied easy categorization” (2010, pp. 165). Indeed, categorizing the spectacular effects that make some of audiences' favorite movies possible almost requires a paper in itself, but the present paper can hope to offer, at the least, some basic definition that allows us to grasp the overall concept of special effects, by offering a the basic principle behind them and their purpose. In her own attempt to define special effects, Griffiths offers the definition of another. “As Warren Buckland (2004) explains, invisible effects...’simulate events in the actual world that are too expensive or inconvenient to produce...[and] not meant to be noticed (as special effects) by spectators. Visible special effects, on the other hand, simulate events that are impossible in the actual world (but which are possible in an alternative world)’” (2010, pp. 165). It becomes

apparent from this definition that many special effects can fly right under the nose of viewers and they would never know it. For the purposes of the present paper, the latter from Buckland's definition, visible special effects, will be examined.

“Film is the natural habitat of myth because it is the only medium where myth can exist as a talking picture” (Dick, 1975, pp. 124). Any number of things can comprise these visible special effects, and in many ways, it can be left up to the reader's imagination what that means. If one considers something that is not possible in our world, it can be a special effect in film, no matter the means to achieve it. Dinosaurs – whether they are achieved on screen via digital effects, animatronics, by puppetry, or are simply men in special suits – are considered a special effect. Monsters, such as werewolves, mummies, and various swamp creatures can be achieved with digital effects, or, more impressively, with makeup. Aliens, too. Men who can fly, laser swords (read: lightsabers), laser guns, green monsters spurred by anger, giant apes, apes who talk (or any animal), and even something that seems simple by most of today's filmic standards: explosions. Additionally, animation can be viewed as a special effect by some stretch of the imagination. All of these are considered a special effect no matter the method used to realize it on screen for viewers. As such, one would be right in assuming a storied history behind special effects.

An Abridged History of and Closer Look at Special Effects in Film

With such a broad definition, it comes as no surprise that, like many things, special effects in cinema have a history as long as cinema itself, and to understand how special effects have changed films over the years, both from a storytelling standpoint and a thematic standpoint, it's important to have some knowledge of how they got where they are now. Blackmore writes

this sentiment the most succinctly, saying, “In some ways, as long as there has been film, there have been special effects” (2007, pp. 368).

The present paper has already discussed early stop motion with Willis O’Brien and Ray Harryhausen on *The Lost World* and *King Kong*, released in 1925 and 1933, respectively. Stop motion is considered a form of animation, which, like other special effects, has been around for nearly as long as film has, and “has been a significant form throughout the history of cinema. . . . Stop motion is the branch of digital animation where some form of model is used; these models can be as wide-ranging as paper doll cutouts, Lego blocks, clay figures, toys, and even people” (Thomas & Tufano, 2010, pp. 161). In order to achieve stop motion animation, pictures are taken of the desired models, and each picture represents one frame of movement. After one picture is taken, the models must be moved just enough to compose the very next frame of the shot, and then another picture is taken. The models are then moved another frame, another picture is taken, and so on. “When you play back the sequence of images rapidly, it creates the illusion of movement” (Dragon Frame, n.d.). This process has been responsible for not only some of cinema’s most illustrious creatures and effects, but also some of its most beloved films, one example of which is *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Stop motion is not the only early special effect to bring about such classic films, though.

Nestled between the releases of *The Lost World* and *King Kong* is Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, released in 1927. *Metropolis* is a classic example of miniatures and a technique called forced perspective used as an effect in film. With forced perspective, a camera trick more than anything, something that is actually small appears large, or vice versa. In the case of *Metropolis*, forced perspective was used to make a model of a fictional city appear as though it were an actual city. Particularly passionate or knowledgeable film buffs will remember *A Trip to*

the Moon, directed by Georges Méliès and released in 1902, as the first true example of miniatures used in cinema. Miniatures and forced perspective are still often used in the film industry even today. Another classic, simple-by-design effect used to create such grandiose images in film include matte paintings, which were used to particularly great effect in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Going back to the effects used make various creatures, the use of makeup was at one time quite prominent in the industry, and we have prolific makeup artist Rick Baker to thank for some of the most bone-chilling special effects in cinema history. Namely, those found in *An American Werewolf in London*, directed by John Landis, released in 1981. In it, the protagonist, David Kessler, undergoes a transformation into a werewolf halfway through the film. The scene is gory, long, and detailed, yet involves no digital effects and very little camera trickery. The transformation, as well as the full werewolf creature, was achieved solely with makeup and Rick Baker's own ingenuity. So impressive were the makeup effects in this film, that Rick Baker was the very first recipient of the Academy Award for Best Makeup in 1982. Another makeup artist film scholars might recognize is Stan Winston, who was responsible for effects in much of director James Cameron's works, including *The Terminator* and *Aliens*.

One film that must be mentioned in any look back at the history of visual effects in cinema is *Star Wars*, later retitled *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*, directed by George Lucas and released in 1977. *Star Wars* used a combination of all of the aforementioned effects to achieve an in-depth and detailed galaxy. It also pioneered the use of motion-controlled photography, which allows for the duplication of one object multiple times on screen with a moving camera. This is impressive, because the process of duplicating a person or object on screen usually means a perfectly still and unmoved camera. *Star Wars*, though, is perhaps most

important to the industry not in what effects or stories it introduced to the industry and viewers, but for introducing George Lucas and his special effects house, Industrial Light & Magic, to the world. Industrial Light & Magic, often abbreviated ILM, is one of the most prolific special effects houses in the business today. If one thinks of any number of recent films that are heavy on special effects, there is a high probability that the films special effects were done by ILM. As Turnock put it, “ILM veritably invented our contemporary notion of photorealism, not only in special effects, but in cinema and moving image capture realms more broadly” (2012, pp. 158).

Most special effects of today are computer-generated effects. Creating products of directors’ imaginations is a much simpler process when computers are involved. If a film has need of a werewolf or an alien, creating it digitally is cheaper and faster than the hours-long process of putting an actor in layers upon layers of makeup, or even using a puppet. When you factor in the great cost and length of time shooting any film takes, the money and time saved using digital effects is too helpful to ignore. Before digital effects took over the film industry as entirely as they seem to have, however, there was a middle space. In this middle space, films used a mix of digital effects and more practical effects (the term used for all of the other types of effects mentioned here). One need not look any further than Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*, released in 1993, for not just the benchmark example in films that utilize a mix of practical and digital effects, but possibly as the turning point for special effects in all films going forward in general. To create the dinosaurs found throughout the film, Spielberg and company, including ILM, used animatronics – or life-sized, robotic puppets – that were bolstered with CG to breathe more life into the various creatures found in the film. This mixture of multiple styles of effects was a resounding success, making *Jurassic Park* a landmark film in special effects, and nearly 25 years later, the film’s effects still look as good they did when it first came out.

Finally, a special effect that has risen to prominence since the beginning of the new millennium and is still prominent today is motion capture. Used in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy to create Gollum, as well as the most recent *Planet of the Apes* films, motion capture, or mo-cap, involves putting an actor in a skintight motion capture suit, and recording their actions for use in digitally animating a character for on-screen use. This style of performance capture is used to inject human emotion and mannerisms into digital characters. Andy Serkis, an actor most well-known for his motion capture acting, portrayed Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as well as the protagonist in the aforementioned *Planet of the Apes* films, Caesar.

Opinions on special effects vary from viewer to viewer. Most enjoy them, as the sense of spectacle they offer is often a sight to behold. Others think they are used too often, opting for a preference that wishes directors, producers, and special effects artists were more sparing in their use of them in any given film. One particularly cynical view of them is offered by Blackmore, who says in his article, “It is a present where special effects are no longer special, but normal, are in fact required to make the event seem ‘real’” (2007, pp. 371). All cynicism aside, Blackmore has something of a point on his hands. Special effects are the norm. Where Blackmore’s point is rendered somewhat moot, however, is in stating it only ten years ago. As has been discussed in this article, visual effects have always been around. In a sense, they have always been ‘normal,’ in that from the beginning, in some form, they have always been an option that is available to filmmakers. Whether one supports their use or is against their unrelenting use is irrelevant. Like the writing, acting, direction, set design, and virtually all other aspects of every film, special effects are a part of every production, and can either be done well or poorly. In this sense, they are no different from those other facets of filmmaking.

Where they are either done well or poorly is where the present paper enters the discussion. When special effects are done well, they serve to enhance a film's story, and they can be done well in any number of ways. They can be used subtly and only when required, a minimalist approach that is perceived as genuine. One such film that does so is *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the epitome of what an effects-driven film is. In *Fury Road*, most of the effects are practical. The bevy of cars and explosions are real. It was shot on location in the deserts of Namibia, and the only apparent digital effect in the entire experience is a sand storm. A look at any behind-the-scenes look at the visual effects of *Fury Road* shows us that other than the sand storm, the only other major digital effect seen throughout the film is color enhancement (Miller, 2015), which resulted in the bright and popping color palette of the film. This is an important addition to that film, yet it's subtle, and the film doesn't force it on the viewer.

Not every film can be so well made, and while it's trite to call his name out in this discussion, one director who is consistently criticized for focusing too greatly on effects over story – all style, no substance, as it were – is Michael Bay. In reference to Bay's *Armageddon*, Jones says, "There are long stretches during those scenes when I had no idea who or what was doing what to what or whom, when the screen was a veritable squall of hurtling rocks and bodies, white smoke jets, scowling faces, asteroid fissures, uncoiling cables, heavy machinery, and...bullets sprayed from a gatling gun...Some have characterized *Armageddon*...as a punishing experience" (Jones, 2001, pp. 27). 16 years since Jones' article was published, and audiences still feel largely the same way about the explosion-obsessed director. While his films are dazzling to the eye, they are not challenging enough from a story standpoint, and suffer as a result. While he focuses on couples, with Corbett's (1998) research and findings, we know that audiences, in general, prefer to garner some sort of meaning out of the films they view.

A great many of fantastic films that are deserving of mention for their effects are not mentioned here, but for the purposes of this paper, all branches of the broad spectrum of special effects that need mention have been discussed.

Framework

As is evidenced by even the short discussion on special effects found in earlier sections of this paper, special effects are an immensely important aspect of film. Stephen Prince opens his book, *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema*, explaining just how important to the industry digital effects are, saying, “The digital era in cinema challenges our understanding of the medium and not simply because of the shift to electronics from celluloid. It challenges us to think anew about the nature of realism in cinema and about the conjunction between art and science” (2012, pp. 11). While there are many films that get by with very little in the way of effects, there are that many more that require them in some respect. This sentiment, and Prince’s, are especially true for the genre film, in which things that are not necessarily part of our world often appear.

While special effects are important, the most important aspect of every film is story. If a film tells no story, then it serves no purpose. Further, one of the most important aspects to story is theme, or what we as viewers perceive to be the overall message a story is attempting to deliver to its audience. Because special effects are so critical to film in general, it is no surprise that they have some kind of impact on the story of any particular film. In the book, *Digital Storytelling*, the author makes a statement and poses a question regarding the dichotomy of narrative and special effects. “Classical narrative is supposed to be so engrossing as to keep the ‘apparatus’ of the filmmaker invisible, but spectacle, as created by effects, also is supposed to make the audience aware of the technology of filmmaking...Is it ever possible for spectacle – and effects – to fit into classical narrative filmmaking?” (McClellan, 2007, pp. 7-8). The most

apparent answer is that many stories are simply not possible to tell on screen without the use of special effects, and therefore require some suspension of disbelief on the viewer's part. Wood said, "Contemporary spectacular cinema...combines spectacular elements with narrative elements and integrates them within the experience of the film" (2002, pp. 373). Steven Spielberg could not have adapted Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* to screen without them, and we would have no *Star Wars*, no Marvel Cinematic Universe, or even *King Kong*. Obvious and clear as that may be, this paper seeks to dive deeper into the question, how is story in film altered by the use of special effects?

In analyzing special effects in this specific way, two effects-driven films will be inspected, compared, and contrasted. Like Wood, the films discussed in the present paper "combine either computer-assisted or generated images with those produced with optical processes" (2002, pp. 371). In other words, they are live action films that are bolstered with digital effects. One of these films is considered successful amongst audiences, while the other is derided. As such, it is assumed that the special effects enhanced one, while they ultimately hindered the other. The critically successful film is *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, from 2014, directed by Matt Reeves. The critically derided film, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, released in 2008, directed by Steven Spielberg. While these films are six years apart, and thus seemingly unfair to compare their special effects when one has the technology advantage of being produced years later, the comparison in this paper is not necessarily between the overall quality of the special effects in each film, but the nature of how the films used their special effects to enhance their respective stories.

Looking at these two films – with some analysis of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* – from an effects-based standpoint, several ideas are pondered. While film can arguably be considered

subjective, the goal of the present paper is to shed some more light on the discussion of story, and theme, versus effects. First, the impact that visual effects have on the storytelling aspects of a film – including its overall narrative – is analyzed. Second, this paper dissects how, if at all, a film's general thematic elements, outside of its story, are altered by the presence of visual effects. Finally, whether a film's thematic elements are contingent on visual effects, within the context of its story, is pondered.

Analysis

Narrative versus Special Effects

Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull is the fourth entry in the beloved *Indiana Jones* franchise, which stars Harrison Ford as the title character. Grandiose by nature and always considered big, bombastic adventure films, spectacle is no stranger to this franchise. This is not terribly surprising, considering the fact that it was created by George Lucas, with all four films being directed by Steven Spielberg. The first three films in the franchise were released between 1981 and 1989, placing *Crystal Skull*'s release a full 19 years after the third film. As such, there was immense anticipation for the film leading up to its release. With such a buildup for one project, one can imagine the ambition its creators would have for it, and that ambition is apparent in *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. Ultimately, though, that ambition might have possibly gotten the better of Spielberg and company, muddling the story in the process. (Spielberg, 2008)

Indiana Jones is a franchise from which viewers expect a certain level of action on display. In the opening scene of the first film, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indiana Jones steals a golden idol from a temple in Peru, causing the temple to crumble, and numerous traps to set off,

including a giant, rolling boulder, which initiates the iconic moment in which Indy barely escapes the temple, the boulder hot on his heels. The scene is thrilling, shows us how cunning our hero is, and sets the audience up for the adventure on which they are about to embark. On the opposite side of the franchise, the opening scenes in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* lead to a similarly action-packed moment. In this one, Indy finds himself in a nuclear weapons testing site, with a nuclear bomb about to be tested mere seconds before he realizes it. Unable to escape on such short notice, in order to protect himself, Indy hops into a lead-lined refrigerator just as the bomb explodes. It's visually spectacular, with several camera shots within the blast zone of the moments-long explosion. The scene paints for us precisely what that refrigerator that houses Indy must be going through in that moment, and unfortunately, sets the audience up for the 'adventure' on which they are about to embark.

Indy emerges from the refrigerator – now a good distance from where he first entered it – completely unharmed. This scene is now notorious, discussed amongst fans as the lowest point of the series. As is common for the franchise, there is a big reveal of some supernatural entity at the end. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, it was angels of death. *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* concludes with the revelation that the crystal skull to which the title refers belongs to race of interdimensional aliens. Both are equally steeped in the bizarre, but where *Crystal Skull* fails where *Raiders of the Lost Ark* succeeds is in the nature of the entity. The angels, while a supernatural force, are a concept that exists within our world. Religious subtext is inherent in the imagery, and religion is unequivocally a human concept. Aliens, on the other hand, are an otherworldly and extraterrestrial force. In the case of a fourth film in an established franchise, Spielberg and company altered the essence of the worldbuilding that took place across the three films prior, and introduced to the fiction an element that feels out of place. *Kingdom of the*

Crystal Skull is bookended by two scenes that feel more focused on the spectacle over the story, intent on wowing viewers strictly with visuals, rather than using the visuals to enhance the story. In the case of *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the special effects – the ambition they allow to come to fruition – had a negative impact on the story.

As has already been explained with several examples in this paper alone, films don't have to be constrained by their special effects, and filmmakers don't have to sacrifice a poignant story for the ambition of a bigger sequel. *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* is the sequel to 2011's *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, and features the work of a different director from the first one. In *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, the world is broken and in despair. A Simian flu has reduced the human population to limited numbers. Humans and a tribe of highly intelligent, evolved apes live separate from one another, with a community of humans living in San Francisco near the tribe of apes, who live in the Muir Woods. While it's an admitted oversimplification, there are two characters on each side who are pivotal to the film's plot. On the apes' side, there is Caesar, the leader of the apes, and Koba, portrayed by Toby Kebbell via motion capture (all of the ape performances were captured this way). On the humans' side, there is Malcolm, the leader of a small party of humans, portrayed by Jason Clarke; and Dreyfus, the leader of the community to which Malcolm's party belongs, portrayed by Gary Oldman. Caesar and Malcolm can be viewed as the protagonists for the apes and humans, respectively, whereas Koba and Dreyfus can be viewed as the antagonists. (Reeves, 2014)

The characters of *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* make the film, and that includes the digital ape characters. Every major ape character in the film was brought to life with motion capture and a dedicated actor, but they were all still digitally rendered for the screen. As such, there is almost always some form of visible special effect on the screen, including the smaller

moments and character interactions. Caesar is arguably the most human character in the film, yet there is no hiding the fact that he was created with digital effects. His friendship with Malcolm feels real, and the film puts a focus on this element before it puts a focus on wowing the audience with action, on which the film still delivers, particularly during its climax.

Similarly, Koba is a truly intimidating and terrifying antagonist, and his machinations to betray Caesar are not made less impactful by the fact that during filming, he was just an actor in a mo-cap suit. *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* serves as an example of a film on which the creators used special effects to the film's advantage, rather than to its detriment. Where effects played a role in what's to dislike about *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, they played a role in what makes *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* such an endearing film. Looking so closely at these two films in this way, we can see that special effects can have an influence on the narrative of a film, either positive or negative. Being such an important part of story, the relationship between theme and special effects must also be discussed.

Theme versus Special Effects

If we examine closely the dynamic of the aforementioned four characters in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, certain themes that are in the film start to become clear. Between the humans and the apes, on each side, there is a leader and one who would oppose them. As has been mentioned, the leader of the apes is Caesar, while the leader of the humans is Dreyfus; the ape who would oppose Caesar is Koba, and the human who would oppose Dreyfus is Malcolm. Between the species are pairs who share ideologies. Caesar and Malcolm are both interested in the idea that humans and apes can coexist, while Dreyfus and Koba would prefer to eradicate the species that is not their own. This dynamic allows Caesar and Malcolm to befriend one another, which shows the audience that there is potential for peace between the two species. Despite that,

because of the drive to kill inherent in Dreyfus and Koba, this peace can never be achieved. There will always be a Dreyfus or Koba ready to go to war, a message that exists as a deeper part of the film's story. Perhaps as a sign of hope, there will also always be a Caesar or a Malcolm ready to end the fighting.

Beyond war, leadership is also a theme found in the film, as evidenced by the same four characters that have been discussed already. Dreyfus and Caesar are leaders on the opposite side of the moral spectrum for their particular species, and Malcolm and Koba – also on the opposite side of the moral spectrum – serve as the antithesis against their respective leaders. Caesar is rightfully the leader of the apes, and he leads his people in a direction that is expected of a good leader, but for Koba, it appears weak. Dreyfus, then, is what it might look like were Koba the leader of the apes, and the audience gets the sense that both sides would be better off if only Malcolm led the humans, rather than Dreyfus.

These themes forge the dynamic that makes *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* such a powerful and affecting film. With leadership and war as primary themes, in many ways – and similar to Rubey's comparison of *Star Wars* to the wars of the past – it shares its themes with those of a typical war film. "Military itself is a corrupt institution. The theme is commonly dramatized in two ways. The first develops the characters and actions of corrupt...men who are in positions of military authority" (Donald, 1991, pp. 78). We see this in Dreyfus. Further, "The enemy, although of a different culture, is in many ways quite similar to the soldier" (Donald, 1991, pp. 78). In *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, we see a similar approach, except there is no 'enemy' force. There is good to be found on both sides, and equally so, there is bad to be found on both sides. The moral spectrum of the film is 'gray,' as it were.

Doubling back to *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, and looking at the themes found therein, it must be said that the *Indiana Jones* franchise hinges on its title character. While there was at one time discussions moving the franchise forward without Harrison Ford (to ostensibly be replaced by Shia LaBeouf's character), four films in, and the stories have become more about the growth of Indy as a character and as a person. As such, the thematic elements of *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* revolve around Indy (now sometimes referred to as Henry by other characters, since the revelation of his birth name in the third film) as he is 19 years since audiences last saw him. This fact is important, because at that point, the last time we had seen Indy was at the conclusion of *The Last Crusade*, in which "Indiana concludes his adventures not as a 'knight'...but as Henry Jones, Jr., secure in the values of family, religion, and cultural tradition" (Aronstein, 1995). This focus on family even in that film is pertinent, as we will see.

Kingdom of the Crystal Skull sees the return of Karen Allen portraying Marion Ravenwood, Indy's lost love interest from the first film, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. She now has a son – portrayed by Shia LaBeouf – who goes by the name of Mutt Williams. When Indy discovers that Mutt is Marion's son, Marion initially tells Indy that she happened to have a life after he left her, but as the plot of the film trucks on, it is revealed to Indy – and the audience – that Mutt's birth name is Henry Jones III, and that he is in fact Indy's son. This changes Indy's perspective in the adventure of the film, and he is now able to view this 'rebel' character as his own blood, and Marion not just as his old missed opportunity, but as the mother of his child. Further, Indy has no legitimate interest in the adventure presented in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, but rather, he merely wants to get the titular crystal skull where it belongs and be done with it. Once that is done, and the film reaches its end, Indy and Marion marry, and Indy embraces the family he always had, but never knew he had.

Family has always been a popular theme in film, as the values found in this particular thematic element are unequivocally relatable to many. “The family and family-related values have always been a major cultural element of the American Way of Life. Indeed, the portrayal of the family in popular culture is an issue of great social...significance” (Levy, 1991, pp. 187).

Based on the research completed for the present paper, the themes found in both *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* and *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* appear to be prevalent and common within the film industry. That’s not a criticism, as the purpose of themes in film is to teach a lesson, or make an argument of some kind. In *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, war is unavoidable, and leadership is fragile. In *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, barring the danger in which the family is placed because of it, the theme of family exists outside of the adventure. These themes in both films exist outside of the major component responsible for most of the visual effects in the film: the overarching plot. As such, it cannot be concluded with any certainty that visual effects have any impact on the inherent themes of a film.

While a specific theme is not dependent on special effects to get its message across in a general sense, it could be dependent on the presence of special effects based on the story. *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* is a story about war, but it’s a story about war between humans and intelligent apes who are capable of speech. The theme of war might exist in humans versus humans stories, but even the original *Planet of the Apes* had to use visual effects to some extent to capture the ape characters (Schaffner, 1968). Without visual effects to bring them to life, putting the apes to screen without visual effects would be impossible, and thus, the themes present in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* would not be able to exist within the context of that story without the digital effects to sell it to the audience.

Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, ultimately being about family, might present a different approach to that idea. While Indy, Marion, and Mutt are placed in the face of danger throughout their adventure, and that adventure is the spawn of plenty of remarkable special effects, it's still just a family of three facing a set of trials. Those same three characters could be placed in trials that require fewer special effects, and the same themes could be expressed to the audience regardless of that. *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* and *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* are different in this regard. Based on the films researched for this present article, we can see that some films may require the use of visual effects to sell, as it were, its themes to the audience, while others may not inherently require their use.

Discussion/Future Research

By the nature of the analysis therein, this study was limited to how special effects might impact the narrative or the themes in any particular film. As is to be expected, though, with such a broad subject matter, there are many facets to these ideas that are not examined in the present paper. In looking at how visual effects might have negatively affected *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the filmmakers behind it were ostensibly caught up in the ambition of a new *Indiana Jones* adventure after 19 years since the one which precedes it. This resulted in a story that perhaps doesn't make sense within the context of the *Indiana Jones* franchise. What this sentiment fails to take into account, however, is that the original trilogy of *Indiana Jones* films are all set in the 1930's, and two of them feature Nazis as the main antagonistic group. In some ways, this establishes *Indiana Jones* stories as ones in which our hero faces threats that existed during a certain era. Set in the 1950's, the Soviet Union was chosen as this antagonist. There is also a decided B-movie vibe in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, with the nuclear blast at the beginning, and the aliens at the end, and these two ideas were particularly prominent in the time period in

which *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* is set. With that, it's likely that this was the intention of the storytellers behind the film. Were that the case, then the nuclear explosion and the aliens – both of which were described in the 'Analysis' section as ambitions that got ahead of the story – would be examples of deliberate genre homages. This particular paper only looked at how special effects might get in the way of telling a story in film, but future research could look at it from a genre perspective.

Looking back at theme in film, this article determined that the thematic elements of a film aren't necessarily dependent on visual effects, and can't necessarily fail to deliver based on them. The theme of family was discussed regarding *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. Indy is finally able to have some semblance of peace in the new family he finds in this film. The impact this has on the audience in this particular film, though, hinges on the notion that the audience has followed Indy through all of his adventures, and followed his character growth. Where in the original trilogy, we see him as a loner at one time only concerned with himself, who eventually learns to overcome his goal of fortune, in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, we finally get to see that growth come to a peaceful conclusion. Looking at it this way, it could be suggested that the themes in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* are dependent on its predecessors. Theme is not contingent on special effects, but further research could look into the idea that theme is contingent on sequels.

This paper examines the themes in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* as a solo film, but it doesn't look at it as part of a larger franchise. *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* has a direct predecessor in the form of *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, which itself serves as a reboot to an earlier film franchise, as well as a remake from 2001 by Tim Burton. With this long history, research into how themes change over time – potentially based on the era during which the film is made – is possible. It would be worth it to see how the current *Planet of the Apes* films

compare from a thematic standpoint to the original films, and how those compare to the 2001 film.

Finally, this paper analyzes how special effects impact two concepts in film, narrative and theme, using qualitative research, looking at the past works of other scholars. To be a more complete look how those factors may be altered by special effects, a more quantitative approach should be taken in further research. This would allow us to discover not just how narrative and theme are impacted by special effects, but also how the audience perceives them to be impacted. All viewers have differing opinions on film, and on the use of special effects in them. An analysis on that would be a welcome addition to the research here.

Conclusion

Special effects are not a new advent in the world of film. Having been around since nearly the beginning, filmmakers have been dazzling audiences with ‘movie magic’ for over a century. From the miniatures used in Georges Méliès’ *A Trip to the Moon*, to the stop motion animation used in Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s *King Kong*; from the believable science fiction in George Lucas’ *Star Wars*, to the werewolf made solely with makeup in John Landis’ *An American Werewolf in London*, and everything beyond, special effects have enriched films in a myriad of ways. Steven Spielberg finally found the perfect balance of practical and digital effects in *Jurassic Park* (which arguably hasn’t been replicated since), and now, digital effects reign supreme in the filmmaking industry. Producing a fictional creature is a simpler process when computers are involved, as opposed to makeup. As unfortunate as that may be to some, there’s no denying that special effects are always changing the way films can be made, and as such, there’s no denying that special effects have a vast impact on film.

The most important facet of any film is narrative, and evidence shows that narrative can be either enhanced or diminished based on how effects are used in any given film. In *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, they are used to great effect, with motion capture performance used to bring the ape characters to life, injecting emotion and character into them in a way that wouldn't be possible without 'mo-cap.' Without those performances, the weight of the narrative might not hit quite as hard as it does, and that is in many ways thanks to its special effects.

Special effects don't always have a positive impact on the narrative of a film, however. In *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, there is evidence to suggest that its creators were caught up in the spectacle and grandeur that came with producing a new entry in the eminent *Indiana Jones* franchise. In the first 20 minutes of the film, Indiana Jones survives a nuclear blast by hiding inside of a lead-lined refrigerator. The refrigerator flies through the air outside of the blast zone, and our protagonist emerges without a scratch. By the end of the film, it's revealed that the secret of the crystal skull Indy has lugged around is alien in origin. Visually spectacular as nuclear explosions and aliens may be on screen, it stilts the overall narrative in favor of spectacle, a balance that is sometimes difficult to achieve.

It was suggested that special effects can also change the way a film delivers the message of its overall themes to its audience. Comparing *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* to the concept and themes often found in war films, it was found that such themes are still possible even without the presence of the digital effects found in the film. Similarly, the theme of family transcends the special effects in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. With this in mind, and with these films as the center of analysis in this paper, there is no evidence that themes are dependent or can be altered by the presence of special effects, no matter how off-the-wall they may get sometimes.

The concept of theme in the context of a film's particular story was also analyzed. More specifically, the question that was presented asked, are the themes found in a film dependent on the use of special effects strictly within the context of the same film's story? In *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, it was found that while those themes can exist in a different story, in the context of that story, it is not possible to sell the themes of war and leadership without the presence of both groups, humans and apes, and as such, special effects are required to create the ape characters. By contrast, though, in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the themes of family exist outside of the special effects. Indy, Marion, and their son, Mutt, could simply be lost in the jungle for two hours, and the audience would still get the same sense of family, outside of any major special effects.

Future research on the subject matter of the intersection of narrative, theme, and special effects could look at how genre and genre homages might factor into the use of special effects, outside of narrative and theme. This would account for the 1950's science fiction vibe of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, which this paper does not factor. Future research could also analyze if multiple films in one franchise alters how themes in said franchise are relayed to the audience, or how an audience perceives them. Further, it may be worth it to analyze how the themes in a particular film that serves as a reboot or remake differ from those in the original, especially when the original series and the reboot are far removed from each other, as is the case with *Planet of the Apes*. Finally, quantitative research on the aforementioned ideas for research, as well as the research presented in this paper, would go a long way in telling us how film watchers view special effects, narrative, and theme, and how they all coincide with one another, in film.

As Manovich tells us, “Since the majority of viewers and critics equate cinema with storytelling, digital media is understood as something which will let cinema tell its stories in a new way” (2012, pp. 1). Special effects have been a dominant force in films and the film industry as a whole for longer than is easier to remember, and one thing is for certain as films continue to get more grandiose, the storytelling of filmmakers more ambitious: special effects will continue to impact films the same way that – if not in more ways than – they always have.

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