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Diachronic Metalepsis in Cinema: A Focus on English-Language Films

This research investigates the diachronic development of metalepsis in cinema, focusing on English-language films from the silent era to contemporary AI-driven narratives. Metalepsis – a narrative strategy that transgresses the boundaries between different levels of reality – has been extensively theorized in literature but remains underexplored in cinematic contexts, particularly as a dynamic, evolving technique rather than a mere stylistic device. This study addresses this gap by adapting Karin Kukkonen's (2011) metalepsis matrix through grounded theory methodology, incorporating audiovisual elements unique to film, such as subjective cinematography, sound design, editing, and intertextual references.

Drawing on a dataset of 43 English-language films, with 11 representative works selected across decades, the study traces the historical trajectory of metalepsis, identifying three stylistic phases: classical cinema (rhetorical metalepsis, linear narratives), modern cinema (self-reflexivity and fourth-wall breaking), and postmodern/contemporary cinema (ontological ruptures, nested realities, and technologically mediated storytelling). Through open, axial, and selective coding, the research examines how cinematic techniques – from intertitles and direct audience address to CGI, interactive media, and AI-generated narratives – have facilitated increasingly complex forms of metalepsis, challenging conventional narrative structures and reshaping audience engagement.

The study contributes a comprehensive theoretical framework for cinematic metalepsis, refining Kukkonen's matrix to account for film-specific phenomena and exploring the implications of emerging narrative technologies. By situating metalepsis diachronically, the research offers both a historical map of its evolution and a forward-looking perspective on its role in interactive, AI-driven storytelling. The findings advance narratology, media studies, and film theory, providing practical insights for scholars and filmmakers while laying the groundwork for future studies on cross-cultural and algorithmically generated cinematic narratives.

Works Cited

Kukkonen, Karin et al. (eds.) (2011): *Metalepsis in Popular Culture*. Berlin / New York, NY.

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