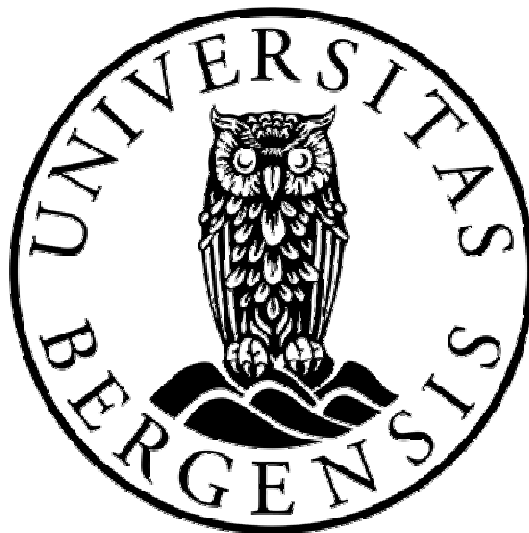# Changing Narratives

Five Essays on Hollywood History

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Contents

Preface

The road traveled: towards a meta-perspective

This thesis was supposed to be a broad and systematic empirical study of changes in narrative and stylistic conventions in Hollywood cinema. Some four years ago I wrote a preliminary introduction to my thesis which stated that "The central theme of this dissertation is the comparison of some kind of 'Hollywood now' with some kind of 'Hollywood past' (or 'pasts')". Today that assertion is merely moderately accurate. While it holds true for certain sections of the book, it seems to me that, for the most part, what I have ended up doing is the theoretical and philosophical groundwork for such a study.

There are several reasons for this. Most importantly, it dawned on me that the empirical investigation I was thinking of required more work than I would be able to carry out within the stipulated time frame. Also, the need for a large-scale study became, if not redundant, then certainly less pressing with the publication of David Bordwell's *The Way Hollywood Tells It* in 2006.

Still, there's no escaping the fact that the final result falls somewhat short of my initial ambitions. However, while the decision to forsake the large-scale study of contemporary Hollywood cinema in favor of a series of articles more limited in scope may be seen as a retreat, I prefer to frame it in more positive terms. For one thing, while the focus of the individual pieces is narrower than the sweeping project I had in mind to begin with, they still deal with big, convoluted, sometimes long-standing issues. One might say that the final result is less voluminous but more intellectually ambitious than the project I envisaged at the outset.

More importantly, I do not think of the work I ended up doing as a kind of failure to move beyond the preliminary phase; rather I conceive of the preliminary phase as throwing up a number of questions that seemed to me both more interesting and more in need of exploration than the ones I started out with, questions that have to do with the role of the historian, of interpretation, of narrative, and of theoretical frameworks in historical investigations. These are obviously big philosophical topics that have been pondered for centuries. My aim, though, has not been to consider them in their most abstract form, but to open them up for discussion and to

demonstrate their relevance to the study of Hollywood history. More concretely, I think that film studies has much to gain from contending more seriously and directly with the question of how accounts of aesthetic objects – historical or otherwise – are shaped by the cultural and critical discourses in which they are steeped.

It seems to me that our grasp of the whole classical/post-classical debate stands to profit a great deal from a more careful examination of various quite fundamental questions. To take a more specific example, I think that if we want to add to our understanding of the historical relationship between spectacle and narrative in Hollywood cinema, we do not really need another reading of how the special effects in some action film is integrated into (or bracketed off from) narrative concerns. It would be much more helpful at this point, I think, to consider more principal questions, such as:

- How do we define or conceptualize key terms like spectacle and narrative progression?
- What criteria for narrative integration have been employed by various scholars? How do they enter into or bring about different historical accounts?
- What cultural connotations do terms like spectacle and narrative carry? What function do these connotations play in scholarly constructions of Hollywood history?

My own contribution is modest, and the present collection of essays does not take on all of these questions. However, I do at least hope to get across the point that turning our attention to more basic and underlying issues is the best way to gain more traction in debates about classical and post-classical Hollywood cinema. That belief is also the reason why I think the present collection of essays has turned out to be a more valuable venture than the empirical study I started out with would have been had I gone through with it.

When I say that I feel like I've been doing the "groundwork" for a broad historical survey, I do not mean to suggest that the work I've done is merely "preparatory", or some first step towards something else and more important that turns out to be missing in the volume at hand. I find all five articles real and valid contributions in their own right, although at least the final four can easily serve as a kind of basis for more local/empirical investigations as well. Anyway, as will hopefully become clear in the course of the book, I do not think that "doing history" amounts

to some kind of gradual progression through a series of distinct phases. Rather, it is the more holistic enterprise of wondering, and constantly revising and questioning, what evidence goes together with other evidence, both at the empirical and theoretical level.

In sum, then, the project might be said to have made progress by taking a series of steps backwards, towards ever more pronounced meta-perspectives. I am sure that is partly a reflection of the PhD student's effort to come to terms with academic protocol: identifying and sometimes questioning all kinds of implicit knowledge; figuring out unwritten rules, procedures, and rhetorical strategies – in short, reading between the lines to figure out what it all "really" means.

Why a collection of essays?

The decision to write a collection of essays rather than a monograph was partly a pragmatic one. Much is expected of doctoral students in the current academic climate. In fact, in the course of my relatively short career as a PhD student the pressure to publish articles as well as to finish the thesis on time has increased noticeably. In light of this I found that an article-based dissertation worked well for me. There is little conflict between publishing and finishing on time, since the essays can be submitted for publication in academic journals with little or no extra work. Converting book chapters into articles, by contrast, will often require heavy revision. Moreover, a series of stand-alone pieces ought to be easier to organize than one long, continuous text.

It also allowed me to carefully explore a series of disparate but related topics in ways that would have been hard to do in a monograph. Though it probably wasn't a conscious part of my decision to go for an article-based dissertation in the first place, the freedom it affords to pursue a variety of interests – within certain limits, obviously – is certainly something I've come to think of as no small blessing along the way. I am not saying that the monograph format is somehow incompatible with diversity, but in my case it very probably would not have permitted the particular combination of breadth and depth that I came to appreciate so much. As a colleague of mine put it, the end product of all the hard work that goes into a PhD is not really the book that emanates from it, but the book's author, and his or her future career. With that in mind, I'd venture that the decision to settle on the article-based format has made me a more intellectually versatile end product.

Presentation of the essays

Four of the five essays have been submitted for publication in peer reviewed journals: "Narrative Structure in *The Sixth Sense*: A New Twist in 'Twist Movies'?" was published in *The Velvet Light Trap* number 58, 2006. "The Battle for the Blockbuster: Discourses of Spectacle and Excess" has been accepted for publication by *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, and will appear in vol. 6, no. 2, 2008. "'Not the Obstacle but the Means': Film History and the Postmodern Challenge" and "New Narrative Depths? Spectacle and Narrative in Blockbuster Cinema Revisited" are undergoing peer review at the time of writing (September, 2007). "Perspectives on and in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*" has not been submitted for publication.

I have resisted the temptation to expand the four essays submitted for publication, or to reintroduce paragraphs or footnotes left out from earlier versions so as to comply with the submission guidelines of various scientific journals. I am happy with their current formats, and to the extent that I feel the need to expand or comment on the articles, I will do so in the introduction. The essays have been submitted to journals with different citation styles, so I have changed some in order to give the book a consistent appearance. I have also made some very minor orthographical changes that I have discovered subsequent to publication. Still, for all practical intents and purposes, their present and published forms are identical.

The articles are presented in the sequence in which they were written.[1] As stand-alone pieces they can be read in any order, though some have more in common than others. Essays number two and three are both on historiography, and might usefully be read together. I will also introduce them collectively. The same goes for the two final articles, which are both on blockbuster cinema. Seeing as I will have something to say about how the individual essays came into being when I comment on them, a chronological organization will no doubt yield the most coherent account.

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[1] Sometimes I have worked on more than one article at the same time. As I touch upon in the introduction to "Perspectives on and in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*", this essay could have been placed almost anywhere. I have decided to put it next to "Not the Obstacle but the Means" since they supplement each other to a large extent.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Leif Ove Larsen, who encouraged me to pursue an academic career in the first place, after expertly guiding me through my Master's thesis. He has been terrifically supportive and trusting throughout my work on this dissertation.

I would also like to thank my good friends and colleagues Rune Klevjer and Hallvard Moe, and my good friend Ståle Karlsen. All have read and commented on parts of this study, and offered valuable advice. More importantly, they have permitted me to join in a hell of a lot of great conversation.

Part I
Final contribution

General introduction

Most generally, all the articles in this collection deal with questions of historical change in American cinema. Somewhat more specifically, they revolve around issues that can be related to the alleged shift from a classical to a post-classical period in Hollywood. This is a topic that has been endlessly discussed by scholars, critics, and fans for decades, and it is not my ambition to engage with all aspects of that debate. Most importantly, this book focuses on aesthetic changes, leaving industrial, economic, and technological developments only marginally present.

I will comment on and contextualize the essays one at a time. Even so, I want to start off by offering some broad-based introductory remarks that apply to them collectively, focusing on two main issues: the theoretical approach and the research focus. At least in part I approach the latter subject through a process of elimination, by outlining and commenting on a number of topics that border on, and sometimes overlap with, my concerns in this dissertation.

Theoretical approach

The essays in this collection are too diverse to be informed by any single and consistent "theory". However, most of them are influenced by what David Bordwell has called a historical poetics of cinema.[2] This is most evident in the first article, on narration in *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), which explicitly adopts a historical poetics perspective in order to pin down the film's narrative strategy and to account for the peculiar reactions it elicited from moviegoers. The essay then goes on to place the *The Sixth Sense*'s narration in an historical context.

This is precisely what a historical poetics does. According to Bordwell, it produces knowledge in answer to two broad questions: First, what are the principles according to which films are constructed and by means of which they achieve particular effects? Second, how and why have these principles arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstances? (1989b, 371).

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[2] See Bordwell (1989a and 1989b) and Jenkins (1992) for a more detailed account. For a critical perspective on historical poetics, see Bhaskar (1999). Bordwell's book *Poetics of Cinema* – a collection of fifteen essays, some new, some revisions of previously published material – was imminent, but not yet available at the time of writing.

A historical poetics pursues explanations rather than explications. While I have confidence in the capacity of rational conversation to produce some kind of consensus in many cases, I am not so sure that the differences between scholars who tend to favor descriptive studies and scholars who tend to favor interpretative studies can be resolved once and for all in such a way. To a great extent, this has to do with individual preferences. Bordwell has repeatedly – and often polemically – voiced his frustration at what he calls SLAB theory:[3] for example, he finds that it is doctrine-driven, failing to ask particular questions or to consider counterexamples. Conversely, Bordwell has described how the kinds of meaning he is interested in have been seen as "unproblematic and uninteresting by most film scholars" (1989a: xiv). Similarly, some readers of my *Sixth Sense* article have commented that they're not sure it amounts to a "real analysis". They think it is fine as far as it goes, but they do not find an investigation of the film's constructional principles of interest in itself. They express surprise that it does not function as a stepping stone to a discussion of how the film's narrative strategy ties into some theme or subtext, or that it does not set up a more detailed and imaginative debate about what it might reveal about contemporary culture.

It is hard to agree on criteria of interestingness, and I do not know how to reply to such remarks except to say that from my perspective there is no need to make that final hermeneutic or diagnostic step. As Bordwell has pointed out on a number of occasions, in other fields like painting, architecture, and music it is perfectly acceptable to focus on technique, structure, and composition as an end in itself. The point is not to suggest that it is somehow illegitimate to make connections between a film's formal features and its context. Indeed, it is indispensable if we are to answer Bordwell's second question (how and why certain aesthetic principles have developed and changed in a specific place at a specific time). I think Henry Jenkins puts it very well when he writes that historical poetics understands aesthetic principles as "historic facts to be documented or interpreted in the larger contexts of the film's production, circulation, and reception" (1995: 101).

Some find this attention to the work itself, and to its most proximate context, somewhat unadventurous. They prefer the bolder, more exploratory approach of high theory. Robert B. Ray, for example, thinks that "if there is a complaint to be made about Bordwell […] it is that he is too

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[3] SLAB is an acrimonious acronym for Saussurean semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism, and Barthesian textual theory (Bordwell, 1989b: 385).

modest" (2001: 53). Ray seems to suggest that Bordwell's resolve to empirically test carefully framed hypotheses commits him to discover the already known; truly new and radical knowledge is much more likely to emanate from more audacious and improvisatory research strategies.

Ray presents an admirably lucid and concise account of the virtues of "poststructuralism's word play, aestheticization, neologisms, cathacreses, and esoterica" (ibid: 53). But while I can follow his arguments and see his points, by and large I find it hard to really embrace his perspective. For example, I fail to share his enthusiasm for puns and parodic uses of logical transitions (ibid: 55). More and more I've come to think that our theoretical preferences are perhaps not so different in kind from our cinematic preferences. Thus, where others see in high theory daring leaps of imagination, fruitful digressions, and revolutionary knowledge, "my kind" tends to see associative and speculative lines of reasoning, terminological imprecision, and deliberate obscurantism. Frequently, a sense of annoyance kicks in long before we have the chance to become intrigued.

Conversely, the focus on specific and testable questions, on conceptual clarity, on theoretical rigor, and methodological systematicity that some find unoriginal or uninspired[4] is precisely what attracts me to the historical poetics approach. I also regard as highly productive the attempt to establish connections between, on the one hand, artistic and institutional norms, conventions, and practices and, on the other, specific textual features. As Bordwell points out, a historical poetician will often work to reconstruct the artistic alternatives facing a filmmaker at a particular time, assuming that the filmmaker's choice derives from the pursuit of some specific effect (1989b: 373). My discussion of the anniversary dinner scene in *The Sixth Sense* is precisely an attempt to deduce from the final film the filmmakers' aesthetic decisions, and to see these decisions in relation to the effort to achieve a specific audience reaction. Meanwhile, the final article explores the relationship between narrative and spectacle by contemplating the options facing filmmakers in crafting different kinds of stories (though having said that, I should add that it does so at a more abstract or philosophical level than has been typical in the historical poetics approach).

Bordwell also thinks that metacriticism can be an integral part of a historical poetics (1989a: xiv). As Jenkins puts it, "a contextual approach in historical poetics looks at the

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[4] See for example the quote from Nichols (1992) in footnote 16 in "Perspectives on and in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*".

institutions which shape the reception of popularly circulating films" (1992: 109). That would be a quite fitting description of what the fourth essay, "The Battle for the Blockbuster: Discourses of Spectacle and Excess", sets out to do. Jenkins cites Janet Staiger's historical materialist approach as an example (Staiger, 1992, 2000). Admittedly, Staiger draws more on reader-response theory, whereas I make use of discourse analysis; and while she tends to focus on the assumptions of journalistic critics, I look at the ideas and vocabularies of academics. Both, however, can be said to investigate how thinking about films are shaped by larger critical debates.

The two remaining articles – "'Not the Obstacle but the Means': Film History and the Postmodern Challenge" and "Perspectives on and in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*" – have rather less in common with a historical poetics. They are less empirically grounded, more theoretical, and thus not as well suited to that approach. Moreover, both are to a great extent review essays, and as such they do not necessarily bear the stamp of any particular theory.

A match made in hell?

I ought to comment on the postmodernism essay, for it might come as something of a surprise in light of what has been said so far. Its sympathetic treatment (however cautious) of postmodern historiography would appear to be very much at odds with the kind of scientific aspirations that Bordwell promotes. However, if we agree with pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty that we ought to make a strict separation between metaphysical considerations and practical or mundane activities, there is in fact no conflict. Those historical debates that have acquired the postmodernist label tend to focus on the philosophy of history. They concern such things as the textuality of history and correspondence theories of truth. These are metaphysical matters. For Rorty, the beliefs that historians hold in this sphere has no bearing on the practice of "doing history". Both a pragmatist and an anti-pragmatist outlook would be completely compatible with historians going about their business the way they have always done (Rorty 2000: 198). Stanley Fish puts the point succinctly: "[T]he commitments we profess in metaphysical discussions […] do not follow us when we leave those discussions, but remain where they are, waiting for us should we leave the context of some mundane practice and return to the practice of discussing metaphysical points" (2003: 414).

For Rorty, pragmatism is not some "theory" that can be "applied" to historical reasearch. He does not think his philosophical ideas can (or at least ought to) cause scholars to do anything

different, though they might make them think differently about what they're doing. They can help us reflect on texts and things and activities in non-reductive ways. For example, it might make us think of "post-classical Hollywood cinema" not as something that exists or not, but as something that it is or is not useful to talk about, for certain purposes.

While I realize that Bordwell and Rorty might sound like a match made in hell, I do not in fact find their ways of thinking entirely incompatible. As we have seen, Rorty does not think that pragmatism carries any practical consequences for historians (or literary scholars or geologists for that matter). How they carry out their tasks is not influenced by their metaphysical beliefs; it is exclusively a matter of disciplinary training, of institutional norms, standards, and habits. In fact, Rorty's claim that pragmatists prefer "aphilosophical historians" (2000: 199) would seem to suggest that Bordwell is exactly the kind of historian that Rorty favors: one that sticks to his task, that conforms to the expectations of his disciplinary matrix.

Moreover, on those occasions that Bordwell has offered insight into his metaphysical perspective, he does not seem all that hostile to Rortian ideas. For example, defending himself against the claim that he is some naive empiricist, he submits that "one can consider a fact to be an accepted claim about what there is in the world" (1989b: 379). This would seem to be wholly in keeping with Rorty's conception of truth as that which is non-controversial.

Now, I am not implying that there are no real conflict between Bordwell and Rorty. My point is rather that it is not as farfetched to draw on both as their public images would seem to suggest. At least from a Rortian perspective there need not be any quarrel between them. If we say that Bordwell is primarily occupied with empirical issues while Rorty tends to concentrate on metaphysical issues there is no problem, since writing history and thinking about the ontological or epistemological results of that activity are simply two different "games". In other words, it is feasible to be influenced by both Bordwell and Rorty, as long as we draw on the former when we undertake empirical history and the latter when we engage in the philosophy of history.

However, the postmodernism article goes further than that, into territory that I suspect both Bordwell and Rorty would object to, by contemplating the possible practical consequences of postmodernist ideas for empirical historians. Still, I'd like to stress that it is an essay on, not an exercise in, postmodern historiography. And to the extent that there is a certain tension between this piece and the others, it is a reflection of my own ambivalence or uncertainty about the issues

at hand. After all, unlike Rorty and Fish, plenty of historians think that the work that goes into theorizing history should, and must, inform the writing of history.

But then again, Rorty does concede that the anti-foundationalism at the heart of pragmatism may at least have some bearing on the cognitive status of our ideas and beliefs. Specifically, it may lead to what Rorty calls irony, which stems from the "realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" (1989: 73). I would certainly say that the examination of various conceptions of classicism in "Perspectives on and in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*" is very much influenced by pragmatism, at least in the sense that it is less interested in finding out which of the models under scrutiny "actually" corresponds to reality than it is in outlining their relative merits.

On the whole Rorty's influence on this collection of essays is probably most evident in the writing style, however, which occasionally displays a kind of non-committal rhetoric brought on by Rortian irony. This is probably where these essays differ the most from Bordwell's approach. The main complaint I have of his work is that I wish it displayed greater flexibility and openness, a more explicit awareness of and sensitivity to the contingency of the perspective from which he writes. I try in my own writing to call attention to my own (for want of a better word) subjectivity, to stand back from the object being examined and consider how it changes as we shift perspective, or to consider how films acquire meaning not only by means of its ontological features, but also through the discourses we have created around them. One might say that I use Bordwell in an effort to contribute to the disciplinary matrix, and Rorty to reflect on its practices.

Research focus

My decision to focus on issues of aesthetic change in Hollywood is not to deny that important institutional transformations have taken place as well. In fact, it is probably easier to argue for a historical break at the industrial level than at the textual. There is no doubt that the Supreme Court decision in 1948 to order the fully integrated major studios to divest themselves of their cinemas was a major turning point in the industry's history. Without guaranteed exhibition outlets, the studios had to cut back production and phase out their contract personnel. In the mid-fifties they adopted the so-called package-unit system. Previously, Hollywood management seldom thought in terms of a single work. Rather, individual films were simply seen as one

element of that year's total production slate. A set of projects were assigned to a few supervisors once the annual budget and schedule had been determined. Actors, writers and directors only came on board later. After 1955, by contrast, the putting together of such a package – of top stars (both behind and in front of the camera) and top story material – became the *first* step. Each film became a one-off event produced and marketed on the basis of its individual merits rather than on its place within a carefully regulated yearly output. The major studios acted increasingly less as actual makers of film, and increasingly more as financiers and distributors. The Paramount Decrees thus initiated a reorganization of the industry whereby the assembly-line production of standardized films for a mass market was replaced by the manufacture of differentiated films for heterogeneous audiences. This can be seen as a fairly clear-cut shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of production. As we will see, the same kind of changeover at the basic, systemic level has been more difficult to establish and more contentious in accounts of Hollywood's aesthetic history.

The proliferation of television sets in American homes in the same period intensified the trend towards fewer, more lavish films. Now that spending an evening in front of the TV was an option it took something out of the ordinary to bring people to the theatres, so Hollywood put its faith in widescreen and Technicolor productions. This clearly shows that the formal features of Hollywood cinema are bound up with a host of other dimensions. It is possible to study the intricate interplay between all (or some) of them, but it is also an option to study just one in relative isolation (see Bordwell, 2005). That is what I am doing in this book: I am primarily looking at and trying to come to terms with aesthetic developments – as well as discourses about aesthetic developments – although I am fully aware that there are all kinds of reciprocal links to economic, industrial, legal, demographic, technological, sociological, ideological, and political developments as well.

Furthermore, within the focus on aesthetics it is possible to identify an even narrower center of interest, namely on narrative conventions. This means that important formal dimensions – to various extents – have been passed over, and I will comment on three of them briefly.

Postmodern features

Postmodernism is a notoriously difficult concept, and its relationship to Hollywood cinema is – to put it discreetly – intricate. However, John Hill makes a useful distinction between three main

strands of thinking about postmodernism (1998: 96). First, the term has been used in philosophical debates on epistemological foundations (this, obviously, is where the essay on postmodern history belongs). Second, it has been integral to socio-cultural debates concerned with globalization, the post-industrial economy, and the reshaping of social experience and identity. Third, postmodernism has been a key term in aesthetic debates within a number of art forms and cultural practices, and it is this strand that is relevant here.

The key features of postmodern cinema are commonly taken to be such things as genre hybridity, quotation, allusion, appropriation, irony, simulation, seriality, pastiche, and an eclectic mix of styles from different periods and from both high and low culture. The history of post-classical Hollywood cinema, which is my center of interest, does overlap with work on the history of postmodern Hollywood cinema. As I see it, the major difference is that the former tends to focus on a set of fairly tightly interwoven and contiguous causal explanations whereas the latter tends to invoke a looser, more diverse array of factors. In that sense, the discourse on postmodern cinema is liable to seem more ambitious. It might give the impression, for example, that what is being accounted for is not really (or at least not merely) the development of Hollywood cinema, but rather the development of Hollywood cinema (and quite possibly a range of other cultural practices as well) as a symptom of the postmodern condition. Thus, while research on post-classicism has for the most part been conducted by film scholars, work on postmodern Hollywood cinema has just as often been done by cultural theorists of various kinds.

From the perspective of someone drawn to the historical poetics approach, there are some substantial, often related, problems with the idea that Hollywood cinema has entered a postmodern phase. First, I am more interested in studying films as aesthetic objects than as sources or instances of broader social/cultural/historical phenomena. Second, in seeking to explain formal changes, my inclination is to seek out more proximate causal input – such as technological innovations or new artistic norms – than the postmodernists tend to do. Adherents of the postmodernist discourse on cinema are attracted to its broad explanatory power, for example its ability to explain similar trends across a variety of art forms or cultural practices, or to establish daring and adventurous links between the cultural sphere and the economic sphere.[5] I

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[5] The most obvious and famous example is Frederic Jameson's theory that the three phases of capitalism – market capitalism, monopoly capitalism, and multinational capitalism – are related to three aesthetic macrostructures: realism, modernism, and postmodernism. See Jameson (1981, 1991).

am prone to consider this speculative and somewhat hubristic. Third, there is little agreement on how to periodize, recognize, or evaluate postmodern cinema. As Hill has pointed out

> On the one hand, the idea of postmodernism has been used to carry on a tradition of ideological criticism which has sought to identify the social conservatism of the aesthetic conventions employed by postmodern cinema. On the other, it has been used to discuss films which may be seen to continue the "oppositional" or "transgressive" tradition of "political modernism".

Fourth, films tend to be picked unrepresentatively and read selectively, so that they come to prove whatever the scholar set out to illustrate in the first place. I agree with Michael Walsh that "Postmodernism can be mobilized as an explanatory device across a widely varying range of films because it can be so many different things at so many different moments" (1996: 489). Besides, it is far from certain that some key features of postmodern cinema are all that new, thus calling into question their ability to distinguish the postmodern age from the modern era. It would seem that their novelty is simply assumed, rather than based on a systematic study of a large and representative sample of films from different periods. In fact, one study of a sample of 3490 films released between 1940 and 1979 found that there were roughly six times as many recycled-script films in the 1940s as in the 1970s (Simonet, quoted in Neale, 2000: 247).[6] Thus, while such trademark postmodern traits as repetition and seriality may be more noticeable these days due to the current fashion for numerals in film titles, the evidence flatly contradicts the supposition that these phenomena have been more widespread in the past couple of decades. Meanwhile, in a large-scale study of genre developments in Hollywood cinema, Steve Neale finds that "generic hybridity is as common in old Hollywood as it is in the new Hollywood" (2000: 249). Finally, David Bordwell has argued convincingly that critics have tended to exaggerate the novelty of current developments, for there was room in the studio tradition for all the tactics that are taken to signal some new era, such as citation, pastiche, or playful knowingness (2006: 10).

Still, allusionism – in a seminal essay by Nöel Carroll described as "an umbrella term covering a mixed lot of practices including quotations, the memorialization of past genres, the reworkings of past genres, *homages*, and the recreation of 'classic' scenes, shots, plot motifs, lines of dialogue, themes, gestures, and so forth from film history" (1982: 52) – would seem to be

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[6] "Recycled-scripts" refers here to series, remakes, and sequels.

the best candidate for heralding a new era.[7] On the one hand, it is clear that allusions were far from exceptional in old Hollywood (Bordwell, 2006: 7-26; Neale, 2000: 248). Besides, as Neale points out, it can be difficult to compare films from different periods since "the allusive dimension of many studio-era films are often invisible to contemporary scholars" (2000: 248).[8] On the other hand, most scholars seem to agree that there was a proliferation of allusions in Hollywood films in the 1960s as a new generation of directors integrated into their works a burgeoning sensibility for the cinematic past, their efforts much appreciated by a cine-literate audience. It also seems clear that the use of allusions grew further in the 90s.[9] What sets allusionism in the new Hollywood apart from allusionism in the old Hollywood is not primarily its sheer quantitative expansion, but its extension to non-comic story-types. Also, whereas allusions in studio-era films were mostly aimed at everyone in the audience, in the modern era they are frequently intended for a select group of cinema connoisseurs.[10]

It seems to me both that allusionism can be studied as a constructional principle, and that it is possible to explain its inflation in terms of craft practices. For example, in *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, Kristin Thompson discusses the modern emergence of what she calls virtuosic or subtle motifs, an important component of which is allusions. She hypothesizes that the reason might be that contemporary screenwriters – unlike their studio-era counterparts – have so much time to labor over their scripts in the preproduction phase, which they frequently spend fine-tuning their work, adding reflexive references and other clever touches (1999: 130).

Bordwell, too, declines to invoke postmodern notions of depthlessness or simulacrum in his account of allusionism. Instead, he thinks the trend stems from changes in artistic self-understanding. Since the 1960s, Bordwell suggests, filmmakers have been affected by what he calls "the problem of belatedness" (2006: 23-26). University film courses, the auteur theory, and television reruns of classic works all played a part in making directors acutely aware of coming

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[7] Actually, Carroll explicitly states that he does not consider allusionism a postmodern trend because it is undertaken for expressive, as opposed to reflexive, purposes. Others would be apt to see allusionism as a postmodern trend for those very same reasons, or to read the very films that Carroll mentions as reflexive rather than expressive. See for example Dika (2006). As I have indicated, though, such confusion is typical of debates about postmodern cinema.
[8] For a detailed discussion of similar arguments in relation to a specific genre – the western – see Gallagher (1995).
[9] Thus Valerie Wee (2006) believes that films such as the *Scream* trilogy mark a later phase of postmodernism that she calls "hyperpostmodernism". This claim is, in turn, based on the suggestion in Jim Collins' 1993 essay "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity" that "what we have seen thus far is really a first phase, perhaps Early Postmodernism" (262). See also Collins (1995).
[10] As Carroll puts it, popular cinema has developed "a two-tiered system of communication which sends an action/drama/fantasy-packaged message to one segment of the audience and an additional hermetic, camouflaged, and recondite to another" (1982: 56).

late to the Hollywood tradition, and allusionism was one way for them to leave their own mark on it.

This is not to imply that other, less crafts-centered factors cannot shed light on these developments. But it shows that a historical poetics lends itself well to the study of allusionism. Moreover, given the highly confusing and contested nature of postmodern cinema, it seems to me that it would be useful to subject some of its key terms to the kind of discourse analysis that "spectacle" and "excess" are exposed to in the fourth essay in this collection.

In other words, while I have proclaimed severe doubts about the explanatory power of the notion of postmodern cinema, there is no doubt that some of its key features could be seen to be a natural extension of my present concerns. Thus, had this dissertation had a broader focus, it might easily have featured an examination of allusionism in Hollywood cinema (or in critical and scholarly writings on Hollywood cinema). However, that would have been a huge task in itself, so I have decided to focus my research on matters of narrative.

Thematics

This study rarely touches upon changes in themes or subject matter, which has been a key component in at least some important works on postclassical Hollywood cinema. While this may seem more suited to discussions of ideology than to film form, it can be impractical to make a strict separation between subject matter and storytelling conventions. For example, we might say that the alienation theme so prominent in many Hollywood Renaissance films undercuts key characteristics of classical narratives: the sense of isolation and emptiness is hard to reconcile with the clear-cut, typically happy endings of studio-era films, and aimless, drifting characters are even harder to square with goal-driven narratives. Meanwhile, Bordwell maintains that thematics is one of the objects of study for traditional poetics, as long as subject matter and themes are seen as components of the constructive process rather than as symptoms of social or cultural change (1989b: 375).

Studies of the latter kind are of course by far the most common, and there is an enormous amount of literature on the relationship between changes in filmic content and changes in society at large, ranging from close textual readings of particular films, to sociological research, to

statistical content analysis.[11] Most relevant to the present discussion, some important works – such as Thomas Elsaesser's seminal essay "The Pathos of Failure" (1975) and Robert B. Ray's *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* (1986) – take certain changes in films' ideological outlook to signify a general shift in Hollywood history. Both take the classical cinema to be chiefly consensus-driven: Elsaesser argues that it is characterized by "a fundamentally affirmative attitude to the world it depicts, a kind of a-priori optimism located in the very structure of the narrative about the usefulness of positive action" (Elsaesser, 1975 [2004]: 281), while Ray finds in studio-era films a basic reconciliatory pattern. Both find that Hollywood cinema's affirmative function started to dissolve in the late 60s.

In one respect this makes perfect sense. There is no doubt that the abandonment of the Production Code was a defining moment, making it possible for mainstream films to break with the industry's long-standing restrictions on depictions of sex, violence, and social critique. Moreover, the introduction of the new rating system coincided with a number of other important and interlocking changes: political assassinations, the struggle for racial justice, the Vietnam War, and Watergate made it a time of great social unrest, reflected in many of the Hollywood Renaissance films; the film industry suffered a serious financial crisis due to overproduction; the core cinemagoing audience was changing; the studios were taken over by large corporations; the genre system was heavily restructured; and a new generation of film school-educated directors made a series of films unmistakably inspired by European art cinema conventions.

The cumulative effect of all these development made it seem that the late 60s and early 70s was a definite cut-off point in Hollywood history. Films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970), *Brewster McCloud* (Robert Altman, 1970), *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Monte Hellman, 1971), *The King of Marvin Gardens* (Bob Rafelson, 1972), *The Long Goodbye* (Robert Altman, 1973), *The Last Detail* (Hal Ashby, 1973), and *Shampoo* (Hal Ashby, 1975) appeared to signal the arrival of a brand new era of American filmmaking.

On the other hand, as many writers have pointed out, these films never constituted a majority practice. Hollywood did not suddenly stop producing conventional fare, and most of the

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[11] On the studio era, see for example Girgus (1998) and May (2000). Among the most frequently cited works on representational changes in the post-studio era are Wood (1986), Ryan and Kellner (1988), Kolker (2000), and Krämer (2005). A more hard science approach is provided in Powers, Rothman, and Rothman (1996). The politics of Amrican cinema in the 1970s has been an especially popular subject. See for example Lev (2000).

top box-office hits of the era were considerably more conventional than the films listed above. With the benefit of hindsight, I'd suggest that it makes more sense to see these movies as constituting a cycle that pushed against, and now and then crossed, the border of classicism. But while the Hollywood Renaissance films certainly broke new ground, their novelties were never that widely adopted.

Take the romantic comedy. By the mid-70s the genre seemed pretty much extinct. Brian Henderson argued in 1978 that it had become unviable, mainly for the reason that film characters were now free to ask the question, "Why don't we fuck?" (or in the case of comedies of old love, "How come we stopped fucking?"). This was the question around which the old screwball comedies revolved too, but they could never pose it directly. Still, it was present in displaced form. Indeed, it was the struggle to pose this question through euphemisms or non-verbal means that bestowed upon the studio-era romantic comedies their characteristic zany, madcap quality. Henderson concluded thus: "That you can say something does not mean that you must do so. But has the realm of art invented for itself a system of censorship not imposed upon it? On this ground alone, it may be that romantic comedy is not an art that can flourish in this period" (1978: 327).

At the time, it probably seemed that Henderson was asking a wholly reasonable rhetorical question. Today, though, we can see that it was entirely out of place. In the 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s, the romantic comedy reinvented itself to become one of the mainstays of the Hollywood genre system. And it did so precisely by imposing on itself a kind of censorship. Films such as *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, 1993), *It Could Happen to You* (Andrew Bergman, 1994), *Only You* (Norman Jewison, 1994), *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), *Michael* (Nora Ephron, 1996), *Ever After* (Andy Tennant, 1998), *Return to Me* (Bonnie Hunt, 2000), *Kate & Leopold* (James Mangold, 2001), *Serendipity* (Peter Chelsom, 2001), and *Just like Heaven* (Mark Waters, 2005) tend to deemphasize sexuality and to highlight romance, to stress spiritual rather than physical union. Compared to the classical screwball films they are less farcical and more melodramatic. We could say that the situation has been reversed: whereas the studio-era movies made every effort to bring to the surface what could not be articulated openly, contemporary romantic comedies strive to conceal what's become almost ubiquitous – sex.

Consequently, romantic comedies have for the most part moved in the opposite direction of what Henderson foresaw. By shrouding itself in a veil of romantic sweetness, purity,

innocence, and nostalgia the main strand of the genre has fled from, rather than sought out, the opportunities afforded by the breakdown of the Production Code to explore the relationship between men and women in more realistic and challenging ways.

Of course, there are other kinds of romantic comedies, often semi-independent, like *Chasing Amy* (Kevin Smith, 1997) or the films of Woody Allen or Nicole Holofcener, that tend to deglamorize standard notions of romantic love.[12] The collapse of the Production Code was a watershed event in the sense that it cleared the path for a wider range of representations of sex and violence, and for films to feature subject matter that was unthinkable prior to the 1960s. Importantly, this diversity still remains, but the point is that the films of Altman, Ashby, Peckinpah, and Penn did not exactly open the floodgates for some industry-wide change.

I think the romantic comedy example is fairly symptomatic of Hollywood cinema more broadly. Most films made in the past three decades have been recognizably generic, they have addressed general rather than niche audiences, and they have for the most part been affirmative and reconciliatory. Of course, we can make out a number of more restricted thematic/ideological transformations in the form of cycles and generic innovations or reorientations. Thus, Kathleen Rowe (1995) has identified a shift in recent romantic comedies whereby masculinity becomes the subject of pathos rather than laughter. A more recent trend still is what we might call the romantic gross-out comedy, which mixes standard saccharine components with tasteless and sickening elements.[13]

Possibly the most perceptive of all the small-scale accounts is Jeffrey Sconce's discussion of what he calls "smart cinema", which is characterized by (among other things) "a thematic interest in random fate [and] the white middle-class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction" (2006: 432). There are obvious parallels between this cycle and the Hollywood Renaissance,[14] and the "smart cinema" can be seen to exemplify the thematic diversity that has remained a feature of contemporary American cinema since the breakdown of the Production Code. In fact, one could probably argue that there is an even greater range of

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[12] I explore both types of romantic comedies (that I call "idealistic" and "realistic") in *Kjærlighet i Seriemonogamiets Tidsalder. Romantiske Komedier i Hollywood på 1980- og 1990-tallet* [*Love in the Age of Serial Monogamy. Romantic Comedies in Hollywood in the 1980s and 1990s*].

[13] While there are precursors, the defining film is clearly *There's Something about Mary* (Bobby and Peter Farrelly, 1998). Other examples include the *American Pie* films, *Say It Isn't So* (James B. Rogers, 2001), *The Sweetest Thing* (Roger Kumble, 2002), *Along Came Polly* (John Hamburg, 2004), *Adam and Steve* (Craig Chester, 2005), and *Just Friends* (Roger Kumble, 2005). See Lavik (2007) for more on this trend.

[14] See for example Waxman (2005) and Mottram (2006).

representations today. Particularly with the emergence of the so-called "Indiewood" phenomenon – the aesthetic and industrial integration of independent and studio filmmaking – a number of American films have challenged the representational boundaries on several levels: violence (from Tarantino to *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) to *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) to the recent spate of "torture porn films", such as the *Saw* and *Hostel* movies)); sex (*Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), *In the Cut* (Jane Campion, 2003)); subject matter (*Citizen Ruth* (Alexander Payne, 1996), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), *Your Friends & Neighbors* (Neil LaBute, 1998), *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky, 2000), *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), *Little Children* (Todd Field, 2006)); and ideology (from the right-wing fantasy *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) to the films of John Sayles, Ang Lee, or Oliver Stone)).[15]

On the other hand, though, Sconce's "smart cinema" is still a far cry from being the new norm. And while Rowe describes the new 1990s films such as *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Pretty Woman* (Gary Marshall, 1990) as post-classical, that label is apt only in the most literal sense – as "coming after the classical romantic comedies" – for they do not in any way depart from the basic principles of classical Hollywood cinema more generally.

I would submit that the majority of Hollywood films since the late 1970s have looked more to the classical era than to the Hollywood Renaissance. From that perspective, the abandonment of the Production Code does not look like some great before-and-after moment. Looking back, we might say that, on the whole, it has facilitated a new Hollywood more in theory than in practice.

Style

A historical poetics is extremely well suited to examine stylistic transformations in Hollywood cinema, and Bordwell has carefully studied four changes in particular: more rapid editing, more frequent use of very long or short lenses, a greater reliance on close shots, and more free-ranging camera movements (2002b, 2006).[16] Together they add up to what he calls "intensified

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[15] Another prominent feature of contemporary Hollywood cinema has been the mainstream success of a number of controversial documentaries, most notably those of Michael Moore. Furthermore, in more genuinely independent, though often quite well-known and easily available, films we frequently come across even more extreme representations: think of *Spanking the Monkey* (David O. Russel, 1994), *Julien Donkey Boy* (Harmony Korine, 1999), *Vulgar* (Bryan Johnson, 2000), *Ken Park* (Larry Clark and Edward Lachman, 2002), *The Brown Bunny* (Vincent Gallo, 2003), or *Shortbus* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006).
[16] See also Barry Salt (2004, 2006). Salt is a proponent of statistical style analysis.

continuity". It is important to note, however, that this should not be taken to mean that the continuity is even stronger and more pronounced today, but rather that the classical principles have been "amped up" to create a more frenzied style.

Generally, Bordwell stresses historical continuity, and he considers intensified continuity an instance of stylistic assimilation. This has to do with how historical change is defined and understood. For while it is self-evident that innovations like Technicolor or widescreen processes have significantly altered the way movies look, it is quite feasible to see these changes as superficial. Instead of asking, "Have these innovations brought about stylistic change?" (which they quite obviously have), we can ask, "Have these innovations led to film style being put to new uses?". Thus Bordwell concludes that "What has changed […] is not the *system* of classical filmmaking but rather certain technical *devices* functioning within that system" (2006: 119).

This seems to me a useful way of thinking about historical change. However, it is a perspective that stresses constancy and sameness, since it is only at the functional level that "real" stylistic transformations take place. Even when Bordwell discusses the most anomalous films and filmmakers in recent times, he never fails to specify how, as he puts it, "nothing comes from nothing" (ibid: 75). Thus when he discusses *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), he strives to tame the film's disjunctive devices by mentioning that its bursts of associated imagery is reminiscent of *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959), that the mixing of color and black-and-white footage has been a modern convention since *A Man and a Woman* (Claude Lelouch, 1966) and *If…* (Lindsay Anderson, 1968), that the soundtrack binds the shots together, and that these potentially disruptive techniques are situated within a conventional plot (ibid: 76, 176).

This can be somewhat frustrating in the sense that very little counts as "truly" new. Moreover, we could object that while it is certainly possible to find historical parallels and precursors for all the individual stylistic eccentricities of a film such as *JFK*, if we stop for a second and ask what they add up to collectively, then surely we would have to say that the movie bears very little resemblance to studio-era filmmaking. If we take the classical style to be characterized by its relative unobtrusiveness, then surely we would have to conclude that films like *JFK*, *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Spun* (Jonas Åkerlund, 2002), or *Domino* (Tony Scott, 2005) are non-classical.[17] In my opinion these films stand out from Hollywood

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[17] Another thing to notice about the *JFK* example is that Bordwell tends to list patently non-classical influences, the relevance of which are hard to determine in a discussion about the persistence of the classical paradigm. This is an issue I also bring up in "Perspectives on and in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*".

cinema of the 30s and 40s to a greater extent than the films of Dreyer or Ozu that Bordwell seems more prepared to think of as actual breaks with classical filmmaking norms.

On the other hand, Bordwell does declare that intensified continuity represents "a marked change from the classic studio years" (ibid: 118). Still, there is a sense that his inclination to catalog historical analogies and his reluctance to come out and say that anything is genuinely new[18] tend to drown out such proclamations. There are, I think, two main reasons for Bordwell's penchant for stressing continuity. First, it is a function of his resolve to counter hyperbolic assertions about the disintegration of classical principles. Second, it has to do with the way that his conception of classical style is bound up with comprehension. What characterizes the principles of the classical continuity system for Bordwell is that "they assure that the spectator understands how the story moves forward in space and time" (ibid: 119). Time and again he points out that while stylistic (or narrative) innovations may stand out, the films are still accessible to viewers (ibid: 17, 22, 72, 76, 176). For Bordwell, then, a film's intelligibility can be seen to rein in its use of outré and ostensibly non-classical techniques.

This poses a problem for the chronicler of stylistic history. As a strictly formal system the classical style can be studied chronologically and described precisely. Thus Bordwell can state that in the classical system, "perceptible jump cuts and unmotivated cutaways are flatly forbidden" (1985: 164). However, the criterion of intelligibility undermines this. As Bordwell points out, the threshold for obtrusiveness has increased as viewers have gotten used to more overt narration (ibid: 184). These days, jump cuts are not uncommon in Hollywood films, but rarely do they come at the expense of narrative engagement.

Of course, style considered as a set of formal options could easily be used as a stable, objective, and self-sufficient criterion to be mapped onto films from various periods. This would create a very clear-cut boundary between classical and non-classical stylistic practices. However, it would lose sight of the fact that the same stylistic device may acquire quite different purposes as viewing skills change, so that options that would have been transgressive in the studio era go by unnoticed today. Only by combining the study of textual features with considerations of textual uptake do we get a sense of how cinematic modes, such as classical Hollywood narration, change across time.

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[18] Perhaps the closest he has come is a paragraph on narration in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* in which he concedes that "If complex storytelling demands high redundancy, Lynch has been derelict in his duty" (2006: 89).

Summary

In sum, then, I do not find it reasonable to talk of a broad-spectrum shift in Hollywood cinema along any of the dimensions I have looked at here. Certainly, there are minority practices that are hard to reconcile with classical principles but – on the whole – it seems to me easier to establish continuities with studio-era films than to outline the essentials of some new system or tradition, at least in a non-reductive manner.

But then again, everything depends on how change is measured and on what criteria we emphasize in our conception of classical and post-classical cinema. Thematics, for example, is not a key component of classicism in Bordwell's formalist account, and it seems to me that if we want to work that criterion into our framework, a somewhat more discontinuous narrative might materialize.

Meanwhile, postmodern features such as parody, pastiche, and allusions do not make any significant dent in the formalist historical account of Hollywood cinema. Although I have expressed strong reservations about such a move, it is clear that when studied in the context of postmodernism rather than post-classicism – i.e. when they are interpreted symptomatically in relation to broader cultural and social developments – they can be made to function as signifiers of an important historical shift.

In terms of cinematic style, Bordwell has identified several changes that he ultimately considers extensions, rather than breaches, of classical practices. There is a danger here that style becomes simply subservient to comprehension. It sometimes seems that as long as a film orients the viewer in time and space, it is possible to make a case for its classicism. This would seem to leave the stylistic component little autonomy or conceptual precision in discussions of classical and post-classical cinema. Still, as I have argued, there are good reasons for studying style and comprehension in tandem, since it yields a richer appreciation of the shifting functions or purposes that style serve, and thus of the dynamism of the classical mode of narration.

Of course, we might ask: if we accept that Hollywood cinema has not undergone some general shift, perhaps we could talk of genuine changes *within* Hollywood cinema? As I have indicated, some films – a minority, often (though not necessarily) on the margins of the studio system – seem far removed from the films of the studio era indeed. Thus, instead of awkwardly tracing parallels to previous traditions and films, it might be more productive to seek to spell out

how these films differ from classical cinema and, if possible, to describe what they have in common.

A recent article by Elephteria Thanouli (2006) does just that. While previous accounts of Hollywood cinema have tended to posit some kind of across-the-board change, Thanouli sensibly elects to see post-classicism as a distinct *mode*, i.e. a set of stylistic and narrative norms that transcend genre. Instead of having to take on the ill-fated task of establishing some wholesale historical shift, this allows her to make a far more convincing argument for the non-classicism of a subset of films *inside* contemporary (Hollywood) cinema.[19]

Thanouli's essay is an ambitious effort to outline a set of associated alterations in narrative logic, and also in the representation of cinematic space and time. There are a number of problems with Thanouli's description, however: some of the examples she cites, such as *Europa* would intuitively seem to belong to the art cinema mode of narration; several of the developments that she catalogs are, as far as I can tell, perfectly compatible with classical cinema (for example the use of subjective realism to depict mental or emotional states); some of the changes she identifies seem vague (the post-classical cinema's "new logic" for connecting shots and establishing causal links, for example), others exaggerated (such as generic hybridity, for previously mentioned reasons); and finally, whereas the characteristics of classical cinema seem genuinely interrelated, the features of Thanouli's post-classical cinema appear somewhat scattershot. It reads like an inventory of a number of familiar assertions about historical change in Hollywood, but their internal relations frequently remain unclear. In Bordwell's model of classical cinema, the notion of narrative causality functions as a dominant that structures the representation of time and space; Thanouli, meanwhile, declares that in the post-classical paradigm, new norms and conventions become the technological and aesthetic dominant. However, it is not clear how the new dominant conveys information about the internal relationships between the new mode's narrative, spatial, and temporal systems, or indeed what the dominant actually is.

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[19] Just as Bordwell sees classical cinema as an international template, with Hollywood its most prominent practitioner, Thanouli considers post-classical cinema a cross-national phenomenon. Thus she lists such films as *Europa* (Lars von Trier, 1991), *Chunking Express* (Wong Kar-Wai, 1994), *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998), *Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), and *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002) alongside such American releases as *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999), *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky, 2000), and *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001).

But what are the main differences between Bordwell and Thanouli's concepts? They certainly exist at different levels. Intensified continuity is simply a *stylistic* alteration that applies to the vast majority of contemporary Hollywood films. Thanouli's postclassical mode, however, while a minority practice, is a more encompassing category in the sense that intensified continuity is merely one of its features. In other words, a comedy featuring rapid editing and plenty of close shots and camera movements would be an instance of intensified continuity. However, if it displays no other post-classical traits – if its narrative remains linear and clearly goal-oriented, if it stays focused on just one or two plot lines etc. – then the film would not seem to belong to the mode that Thanouli has outlined.

On the other hand, their differences are also to some extent a matter of emphasis. As we have seen, Bordwell by and large tells a story of deep-seated continuity that tends to crowd out qualifications such as "Nonetheless, intensified continuity represents a significant shift within the history of moviemaking" (Bordwell, 2006: 180). Thanouli's business, by contrast, is to tell a story about novelty, to stake out a new mode of narration, while at the same time stressing that post-classicism "does not eliminate the classical rules and conventions [and] replace them with some radically new ones" (Thanouli, 2006: 189-190).

Now, from a Rortian standpoint, there is no real difference between saying that Thanouli has made out a new mode of narration and saying that she has made it up. Philosophically, the success of new vocabularies ought not (in fact, *can* not) be measured by how well they correspond to reality, but by how well they work as tools, for making our way around the world, for linking up with or weaving together other descriptions that we like. Clearly, recent trends in modern mainstream cinema have emerged that appear to fit neither the category of classical cinema, nor that of art cinema, comfortably. Thanouli and Bordwell offer two ways of integrating these trends into previous accounts. The concept of a post-classical mode of narration seems to me to need refining, but it might still be the most promising option if what we want is to isolate and emphasize the novelty of these developments, and to bring a maximum number of them under a single heading. Still, I prefer Bordwell's account, mainly for its coherence. It offers plenty of points of contact with prior descriptions and does not require much revision. Admittedly, it seems skewed in favor of continuity rather than change. Nevertheless, if we put up with the idea that historical breaks at the systemic level are pretty much unattainable in

mainstream cinema, then even "superficial" change will take on real importance in Bordwell's account.

This has been my brief take on the issues that I take to be most approximate to, or the most obvious extensions of, the essays in this collection. I will now go on to introduce the individual articles, to relate them to the field of film studies or film history, and to draw out their interconnections.

Introduction to the articles

The *Sixth Sense* article

The first article explores where the surprise ending, or twist, in *The Sixth Sense* fits into the Hollywood tradition. In fact, the reason I took an interest in the film in the first place was a hunch that it could not have been made in the classical period, and I was keen to find out if it would be possible to substantiate that intuition.

My feeling was that it had to do with the complexity of *The Sixth Sense*'s narrative structure. However, when I first started thinking about the project I did not come across any literature on narrative complexity in Hollywood cinema. Indeed, there was very little scholarly work at all on the narrative ingeniousness that so obviously had come to the fore in US cinema in the 1990s, particularly in the wake of the hugely influential *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994). So although such things as the Indiewood phenomenon and the art-house-heavy 1997 Oscars had received a lot of attention in newspapers and film magazines, scholarly work on the post-Hollywood Renaissance period focused mostly on big-budget blockbusters and high concept moviemaking. Of course, rather than narrative complexity, this branch of Hollywood cinema was taken to be characterized by narrative simplicity.

My impression was that the academic literature on contemporary Hollywood cinema by and large constituted a narrative of decline, of how all that was good about the 1970s had somehow been reversed: instead of subtle character studies audiences were served cartoon caricatures; instead of courting college-educated young adults, Hollywood now catered to pre-adolescents; rather than daring, sophisticated, and idealistic "small films" we got overblown, pre-screened blockbuster behemoths; and subversive explorations of American myths gave way to conservative backlash. I am – no doubt – caricaturing the prevailing view, but the point is that the scholarly community had yet to come to terms with the diversity of recent developments.

As far as I can tell, Hollywood cinema since the 90s has been more heterogeneous than ever before, at all levels: thematically (as I have already argued), stylistically,[20] and narratively. As is well known, inquiries into story-level changes in Hollywood cinema since the studio era have fallen into two curiously contradictory groups. The first has concerned if and how the films from the Hollywood Renaissance break with classical storytelling conventions. This version stresses how filmmakers influenced by the French New Wave introduced aimless characters, inconclusive endings, and greater psychological and social realism. The second is linked to the perceived breakdown of narrative in the Blockbuster Era, both compared to the classical period and to the Hollywood Renaissance.[21] Still, while there was some inevitable overlap, these opposites were mainly used to tell a story of transition, of how the sophistication of the 70s eventually surrendered to the "primitiveness" of the 80s. Since the 90s, by contrast, the opposites seem to have existed side by side much more harmoniously. In addition, the extremes at either side are, I believe, farther apart than ever before in Hollywood history.

I think 1989 works well as a symbolic starting point for the peculiar schizophrenia of this period. That was the year that saw the release both of Tim Burton's *Batman* – perhaps the first truly modern blockbuster, at least in the sense that it was not just a film, but a brand – and Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, whose success (re)opened Hollywood's eyes to the commercial potential of independent cinema.

Initially, then, my point of departure was that Hollywood cinema since the early 90s had been characterized by a curious and contradictory eclecticism. What intrigued me, in particular, was that exceedingly intricate narratives had come to exist side by side with the alleged narrative minimalism of high concept cinema. While there are several films that I think of as better, it is hard to come up with previous examples that are as "plot-technically" sophisticated and inventive as *The Sixth Sense*, *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004). I decided it would be interesting to examine how the new narrative

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[20] This is a possible point of contention with Bordwell. He suggests that in recent decades the stylistic options in Hollywood films have narrowed (2006: 130). I am not sure I grasp his argument, but he surely cannot mean that filmmakers today have fewer stylistic alternatives available. Technological innovations and the ability of Hollywood cinema to absorb stylistic experiments from other traditions means that filmmakers' toolbox of stylistic options constantly expands (and Bordwell catalogs a great number of them in his book). Bordwell is right that there is a tendency to use a limited range of options along a few, admittedly important, dimensions. While I (like most film scholars, it seems) join Bordwell's lament at the relative rarity of long-take films, two-shots, and complex staging strategies, none of these alternatives have been outlawed. Certainly, the stylistic extremes in contemporary Hollywood cinema are much farther apart today than in the studio era.
[21] See for example Krämer (1998) and King (2002).

complexity, as well as the narrative simplicity that was said to characterize big-budget blockbusters, fit into the classical Hollywood tradition.

As I have indicated, the ambition to comprehensively map both sides of the spectrum was ultimately scaled down in favor of a series of smaller, more manageable (and more theoretical) undertakings. This is the context in which the essay on *The Sixth Sense* should be understood. So while the aim of the article is to pin down what is distinctive about the film's narrative construction, an ambition to relate it to the Hollywood tradition and find out where it fits in historically remains. Thus towards the end of the article I suggest that it might be productive to see the film as part of a larger trend in American cinema, characterized by a more experimental and playful approach to classical storytelling conventions.

Evidently, many scholars were thinking along the same lines, for in the past couple of years there has been a deluge of literature that touch on the same, or at least related, matters. In fact, the article appeared in a special issue of *The Velvet Light Trap* on narrative and storytelling that featured an essay by Jason Mittell on narrative complexity in contemporary American television, as well as an examination of "modular" or "database" narratives like *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) and *21 Grams* (Alejandro Gonzàles Iñárritu, 2003) by Allan Cameron (who in turn drew on previous work by Manovich (2001) and Kinder (2001, 2002)).

Another special issue, of *Film Criticism*, appeared at the same time, focusing specifically on complex narratives. Charles Ramírez Berg's "A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the 'Tarantino Effect'" (2006) is the most elaborate effort to map and systematize the stream of unorthodox narratives over the past fifteen years. Berg develops a typology based on syuzhet construction with twelve categories. Common to all is that they were either absent or quite rare in the classical era. According to Berg the films may diverge significantly, but not fundamentally, from the principles of Hollywood story construction. In other words, all the films that he considers can be said to belong to the classical mode of narration.[22] Consequently, Berg's taxonomy is a more fine-meshed version of Bordwell's summary of circular and network narratives, puzzle films, scrambled time schemes, subjective stories, and forking-path-plots[23]. Together with Sconce's writing on smart cinema these are the only efforts to chart this whole trend comprehensively (2006: 72-103).

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[22] Berg has excluded films that have more in common with experimental or avant-garde cinema. Thus most David Lynch films, for example, are ruled out.
[23] See also Bordwell (2002c), Branigan (2002), and Young (2002).

Other contributors to the *Film Criticism* special issue, such as Elliot Panek and Michael Z. Newman, are more prepared to say that the recent spate of complex narratives are basically "something else" than classical Hollywood cinema.[24] Other articles that have appeared in the new millennium whose concerns clearly overlap with mine include Church (2005), Ferenz (2005), Friedman (2006), Houtman (2004), Howley (2004), Perlmutter (2002), Smith (2001), and Wilson (2006).[25]

Moreover, the narrative characteristics of American independent and semi-independent cinema have been discussed in several recent books, most relevantly in King (2005) and Murphy (2007), and also in more journalistic and anecdotal accounts by Biskind (2004), Mottram (2006), and Waxman (2005). Finally, the cognitive complexity of a range of popular culture products was widely debated in the wake of Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (2005).

There is no doubt, then, that scholars have been rapidly catching up on this hard-to-define narratively experimental branch of Hollywood cinema. Still, it has been hard to come up with a common framework for all the films regularly mentioned, to provide descriptions of films as varied as *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991), *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996), *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999), *Memento*, *Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), *Waking Life* (Richard Linklater, 2001), *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002), *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002), *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004), *The Machinist* (Brad Anderson, 2004), and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005), except in very general terms. Thus it is not surprising that many of the articles and books on these films focus on specific subsets within the hundreds of films that have been made over the past fifteen years that have extended or crossed the boundaries of the classical paradigm.

Twist movies are obviously nothing new, and I agree with Bordwell that *You Only Live Once* (Fritz Lang, 1937), or *Fallen Angel* (Otto Preminger, 1945), or *The Blue Gardenia* (Fritz Lang, 1953) are obvious historical precedents that it makes sense to bring into the discussion. I also do not repudiate Bordwell's contention that the narrational tactics of the films that I look at –

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[24] Newman's effort is also one of the few contributions that actually tries to shed light on the concept of complexity by introducing a useful distinction between complex narration (such as the exposition in *21 Grams*) and complex narrative (such as the presentation of character in *Passion Fish* (John Sayles, 1992)).

[25] Several conference papers on unconventional narratives in 90s cinema are available on the Internet. In addition, numerous articles have been published on key films of this trend, such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Sporless Mind*, without explicitly relating them to the Hollywood tradition. One essay that is quite similar to mine is Harper Cossar's "Wait, How Did I Miss that? Understanding the 'Twist' in *The Woman in the Window*" (forthcoming).

particularly *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) – can be seen to extend rather than exceed the limits of classical cinema, for my conclusion is that we are dealing with differences in degree, not in kind. Nevertheless, I would insist that the more recent films do share certain features that set them well apart from the predecessors that Bordwell mentions. My aim is to pin down what I take to be novel about, or especially pronounced in, a small number of recent films. In other words, I am telling a story that emphasizes difference in the face of sameness. Bordwell's (admittedly far briefer) discussion of *The Sixth Sense* is mainly interested in continuity.

Narrative spectacle

I would like now to offer some more detailed and concrete comments on the idea that the small cluster of films I have been writing about, *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club*, and *The Others* in particular, can be seen as a subset within a larger – and much looser – group of films. I want to ask: What would be a good way to proceed if we intend to tell a story about as many of these films as possible, i.e. if we want to describe and explain them as a reasonably cohesive historical trend?

It still seems to me that the most practical approach is to concentrate on complexity and self-consciousness. While the two concepts obviously are not congruent, in the context of the films considered here they overlap and intersect to a very considerable extent. Mainly, their self-consciousness frequently appears to be a function of their complexity. A more serious problem is that the films can be complex and self-conscious in many different ways. Complexity, in particular, is exceedingly difficult to talk about. We often refer to some aspect of a film as "complex" since it has the advantage of sounding fairly specific and profound, though in reality – as with such other black-box terms as "intriguing" or "rich" – it simply serves as the vaguest sign of approval. Alternatively, we may use it to come clean about, or to dress up, our confusion (it is better to talk about "a highly complex process" than "a highly baffling/inexplicable/chaotic process").

However, the kind of complexity that characterizes the films under scrutiny here is, I believe, tied to cognition. The point I want to make coincides with Steven Johnson's observation that much of contemporary popular culture offers what he calls a "cognitive workout" (2005: 14).

This need not entail self-consciousness. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, for example, is complex in the sense that it contains a great number of characters and plotlines, but that is not the type of complexity I will be concentrating on here. Nor is the kind of narrative non-redundancy found in a film such as *The Hunt for Red October* (John McTiernan, 1990), where "an enormous amount of information, ranging from crucial causes to minor details, flies by […] Many names, locations, and technical terms are mentioned just once and do not return until they have important consequences, often many sequences later" (Thompson, 1999: 215). I am also not thinking of what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls "transmedia storytelling", where vast narratives unfold across many media platforms, like films, comics, books, and computer games, thus encouraging more detailed and dedicated modes of viewing.[26]

This amounts to what Steven Johnson describes as a lack of "narrative handholding" (2005: 74), and it seems to have become more common in recent years. Clearly, this makes the films harder to follow, but it is not a tactic that calls attention to itself. In other words, you can have complexity without reflexivity. However, films that I think are at the heart of this trend do not just require attentive viewers, they also put on view their own narrative construction. Cameron, for example, defines a database narrative as one that "foreground[s] the relationship between the temporality of the story and the order of its telling" (2006: 65).

By linking complexity to cognition it becomes pretty much synonymous with difficulty, which can be approached both from the point of view of the spectator and from the point of view of the filmmaker. So far we have focused on the reception side, i.e. on the cognitive demands placed on spectators. Self-consciousness, by contrast, is more related to the production side or, more precisely, to spectators' awareness of the production side and the craft of storytelling.

In both cases it is crucial that it is possible to construct a logically coherent and intersubjectively held story in due course, even though the audiovisual information is organized in a non-canonical way. It is important to distinguish these films from the permanent gaps and ambiguities that we find in some art films.[27] Also, concentrating on comprehension means that other types of complexity, such as Cameron's "character complexity", are not relevant here.

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[26] Jenkins' main example is the *Matrix* trilogy.

[27] In other words, I propose to follow Ramirez' lead and rule out films that are clearly outside the Hollywood tradition (I'm not sure this disqualifies much Hollywood-affiliated work, though some of David Lynch's films are no doubt excluded).

Having made these clarifications, we are better equipped to describe the nature of complexity and reflexivity in the narratively experimental films made in (or on the margins of) Hollywood in the past decade and a half: their complexity has to do with the difficulty spectators face in piecing together a consistent story from material presented in a non-conventional way in which everything nevertheless adds up eventually; their self-consciousness, by contrast, has to do with spectators' awareness of the difficulty of fashioning or crafting such a story.

The latter point has been developed by among others Jason Mittell, who demonstrates how recent films and television shows invite viewers to engage with story both as diegesis and as formal structure. We are invited, for example, to ponder, even marvel at, the ways in which multiple plotlines are brought together in sitcoms like *Seinfeld* and *Arrested Development*, or in films such as *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, 1993) and *Playing by Heart* (Willard Carroll, 1998). Frequently, these films ask us to endure temporary confusion in order to enjoy the process of clarification. In the studio era it was mainly in detective films that the narration was two steps ahead of the audience. These days all kinds of stories ask the audience to play catch-up. Watching films such as *Last Days* (Gus Van Sant, 2005) and *21 Grams* (and TV shows such as *The West Wing*) we are thrust into situations we are not meant to comprehend right away. This creates curiosity, drawing us into the fiction, but at the same time we can also appreciate the skill with which pertinent information is distributed: gradually, implicitly, and just-enough, rather than all at once, explicitly, and abundantly. And films such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990), *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995), *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress, 2004), *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2004), and *Stay* (Marc Forster, 2005) do not really make sense until right at the end (and some might say not all of them make sense even then). Time and again, we are placed in temporary limbo, our attention focused not, or not only, on the question "What will happen now?", but (also) "What (the hell!) is happening?".

Again, the point is not that these tactics are new – some noir films have fairly complicated plots; *The Killing* (Stanley Kubrick, 1956) combines temporal shifts and repeated actions; and some of Hitchcock's most famous movies, like *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959), set up a seemingly absurd narrative premise that only makes sense right at the end. What stands out today is the sheer quantity of such films, the refinement of some of these tactics over time, and the combination of so many of them in individual films.

Now, there are of course no clear-cut boundaries between films that are narratively complex and films that are not. A film such as *Last Days* evokes art cinema conventions to such an extent, first and foremost through narrative stasis and suppression of character motivation, that it would seem to be a somewhat peripheral instance of this trend. But what we tend to think of as the core examples, those films that are cited in pretty much every account – *21 Grams*, *Adaptation*, *Fight Club*, *Memento*, and *Pulp Fiction*, for example – are both unmistakably complex and reflexive; moreover, their complexity and their reflexivity are intertwined.

Mittell also suggests an interesting link between such complex films and the blockbuster cinema considered in the two final articles. He points out that accounts of special effects typically stress how moments of awe pull spectators out of the diegesis. Modern spectacles are often seen as descendants of Tom Gunning's cinema of attractions, which is more about visual display than storytelling. Narratively complex films and TV series, by contrast, offer what Mittell calls the narrative special effect, or narrative spectacle. This mode of attraction calls attention to "the constructed nature of the narration and [asks] us to marvel at how the writers pulled it off; often these instances forgo realism in exchange for a formally aware baroque quality in which we watch the process of narration as a machine rather than engaging in its diegesis" (2006: 35).

I think the notion of narrative special effect is useful, and the twist in *The Sixth Sense* is, I think, one of the very best examples (indeed, Mittell cites it explicitly). Not least, it conveniently shows up both notable similarities and differences between films that would seem to occupy opposite ends of the spectrum I set out investigate at the outset.

The question of quality

So far I have not brought up the issue of quality, though it is hard to avoid in a discussion of complexity, since it is such a loaded term. As I have suggested, the historical poetics approach is not primarily interested in evaluation. Certainly, my motivation for writing about *The Sixth Sense* was not to convince anyone that it is a cinematic masterpiece. I think it is a good film, but it was the twist and its historical status that led me to write the essay. I actually happen to prefer Shayamalan's follow-up film *Unbreakable* (2000) to *The Sixth Sense*, even though I think its twist is less successful. Also, the line between complexity and sheer confusion can be very fine indeed. *Domino* (Tony Scott, 2005), for example, may have the most convoluted plot I have ever come across, but I find the film a complete mess.

Moreover, I have tried to describe a specific kind of narrative complexity, namely one that announces its own dexterity. I think that from a crafts perspective the narrative mechanics of a film such as *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, 1960), in which all the story's parts fit into each other perfectly, like cogs in a clockwork, is every bit as skillfully made as any film mentioned so far. And the ease, elegance, and clarity with which the highly intricate plot of *The Sweet Smell of Success* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1957) unfolds its story of intricate mind-games and ulterior motives must have been just as difficult to pull off as the twist in *The Sixth Sense* – and it is, in my opinion, vastly superior. But these films are "invisibly complex". They do not display their own complexity as virtuosity.

Moreover, I do not want to embrace Johnson's notion of a "cognitive workout" unreservedly. I think he overstates the difficulty of many of the films and television programs he examines. Many of them are not really terribly hard to follow at all, and it does not do anybody any favors to hold up audiences' ability to connect the story-dots as some grand achievement. I expect that a film such as *Z* (Costa-Gavras, 1969), with its multitude of characters and information, or *McCable & Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971), with its overlapping dialogue, require more focused viewing than many films mentioned so far. But while these films are difficult to follow, they do not – to put it difficultly – make viewers aware of the difficulty of crafting a story that is hard to follow.

Having said all that, though, narrative complexity is obviously one criterion we can make use of in discussions about quality. In the sense that I have used it, focusing on comprehension and craftsmanship, I suspect that it might also be a criterion for which it is reasonably practicable to offer clear and rational arguments for one's likes and dislikes. I expect it is quite possible in many cases to link the concept of complexity to the concept of originality, which is a less controversial indicator of aesthetic worth. Moreover, in many cases more complex storytelling seems – not unreasonably, I might add – to be quite synonymous with more intelligent or subtle storytelling, particularly in Johnson's account. For example, he remarks that "Watch *Starsky and Hutch* or *Dragnet* after watching *The Sopranos* and you'll feel as though you're being condescended to" (2005: 83).

Ultimately, though, I do not see any reason to think of narrative complexity as some generally and inherently good property. It is perfectly possible to take pleasure in one film for its complexity and in the next one for its plainness or straightforwardness. Both complexity and

"simplicity" can be well or poorly executed, so there is no need to make an a priori choice between them.

The historiography articles

An examination of "post-classical Hollywood cinema" implies some kind of discrepancy between a past period and some later era. One's conception of this discrepancy obviously depends on one's understanding of classical Hollywood. So although my main aim has been to shed light on the "post"-part of the phrase, any description of post-classicism logically has to build on a previous notion of what was classical in the first place. And of course David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* has remained the standard work since its publication in 1985.

The book has generated a great deal of debate, some of it quite critical. However, in reading up on the literature dealing with classical and post-classical Hollywood cinema, and comparing wildly contradictory accounts submitted with equal confidence and assertiveness, I came increasingly to ponder more fundamental historiographical questions. Looking back, I am sure this was only natural. Having had no previous training in history, it was probably inevitable that I would shift my interest at some point from the superstructure to the infrastructure of history. Leon J. Goldstein explains the difference like this:

> [The superstructure of history refers to] those products of the historical enterprise which are typically consumed by those readers who are not themselves historians, the accounts produced of times past, mainly narratives but not only such, which are intended to give their readers some idea of what some part of the human past was like. In contrast, most readers of works of history never become acquainted with the infrastructure of history, that phase of historical research during which historians apply the techniques and methods of their discipline, and by thinking historically – whatever that proves to mean – about historical evidence come to some conclusion about what it is most reasonable took place in the historical past (1986: 82).

I became interested in such things as the nature of historical knowledge, in the – to stick with Goldstein – distinction between "a real past which has nothing to do with historical events and an historical past made up of hypothetical events introduced for the purpose of explaining historical evidence" (1962: 175). Like the two blockbuster articles, both of these articles on historiography are also infused with a curiosity about the influence of the film scholar's subjectivity on his or her accounts (and with the advantages and disadvantages of displaying that subjectivity). For

although historians rarely cite anything other than fidelity to the historical record as the rationale for their choice of terminology, this is always interlaced with a host of other (less "objective" and "scientific") considerations: the purposes of the inquiry, career moves, previously held beliefs, and so on. For example, one of the things that the authority of film scholars rests upon is their ability to detect and describe what is not immediately apparent to non-experts. Hence there is a tendency to focus on non-obvious meaning. Arguably, this is why the presence of a freeze frame, or a character look into the camera, or a couple of jump cuts in films from the Hollywood Renaissance are sometimes portrayed as a more profound break with classical principles than the introduction of taboo subject matter, or social criticism, or unprecedented representations of violence. These latter aspects are perhaps too self-evident to warrant much consideration, even if it seems fair to assume that they leave a greater impression on most viewers than the borrowing of a few art cinema devices.

Getting to know the infrastructure of history has been a long and arduous process. I soon learned to curb my enthusiasm whenever I thought I had made some ground-breaking historiographical discovery, for each time I would find out that it had been articulated with far greater clarity and elegance (sometimes centuries) before. Moreover, it was – and is – not easy to determine whether or not all these historico-philosophical issues carry any practical consequences. What, or how, does it matter, for instance, that we treat an historical reconstruction not as "inferred from the facts", but rather as "postulated to explain the facts" (Goldstein, 1958: 474)?

We might say, then, that the "Not the Obstacle but the Means" article sprang out of my work on *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, but that certain topics took on an interest in themselves. Specifically, the essay is an effort to come to terms with three large questions. First, what is the difference between modernist and postmodernist history? This is an issue that has spawned an enormous amount of debate over the course of several decades, often heated and confusing in equal measure. Thus the opening part of the essay is an attempt to soberly sum up the arguments on both sides, to find out where there is common ground, and to figure out what is at stake in these debates. To the extent that there is a real divide, it seems to me to be this: modernist accounts largely strive to hide from view the seams – doubts, choices, qualifications, etc. – of their accounts. Postmodernist accounts, by contrast, draw attention to their own contrivances, reflexively contemplating the inaccessibility of the past *per se*, or the function of

language and emplotment. They tend to put on display the historian's own role in the construction of history in order to expand our grasp both of some concrete past and the act of doing history more generally.

The second question sprang out of the observation that the challenge posed by postmodern philosophers of history to practicing historians had largely escaped the field of film history. Though I am certain that film historians have not been unaware of the historiographical discussions that have taken place, they have just as certainly remained practically completely unaffected by them. The only article that I have been able to dig up that explicitly engages with these debates is Janet Staiger's "The Pleasures and Profits of a Postmodern Film Historiography" from 1995. Consequently, my article seeks to discover just what film historians have had to say on this issue, and also to suggest why they have remained largely silent on it. This is obviously a daunting task, and I would not claim to have made a comprehensive survey.

Third, I ask what a postmodern history might actually look like in practice. This, more than any of the others, is a question that still remains enigmatic to me, though I do find it worthwhile to ponder. I end up comparing two incompatible accounts by Peter Biskind (1998) and Tom Shone (2004) of the transition from the Hollywood Renaissance to the Blockbuster Era. They are not in themselves postmodern, but I try to suggest an epistemic perspective from which to conceptualize them that might be said to be postmodern (though I am sure there are good reasons for thinking it is not necessarily so).

I have for a long time been fascinated by the historical changes that took place in American cinema from the late 70s, particularly in terms of narrative conventions. The main reason that I took an interest in this shift in a broader meta-historiographical sense had to do with the "crookedness" of the historical trajectory: I would say that conventional wisdom adds up to a mental map of Hollywood cinema according to which films from the classical period occupy a middle ground between the "intricacy" of the 70's films and the "simplicity" that is said to have characterized the output since the 80s. It is interesting to note how the somewhat irrational structure of this mental map ("middle ground – one extreme – opposite extreme" as opposed to the more natural progression of "one extreme – middle ground – opposite extreme") intrinsically seems to militate against any straightforward teleological explanations of the development of narrative conventions in Hollywood. I think Biskind and Shone's irreconcilable accounts nicely exemplify Goldstein's observation that

> Historians do not put together atomic facts. It is because they think fact *a* that they are inclined towards fact *b*, and if fact *b* proves to be untenable, they may have to do something about fact *a*. The account hangs together because its statements are not atomic, logically independent in the manner favored by logicians, but intimately intertwined in their genesis and function (1986: 99).

Once more, though, I must admit that what I believe I have done is mainly to provide a lucid illustration of a problem, not a solution to it. But then again, I am not sure that any solution as such exists. Perhaps the best we can do is to offer up accounts of the infrastructure supporting the superstructure and hope that that provides a fuller version of "what happened", to trust that reflections on the nature of historical knowledge and on the process of bringing history into being provides a different, or additional, perspective (one that is less naïve, perhaps) whenever we read history.

All in all, I do not claim in any way that the article gets to the bottom of the topics it explores, but I hope it opens them up for discussion, since they traditionally have not really been on film historians' agenda at all. At least I think it offers a more detailed and systematic examination of postmodern historiographical issues than those few efforts that have preceded it in the field of film history.

The article on *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* is by far the one most difficult to place chronologically. It has existed in a number of different forms, both as conference papers and as book chapters. It is as a kind of Ur-text on which I have been working on and off throughout my time as a PhD student (in fact, it was the one I started writing first, but also the one I finished last). It probably would not be entirely out of place to think of all the other articles as spin-off products of a four-year endeavor to write a twenty-year-too-late review of Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's book.

The article, in its final form, recapitulates the most frequently voiced reservations about the book, before examining certain trade-offs and tensions within its proposed model of classical Hollywood, such as the somewhat awkward place assigned to genre in it. The extremely tricky task that Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson are faced with is to describe a wide variety of different kinds of films as a reasonably coherent system. They settle on narrative causality as the system's *dominant*. However, certain genres clearly display other concerns as well, at least some

of the time. The appeal of many comedies, unlike most detective films, has pretty much everything to do with whether or not they make us laugh. Therefore, they are more likely to pile up a variety of jokes and gags in a fairly indiscriminate manner, that is to say, without necessarily paying all that much attention to how well integrated they are in a narrative structure. Of course, a detective film may also contain humor but, unless it is a spoof detective film, it will very likely contain less of it, and it will make a greater effort to unfold a tightly organized series of causes and effects. Integral to the genre, this very structure of events is important in itself; it is not the detective film's only attraction, of course, but it is apt to be a key one. To put the matter somewhat differently, the presence of poorly motivated causal links is apt to be much more detrimental to our enjoyment of a detective film than of a comedy.

The article also examines two rival models set forth by Elizabeth Cowie and Dirk Eitzen. I consider their usefulness, and look at how diverse perspectives and choices might bring forth different ways of conceptualizing classical Hollywood cinema.

It is important to note that the authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* strongly hint that the mode of film practice described in the book has persisted beyond the studio era, and the argument is made explicitly and comprehensively in Bordwell (2006) and Thompson (1999). However, the way that they argue for the continuation of classical narrative and stylistic conventions comes at a price, as the definition of classicism seems to include "virtually all possible deviations, so that every exception therefore proves the rule. The church is so broad that heresy is impossible" (Cowie, 1998: 178).

I agree that the inclusiveness of Bordwell and Thompson's conception of classicism may seem a rather blunt tool by which to measure historical change. It tends to flatten history, to give the impression that there is nothing much to get worked up about since nothing is ever really new.[28] But in *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, Bordwell offers insights into his notion of classicism that help explain why a device can be historically unique but still within the bounds of the classical:

> The premises of Hollywood filmmaking host an indefinitely large number of artistic strategies. Some of those strategies have become the most common options; others are imaginative ways of working within that tradition. Some recourses have been heavily exploited, others have not. […] The norms of any

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[28] This, it seems reasonable to speculate, might be why Bordwell himself feels compelled to inform his readers that "By insisting on the ways that daring films make themselves accessible, I don't mean to shrug off their ambitions" (2006: 103).

tradition are regulative principles, not laws. The classical system is less like the
Ten Commandments and more like a restaurant menu (2006: 14).

In other words, never realized artistic alternatives may be said to be part of the classical system as latent possibilities. But this begs the question, "How do we recognize such a latent possibility as *classical*?". Again, it would seem that comprehension is the litmus test of classicism. For example, Bordwell allows that the setup in *21 Grams* is tantalizingly fragmentary, but proceeds to point out that the dizzying array of past and future segments are resolved in the end (2006: 102). Once more, as in the case of his conception of classical style, this involves a trade-off. On the one hand, it yields a highly dynamic model of classical narration that is finely tuned to historical continuity. On the other, classicism becomes a rather undifferentiated concept. For example, Cameron relates the strikingly chaotic and non-linear structure of *21 Grams'* opening to Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's observation that "classical narration admits itself to be spatially omnipresent, but it claims no comparable fluency in time. The narration will not move on its own into the past or the future" (quoted in Cameron: 67). Thus Cameron plausibly concludes that the temporal omnipresence at the beginning of *21 Grams* represents a rare departure from the rules of classical Hollywood cinema. Bordwell would certainly consider the sequence non-typical, but presumably not non-classical, since everything makes sense eventually.

I think the most sensible way to resolve this tension would be to think of those descriptions of classicism that Bordwell provides in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* and in *Narration in the Fiction Film* that are quite specific as an effort to flesh out the prototypical features of the classical mode, not to build a fence around it. Discovering the exact boundary line between the classical and the non-classical is simply not very high on Bordwell's list of priorities. As far as I can tell, he provides a rather nondescript account of classical Hollywood cinema – pushed to its logical extreme, there would seem to be a case to be made for classicism in any film whose story adds up – but a very useful account of *prototypical* classical Hollywood cinema. Moreover, since this notion of classicism is exceptionally inclusive, "failure" to go beyond the classical is not necessarily a sign of banality or unoriginality. Quite clearly, it is perfectly possible for a film to be part of the classical tradition and still be strikingly innovative. Bordwell's definition of classicism does not rule out talk of change, even substantial change, but we should not expect it to appear at the systemic level.

But even though it spawned "Not the Obstacle but the Means", the work I have done on postmodern historiography has also been fed back into "Perspectives on and in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*". Still, I am hesitant to say that this article represents an effort to "apply" postmodern ideas on history to an examination of classical Hollywood cinema, mostly because I am still not sure I know what postmodern historiography is, or whether it is something that is possible to put to use in practice. As I have suggested already, though, Rorty's ideas in particular did inform my conceptualization both of Bordwell, Stagier, and Thompson's book and its critics. In fact, in its previous incarnations this article was far more critical, both of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* and of Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*. From the outset I very much *wanted* to come up with an alternative model of classical Hollywood cinema, but whenever I reread these books I discovered – initially much to my disappointment, I must admit – that both had somehow taken my objections into consideration. I also came to think that the criticisms leveled at them (criticisms with which I originally agreed) frequently were somewhat unfair or inflexible.

As I go on to state in "Not the Obstacle but the Means" article, I am not sure that the postmodern historiographers who cite Rorty as an influence invoke his ideas in a manner that he would approve of. What I take from him is the notion that different descriptions of the past are tools for specific purposes. This has led me, I think, to focus more on the practical advantages and disadvantages of competing models of classical Hollywood cinema in less polemical ways. My hope is that this may facilitate more nuanced and open debates about the relative merits of alternative accounts.

I want to stress, however, that I am not suggesting that we should stop trying to synthesize, or give up the quest for a coherent set of beliefs. The solution is not merely to add ever more descriptions in order to arrive at a better understanding of what classical Hollywood cinema is. Moreover, I do not want to rule out the possibility that someone will come up with a vocabulary at some point that is able to integrate the virtues of all the models that I consider in the essay, and I would certainly think of that as an improvement. But I believe that if we think of human linguistic practices from Rorty's pragmatic perspective – i.e. if we think of our descriptions as simply more or less useful ways of knowing our way around the world, not as a set of separate pieces in some great puzzle – we will not think of the co-existence of opposing versions as a kind of "systemic malfunction", as being stuck with too many pieces, for example.

Let me interject at this point that the previous sentence illustrates a familiar problem facing all attempts to stake out Rorty's pragmatism: it tends to end up caricaturing rival positions. The idea that the elements that make up our language are pieces in a large puzzle called "The World" or "Reality" is clearly a heuristic device, a position inhabited by no living being, used for purposes of contrast. Ultimately, in coming around to Rorty's way of thinking, what matters is not the stance one leaves behind – which more likely than not, I think, is quite fuzzy anyway – but the distinctness of the new one that gradually comes into view.

The blockbuster articles

"The Battle for the Blockbuster" looks at how film scholars have drawn on the terms "spectacle" and "excess" in debates about what has probably come to be seen as the prototypical Hollywood creation over the past couple of decades: popular, big-budget, effects-laden films of the action/adventure/science fiction/fantasy/superhero kind. The article shows how these terms are tied to different cultural discourses. Excess has most often been invoked to describe a detached, fine-arts spectator economy. Spectacle, while often brought into play to bemoan the breakdown of narrative, has also increasingly been called upon to celebrate a kind of liberation from (or addition to) narrative. The argument has been expressed and evaluated in various ways, but generally it has to do with the ways in which "the sensual" – performative, visual, and visceral elements – has either displaced or taken precedence over "the semantic", over hermeneutics and narrative resonance. The tendency is to give emphasis to what spectacle adds to the cinematic experience rather than to the ways in which it detracts from narrative.

"New Narrative Depths?" is also about the status of narrative and spectacle in blockbuster cinema. And like the previous essay, it tries to read between the lines to arrive at a deeper understanding of important debates about contemporary action spectaculars. But whereas the preceding article aims to link academic arguments about blockbuster cinema to fairly familiar cultural discourses, this one makes a more speculative move: it aims to tease out an implicit, (possibly even instinctive) assumption about why blockbuster narratives come up short compared to other kinds of culturally sanctioned narratives. Briefly, the assumption is that there is a distinct difference between stories that are simply a pretext for a series of isolated attractions and stories that are guided by some greater predefined purpose or guiding idea. I think that if we look more closely at it, this presumption will throw up some surprising and paradoxical findings. To sum up, my impression – or guesstimate – is that this line of reasoning has a tendency to seep into the debate about classical and postclassical Hollywood cinema, and since I do not think we should take this assumption for granted, I believe it has tended to confuse the debate.

I stress in the article that I do not maintain that this is a clear-cut position, or part of a precise historical argument, but rather an impulse that informs much thinking about Hollywood cinema. In the article I offer a number of quotes where I find that this line of reasoning is implied (and I think it is probably easier to come up with examples in popular film criticism than in

academic writing). The opening paragraph of David Mamet's recent book on the Hollywood movie business provides another instance:

> All the rivers flow into the sea. Yet the sea is not full. Films, which began as carnival entertainments merchandising novelty, seem to have come full circle. The day of the dramatic script is ending. In its place we find a premise, upon which the various gags may be hung. These events, once but ornaments in an actual story, are now fairly exclusively, the film's reason for being. In the thriller these events are stunts and explosions; in the horror film, dismemberments; in the crime and war film, shootouts and demolition. The film existing merely for its "high spots" has, for its provenance, the skin flick (2007: xi).

To reiterate, I freely admit that my argument is conjectural and vulnerable to the objection that my protestations are directed at a straw man. On the other hand, if I do manage to satisfy readers that this assumption has on occasion colored – I am inclined to say clouded – discourses on Hollywood history, then the potential reward is, I believe, considerable. It would lay bare certain prevalent but tenuous and unhelpful notions about narrative in blockbuster cinema. However, I want to stress that I do not propose that the assumption I want to challenge is completely groundless and crafted out of thin air. Rather, I want to restate it in different terms in order to cast doubt on the kind of historical argument that the Mamet quote above typifies.

Generally, it seems to me that (the by now numerous)[29] examinations of the relationship between spectacle and narrative in blockbuster cinema has been characterized by too much hyperbole, and has not been as sophisticated as comparable debates about the status of narrative in comedy and melodrama.[30] For example, I think one conclusion to be drawn from the "Battle for the Blockbuster" article may be that the textual features routinely referred to as spectacle appear to be insufficiently patterned to be brought under the same heading in a meaningful way.

Two related concepts that have been highly influential – though, in my opinion, not always beneficial – in debates about contemporary Hollywood cinema are *cinema of attractions*

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[29] See Allen (2003), Anderson (1998), Arroyo (2000), Barker and Brooks (1998), Bordwell (2006), Buckland (1998, 2006), Bukatman (1998), Crispin Miller (1990), Darley (2000), Elsaesser and Buckland (2002), Gallagher (1999), King (2000, 2002, 2003, 2006), Leitch (2004), Maltby (2003), McClean (2006), Ndalianis (2000, 2004), Pierson (1999a, 1999b, 2002), Romao (2004), Schatz (1993), Seamon (2006), Tasker (2004), Thompson (1999), Winston Dixon (2001), and Wyatt (1994).

[30] I am thinking of contributions made by Crafton (1995), Gunning (1995), and Jenkins (1992) on comedy, and by Gledhill (1987) and Williams (1998) on melodrama.

and *high concept*. The former term was introduced by Tom Gunning in the mid-1980s as a tool for describing the earliest period of cinema, until 1906-1907, when its energies were more directed towards display than storytelling.[31] Gunning's focus on this exhibitionist disposition allows him to link early cinema to avant-garde practices. He redefines the status of early cinema by refusing to treat a lack of interest in creating a self-enclosed fictional universe and in narrative absorption as "imperfection". The term "attractions" derives from Sergei Eisenstein, for whom it signified both an aesthetic and a political strategy, both an assault on the senses and an awakening of political consciousness. But Gunning also suggested that "recent spectacle cinema has reaffirmed its roots in stimulus and carnival rides, in what might be called the Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects [or] tamed attractions" (1990: 61).

Despite the numerous and obvious differences between early cinema and contemporary blockbusters, Gunning's proposition has had no shortage of takers. I am not convinced, however, that it has proved particularly illuminating to investigations into present-day Hollywood cinema. For the most part such studies simply assert the rather tenuous analogy that the foremost fascination of both Lumière and Lucas's cinema is not sustained narrative absorption, but the bursts of interest signaled by sights and spectacles.

There are several sticking points to this line of reasoning. The "original" cinema of attractions is defined by its pre-classicism; the proposition that Hollywood cinema has returned to its roots, has come full circle, so to speak, implies that present-day cinema of attractions is post-classical. But Gunning never posited an absolute break between early and classical cinema in the first place; he argued that the cinema of attractions never disappeared, but rather went underground in the narrative cinema that came to dominate (ibid: 57). So how has cinema since the late 70s been different from classical cinema, and why did it return to its roots just then? I do not think these questions have been adequately answered.

Warren Buckland has picked out other important ambiguities:

[For Gunning] the attractions [in contemporary action spectaculars] are tamed because they have lost their political shock value, leaving only an aesthetic shock. If the attraction loses its political shock value, can it still be considered an attraction? The link between attraction and political shock value remains indeterminate in Gunning's essay. We do not discover if the political shock value is a necessary condition for the definition of an attraction. Moreover, can

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[31] For more on the genealogy of the term, see Strauven (2006).

we really claim that special effects in contemporary cinema are non-illusionistic, that they are not co-opted into the ideology of realism and credibility? (2006: 52).

In my opinion there has been a tendency to posit too much equivalence between the old and the new cinema of attractions. Disregarding any textual differences, there still remains the absolutely crucial fact that during the old cinema of attractions no classical or narrative cinema had existed; contemporary filmmakers and cinemagoers, meanwhile, can never "forget" their acquaintance with the norms and conventions of classical cinema. Thus neither the production nor the reception of film can ever be "the same" in any remotely literal sense.

The analogy must be understood as a heuristic device. As such its success must be measured by the extent to which it has enabled understanding, or helped us find useful or interesting things to say about contemporary cinema.[32] In my opinion its achievements have been mixed. On the one hand, the notion of a "new" cinema of attractions has drawn attention to a "something else" in contemporary Hollywood cinema that many people clearly find it important and meaningful to talk about.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the differences far outweigh the similarities, and that the key consequence of the analogy has been to produce a series of inflated assertions about the spectacularity of contemporary Hollywood cinema. The best example of this is probably the claim, habitually made by film scholars, that modern blockbusters are like a rollercoaster, addressing viewers at a corporeal rather than cerebral level. Now, while there is no doubt that, in general, the modern cinemagoing experience to a greater extent than before is viscerally engaging – booming THX bass,[33] aggressive editing, in-your-face imagery (what Geoff King (2000: 101) calls an "impact-aesthetic") – I do think there has been a tendency to overstate the degree of sensory intensity. Surely it is so benign compared to other entertainments available that were it true that audiences sought solely, or even mainly, kinesthetic excitement, it is hard to

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[32] As Gunning himself puts it in a recent article outlining the term's origination: "Its value lies ultimately in how it opens up films and generates discussion, in a historically specific and analytically detailed manner, of the nature of film spectatorship. Disagreements undoubtedly will continue about how to resolve these discussions, but I think the concept of attractions continues to serve us well in keeping these discussions going" (2006: 38).

[33] See Rick Altman (1995). Altman observes that "the Eighties ushered in a new kind of visceral identification, dependent on the sound system's overt ability, through bone-rattling bass and unexpected surround effects, to cause spectators to vibrate – quite literally – with the entire narrative space. It is thus no longer the eyes, the ears, and the brain that alone initiate identification and maintain contact with a sonic source; instead, it is the whole body that establishes a relationship, marching to the beat of a different woofer". For more on "post-classical sound", see Sergi (1998, 2004) and Kerins (2006).

imagine why anyone would queue up at the cinema instead of at IMAX theatres or theme park rides. Clearly the fact that the physical thrills are narratively situated is absolutely crucial, and it seems to me that this is something the notion of a contemporary cinema of attractions has a tendency to ignore or direct attention away from.

Also, if audiences really were so interested in Mamet's "high spots" – stunts, explosions, dismemberments, shootouts, and demolitions – then surely we should expect web sites such as Youtube to be full of such indiscriminate assemblages. After all, by now just about everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of recut trailers in which footage from popular films are reedited to misrepresent their generic status (so that *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), for example, is made to resemble an innocent romantic comedy). Here, of course, the humor hinges on spectator recognition of storytelling conventions. However, I have yet to come across simply a random collection of spectacles from Hollywood feature films. Interestingly, there are plenty of such compilations, of fights, explosions, and car chases, from real life, however, recorded by such things as security cameras and mobile phones (and usually accompanied by some heavy metal soundtrack).

In "The Battle for the Blockbuster" I suggest that Gunning's reference to the Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects works better in its original context, since its function was not to spell out continuities; rather, his assertion that such modern effects are in fact "tamed attractions" conjures up both resemblance *and* difference, and it seems to me that the stress is on the latter. In other words, Gunning's focus is on difference in resemblance, while analyses of present-day effects-driven films tend to talk about resemblance despite difference.

From my perspective it does not seem that film scholars have been able to integrate the concept of a second cinema of attractions properly into historical accounts, mainly because it has proved hard to come up with descriptions that capture the novelty and uniqueness – that justify the prefix – of post-classicism, and at the same time maintain an awareness of historical continuities. In sum, the main problem with applying the concept of a cinema of attractions to today's Hollywood cinema has been to stake out a tenable position between the Scylla of exaggeration and the Charybdis of a shortage of specificity.

The idea notion of a new "high concept cinema" is even more problematical. Originally an industrial term, high concept refers to a movie idea which is easy to reduce to essentials and

exploit in marketing campaigns. It seems to me that the quality that serves it so well inside the movie business – its malleability, or its aptitude for rationalizing after the fact a film's financial success or failure – sticks to it, making it rather less useful as an analytic tool. It is always possible to profess causal links between the promotion of a film and the film's box office performance. Wyatt's term would seem to enable us to probe this relationship in a systematic, even scientific manner. However, in my opinion this is down to the fact that the term is so flexible that it can accommodate just about any eventuality. For example, exploiting the fit between star persona and story type is typically a sign of high concept, but so can the casting *against* type be (Wyatt, 1994: 10-11). Moreover, Wyatt stresses that high concept is not something that films either are or are not; rather it is something they are to a greater or lesser extent (ibid: 22). Finally, he points out that the features of high concept are constantly changing: "each newly successful high concept film potentially offers an alteration to be assimilated by future high concept films" (ibid: 199).

The term is perhaps most awkward when it addresses matters of film style. Wyatt undertakes to specify an aesthetic that distinguishes high concept filmmaking from the old Hollywood tradition. However, his analysis is quite eclectic or unsystematic, and the stylistic features he outlines are a mixture of the too particular and the not particular enough: extreme backlighting; a minimal color scheme; sleek, modern, high-tech settings; the prevalence of austere, reflective surfaces; physical perfection; and aestheticazion of everyday environments, and a strong match between image and music soundtrack (ibid: 16, 17, 25, 28, 30).[34]

According to Wyatt, high concept films are also characterized by a simplification of narrative and character by drawing heavily on stock generic situations and by minimizing psychological motivation. Wyatt dubs high concept narratives "modular", in the sense that they are really just a piecing together of discrete – but always marketable – elements, such as star power (which tends to rupture the coherence of story and character) and music video segments (which fragment the films' storylines). In fact, Wyatt seems to posit broad transformation in audiences' relationship to the screen:

> The modularity of the films' units, added to the one-dimensional quality of the characters, distances the viewer from the traditional task of reading the films'

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[34] These stylistic features are not, for example, conspicuous in *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), perhaps the paradigmatic high concept film.

narrative. In place of this identification with narrative, the viewer becomes sewn
into the "surface" of the film, contemplating the style of the narrative and the
production (ibid: 60).

I am not fully convinced by any of these arguments. For example, David Bordwell has compared
screenwriting manuals from the studio era and contemporary manuals, and finds that the latter
"demand more", by stipulating that every major character ought to have flaw, and by
emphasizing backstory and subtext.[35] He also provides a detailed reading of *Kramer vs. Kramer*
(Robert Benton, 1979) to illustrate his points.

And contrary to claims of narrative fragmentation, he argues that many films are
hyperclassical, with numerous visual and thematic parallels, echoes and counterpoints. Again, he
provides a far more detailed account than Wyatt of how this shows up in a particular film (*Jerry
Maguire* (Cameron Crowe, 1996), which he finds far more complex and unified than it needs to
be). I also think that Keating's Cooperation model (2006) that describes the relationship between
narrative and seemingly autonomous and isolated attractions (and that I cite approvingly both in
"Perspectives on and in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*" and in "New Narrative Depths") can
be brought to bear on many music video scenes to illustrate that such sequences frequently draw
viewers *into* the story. Think of moment in romantic comedies and melodramas when the
relationship between the lovers hits its low point: we are typically presented with alternating
images of the protagonists as they walk alone – or sit alone in their apartments, the rain running
down their windows – while some pop ballad is playing on the soundtrack. But contrary to
Wyatt's claim, such images do not fragment the story; rather, they serve as what Keating calls
"apparent failures", "doubt generators", and "stakes reminders" that intensify emotional
involvement.

In "Not the Obstacle but the Means" I also question the historical novelty of high concept
by suggesting that unique ideas whose appeal can be summed up quickly was part and parcel of
classical cinema as well. We can also add that arresting and stylized visuals too were a staple of
movies in the studio era, in musicals as well as in films noir. Wyatt acknowledges that moments

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[35] As Robert Davis and Riccardo de los Rios observe: "Today, on Hollywood's pop-Freudian post-McKee planet,
studio pictures – glorified B-movies and genre films – are developed as though they were amped-up equivalents of *A
Streetcar Named Desire*, replete with backstories and dramatic ironies" (2006: 158). They also quote legendary
supporting actor Jack Elam: "Rory Calhoun was the hero because he was the hero, and I was the heavy because I was
the heavy – and nobody cared what my *problem* was. And I didn't either. I robbed the bank because I wanted the
money…I never had a *problem* – other than the fact that I was just bad (ibid: 158).

of excess could be found in the pre-high concept era, but he thinks that its use was far more heavily regulated. He takes as his example a scene from *Bigger Than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956), which depicts the terrible effects of a new drug on family man Ed Avery (James Mason):

> A key scene in which Ed bullies his son while the boy solves a math problem is shot from a very low angle, creating a "bigger than life" image for Ed and a huge shadow which symbolically engulfs the boy. The excess suggested in the image corresponds to the plot and character development in this case. Where [Douglas] Sirk and Ray created moments of excess which directly related to the repression evidenced in the melodramatic plots, the excess in high concept cannot be reconciled in a similar fashion (1994: 34).

As far as I can tell, this is not a description of excess at all. Here style is motivated by character psychology ("the film's style matches [Ed's] delusions of grandeur" (ibid: 34)). However, for Kristin Thompson – who is Wyatt's reference in this discussion – excess is precisely those stylistic features for which we cannot come up with such a narrative function. But more is at stake here than terminological confusion. Ignoring the question of whether or not excess is a useful concept in the first place,[36] I simply cannot agree that it was absent in classical filmmaking. Surely the films of Josef von Sternberg are as stylized and "excessive" as anything produced today. If Wyatt's argument is that excess has simply been more prevalent in Hollywood cinema since the 80s, he would have to provide a more detailed account from a larger sample of films – although that would also undermine his contention that the style in high concept cinema is "unique" (ibid: 16).

In other words, I think that the term high concept, when used as a marker of historical change, raises more questions than it answers. In addition to the arguments presented so far is the issue of high concept's pertinence to Hollywood productions since the 1990s. Towards the end of the book, Wyatt indicates that he has detected "a movement away from the high concept syndrome". He does not think this brand of filmmaking has disappeared, but certainly that has become less prominent. What he seems to suggest is that it may be seen as a cycle that reached its peak between 1983 and 1986 (ibid: 161). And I would agree with Wyatt that the slick fashion-layout look of some of his key examples – *American Gigolo* (Paul Schrader, 1980), *Flashdance*

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[36] David Bordwell has sometimes alluded to the concept of excess, but now thinks that it was "a dead-end", "an empty idea" about which there is not much to be said. See Nielsen (2005: 44).

(Adrian Lyne, 1983), and *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986), for example – has been promoted to the same extent since.

However, the notion that the heyday of high concept cinema may be over – at least as Wyatt framed it – is hardly ever brought up by scholars who have adopted the term in discussions about Hollywood cinema in the 1990s and beyond. It has also tended to be used pretty much synonymously with blockbuster cinema. But in Wyatt original formulation, the term was applied to a pretty assorted set of films, including some that we would be hard pressed to think of as blockbusters today.[37]

Henry Jenkins' work (2006) on transmedia storytelling would also seem to challenge the routine practice of equating high concept/blockbuster cinema with bare-bones narratives. In a recent blog entry on the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy he discusses American critics' claim that the final installment has an unnecessarily complicated story. Jenkins argues that critics fail to realize that such films are more focused on building complex and richly textured worlds than on character or plot. He argues that "Hollywood has moved from a primary focus on stories as the generators of film pitches to a focus on characters that will sustain sequels to a focus on worlds that can be played out across multiple media platforms" (2007: n.p.). These observations strongly indicate that Wyatt's outline of high concept cinema is in severe need of an update if it is to be of relevance to Hollywood cinema in the new millennium.

The aim of the blockbuster articles in this collection is to draw out and then critically examine the premise that there is some obvious difference between narratives built around stand-alone moments and other kinds of narratives, which seems to be implicit both in arguments about the cinema of attractions and high concept.

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[37] Wyatt even lists a David Cronenberg film – *The Fly* (1986). For discussions of the concept of blockbuster cinema, see Hall (2002), Neale (2003), and Stringer (2003).

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