

INTRODUCTION

Beyond the Blockbuster

Q: Do you write with specific actors in mind?

A: Always . . . but they're usually dead.

CHARLES SHYER

(Private Benjamin, Irreconcilable Differences)

This book is about the art and craft of Hollywood cinema since 1960. In two essays I trace some major ways that filmmakers have used moving images to tell stories. The narrative techniques I'll be examining are astonishingly robust. They have engaged millions of viewers for over eighty years, and they have formed a lingua franca for worldwide filmmaking.

Naturally, during the years I'm considering, American films have changed enormously. They have become sexier, more profane, and more violent; fart jokes and kung fu are everywhere. The industry has metamorphosed into a corporate behemoth, while new technologies have transformed production and exhibition. And, to come to my central concern, over the same decades some novel strategies of plot and style have risen to prominence. Behind these strategies, however, stand principles that are firmly rooted in the history of studio moviemaking. In the two essays that follow I consider how artistic change and continuity coexist in modern American film.

To track the dynamic of continuity and change since 1960, it's conventional to start by looking at the film industry. As usually recounted, the industry's fortunes over the period display a darkness-to-dawn arc that might satisfy a scriptwriter of epic inclinations. We now have several nuanced versions of this story, so I'll merely point out some major turning points.¹ The appendix provides a year-by-year chronology.

Although court decisions of 1948–1949 forced the major companies to divest themselves of their theater chains, during the 1950s Warner Bros., Disney, Paramount, Columbia, 20th Century Fox, United Artists, MGM, and Universal controlled distribution, the most lucrative area of the industry. While the studios were producing a few big-budget films themselves, they also relied on the “package-unit” system of production.² In some cases, in-

house producers oversaw a unit that turned out a stream of releases. Alternatively, a producer, star, or agent bought a script, assembled a package of talent, and approached a studio for financing and distribution. At the start of the 1960s, the studios were providing lucrative prime-time television programming, but theatrical moviemaking was not a great business to be in. Attendance was falling sharply. Road show pictures like *The Sound of Music* (1965), playing a single screen for months on end, were for a while bright spots on the ledger, but the cycle of epic road show productions, already overstretched with the failure of *Cleopatra* (1963) and *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1965), crashed at the end of the decade. Soon studios faced huge losses and were taken over by conglomerates bearing mysterious names like Gulf + Western (which bought Paramount in 1966) and Transamerica Corp. (which bought United Artists the following year). Feature filmmaking continued to hemorrhage money—by some estimates, as much as half a billion dollars between 1969 and 1972.

Yet by 1980 the industry was earning stupendous profits. What changed? For one thing, a tax scheme sponsored by the Nixon administration allowed the producers to write off hundreds of millions of dollars in past and future investments. The studios also found ways to integrate their business more firmly with broadcast television, cable, the record industry, and home video.³ Just as important, a new generation of filmmakers emerged. Some, modeling their work on the more personal European cinema they admired, produced Americanized art films like *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and *Mean Streets* (1973). The young directors who found the biggest success, however, were willing to work in established genres for a broad audience. They were responsible for a burst of record-breaking hits: *The French Connection* (1971), *The Godfather* (1972), *The Exorcist* (1973), *American Graffiti* (1973), *Jaws* (1975), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). There were less innovative top-grossers as well, such as *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) and *The Sting* (1973). In all, the 1970s lifted the ceiling on what a film could earn, and it remains the decade with the most top-grossers in adjusted dollars. On its U.S. release, *Jaws* reaped about \$260 million—the equivalent of \$940 million today. *Star Wars* took in over \$307 million on its initial domestic release (a staggering \$990 million in 2005 dollars), and after rereleases it became by far the top-earning film of the modern era.⁴

No films had ever made so much money so quickly. The studios' decision makers realized that the market for a movie was much bigger than anyone had suspected, and they settled on a business strategy to exploit the "megapicture," or blockbuster. This was a must-see movie very different

from the road show attraction. Budgeted at the highest level, launched in the summer or the Christmas season, playing off a best-selling book or a pop-culture fad like disco, advertised endlessly on television, and then opening in hundreds (eventually thousands) of theaters on the same weekend, the blockbuster was calculated to sell tickets fast. By the early 1980s, merchandising was added to the mix, so tie-ins with fast-food chains, automobile companies, and lines of toys and apparel could keep selling the movie. Scripts that lent themselves to mass marketing had a better chance of being acquired, and screenwriters were encouraged to incorporate special effects. Unlike studio-era productions, the megapicture could lead a robust afterlife on a soundtrack album, on cable channels, and on videocassette. By the mid-1980s, once overseas income and ancillaries were reckoned in, few films lost money.

The new release system demanded an upgrade in exhibition as well. In the 1970s those downtown theaters or road show houses that weren't demolished had been chopped up into lopsided, sticky-floored auditoriums. But the blockbuster showed to best advantage in venues with comfortable seating, a big screen, and surround-sound systems, so in the 1980s exhibitors began building well-appointed multiplex theaters. The multiplex provided economies of scale (fewer projectionists and concession workers per screen), and it proved ideal for megapictures, which opened on several screens each weekend.⁵

The blockbuster reshaped the industry, but very few projects were conceived on that scale. In any given year, the major companies and independent distributors released between two and five hundred films. Most were genre pictures—dramas, comedies, action movies, children's fare, and other mid-range items. Cable and video had an omnivorous appetite, so independent production flourished, from the down-market Troma and its gross-out horror, to the high-end Orion, purveyor of Woody Allen dramas. A radically low-budget independent sector created its own hits, like *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). The success of this sector in nurturing young talent and attracting upscale consumers led studios to buy the libraries of indie companies. The majors also launched specialty divisions, notably Miramax and New Line, which acquired films for niche distribution and could produce their own projects at lesser budget levels.

The industry's success nourished a new kind of acquisition mentality. Now entrepreneurs in other leisure industries saw movies as generating "content" that could be run through publishing, television, theme parks, and other platforms. The Walt Disney company had pioneered this approach, but other firms took it up, starting with Rupert Murdoch's purchase of 20th

Century Fox in 1985. By 2003, with General Electric/NBC's acquisition of Universal Pictures, no major distributor stood outside an entertainment combine. Initially, the drive was to maximize synergy. Batman could undergo a hard-edged makeover in his comic book and then become the hero of a new movie, which yielded soundtrack albums, sequels, and an animated TV series—all because Time Warner owned DC Comics, a movie distribution firm, and a music company. Synergy did not always work so smoothly, but it was clear by the mid-1980s that “intellectual property” was endlessly lucrative, and conglomerates were in the best position to nurture and market it around the world.

Consumers responded. Despite home video and other entertainment rivals, attendance at U.S. movie theaters soared to 1.5 billion viewers a year. The overseas market grew too, partly thanks to the multiplex habit. On average, U.S. films drew half their theatrical income from overseas, while worldwide home video surpassed theatrical income. The 1990s saw a boost in income for the industry generally, but the decisive development was the arrival of the DVD in 1997. Designed to be sold as well as rented, the DVD format soon pushed the videocassette into oblivion. In 2004 the major studios' theatrical releases grossed \$9.5 billion worldwide, but DVD sales and rental yielded over \$21 billion.⁶ Now DVDs were keeping virtually every movie's budget afloat. The downside was that digital reproduction made massive piracy easy. In China bootleg DVDs sold for less than a dollar. The appetite aroused by Hollywood for event pictures, the sense that you're not in touch with contemporary culture unless you've seen this weekend's hit, came back to haunt the studios when anyone with high-speed Internet access could download movies that had not yet opened. The next task for the industry would be finding a way to distribute films in digital form—to theaters, to homes via the Internet, and eventually to personal digital devices like cellular phones.

A tale of last-minute rescues—the industry saved by the blockbuster, then by home video and the multiplex, then by DVD—is always captivating, but American cinema is more than a business. Since the late 1910s, Hollywood cinema has constituted the world's primary tradition of visual storytelling, and despite the four decades of industrial upheaval just chronicled, this tradition has remained true to its fundamental premises. In an earlier book, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985), two colleagues and I sought to analyze the narrative principles governing studio-era filmmaking, from 1917 to 1960. We picked the endpoint as a matter of convenience, since we believed that the classical system was still flourishing. This book is an effort to back up that belief.

Since we made our initial foray into this terrain, the boundary lines have shifted. Some scholars have suggested that however valid our account might be for the studio era, dramatic changes have taken place since 1960, and especially since the late 1970s. There is, they claim, a “postclassical” cinema—taken either as U.S. studio filmmaking as a whole or as the dominant trend within it.⁷ We can trace this line of argument through several stages, all connected in one way or another to the rise of the blockbuster.

Megapictures may have saved the major companies, but they also shrank the auteur aspirations of the early 1970s. Did Hollywood storytelling change in response to the blockbuster phenomenon, and if so, in what ways? From *American Graffiti* (1973) to *Jaws* (1975) to *Star Wars* (1977), film historian Thomas Schatz suggests, films became “increasingly plot-driven, increasingly visceral, kinetic, and fast-paced, increasingly reliant on special effects, increasingly ‘fantastic’ (and thus apolitical), and increasingly targeted at younger audiences.”⁸ Several commentators suggest that storytelling was undercut by spectacle. One scholar, denouncing the “violent spectacle” of the big-budget movie, speaks of “the collapse of narrative.”⁹ Others claim that stylistic unity evaporated. Contemporary Hollywood films, according to one writer, “cannot be seen as unified as was possible under the old oligopoly. Stylistic norms have changed, and perhaps no longer exist as a consistent group of norms.”¹⁰

What made narrative cinema crumble? The causes commonly cited are industrial. Since the 1970s, companies have split and recombined, the marketplace has splintered into dozens of demographics, and merchandising has spun off ancillary products. “Equally fragmented, perhaps,” writes Schatz, “are the movies themselves, especially the high-cost, high-tech, high-stakes blockbusters, those multi-purpose entertainment machines that breed music videos and soundtrack albums, TV series and videocassettes, video games and theme park rides, novelizations and comic books.”¹¹ Contemporary cinema, claims another historian, directs its energies “more to the pursuit of synergy than to that of narrative coherence.”¹² An indie producer-writer has argued that action pictures like *Volcano* (1997) and *Independence Day* (1996) don’t need classical narrative construction because their narratives will be “fragmented” into CD soundtracks and T-shirt logos. “The supposed ‘identity’ of the filmic text comes increasingly under the dissolving pressures of its various revenue streams.”¹³

Comparable arguments have been made about the “high-concept” film, typified by *Saturday Night Fever* (1976), *American Gigolo* (1980), and *Flashdance* (1983). Justin Wyatt has proposed that such films’ musical interludes and stereotyped characters rendered plot and psychology secondary. Stars

did not so much perform as strike magazine-ad poses, and TV-commercial imagery made style itself a major appeal; this favored the marketing of spin-off fashions, soundtracks, and videos. Wyatt argues that high concept grew out of the blockbuster syndrome and became a central development of post-classical cinema.¹⁴

Eventually these lines of argument encountered objections. Murray Smith proposed that claims of plot fragmentation and stylistic collapse were overstated; even blockbusters showed “careful narrative patterning.”¹⁵ Smith and Peter Krämer suggested that conceptions of “postclassical” cinema rested on intuitive comparisons rather than on thorough and systematic analyses of films.¹⁶ When a scholar examined *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1980), he found the film’s plot and narration to be quite strongly unified.¹⁷ Similarly, Geoff King argued that the spectacle-narrative split was not apt even for the theme-park movie: “The demands of the blockbuster may have led to an emphasis on certain genres and on more episodic forms of narrative, but this is not the same as narrative being displaced.”¹⁸

Most comprehensively, Kristin Thompson examined several dozen post-1960s films and analyzed ten in detail in her book *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* (1999). Her studies show that even blockbusters like *Jaws* and *Terminator 2* (1990) display highly coherent storytelling. Other films she analyzes, such as *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (both 1985), are more character centered, but these “independent” productions also remain committed to classical premises. Thompson also offered general arguments against the power of merchandising to shape storytelling. To suggest that a film’s plot “fragments” into a shrapnel burst of tie-ins, she points out, is to indulge in misleading rhetoric. The film itself isn’t fragmented by its publicity: “One model of car can be marketed to college kids and to young professionals using different ads, but the individual vehicles do not cease to run as a result.”¹⁹ The fact that a film will be hyped on many platforms mandates nothing about its form and style.

As for the role of high concept, it now seems clear that the term can mean at least three things. The high-concept movie, it’s usually said, is one that can be encapsulated in a single sentence, usually called a *logline*.²⁰ Nowadays every film needs to be summed up in an enticing way on the first page of a script or during a pitch session. But any film from any period of Hollywood history can be reduced to one intriguing sentence, as TV listings in newspapers show. Although the logline is important as a production practice, by itself it doesn’t seem to distinguish “high-concept” projects from others. A more specific sense of the term denotes a movie sold on the strength of an unusual plot idea that will work without stars. “High concept is story as star,”

notes one screenplay manual.²¹ *The Exorcist*, *Jaws*, and *Star Wars* lured in audiences with bold premises, not stellar casts. Yet stars have embraced high-concept projects, from *Tootsie* (1982) to *What Women Want* (2000). A 2002 *Variety* report on recent concept-driven properties suggested that those without stars had trouble getting attention or getting released.²² Wyatt's most vivid specimens of high concept illustrate a third sense of the term, one associated with a particular 1980s production cycle. *American Gigolo* and *Flashdance* do display bold music and slick visuals, but they were rarities in a field dominated by films as stylistically unprepossessing as *9 to 5* (1980), *Stir Crazy* (1980), *Any Which Way You Can* (1980), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), and *WarGames* (1983)—all of which did much better at the box office.²³ Wyatt's research skillfully captures a distinct trend in early 1980s cinema, but the films' fashion-layout gloss remains a fairly isolated phenomenon.

Given the evidence that even blockbusters can be quite narratively coherent and that the high-concept style covers only a fraction of Hollywood's output, the postclassical position has become less plausible.²⁴ Today, the argument revolves largely around one aspect of modern movies: their frequent allusions to other movies. Noël Carroll was one of the first scholars to write about this tendency, and his approach to the problem in an essay from 1982 is instructively concrete. After mapping out varieties of allusionism, he ascribes the impulse to a new generation of filmmakers who, brought up on TV and trained in film schools, addressed each other and a newly hip audience by citing classic films. A film could gain emotional or thematic resonance by making references to *Psycho* (1960) or *The Searchers* (1956). Seeking to add expressive dimensions to their work, filmmakers turned from "organic expression" to "an iconographic code" based on their devotion to auteurs.²⁵

Since his essay, allusionism has proliferated in movies, and what Carroll took as a single trend other scholars have held to be a core feature of postclassical Hollywood. One version of this view has been broached by film critics Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland. Acknowledging the arguments of Smith, Thompson, and others, they argue that postclassical cinema is at once classical and "classical-plus." It displays traditional patterns of narrative and style, but it adds a playful knowingness. The film asks viewers to appreciate its masterful use of traditional "codes." At the same time, the postclassical film's playfulness is "excessive" in that it anticipates with startling literalness how it may be read by academics. The latter conditions occur in "all those moments . . . when our own theory or methodology suddenly turns up in the film itself, looking us in the face; either gravely nodding assent, or winking." *Back to the Future* (1985) has fun with an obvious Oedipal scenario, and the web of references to racial bonding in *Die Hard* (1988) "has

ensured that the interpretive community of 'race-class-gender' studies can have a field day. . . . *Die Hard* looks as if its makers had read all the relevant cultural studies literature, so as to provide 'something for everybody.'²⁶

Surely some recent films are self-conscious, but playful knowingness isn't new to Hollywood cinema. The Marx Brothers films, Bugs Bunny cartoons, *Hellzapoppin'* (1941), and the Bob Hope/Bing Crosby road pictures are shot through with references to other movies (and to themselves *as* movies). What seems new are the extensions of allusionism to noncomic genres and the tactic of addressing some allusions to only part of the audience. Carroll calls the latter a two-tiered system of communication—a straight story for everybody and allusions for the movie buffs—and suggests that these tactics can be explained by the efforts of New Hollywood directors to establish a "common cultural heritage" to replace the Bible and European canons of art.²⁷ My first essay pursues a complementary line of explanation by appeal to the "belatedness" confronting directors starting their careers after the decline of the studio system.

As for the postclassical film's also "knowing" about academic trends, this is a rather curious claim, and Elsaesser and Buckland don't really account for how such a state of affairs might occur. Surely some filmmakers have read film theory, but most practicing screenwriters and directors couldn't care less about postmodern subjectivity, the crisis of masculinity, or other seminar gambits. In raising this possibility, moreover, the two writers shift from claims about *how films tell their stories* to claims about *what the stories might mean*. Once we move to the realm of interpretation, there are few—some would say no—constraints on what counts as a plausible reading.

A functional analysis of *Die Hard's* plot can point out that the broken-glass motif is part of a concrete causal logic, fulfilling the demand to make things as hard on your hero as possible. Get McClane to take his shoes off as a way of resting up after a long plane flight. To keep those shoes off, force him to flee the room. Make it impossible for him to find another pair of shoes that fits. Then during a firefight, surround him with a field of glass shards so that his bare feet make him more vulnerable. You can also expand the glass motif to include the skyscraper (a glass tower) and the windshield-shattering fall of a gunman. Such linkages are part of the economy of the classical tradition, in which a setting is milked for as many well-motivated purposes as the production team can imagine. All this is straightforward. But when Elsaesser and Buckland go on to interpret the glass motif as symbolizing the "surface texture" of the film itself, they make a claim of a more debatable order. Similar is the claim that "a piece of advice McClane receives on the plane: 'Curl your toes into a fist.' . . . functions figuratively in a wider

context, that of the central contradiction of the film between male and female. . . . 'Fist,' it is easy to see, suggests masculinity and violence, but what about 'toes'? 'Curl your toes' alludes to bound feet, with distinct female connotations." This is pretty tenuous as is, but it becomes implausible when we recall that the line in the film is actually "Make fists with your toes," which smacks more of kung fu than of foot binding.²⁸

Even if such interpretive claims are persuasive, they won't on their own distinguish a "postclassical" film from a studio-era one. *Kings Row* (1942) features two heroes without dads and several women with punitive fathers, one of whom amputates the legs of a man who gets too close to his daughter. Not least, the protagonist goes to Vienna to study psychiatry. Doesn't this morbid tale's "excess" anticipate academic interpretation? There is even a moment when the secondary hero, hearing his girlfriend protest that she's from the wrong side of the tracks, replies: "If you're gonna start that bunk about class again!" *Kings Row's* blatant knowingness makes *Die Hard* seem fairly reticent. More broadly, the sorts of punning and "sliding signifiers" highlighted by Elsaesser and Buckland have been found by other critics in *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932), films noirs, and the Andy Hardy series.²⁹ I've argued elsewhere that interpretation is a process of elaborating semantic fields according to rules of thumb developed within a critical institution.³⁰ The academic institution's current heuristics encourage highly novel, if strained, interpretations. To create fresh readings, critics are encouraged to forge slender chains of associations, including those that would make any work of fiction, drama, or cinema seem to anticipate its own interpretation. For a hundred years, readers of *Hamlet* have marveled that Shakespeare laid bare the Oedipus complex as cogently as if he had studied with Freud.

The debate about postclassical Hollywood raises the question of how to gauge change over history. On the whole, I think, critics have exaggerated the novelty of current developments. This isn't surprising, since our perceptual and cognitive systems are geared to take a great deal for granted and to monitor the world for change. We are sensitive to the slightest break in our habits. More prosaically, many humanities professors are by temperament keen to spot the next big thing. But if we want to capture the nuances of historical continuity, we don't want every wrinkle to be a sea change. Did the "classical cinema" end with the playfully knowing *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), or with the playfully knowing *Citizen Kane* (1941), or with the playfully knowing *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924)? In *Boy Meets Girl* (1938), a pair of screenwriters comments on the action unfolding before them by hollering out plot points ("Boy Loses Girl!"). In *Page Miss Glory* (1935), a wisecracking flap-

per hears men critically appraising Garbo, Dietrich, and Harlow and remarks, "You'd have a tough time getting a date with Minnie Mouse." The studio tradition has room for citation, reflexivity, pastiche, parody, and all those tactics that have been considered recent inventions. We can't wholly trust our sense of what's brand-new; our intuitions have to be tested against a wide array of evidence.

How wide? Very wide. One drawback of the blockbuster and the high-concept positions is that they take a handful of films to represent a vast output. Hollywood has given us baseball movies, football movies, basketball movies, hockey movies, soccer movies, golf movies, surfing movies, bowling movies, fly-fishing movies, skydiving movies, poker movies, prizefighting movies, bike-racing movies, chess movies, roller-skating movies, middle-class-family movies, upper-class-family movies, working-class-family movies, coal-mining movies, cowboy movies, doctor movies, knights-of-old movies, grifter movies, adultery movies, gangster movies, transvestite movies, discreet decline-of-Empire movies, war movies, adult-lust movies, teenage-lust movies, teenage-prank movies, colorful-geezer movies, prison movies, survival movies, dog movies, cat movies, tiger-cub movies, whale movies, dolphin movies, sensitive coming-of-age movies, lovers-on-the-run movies, single-parent movies, disco movies, Thanksgiving movies, Christmas movies, stalker movies, robot movies, firefighting movies, ghost movies, vampire movies, Sherlock Holmes movies, male-bonding movies, female-bonding movies, frat movies, sorority movies, spring-break movies, summer-vacation movies, road movies, road-trip movies, time-machine movies, Civil War movies, rise-of-Nazism movies, World War II movies, Broadway-play movies, TV-spin-off movies, dance movies, motorcycle-trash movies, and movies showing fops and their ladies curtsying in powdered wigs; and none of these is necessarily a blockbuster.

Too often, writers discussing postclassical cinema concentrate on the tentpole films—typically action pictures and heroic fantasy—or on the acknowledged classics (*Chinatown*, *The Godfather*). These are peaks, no doubt. But Hollywood also dwells in the valleys. Perhaps our orthodox account of the industry's recent history, focusing on the rise of the megapicture, lets all the other films slip too far to the periphery. Beyond a few blockbusters or high-concept breakouts, there are hundreds of other types of films. There are the A-pictures in well-established genres like horror, suspense, comedy, historical drama, and romantic drama. There is Oscar bait, the prestige picture adapted from a tony literary source and displaying virtuosic acting aided by plenty of makeup (*The English Patient*, 1996; *The Hours*, 2002). There is edgy fare from Spike Lee, Oliver Stone, or Paul Thomas Anderson. There

is the indie drama (*In the Bedroom*, 2001) or comedy (*The Tao of Steve*, 2000). There are children's movies. There is today's equivalent of drive-in fare—the teen comedies, horror tales, or B-actioners. Each year, a few of these less-trumpeted efforts will find financial success, while many would-be blockbusters will have crashed on their second weekend.

Every year's most successful releases include some outliers. The eleven top-grossing films in 1984's North American market were *Ghostbusters*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Gremlins*, *The Karate Kid*, *Police Academy*, *Footloose*, *Romancing the Stone*, *Star Trek III: The Wrath of Khan*, *Splash*, and *Purple Rain*. In the same year, *Rhinestone*, boasting the supposedly infallible teaming of Sylvester Stallone and Dolly Parton, wound up at number fifty, grossing about a third of what *Splash* took in. In 1993 *Jurassic Park* was far in the front, but *Mrs. Doubtfire* came in at number two, *Sleepless in Seattle* at number five, *Indecent Proposal* at number six, and *Schindler's List* at number nine. *Free Willy* (eleven), *Philadelphia* (twelve), *Groundhog Day* (thirteen), and *Grumpy Old Men* (fourteen) did much better than the Stallone vehicle *Demolition Man* (eighteen), Schwarzenegger's *Last Action Hero* (twenty-six), and Sharon Stone's erotic thriller *Sliver* (forty-five). Or note the top-fifteen worldwide grossers for 2000, dominated by *Mission: Impossible 2* and *Gladiator*, but also including *Cast Away*, *What Women Want*, *Dinosaur*, *Meet the Parents*, *What Lies Beneath*, *Scary Movie*, *Erin Brockovich*, and *Unbreakable*. Wannabe 2000 blockbusters like *The Beach*, *The Cell*, *Rules of Engagement*, and *Proof of Life* did not make the top twenty, and the deeply peculiar *Battlefield Earth*, with an estimated budget of over \$100 million, came in one hundred and second, garnering a paltry \$30 million worldwide.³¹ Such train wrecks are a fact of modern Hollywood history, from *Cleopatra* (1963) and *Dr. Dolittle* (1967) through *Heaven's Gate* (1980) and *Ishtar* (1987) to *The Adventures of Pluto Nash* (2002) and *The Alamo* (2004). Many blockbusters just go bust.

True, a successful megapicture generates a huge payout for the distribution company (at a minimum, about 30 percent of box-office returns). Cultural buzz pays off too; every studio likes to be at the center of a phenomenon like *Spider-Man* or *The Lord of the Rings*. But the A-pictures, the children's films, the low-budget action and horror titles, and all the rest enable the companies to fill screens day in and day out. "The studio emphasis has shifted to event films to be released around the world, but they need more titles to run through the system," notes one agent. "Those additional films, which are largely dramas, genre films, or foreign content stories are an opportunity for the talent as well as the independent producer."³² They're

also an opportunity for steady money. While locomotives might earn the topline grosses, they carry the greatest risks. They have the highest budgets, the longest shooting schedules, the biggest costs for prints and advertising, and the most debt service.³³ Nearly all the top tentpole films don't recoup their costs until after they're released on home video. So studios also need to hit doubles and triples, successful movies brought to them by independent producers, shot on mid-range budgets but carrying a large profit margin. In 2003 *Love Actually*, with a budget estimated at \$45 million, grossed only about \$60 million in North America. But it earned much more overseas, ending with a worldwide gross of about \$246 million—almost exactly the international take of *Hulk* (estimated budget \$172 million), and much ahead of *The Italian Job*, *Anger Management*, *Kill Bill vol. 1*, *The Cat in the Hat*, and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. On DVD *Love Actually* competes briskly with 2003's aspiring blockbusters.³⁴

The talent, like the output, is far more diverse than the blockbuster aesthetic would suggest. For every producer like Jerry Bruckheimer (*Pearl Harbor*, 2001) and Joel Silver (*Lethal Weapon*, 1987), there is a James L. Brooks (*As Good As It Gets*, 1997), a Mark Johnson (*Donnie Brasco*, 1997), and a Scott Rudin (*Wonder Boys*, 2000). For every director as bodacious as Tony Scott or Antoine Fuqua, there are calmer hands like Clint Eastwood and Phil Alden Robinson. And nearly everyone crosses over. Bruckheimer produced *Dangerous Minds* (1995), Silver produced *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), Johnson produced *Galaxy Quest* (1999), and Rudin produced *Shaft* (2000), while Scott directed the indie-inflected *True Romance* (1993). If we're to capture the dynamic of stability and change that characterizes contemporary American moviemaking, we need to recognize that it is a fluid system.

It remains, however, a system. Classical filmmaking constitutes not just one stylistic school, on the same footing as Soviet montage or Italian neorealism. The classical tradition has become a default framework for international cinematic expression, a point of departure for nearly every filmmaker. The premises of classical storytelling have played a role similar to that played by the principles of perspective in visual art. Many different schools of painting, from Renaissance classicism to surrealism and modern figural art, work with the assumptions of perspective projection. Likewise, most traditions of commercial moviemaking adopt or recast classical premises of narrative and style.

Historically, these premises sprang mostly out of other media. From popular literature and drama came principles of plotting: psychological causality, planting and payoff, rising action, and recurrent motifs. From theater, paint-

ing, photography, and the graphic arts came ideas about spatial vantage points and pictorial composition. Other premises derived from cinema's particular resources, such as the possibility of breaking a scene into closer views of the characters, or joining disparate spaces through alternating editing. Soon after movies became a public entertainment, filmmakers tested all these principles in haphazard fashion. By 1917 American filmmakers had synthesized them into a unified style, and it was this style, within the next decade, that was taken up and developed around the world.³⁵

What role did this style play in the international advance of the Hollywood movie? I remember attending a silent film festival spotlighting Russian czarist dramas, all admirably mounted and acted but solemn and introspective. The programmers broke the mood by inserting Raoul Walsh's *Regeneration* (1915). A mother dies, a boy is beaten by a drunken foster father, the boy grows to be a tough gangster, he plunges into a barroom quarrel, slumming rich folks visit a bawdy nightclub, the gangster is transfixed by the sight of a beautiful debutante: more happened in the first twenty minutes of *Regeneration* than in the entirety of any of the Russian films. And the film's brief scenes, rapid cutting, and constant changes of angle probably seemed as frenetic in 1915 as any action movie looks to us today. My friend leaned over and whispered, "Now we know how America won."

Critics were as captivated as the audiences. Denouncing continental films as too theatrical, a German critic wrote in 1920: "America's healthy will has created true film. . . . What is happening or rather racing by on the screen can no longer be called plot. It is a new dynamic, a breathless rhythm, action in an unliterary sense."³⁶ Of course, the style didn't propel the films into foreign markets on its own. Hollywood studios have been shrewdly entrepreneurial, and the United States, home to a large and affluent moviegoing population, has given domestic films an enormous base from which to expand.³⁷ Still, since the late 1910s American narrative norms have been very export friendly. The plots rely on physical movement, vigorous conflicts, escalating dramatic stakes, and a climax driven by time pressure. The visual style, contoured to maximize dramatic impact, is likewise easily understood.³⁸ Just as Webern will never become elevator music, a highly experimental approach to cinematic storytelling is unlikely to attract a large international audience.

In a passage that has become famous, André Bazin pointed out that this tradition is at once solid and flexible: "The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable, i.e., not only the talent of this or that film-maker, but the genius of the system, the richness of its ever-vigorous tradition, and its fertility when it comes into contact

with new elements." The system that Bazin praised wasn't the film industry but rather a coherent approach to genre, plot, and style that can assimilate a great range of thematic material. He believed that *Picnic* (1955) and *Bus Stop* (1956), underrated by his younger critical colleagues, were valuable partly because of their presentation of "social truth, which of course is not offered as a goal that suffices in itself but is integrated into a style of cinematic narration."³⁹

In the essays that follow I try to show that the richness of classical American filmmaking, as an artistic system, depends on just this capacity for flexible but bounded variation. 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 the tradition. Some resources have been heavily exploited, others have not. Some narrative strategies, such as the multiple-protagonist film, were rarely pursued in the studio era but are being ingeniously developed today. The situation is summed up by musicologist Leonard Meyer, who considers style in any art as a hierarchical system of constraints and opportunities: "For any specific style there is a finite number of rules, but there is an infinite number of possible strategies for realizing or instantiating such rules. And for any set of rules there are probably innumerable strategies that have never been instantiated."⁴⁰ The norms of any tradition are regulative principles, not laws. The classical system is less like the Ten Commandments and more like a restaurant menu.

Flexibility within limits is most evident at the level of visual style. According to one convention of classical filmmaking, extensive passages of time can be condensed through a "montage sequence," a series of images that stands for a whole process—crossing the Atlantic, making a suit of armor, spending wonderful days with a lover. The montage sequence originated at the end of the silent era, and it typically linked its brief, typical images with dissolves. The technique was elaborated more fully in the sound era; not only was music added, but the invention of the optical printer allowed fancier transitions, such as elaborate wipes. So important did the montage sequence become that the studios employed montage specialists, the most famous of whom, Slavko Vorkapich, brought an avant-garde sensibility to portraying stock market crashes, the arrival of world war, or a hero's public humiliation. By the 1960s most filmmakers had dropped the fancy transitions in favor of simple cuts, but because the montage sequence was easily understood as a narrative summary, it could also anchor high-tech innovations, as in recent computer-generated imagery (CGI) montages.

It's not surprising that narrative functions tend to tame visual devices.



An early montage summarizing a frenzied nightclub party in *So This Is Paris* (1926).



Thanks to the optical printer, elaborate wipe effects could present a couple separated by a rival (*Maytime*, 1937).



One of Slavko Vorkapich's elaborate montages for *Meet John Doe* (1941); here the hero is spurned by the citizenry.



A CGI version of conventional montage design (*Spider-Man*, 2002).

We grasp the flashy wipe as an ellipsis because we already understand that a montage sequence summarizes a stretch of time. Stylistic devices of all sorts depend on our following this or that bit of story. We know that characters in conversation tend to look at each other, so we construe cuts from one face to another as reaffirming that situation. We recognize flashback sequences because we know that stories, in film or literature or on stage or on a comic book page, can shuffle events out of order. And we understand stories in general because they are a heightening and focusing of skills we bring to understanding everyday social life—connecting means to ends, ascribing intentions and emotions to others, seeing the present as stemming from the past.⁴¹ To study classical narrative forms is to examine how we make sense of story information. So when I talk of structure or style,

I'm also talking of how viewers turn dramatic and visual patterns into an intelligible story.

A complete account of Hollywood's creative options, then, should recognize both novel storytelling devices and the well-proven narrative purposes they serve. To those who think that the blockbuster era introduced a mindless uniformity, I want to suggest that American cinema continues to host innovative narrative strategies. To those who think that the tradition has collapsed, I'll try to show that the principles of that system remain firmly in force—sometimes refined and reweighted, but not rejected.

Allusionism and knowingness take on a new significance from this angle, and to see why, let us consider a historical parallel. Early-sixteenth-century Italian painters faced a problem. All believed that art progressed, but the titanic "classical" artists, Raphael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, seemed to have conquered most realms of expression. What was left for a young artist to do? "Art had been developed to such a point," writes art historian E. H. Gombrich, "that artists were inevitably conscious of the choice of methods before them."⁴² They accordingly sought out new niches. A painter might present esoteric images, or express movement in a virtuosic way, or contrive unexpected visual effects as the mannerists did, or create a tactile naturalism akin to that seen in Dutch still lifes.⁴³ The strivings of post-Renaissance painters help us to understand changes in American film craft. Assuming that artists compete not only with their contemporaries but also with their predecessors, we can see many developments in post-1960 Hollywood as efforts to respond to the powerful legacy of studio-era cinema. Aware of the tradition, filmmakers could extend it, refine its premises, explore its underutilized resources, apply it to new subjects and themes, even pay homage to its outstanding achievements—all without abandoning its fundamental commitments. This hypothesis explains why Hollywood storytelling ranges from relatively conservative efforts to quite bold experiments.⁴⁴ In both the following essays I examine this as a likely explanation for many artistic impulses at work in the period. What some call "postclassical" filmmaking need not be anticlassical filmmaking.

In the first essay I try to tease out these concerns by showing how time-honored principles of plot construction and narration have been actualized in a range of ways. Neither tentpoles nor programmers nor prestige items are exempt from classical storytelling strategies. Outstanding successes like *The Godfather*, *Jaws*, *The Lion King*, and *Spider-Man* are profoundly "classical," and both the action extravaganza and the throwaway comedy will rely on genre traditions. Some films revitalize classical principles in imaginative ways; my chief example of this is *Jerry Maguire*. Further along the

spectrum are edgier experiments, but these demand that the filmmaker judiciously balance novelty with familiarity. If your story will be recounted backward, as in *Memento*, how do you keep the audience from getting confused? If you want to take your audience into the world of a schizophrenic, as in *A Beautiful Mind*, how do you distinguish between hallucination and reality? The traditions of Hollywood storytelling, particularly the redundancy built into the system, can make innovation accessible to audiences.

In the second essay I examine visual style, a realm of cinematic expression with its own aims and resources. As in the “baroque” 1940s and the early wide-screen-and-color era, the extremes of today’s style are resolutely showy. Many movies flaunt fast cutting, hyperkinetic camerawork, and swaths of details and “atmosphere.” Despite this swaggering technique, I argue that the palette is not quite as rich as it once was. Although the last forty years have opened up fresh possibilities for narrative construction, they’ve also made certain stylistic options quite unfashionable. This trend suggests that stylistic change in film, as in other arts, is not a simple accumulation of options, an expanding range of choice.

Most books analyzing contemporary Hollywood focus on changing subjects and themes, such as the representation of gender, ethnic groups, or cultural attitudes. The results are typically exercises in interpretation, taking films as “texts” to be deciphered. By contrast, this book emphasizes the craft of storytelling. In the spirit of reverse engineering, I want to tease apart the finished films and see what strategies of plot and visual style govern their design. We still lack knowledge of how Hollywood’s “ever-vigorous tradition” tells stories in a distinctive way, so my main goal is to expose some central constructional principles of contemporary moviemaking. When we’ve grasped those principles, we will be in a better position to track both local and long-term changes in the ways movies work.

A secondary aim of these essays, needless to say, is to shift the burden of proof to those who believe that the megapicture ushered in a new narrative regimen. I argue that crucial practices of storytelling persisted, despite the demise of the studio system, the emergence of conglomerate control, and new methods of marketing and distribution. Whether music videos and Happy Meals have banished coherent storytelling is not a foregone conclusion but an empirical question. We have to look and see.

Two final points. First, my Hollywood covers a lot of ground. I discuss many independent films, principally because most of them are scripted, shot, and cut according to classical principles. Nowadays many off-Hollywood titles are distributed by the major companies through their boutique divisions or

larger-scale subsidiaries like New Line. By seeking unusual movies with profit potential, these Indiewood companies cultivate niche audiences and scout talent for studio projects.⁴⁵ For similar reasons I include British and Canadian films that subscribe to classical premises, that find U.S. theatrical distribution, and whose directors are apt to be snapped up for the next comic-book franchise or Oscar contender.

Finally, there's the matter of quality. Although I spend some time on outstanding accomplishments, on the whole I draw my examples from movies that exemplify common strategies of plotting, narration, and visual style. I don't mean to suggest that these films are all excellent, or even good. Most are just ordinary. Too many times, after setting down words in defense of this tradition, I would immediately see a movie that left me feeling dumber than when I had started. Then I had to remind myself that we judge any tradition by its best achievements. Norms help unambitious filmmakers attain competence, but they challenge gifted ones to excel. By understanding these norms we can better appreciate skill, daring, and emotional power on those rare occasions when we meet them.