

A close encounter with *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

Notes on narrative aspects of the New Hollywood blockbuster

Warren Buckland

Discussing the rise of the blockbuster in the New Hollywood, Thomas Schatz writes that the

mainstream hits are where stars, genres, and cinematic innovations invariably are established, where the 'grammar' of cinema is most likely to be refined, and where the essential qualities of the medium – its popular and commercial character – are most evident. These blockbuster hits are, for better or worse, what the New Hollywood is about, and thus are the necessary starting point for any analysis of contemporary American cinema.¹

Because popularity is commonly equated with escapism and triviality, blockbusters have either been shunned or dismissed by most academic film scholars as calculated exercises in profit-making. This is in contrast to the work of an auteur like Orson Welles, who receives an enormous amount of critical attention but whose films were commercial failures. However, those who dismiss blockbusters as exercises in profit-making fail to understand the New Hollywood's mode of production. Rather than the assembly-line production of the Old Hollywood, where stars, directors and technicians were tied to long-term contracts, in the New Hollywood talent is hired on a film-by-film basis. As a result, power has shifted to the deal-makers (the agents), who can attract and package talent around individual projects and films. The shift from assembly-line production to deal-making has had another effect: more and more money goes into the making of fewer and fewer films. Consequently, the films that are produced need to make enormous amounts of money in order to recoup their costs.²

So, expensive blockbusters are central to the output of modern Hollywood. But what, aside from costs, are their dominant characteristics? How are they able to attract, engage and entertain millions of people? One dominant characteristic of the blockbuster is its mode of address. As Timothy Corrigan has pointed out, the blockbuster, in contrast to the small-scale independent feature, is aimed at an

undifferentiated popular audience rather than at any particular sector of the viewing population.³ It addresses this audience by means of a mix of genres – often combining action-adventure with comedy, drama, romance, science-fiction and the like – and by means of a remodelling of character and plot. Many critics argue that, in comparison with Old Hollywood, New Hollywood films are not structured in terms of a psychologically motivated cause-effect narrative logic, but in terms of loosely linked, self-sustaining action sequences often built around spectacular stunts, stars and special effects. Complex character traits and character development, they argue, have been replaced by one-dimensional stereotypes, and plot-lines are now devised almost solely to link one action sequence to the next. Narrative complexity is sacrificed on the altar of spectacle. Narration is geared solely to the effective presentation of expensive effects.

In my view, this argument has been overstated, and my aim in the rest of this chapter is to reverse its emphasis by focusing on aspects of narrative and narration in a seminal early modern blockbuster, Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). As we shall see, even where the argument carries some weight, as in its description of the blockbuster in terms of a chain of relatively self-contained sequences and scenes, it is unable – or unwilling – to recognize the aesthetic possibilities of what is in effect an episodic narrative form, just as it is unable or unwilling to recognize its provenance in Old – or classical – Hollywood forms. Faced with what is in my view an unhelpful and hostile evaluative stance, it is best in my opinion to suspend aesthetic judgements, and to adopt an analytical and descriptive approach to these films. The foundations of such an approach are to be found in what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have dubbed 'historical poetics'. Historical poetics concerns itself with the analysis of those principles, norms and conventions dominant at any one point in time and their role in the construction of individual works. More formally, following the terminology of R. S. Crane, Bordwell has divided historical poetics into the following three domains:⁴

- 1 precompositional factors (sources, influences, received forms);
- 2 compositional factors (normalized principles of composition);
- 3 postcompositional factors (the varying responses to a film, including its evaluation and theorization).

For my purposes here, I shall only concentrate on the second domain. 'At this moment', writes Bordwell, 'I believe that the most promising avenues for poetic analysis are those opening onto compositional processes of form and style.'⁵ The poetician begins from all the standardized compositional norms available at a given historical moment and analyses the actual choices made by filmmakers, through a close analysis of individual films. It thus helps to pinpoint the features and systems unique to a work, as well as those it shares with others.⁶

In an article in *Approaches to Popular Film*, Henry Jenkins makes the case for this approach and suggests its relevance to New Hollywood films. He points out that historical poetics is one of the few approaches to take 'popular cinema seriously as an aesthetic practice', and he goes on to suggest that 'To map the aesthetics of an otherwise neglected form . . . constitutes a political act, helping to question the naturalness of the aesthetic norms separating high and low culture (and with them, the social distinctions they express and repress)'.⁷ Jenkins then notes that the deal-making system in which contemporary directors work, being contracted on a film-by-film basis, places emphasis on the director's particular treatment of theme and style – that is, on the poetics of their work:

By treating film-makers as independent contractors, the new production system places particular emphasis on the development of an idiosyncratic style which helps to increase the market value of individual directors rather than treating them as interchangeable parts. Directors such as Steven Spielberg, David Lynch, Brian DePalma and David Cronenberg develop distinctive ways of structuring narratives, moving their camera, or cutting scenes which become known to film-goers and studio executives alike.⁸

New Hollywood directors develop their own recognizable style because it increases their market value. So an emphasis on the poetics of the New Hollywood does not present itself as just one approach among many, but sets itself up at the approach that can explain the specificity of the New Hollywood film.⁹

In his essay 'History and timelessness in films and theory' Dudley Andrew attempts to explain the widespread appeal of classic films, such as Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945). He suggests it is hardly surprising that film scholars who attempt to explain the power of movies in general should concentrate on exemplary films, simply because the widespread appeal of such films illustrates what cinema in general is capable of achieving. Andrew begins by identifying the primary 'objects' of film theory: 'Both the immediate appeal of [a film] and the highly mediated systems that can be shown to determine it (structural, semiotic, psychoanalytic, etc.) are the direct objects of film theory'.¹⁰ Here I wish to borrow Andrew's distinction between the immediate and the mediate to analyse the immediate, widespread appeal of Spielberg's films by studying the highly mediated systems that determine them. This links with historical poetics because 'poetics' analyses those basic and fundamental norms of composition that confer a sense of 'timelessness' on a classic film, while the historical can help us emphasize the 'timeliness' of a film, rather than simply its timelessness.

Andrew notes a number of reasons for the popularity of *Les Enfants du Paradis*: its articulation of the universal human need for stories of loss as manifest in

melodrama, its explicit replaying of familiar, unavoidable and obsessive moral situations, and the spectator's primary identification with the narration as such and submission to the paternal authority of the storyteller.¹¹ But Andrew argues that it takes more than these timeless structures to explain the film's appeal and popularity – one must also consider what he calls its inventiveness, or response to its historical moment. Here, the film is seen, not merely as the manifestation of universal rules, but in terms of its individuality, including its response to its historical moment, in which style and composition respond to the historical questions posed in the culture in which the film is made. Andrew puts forward this notion of a film's inventiveness in opposition to essentialist and determinist theories of the cinema. Following the hermeneutic approach of Paul Ricoeur, Andrew looks at films as potential sources of new meanings rather than as mere vehicles of universal laws. Andrew writes that: 'Essentialism follows when theory aims to explain the power of cinema through such effectively timeless factors as technology, biology, psychology, logical structure, or language.'¹² By concentrating on the composition of single films, historical poetics can overcome this essentialism and go some way to explaining the popularity of individual films, particularly the blockbuster. It is in this spirit, and within this ambit of approaches and concerns, that the following notes on *Raiders* have been assembled.

Textual analysis with a vengeance

For directors of New Hollywood films, a variety of compositional norms exists for exploitation. These include: the selective quotation of Old Hollywood films, the visual rhetoric of comic books, the norms of television aesthetics, and the compositional norms of European art film and the avant garde. One aim of a historical poetics is to determine what norms dominate the composition of each particular film. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, one can find references to Old Hollywood films. Indeed, Omar Calabrese argues that 350 references to other films can be detected in *Raiders*.¹³ As I point out below (see p. 171–2), *Raiders* is structured according to the serial format of the B-movie adventure stories, and we can also detect the influence of comic books, particularly in the storyboarded action sequences. Finally, elements of a television aesthetics are present (and it is important to remember that Spielberg worked in television from 1969–72).

Jerzy Toeplitz has argued that 'characteristically the directors who have come to film from television, regard montage as a much more important part of their skills than did the filmmakers of the 1930s and 1940s. . . . They seem closer to the tradition of the silent screen'.¹⁴ Richard Maltby has suggested why editing and montage are fundamental to TV aesthetics.¹⁵ He argues that, due to the small size of its screen and its lack of resolution, television has little use for complex, deep

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focus shots. Instead, it is dominated by close-ups (showing single objects in isolation), rapid cutting (since the close-up requires less time for its content to be exhausted), a highly mobile camera (for the same reason as rapid cutting), and a shallow, lateral space, partly created by the use of telephoto lenses.

For many critics, the consequence of television's aesthetics is that it foregrounds or overemphasizes action and divorces style and technique from narrative. Mark Crispin Miller has graphically illustrated the result of Hollywood's adoption of television aesthetics (as found in TV adverts and music videos in particular): 'Each shot [in contemporary Hollywood films] presents a content closed and unified, like a fist, and makes the point right in your face: big gun, big car, nice ass, full moon, a chase (great shoes!), big crash (blood, glass), a lobby (doorman), sarcasm, drinks, a tonguey, pugilistic kiss (nice sheets!), and so on.'¹⁶ For Maltby, Miller and others, this aesthetic is created through an overemphasis on techniques such as saturated colours, strong backlighting, rapid editing or constant camera mobility, sound effects and special effects that directly assault the spectator's senses and nervous system. The result, according to these critics, is that style in the New Hollywood film becomes self-sufficient and autonomous, rather than being subordinated to a film's themes and narrative.

There are scenes in *Raiders* which would seem to support such an argument. The fight which ensues when Jones returns to Marion's bar provides an example of an action sequence that is structured according to television and comic book aesthetics.¹⁷ The sequence lasts two minutes forty-four seconds, and consists of ninety shots. This makes for an average shot length of (or a cut every) 1.8 seconds. Moreover, one-third of the shots are close-ups (including medium close-ups). Although they don't appear to have been shot with a telephoto lens, many of the close-ups have a very simple, graphic composition and shallow space, since the characters are filmed against simple backgrounds such as walls. Moreover, there is no extensive use of camera movement, since the frenetic effect of the scene is created by the rapid cutting and by movement within the image. The overall effect of these stylistic choices is indeed to foreground the action and assault the senses and nervous system of the spectator.

But this is not, as it were, the end of the story as regards sequences such as these or the film as a whole. To begin with, it is worth noting that Spielberg himself has emphasized the importance of narrative, not least in terms of its commercial appeal. 'You need good story-telling to offset the amount of ... spectacle the audiences demand before they'll leave their television sets. And I think people will leave their television sets for a good story before anything else. Before fire and skyscrapers and floods, plane crashes, laser fire and spaceships, they want good stories.'¹⁸ In addition, Peter Biskind has argued that both Spielberg and Lucas initially set out to re-establish traditional - causal and linear - narrative values in the New Hollywood context in which they found themselves.

TV - close-up, shallow space, rapid cutting, mobile camera, telephoto lenses, saturated colours, strong backlighting, rapid editing, constant camera mobility, sound effects, special effects, assault the senses and nervous system, self-sufficient and autonomous, rather than being subordinated to a film's themes and narrative, scenes in Raiders, fight, action sequence, structured according to television and comic book aesthetics, two minutes forty-four seconds, ninety shots, average shot length of 1.8 seconds, one-third of the shots are close-ups, very simple, graphic composition and shallow space, characters are filmed against simple backgrounds such as walls, no extensive use of camera movement, frenetic effect of the scene, overall effect of these stylistic choices is indeed to foreground the action and assault the senses and nervous system of the spectator, But this is not, as it were, the end of the story as regards sequences such as these or the film as a whole, Spielberg himself has emphasized the importance of narrative, not least in terms of its commercial appeal, 'You need good story-telling to offset the amount of ... spectacle the audiences demand before they'll leave their television sets. And I think people will leave their television sets for a good story before anything else. Before fire and skyscrapers and floods, plane crashes, laser fire and spaceships, they want good stories.', In addition, Peter Biskind has argued that both Spielberg and Lucas initially set out to re-establish traditional - causal and linear - narrative values in the New Hollywood context in which they found themselves.

Biskind himself goes on to suggest that their attempts backfired, because they each tended to over-emphasize the plastic, formal and sensual qualities of sound and image. The 'attempt to restore traditional narration had an unintended effect - the creation of spectacle that annihilated story. The attempt to escape television by creating outsized spectacle backfired, and led to television's presentational aesthetic.'¹⁹ Whatever the merits of Biskind's argument, it is clear that Spielberg was - and is - committed to narrative. It is also clear that *Raiders* itself tells a story, a story which is structured according to the principles of the serial format that operated in B-movie adventure films in the 1930s and 1940s - a style or mode of storytelling suppressed or dismissed as marginal in most accounts of 'classical' Hollywood narrative.²⁰ It can thus be divided into six distinct episodes, each of which is relatively self-contained, and each of which ends in a series of rapid dramatic actions and/or in an unresolved cliff-hanging sequence:

- 1 The first episode depicts Indiana Jones' (Harrison Ford) adventures in the South American jungle. He successfully retrieves a golden idol from a cave, only to have it taken away by Belloq (Paul Freeman). Belloq tries to kill Jones, but Jones escapes.
- 2 In the second episode we see the reverse side of Jones' character as he teaches a class of students. He is now presented as an eccentric professor. In a long expositional scene he explains the significance of the Ark of the Covenant to two government representatives. Jones is then asked to retrieve the ark before the Nazis get hold of it. This involves a detour to Nepal and a visit to Jones' former partner, Marion (Karen Allen), who possesses the headpiece to the staff of Ra that helps indicate where the ark is located. But the Nazis follow Jones to Nepal, burn down Marion's bar, and try to kill both Marion and Jones. Jones and Marion escape, and Marion decides to join Jones on his quest.
- 3 In Cairo, Jones and Marion are again pursued by the Nazis. Marion is kidnapped and appears to die in an explosion. Jones has the headpiece interpreted, and only just escapes being poisoned.
- 4 Jones locates the ark and discovers that Marion is alive but being held by Belloq. In an act of symbolic exchange, Belloq and the Nazis steal the ark from Jones, but in return give him Marion. Both Marion and Jones are then sealed inside a tomb.
- 5 Jones and Marion escape from their incarceration, blow up a plane, and retrieve the ark after a long struggle. Marion and Jones sail away with the ark, only to be stopped by a Nazi submarine. The Nazis take Marion and the ark, but Jones succeeds in escaping.
- 6 On a remote island, Belloq opens the ark to devastating consequences: all who witness its contents are killed. Only Jones and Marion, who close their

serial format, B-movie adventure films, 1930s and 1940s, suppressed or dismissed as marginal, 'classical' Hollywood narrative, six distinct episodes, relatively self-contained, rapid dramatic actions, cliff-hanging sequence, Belloq - Paul Freeman, golden idol, South American jungle, South American, Indiana Jones, Harrison Ford, retrieves, cave, Belloq, Paul Freeman, tries to kill Jones, Jones escapes, reverse side of Jones' character, eccentric professor, long expositional scene, significance of the Ark of the Covenant, two government representatives, retrieve the ark, Nazis get hold of it, detour to Nepal, visit to Jones' former partner, Marion (Karen Allen), headpiece to the staff of Ra, Nazis follow Jones to Nepal, burn down Marion's bar, try to kill both Marion and Jones, Jones and Marion escape, Marion decides to join Jones on his quest, Cairo, Jones and Marion are again pursued by the Nazis, Marion is kidnapped, appears to die in an explosion, Jones has the headpiece interpreted, only just escapes being poisoned, Jones locates the ark, discovers that Marion is alive but being held by Belloq, act of symbolic exchange, Belloq and the Nazis steal the ark from Jones, in return give him Marion, both Marion and Jones are then sealed inside a tomb, Jones and Marion escape from their incarceration, blow up a plane, retrieve the ark after a long struggle, Marion and Jones sail away with the ark, only to be stopped by a Nazi submarine, Nazis take Marion and the ark, but Jones succeeds in escaping, On a remote island, Belloq opens the ark to devastating consequences: all who witness its contents are killed, Only Jones and Marion, who close their

eyes, are spared. In an epilogue, the American government takes possession of the ark, and Jones and Marion mark their status as a couple.

Handwritten notes in the left margin: 'As is the case in most serial narratives...', 'The off-screen presence is an external norm...', 'During the course of this sequence, Jones and Marion have an argument, and...'

As is the case in most serial narratives, causal motivation appears at times to be suspended: it is unclear, for instance, precisely how Jones escapes from the Nazi submarine at the end of episode 5. However, a single plot-line linked to the search for the ark of the covenant, and an antagonistic relationship between the hero, Jones, and the villain, Belloq, link each of these sequences together. Moreover, in contrast to the casual nature with which causal motivation is sometimes treated, and as is common in Spielberg's films, an unseen or off-screen presence or agent is used systematically to generate suspense and surprise at the level of each individual sequence. As these sequences accumulate, they generate an overarching pattern that reaches its resolution in episode 6. The point to make here is that this pattern transcends individual episodes, and is dependent for its very existence on the presence of a feature-length story. It fits very well with Tom Gunning's suggestion that we think of narrative as a 'process of integration' in which smaller units, like episodes and scenes, are absorbed into, and generate, larger patterns of precisely this kind.²¹

The off-screen presence is an external norm to the extent that it dominates a large number of contemporary films, and is consistently used to structure Spielberg's films. For example, in *Duel* (1971), *Jaws* (1975) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), the off-screen presence remains off-screen or at least unseen for most or all of the film. Similarly, in *Hook* (1991), during the kidnapping of Peter's children from Wendy's house, Hook remains a menacing off-screen presence throughout the whole of the scene. In *Raiders*, this off-screen presence has a fluctuating identity. The credit sequence shows Jones and his team searching for a cave in a South American jungle. Some of the shots in this sequence can be read as unattributed point-of-view shots, since the proximity of the foliage to the camera suggests that the camera may be representing the visual experience of an unseen agent. And the existence of an off-screen presence is confirmed when Jones later discovers a poisonous arrow. At this point in the film, restricted narration is employed: the provision of narrative information is filtered through Jones and his helpers; we find out what they find out. It is only when Jones leaves the cave with the idol that the off-screen presences - the Indians and Belloq - are shown on screen. In passing, we can note that an unidentified causal agent appears to be at work in the cave, for no natural motivation is provided for the sudden appearance of the rolling boulder. Thus emphasis is placed in various ways on off-screen agents and off-screen space. But the agents or presences themselves are not necessarily fixed. And this is highlighted during the sequence at Marion's bar, where at one point Jones himself becomes an off-screen agent.

During the course of this sequence, Jones and Marion have an argument, and

Jones leaves - or appears to leave - the bar. As he walks away, he leaves the camera's field of vision, while the camera itself remains in the bar in order to show us what happens next. We are thus led to believe that Jones has left, and that the narration itself is omniscient - it has shown Jones' departure and is about to show us the next piece of narrative action. As Marion closes the bar, Toht (Wolf Kahler), who has followed Jones to Nepal, arrives and threatens her when she refuses to relinquish the headpiece. However, at the moment at which he is about to scar her with a red hot poker, we hear Jones' whip as it knocks the poker to the floor. We are thus suddenly and unexpectedly informed of his presence. He is now revealed to have been not absent but present off-screen, thus taking his place alongside others - like Toht himself - who have occupied a position that by now has become both marked and significant.

Jones' sudden reappearance is pleasurable to the spectator, not simply because of the narrative events (he saves Marion), but also because of the structure of narration employed. In effect, the film sets up in the spectator the belief that the narration is omniscient over Jones, but then negates this belief by showing that Jones knows as much as the spectators - only the spectators didn't realize this. Jones' sudden reappearance makes the spectator retrospectively reinterpret the scene, negating its previously omniscient nature. Unknown to the spectator, the film has negated the hierarchy of knowledge it initially set up: the spectator assumes that he has been privileged by the narration and thus knows more than Jones does, whereas in fact Jones knows as much as the spectator.

During the course of this scene, there are in fact one or two ambiguous textual clues suggesting Jones' continuing presence - off-screen - in the bar. As he leaves, Marion says 'See you tomorrow, Indiana.' But he pauses at the exit. And his backward glance and a second pause suggest that perhaps he does not intend to go anywhere. In addition, there are two possible unattributed point-of-view shots a little later on, shots which suggest that Jones - or some other character - may be hiding behind a pillar. Like similar shots in the opening sequence, these shots remain unattributed and hence ambiguous. In so far as they can be attributed to Jones, they can be seen as providing motivation for Jones' later appearance.²² But they figure principally in the patterns of suggestion of an off-screen presence established early on in the film. And they figure in the condensation and combination of the norms and figures of serial narration that occur during the course of the sequence - and the film - as a whole, as Marion is threatened then rescued at the last possible moment, as an action sequence leads to the (temporary) defeat of the villains, as Marion's bar is burned down in spectacular fashion, as the central couple are united, divided, then united again, as Jones himself appears, disappears and reappears to thwart the villains and to rescue the heroine, and as two events central to portions of the story that follow are clearly established: Toht's hand is branded by the headpiece; and Marion joins Jones on his quest for the ark. It will

Handwritten notes in the right margin: 'Jones leaves - or appears to leave - the bar...', 'The film sets up in the spectator the belief that the narration is omniscient over Jones...', 'Jones knows as much as the spectators - only the spectators didn't realize this...'

be apparent, then, that in spite of – or rather in addition to – the spectacular rendering of the fight, the scene is replete with narrative interest and significance.

I shall demonstrate the use in *Raiders of the figure or device of an off-screen presence in one more shot, a shot which occurs near the beginning of the scene in which Jones has the headpiece interpreted.* Jones is shown peering out of a lattice doorway. He then leaves the doorway and exits into off-screen space. As he leaves, an Arab who has been following Jones enters the doorway and poisons some dates. Only then do we cut to Jones, providing us with a second shot of the film's principal protagonist, a shot we might have expected earlier on, immediately after he leaves the doorway, immediately prior to the entry of the poisoner, and hence immediately prior to the shift in significance and status of the shot of the doorway itself. This shot of Jones, the doorway and the poisoner is ambiguous from a narratological point of view. First, we see Jones stare out of the doorway. The shot appears to be objective, and it appears to be focused on Jones. However, as he leaves the frame the camera remains static; it has disengaged itself from Jones and is now focused on the doorway. Is it now an unattributed point-of-view shot? Does it now suggest an off-screen presence? Once Jones has left, the poisoner enters the frame. The camera now focuses on him as he engages in a significant piece of narrative action, the poisoning of the dates. The shot thus appears to centre on Jones but in retrospect it actually – or finally – centres on the Arab. In addition it initially appears insignificant, a linking or transitional shot of some kind, but it actually serves to provide us with important narrative information, information which of course isn't shared by Jones himself. Again, we can argue that this process of reinterpretation creates filmic pleasure. After the dates have been poisoned, only then do we cut to Jones, the shot we 'expected' as soon as he exited screen space. The moment of omniscient narration, showing us the Arab poisoning the dates, has therefore 'interrupted' the action, but for good reason. It also serves to generate suspense. What will happen now? Will Jones find out in time? As is typical of Spielberg, he only finds out at the last possible moment. As is also typical, the combination of purposes and functions served by what initially appears to be a single, simple shot seems clearly designed to engage the spectator in the narrative in as many different ways as is possible.

The fluctuations in audience knowledge that occur during the course of these sequences, combined with the generic figures and devices of serial adventure and the patterns of off-screen (and on-screen) presence, point to the need to consider narrative and narration, as well as spectacle, as sources of pleasure and appeal in a film like *Raiders*. They also suggest the need for close formal analysis. These elements are played, replayed and varied from scene to scene, sequence to sequence, episode to episode. In addition to the play with off-screen presences, two motifs in particular stand out: the last-minute rescue (or the last-second rescue), and an escape scenario, in which the hero has to escape from a seemingly

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impossible situation.²³ They culminate – in typically condensed form – in the scene in which the ark is finally opened. This is a scene of spectacle and special effects, but it is also a scene which combines suspense with surprise, and in which the ultimate off-screen presence is unleashed on the Nazis, serving both to vanquish the villains and to rescue heroine and hero alike. It thus highlights the extent to which narrative condensation and narrative economy – as well as spectacle and special effects – are hallmarks of this particular New Hollywood blockbuster, and perhaps constitute one of the features – or norms – of this particular type of New Hollywood film.

Left unanalysed, it would be easy to account for the popularity of a film like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* by referring to the presence of Spielberg's creative and expressive personality, or by simply referring to the annihilation of narrative in favour of special effects and action sequences. By contrast, poetics begins from the compositional structure of a film, the options available to the filmmaker and the actual choices s/he makes, including the specific way s/he combines compositional devices. This emphasis only marks the beginning of a comprehensive analysis of Spielberg's films: it would be foolish, of course, to suggest that they are only about spatial relationships. The next stage of analysis is to consider the relationship between the composition of *Raiders* and its themes, which would involve discussing it as 'Reaganite entertainment', and to specify and evaluate its inventiveness (in Andrew's sense of the term). And in addition to further work on narrative, Spielberg's films and action-adventure blockbusters in general would reward further research on the roles of sound and music (touched on elsewhere in this book by K.J. Donnelly and Gianluca Sergi: see chapters 9 and 10), on the constituents of spectacle, on the positive – as well as negative – influence of television, and on the impact of comic books on visual design. If everything else in this chapter has fallen on deaf ears, I hope at least to have shown that Spielberg's popular blockbusters have their own complex structure, and that their popularity does not preclude them from being considered as serious objects worthy of study. It is perhaps time to stop condemning the New Hollywood blockbuster and to start, instead, to understand it.

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 - Spielberg's creative and expressive personality
 - annihilation of narrative
 - special effects and action sequences
 - poetics begins from the compositional structure
 - options available to the filmmaker
 - actual choices s/he makes
 - specific way s/he combines compositional devices
 - Spielberg's films
 - relationship between the composition of Raiders and its themes
 - Reaganite entertainment
 - specify and evaluate its inventiveness
 - further work on narrative
 - Spielberg's films and action-adventure blockbusters in general

Notes

- 1 Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 10–11.
- 2 For an excellent account of the business strategies in the New Hollywood, see Mark Litwak, *Reel Power: The Struggle for Influence and Success in the New Hollywood* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1994).
- 3 Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls, Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 21–4.

Handwritten notes in bottom right corner:
 - Persistence of a positive

- 4 David Bordwell, 'Historical poetics of cinema', in R. Barton Palmer (ed.), *The Cinematic Text* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), p. 376. See also Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armour, Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
- 5 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 270-1.
- 6 Just as Christian Metz argued in his monumental book *Language and Cinema*, trans. Donna Jean Umika-Sebeok (Mouton: The Hague, 1974) that filmic specificity is defined in terms of a specific combination of codes, rather than in terms of a single specific code, so here I shall argue that the popularity of Spielberg's films can be defined in terms of a specific combination of compositional norms, rather than in terms of one single specific compositional norm. So it is not sufficient merely to list the compositional norms Spielberg uses, but to outline the specific way they are combined and used in each film.
- 7 Henry Jenkins, 'Historical poetics', in Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (eds), *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 111.
- 8 Jenkins, 'Historical poetics', p. 115.
- 9 Note that this is not a return to the auteurism of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Movie* or Andrew Sarris, since the individuality of films is located, not in the testimony of a unique personal vision, but in a set of compositional norms from which a director can transgress, conform to, or develop in unforeseen ways. The specificity of a director's work can then be characterized according to the choices of both external and internal norms available to directors to adopt and manipulate within a particular historical moment and historical context.
- 10 Dudley Andrew, 'History and timelessness in films and theory', in David E. Klemm and William Schweiker (eds), *Meaning in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricoeur* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 117.
- 11 Andrew, 'History and timelessness in films and theory', pp. 117-20.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 13 Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times*, trans. Charles Lambert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 173.
- 14 Jerzy Toeplitz, *Hollywood and After: The Changing Face of Movies in America*, trans. Boleslaw Sulik (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1975), p. 92.
- 15 See Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* (Metuchen, NJ and London: Scarecrow Press, 1983), Chapter 10.
- 16 Mark Crispin Miller, 'Advertising: end of story', in Mark Crispin Miller (ed.), *Seeing Through Movies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 205.
- 17 The influence of comic books is partly determined by Spielberg's extensive use of storyboards. The final shooting script is broken down into images that represent the composition of a particular shot. Each image on the storyboard usually contains camera angles, direction, camera movement and character movement.
- 18 Steven Spielberg, quoted in Peter Biskind, 'Blockbuster: the last crusade', in Mark Crispin Miller (ed.), *Seeing Through Movies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), pp. 145-6.
- 19 Biskind, 'Blockbuster', p. 147.
- 20 Serials are only mentioned in passing in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985). They tend to be viewed as sites in the 1910s of a narrative

- aesthetic discarded ^{since} once the feature film and 'well-made' narrative values came to the fore. Their presence as an integral component in Hollywood's output in the 1920s, the 1930s and the 1940s is referred to only once, on p. 144.
- 21 Tom Gunning, 'Response to "Pie and Chase"', in Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (eds), *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 121.
- 22 These shots remain ambiguous because they are unattributed to any character. However, it is not the task of a historical poetics to resolve these ambiguities, but to determine what aesthetic purpose they serve. As mentioned above, these two shots are textual clues that retrospectively seem to attest to the off-screen presence of Jones in the bar. On first viewing, it may appear that the film is constructing Jones as a superhero, or a supernatural causal agent, who simply knows everything, and can turn up at the right place at the right time. But these two unattributed point-of-view shots construct Jones as a conventional, human causal agent. All of this suggests that Jones' last-minute return to the bar is causally motivated, and foreshadowed in the textual structure of the film. Pleasure is generated by these ambiguous shots and by the fact that Jones returns at the last possible moment.
- 23 Jones not only rescues Marion at the last possible moment in the bar, but also rescues her from a plane seconds before it blows up. But Jones is also saved at the last possible moment on two occasions - when Marion shoots a Nazi in her bar, and when Sallah's children surround him in a bar in Cairo, just as Arabs are about to shoot him. Moreover, many scenes end on highly orchestrated and violent actions consisting of Jones and Marion escaping from seemingly impossible situations.