

## 2 Classical/post-classical narrative (*Die Hard*)

### Introduction

This chapter sets itself the task of defining what is at stake in making a distinction between so-called classical and post-classical Hollywood cinema. After setting out the currently available range of definitions for this distinction (economic-institutional, period-based and historiographic, stylistic, cultural-political, technological and demographic), the chapter will focus on the stylistic one, and examine the often heard but not always convincing opposition between narrative and spectacle as one of the key features dividing 'old' from 'new' Hollywood. In the course of clarifying these terms, it will be necessary to recall some basic principles of cinematic story-telling. This we shall do by briefly outlining the premises and procedures of two types of narrative analysis that have dominated academic film studies: the Aristotelian, poetological one of the well-made (screen)play, and the structuralist one, originally derived from Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myths and Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folk tale, sometimes transformed into a diagrammatic representation known as A.J. Greimas' 'semiotic square'.

As to spectacle, we shall be asking whether it can or should be construed in opposition to narrative at all. Thus, we are not comparing the two approaches to narrative directly with recent theories of spectacle, as developed, for instance, by feminist film theory's gendering of the opposition of active male scopophilia/epistemophilia (narrative: 'sadism demands a story') and passive female self-display (spectacle: 'to-be-looked-at-ness'); by historians of early cinema (the 'cinema of attractions' vs the 'cinema of narrative integration'); by proponents of special-effects movies ('roller coaster rides'); or by theorists of the media event ('spectacle, ceremony, festival'). Instead, we shall proceed in a more inductive manner, developing some of the relevant terms out of the analysis of the blockbuster *Die Hard* (produced by Joel Silver, directed by John McTiernan, screenplay by J. Stuart/ S.E. de Souza, 1988, starring Bruce Willis, Bonnie Bedelia, and Alan Rickman).

Our working thesis will be that the film is both 'classical' and 'post-classical'. We shall argue that the difference depends at least as much on one's critical agenda as on the 'objective' formal or technological properties of the film. For instance, we shall be citing some of the original reviews of *Die Hard* which tend to agree that the film stresses spectacle and neglects plot, though they are ambivalent as to whether they welcome or regret this shift. These newspaper reviews will be contrasted with a more academic textual analysis that highlights features of *Die Hard* usually associated with classical rather than post-classical Hollywood, in order then to propose another reading that stresses elements that could be called post-classical, but now grounding the latter in a slightly different set of criteria from those underlying the opposition spectacle vs narrative and the claim that post-classical Hollywood invests in special effects *at the expense* of plot. The chapter will conclude by suggesting that among film scholars, too, the boundary between classical and post-classical cinema tends to shift according to the domain a critic chooses to privilege, so that a jagged rather than a clean line separates the two terms, leading some to question the usefulness of the term 'classical' altogether. In this way, the distinction made in Chapter 1 between analysis and interpretation, as a change of focus rather than of object (briefly, a change from perceiving difference 'out there' to seeing it generated 'in here'), will have been put to use, notably by offering several – classical and post-classical, formalist and culturalist – readings, without making them compete for pre-eminence or exclusivity. It also foreshadows our approach in the subsequent chapters, where the different textual analyses justify themselves not so much because of a natural fit between the method and the film itself, nor because we feel that certain products of contemporary Hollywood cinema finally deserve an analysis backed by a challenging or prestigious theory. The aim is rather to show how different assumptions (e.g. those underlying a cultural studies approach with a gender perspective, or those taking on psychoanalytic and post-structuralist perspectives) can bring out different facets of the film text and the film experience, without thereby invalidating more tightly focused formal or narratological readings.

We have chosen *Die Hard* for a number of reasons. As indicated, it had mixed reviews when it was first released, but was immensely successful at the box office and went on to become a classic of its genre. In fact, it can be taken as paradigmatic of the new action film whose emphasis is supposed to be on spectacle and special effects rather than on story-telling and narrative. *Die Hard* also re-launched its leading actor Bruce Willis as a megastar, after a career mostly in television. As we shall see, his action-hero persona is unusual in that it engages in unexpected ways with gender, class, and race issues. Among aficionados of the genre, *Die Hard* was praised for its unusual soundtrack, a feature often cited when discussing the use of innovative film

technology in post-classical Hollywood. Finally, it was popular enough to spawn several sequels (*Die Hard 2*, *Die Hard with a Vengeance*), each almost equally profitable for its producer–screenwriter–actor team, which suggests several layers of film industry self-reference, another feature of the post-classical mode.

In *Die Hard*, New York policeman John McClane (Bruce Willis) returns to Los Angeles on Christmas Eve, hoping to be reconciled with his wife, Holly (Bonnie Bedelia), now working as a senior executive for a Japanese multinational company. Straight from the airport, McClane joins her at the Nakatomi Christmas party, held at the Corporation's brand-new all-glass high-rise tower. Just as he and Holly are beginning to make up, a group of thirteen bank robber-terrorists, led by the formidable German Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman), burst in on the executive floor, demanding convertible bonds from the chairman, but eventually taking the entire staff as hostages. Having used the bathroom at the time of the attack, McClane is the only one who remains undetected, but he is trapped on some half-finished floors of the tower. A battle of wits and weaponry ensues between the high-tech terrorists and the barefooted cop-on-leave in his undershirt. With some help from a black LA policeman on the outside with whom he establishes radio contact and a buddy relation, McClane foils and eventually decimates the robbers/terrorists, killing their leader, freeing the hostages, and winning back his wife.

## 2.1. Theory: classical Hollywood cinema

The debate around the distinction between classical and post-classical Hollywood is often conducted polemically. The question is usually put as: is it still 'business as usual' in post-classical cinema, or do we need to change our vocabulary in order to 'do justice' to the movies made in Hollywood since the mid- to late 1970s? One faction (represented, for instance, by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson) argues that there is no need to change one's approach, insofar as even the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster is in many salient respects faithful to the stylistic and narratological principles that have informed mainstream cinema from the 1920s to the 1960s. Another faction (one might cite Thomas Schatz, Tim Corrigan, Scott Bukatman) would argue that what we need to explain is not the elements that have stayed the same, but what is different, in order to account for the major revival of the fortunes of Hollywood picture-making. For instance, if we make questions of studio ownership, the package deal, new marketing techniques and global distribution networks the key factors that have transformed Hollywood since the mid-1970s, then we can conclude that this 'new' Hollywood is defined by

its different spectator appeal and a shift in demographic profile to younger, more mobile and global audiences. If we focus on narrative, then we can still detect changes, though perhaps more gradual and contradictory: there is first the influence of the European art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, introducing a looser chain of cause and effect actions, a less purposive hero, with more open-ended story outcomes; and as if to counter these changes, there is a parallel development where Hollywood narrative began to return to archetypal myths and stereotypes, but now filtered through the genre formulas of an earlier era's television series.

Advocates of a 'post-classical' break would add that it is special effects, new sound design, and the bodily sensations of the theme park and roller coaster ride which most clearly typify the aesthetics of New Hollywood, and that horror, violent death and explicit sex have migrated from the B-movie (and pornography) margin to the mainstream centre. Together, these sensory stimuli and thematic preoccupations have changed the way films are designed and visualized, with the result that they are differently interpreted (or used) by audiences. 'Spectacle' in this context would connote that such movies are 'experienced' rather than watched, that they offer a fantasy space to 'inhabit', rather than opening a window onto reality. The emphasis on sense impact and emotional contact makes it easy to think that story-telling no longer mattered in the way it used to during the period of the so-called classical style. But what exactly is or was the classical style?

### 2.1.1. Classical Hollywood narrative: two possible models

When outlining some of the possible prototypes of the classical Hollywood narrative, two groups or families come to mind, both of them literary in inspiration: one is derived from classical drama and the novel (Aristotle's poetics, Russian formalism, Gérard Genette); the other from oral narratives such as myths, fairy tales, and the early (picaresque) novel (Lévi-Strauss, Propp, Bakhtin). In film studies, the first is associated with the canonical story structure as taught in screenwriters' manuals, and refined in David Bordwell's neo-formalist poetics (Bordwell 1985); the second either adapted Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1973) (e.g. Wollen 1982) or evolved via Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* (1972) (as modified by, for instance, Raymond Bellour or Fredric Jameson) a standard structuralist reading of classical Hollywood that was widely debated thanks to exemplary analyses, such as *Cahiers du Cinéma's* collective essay on John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln* (in Nichols 1976: 493-529); structuralist studies of certain genres (the Western, the gangster film), or Colin MacCabe's ideological reading of the 'classical realist text' in literature and film (1985; 1986); finally, some scholars derived a method for the analysis of (mainly non-Hollywood) films

from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the 'dialogical' or 'heteroglossic' text (e.g. Stam 1992). To these one could add the narratological model developed by Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, which will be laid out in more detail in Chapter 5.

Generally speaking, these models make a distinction between the macro-analytical level, which all narratives share, regardless of the medium and the material support (i.e. oral, written, film narratives, strip cartoons, allegorical painting), and the micro-analytical level, where one would be looking for the medium-specific stylistic devices and formal elements most pertinent to the analysis – in this case – of the cinematic discourse (the scale of the shot, camera movement and camera perspective, composition of the image, the transitions from shot to shot, the possible relations between sound and image).

For the macro-analysis, Lévi-Strauss has provided some of the more familiar categories, such as the notion of binary pairs as the building blocks of most known narratives. His method proved influential not because it represents some 'truth' about the world or even about the human mind, but because his key text in this respect, the 'structural study of myth' (1972: 206–31), adheres to a rigorous formalism and highlights central theoretical concerns of all narrative analysis, such as the question of segmentation, categorization, and classification, with (perceptible) 'difference' as the minimal condition for the production of meaning. Lévi-Strauss also drew some inferences as to the socio-cultural function of narratives: how narratives construct a culture's idea of nature and the supernatural, how they articulate kinship relations (and thus address the question of sexual difference), how they deal with contradictions (what logical categories are involved in narratives), and finally, how important they are for symbolizing a society's economic relations (their implicit systems of exchange and equivalence). He also provided a handy soundbite for the overall relation of narratives to the non-narrative world of brute facts and the social conditions of existence: myths are, he says 'the imaginary resolution of real contradictions' and therefore help human beings make sense of their lives.

The Aristotelian model by comparison seems to stress overall unity (of time, place, and action), rather than segmentation. It also centres on characters as initiating agents rather than on interpersonal transactions (functions) as the core elements of a narrative. But this type of analysis still distinguishes discrete units, such as act division (as in Greek tragedy, or the 'well-made' boulevard play), while also specifying the relation between acts (according to Aristotle, the 'complication' is followed by the 'reversal of fortune' which leads to the 'unravelling', coming after the 'moment of recognition'). Aristotle also noted that dramatic narratives are generally centred on a single protagonist. Accordingly, commentators agree that much of classical Hollywood narrative conforms to such a pattern:

What is narrative ('a sequence of action ordered in time and space'), and what is Hollywood narrative? The scriptwriters' manuals borrow their models from drama, the Aristotelian division, or from the short story. Three or four act division, development of character, transformation, the initial situation, the complication, the resolution, the consequences of the resolution.

(Hauge 1988: 83)

This contrasts with the Russian formalist model, which either follows Vladimir Propp, who simply chained together a series of narrative functions, or takes its lead from Victor Shklovsky and distinguishes between the underlying narrative material (story: the time-space continuum) and its compositional arrangement (plot: the discontinuous distribution of information). Shklovsky's distinction of *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot) has been reworked by David Bordwell, in his influential books *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (co-authored with Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, 1985) and *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), where he theorizes the macro-structures and micro-levels of the canonical story-telling format by a blend of Aristotelian and Russian formalist principles. (In the first part of Chapter 6 we use *Narration in the Fiction Film* to analyse *Lost Highway*.) Thus from Aristotle Bordwell takes the 'character-centred' causal nexus driving the action forward, adding to it the double plot-line in the classical Hollywood film, the adventure and the romance plot, with the terms of narrative closure depending on the way these two plot-lines are intertwined, cross each other, and become the conditions for each other's resolution. From the Russian formalists he takes the idea of narration as the variable distribution of cues which the spectator has mentally to reassemble into a linear time-space continuum.

The double plot structure usefully directs attention to another way of describing the Hollywood film, which would combine the Proppian model with the Lévi-Straussian one. Instead of a double plot-line, one could speak of two levels, each of which is organized in specific ways. For instance, the adventure plot could be said to provide a film's 'surface structure', while the romance plot traces out a 'deep structure': one supplying the overt logic, the other a covert one. Simplifying perhaps, one might say that a particular kind of interaction links surface structure to deep structure, where 'realism' (verisimilitude) competes with 'fantasy' (a complex of desire and prohibition) and 'intelligibility' with 'real contradiction'. If we wanted to give this interaction a psychoanalytic turn, we could distinguish between the 'rational agent logic' and the 'logic of desire'. The former is unilinear, sequential, and causally connected; the latter is attached to the past, typified by repetition, and therefore often circular. These two levels can stand in a marked tension to each other, but this need not be noticed by an audience. In fact, it may be in

the nature of the logic of desire to be invisible because in order to be effective emotionally as well as ideologically, it has to remain 'unconscious'.

To anticipate one point of our analysis of *Die Hard*: as a rational agent, McClane is trying to reclaim his wife, and he can do so only by rescuing the hostages and defeating the terrorists. But parallel, or 'underneath' this rational agent motivation, there is the logic of desire – or anxiety – which centres on McClane's desire not so much to retain his family as to maintain his identity as a working-class male, whose position in life is threatened both by the ascendancy of women in the world of (middle-class) management and by the devaluation of manufacture through the rise of (multinational) companies and their ability to shift production to low-wage countries. Thus, while at the rational agent level, McClane has to act purposively by calculating means and ends, at the level of desire he stubbornly sticks to his guns, an American male who asserts himself through macho values, brute force, and physical bravery. The skill of the film (or its 'ideological work') is to balance these two kinds of logic by melding them into a single, emotionally acceptable, and narratively plausible story. What appears as natural and self-evident to an audience focused on action and suspense could also be seen as a dubious ideological manoeuvre to reassert the values of patriarchy and (white) supremacy during a period of acute economic and multicultural transformation. At the surface structure, the film invents an external threat – the foreign terrorists – who are made to 'stand in' for the internal threat in the hero's deep structure, namely the contradiction between patriarchal masculinity (in the film encapsulated by the hero's wish never to have to say sorry) and corporate capitalism (its need for women in middle management jobs, dealing with personnel, communication and services, at the expense of semi-skilled males in the manufacturing sector). A substitution of one set of problems ('terrorists' or gangsters) for another (gender, race, and class identity) allows the film's narrative to engineer a trade-off between rational action logic and the logic of desire/anxiety whose exact working remains hidden and unconscious to both the hero and the audience.

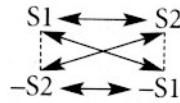
### 2.1.2. Narrative as syllogism: the semiotic square

This psychic dilemma (of the hero) or ideological operation (of the narrative) can be described also in terms of formal logic or rhetorical strategy. Rather than presenting it as a simple opposition (surface structure vs deep structure), of binary pairs (male/female; white/non-white; American/foreign), we could see John McClane's rational action/unconscious desire in terms of a more three-dimensional, dynamic process, of which the narrative is the linear, sequential articulation, at the same time as it is layered, differently textured, and contradictory. Lévi-Strauss assumed

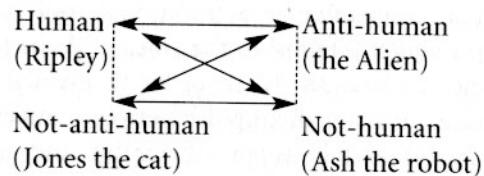
that a society starts telling itself myths when, as a culture, it is faced with contradictory experiences which it cannot make conscious to itself. The myth preserves the contradiction at the same time as it 'resolves' it in another medium and through another modality – e.g. that of 'art' or 'narrative' – which is why he argued that myths are 'the imaginary resolution to real contradictions'. Using the Oedipus myth as his example, Lévi-Strauss established a set of successive equations with multiple variables ( $A:B = C:D$ ), in order to show how a family of mythic narratives transforms initially contradictory statements into apparently unproblematic equivalences (see Lévi-Strauss 1972). In our example, it would be 'terrorists taking women hostages' = 'working-class male identity taken hostage by middle-class female values', with the result that 'male identity' is allowed to rescue 'women hostages'. A.J. Greimas (1983) recognized in such representations of unconscious societal contradiction a traditional tool of logic, similar to Aristotle's syllogism which establishes the rules of deductive reasoning (see Corbett and Connors, 1999: 38–9). In order to deduce valid conclusions from a given premise, logicians distinguish between universal and particular propositions (quantity) and between affirmative and negative assertions (quality). Once these premises are fitted into the so-called 'square of oppositions', propositions can be tested as to their validity by diagrammatically placing the terms involved into the different corners of the square, according to whether they are positive or negative terms (e.g. human/not human), and whether they make universal or particular claims (all humans/some humans). The diagonals, top and bottom, left and right will then be readable as establishing pertinent relationships. From this example, Greimas developed his so-called semiotic square, in order to provide a structural model for the conditions of possibility of narratives. Made up of contradictions (mutually exclusive terms), contraries (a double negative generating a positive term), and implications (terms generated by complementary relations), the semiotic square is intended to identify the 'elementary structure of signification' by specifying the 'semiotic constraints' underlying culturally meaningful narratives.

For instance, seeing the repetitions, redundancies and relationships of mutual implication in Propp's morphology of the Russian folk tale, Greimas sought to reduce Propp's linear succession of narrative events to a closed system, where the semiotic constraints of the syllogistic square could account for the permutation of functions, after Propp had already successfully demonstrated how the multiplicity of characters in folk tales can be reduced to a relatively limited repertoire of functions, and particular actions can be understood as general 'moves'. If in a tale someone pronounces a prohibition, this will inevitably be followed by a transgression, so that prohibition and transgression imply each other and only amount to a single move. Greimas

put forward the notion of semes (minimal semantic units) and arranged them in a four-term homology:



These four semes establish logical relations to one another. Seme S1 is the positive term. S2 establishes a relation of opposition to S1; -S1 is the contrary of S1; and -S2 is implied by S1. For example, if we invest S1 with the semantic content /human/, S2 = /anti-human/, -S1 = /not-human/, and -S2 = /not-antihuman/. James Kavanaugh finds these semes to be the dominant values in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (Kavanaugh 1980: 98):



Greimas therefore shows how a narrative generates a sense of coherence and closure by a structure which contains negation, equivalence, opposition, and contradiction, as the logical types of relation elaborated to accommodate ideologically or culturally contradictory material. As Fredric Jameson sums up the advantages of the semiotic square:

The first merit of Greimas' mechanism is to enjoin upon us the obligation to articulate any apparently static free-standing concept or term into the binary opposition . . . which forms the very basis for its intelligibility. [This] might take the form of the invention of some mediatory concept which bridged the gap [of the contradiction.] Or [the mechanism may function as] a value-system, in which raw materials coming in from the outside are at once given their place in the rectangular structure and transformed into symbolically signifying elements within the system.

(Jameson 1972: 164)

Jameson has himself drawn a number of such semiotic squares for Hollywood feature films, including *Dog Day Afternoon* and *The Shining* (in Jameson 1990: 35–54, 82–98), in each case gathering up the socio-political 'material' that the film in question is said to transform.

Treating *Die Hard* as such an accumulation of culturally problematic 'material' from the outside, we can see how it is converted into binary pairs, and what sort of functions and relations are highlighted when we devise for these pairs the 'rectangular structure' of a semiotic square: male and female,

working class and middle class, foreign and domestic, the police and the criminals could all be the binary pairs necessary for supplying the contradictory, contrary, and complementary relations, across which the imaginary resolution can be generated. There is even a 'mediatory concept bridging the gap', in the figure of the black patrolman Al Powell: we shall see how crucial not only he but 'race' is for the logic of the film's overall action and the plot's successive moves.

## 2.2. Classical Hollywood narrative: method

In terms of method, both the screenwriters' manual and the structuralist model can be used for the purposes of segmentation. Both name principles of division and difference, define what constitutes discrete units, and apply the processes that join the individual parts, in order to impart the impression of wholeness and completion to a narrative. But they also identify general characteristics, which we shall here divide between cultural definitions and formal definitions.

### 2.2.1. The 'classical cinema': some cultural definitions

While Aristotle argued that the cultural function of drama is to 'purge' the emotions by evoking 'fear and pity', the Russian formalists did not specify the purpose of narratives in this way. By contrast, Lévi-Strauss and his followers, as we saw, offer a number of explanations why story-telling and dramatic narratives are such universal features of human societies. In film studies since the 1970s, these explanations have tended to be narrowed down to those indicated above, namely ideology and gender (to which have been added race, ethnicity, religion, and colonialism). The broad underlying assumption of structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructivist, postmodernist, and post-colonial analysis has thus been that the purpose of Hollywood story-telling is to disguise the ideological contradictions of contemporary capitalist society and to enforce patriarchal values in the form of normative heterosexuality. There is, nonetheless, a certain broad consensus, from Aristotle's 'catharsis' to structuralist 'semiotic work', from cultural studies' 'ideological work' to post-structuralist 'textual work' and cognitivist 'problem-solving' routines as to the cultural purpose and use of narratives. Even where they do not agree about the 'culturalist' assumptions, the 'political interventions' or the precise 'identity politics' agenda, the competing models here introduced nevertheless provide, at the macro-level of analysis, a number of common features. If we take David Bordwell as representing one of our models and Raymond Bellour the other, we can, for instance, note that:

- They agree on the effect of (ideological) self-evidence and the means by which it is achieved: David Bordwell calls classical Hollywood an *excessively obvious cinema*: 'classical cinema has an underlying logic which is not apparent from our common-sense reflection upon the films or from Hollywood's own discourse about them. Armed with [concepts like norm, paradigm, stylistic alternatives, levels of systemic function] we can go on to examine how that style [called the classical] organises causality, time, and space, [so distinctly that] like Poe's purloined letter, it 'escapes observation by dint of being excessively obvious' (Bordwell *et al.* 1985: 11). Raymond Bellour, for his part, speaks of *the obvious and the code*: 'According to Rivette's famous formula, "obviousness is the mark of Howard Hawks's genius." No doubt – provided we recognize the extent to which that obviousness only comes to the fore insofar as it is coded' (Bellour 2000: 72).
- They agree on the structural importance of normative heterosexuality: Bordwell's insistence on the romance plot echoes Bellour on 'the formation of the (heterosexual) couple'.
- They are also in agreement that the classical Hollywood cinema has been a remarkably homogeneous cultural phenomenon, having remained stable over a relatively long period of time: what Bordwell *et al.* call the 'classical mode of representation' is given a time frame from roughly 1917 to 1960. Similarly, Bellour would date classical cinema from D.W. Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) to Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964) (see Bellour 2000).

### 2.2.2. The 'classical cinema': some formal definitions

Implied in the cultural definitions above is the recognition that the Hollywood cinema's 'impression of reality', i.e. to pass off as natural something which is historical or ideological, is actually not so much a matter of how real that is which is being filmed (the documentary value or veridical status of what is before the camera) but how formally elaborated and how culturally ingrained the codes, norms, or conventions are that govern cinematic representation. It is not 'reality' that makes things appear real on the screen, but a rhetoric, a formal system which also transports a cultural logic. Among some of the indices are:

- Character-centred causality, based on psychological traits. Non-psychological forces are discounted as causal agents unless they can become metaphors of the protagonist's psychological conflicts, e.g. wars, revolutions, natural disasters, alien intrusions are made to mirror inner dilemmas, as we saw above in the case of John McClane's dilemma in *Die*

*Hard*. 'The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. ... The principal causal agent is thus the character, a distinctive individual endowed with an evident, consistent batch of traits, qualities and behaviors.' (Bordwell, in Rosen 1986: 18). This contrasts, as indicated, with the functionalist and relations-based, essentially a-causal and instead more complexly 'logical' and 'semantic' structuralist and post-structuralist model of character and causality.

- Repetition/resolution (underlying the formation of the couple): 'a ... fundamental effect, proper to many American classical films, [is that] the textual volume multiplies and closes off doubly the field of its own expansion. The systematic accumulation of symmetries and dissymmetries throughout the filmic chain, decomposed by the work of a generalized segmentation, constantly mimics and reproduces (because the one produces the other) the schema of family relations which founds the narrative space' [... and] which makes of the segmental the textual condition for a happy slide from the familial to the conjugal' (Bellour, 2000: 205–6). What Bellour here indicates is that the sophisticated formal system of classical Hollywood is in the service of category shifts and logical transformation, which in turn is necessary for the ideological 'work' that makes Hollywood an important institution of ideological reproduction in the US, and increasingly so also in the rest of the world.
- Continuity editing (which creates a spatially consistent visual field and single diegesis by means of the following editing conventions: the 180 degree rule, the shot/reverse shot pattern, staging in depth, eyeline matches, cutting only within a 180/30 degree radius, match on action cuts) prevails over montage editing (multiple diegesis, discontinuity of shots in time and space, juxtaposition of shots). In the classical film, the fictional world is homogeneous: discontinuity and juxtaposition can always be reintegrated by the viewer at another level of coherence which does not violate the (generically defined) standards of verisimilitude and plausibility, with regards to either action, character motivation, or coherence of place/space. What this means in practice, as we shall see, is that everything in a classical film is motivated and serves a purpose, while the 'rules' of continuity editing ensure smooth, invisible (because either expected or retrospectively explicable) transitions from shot to shot and from segment to segment.
- Narration (variable distribution of knowledge among characters and between characters and audience). Narration is not primarily a matter of style or mode (melodramatic vs realistic or serious vs comic) but a question of how information reaches the audience and is mentally or emotionally processed. It is thus a key factor in how a film addresses,

involves, implicates, activates, and manipulates the spectator. The function of filmic narration is to guide the eye and cue the mind, which might involve either an optical or cognitive centring of the spectator, drawing him or her into the picture, or a manipulation of the spectator's position of knowledge, playing either with his/her desire to see and observe (voyeurism, visual pleasure, scopophilia) or on his/her desire to know and to infer (exploiting ignorance, anticipation, or superior knowledge vis-à-vis the characters).

### 2.2.3. The logic of the actions: macro-analysis

Thus, one way of tying these features together and understanding their concerted effect in creating (the impression of) unity and coherence within a classical narrative film is to study the logic of the actions: what a character does, why s/he does it, what goals or aims are being pursued, what obstacles are encountered. Classical narrative in this sense is the name for a particular kind of logic – notably a temporal, a spatial, and a causal logic, held together by an overall trust in the efficacy of problem-solving procedures. At the same time it is a sort of semiotic operator, which uses the relation of parts to the whole, the hierarchy of characters, and the arrangement of their functions as elements for another kind of procedure – that of making meaning out of actions and moves rather than out of words and statements, in order to accomplish certain ideological tasks, such as presenting specific cultural values or social relations as natural, self-evident, and inevitable.

This already belongs to the category of (textual, psychic, political) work, and alludes to the second kind of logic, which we called the 'logic of desire' and which is also a logic of the actions, often identified with the Oedipus complex, by which Freud specified the model of (male) identity formation, but also a contradictory relationship between knowledge and belief, between the motives for action and their conscious rationalization. The particular interplay of surface and depth structure, linear movement, and obsessive repetition at the formal level has thus been called the 'Oedipal trajectory' of classical narrative. What this implies is that, irrespective of what a protagonist thinks his goal, problem, or ambition is at the practical, everyday level, he is also engaged at the symbolic or cultural level, usually in a crisis of identity, worrying about what it means to be or to become a man, anxious about his masculinity or ethnic identity, his place in the world, and in the process of finding out who he is, defending himself against castration anxiety and the threat of sexual difference. This Oedipal logic is particularly evident in the action-adventure genres, as well as the Western, the thriller, and the *film noir*. A differently gendered variant would be the logic of melodrama, where the main protagonist is generally a woman, and where the film charts the

formation of female identity, or rather, its impossibility (what Mary Ann Doane (1987) has called 'the desire to desire').

An Aristotelian or Proppian analysis generally does not seek to describe this Oedipal trajectory. When clarifying what drives a narrative forward, what gets the protagonist going and keeps him/her going, the neo-formalist model does not problematize, for instance, the relation between the adventure plot and the romance plot. It is satisfied with noting the conflict between the hero wanting something and the world (often embodied in a clearly defined antagonist), putting obstacles in the way of the hero's object of desire. In Propp's morphological model, the motor is a lack, a missing object or person that the protagonist has to restore to its rightful place, like returning the princess to the king (her father) or getting the magic ring back from the evil dragon. In either case, however, positing an Oedipal trajectory does not invalidate or contradict the logic of the actions, and instead supplements and deepens it. For instance, identifying 'lack' with 'castration anxiety' is in one sense merely to link the object of desire or the missing object to a transgression: if in Aristotelian tragedy the hero has knowingly or unknowingly broken a law, which produces consequences that the hero has to address and his actions are called upon to redress, then in a more psychoanalytic language we could say that his actions are designed to defend himself against the anxiety of (sexual) difference, through adopting fetish objects and a narcissistic investment in his own bodily identity. A film like *Die Hard* is an outstanding example of this kind of logic: McClane assembles a number of fetish objects, and he has a particularly striking obsession with his physical body. So much so that we may even have to consider these features once more under the rubric of the post-classical, if we concede that the post-classical is not the non-classical or the anti-classical, but the excessively classical, the 'classical-plus'.

On the other hand, invoking the most abstract and general level of classical narrative, we could also summarize the logic of the actions as revolving around a disturbance/transgression, followed by the closing of a gap, and the return to a revised *status quo ante*. An even more basic schema would be to say that any narrative structure is complete when it consists of a triple structure: a state of equilibrium, followed by a disequilibrium, which is worked upon until a new equilibrium is established. This, too, would fit the situation of *Die Hard*: the equilibrium is the nuclear family (and the traditional roles of male/female within the family), disturbed by Holly leaving for Los Angeles (and taking on the male role of provider), which is being 'worked upon' (Holly exposed to mortal danger, John coming to her rescue), until the equilibrium is re-established (at the end, John is once more in control and presumably Holly is ready to have him resume his role as head of the family).

Thus, one of the tasks of textual analysis – one of the hypotheses when

analysing a film – is to ask: what is the nature of the goal, the missing object or lack, or the disturbance/transgression in this particular film? If one follows Lévi-Strauss, the question would be: what is the ‘real contradiction’ for which the film narrative provides the imaginary resolution? And if one adopts Greimas’s semiotic square: what are the relations of contrariness, contradiction, and implication that hold the contending forces in balance and at the same time move them towards the generation of a new, mediating term?

In all these cases, the greatest formal resource of the classical film would seem to be the extraordinary number of different kinds of symmetry, asymmetry, and repetition it generates, whether in the form of mirroring and doubling, or of splitting and reversal, echoes and parallels. Bellour has made this feature central to his type of textual analysis (in his essays on *The Birds*, *Gigi*, and *The Lonedale Operator*, in Bellour 2000). Analysing a sequence from Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, for instance (Melanie crossing Bodega Bay to deliver the pair of love birds), Bellour can demonstrate how different kinds of symmetry, asymmetry, and alternation manage to structure the scene into a coherent statement, merely by exploiting three types of binary pairs: moving camera/static camera, Melanie looking/Melanie being looked at, and close shot/long shot. In Minnelli’s *Gigi*, Bellour takes a whole film and meticulously demonstrates how its individual sequences are organized into an exactly symmetrical shape, so that the whole film folds into itself, like an intricate origami figure, but also folds outward from relatively simple units, which are like themes and variations in music, to build up a complete, seemingly linear narrative. Not only is the film structured like a poem, in that each sequence rhymes with another sequence, but individual sequences often turn out to have the same structure as the film overall, in other words, repeating itself at different levels, like the morphology of a plant, or like the fractals of the Mandelbrot set that computers generate out of very simple forms and programmes.

In the case of Griffith’s *The Lonedale Operator*, Bellour argues that the Hollywood narrative film progresses and comes to a closure by what he calls the ‘repetition-resolution’ effect, which is his micro-analytical adaptation of Lévi-Strauss’s equation with multiple variables. In other words, the excessive and insistent symmetries of the classical film are in fact no mere ornament or ‘formal play’, but the essential semantic/syntactic elements which the narrative puts to ‘textual work’, in order to accomplish an aesthetic effect (coherence, homogeneity, natural or organic unity) that doubles as ideological work (the naturalization of different kinds of cultural contradiction). This work one can describe in two ways. First, it is this repetition-resolution which reconciles or makes imperceptible the two different levels we mentioned earlier, the surface level and the depth level. While on the surface a Hollywood film impresses with its relentless forward

drive, its cause-and-effect logic, its blow and counterblow, its question-and-answer progression, at the other level nothing really moves, and the narrative simply repeats the same configuration over and over again, as if the film – or its central character – was coming up against the proverbial brick wall.

Bellour has a name for this effect, too. He calls it the ‘symbolic blockage’ (see his analysis of Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, or the final remarks in his essay on *Gigi*, in Bellour 2000), and also ties it firmly to the Oedipus complex, according to which both men and women have to learn to live within the patriarchal law, and the gender imbalance it implies. Rational agent logic and the logic of desire are therefore the recto and verso of each other, two sides of the same coin, put in circulation to help us cope with the contradictions of our culture or the conditions of human subjectivity/identity. The advantage of Bellour’s formula is that it combines a micro-analysis of classical Hollywood’s stylistic devices and formal features with a macro-analysis of Hollywood’s cultural significance and ‘civilizing’ achievement. These he ranks as highly as Greek mythology and the realist novel, insofar as they all represent aesthetically satisfying, self-contained, and self-regulating ‘universes’ that not only perfectly express the world-view of the periods or nations that brought them forth but also retain a validity and truth even for those who do not (or no longer) subscribe to their value systems or ideology.

To some extent, the neo-formalist analysis of classical narrative would be able to go along with Bellour’s evaluation, maybe even extending it by arguing that there is a natural convergence between the formal characteristics of classical narrative and the organization of the mind: that the principles of Hollywood story-telling are closely modelled on the human mind’s perceptual and cognitive organization, which explains both the longevity of the form and the universality of its appeal.

However, there are many who would dissent from this view, considering it ahistorical and ideologically blind, unacceptably ethnocentric, and biased in favour of the United States, its economy and its ideology, its patriarchal capitalist values, and its hegemonic role in the world. Thus, there is a second manner of looking at the ‘work’ done by classical narrative, with its formal semantics that relies so heavily on symmetry and repetition, using them to disguise and naturalize the very fact that it is a semantics and a rhetoric – which is to say that these images of fictional characters, their actions, reactions, contests, and victories, also spell out messages, addressed to someone, with the expectation of persuading and the effect of exacting assent. These sharply ideological critiques of classical Hollywood narrative, as an instrument of capitalism and the bourgeois value system, predominated in the 1970s. They were followed by a further radicalization of the argument in the 1980s, when feminist critics deconstructed this anti-bourgeois critique, in



order to add to the charge-sheet patriarchy and sexual difference: classical narrative perpetuated gender stereotypes and reinforced gender imbalance not only by its emphasis on heterosexual romance but in the very stylistic devices that guarantee continuity editing, notably the shot/reverse shot and the eyeline match which split the visual field into the gendered opposition of 'seeing' and 'being seen'. In the 1990s, this reading of classical narrative once more gave way to a broader historical and cultural critique that added 'race' to the previous critical paradigms of the ideological and the feminist critique, now referred to as 'class' and 'gender'. We shall come back to the co-presence of three such critical concerns or 'discourses' in the analysis of classical Hollywood, making them part of our hypothesis about the possible definitions of the post-classical, and of our case for seeing the label fulfil a valid critical function, beyond or apart from its uses as a distinct stylistic or formal category.

#### 2.2.4. The logic of the actions: micro-analysis

To conduct a complete analysis of *Die Hard* in the spirit of either Bellour or Bordwell would take up more space than we can give it here. Therefore we shall switch between macro- and micro-analysis, first by picking for commentary only one, albeit extended, passage (the opening), and second, by choosing a form of segmentation that varies between noting specifically filmic elements (the treatment of sound and image, of space, camera movement, and visual composition) and non film-specific ones, i.e. cognitive body schema and spatial categories, such as inside/outside, arrival/departure, or culturally (over)determined roles (such as 'husband/wife', 'mother/ father', 'superior/ subordinate') and character attributes ('violent'/'vulnerable', 'nurturing'/'macho'). We shall leave out the more fine-grained analysis of a single sequence or shot, of the kind Bellour has done in his analysis of *The Big Sleep* (2000: 69–76), where he minutely breaks down and segments no more than twelve shots to demonstrate their inner cohesion. Nor shall we conduct an analysis that hierarchizes shots of different type and specifies the order of their combination (as Christian Metz has tried with his *grande syntagmatique* (1974: 108–46)).

Some of the most influential extended application of this type of micro-analysis to classical Hollywood films can be found, besides the work of Bellour, in essays by Stephen Heath, who has conducted readings of entire films in an effort to provide exemplary and generalizable models of textual analysis (see his analysis of Welles's *Touch of Evil* (Heath 1975)). Both Bellour and Heath have come to rather similar conclusions, which beyond individual authorship may either confirm the homogeneity of the Hollywood classical system or indicate common positions (or problems!) in their methodological

assumptions. Especially with regard to the latter, Heath's work has received sustained criticism by scholars such as David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, and Edward Branigan, who in their turn have also provided close textual analyses of particular films and sequences, using cognitivist rather than psychosemiotic models (cf. Bordwell's analysis of *Rear Window* (1985: 40–47), and Branigan's analysis of *Hangover Square* (1992: 125–40)). Bordwell has also provided close stylistic analysis of shots and sequences, often on a comparative basis, by trying to describe the larger systems behind compositional choices, such as background/foreground, figure placement, and the staging and blocking of the action (following, e.g., in his *On the History of Film Style* (1997) the analyses of early cinema conducted by Barry Salt, Kristin Thompson, or Yuri Tsivian).

In our 'classical' analysis of *Die Hard*, we shall begin with a brief overview of the vocabulary recurring in the newspaper reviews, before moving to a more scholarly defined set of terms, used predominantly in structuralist analyses, such as the one by Thierry Kuntzel. His textual analysis of *The Most Dangerous Game*, a non-*auteur* Hollywood film from the early 1930s, is in some sense exemplary for our purposes because it is a sort of theoretical summary of the formal phase of analysing classical narrative, while also touching on broadly ideological motifs insofar as he subscribes to the assumption that the cinema when telling stories also does 'work', in the sense discussed above (Kuntzel 1980). Besides having internalized the methodological debates around Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and Greimas, followed the narratological developments around Barthes and Genette, and attended to the film-specific codes identified by Metz and Bellour, Kuntzel has also looked once more at Sigmund Freud's model of dream-work, in order to make some of its key concepts, such as condensation and displacement, useful for film analysis.

## 2.3. Classical analysis

### 2.3.1. The reviews

As mentioned, *Die Hard* is generally regarded as paradigmatic of the new Hollywood action-adventure picture, and has been compared to the Rambo films (e.g. *First Blood*), to Arnold Schwarzenegger vigilante films (e.g. *Predator*), and to the bi-race buddy films (e.g. the *Lethal Weapon* series). This genre or sub-genre (sometimes also known as the 'male rampage film') is judged by journalists to be a high-velocity, shoot-'em-up piece of mindless fun, a general opinion reflected in the specific reviews of *Die Hard* that appeared on 15 July 1988, in the week of the initial release:

[The film's] strategy . . . involves the deployment of a great many stunts and special effects, such as when Willis swings through a plate glass window on the end of a fire rope or when he drops plastics explosives down the elevator shaft.

(Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*)

The new Bruce Willis picture *Die Hard* is a logistical wonder, a marvel of engineering, and relentlessly, mercilessly thrilling. It has masterfully executed effects, a pile-driver steady pace and a sleek, nonporous design. Add a percussive, big-star performance to the state-of-the-art mechanics, turn up all the knobs, and you've got a sure-fire, big-bucks, major-studio-style summer attraction. All that's left is to light the fuse.

(Hal Hinson, *Washington Post*)

[Due to weaknesses in the script, *Die Hard*] is a mess, and that's a shame, because the film does contain superior special effects, impressive stunt work and good performances, especially by Rickman as the terrorist.

(Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*)

Willis has found the perfect vehicle to careen wildly onto the crowded L.A. freeway of *Lethal Weapon* and *Beverly Hills Cops*. And he keeps a respectable grip on the wheel, his only acting requirements being to shift that *Moonlighting* glibpeak into R-rated high-drive and fire his Baretta 92 [*sic*] to heart's content. Never mind that the script is a monument to illogic. Led by a Mr. Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman), a stereotypical German elitist, the invaders have come to this high-rise, not to take hostages, not to issue demands, but to get at Nakatomi's moola – more than \$600 million in a formidable safe. (So why bother invading the party to take hostages? Why not just rob the place at night, trouble-free? And why does it have to be Christmas Eve? And – oh, forget it.)

(Desson Howe, *Washington Post*)

As nearly as I can tell, the deputy chief is in the movie for only one purpose: to be consistently wrong at every step of the way and to provide a phoney counterpoint to Willis' progress. The character is so wilfully useless, so dumb, so much a product of the Idiot Plot Syndrome, that all by himself he successfully undermines the last half of the movie.

(Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*)

McClane is in a bedroom suite when the gunmen burst in. So he hides out in air ducts, above elevators, on the roof, in an attempt to pick them off. And this cat-and-mouse is where director John (*Predator*) McTiernan earns his money. McClane takes the bad guys on one by one, the biggest fight being with gunman Karl (Alexander Godunov), a flaxen-haired tough cookie who's real mad at McClane for killing his brother and fellow thug. By the time all is said and gunned, the building's aflame, an FBI helicopter is

downed, and the subplots are piled higher than the ubiquitous debris, the various *Die Hard* characters literally line up before the camera to complete their respective story lines.

(Desson Howe, *Washington Post*)

The film's early scenes, before the burglars arrive and the shooting starts, are tentative and unfocused. . . . *Die Hard* is designed to present Willis as an action hero in the Schwarzenegger–Stallone mode, and he has the grace and physical bravado for the job. He can also be engagingly funny, an Olympian wiseacre. But there isn't much opportunity here for him to flash his wits. For most of the film we watch Willis, barefoot and stripped down to a T-shirt, work himself into precarious jams, then, through a combination of cleverness, chutzpah and superhuman athleticism, work himself out again. . . . every detail in the film has been calculated purely for audience effect. The director, John McTiernan . . . is unapologetic about his manipulations.

(Hal Hinson, *Washington Post*)

When describing the action of *Die Hard*, the newspaper reviews resort, quite stereotypically and consistently, to metaphors of speed, machine energy, violence (physical and pyrotechnic): 'stunts', 'special effects', 'pile-driver pace', 'logistical wonder, 'marvel of engineering', with Willis keeping a firm 'grip on the wheel', or ready to 'light the fuse'. These action set pieces are contrasted with 'the script [which] is a monument to illogic', 'tentative and unfocused' opening scenes, while certain characters are the 'product of the Idiot Plot Syndrome' who in the end 'literally line up before the camera to complete their respective story lines'. The underlying opposition of (impressive) spectacle and (incompetent) plotting is reinforced by reference to unashamedly commercial calculation with no pretensions to anything else: 'the director . . . is unapologetic about his manipulations, giving the studio what it wants, a "sure-fire, big-bucks summer attraction"'. Although these reviewers seem to speak the (Aristotelian) language of the screenwriter, their mode of argumentation fits well into a structuralist model, since the contrasts they deploy are almost all organized into binary pairs (spectacle/narrative, commerce/art, glibpeak/flashes of wit, 'good performances'/minimal acting requirements'). One (polemical) way of defining the shift from the classical cinema to the post-classical is here encapsulated. It unfavourably contrasts the supposed absence of (narrative) substance with the fireworks of special effects, a roller coaster ride, which the critics nevertheless confess to being impressed by.

One simple way to move beyond the polemical divide between spectacle and narrative is to ask whether *Die Hard* can still be discussed in the categories itemized above for analysing classical narrative cinema. Does it make sense as a psychologically motivated narrative, following a cause-and-effect logic, adhering to the three unities? Is it narrated coherently, so that the

'distribution of knowledge' (who knows what, when, and how) is in the service of comprehensibility and the regulated deferral of expectation known as 'suspense'? Or can we account for it according to the structuralist model, follow its Oedipal logic, articulate the binary pairs of oppositions that could be plotted as a system of semiotic constraints, and see whether they undergo the sort of transformations implied by the repetition–resolution effects?

The answer, as has already been hinted at, is yes, both of our models make good sense of the film. *Die Hard* has a very classically constructed three-act scenario; its script is professionally written, with the moves, character motivations, and plot-points carefully worked out. Its narration is consistent, focused mostly on the central protagonist (in Bordwell's terminology, 'restricted'), and the story keeps to an impressively intricate unity of action, place, and time, taking up roughly twelve hours from dusk to dawn on Christmas Eve in a single LA location. Furthermore, a detailed segmentation would show how the film adheres to both Bordwell's and Bellour's rules that govern the relation between the transparency and 'obviousness' of the dramatic scenes, and the coded, elaborated, stylized manner of their representation. We have already noted the film's Oedipal trajectory and the formation of the couple, along with the character-centred causality and the double plot structure. What the plot may lack in verisimilitude and plausibility (but by which standards are these to be measured in the action-adventure genre?) it more than makes up in its semantic texture, its obsessive concern with male white identity and sexual difference at the symbolic level, and its many references to the topical cultural studies themes of 'race–class–gender–nation'. Yet it is precisely because some of the 'excessiveness' elaborated around the 'obviousness' is so foregrounded (not only in the action scenes), and because the film at times flaunts a special knowingness about its own generic conventions (it jokes about being a remake of *High Noon*, for instance, and exposes Gruber as an ignorant snob: he thinks that John Wayne rather than Gary Cooper played the lead), that one has to conclude that its 'ideological work' on the fashionable themes of 'identity politics' is not so much unconscious and displaced as self-consciously displayed. These, then, are more reasons for considering *Die Hard* also as an example of 'post-classical' cinema, a thesis whose implications we shall be probing in the second part of the analysis.

### 2.3.2. Classical analysis: the opening

In keeping with the points listed under 'Method', we shall concentrate on the logic of the actions, trying to combine elements of the Aristotelian model with those of the structuralist one. For many of the considerations just mentioned, the openings of films take on a privileged role, being in a sense that part which

sets up the terms of the system. They pose the enigma, the dilemma, the paradox, to which the film as a whole will appear to give the answer, the resolution. Openings of classical films are somewhat like manuals. The manual is what one finds when unpacking the box of a new appliance. It belongs to the package, but it is also at one remove from the package: a meta-text, to use a word one would not normally employ for a manual. Similarly, the opening of a film could be regarded as a special case of a meta-text. It is separate from and yet part of the narrative, in that it usually establishes setting, place, and time, as well as introducing the main protagonist(s). But it is also a kind of meta-text in the sense that by introducing us to the rules of the game, it shows us how a film wants to be read and how it needs to be understood. In this regard, the opening is also different from a manual, which is usually a text about an object, while the opening of a film is made of the same 'material' as the object itself. In fact it is, for most viewers, indistinguishable from (the rest of) the film. To mark the special textual/meta-textual status of the opening of a classical film, critics have had recourse to a number of metaphors. For instance, the opening has been considered as a 'compression' or 'condensation' of the film. Another term is that of *mise-en-abîme* – literally, a plumbing of depths. Originally derived from medieval heraldry and baroque picture puzzles, the term hints at a particular type of self-reference, a 'drawing attention to itself'. Applied to an opening sequence, it designates the economy of mean(ing)s with which a Hollywood opening prepares the stage and often presents (in a different form or code) the whole film in a nutshell.

It is this effect of compression or enfolding of a larger unit in the opening which made Thierry Kuntzel turn to Freud's analysis of dreams in his essay on *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932, dir. Schoedsack and Cooper) (Kuntzel 1980) and a similar one on *M* (1932, dir. Fritz Lang) (Kuntzel 1978), which he collectively called 'The Work of Film' (*Le Travail du film*). If we think of a dream as a text, its typical feature is that it can seem a very ordinary story, visually coherent and even logical, except that the very ordinariness serves to disguise another level of meaning, where unconscious fantasy material is being negotiated. On the other hand, a dream may consist of very vivid scenes or violent set pieces but make no overall sense at all. These tensions between the overt and the covert meaning of the dream led Freud to posit a number of transformational moves brought about by the unconscious activity he called dream-work. The main moves Freud described under such headings as 'condensation' and 'displacement', 'screen memory' and 'wish-fulfilling fantasy', 'representability' and 'secondary elaboration'. Taking our cue from Kuntzel's use of Freud for the overall framework, but combining the terminology of Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and Bellour as well as Freud, we shall be looking at the film's opening. Not least in light of the opinion of one reviewer

that the opening scenes were 'tentative and unfocused', it will be instructive to put his judgement to the test.

### 2.3.3. Entry (into the film, entry into the fiction, entry into the characters)

The opening of *Die Hard* lasts from the moment John McClane lands in LA, walks through the lobby, and witnesses another passenger being welcomed by his wife or girlfriend to the time he collects his baggage and is picked up by the Nakatomi chauffeur, Argyle (with whom he has a discussion about his family, Christmas music, and the size of Argyle's expected tip), before being dropped at the entrance of the Corporation headquarters. The sequence is thus bracketed by two arrivals (at the airport and at the Nakatomi Tower), but these two visual rhymes are prepared and punctuated by a whole series of 'brief encounters': with the passenger on the plane, the stewardess on the way out, the blonde woman in white hot pants who for a moment he thinks is smiling at him, the black chauffeur Argyle, the security guard, the Nakatomi CEO, and finally, Holly.

Not only do these encounters between two arrivals structure the sequence into smaller units of action, charting a sort of narrative path for McClane, they are also designed to give us a lot of information about McClane as a character: even though travelling on a plane, he carries a gun, he has the roving eye for the ladies (and they for him), he is disappointed that Holly thought herself too busy to meet him in person (hence the mistaken welcome from the blonde), and that – compared to his status as a New York cop – she is clearly an important person in the corporation if she can send a chauffeur. In the conversation with Argyle, McClane gives us the gist of his central problem (he is separated from his wife and does not like it) and the way he intends to resolve it (by joining his wife and little daughter for Christmas, the ideal family occasion in a season of peace and reconciliation). McClane's most bulky item of luggage is a giant teddy bear, which foreshadows a 'Father Christmas' theme that is to become important subsequently (see below). In order to close off the opening scene even more, and mark it as a self-contained unit, a kind of complete mini-narrative, Argyle, who has been discussing McClane's marital situation and the chances of a successful reunion, says to McClane as he drops him: 'and now we get the music playing and they live happily ever after – but just in case they don't, here's my telephone number. I'll be waiting for you in the car-park.'

### 2.3.4. Repetition, alternation, and reversal

Already in the opening we note a number of formal repetitions, such as the series of encounters with secondary or even apparently irrelevant characters,

expendable in that some are one-offs and seem to contribute little to the plot, and yet indispensable in other respects. For apart from telling us something about the main protagonist or giving him an occasion to tell us about his motivation and goals, they also exist in order to alert us to the principle of repetition itself. In one case, as we shall see below, McClane's encounter with the passenger next to him, his utterance spells out – albeit in riddling or highly coded fashion – the terms of the narrative's resolution. The principle of repetition as alternation and reversal is rehearsed twice more in this opening. Once when the passenger, in response to McClane's puzzled look after receiving his advice about what to do in order to avoid jet lag, answers: 'Trust me, I've been doing it for nine years', a phrase which McClane repeats – with a slight, but significant variation – immediately after, in response to the Asian-American's puzzled look, upon seeing McClane's gun on his shoulder-holster, as he stretches to get his jacket from the overhead luggage hold: 'Trust me, I've been a cop for eleven years'. The second verbal exchange of the opening is built exactly like the first. When Argyle, nearly missing him, greets McClane by apologetically saying to him: 'It's my first time *driving* a limo (as chauffeur)', McClane repeats the sentence, reassuring Argyle that it also is his first time *riding* a limo (as passenger)'. Again, beyond signalling McClane as a wiseacre and smarty-pants (who is heading for a comeuppance), the verbal repartee 'draws attention to' (acts as a *mise-en-abyme* of) the principle of repetition.

### 2.3.5. Characters and functions: transfer and substitute

The question of expendable characters brings us to the issue of who and what the spectator identifies with, and what, in a classical narrative, is the function of secondary characters. One way to describe them is in Proppian or Greimasian terms: instead of centres of autonomy or agency, they are relays, vehicles of transfer. They can signal a displacement, or they can be initiating a chain of substitutions. In this function they are supported by the *mise-en-scène* and narration, i.e. the formal elements of composition, camera placement, and attention guidance. In *Die Hard's* opening, the camera is noticeable by being so clearly in the service of the narrative (underlining plot-points) and narration (manipulating the distribution of knowledge). After an initial shotcountershot scene of the exchange with the passenger, edited in classical continuity style with eyeline matches, the camera seems to take on a movement of its own, independent of McClane for part of the time, and then again lending itself to his point of view (for instance, in order to trick us into making the same mistake as he), while also cleverly shifting to Argyle's point of view, the cut made imperceptible by a near-collision between Argyle and the baggage trolleys. By a threefold

mimetic process of equivalence (or doubling, as Raymond Bellour would say), the camera associates itself successively with different points of view, while nonetheless keeping the movement from one place to the next extremely smooth, and managing to establish the main protagonist as focus of attention as he moves through this space. Narratively, this movement is determined by the logic of events and their code of verisimilitude: what one does when deplaning and arriving inside an airport. Figuratively, the camera movement draws attention to particular objects (such as McClane picking up the teddy bear from the luggage conveyor belt). Symbolically, it elaborates the characters' function as substitutes: the woman in white substitutes for the absent Holly, and Argyle out of his depth as chauffeur substitutes for McClane out of his depth in the world of company executives.

Twice, the camera's point of view is delegated to the main character via a close-up: once of an object, in the form of a POV shot (of the oversized teddy bear), and once of a face (of the smiling woman, itself a repetition of the stewardess's smile, who had not only seen McClane's come-on look but decided to ignore it). The second close-up connotes a situation of collusion and participation in which the spectator is implicated by way of inference: once we know more than McClane (we see what the stewardess sees), and once we know as little as McClane (we too think that the woman in the white pants is smiling at him). The shots thus give us access not only to the field of vision of the character, which may be deceptive, as in the point of view (POV) shot of McClane looking at the blonde woman, but also to the character's intention, secret plans and thoughts, which we infer via the object brought to our attention. The transfer is from camera to object, but the meaning of the shot has little to do with the object as such, because the object is itself a stand-in, a substitute: for the characters' motivation, inner thoughts, and response.

More generally, in a classical Hollywood narrative such as this one, the action progresses by involving us with the protagonists, successively and by transfer, using the film's objects as much as the dialogue, to foreshadow its future action spaces, and using its secondary characters to mirror the main ones via substitution and equivalence. One sub-category of this mode of transfer is what has been called the 'erotetic' principle of question and answer, where one scene implicitly 'answers' the previous one. For instance, at one point, Holly slams down the photo of McClane on her desk, as if to answer the blonde woman leaping into the arms of her man at the airport. Later on there are several more such ironic links, especially in the breakdown of communication between McClane and Argyle (his self-appointed, useless helper) and the intuitive communication between McClane and Al Powell (his initially reluctant helper).

### 2.3.6. The emblematic cluster

In an opening scene or sequence, we often find a privileged image or composition which in a sense gathers together diverse and heterogeneous elements in a single configuration, whose meaning will only become fully apparent in retrospect, and which thus functions rather like an emblematic picture, or a condensation of the various narrative motifs, as well as implying a temporal structure of anticipation and foreshadowing. In *Die Hard*'s opening there are a number of such constellations, chief among them the verbal exchange between McClane and the passenger sitting next to him on the plane as they land in LA. The passenger, noticing how tense McClane is before and during touchdown, gives him a piece of advice: 'When you get home, take off your socks, and curl your toes into a fist.' The phrase represents, in figurative form, three central oppositions (or enigmas) which the narrative sets itself the task to resolve: the culturally difficult relationship between masculinity and the exposed body, the anxiety-producing relationship between vulnerability and violence, and finally, the counter-intuitive relationship between common sense and a winning strategy.

The opposition toe/fist, as well as the suggestion to take off his socks, will, as we shall see, feature prominently – and unexpectedly – in the subsequent narrative. The figure of the passenger is also important in another respect: he is an Asian-American, and thus introduces the semantic cluster of race and ethnicity, used in the film both as a semantic category (it gives rise to a number of pertinent oppositions with which the narrative can play to advance its resolution) and as a cultural-historical category, in that it hints at the antagonistic constellation of Americans, Japanese, and Germans, which the film exploits also for an (anti-?) globalization argument.

### 2.3.7. The enigma

Narratives, according to Tzvetan Todorov, can be characterized, at their most basic, as structures which begin with a steady state, an equilibrium, a balance. This balance is disrupted by an intervention, an irruption (in *Die Hard*, the breakup of John and Holly McClane's marriage, the sudden burst of the terrorists' entry into the office Christmas party) which it is the task of the narrative to neutralize and to eliminate, so that finally an equilibrium can be re-established which resembles the initial one, but with significant differences.

As we saw above, the narrative's necessary interruption can also be presented as a lack, a desired object that is lost or, as in this case, an enigma, a puzzle. On the surface of *Die Hard*, the lack or lost object is the family unit which McClane has come to restore. At the deep-structure level, however, we are now arguing, it is the Asian-American's piece of advice which is the enigma, except that neither we nor McClane know that it is actually a riddle.

In the terms of our analysis, therefore, it belongs to the logic of desire rather than to rational-agent logic.

The opening scene by itself does not reveal the riddling nature of the advice. Instead, it lets us see the constellation also from the other point of view – that of Holly and, by extension, the Nakatomi Corporation. As McClane lands and leaves the airport, we cross-cut to the Christmas party at the Corporation headquarters, the speech of the CEO, and Holly telephoning her maid at home and speaking to her daughter. From this combined perspective of Holly and the people at the Nakatomi Tower, McClane constitutes the interruption and intrusion, drawing a powerful parallel between McClane and the terrorists. On the face of it, the terrorists only appear in the subsequent segment, taking over the lobby, and then bursting into the building and violently crashing the party. But covertly, the terrorists do appear in the opening sequence, and this twice over. After Argyle's limousine has entered Nakatomi Plaza, the camera cuts to a big, sinister-looking truck also heading in the same direction. This, as it turns out, is the delivery truck the terrorists use to gain entry into the underground parking of the corporate tower, which they do at about the same time McClane is told by Argyle that he'll wait for him in the parking lot. In this way, the film establishes a parallel between McClane's arrival and the terrorists' arrival: both are outsiders, both are disruptive forces in the lives of Holly and the Nakatomi Corporation.

The first time the terrorists appear, however, is even earlier, on the plane, when the Asian-American passenger notices McClane's gun. A gun on a plane usually means only one thing, terrorists plotting a hijack, and this is the inference which McClane's answer acknowledges: 'Don't worry, I've been a cop for eleven years.' This scene, too, draws a parallel between the terrorist and McClane, but now on the basis of his being a policeman – a parallel that the narrative takes up several times later when the police inadvertently help the terrorists, instead of McClane.

### 2.3.8. A system of semiotic constraints

Openings, then, are also an opportunity to identify surface and deep structure, and their interrelatedness. Here, the formal-textual operations play through the different repertoire of making continuity out of discontinuity while at the same time 'thickening it' by way of figuration and verbal texture. The Hollywood text is 'closed' but also 'open': there are different entry points for an audience, many of the cues are ambiguous, but it is a planned ambiguity, multi-layered and multi-levelled. But the opening can also be read as quite unambiguous, formally closed, semantically and syntactically complete – in which case it does serve as a *mise-en-abîme* of the whole and as

a miniature version of the overall design. *Die Hard's* opening scene, although not detachable, is nonetheless an entire story, in that the meeting of John and Holly at the Christmas party could already be the reunion and reconciliation that both partners are obviously hoping for. But if this was the ending of the story, it obviously would not be worth a movie, and on the other hand, it would not give us the 'cultural' message: that for a relation like this to come together again, both partners have to work for it. In this sense the intrusion of the terrorists is, from the point of view of the story of John and Holly McClane, only the external motivation to render inescapable the necessity for them to 'work' on their relationship. The action-adventure movie becomes the place for family-couple therapy.

The point we are trying to make is threefold. One: the examples give an idea of how the signifying economy functions in classical Hollywood narrative – a relatively limited number of elements or pro-filmic events are subjected to several permutations and combinations, in order to yield complex structures, whose logic can be quite abstract. The nature of the narrative intrigue of a Hollywood film is such that in terms of motivation of the protagonists, and in terms of information about them (what is visually, verbally, or aurally introduced), the conflict and the psychology are kept simple, in order for the overall design and effect to become complex and intricate. And in the process, everything is made to count, everything is put to use. Nothing is wasted: as with a good butcher or housewife, there are few leftovers at the end of the day, or like a modern car production line, where profitability means a minimum of components, arriving just in time and capable of being assembled into several models. What the craft that goes into a Hollywood screenplay is in the service of – and justifies the many individuals who sometimes work on it – is not only the neat act division, the complication and reversals, or the tying up of loose ends, but what David Thomson, in a review of Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep*, once called 'the obliging servitude of the arranged world'. Everything is constructed, created, but then seems just sufficiently dense and opaque to be experienced as 'real', seems just sufficiently 'there' to become part of a rhythm of rupture and resistance, difference and separation, in order for there to be the impression of a fit between story and 'world', and their successful narrative integration.

Second: when decomposing/recombining the image material, in order to draw from it its full narrative and semiotic potential, classical cinema relies very heavily on relations of similarity and difference, by employing the rhetorical possibilities inherent in the similarity/difference axis represented by metaphor and metonymy. Some of these similarities are visual and verbal, i.e. echoes and rhymes, but others require a fair amount of abstraction in order to register. It would therefore seem that there is a kind of continuum from the perceptual to the cognitive, from the sensory to the conceptual. One cannot

neatly separate what is 'out there' in the image from what goes on 'in here', the mind of the spectator.

At the same time, it is always surprising to realize how much 'work' of very different kinds (textual work of scripting and *mise en scène*, professional expertise in staging, production values) goes into the simplest Hollywood scene. To take a moment of the textual (micro-) level: there is an apparently merely functional scene, when the cop car with Al Powell, the patrolman, is driving up to Nakatomi Plaza after the emergency call, but fails to find anything suspicious (i.e. he is 'blind' to the real goings-on). On the soundtrack there is a reference to a blind singer, 'not Ray Charles but Stevie Wonder' – and the car's headlights are on/off depending from whose point of view they are seen, the unsuspecting Al's or the anxious McClane's. The narrative perspective, the way the scene is seen, in other words, crucially differs in each shot, and the *mise en scène* underscores this difference in the moral (as opposed to optical) point of view of the two characters, by introducing what to some sharp-eyed commentators, appeared to be a continuity error (the on/off headlights). But the continuity has not 'goofed', as the blooper sheet has it (see <http://us.imdb.com/Goofs?0095016> listing the continuity errors in *Die Hard*). Rather, the director seems to have taken – perhaps surprisingly for a mainstream Hollywood film, but these moments in the past were the delight of *mise en scène* or auteurist critics – some liberties with plausibility, for the sake of added psychological depth and narrational involvement.

Third: this 'work' on the surface texture and the narrative-thematic context of a film is, however, not quite the 'work' we alluded to earlier on, whether we call it 'dream-work' after Freud or 'ideological', 'textual' work and 'problem-solving' after culturalist, post-structuralist, and cognitivist critics. What we identified as the level of abstraction produced in the opening scene of *Die Hard* is the 'work' of repetition, with specific gestures or actions repeating themselves to generate a concept, which is to say, a relation imbued with meaning. It is at this point that the 'work' we are trying to identify goes beyond a purely binary structure of oppositions and can be cast in the form of a syllogism of the kind identified above with Greimas's semiotic square.

For the genre of action-adventure films called 'male rampage films' and which, besides *Die Hard*, includes *Lethal Weapon I and II*, Fred Pfeil has worked out what could be called a 'system of ideological constraints'. Seeing the films as fables of 'masculinity in crisis', he distinguishes between male and not-male, phallic and non-phallic, state (police) and business (the multinational corporation), wilderness and domesticity, with the heroes and the villains symmetrically positioned as opposites, but each one also ambiguously poised as an outsider 'in between' (in the case of John McClane, between the non-phallic wilderness of bi-racial male bonding and the feminine world of sexual difference and the family, while Hans Gruber is in

between the phallic world of authority/the law and the 'neutered' world of the multinational corporation). In Pfeil's scheme, *Die Hard* features as an example of an ideological narrative which tries to mediate between Fordist and post-Fordist values, but does so by a complex *combinatoire*, made up of quite basic anthropological units:

[Position (S1)] is the nameable yet never represented space of 'the Wild' – the place the white protagonist has come from before he lands in LA, be it Viet Nam (in *Lethal Weapon*) or, in *Die Hard*, that other well-known symbol of multiracial rot and riot, New York. The Other, or [S2] of this space would then clearly be 'Domesticity,' the site of (heterosexual) life and family life. The Opposite [-S1] in these films must be the place of Business or professional-technical work. And finally, filling the place of [-S2], functioning as the inverse of the nurturant realm of hearth and home, we find the official space of law, authority, and order, i.e., the State.

(Pfeil 1993: 127)

Around this Greimasian analysis, we could also establish for *Die Hard* a slightly different system of semiotic constraints, constructed as the (cultural, ideological) incompatibilities of home and office, subtended by the (natural, cultural) difference between male and female. Although it broadly comes to the same conclusions, it would help us grasp one of the turning points of the story, namely the moment where McClane is closest to giving up, thinking he is about to die, while asking Al to tell Holly that he is sorry for how he behaved. The significance of this scene at the level of cultural contradiction is that McClane's situation here most exactly promises the structural resolution to the initial problem, namely that of Holly as a 'working mother'. He has become a 'feminized male', whose body bears the marks of femininity (connoted by his bleeding feet, to which the film has given a gender connotation – see below), whose interpersonal situation is emotional dependence (on Al, the cuddly desk cop, coded as a non-phallic male) and whose subjective state is his readiness to apologize (again, culturally coded as unmasculine). At the level of the Oedipal deep structure, it is the moment where he 'accepts castration', but at the ideological level, it would be the end of patriarchal disavowal of castration, while on the level of the action/rational agent logic it is the moment of greatest danger and imminent death. Thus, the narrative has to invent an escape for McClane, thereby also initiating a gradual climb back to phallic masculinity and a reclaiming of patriarchal values, towards the finally reassertion of an apparently unreconstructed macho identity. The Greimasian model thus allows us to trace more precisely the semantic/logical operations that make the ideological work possible and – an important point – pleasurable to that part of the audience that unconsciously identifies with McClane's anxiety and consciously wants to emulate his cocky masculinity.

### 2.3.9. Repetition/resolution

Part of this work, as we have stressed several times, is a certain excessiveness. This makes *Die Hard* also an example of what Colin MacCabe or Stephen Heath have analysed as a necessary instability of the classical system, its constant breakup of the configurations and their reassemblage. Heath, in his essay 'Narrative Space' (1981: 19-75), traces the different kinds of excess and instability in Hitchcock's 'geometry of representation', as they can be seen, for instance, in the different function of two paintings in *Suspicion*. This necessary instability, it might be argued, manifests itself in *Die Hard* as an emphasis on special effects, on the pyrotechnics of violent assault on bodies and buildings, typical of an action film but here staged in such a flamboyantly self-confident way that one suspects an underlying panic to be part of its violent urgency. For this kind of excess only serves to displace and cover up others kind of instability: the skewed 'relations' between male and female protagonist, the non-congruence between what John wants/needs and what Holly wants/needs for their gendered identity, and the asymmetry that locks executive female and working-class male into conflict and contradiction. A Bellour-type reading would identify the 'symbolic blockage' around the impossibility of McClane accepting his second, social 'castration' (in the new world of globalization), and therefore starting the pyrotechnical mayhem, a sort of fetish action by which he hopes to escape the acceptance of his first, originary castration under the law of patriarchy. This would identify his actions as motivated by guilt feelings about 'unfinished business' (in relation to his wife, but also to his profession as a New York cop), and it would confirm that while this classical narrative is apparently 'about' the male hero's psycho-sexual identity, 'woman trouble' is also at its heart. *Die Hard* can indeed be shown to be a film where the woman's unstable position in the world of men appears as the 'real' trouble in the system, not post-Fordism. But at the surface level, it is the trouble with a certain type of masculinity that actually propels the film. Such an emphasis on male desire and male anxiety means that masculinity becomes the motor of a perfectly functioning narrato-logical machine, where there can be no interruption or pause, and where even minor details and detours are relentlessly reintegrated, or retrospectively re-motivated as contributing to the central dilemma, by providing either possible solutions (the roads not taken by the hero) or impossible solutions (the pitfalls avoided by the hero).

One of the impossible solutions avoided by the hero is that provided by the subplot around Ellis, Holly's colleague and McClane's sexual rival. While Ellis may be more respectful of Holly's professional identity, both his predatory sexuality and his subservience and betrayal are severely punished by the film. His bad character's uncompromising stance towards McClane and Holly

retrospectively confirms the hero in having been right in his uncompromising stance, also vis-à-vis his wife. As to a possible solution not taken by the hero, there is a scene of the sex-mad couple at the party, who burst into the room where John and Holly are trying to make up, looking for a safe place to copulate. It is a shot that is repeated when the terrorists burst in, and its importance is indeed twofold: it demonstrates in a jokingly graphic way one option for John and Holly to get together again very fast indeed. But it also sets up expectations – false as it turns out – that the second time will also be an irruption of unbridled libido, when in fact it is an entirely different danger to the Christmas festivities. Here the repetition does not provide a resolution, but points to a dead end (for the couple), in the sense that their 'work' on the relationship encompasses more than sexual desire, which is shown (as so often in classical American cinema, with its puritan streak) to have destructive consequences: the wild sex drive of the couple is directly associated with the criminal drives of Gruber and his gang.

Another road not taken for McClane is the fate of Al Powell, the black patrolman. On the one hand, we see how his goals chime in with those of the main characters, especially McClane, both as a cop (to do his duty) and as a man (to have a family to go home to). He gets caught up in the action, on his way home to his pregnant wife, to whom he wants to bring the hostess cakes she has a craving for. In this respect he is a McClane without the macho-chip, but we see what a terrible price he has to pay: he is traumatised from having once shot and killed a youngster by mistake, a desk-bound cop (shorthand for emasculation in many Hollywood films, witness the Robert Duvall character in *Falling Down*), who needs to redeem himself as a policeman and a professional. He thus presents the (unacceptable) solution to McClane's dilemma, since the nurturing male for this genre is inevitably a traumatised or 'castrated' male.

### 2.3.10. Summary of the classical reading

The classical reading has highlighted a (macro-) structure that consists of three acts plus opening and coda. The opening ends with McClane arriving at the Nakatomi Plaza, while the terrorists are closing in as well. The first act ends with McClane talking to his wife in the bathroom. He is vulnerable (no shirt, shoes, or socks), but not repentant enough to respond to Holly's double invitation: to stay in the spare bedroom (rather than share her bed) and to pick up her admission that she misses him, by saying how sorry he was for not backing her career. The second act ends with McClane wounded, on the rooftop of the building, talking to Al Powell via the two-way radio about his possible death, eventually asking Al to tell his wife Holly that he is sorry. The third act ends with Hans Gruber falling to his death and Holly (as well as the



hostages) safe. The coda ties up the loose ends, including the restitution of Al Powell to full professional manhood. After nearly killing the hapless Argyle – and thus almost repeating his traumatic mistake – he successfully eliminates the oddly indestructible Karl. There follows the bi-racial embrace/male bonding of McClane and Al, and the ‘masculine’ gesture of Holly socking the TV journalist.

We have also established, thanks to the criteria of the well-made (screen)play, as itemized, for instance, by Bordwell, Straiger, and Thompson (1985; see also Thompson 1999), that the film has a goal-oriented hero who wants his wife back and to repair his marriage, preferably at no cost to his macho values. This hero is embedded in a psychologically motivated, character-centred plot, whose purpose is to allow each of the characters to pursue their objectives in a linear, resolute, and resourceful manner. Also conforming to the rules, the film has a double-plot structure, each plot strand braided together with the other: the romance plot and the terrorist plot, with the hero having to defeat the terrorists and the police, in order to resolve the romance plot. The ending finds a satisfactory closure with the death of all the villains, the formation of the heterosexual couple, and the rehabilitation of Al.

Had we conducted our analysis with the help of Propp and his ‘morphological’ approach, it would have yielded a slightly different segmentation, but the film’s canonical format and overall structure would nonetheless have been confirmed. For instance, we might have rephrased the question of the enigma slightly differently, so that the constitutive lack/absence would have been more explicitly expressed in the terms of a fairy tale: Holly as the princess, who has been abducted (first by the Nakatomi Corporation, who made her an offer she could not refuse, and then by Gruber and the terrorists who keep her as a special hostage when they learn she is the wife of McClane, their antagonist). It is, of course, the job of McClane to rescue her and return her to her rightful place: the family home. In order for McClane to do so, he has to be recognizable as the hero, and we do indeed witness the creation of a hero: first of all, as in a fairy tale, there are several tests, with magic objects (for instance, the contents of the tote bag of the terrorist he manages to kill), helpers (like Argyle or Al Powell), and the eventual confirmation of the male protagonist as ‘hero’ by his confrontation with and recognition of the villain (despite his disguise as a helper). McClane becomes worthy of being the hero via the three stages or steps of ‘contest, conquest, and coronation’. More complicated – but in line with Propp’s model – is the question of the helpers, several of whom are ambiguous, obstructive, and deceiving: in fact, in *Die Hard* the hero, as in many Hitchcock films, has both the villains and the police against him. Some of the baddies turn out to be good helpers (especially when dead) and vice versa. The film skilfully plays with these ambiguities, especially around the police, whom

McClane expects to be helpers but who inadvertently help Gruber instead; Argyle, the driver who wants to be a helper but is for the most part useless; or the television crew that also inadvertently helps Gruber by revealing the identity of ‘Ms Genaro’ as Mrs McClane.

In view of the relatively straightforward linear, goal-oriented action-line, we have perhaps concentrated too much on the deep-structural story-line, grouped around contradiction and propelled by the logic of desire. Where both storylines come together is in the interaction between the characters, an interaction that presented itself as a kind of battleground of cross-purposes, made up of their incompatible goals, but also of the many parallel relations joining them together, across apparently inexhaustible resources of repetition. Different kinds of incompatibility were seen to mirror each other. For instance, McClane’s goals turn out to be incompatible: he wants his wife back (and to function in the domestic sphere as father and head of family), but he also needs to be a good cop (to maintain and retain his professional self-esteem). This turns out to involve a contradiction that is resolved by seeing his conflict mirrored or paralleled in other characters. Thus, Holly McClane (Genaro) wants to be a professional (and make a career as executive in the Nakatomi corporation), but she also needs to be a good mother and wife. Here, too, two perfectly reasonable ambitions or goals are made to appear incompatible and contradictory: on the surface, because she is married to a macho cop with a chip on his shoulder, but also at the deep-structural level, because these are symptomatic tensions, either on the psychic battleground of sexual difference and human subjectivity or on the ideological battleground of the ‘culture wars’ in Reagan’s America of the 1980s, on the verge of experiencing the social and domestic impact of its globalized, globalizing economy.

We also established that the secondary characters in crucial respects ‘mirror’ the central ones, and thus play through alternative version of or variations on the central dilemma. As we saw, Al Powell and Ellis ‘mirror’ John McClane’s double dilemma, in one case that arising from his being a cop and thus committed to the ‘macho’ values of law and authority, and in the other case that of being a husband and lover, where his problem is to accept Holly as an equal partner in the marriage. On the other hand, a character like Ellis also mirrors Holly’s dilemma, and he is in some sense her alter ego, even though he turns out to embody the unacceptable solution. He is like Holly, in that he takes her professional ambitions for granted and even accepts her professional status, to the point of being envious of her Rolex watch. He also suggests how she could solve her other problem (as a single mother without a male companion) by wanting to date her, the problem there being that he sees her only as a sexual object/partner, and is not prepared to recognize or respect her obligations as a mother. Ellis, like Holly, wants to be boss, but the way he

goes about it – ingratiating himself with anyone who is in charge – is a negative example to her, and he promptly (and, for the audience, deservedly) is killed by Gruber.

Similar analyses could be made for several other, minor characters, such as Holly's Spanish maid (who wants to bring the family together, but needs to go undetected for being an illegal immigrant), the journalist (who badly needs a scoop), and Karl (who wants to avenge his brother's death but because of his private vendetta becomes a liability to Gruber): each has his own reasons, and each echoes the basic structure of mutual exclusiveness or contradictory goals powering the narrative. A special case are the 'black helpers' on either side: among the terrorists, the black safe-cracker wants a money share of the profits, and on McClane's 'team', Argyle the limousine driver also wants money – a fat tip: a parallel in the sub-plot across the difference of their respective allegiances. Similarly doubled and divided is the function of the Police. The LAPD wants to play it by the book and is always wrong; the FBI wants to defeat the LAPD even more than the terrorists, which is why the FBI men end up helping the terrorists (by shutting off the electricity in the building which inadvertently opens the safe).

The role of these characters is thus not only to generate complications and obstacles for the hero, but also to be at cross-purposes with each other; they are functions more than rounded characters, grouping themselves around the incompatibility of the goals of John and Holly, i.e. the apparent irreconcilability of domesticity and career, of being private and professional, of being 'man' and 'woman' at home and at work. In this sense, each character has his or her double somewhere, and all are linked to each other by a system of parallels and binaries that is woven around contradiction, contrariness, and complementariness, with every localized contest a version/variant of the other (or main) characters' dilemmas. Overall coherence in the classical narrative is thus the effect of macro-conflicts and micro-contradictions mirroring each other: repetition (and difference) as resolution (and unity).

## 2.4 The post-classical reading: theory

Given that the narrative of *Die Hard* seems so perfectly readable in terms of the classical model, is there even a need to move to another level and invoke the contested distinction classical/post-classical? What is it in the film that demands additional explanation? The questions bring us back to one of the terms we started with, namely spectacle (which we initially excluded in favour of a discussion of narrative) in order to consider the implicit polemical charge that spectacle and narrative exclude each other. What we hope to have established – and maybe even excessively so – is that if one defines the post-

classical as the priority of spectacle over narrative, then either the label as such is unconvincing or this particular definition of it will not hold. On the basis of our analysis, whether Aristotelian (the linear logic of the screenplay) or structuralist (the Oedipal logic of the narrative), we can conclude that the opposition drawn by the reviews is false: even assuming there is a new kind of emphasis on spectacle in contemporary Hollywood, then judging from *Die Hard*, it does not seem to be at the expense of the screenplay, the craftsmanship of the plotting, or indeed to the detriment of the deep-structural 'work' which classical narrative is said to accomplish on behalf of the dominant ideology.

Thus, the difference between classical and post-classical cannot be established on the basis of a binary opposition such as spectacle vs narrative, nor, we suspect, any other 'either/or' construction of difference. One suggestion was that we may have to look for a definition of the post-classical more along the lines of an excessive classicism, rather than as a rejection or absence of classicism. Applied to *Die Hard*, this would involve, on the one hand, a reconsideration of the (narrative, deep-structural) function of the spectacular scenes, as already hinted at several times above, and on the other, a deconstruction of both 'narrative' and 'spectacle', and with it a reconsideration of those elements that we have, up to now, so confidently assigned to the binary pairs of our respective semiotic squares.

Before doing so, however, let us briefly review once more the other definitions on offer for identifying the post-classical as a distinct mode: not only of representation and style, but also of production and reception.

### 2.4.1. Post-classical Hollywood: production and reception criteria

There is now a fairly broad consensus among film scholars how to understand the transformations of Hollywood picture-making that took place between the 1960s and the 1980s, which have led to the unexpected revitalization of the American cinema as both an economic and a cultural force. Among the key features are the gradual undoing of the consequences of the Paramount decree of 1947/48, which obliged the studios to divest themselves of their theatre chains and to break up the vertical integration that had sustained the film industry as a trust or cartel for the previous 25 years. Several waves of mergers and acquisitions within the audio-visual, televisual, and telecommunication sectors in the US during the 1970s and 1980s (favoured by a lax governmental anti-trust policy and accompanied by radical changes in management and business practices) did ensure that by the mid-1980s something rather similar to vertical integration had been re-established.

However, the engine of the revival and the symbol of the new clout of

Hollywood was the blockbuster, a heavily marketed, high-concept, multi-functional audio-visual entertainment product, which also served as showcase for new technologies in sound (Dolby) and image (special effects, computer-generated images). Able to attract new audiences and benefiting from saturation media exposure and global distribution, a blockbuster could reap huge revenues in a relatively short period. These encouraged sequels, hybrid genres, or formulas, as well as favouring the 'package deal', where either a star or a team around a producer could corner the market in a particular sub-genre or 'concept movie', which often combined a tested literary property, a particular visual style, and a marketing gimmick (known also as 'the book, the look, and the hook'). *Die Hard* fits this 'high concept' package deal approach to movie-making very well, seeing that it does form part of a sub-genre, the bi-racial buddy film, a niche market successfully colonized by a creative team assembled around the Gordon/Silver producer partnership, working as a semi-independent unit, but distributing via a major studio, in this case Twentieth Century Fox: 'It's good, dumb fun brought to you by producers Lawrence Gordon, Joel Silver and scriptwriters Jeb Stuart and Steven E. de Souza, who among them have already churned out *48 Hours*, *Predator*, *Commando* and *Lethal Weapon*' (Desson Howe, *Washington Post*, 15 July 1988). *Die Hard* also established a certain look of 'gritty glamour' as fashionable, and it had a punchline ('Yippi-ky-aye, motherfucker') that, like other famous movie one-liners ('Make my day, punk', 'Are you looking at me?!'), took on a life of its own in the culture at large.

Third, blockbusters, but also other Hollywood productions, fitted themselves around the entertainment expectations and trends of the 'youth culture' which in the 1980s had mutated from identifying with the 'counter-culture' to aggressively participating in the event and experience culture of shopping malls, theme parks, video arcades, hip-hop, raves, and music television. To this extent, mainstream movies had to learn to address this more diverse but also more volatile audience, differently segmented from the family audience of both cinema and television in the 1950s and 1960s. Hollywood's new audiences, male and female, domestic and international, expected the much-hyped sound and image technologies to deliver intense bodily, sensory, and emotional involvement.

#### 2.4.2. Post-classical Hollywood: formal and cultural criteria

It is this high-impact, technologically sophisticated involvement on the part of the primary target audience that Hollywood needed to appeal to which has found in the notion of 'spectacle' a shorthand common denominator. Technological advances in very different fields of popular entertainment (from animatronics in theme parks to computer games on play stations) and

at all levels of picture-making and sound reproduction (from IMAX screens to digital sound, from morphing to virtual reality environment) have indeed made inroads in such a traditional mass entertainment form as the cinema, and they have affected its staple product, the full-length feature film. One way, therefore, of interpreting the opposition spectacle/narrative – and with it, the division classical/post-classical – is to say that, just as in previous periods of cinema history it was new technologies that were putting pressure on the mode of production as well as transforming reception, so it has always been the task of story construction, *mise en scène*, and narration to absorb these changes, by adapting narrative structure and genre formats. Contemporary Hollywood gives every indication that it too has transformed and adjusted itself to recent technological changes, while in important respects retaining the features that have secured its success in the past. It is in this sense that one can say that the classical cinema is merely refigured within the post-classical, neither abandoned nor opposed – or, as we phrased it earlier, the post-classical is also the excessively classical cinema, a sort of 'classical-plus'. What this 'plus' in each case amounts to (including whether some see it in fact as 'minus') remains to be specified. Thus, one could think of the post-classical as a pastiche of the classical, or its meta-discursive and self-referential citation, but one could also picture a more two-way process of absorption, exchange, and modification, where technology is only one factor among many in the general realignment of Hollywood, its mode of production, story-telling skills, and audience/user expectations. For instance, one can imagine that the binary opposition classical/post-classical might disappear altogether, if Hollywood – as some predict and as we consider in subsequent chapters – were to concentrate more and more on developing narratives that are the blueprints or pilots for interactive computer games. Whether this is likely to happen or not, for the theorist the possibility alone is enough to suggest that such an interactive narrative might come to be looked at as the more general category, of which what we now call classical and post-classical would merely be the limited, transitional, or specialized instances.

This leads us back to the cultural aspect of the classical/post-classical interchange, notably the factor we have been calling 'work', the meaning-making processes whereby internal (formal, stylistic, rhetorical) procedures are transforming external (social, ideological, referential) materials into narrative. In the cinema, this conversion of sounds and images of the world into assertions and feelings *about* the world makes narrative, in its widest sense, a remarkable vehicle of cultural communication and social reproduction. What, therefore, happens to this 'work' in the 'post-classical' cinema, which we might consider as a mere phase in a continuous process of adaptation or realignment? At first glance, and given our analysis of the

textual and ideological work in *Die Hard*, it does look as if it is 'business as usual' too in this respect. But then, we also noted how often the film puts on show its own rhetoric, as well as the ideological material it is supposed to transport and transform.

In a somewhat different vocabulary, and arguing within the framework of 'postmodernism' rather than post-classical cinema, these thoughts preoccupy Fred Pfeil, who introduces his discussion of 'male rampage' films as follows:

Thanks in no small part to the *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* films I have come to see ... postmodernist cultural practices migrate, drift or [be] exchanged, like designer-label knock-offs or smallpox-infested blankets, across the porous frontiers separating hip from straight-out mass culture. In fact, one of the first things that struck me about these four films ... was precisely their unsettling affinities to previous, canonically hip postmodern works. True, their straightforward plots have little in common with the loopy surprises and multiple thematics of a *Brazil* or *My Beautiful Laundrette* ... But on the more formal level of cinematic style, narrative structure, and constitutive space-time, our fast-paced smash-'em-ups have a lot more in common with certified pomo art films like, say *Diva*, than you might think.

(Pfeil 1993: 124)

Pfeil then lists what he sees as the chief crossover features: the 'urban look' in the colour schemes ('washed-out pastels and dark metallic blues and greys'); the Bakhtinian chronotope of two sharply contrasted spaces within one diegetic temporal realm (in *Die Hard*, 'the spanking new high-rise office building ... and the functioning viscera [of] ventilation ducts and elevator shafts') where the space-time relations only seem to know one time (*now*) and one space ('the action is simply taking place *here* – and *here* – and *here* – in spaces whose distances from one another are not mappable as distances so much as they are measurable in differences of attitude and intensity'). As to the films' narrative structure, Pfeil adopts the view we have been arguing against, when we came across it in the reviews: 'an older model of plot development, moving from a state of stasis ... to a new and more fully resolved stasis, is largely superseded ... by the amnesiac succession of self-contained bits and spectacular bursts' (Pfeil 1993: 124-5).

However, as we saw from his Greimasian square, what concerns Pfeil about these films more than a close textual analysis of *Die Hard*'s surprisingly intricate plotting and careful *mise en scène*, both dedicated to the virtues of classical narration, is their handling of the large cultural formations of race, class, and gender, which he holds up against the political realities of the Reagan era, with its Iran-Contra cover-ups and Ollie Norths, and the economic realities of globalization with its shake-out of the labour market,

squeezing the (manufacturing) middle while the (managerial) top, as Pfeil says, gets multinational and the (unskilled) bottom multiracial:

Our films ... depict a very specifically white/male/hetero/American capitalist dreamscape, inter- and/or multi-national at the top and multiracial at the bottom, in which the interracial is eroticised even as a sharp power-line is reasserted between masculine and feminine: in which, indeed, all the old lines of force between races, classes, and genders are both transgressed and redrawn. If the results of all these constructions and operations are scarcely to be extolled as examples of radical or liberatory cultural production ..., they nonetheless suggest a new and vertiginous psycho-social mobility, a moment of flux.

(Pfeil 1993: 147)

Thus, despite his qualification of the plot as 'amnesiac', Pfeil still expects the narrative of *Die Hard* to be doing its customary work of ideological 'constructions and operations', though no longer unambiguously in the service of the hegemonic value system, producing instead mobility and flux within the categories of race, class, and gender. 'New mobility' and 'a moment of flux' are, of course, terms which themselves belong to the (positive) vocabulary of postmodernist discourse, so that at this point the ideological work of the film and the critical work of the theorist miraculously mirror each other.

Yet, as Pfeil is only too aware, this effect is due to the fact that what is at stake in postmodern thinking is the very dissolution of binary oppositions, including those basic ones that for nearly three decades have informed much of textual analysis itself, such as radical/conservative, progressive/reactionary, critical/hegemonic, left/right. The consequence is that the mode of engagement with the object of analysis is also no longer the same, for instead of keeping its critical distance, the analyst's tactic now turns around notions such as 'appropriation', 'cooption', and 'deconstruction', where it is understood that even conservatives and hegemonic ideologues are now deconstructivists, adept at reading the mobile signs of hybridity and bricolage around the formerly radical or critical discursive formations of race, class, gender, and nation.

## 2.5. Post-classical reading: method

More or less the same dilemma confronts us in our definitions of the 'post-classical', and especially when we try to turn the economic-technological analysis of contemporary Hollywood's mode of production, and Pfeil's formal-cultural definitions of postmodern cinema, into a 'method' for the stylistic analysis of post-classical films: post-classical, we now want to

propose, are above all those moments in a classical film when our own theory or methodology suddenly turns up in the film itself, looking us in the face: either gravely nodding assent, or winking. In subsequent chapters – especially those on *Chinatown* (Chapter 4), *Back to the Future* (Chapter 8), and *Silence of the Lambs* (Chapter 9) – we shall encounter a similar phenomenon, and each time we will try to make it productive as the moment where a different method or paradigm can make its entrance. In the present chapter, in which we try to describe these déjà vu's and uncanny encounters in some detail, it will not lead to a different paradigm, but to a sort of action replay of our own classical analysis, to see how we can recapture these moments of nodding or winking.

- We shall begin by once more looking at the *narrative structure*, probing it to see what else it might reveal.
- We shall also reconsider our heuristic distinction between *surface* and *depth*, to find that the film takes it more literally than we would want it to be taken, especially with respect to its *Oedipal logic*.
- This will allow us to comment on *race*, *gender*, and the *male body*, arguing that certain areas of taboo, censorship, and indirection in the classical mode of representation (of bodies, genders, and races) have been 'opened up', although possibly with the result that 'transgression' itself has become a mere 'surface effect'.
- In the section on the *transnational/post-colonial/globalization theme* we shall be arguing that a double perspective envelops the film's socio-political themes: while the story is clearly *about* certain aspects of transnational capitalism from an American point of view, the film knows that it is itself also very much *part of* this globalization, a situation it seems to address by becoming a sort of two-way mirror of national clichés in a multicultural setting.
- What holds the mirror in place and the spectator in the picture, we shall be concluding, is the film's penchant for punning: from the star's trademark wisecracking to visual jokes and structural ironies, elaborated around tag-lines or riddling phrases, *Die Hard* keeps us on our toes without giving us a firm foothold, thanks to what we are calling its *sliding signifiers*.

## 2.6. Post-classical analysis

### 2.6.1. Narrative structure

Perhaps the case for *Die Hard* as a post-classical film, Pfeil's remarks notwithstanding, is at its weakest when argued on the basis of its plot

development, which follows quite straightforwardly the canonical three-act structure, centred on a male protagonist. However, as one goes through the act division once more, two features invite further comment: one is the spacing and pacing of the violent action scenes that intersperse the unfolding of the drama, and the other is the fact that the three-act division can also be 'turned', so as to be centred not on John McClane, but on Holly Genaro or Hans Gruber. Although the overall momentum of the action seems to favour McClane, each act offers parallel nodal points of development for the other characters. For instance, Act 1 ends with Holly admitting that she still loves John; Act 2 ends with her being taken hostage by Hans Gruber, after he recognizes her as the wife of John McClane; Act 3 ends with her having to part with the Rolex watch, symbol of her social status as a career woman, in order to save her life. The coda ends with her socking the journalist who had pried into her family life.

Similarly, it is possible to chart the rise and fall of Hans Gruber around the same three-part act division: his successful surprise entry, the discovery of a 'rogue' occupant in the building, the internal unravelling/decimation of the gang, and his fatal fall clutching a Rolex watch. Thus, the story makes sense from the perspective of each of the three principal characters, with the spectacular set pieces dividing the initiative almost evenly between McClane and Gruber – the action with the fire hose or the elevator shaft being all McClane's, while Gruber calls the shots (with McClane a mere spectator) in one of the most chilling scenes, the assassination of Tagaki, Holly's boss. The case for a post-classical reading, therefore, does not depend on the absence/presence of the canonical story format per se, but would build on the evidence of a 'layering' of the traditional screenplay, which opens it up to several players or avatars, allowing the film to migrate quite comfortably from big screen to the video arcade or the gameboy console. Unusual for a classical film, but again relevant to an interactive scenario is the motive-shifting of the villain: Gruber seems to change his mind as to why he is occupying the building at least three times, morphing from international terrorist to thief and back again to a man with a grievance and the brains and the firepower to act on it.

### 2.6.2. Surface structure and deep structure

Much has been made in our classical analysis of the distinction between surface structure and deep structure. Yet these terms are merely spatial metaphors to direct attention to a disparity of dramatic movement, to a cognitive tension, or a difference in emotional patterning or intensity. In some ways, however, *Die Hard* behaves as if it knew about this purely heuristic distinction. For instance, it constantly alludes to its surface texture, by staging

a quite extraordinary play on 'glass'. In fact, one way to define 'spectacle' in *Die Hard* would be to say that it draws some of its most memorable effects from the splattering and shattering of glass – the big plate-glass windows that McClane has to smash to push out the body in order to draw the patrolman's attention to the fact that not all is what it seems at Nakatomi Plaza; Gruber ordering one of his men (in faulty German) to fire on the glass in order to make of it a carpet of splinters which will cut McClane's feet to bleeding shreds; the blood and brains of Tagaki clouding the glass partition and blocking McClane's view. Glass also provides some intense sound effects throughout, and there is even a Roy Lichtenstein-inspired pop art picture of a shattering pane of glass on the wall in Holly's office, shown twice – the second time accompanied by the crackling sound of machine-gun fire.

Similarly, with respect to the narrative's deep structure, our argument has been that it is there that the story's Oedipal logic unfolds. 'Ho-ho-ho,' the film says, not only to Oedipus, but to patriarchy, and gives us Father Christmas instead. The fact that one of the reviewers should ask, 'Why Christmas?' suggests that he cannot have watched the film all that carefully. In fact, Christmas is crucial in at least two distinct ways. It is, as indicated, the season for family reunion and reconciliation, motivating McClane's return to Holly. It is also a culturally overdetermined holiday season (white, first world, Christian), and there is something distinctly off-key in the Nakatomi Corporation having an elaborate Christmas party (a fact which the film acknowledges musically when it cross-cuts between Bach and Handel at the Nakatomi reception and rap music in the limo). Christmas in sun-baked LA always carries a surrealist touch, with snow-powdered Christmas trees, an incongruity verbalized in the opening scene mostly by Argyle, whose limo's in-car entertainment consists of hip-hop and rap, and who is suitably facetious about 'white' Christmas music: when asked by McClane: 'Don't you have some Christmas music?', he answers 'This *is* Christmas music.'

But Christmas is even more pervasively embedded in the visual, verbal, and thematic texture of the film, functioning as a semantic resource in several distinct registers. An explicit reference, for instance, is Gruber's delight that the FBI is making him a Christmas present by shutting down the electricity, which 'lights up his tree': Gruber expects a miracle, and it occurs when the lights go out and the last door of the safe opens, like an Advent calendar on Christmas Eve. More oblique, but hardly to be missed, is McClane's practical joke on one of the villains, the intellectual Fritz. McClane helps himself from Fritz's bag to cigarettes, lighter, a machine gun, and a walkie-talkie, then dresses the dead body up as Father Christmas, having first emblazoned his t-shirt with the words 'ho-ho-ho', before sending him down the elevator as if it was a chimney ('Father Christmas coming down the chimney'), a visual pun that is once more activated when McClane plunges the explosives down the

ventilation shaft and it lights up at the bottom like a fire in the hearth. One additional element of the (Anglo-American) Christmas ritual is worked into the narrative: it seems as if by taking off his socks, McClane had 'invited' Father Christmas to fill his stockings, so that the magic objects he needs for his fight against the robbers/terrorists are in fact *his* Christmas presents.

In other words, the signifier 'Christmas' is both a 'sliding signifier' (see below) and at the centre of a culturally, visually, and cognitively rich seam of meaning, which the film (in terms of script and *mise en scène*) exploits in order to give a special texture and resonance to the actions. In the family reunion drama, Christmas acts as a element of verisimilitude; in the LA setting, it provides an atmosphere of dissonance, alerting us to the ethnic theme; in relation to Gruber and McClane, it adds dramatic irony to the fairy-tale motif of donors and helpers; for McClane it is the occasion for practical jokes at his enemies' expense, and for the *mise en scène* it motivates one of the metaphoric uses of the spatial configuration unfinished building/unfinished business (elevator shafts and ventilation ducts/terrorists to be dispatched); finally, the socks/stocking allusion contains an irony directed at McClane's emotional immaturity, while the Father Christmas references sarcastically comment on the patriarchal quest of the hero, in search of a new foundation for his fatherhood and masculine identity.

### 2.6.3. Race, gender, and the male body

Also alerting us to 'surface structures' is another element that did not escape the critics, often said to belong to the arsenal of the post-classical cinema, namely the emphasis on the body, and in particular on the display of the male body:

Bruce Willis in another one of those Hollywood action roles where the hero's shirt is ripped off in the first reel so you can see how much time he has been spending at the gym.

(Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 15 July 1988)

As Ebert implies, the film reflects a preoccupation of popular culture and especially media culture since the 1980s with the eroticized male body, as we know it from body-building, *Baywatch* and jogging, leading another reviewer to speak of *Die Hard* as 'a body-intensive, cardiovascular workout movie' (Hal Hinson, *Washington Post*, 15 July 1988).

Not least because of television, and its ability to invest sports performers via close-up with a special kind of physical glamour, representations of the male body have changed dramatically in the past two decades. Slow motion and action replays have turned televised football (or soccer) into one of the most lucrative forms of entertainment ever known, helping to make this traditionally uniquely male spectator sport also pleasurable to women

audiences. The male body has become big business visual spectacle, in contrast to the classical male body, usually seen as the bastion of abstraction from its physical manifestations (except in pornography), neither eroticised nor 'marked' (for fear, it is said, of yielding to the homoerotic subtext that has always been present in Hollywood). Although there have been exceptions in certain genres (such as the boxing film or the war film), certain stars (Clark Gable's string vest), and certain directors, notably in Anthony Mann's Westerns, and almost all of Robert Aldrich's films, classical cinema has mostly shown its men fully clad and physically unimpaired: their Oedipal wounds have remained symbolic, the bodily envelope largely unaffected. But not so in *Die Hard*, where Bruce Willis's body is exposed and put on display. Physically wounded and relentlessly punished, McClane's vulnerability is graphically shown; indeed, his body is 'somatized' and so are we as spectators: we 'feel' how painful it is to walk over broken glass and have the tender skin of our soles torn open and bleeding.

This attention to male skin as a surface – tender in both senses of the word – has not escaped commentary, when film scholars theorize the shifting relations of gender, and in particular, the representation of gays. Whether as pin-ups presented for visual pleasure to male and female viewers, or in scenes of same-sex physical contact between males of different race, Hollywood has not hesitated to follow trends in fashion, advertising, and other areas of popular (sub)culture, in order to make what once was called 'deviance' or even 'miscegenation' consumable. We have already quoted Fred Pfeil, who links the slippage of the classically tabooed race boundaries in the representation of males to the problematically 'multiracial community' of unskilled workers gathering as a reserve pool in low-paid service industries. Yet it is again remarkable how *Die Hard* looks as if its makers had read all the relevant cultural studies literature, so as to provide 'something for everybody'. With the bi-race buddy theme between McClane and Al Powell (and their tearful final embrace), with the 'Johnson and Johnson' joke of the two FBI agents ('no relation'), and the Spanish maid occupying structurally the same nurturing role in respect of Holly as Al does in respect of McClane (aligning 'people of colour' as unthreateningly neutral in the caring positions/professions), *Die Hard* has ensured that the interpretive community of 'race–class–gender' studies can have a field day, by catering to hoary clichés and stereotypes, while sufficiently mixing the categories and boundaries to mildly impress even radical activists like Pfeil.

Sharon Willis is less impressed. In her essay on the genre (Willis 1997), covering much the same ground as Pfeil, she is nonetheless careful to make a distinction between the formations of gender and race, arguing that it is race which, precisely because it is so excessively foregrounded, remains the unacknowledged pivot of the film's ideological construction. Rather than the

film translating racially coded issues into gender-coded ones, she sees a constant slippage and reversal, indicative of what she calls the 'trade-offs' between race and gender, from the point of view of masculinity in crisis, which then release different 'erotic economies' that entail the consequence that 'black' and 'female' emerge as incompatible with each other, unable to exist within the same discursive space. For Willis, it is therefore race that remains the bi-racial buddy films' actual trauma, which they cover up by jocular homoeroticism, spectacularized bodies, and a liberal presentation of interracial communication around the upholding of the law. This strategy disavows the very real impossibility of the white United States to come to grips with its racism, especially seeing that blacks in America do not so much represent the law as have the law inscribed on their bodies in the penal institutions they so disproportionately populate. The liberalism or 'licence' of representation in the films, along with the permanent sexual innuendo and the physical bravado, are the mask that a deeply reactionary genre gives itself, in order to reassert the narrowest of social spaces and the most clichéd of discursive places reserved for non-whites, and to redraw more firmly the lines of sexual and racial difference.

#### 2.6.4. The transnational/post-colonial/globalization theme

Sharon Willis's remarks, along with Pfeil's point about the untranscendable horizon of post-classical (or, in his terminology, postmodern) cinema being that of transnational capitalism are well taken. If we are to look for a historical framework within which to place the tectonic plates and shifting surfaces of *Die Hard*'s identity politics, the information economy of services, and the 'outsourcing' of manufacture to low-cost labour countries by multinational corporations on the one hand and the plight of American urban blacks on the other are as persuasive as any. And yet in at least two respects these political reflections, too, only plunge us deeper into the self-referential double-binds that seem so typical of the post-classical mode.

First of all, *Die Hard* plays a joke on the conditions of its own possibility. Standing in for the Nakatomi Corporation's headquarters as the film's principal location was the then brand-new Century Plaza office tower, home of Twentieth Century Fox, the production/distribution company for which Gordon and Silver made this film and the others in the series. The joke is double-edged: by offering its own real estate as location, the Fox company made a shrewd investment, but it also hints at the irony that a blockbuster's budget in the 1980s was beginning to exceed the construction cost of a high-rise office tower. The fact that the producers make use of the tower in its half-finished state, only then to let it go up in flames and bring it down as debris, is itself a nice touch, an ironic thank-you note addressed to the host and client.

The other level of self-reference relates to the film's extensive deployment of the signifiers of nation: national identity and international business, against the backdrop of transnational history since the Second World War. If we can assume that the plot does indeed engage with the anxieties of America's working class about the future of its jobs and, more generally, the US economy's competitive position vis-à-vis Japan and Europe (in the days before the 'new economy' had taken off, which in the 1990s put America again in the lead), then the choice of nationalities and foreign nationals in the film is very knowing indeed:

The terrorists, too, are a multinational group, led by a German named Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) who is well-dressed and has a neatly trimmed beard and talks like an intellectual and thinks he is superior to the riffraff he has to associate with. He has a plan that has been devised with clockwork precision.

(Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 15 July 1988)

Ebert's review, once again, mimetically tries to render the film's flavour, faithfully reproducing the national clichés in circulation, down to the 'clockwork precision' still inevitably evoking (Nazi-) Germany. Thus we could, without much difficulty, devise for the national/transnational axis another semiotic square. The villains are Germans, the bosses Japanese: from the point of view of America, these two nations have much in common. In the past, during the Second World War, they had been the USA's most formidable enemies, but they are now among its closest political allies. Yet even at the time of *Die Hard*'s release both Japan and Germany were still an economic threat, notably to the US auto industry, and thus to the very emblem of blue-collar jobs that individuals like McClane are likely to lose. This history/present-day binary pair is overlaid by another pair, differently split but equally pertinent, because situated in an intermediary historical period, insofar as the terrorists are identified with the German Red Army Faction of the 1970s – notoriously anti-American and pro-Vietnam in their bombings and assassinations of US military targets in West Germany – while those called upon to defeat them, the FBI and LAPD, are too young to remember, traumatized by or once more gung-ho for another Vietnam. If the film freely indulges in anti-German resentment, it does not spare the Japanese either, even though they appear as the 'good guys'. What underlies the latent hostility – not least on the part of Hollywood itself – is the fear of Japanese takeovers, when we recall the aggressive moves made in the 1980s by companies like Sony and Matsushita to buy up studios like Columbia Pictures and Universal. The in-joke here would be that the Nakatomi Corporation is housed in the headquarters of another Hollywood studio, Twentieth Century Fox, itself owned by a 'Far-Easterner', the naturalized American but originally Australian Rupert Murdoch.

A more subdued but also overdetermined US/UK rivalry makes itself felt as well: it is present via the actor Alan Rickman, who plays the suave Hans Gruber, swapping – James Bond fashion – name and address of his tailor with Nakatomi's CEO, before brutally and casually dispatching him. Truly formidable and treacherous villains in Hollywood are always best played by Englishmen (apart from Rickman, one thinks of Laurence Olivier in *Sleuth* and *The Marathon Man*, or more recently, of Anthony Hopkins's *Hannibal Lecter* as well as the ubiquitous, versatile, but always fiendish Gary Oldman). The melting pot/salad bowl coalition of ethnicities, since the 1980s obligatory for the US film and TV industry, is also present, with the Celtic contingent (McClane), the Italians (Holly), Blacks (Al Powell), and Hispanics (the maid) all represented.

A special place in the intercultural and transnational semiotics of *Die Hard* is reserved for Hans Gruber: international terrorist, avenging angel, common criminal. At one level, he wants to teach Japan and the US a (political) lesson; at another level, he wants to steal \$600 million in bearer bonds (fancy monetary instruments of new economy globalization?). Yet, as we know from his gentlemanly manners and sharp clothes, he is also at home in the executive suits of international business. Thus he seems to be an international terrorist turned international banker, but turns out to be a common, if rather resourceful thief. At yet another (symbolic) level, he is a creature from a different kind of movie, because a master of disguises. Terrorist, businessman, bank robber, employee, and victim: his capacity for disguise makes him not just a villain but a monster, as in fairy tales or a horror movie. It is as if Gruber (and Karl) are Dracula-like 'drive creatures' (as opposed to 'desire creatures'), who apparently cannot be defeated by ordinary means because they have supernatural powers: even the LA police and FBI help Gruber, as does television and the media. Finally, when considering him structurally in relation to McClane's dilemma of class and status, Gruber is a mediator/alter ego: he has the brute force and manual skills of McClane, but he also belongs to the world of executives and global capital to which Holly aspires.

### 2.6.5. The sliding signifiers

On a technical level, there's a lot to be said for *Die Hard*. It's when we get to some of the unnecessary adornments of the script that the movie shoots itself in the foot.

(Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 15 July 1988)

In all likelihood Ebert intended to make a pun, but one wonders whether he did not speak truer than he knew. The film in any event seems to know, since it certainly fetishizes McClane's feet more intensely than almost any other part



of his body, including his bare chest. Starting with the Asian-American fellow passenger on the plane, who advised McClane to clench his toes into a fist – Chinese-style, one supposes – the foot references are never far away in this film, with close-ups of bare feet, bleeding soles, bandaged feet dragged across the floor so often focusing the action on McClane's delicate but damaged extremities. But encouraged by Ebert's pat phrase, how can one not think of the name of the mythic hero, and the impediment to which he owed his name: Oedipus, the club-footed?

This sort of slippery punning – in and out of the text – may itself be an indicator of the post-classical: not as a style, and more as frame of mind, on the part of aficionados and analysts alike. There is certainly no shortage of this kind of bad and ingenious, profound, and facetious wordplay in the film, underscoring also Bruce Willis' star image as an irrepressible wisecracker in many of his roles before and since *Die Hard*. The trend is helped, as indicated, by the inroads that marketing experts have made on blockbuster productions, invariably launched with tag-lines and soundbites ('the hook'). But instead of calling them hooks or bylines, we have opted for the suspiciously semiotic term 'sliding signifier' to indicate a pun's variable relation between signifier and signified, where language exploits plurality on the side of the signifier (verbal or visual doublets) and the film exploits plurality on the side of the contexts (ambiguity, irony, and reversal allowing the signifieds to float). Although this is merely an extension of classical cinema's structural use of symmetry and repetition, such puns in the post-classical mode are at once staged and compressed, drawing attention to the device and to the reversibility of the relations and situations to which it points. By calling these moments of condensation sliding signifiers, we also want to note their 'mobility' and 'drift', since they not only slip and slide between different referents, as puns are meant to do, but also migrate from inside the film to its promotion and packaging, at times entering, as with McClane's war cry, the common parlance of popular culture. Finally, we also want to allude to (and salute) another widely held view about the post-classical, namely that surface extension, recto and verso are the principles that organize meaning, rather than depth and interiority. However, we emphatically wish to resist the prevailing notion that attention to surface must mean being intellectually or emotionally 'shallow'.

A good example of the cinema working the verbal surface of a text are the names and the title. This is not specific to cinema, and even less so an exclusive mark of the post-classical. We only need to think of Charles Dickens's novels, where names such as Mr Gradgrind, Mrs Sparsit, Mr Bounderby, Mr Harthouse, and Mrs M'Choakumchild (from *Hard Times*) all by themselves define the moral atmosphere of a fictionally complete world. In the classical cinema, too, we could cite any number of instances, from the male

chauvinistically named Mrs Rutland in *The Big Sleep* to the middle initial 'O' in *North By Northwest's* Roger Thornhill. Kuntzel, in his essay on *The Most Dangerous Game*, pointed out the triple pun in the title, but he hardly needed to have bothered, since in the film the villain himself, Count Zaroff, takes time out to gloss the double entendre of 'game'.

Again, while the post-classical does not break with this staple of popular fiction in any medium since times immemorial, it vigorously pushes the envelope. It is no accident that John [McClane] should have as his rival Hans [Gruber], when their Christian names are identical in their respective languages. McClane's name is associated with the Scottish word 'clan', i.e. 'family', which is close to the root meaning of his wife's maiden name, 'Genaro'. 'Holly', her first name, inevitably makes (Anglo-Americans) think of Christmas, while 'Tagaki', the name of her boss, apparently means 'tall tree' or *paterfamilias* in Japanese. Johnson and Johnson, the two FBI agents, certainly do not evoke baby powder, but possibly the name of the largest publisher of black American magazines, while Al Powell turns out to have real 'pal power' for John McClane. He also *buys* his sweets ('hostess cakes'), while one of the 'terrorists' (in between guarding the hostages) cannot resist the temptation to *steal* his sweets.

In *Die Hard* ambiguity, polysemy, and irony also cluster around the title: ambiguous, in that a diehard is someone who does not give up easily, thus referring to McClane, but it can also mean someone who just refuses to die, which in the film applies to Gruber's out-of-control associate Karl, absurdly indestructible. Polysemic insofar as the word 'hard' refers to Bruce Willis's macho hard-body image as an action hero, to McClane being a hard man (by not saying sorry to his wife until it's almost too late), as well as to the role played by class in *Die Hard* (hard-hat – working class masculinity). Ironic, finally, in that – as Pfeil points out, by quoting Webster's Dictionary – 'diehard' also means 'an extreme conservative', as if the film was cocking an ideological snook at its progressive critics.

The puns do not have to be only verbal, though even the visual ones often require an implicit linguistic reference point: it being Christmas, the idea of snow is in the air, however incongruous this might be in Southern California, despite Bing Crosby's song or Argyle's scoffing. But in one of the first scenes inside the Nakatomi building, we see Ellis snorting coke ('snow'), and at the very end, the towering ruin of the Nakatomi building becomes itself something of a Christmas tree, from which thousands of sheets of paper, like flakes, are gently falling to the ground, giving John and Holly a white Christmas after all.

The fact that such wordplay and visual punning permeate even the most seemingly insignificant features says much for the professionalism that goes into the making of Hollywood's 'dumb fun'. As a permanent

meta-commentary in a minor key, it also reminds the audience of the film's particular rhetoric of generating meaning out of difference and similarity, metaphor and metonymy, preparing spectators for the introduction, for instance, of a special object, multiply motivated and radiating signifying power at different points and in different contexts. Such a symbolic – or totemic – object is Holly's Rolex watch. It condenses a whole range of motifs, from her rapid rise in the Corporation and her status as a professional woman to her ambivalent relations with Ellis, who keeps pushing her to show it off to McClane, half-proud of her, half-envious. But the Rolex moment of glory is when Holly has to part with it in order to save her life. When McClane finally sees it, it is only to release it from her wrist: symbolically charged icon of her independence, the watch enters the drama as a Hitchcock handcuff, in a situation where the choice is made easy: it's life or death. But the fact that Gruber clings to it is also like a displacement of Holly's desire to cling to it as a precious representation of her 'working mother' identity, so that it becomes doubly ironic that McClane is the one who snaps the Rolex off. These repeated appearances of the Rolex at different junctures in the plot make it function like a semantic battery, plugged into the narrative current, in order to be charged and recharged with meaning. In its way it, too, is a sliding signifier: never more so than when, along with Gruber, it slides off Holly's wrist.

But let us pick a pun that at first does not seem to be one, and therefore needs special unpacking, because it is both a riddle and a mantra, the traditional ways of using enigmatic language for 'serious' (dramatic) purposes, and therefore once more not something unique to the post-classical. We are thinking of the piece of advice McClane receives on the plane: 'Curl your toes into a fist.' Well-meaning though it is, the mantra turns out to be disastrous as well as providential in a quite different context than that intended. Disastrous because, by following it, McClane is caught in the bathroom, not (like Vincent Vega in *Pulp Fiction*) with his pants down, but nonetheless with his socks down. Providential, in that his retreat to the bathroom means he escapes the roundup and the hostage taking. As argued in the classical analysis above, the phrase, however, also functions figuratively in a wider context, that of the central contradiction of the film between male and female, for which it already predicts and spells out the terms of its possible resolution. How so? By making use of the cultural connotations of the body parts which happen to be gender-specific. '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. These are underlined when we think of the bandages McClane will have to wear later on, to stop the bleeding. The metonymies of toes/feet/soles/bleeding/bandages reinforce these associations of femininity, giving us a key as to the metaphoric significance of McClane's bleeding feet: they are part of his 'feminization', his painful

journey to being able to say sorry, his having to learn to become vulnerable, to realize the in- and underside of his diehard obstinacy and hard-body masculine carapace. 'Curl your toes into a fist' has to be read inside out, back to front, in order to spell out the healing formula for McClane's dilemma as a macho: 'make toes out of your first', i.e. admit the female side of your masculinity, open up your violence to your vulnerability. In order to be a proper father/husband, the old macho has to become the new man – before he can become the new old macho again: these are the stages McClane emulates, and they follow the classic narrative triad of 'state of stasis/destabilization/more fully resolved stasis' which Pfeil found lacking in *Die Hard*. Read prospectively, the advice predicts McClane's drama; read retrospectively (and in reverse, as a coded discourse around gender), the Asian-American's message, like the riddle of the Sphinx to Oedipus, like the Wise Man from the East (inscrutable being the appropriate cliché association), names his dilemma and gives him the terms of his possible redemption.

A parallel regendering trajectory is undergone by Holly. She has to be stripped of all her (traditionally male) professional attributes: she starts off in control, and (like a man) takes over when her boss is shot. But when directly confronting Gruber, she 'reverts' to female demands: a sofa for her pregnant colleague and for the women to be allowed to go to the bathroom. She is then taken hostage not as the boss of her firm, but as wife of John McClane, once more becoming the stereotypical object of exchange between males. Then in another scene, she is shown sitting with the pregnant woman, acting as her maid or midwife. In the end, she gets John back, but is properly reduced to the role of mother and nurturer, with only one consolation: she does curl her 'toes' into a fist, when she socks the journalist on the jaw, just before walking away with McClane, the classical 'formation of the couple' having become a post-classical *re-formation* of the couple.

In its bold associations, its 'transgressiveness', and yet also its thematic economy and power of compression, the toe/fist sliding signifier does indeed, we think, qualify as post-classical, at least in the way we have here been discussing it. Yet once again, it suggests that this 'post' is the same, but different, where 'different' may have to be understood in the (deconstructionist) sense of 'deferred', as a delay, which is, after all, one of the meanings of the word 'post', marking a shift in temporality, rather than in substance or quality.

## Conclusion

Have we, by thus deferring the elements of a classical reading from those of a post-classical reading, been able to answer either the question of spectacle vs

narrative or to resolve the polemical opposition 'classical/post-classical'? We started from the assertion that film scholars draw the boundary between classical and post-classical cinema as a function of their critical agendas, while the film itself as artefact and object does not, on the whole, predicate or demand a particular decision one way or another. Once we have clarified the meaning of narrative and spectacle, perhaps we can begin to perceive the boundary between classical and post-classical in the context of the overall status of the film: not only a logically and narrato-logically readable 'text', but (in light of the pressures brought by technology, consumerism, and audience expectations to mainstream cinema) also as a coherently orchestrated 'experience'. Our argument has been that we have to regard the category of spectacle less in the sense of visual excess, or as indexed by physical violence and spectacular display of technology, and maybe not even as the moments where 'showing' overpowers the (narrative) reasons to show. Rather, in the broader context beyond the binary divide, it connotes a different kind of self-display or 'knowingness', a special sort of awareness of the codes that govern classical representation and its genre conventions, along with a willingness to display this knowingness and make the audience share it, by letting it in on the game. This type of spectacle manifests itself, among other things, in the deployment of what we called the sliding signifier, an excess of signification and meaning-making that attaches itself to the visual, verbal and sonic material and makes it available for semantic play (puns) and surface display (glossy look), as well as for special (sound) effects and special (pictorial) effects. As we saw, the signifier 'glass' plays such a role in *Die Hard*: semantic feature, material object, pictorial subject matter, and sound-effect, it is also narratively integrated as an efficient dramatic resource, thereby giving a many-layered, multimedia, polysemic 'texture' to *Die Hard*, performing its narrative, in order to make it part of the somatic-bodily experience of the film.

For it is this knowingness about itself as self-display, as well as about its role in the marketplace of popular culture and cultural politics, that gives the film its multiple entry points for diverse audiences. This includes servicing the needs of fans, of technical aficionados, of radical intellectuals, and of definition-hungry scholars, but also of a new kind of commodification of the Hollywood product via interactive video games: indicating that the post-classical film knows that it has to reach not only the supposedly homogeneous audience of middle America but the by now highly specialized, culturally and ethnically segmented audiences of global reach, of which women, for instance, make up a high proportion, even for action movies.

In other words, what finally matters about post-classical cinema and at once defines the category and defies it, is that certain films seem to 'know' that they are post-classical. From the perspective of production, post-classical

films stand in a tradition: they have mastered the codes of the classical, and they are not afraid to display this mastery as 'play', in the way they are able to absorb, transform, and appropriate also that which initially opposed the classical – be it other film-making traditions, such as European art cinema, Asian cinema, television advertising, or even video installation art, or be it oppositional theories and political practices, such as the critical discourses around the formations of race, class, gender, and nation. From the perspective of reception, it is this knowingness – which may, as we have suggested, be no more than the reflection of the critics' theoretical or political agenda, as it bounces off the film's polished, smooth, chrome-plated surface 'look' – that gives, with its several reflexive turns, the label 'post-classical' its most defensible validity and, perhaps more problematically, its only stable application. The 'work' of classical narrative – dream-work, textual work, or ideological work – is becoming, it seems, the 'play'-station of the post-post-classical. This, if true, would indeed demand the shift to a different paradigm.