

Historical poetics



A Gremlin discusses Susan Sontag: references run riot for the media-savvy audiences of the post-classical film, *Gremlins 2* (1990).

it gathers, researchers are ideally open to new discoveries which might test or refute their initial assumptions. As Boris Eichenbaum writes of the formal method, 'In our studies, we value a theory only as a working hypothesis to help us to discover and interpret facts ... We posit specific principles and adhere to them in so far as the material justifies them. If the material demands their refinement or change, we change or reform them.'

Norms and institutions: the classical Hollywood cinema and beyond

What is perhaps most important about 'historical poetics' as an approach to aesthetic history is its movement away from great works and great authors towards a more broadly based survey of the aesthetic norms in place at a particular historical juncture. Stylistic choices are understood not simply as a means of individual expression by exceptional artists, but rather as grounded in institutional practices and larger aesthetic movements. Key to Bordwell's analysis is the conception of norms, which he derives from the work of Jan Mukarovsky.¹⁰ Norms are not codified and inflexible rules but rather relatively flexible, common-sense assumptions artists bring to bear upon the production of artworks: 'Those norms constitute a determinant set of assumptions about how a movie should behave, about what stories it properly tells and how it should tell them, about the range and functions of film technique, and about the activities of the spectator.'¹¹ Artists' acceptance of the general logic underlying an aesthetic system encourages them to make certain choices from the larger vocabulary of available options. Adherence to those norms allows for the production of works which win easy approval both from the production system and from audience members. Yet disobedience of the norms is not necessarily a 'negative' act, since such formal transgressions often result in welcome artistic innovation or novelty. Any given work will be situated more or less comfortably in the dominant aesthetic tradition, though it may also borrow formal devices from outside that system as a basis for expanding the aesthetic vocabulary. The formalist tradition in historical poetics has particularly been interested in works which 'deform' or 'defamiliarize' the dominant aesthetic traditions within which they operate. Such artworks invite us to rethink our aesthetic perceptions and expectations; and through this process to look upon the world with fresh eyes.

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The Classical Hollywood Cinema shows how a specific set of aesthetic norms emerged from early cinema's relationship to the well-made play and to the magazine short story, came to dominate American film production in the late silent period and held sway into the 1960s; the book suggests how these norms were structured into the Hollywood mode of production, articulated by trade press discourse and production manuals and understood by both film-makers and film-goers. Individual expression in the classical Hollywood cinema operated in the 'bounds of difference' demarcated by this system of norms. These norms included the Hollywood cinema's focus on the goal-governed protagonist as the organizing principle behind a causally structured narrative, the push towards closure or resolution, the insistence on immediate legibility and continuity, and the desire to subordinate aspects of visual and aural style to the demands of narrative exposition.

Others have expanded this mapping of classical norms into other aspects of film style, such as music, costumes, performance, or colour. Mary Beth Haralovich, for example, has investigated the conventions surrounding colour in the classical Hollywood cinema, looking both at the guidelines handed down by Technicolor and at the application of those principles in classically-constructed films.¹² This conventional understanding of colour forms a background against which she can explore Douglas Sirk's systematic and unconventional use of colour in *All that Heaven Allows*. Revising her account, John Kurton has identified several different Hollywood colour schemes, arguing that Sirk follows a less common but nevertheless conventional set of practices.¹³

The norms can thus provide a baseline against which to understand the invention or innovation of individual works. Innovative film-makers can be seen as either as operating fully within the system (as in Jane Gaine's discussion of Edith Head's costume designs)¹⁴ or as constituting a 'limited play' within and against dominant norms (as suggested in recent work on Dorothy Arzner or Oscar Micheaux). Such an account also shows how a non-Hollywood film-maker (Sergio Leone, John Woo or R. W. Fassbender) may rework the generic conventions and formal norms of the classical cinema for alternative political and aesthetic projects.

In the case of these and many other artists (post-1968 Godard for example), their political commitments help to define the conditions under which they operate and the aesthetic assumptions behind their work. In *Making Meaning*, Bordwell has called for a moratorium on interpretative criticism, yet such cases point to the murky space

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between formal and ideological analysis. Bordwell suggests, for example, that 'interpretation of individual films can be fruitfully renewed by a historical scholarship that seeks out the concrete and unfamiliar conditions under which all sorts of meaning can be made'.¹⁵ Historical poetics can, in that sense, be seen as less about privileging form over ideology than promoting historical specificity over abstract theory.

Difference and the classical cinema

The Classical Hollywood Cinema is a monumental and intimidating book, focusing on the stability and continuity of classical norms rather than looking at the more localized and intrinsic norms associated with specific films, genres, periods or directors. Some criticize the book for its lack of interest in the 'differences' within the classical Hollywood system. At times, the studio era film becomes a monolithic structure so that the similarities between, say, *The Crowd*, *The Band Wagon* and *Touch of Evil* overwhelm their more distinctive qualities.¹⁶

However, the Bordwell-Staiger-Thompson model does talk about differences between Hollywood films. The absorption of alternative aesthetics or the introduction of a new technology into the Hollywood cinema necessarily involves periods of transition and experimentation before the system can fully stabilize itself around these changes. The early sound period represents one such important transitional point; film noir may be another. Even if the classical system can restabilize itself in the long term, this transitional phase generates some films which push against the margins of dominant screen practice. On one level of analysis, these works may still be classical films. On another, they suggest stress points in the classical system itself.

The acceptance of classical norms is uneven across the cinematic institution. Peter Kramer, for example, has shown how film comedy lagged behind most other genres in its adoption of the classical norms and traces this process of aesthetic resistance and assimilation in Buster Keaton's films.¹⁷ Certain genres (the musical, pornography, comedian-comedy) embraced show stopping performances at the expense of linear narrative or character consistency.¹⁸ Since historical poetics does not see norms as rigid rules whose violation causes serious disruption or as codes which ascribe fixed-meanings to formal devices, these formal discrepancies are typically understood as operating within the allowable space of 'transgression' established by the formal system itself.¹⁹ Genres

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transgression v. show stopping performance

constitute their own norms, sometimes a subset of the classical system, sometimes borrowing more broadly from other aesthetic traditions, and therefore establish their own aesthetic goals and assumptions.

The differences between genres cannot, of course, be reduced to their formal norms. Genres also assume different social perspectives, different ways of structuring audience identification and cultural experience, though formal norms play a large role in defining what themes are appropriate to a particular genre and how they will be addressed. A sociological critic such as Andrew Bergman may read the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* as a direct expression of the social chaos of the early depression years, while an account grounded in historical poetics would stress how these political images are linked to disruptive and flamboyant tendencies in the vaudeville aesthetic which pits spontaneous protagonists against repressive antagonists.²⁰

As a result of genres' intrinsic norms, a moment which might seem disruptive or disorientating in a docudrama may be accepted as more or less conventional in an animated cartoon. Even within a genre, one can distinguish between the classical realism of Disney animation (with its insistence on preserving the bodily integrity of its characters) and the more anarchic character and narrative construction associated with Chuck Jones and Tex Avery or the more abstracted and sometimes spatially disorientating visual style developed by UPA. Critics such as Donald Crafton²¹ and Rick Altman²² point towards other aesthetic logics, such as the paradigmatic focus of traditional melodrama or the comic spectacle of cinematic gags, which coexist and compete with the causality and continuity at the heart of the classical cinema. A nuanced account of these films would recognize how each operates in relation to systemic classical norms, generic conventions, aesthetic counter-traditions and their own intrinsic norms.

Similarly, historical poetics' consideration of authorship requires attention to the range of formal choices available to directors and the conditions under which authorial expression occurs. The European art cinema, for example, is understood as a formal system which strongly foregrounds the expressiveness of the film director as the source of the film's thematic and formal patterns. Other systems (such as Soviet Revolutionary cinema) seek to subordinate the director's voice to larger state interests or develop a 'group style' (such as the expressionistic look of Universal horror films or the reflexive mode of MGM musicals). Attention to formal norms can locate the competing voices which constitute the film's production (such as the ways that Stephanie Rothman

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Andrew Bergman
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Donald Crafton
Rick Altman
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aesthetic counter-traditions
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European art cinema
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Soviet Revolutionary cinema
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Universal horror films
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Stephanie Rothman

exploits the space provided her for feminist formal and thematic exploration in Roger Corman's exploitation cinema). At the same time, historical poetics may allow a closer consideration of the impact of filmic conventions upon avant-garde or documentary film-makers generally seen as free from the classical system.

A significant body of work has centred on pre-1915 cinema, trying to understand its institutions, practices, and genres as distinct from the classical period which followed it.²³ The pre-1915 cinema was long dismissed as a 'primitive' chapter in the 'evolution' of film form, as film-makers such as Edwin S. Porter or D. W. Griffith discovered and mastered the vocabulary of a new medium. As recent studies by Charles Musser and Tom Gunning suggest, the works of even these canonical figures have been misunderstood and misinterpreted, removed from the context of cinema as a broader aesthetic institution, isolated from developments and practices of their lesser-known contemporaries, and cut off from the different context of their production, exhibition, and reception.²⁴ Tom Gunning, for example, calls this period the 'cinema of attractions', stressing its dramatically different relationship to the spectator and its closer adherence to vaudeville aesthetics. Gunning's work locates an alternative set of norms which dominated film production during this earlier period, one marked by showmanship rather than effacement, spectacle rather than narrative causality, heterogeneity rather than unity, openness rather than closure and fragmentation rather than continuity.²⁵

Rethinking aesthetic evaluation

A governing principle behind this line of enquiry has been the importance of suspending evaluation until one has fully mapped and understood the aesthetic norms appropriate to a particular group of film texts. The privileging of classical norms as a basis for evaluating pre-1915 films blinded earlier film historians to the richness and complexity of this period. Historical poetics rejects the notion that a universal standard, however constituted, can be applied to evaluating all artworks and insists on more local assessments based upon a fuller historical understanding. This suspension of evaluative judgement liberates the study of popular cinema, which has long been vexed by a priori assessments that certain genres are inherently less worthy than those of high art. Once all forms of cinema are understood to be both governed by artistic conventions and shaped by innovation or transgression, the tired dis-

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inction between the personal expression of high art and the conventionality of popular cinema starts to break down.

For example, recent research into pornography as a genre has gained benefit from the willingness of writers such as Linda Williams momentarily to suspend the moral and ideological judgements which had charged earlier discussions of adult cinema.²⁶ Instead, she traces the history of the pornographic film in terms of generic conventions (such as the 'money shot' showing male ejaculation), formal practices (such as camera placement or editing practices which fragment the woman's body and present it as a visual spectacle) and plot structures (such as a range of different relationships between sexual 'numbers' and larger narrative developments). Williams replaces a monolithic conception of pornography with a more diversified sense of the genre, ranging from the voyeuristic spectacle of the early stag films through the narrative integration of *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* to the feminist interventions of Candida Royale and Annie Sprinkles.

Williams's work is not exclusively concerned with formal matters and she, like some of the other writers discussed here, might resist being included in the category of historical poetics. Her book is strongly influenced by the feminist psychoanalytic and Marxist ideological theory which Bordwell and Thompson have often cast in opposition to their own formalist project. Yet the strength of her approach has been a willingness to allow the exploration of formal principles and norms to challenge her own initial preconceptions about pornography. As other writers have begun to examine this genre closely, broad theoretical concepts such as fetishization or objectification have been displaced or supplemented by more nuanced attention to the role of editing, camerawork, and sound in the production and representation of cinematic sexuality. Eithne Johnson, for example, has studied how the long takes and fluid camera movements of *Femme's* new feminine and feminist pornography contrasts with the disjointed, abrupt, and fragmented cutting of traditional male-made pornography.²⁷ The *Femme* style promotes a 'full body eroticism' that is dramatically different from the obsessive display of genitals found in mainstream porn films.

This suspension of evaluation need not be permanent. A film aesthetics which precludes evaluation would be undesirable and unworkable. We all make evaluations all the time when we decide which films belong on our syllabuses. We need a way to talk about the different ideological consequences of the various styles of pornographic representation Johnson identifies; we need the ability to recognize that some works

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in a generic tradition make more sophisticated or innovative use of its formal vocabulary and thematic resources than others. The question isn't whether to evaluate or not, but rather what criteria allow us to evaluate a given text meaningfully. The task of historical poetics is to reconstruct appropriate aesthetic frameworks. A focus on content alone would ignore the fact that content has been worked upon, transformed or reshaped by formal practices and that form may set its own expectations about appropriate content. Historical poetics rejects a simple separation of form and content, seeing an understanding of form as essential to any consideration of content. By requiring us to spell out the underlying formal assumptions at work in a particular cinematic institution, historical poetics helps to denaturalize established cultural hierarchies. A scrupulous historical poetics demands a constant reassessment of canonical works as we come to understand them against new backgrounds and contexts, and a reappraisal of popular forms as we develop appropriate aesthetic frameworks.

Historical poetics and reception

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historical poetics offers two approaches to the question of spectatorship: one strategy foregrounds the way that textual features cue audience response, or films depend upon audience knowledge; and the other looks at intertextual and extra-textual factors, studying interpretative communities to locate the conventions governing their activities.
Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* suggests the potential for a textually-based approach to film spectatorship. Here Bordwell combines a close attention to different modes of filmic narration (classical, historical-materialist, art cinema, parimetric) and to cognitive-based models of narrative comprehension, inference, and hypothesis-testing.
Spectators draw upon norms and expectations from their previous film-viewing experience to make sense of the perceptual challenges posed by a new film narrative. While Bordwell's appeal to cognitive science to explain the 'viewer's activity' in textual consumption might suggest a universal model of the film-viewing experience, Bordwell opens a more explicit space for a historically and culturally situated viewer than does the subject-positioning model which dominates much contemporary film criticism. Film viewing for Bordwell is a 'dynamic psychological

Norms are seen as a shared framework of understanding between artists and consumers, both of which groups are situated in relation to formal systems and aesthetic institutions. Historical poetics offers two approaches to the question of spectatorship: one strategy foregrounds the way that textual features cue audience response, or films depend upon audience knowledge; and the other looks at intertextual and extra-textual factors, studying interpretative communities to locate the conventions governing their activities.

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process' involving the interplay of perceptual capacities (such as the perception of motion or the recognition of colour and light patterns), the audience's prior knowledge and experience (which is biographically specific but which may also be intersubjective and common to many in a shared historical and cultural context) and the material and structure of the film itself ('cues, patterns, and gaps that shape the viewer's application of schemata and the testing of hypotheses').²⁹ A close consideration of the formal structure of films identifies the various cues that spark cognitive, perceptual, and affective activity, while attention to broader historical movements shows the process by which spectators acquire and master the expectations governing their interpretations and inferences.

A related area of research considers the informational economy surrounding different modes of film practice. Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio have studied the place of literary adaptation in pre-1915 cinema, suggesting that films which reduce *Hamlet* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a ten-minute or shorter series of silent vignettes and stock poses assume a high degree of audience knowledge. Pearson and Uricchio trace the intertextual grid (including the popularization of these works through picture postcards or burlesque house presentations) that allowed the contemporary spectator to fill in the gaps left by the story's textual presentation.³⁰ The inscription of meaning in early films was often carried by lecturers and showmen, such as Lyman Howe, who accompanied the films and structured them into an evening's entertainment.³¹ Classical films, by contrast, are seen as more tightly structured and self-contained, depending upon a high degree of redundancy to ensure easy spectator comprehension. K. C. D'Alessandro has investigated the ways in which the genre-mixing characteristic of such contemporary science fiction films as *Gremlins*, *Robocop* and *Back to the Future* depends upon the 'mixed competencies' of viewers accustomed to reading multiple sets of expectations against one another in a tradition characterized by both an aesthetic and thematic of constant change.³²

A contextual approach in historical poetics looks at the institutions which shape the reception of popularly circulating films. Janet Staiger's studies of the reception of such films as *Foolish Wives*, *Birth of a Nation*, *Zelig* and *Silence of the Lambs* or larger movements such as the European art cinema, draw on reader-response theory to explore the assumptions journalistic critics and popular viewers bring to the theatre with them.³³ She wants to understand the historical basis for differences in

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interpretation, looking at how our responses are shaped by larger critical debates (such as those surrounding film authorship or nationalism) and social commitments (such as the gay subcultural readings of Judy Garland as a star performer). Working in this same tradition, Jeff Sconce has looked at the reception community drawn to 'bad films', such as the screen *œuvre* of Edward Wood (*Plan Nine from Outer Space*, *Glen or Glenda*).³⁴ Sconce is interested both in the aesthetic features of these films (mismatched cuts, poor continuity, wooden acting, inexplicable plots, narrative confusion, obvious 'movie talk'), and in the interpretative and evaluative criteria, the myths of authorship and the notions of film style, that surface in fanzine criticism. Differing interpretative contexts shape not only what films mean (a characteristic concern of social historical or cultural studies approaches to film reception) but what textual features seem most salient to those interpretations and what aesthetic frameworks get adopted for evaluating such works (questions which are of especial importance to historical poetics).

Poetic politics

A politically-orientated historical poetics explores the potential relationship between aesthetic norms and broader cultural categories, such as the taste distinctions which Pierre Bourdieu documents.³⁵ Taste distinctions, Bourdieu argues, are not idiosyncratic choices, natural facts, or trivial details; rather, they emerge from specific socio-economic contexts, reflecting our relative access to educational and economic resources, our early and prolonged exposure to differing aesthetic traditions. Taste distinctions are discriminatory, making choices between available goods for consumption, marking distinctions between different social groups. Bourdieu describes the great divide which separates the bourgeois and the popular aesthetics. The bourgeois aesthetic privileges contemplative distance, an aesthetic pleasure in formal experimentation and innovation, a connoisseur's eye focusing on what distinguishes one artwork from another. The popular aesthetic is more functionalist (rejecting style which blocks the easy comprehension of narrative and content); the popular aesthetic also embraces a stronger (spectator identification and a more intense affective experience (more bang for your bucks) rejected by the bourgeois tradition.³⁶

Bourdieu's analysis is problematic: its transplanted from its original specifically French context to a consideration of American popular cinema is more difficult than most of its advocates acknowledge; Bour-

dieu himself never succeeds in writing about the popular aesthetic in anything other than vaguely patronizing terms. Still, these broad distinctions (and the assumption that they originate in response to social and economic conditions) have proved useful in thinking about the historical poetics of the cinema. Writers on early cinema, for example, have traced a muting of the sensationalistic and spectacular qualities of the 'cinema of attractions' and a shift towards the deferred pleasures of narrative exposition as film-makers sought to appeal to middle class consumers as a potential-economic base for their productions.³⁷ Debates surrounding early comedy suggest strong tensions between the popular aesthetic of 'new humour' with its emphasis upon emotional immediacy and intensity (as displayed in vaudeville comic performances) and the more restrained and contemplative aesthetic of 'true comedy', as promoted by bourgeois magazines in turn-of-the-century America and embraced by advocates of the classical cinema.³⁸

Bourdieu's work helps us to identify the political stakes in talking about popular cinema in aesthetic terms. Aesthetics is a discourse of power, claimed as the exclusive property of dominant classes as a club to use against the 'debased' tastes and preferences of the lower orders. Popular culture has often been discussed as a 'non-culture' which must be displaced by educating us in the proper models of cultural discrimination. Often, these distinctions have boiled down to a privileging of artworks that produce intellectual pleasure over those which are dominated by affective (comedy, melodrama) and bodily (horror, pornography) pleasures.³⁹ That historical poetics takes popular cinema seriously as an aesthetic practice presents a powerful challenge to this hierarchical account of artistic production. To map the aesthetics of an otherwise neglected form, then, constitutes a political act, helping to question the naturalness of the aesthetic norms separating high and low culture (and with them, the social distinctions they express and repress).

Such an assumption underlies much recent writing on black American cinema, for example, where the dominant culture's focus on sophisticated visual style has worked against our appreciation of film-makers who did not have access to the technological and economic resources of Hollywood.⁴⁰ Many critics have responded not by privileging black content over style but rather by trying to understand the ways that film-makers such as Oscar Micheaux developed their own aesthetic practices appropriate to their production and reception context. The category of the aesthetic, for these writers, is too important to ignore and too powerful to dismantle. Teshome H. Gabriel, for example, draws upon

the political and cultural theories of Franz Fanon to account for the economic institutions and aesthetic practices characterizing various phases of post-colonial film-making.¹¹ He shows how choices in lighting style, camera placement, music, acting style, and narrative structure, which have led to a critical dismissal of third-world films as technically poor and aesthetically 'underdeveloped', reflect alternative cultural traditions. For Gabriel, these practices warrant respect on their own terms as central to the experience of third world cinema as a political and cultural force.

There is a danger, of course, that historical poetics' fascination with aesthetic defamiliarization may reconstruct hierarchical aesthetic distinctions. Some formalist accounts have tended to treat popular cinema as a baseline (a 'zero degree style') against which to read and appreciate the formal innovations of art cinema directors. Consider the hierarchical assumptions implicit within Kristin Thompson's statement that 'People who have been nurtured on an almost-exclusive diet of classical films may simply reject the notion that film viewing should be challenging and even difficult.'¹² Thompson's call to teach such viewers how to appreciate more 'difficult' and aesthetically 'satisfying' works, however well meaning, reinscribes the class distinctions that characterize the high art tradition. After all, as Thompson suggests in this same discussion, 'defamiliarization is thus an element of all artworks, but its means and degree will vary considerably and the defamiliarizing powers of a single work will change over history'. Defamiliarization is recognized against the background set of available conventions and the ability of film-makers such as Rothman, Royale, and others, to make changes in the dominant practices of popular genres may be as 'defamiliarizing', if not more so, than the ability of directors such as Bresson, Bergman or Fellini, operating within the institution of the art cinema, to surprise us with what can quickly become conventional challenges to the classical system. The concept of 'defamiliarization' does imply that the appreciative audience possesses certain knowledge or competency in film aesthetics and takes pleasure when a gifted artist twists or reshapes their expectations. Yet defamiliarization may involve a play with fan knowledge as easily as it involves a play with schoolroom knowledge, may reward the cultural competences associated with the popular aesthetic as easily as it does the cultural competence of more trained observers, and may lead to emotional intensification as readily as it does towards distanciation. The problem lies not with the concept of defamiliarization so much as with our own willingness as college-educated academics to

accept and appraise forms of knowledge and systems of evaluation which emerge in more popular contexts. Bourdieu himself speaks as if the appreciation of high art involves specialized knowledge while the appreciation of popular art can be taken for granted. In practice, an avid viewer of Japanese animation or reader of popular romances or fan of television soap opera must master a complex array of aesthetic and generic conventions and interpretative skills necessary for a full appreciation of these forms.

Case study: post-classical Hollywood cinema

The utility of historical poetics as an approach for talking about popular cinema may be illustrated by a more sustained example, looking at post-classical Hollywood cinema as an emergent set of aesthetic norms with a complex relationship to the classical tradition. Postmodernist critics have described a series of radical shifts in contemporary American film marked by a breakdown of classical storytelling conventions, a merger of previously separated genres, a fragmentation of linear narrative, a privileging of spectacle over causality, the odd juxtaposition of previously distinct emotional tones and aesthetic materials.¹³ Some post-modern critics, most notably Fredric Jameson, see these shifts as symptomatic of the cultural logic of late capitalism, of the rising dominance of multinational corporations, the shift from a production-centred to an information-based, service-centred economy, and the fragmentation of social communities and disintegration of previously stable identities. The term postmodernism describes both a new aesthetic tradition, first identified in architecture, and later self-consciously or unconsciously developed in the other arts (what comes after realism and modernism), and a new socio-cultural logic tied to particular economic structures (what comes after pre-modern and modern societies). The historical poetics tradition suggests another way of making sense of these formal shifts. Here the term 'post-classical' seems preferable to the terminological confusion posed by postmodernism, since it suggests both continuities and breaks with classical cinema. Adopting more immediate, middle-range explanations, such an account would see post-classical cinema as emerging from the breakdown of the studio system following the 1948 Paramount decision and the gradual dissolution of the dominance of the system of classical norms since 1960. The relationship of contemporary cinema to the group style described in *Classical Hollywood Cinema* is ambiguous. As the book's introduction

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- After all, as Thompson suggests in this same discussion, 'defamiliarization is thus an element of all artworks, but its means and degree will vary considerably and the defamiliarizing powers of a single work will change over history'.
- Defamiliarization is recognized against the background set of available conventions and the ability of film-makers such as Rothman, Royale, and others, to make changes in the dominant practices of popular genres may be as 'defamiliarizing', if not more so, than the ability of directors such as Bresson, Bergman or Fellini, operating within the institution of the art cinema, to surprise us with what can quickly become conventional challenges to the classical system.
- The concept of 'defamiliarization' does imply that the appreciative audience possesses certain knowledge or competency in film aesthetics and takes pleasure when a gifted artist twists or reshapes their expectations.
- Yet defamiliarization may involve a play with fan knowledge as easily as it involves a play with schoolroom knowledge, may reward the cultural competences associated with the popular aesthetic as easily as it does the cultural competence of more trained observers, and may lead to emotional intensification as readily as it does towards distanciation.
- The problem lies not with the concept of defamiliarization so much as with our own willingness as college-educated academics to

suggests, its central argument is that 'between 1917 and 1960 a distinct and homogeneous style has dominated American studio film-making'.⁴⁴ This claim would suggest that something different, or at least less 'homogeneous', came after 1960 or that the dominance of the classical style was challenged in subsequent periods. In the book's concluding chapter, however, David Bordwell argues that 'the principles of classical film-making still hold sway' in contemporary Hollywood. Looking at such post-1960 films as *The China Syndrome* and *The Conversation*, Bordwell concludes they have more in common with the classical Hollywood cinema than such superficially similar art films as *Tout Va Bien* and *Blow-Up*. The contemporary cinema, he suggests, 'has absorbed narrational strategies of the art cinema while controlling them within a coherent genre framework'.⁴⁵ Bordwell's argument seems essentially correct. What is fascinating about the elliptical narratives, the abrupt cutting, the unusual camera angles and movements, the jarring juxtapositions of material found in recent films by Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman, William Friedkin, Bob Fosse, or Walter Hill (to name only a few obvious examples) is the ways in which these directors have taken formal devices which, in their original art cinema context, were used to establish distantiation and employ them to intensify our emotional experience of stock generic situations.

Bordwell's stress on the stability of the Hollywood system fails to acknowledge the necessary process of experimentation and accommodation which surrounds the adoption of alien aesthetic norms into the dominant classical system. Since the breakdown of the studio system, Hollywood has entered a period of prolonged and consistent formal experimentation and institutional flux with a media-savvy audience demanding consistent aesthetic novelty and difference. As a result, stylistic changes which might have unfolded over several decades under the studio system have occurred in a matter of a few years in contemporary Hollywood. In some ways, as Bordwell suggests, this experimentation has changed relatively little in the way Hollywood operates and how its films tell stories, continuing to place strong emphasis upon stars and genres as the primary appeals of commercial entertainment. In other ways, this experimentation changes everything about the informational economy and interpretative framework through which film-makers and viewers approach the contemporary cinema. A historical poetics of the cinema would want to trace the process by which the dominance of a stable set of aesthetic norms tolerated a surprisingly lengthy phase of stylistic experimentation, the process by which formal devices from the

art cinema and the avant-garde were fitted to the demands of genre entertainment, and the uneven process by which critics and viewers have responded to these shifts.

The institutional structures which ensured the stability and consistency of the classical 'group style' collapsed. By treating film-makers as independent contractors, the new production system places particular emphasis on the development of an (idiosyncratic style) which helps to increase the market value of individual directors rather than treating them as interchangeable parts. Directors such as Steven Spielberg, David Lynch, Brian DePalma and David Cronenberg develop distinctive ways of structuring narratives, moving their camera, or cutting scenes which become known to film-goers and studio executives alike. The emergence of the auteur theory in the 1960s provided these directors with a way of articulating and defending these stylistic tendencies as uniquely valuable. Innovations by individual directors are soon duplicated industry-wide and become part of the intrinsic norms of specific genres (as has occurred with the lengthy, often unmarked subjective tracking shots characteristic of the slasher horror film).

As early as 1965, the American press spoke of a Hollywood 'New Wave', consisting of bright young directors who came to the cinema from television, including Norman Jewison, Arthur Penn, Sidney Lumet, John Frankenheimer, Stanley Kubrick, George Roy Hill, and Martin Ritt.⁴⁶ Their films, such as *The Boston Strangler*, *The Manchurian Candidate* or *The Thomas Crown Affair* were praised for their location shooting, improvisational acting, and self-conscious experimentation with swish pans, repeated actions, zooms, jumpcuts, over-amplified sounds, colour filters, extreme deep focus, intimate close-ups, freeze frames, hand-held camera, split screen, jazz scoring and sound-image mismatches, a grab-bag of devices borrowed from the European New Wave movements. This generation of film-makers was quickly displaced in the critical pantheon by the 'movie brats', film school graduates such as Spielberg, Brian De Palma, George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader, who came to Hollywood with a sophisticated grasp of film techniques. Later generations came to the commercial cinema from advertising and from MTV, traditions which freely borrowed from the visual vocabulary of the avant-garde. Each generation of new recruits brought new formal elements which further broadened the classical Hollywood cinema, increased their own market potential and satisfied a media-savvy audience's demands for novelty and innovation.

pushed
distantiation
art cinema
for distantiation
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element

The viewers have watched MTV, too, not to mention endless hours of television storytelling and now the entire repertoire of the world cinema on video. It is not so much that these viewers have a short attention span, as critics protest, but rather that they know all the stories already and they are ready to shift their attention to other levels of the film presentation, to glossy colour schemes, rapid-fire editing, or dizzying camera movements which challenge their comprehension and intensify their emotional engagement. The narrative may be suggested, evoked, without having to be fully developed; narrative traditions can be merged, mixed and matched, played against each other as new hybrid forms of entertainment emerge.

The economic rationale of the new corporate conglomerates which control the film industry requires the cross-promotion and exploitation of story properties across multiple media.⁴⁷ This cross-media circulation of images further influences film aesthetics, resulting in what Justin Wyatt has described as a 'high concept' style of film-making – a focus on the surface iconography, on spectacle, rather than on narrative depth or complexity. Over time, these stylistic experiments get absorbed, so that the film remains fully comprehensible according to traditional classical criteria of causality, coherence and continuity, while adopting a range of stylistic options which would have been transgressive in the context of studio-era film-making. That this new, self-conscious style has so quickly become 'invisible' as it has moved from self-consciously auteurist films to the most mundane action flick suggests something about the stability of the classical norms and their ability to absorb innovations and borrowings from other aesthetic traditions.

Such an approach to the post-classical film may ultimately be compatible with the postmodern account of larger cultural and social shifts, but it seeks initial explanations in terms of cinematic institutions, formal practices and interpretative frameworks. As a historical poetics, it seeks to understand the relationship between this emergent film style and the shifting conditions of production, distribution and exhibition in contemporary Hollywood. Such an approach would map the aesthetic norms governing current film production and reception. Evaluative judgement should be withheld until we can develop new criteria for the meaningful critical assessment of these films. Yet at the same time, generational differences in taste (amplified by the shifting audience demographics of the post-classical cinema) might link these new formal norms with larger social and political contexts (such as changing assumptions about sexuality). Further investigation might explore the

similarity and difference between this transitional phase and others in Hollywood history, such as the innovation of sound, the emergence of deep-focus cinematography, or the stylistic experimentation associated with film noir. A historical poetics would also look more closely at the different ways in which borrowed formal devices operate in post-classical cinema, the European art film, the avant-garde, music video and advertising and at the ways that the same narrative gets transformed as it moves across the new entertainment supersystem. Comparative study is a useful way to understand the interplay of aesthetics, commerce and ideology. Such a model provides appropriate backgrounds for examining specific films, genres, and film-makers who operate in the post-classical cinema, as well as addressing issues such as the aesthetic consequences of remakes, sequels and adaptations.

Notes:

- 1 For Gombrich's work, see especially E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. For useful overviews of the Russian formalist tradition, see Landislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, eds, *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971; Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, eds, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1965; Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine*, The Hague: Mouton, 1969. On the Russian formalists' writings on cinematic poetics, see Herbert Eagle, ed., *Russian Formalist Film Theory*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981 and Richard Tayler, ed., *The Poetics of Cinema, Russian Poetics in Translation*, no. 9, 1982. For Bakhtin, see especially Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981; *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; Mikhail Bakhtin and P. N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: An Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.
- 2 See David Bordwell, 'Historical Poetics of Cinema', in Barton Palmer, ed., *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches*, Atlanta: Georgia State University Press, 1988.
- 3 Boris M. Eijenbaum [Ekenbaum], 'O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story', in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, pp. 227–72.
- 4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- 5 The relationship between Bordwell's concept of historical poetics and

Kristin Thompson's notion of neoformalist criticism is a complex one which Bordwell addresses in the essays cited here. Thompson's own account of her approach can be found in *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988; and *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. As a term, historical poetics has been adopted almost exclusively by Bordwell and a few other writers who have been closely associated with him. Bordwell goes to some trouble in his debate with Barry King to stress the 'differences' within the work of his University of Wisconsin students and colleagues. See Barry King, 'The Wisconsin Project', *Screen*, 27(6), 1986, pp. 74-88; Barry King, 'The Story Continues ...', *Screen*, 28(3), 1987, pp. 56-82; David Bordwell, 'Adventures in the Highlands of Theory', *Screen*, 29(1), 1988, pp. 72-97; Janet Staiger, 'Reading King's Reading', *Screen*, 29(1), 1988, pp. 54-70; Kristin Thompson, 'Wisconsin Project or King's Project', *Screen*, 29(1), 1988, pp. 48-53; Barry King, 'A Reply to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson', *Screen*, 29(1), 1988, pp. 98-118. In 'Historical Poetics of the Cinema', Bordwell suggests that the concept of historical poetics can include critics as diverse as André Bazin, Raymond Bellour, Thierry Kuntzel, Roland Barthes, Nelson Goodman, and Noel Burch. In the conclusion to *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, Bordwell identifies Donald Crafton, André Gaudreault, Tom Gunning, Charles Musser, Janet Staiger, Charles Wolfe, Lea Jacobs and Richard Maltby as recent writers working loosely within the area of historical poetics. Following Bordwell's lead, I am choosing to include within this discussion many writers who may not conceptualize their work as historical poetics but who nevertheless observe some of its basic principles and assumptions.

6 'Historical Poetics of the Cinema'.

- 7 Edward Branigan, 'The Space of *Equinox Flower*', in Peter Lehman, ed., *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*, Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990, pp. 73-108. For other work on Ozu's use of space, a central question in the neoformalist tradition, see Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, 'Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu', *Screen*, 17(2), 1976, pp. 46-55; Noel Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979; Kristin Thompson, 'Notes on the Spatial System in Ozu's Early Films', *Wide Angle*, 1(4), 1977, pp. 8-17; and David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- 8 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- 9 Boris Eichenbaum [Ekenbaum], 'The Theory of the "Formal Method"', in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, pp. 102-3.

- 10 Jan Mukarovsky, 'The Aesthetic Norm', in John Burbank and Peter Steiner, eds. and trans., *Structure, Sign and Function*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 49-54.
- 11 *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, p. 3.
- 12 Mary Beth Haralovich, 'All That Heaven Allows: Color, Narrative Space, and Melodrama', in Peter Lehman, ed., *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*, Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990.
- 13 John Kurton, 'Red, White and Hot Color: The Technicolor Canon', unpublished manuscript.
- 14 Jane Gaines, 'Costume and Narrative: How the Dress Tells the Woman's Story', in Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog, eds, *Fabrications*, New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 180-211.
- 15 *Making Meanings*, p. 272. For an example of the kind of historically-informed interpretations Bordwell embraces, see Lea Jacobs, *Reforming Women: Censorship and the Feminine Ideal in Hollywood, 1929-1942*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981.
- 16 See, for example, Andrew Britton, 'The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole: Wisconsin Formalism and "The Classical Style"', *Cineaction*, 15, winter 1988/89, pp. 47-63.
- 17 Peter Kramer, 'Vitagraph, Slapstick and Early Cinema', *Screen*, spring 1988, pp. 99-104; Peter Kramer, 'Derailing the Honeymoon Express: Comicality and Narrative Closure in Buster Keaton's *The Blacksmith*', *The Velvet Light Trap*, spring 1989, pp. 101-16; Peter Kramer, 'The Making of a Comic Star: Buster Keaton and *The Saphead*' in Kristine Brunslava Karnack and Henry Jenkins, eds, *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, New York: Routledge, 1994. For a similar argument, see Tom Gunning, 'Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of the American Film Comedy', in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*.
- 18 Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982; Linda Williams, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; Steve Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1981; and Frank Krutnik, 'The Clown-Prints of Comedy', *Screen*, 4-5, pp. 50-9. Krutnik returns to this model in 'the Spanner in the Works?', in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*.
- 19 *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 70-84. See also Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Experience*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, especially chapter one, and the introductory essays in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*.
- 20 Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and its Films*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971; and H. Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*

- 21 Donald Crafton, 'Pie and Chase: Gag and Narrative in Early Film Comedy', in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*.
- 22 Rick Altman, 'Dickens, Griffith and Film Theory Today', in Jane Gaines, ed., *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992, pp. 9–48.
- 23 For overviews of this work, see Noel Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, London: British Film Institute, 1990; Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space, Frame and Narrative*, London: British Film Institute, 1990; John L. Fell, ed., *Film Before Griffith*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983; Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, New York: Scribner/Macmillan, 1990. Research in this tradition is regularly featured in *Isis* and *Griffithiana*.
- 24 Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991; Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of the American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- 25 Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-garde', in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, p. 59. See also Tom Gunning, 'Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity: a Theory of Genres in Early Films' and 'Primitive Cinema: A Frame-up? Or, the Trick's on Us', in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*.
- 26 *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*.
- 27 Eithne Johnson, 'Excess and Ecstasy: Constructing Female Pleasure in Porn Movies', *The Velvet Light Trap*, forthcoming.
- 28 Some might claim that cognitive psychology can be read as being as much a 'doctrine' or 'dogma' as the psychoanalytic tradition Bordwell often criticizes. There are important differences, however, in the ways that these models inform their critical practice. Psychoanalytic models provide interpretative categories which get mapped on to formal devices. Cognitive psychology is interested in *how* things mean, not *what* they mean. It describes processes of perception, cognition and affect applicable to a range of different formal and ideological systems. This does not mean that cognitive psychology is 'doctrine-free', however. Cognitive accounts often adopt a functionalist, goal-driven and rationalistic conception of human nature which privileges cognition over affect as the central force in our reception of films. There has been little systematic critique of the ideological assumptions underpinning cognitive approaches.
- 29 *Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp. 32–3. For a useful overview of the potential contributions of cognitive models to film theory, see David Bordwell, 'A Case for Cognitivism', *Iris*, 5(2). Other works within this cognitive tradition would include Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992; Noel Carroll, *Mystifying*

- Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; and Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York: Routledge, 1990. See also the special issue of *Iris*, 5(2), devoted to 'Cinema and Cognitive Psychology'.
- 30 William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- 31 Charles Musser and Carol Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Travelling Exhibition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- 32 Kathryn D'Alessandro, *Mixed Competence: The Tendency Toward Hybridization in Post-1976 Science Fiction Films*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1992.
- 33 Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; Janet Staiger, 'Taboos and Totems: Cultural Meanings of *The Silence of the Lambs*', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 142–54.
- 34 Jeffrey Allen Sconce, *Colonizing Cinematic History: The Cult of 'Bad' Cinema and the Textuality of the 'Badfilm'*, Master's Thesis, University of Texas–Austin, 1989.
- 35 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- 36 Bourdieu, p. 33. Following Bourdieu, then, a historical poetics of the popular cinema would want to explore which formal devices worked to intensify affective immediacy and audience identification, as well as to examine the critical categories by which popular audiences discussed and evaluated those aesthetic experiences.
- 37 See, for example, Tom Gunning, 'Weaving a Narrative: Style and Economic Background in Griffith's Biograph Films', in Elsaesser, pp. 336–47.
- 38 Jenkins, *Pistachio Nuts*, chapter two; and Charles J. Malland, *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- 39 On this point, see Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4 (1991), pp. 2–13.
- 40 See, for example, the essays contained in Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema*, New York: Routledge, 1993; and Jim Pines and Paul Willeman, eds, *Questions of the Third Cinema*, London: British Film Institute, 1989.
- 41 Teshome H. Gabriel, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films', in *Questions of the Third Cinema*, pp. 30–52.
- 42 Thompson, *Glass Armour*, p. 33.
- 43 See, for example, Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993; James Collins, *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and the Postmodern*,

New York: Routledge, 1989; Timothy Corrigan, *Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991; Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993; and Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

- 44 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 3.
 45 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 377.
 46 Peter Hart, 'New Breed Scans Horizons', *New York Times*, 10 January 1965.
 47 Eileen Meehan, 'Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!: The Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext', in Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, eds, *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 47-65; Justin Wyatt, 'High Concept, Product Differentiation, and the Contemporary US Film Industry', *Current Research in Film*, 5, 1991, pp. 86-105; Justin Wyatt and R. L. Rutsky, 'High Concept: Abstracting the Postmodern', *Wide Angle*, 10: 4, 1988, pp. 42-9.

A passive object of male desire? Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) fights back in *Aliens* (1986)

Screen theory

