



1991

# Introduction: Leaving the Cinema

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## Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Corrigan, T. (1991). Introduction: Leaving the Cinema. In T. Corrigan (Ed.), *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (pp. 1-7). New York: Routledge.

Timothy Corrigan originally published this book as part of Temple University's faculty.

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# Introduction: Leaving the Cinema

## **Abstract**

How have modern advertising techniques, the widespread use of VCRs, conglomerate takeovers of studios and film archives, cable TV, and media coverage of the Vietnam war changed the ways we watch movies? And how, in turn, have those different habits and patterns of viewing changed the ways in which films address their viewers? Drawing on a wide variety of American and European films and on many theoretical models, Timothy Corrigan investigates what he calls "a cinema without walls," taking a close look at particular films in order to see how we watch them differently in the post-Vietnam era. He examines cult audiences, narrative structure, genre films (road movies, in particular), and contemporary politics as they engage new models of film making and viewing. He thus provides a rare, serious attempt to deal with contemporary movies. Corrigan discusses filmmakers from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, including Martin Scorsese, Raoul Ruiz, Michael Cimino, Alexander Kluge, Francis Ford Coppola, Stephen Frears, and Wim Wenders. He offers detailed analyses of films such as *Platoon*; *Full Metal Jacket*; *9-1/2 Weeks*; *The Singing Detective*; *Choose Me*; *After Hours*; *Badlands*; *The King of Comedy*; *Paris, Texas*; and *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Orchestrating this diversity, Corrigan provides a critical basis for making sense of contemporary film culture and its major achievements.

## **Disciplines**

Film and Media Studies

## **Comments**

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**ANNENBERG**

PN  
1993.5  
U6  
C64  
1991

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Manufactured in the United States of America  
Design by John Romer

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Corrigan, Timothy.

A cinema without walls : movies and culture after Vietnam / Timothy Corrigan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8135-1667-6 (cloth) — ISBN 0-8135-1668-4 (pbk.)

1. Motion pictures—History. 2. Motion picture audiences—United States. 3. United States—Popular culture—20th century.

I. Title.

PN1993.5.U6C64 1991

791.43'0904047—dc20

90-48192  
CIP



## 2 □ INTRODUCTION

age, gender, economics, and race, for instance) have, at the same time, become much more difficult for a single movie to address. The four walls of theatrical viewing, which might have once reflected the way movies were able to "capture" an audience within carefully constructed cultural parameters, are thus no longer, it seems to me, an appropriate metaphor with which to describe who watches movies, how they watch them, and how movies acknowledge this new audience. The growing budgets of movies have required audiences too large to be truly circumscribed; those audiences have increasingly dispersed themselves in terms of their social and cultural neighborhoods; and movies have had to follow those audiences from theatrical settings into homes and onto videocassette recorders and cable screens. Within this contemporary cinema without walls, the stories, styles, and structures of many commercial movies have then (logically and economically) had to discover how to address these audiences who no longer need or care to watch movies as they may once have.

The anxieties and promises that accompany this disappearance of a clear and stable viewer clearly resemble those often associated with postmodernism and its reputed subversions of the traditional human subject. Just as viewers and critics have bemoaned the loss of "good" movies and wonder (while watching) whom movies are now being made for, observers of postmodernism commonly condemn contemporary culture's seeming dehumanizing vacuities and shifting, centerless visions (through its notorious pastiche sensibilities, retro-obsessionisms, and empty simulations of simulations). Conversely, just as many other viewers marvel at the unprecedented artistic and technological splendor of the latest blockbusters or observe how VCRs and cable technologies have become household items that have made available a growing variety of films and videos (both commercial and noncommercial), champions of postmodernism have seen it in the most recent and promising overthrow of antiquated notions about authentic art and the privileges of aesthetic canons (such as those that would qualitatively distinguish the products of high culture from those of popular culture). These two opposing perspectives on movies are, to be sure, both part of an apocalyptic characterization of the times, as the cynical end of cultural value and historical coherence or the utopian liberation from the burden of those restraints. Their energetic opposition has made

it sometimes difficult to agree even on what the object of inquiry is, let alone a definition of it.

Trying to resolve these disagreements about what postmodernism is may be in fact a violation of, in Linda Hutcheon's words, "the pluralist, provisional, contradictory nature of the postmodern enterprise" (183). Within the conditions of contemporary culture, there are many kinds of films that seem to have little to do with postmodernism and many other films that engage that postmodern enterprise in distinctively different fashions (their exceptional variety itself being a signal for some of a postmodern culture). I am consequently not arguing here that "postmodern movies" are the only kind of films being made within contemporary cultures or that all viewers watch movies as postmodern spectators. Nor, despite my preference for some films over others, am I making a categorical or even qualitative distinction between the movies in this study that seem more a part of the commercial mainstream (frequently aligned with the "bad" postmodernism) and those films that are more consciously self-reflexive or intellectually rigorous (the "good" products of postmodernism). It is obvious that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) follows a far different agenda from *The Third Generation* (1979); it is less obvious how artistically and culturally far apart *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *9 1/2 Weeks* (1986) are. For my purposes, these represent only different types of engagements across a postmodern culture that embraces a multitude of contemporary activities, all of these films sharing a vision of a powerfully altered contemporary audience but some of them more lucidly dramatizing the possibilities of those engagements than others. Since I am more exactly talking about the contemporary or postmodern condition through which films are watched, many different kinds of movies enter that purview, from the commercially common to the artistically adventurous.

The organization of this book follows what I consider key issues across this terrain, as these issues differentiate themselves from their classical and modernist predecessors. While the argument regularly returns to central themes about, for instance, cultural narcissism or the strained status of the patriarchal family, it follows a scheme that describes certain salient conditions in contemporary film culture, from the socio-historical and industrial to the textual, and then presents a variety of cultural and textual engagements with those conditions. The first section locates these differences in a historical

shift that occurs amidst the media politics of the Vietnam war, the restructuring of the movie industry through conglomerate takeovers, the widespread effect of technologies such as the VCR, and the contemporary fascination with different kinds of nostalgia. Related to these historical shifts, the second section then argues two major changes in the relationship of audiences to movie images: one whereby movies now generate and audiences respond according to patterns of “illegibility” that forsake a traditionally common need to understand viewing a movie as a type of reading; the other whereby audiences replace the securities and authorities of reading a film with a more assertive (and sometimes reckless) disregard for essential meanings or secrets in a movie, viewers now *performing* that film as a kind of cult object that they can both appropriate and relinquish themselves to. The third section examines more specific interpretive strategies through which filmmakers and films address spectators across these altered viewing formations. Here I examine conventional categories and schemes for understanding movies, such as auteurism, genre, and narrative, but demonstrate how contemporary film culture has absorbed and redefined them in a way that changes fully what they mean and how they can be used as critical concepts today. The final section discusses the sticky problem of ideology and a politics of viewing within a contemporary scene in which audiences seem to have more control than movies themselves over how a movie will be politically and socially mobilized. The analysis of specific films in each chapter or the reappearance of certain directors is not intended to be summary or even emblematic but rather to be recognizable to most readers as resonant across the contemporary cultural scene.

This book is about watching movies from within American culture. At the same time, however, films discussed here describe an international menagerie. Without denying the continuing significance of different nationalisms in the cinema today, this merging and overlapping of cultural differences is meant to reflect the growing internationalization of national cinema cultures. Stuart Hall has suggested some of what is behind this cultural internationalism when he observed that, through the globalization of Hollywood, “the world dreams itself to be ‘American’” (Bird 45–46). But by “menagerie” I also mean to delineate how watching movies in American culture today involves (or can involve), more widely than



ever before, stories, movies, television serials, and filmmakers from other cultures. A condition encouraged surely by the video market, it is, more importantly, a product of an international industrial state that supports a cross-cultural dreaming in a variety of directions. Sony's recent purchase of Columbia Pictures from Coca-Cola in 1989, the Australian News Corporation's (Rupert Murdoch's) acquisition of 20th Century-Fox in 1986, Pathé Communications's (Italian Giancarlo Parretti's) buying of MGM-UA in 1990, and Matsushita's 1990–1991 takeover of MCA and Universal mean only that Hollywood has continued to enlarge and perhaps vary the international weave of its fabric and that, at least for the American audience, international complicity is a better model of the conditions informing their viewing than cultural difference.

This is not to say that the issue of national cinemas is not pertinent today. In certain cases it clearly is. As I try to indicate, the national character of many of these films—such as the broadcast of *The Singing Detective* (1986) on British television—can complicate and support the unusual way they address their audiences. For this study, though, the American viewer is an international viewer, capable, in Charles Jencks's phrase, of "ironic cosmopolitanism" (27). To treat a filmmaker such as Raoul Ruiz as fundamentally a Chilean in exile or a movie such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) as being primarily about British politics is, I believe, to diminish the complexity of their reach. To speak here of a cinema without walls refers also to the walls of cultural nationalism within an international landscape.

A cinema without walls is thus a contemporary recollection of and a departure from André Malraux's modern museum without walls. Malraux's museum describes a way of collecting art and the details of aesthetic culture not as separate and distinctive objects but as a family of photographs. In this imaginary museum, art objects are transformed into pure instances of aesthetic style, capable of being possessed and shared by a boundless group of viewers: "In our Museum Without Walls, picture, fresco, miniature and stained glass window seem of one and the same family. . . . In the process they have lost their properties as *objects*; but by the same token, they have gained something: the utmost significance as to *style* that they can possibly acquire" (44). In a cinema without walls, however, the development of that reproductive technology and its pervasive

spread through culture has meant exhausting any transcendent relationships between viewers and images and allowing audiences to claim their own place and perspective as the essential authority. Since the shifting family of contemporary viewers can now literally possess images as the ubiquitous backgrounds and ornaments of their lives, those images are recast as social objects defined by the conditions and contexts in which they are viewed. Their previous homogeneous lack of particular and concrete meaning in Malraux's museum now transforms them into a heterogeneous collection of object-images. If in Malraux's museum, images removed objects from their authentic cultural place, in the contemporary cinema without walls, audiences remove images from their own authentic and authoritative place within culture and disperse their significance across the heterogeneous activity that now defines them.

The cultural collapse of those authoritative walls has therefore meant endings and beginnings, the growing impossibility of finding those old authorities and audiences for the cinema and the increasing possibility of admitting new ones. In this study, I emphasize how those endings have been reflected at the movies: how they have changed the way movies are understood and how they position audiences outside previous stabilities. But the potential beginnings toward which each chapter moves are at least as important: the endings and evacuations that these chapters describe also represent the groundwork for possible intervention by viewers outside those now-vacated dominant cultural hierarchies, viewers, for example, of genders, races, and classes who have traditionally been asked to check their differences before they enter the cinema. In her discussion of a postmodern or at least contemporary meaning for a "women's cinema," Teresa de Lauretis neatly describes these beginnings that follow from those endings: in the shift "to what may be called an aesthetic of reception, where the spectator is the film's primary concern," the most significant change "is the particular conception of the audience, which now is envisaged in its heterogeneity and otherness from the text," a "heterogeneity of the audience" that also responds to and "entails a heterogeneity of, or in, the individual spectator" (*Technologies of Gender* 141, 142).

Finally, I do not intend to disguise the problem in discussing movies whose primary definition might be to befuddle certain interpretive categories or to muddle any authoritative understanding of

them. Characteristic of the uncertainties surrounding a critical position in many other fields of postmodern culture, the problem appears to cut two ways: on the one hand, many of these films (and the majority within contemporary culture) are so transparent that to examine them seems to violate them by making too much out of too little; on the other hand, many movies in this study work rigorously and expressly to attack the traditional avenues by which we might organize and make sense of them. What both the vacancies of the first and the densities of the second call attention to is, I believe, the same thing: that real difficulties and serious questions in viewing movies today lie beyond what we see on the screen. If, therefore, I have responded by making difficult some of these films (theoretically, sometimes conceptually), it is because, however transparent or impenetrable these movies may seem, their address and viewing involve them in extremely complex and difficult issues about how we can or cannot engage them. This book seeks, in short, to release these movies toward a common groping for understanding about not so much the films themselves but the contemporary cultural dynamics that inform them. If contemporary culture has begun to create a cinema without authoritative walls, the advantage may be that we can recognize what is now culturally most important: namely, how we talk long and hard to each other on the outside.