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# Hollywood Cinema

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## **“Hollywood Cinema”**

**By Walter Metz**

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Hollywood, soon to become the United States’ national film industry, was founded in the early teens by a group of film companies which came to Los Angeles at first to escape the winter conditions of their New York- and Chicago-based production locations. However, the advantages of production in southern California—particularly the varied landscapes in the region crucial for exterior, on-location photography—soon made Hollywood the dominant film production center in the country.<sup>i</sup>

Hollywood, of course, is not synonymous with filmmaking in the United States. Before the early 1910s, American filmmaking was mostly New York-based, and specialized in the production of short films (circa 1909, a one-reel short, or approximately 10 minutes). At the time, French film companies dominated global film distribution, and it was more likely that one would see a French film in the United States than an American-produced one. However, by 1917, the effects of World War I on global film distribution—severely limiting French companies’ abilities to release films worldwide yet having little effect on the global demand for new films—would allow the Hollywood film industry to expand and stabilize.

The story of the formation of Hollywood also involves a set of filmmakers leaving New York and traveling to Los Angeles. On the business side, an independent producer, Carl Laemmle, fought the major New York-based filmmaking enterprise of the

latter half of the first decade of the 20th century, the Motion Picture Patents Corporation (MPPC), over their attempt to monopolize filmmaking in the city. Despite winning a major court ruling against the MPPC's monopolistic practices, Laemmle left for California to establish Universal studios in Hollywood in 1915. Similarly, the producer Thomas Ince built Inceville, a large studio that by 1916 was producing epic features like **Civilization** (1916), a pacifist critique of World War I.

On the creative side, the career of D.W. Griffith traces the move from New York to Hollywood. Between 1909 and 1913, Griffith was the major director at the Biograph Company, a New York-based producer of shorts for whom Griffith made hundreds of intricately edited last-minute rescue films (such as 1909's **The Lonely Villa**). When Biograph, heavily invested in the two-reel short, refused to allow Griffith to make a feature-length film, he left the company and financed his own film, the epic, **The Birth of a Nation** (1914). Coupled with **Intolerance** (1915), his even more intricately-edited masterpiece, Griffith's feature-length films offer an extreme exemplar of the formation of the Hollywood cinema. **Intolerance**, in particular, is a Hollywood film par excellence. It is a sweeping epic whose failed quest for grandeur began Griffith's fall. Its connection to Los Angeles is legendary: the massive Babylonian set was erected in the city, and when Griffith went bankrupt, it remained a tourist attraction for many years because no one had the money to dismantle it. It was finally taken down during the Depression, thanks to the New Deal's WPA program.<sup>ii</sup>

By 1917, the classical Hollywood cinema was organized around a studio system. The industry evolved into an oligopoly, the control of an industry by a small number of companies. By the 1930s, the hierarchy of these companies had become firmly

established. The major players in the studio system, referred to by film historians as the “big five,” were: Paramount, MGM, 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros., and RKO. These studios were fully vertically integrated, meaning they controlled large holdings in all three areas of the film industry: production, distribution, and exhibition. One step down the ladder were the “little three,” so-called because they had less investment in exhibition real estate. The little three were: Universal, Columbia, and United Artists. Sometimes, this hierarchy is split differently because RKO was less well-positioned in exhibition than the so-called “bigger four.” On the fringe of the studio system were Republic and Monogram, even smaller production outfits whose specialty was the making of cheap genre films, such as Westerns.

The Hollywood studio system was a well-oiled machine for the generation of huge profits. With vertical integration comes the ability to maximize profits by assuring that each layer of the industry is forced to conform to the same efficiency practices. For example, production and exhibition are naturally two sectors of the film industry that are at odds. To make large profits, the producers of movies want them to be made cheaply. The exhibitors of movies, on the other hand, want the movies to be of high quality so as to generate public interest in the product they are offering. So, the studio system colluded between these two sectors of the industry. Under practices like blind buying and block booking, the studio would require its exhibitors to purchase a set of films, sight unseen, rather than just the big budget film they might ordinarily want in isolation because it featured big stars and was guaranteed to generate audience interest. Under this system, a studio could ensure continuous profits, generated not only by the few quality films it

might happen to have made in a given year, but instead via all of the films—good or not—that its factory line churned out.

Despite the extremely limited artistic component of the studio system economic model, this organization resulted in a great many wonderful films, as varied as **The Wizard of Oz** (MGM, Victor Fleming, 1939) and **Citizen Kane** (RKO, Orson Welles, 1941). This is largely because such a system demands aesthetic differentiation of product to accompany economic practices of standardization.<sup>iii</sup> That is to say, what the production wing of the studio system wants is a factory model in which the same product is churned out with reliability and quality. However, while this system can work unfettered in the shoe industry, where it is perfectly possible to want to buy the same shoe over and over again because it pleases one's foot, the same cannot be said for movies. It is unlikely that one is going to keep buying tickets for the same movie over and over again. Instead, the Hollywood studio system relies on standardization (of production methods and of content) alongside product differentiation.

No category of Hollywood filmmaking is more driven by standardization and differentiation than is the genre system. Hollywood cinema's genres allow the efficient production of many films that are designed to seem different from one another. Thus, while no one would go to see the horror film **Dracula** tens of times a year, Universal studios in the 1930s could use the same sets and talent to make a cycle of horror films that were mostly like **Dracula**, but with narrative and aesthetic differences. Thus, during the 1930s, Universal made horror films about Frankenstein, the Invisible Man, the Wolfman, as well as sequels and intertextual permutations which combined them together, such as **Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man** (1943).

This economic system of film production allowed the Hollywood film industry to weather the Depression and World War II. In the immediate post-war period, Hollywood's economic stranglehold on American national cinema reached its apex, with the years 1946-1947 representing the largest per capita movie attendance in American history. However, by the late 1930s, forces emerged which would change the economic structure of Hollywood. In 1938, an antitrust case was filed against the Hollywood studio system that would come to be known as the Paramount case. Because of the intervening Second World War, the case was not fully adjudicated until 1948, at which time the Hollywood studios signed a consent decree with the Justice Department admitting to oligopolistic collusion.

However, rather than crippling the studio system, the tenets of the Paramount decree in the long run ended up preserving the Hollywood system. The Paramount decree forced the studios to cleave off one facet of its vertically-integrated system, exhibition. Due to the forces of post-war suburbanization, by the early 1970s the studios' expensive real estate holdings in downtown urban centers would be deserted, becoming spaces for the exhibition of international art cinema and pornography. Of the three parts of the business of moviemaking, the least capital intensive, yet most profitable, is distribution, over which, to this day, the former Hollywood studios continue to exert a stranglehold.

The selling off of their exhibition infrastructure, nonetheless, did radically change the Hollywood industry. By 1960, the classical Hollywood studio system was gone, replaced by what has come to be known as "the New Hollywood." There are three major periods of the New Hollywood: the 1960s period which responded to the full effects of the Paramount decree, the "Hollywood Renaissance," (1967-1972) in which these

economic changes allowed briefly for an unprecedented level of experimentation in mainstream American filmmaking, and a return to the “blockbuster” mode of moviemaking with the spectacular summer release of **Jaws** in 1975. The quest after huge profits generated out of a relatively small number of major studio-distributed films continues unabated in contemporary Hollywood to this day.

The first period of the New Hollywood, roughly 1960-1968, is marked by a precipitous decline in studio prestige. A number of films from this period could be used to mark the transformation in Hollywood, but **Psycho** (1960) is the iconic one. The late 1950s films of Alfred Hitchcock were wide-screen, high gloss color spectacles featuring major Hollywood stars; **North by Northwest** (1959), starring Cary Grant is a good example. Some of these films, like **Vertigo** (1958), were financial disasters. **Psycho**, on the other hand, was made for Universal with Hitchcock’s television crew, in black-and-white on a small budget. The film featured no “A” list stars, instead relying on the eclectic casting of Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh. The success of **Psycho** dovetailed with an industry shifting toward the pursuit of genre-bound formulas of sensation that would appeal to a rising post-war youth culture.

The use of a television crew to shoot a Hollywood film offers a useful metaphor for the role of television in Hollywood’s transformation. While traditional film historians sometimes reduce the story to one of blind studio heads ignoring the rising importance of the new medium of television, in fact the story of Hollywood’s response to television is quite complicated. For one, the studio heads tried desperately to subsume the burgeoning television industry, but were stalled by a number of forces, not the least of which was the fear of government regulation, given that the Hollywood industry was a known anti-trust

violator. For example, Hollywood tried to create television systems which people could watch in movie theatres, but these systems failed for reasons related to government regulation and failed technological innovation.<sup>iv</sup> Television gained popularity throughout the 1950s, and began to compete with the cinema as America's top choice for audio-visual entertainment. Hollywood engaged in a number of technological innovations related to the presentation of movies—quadraphonic stereo sound, anamorphically-produced widescreen images, and three-dimensional images, among them—in order to lure viewers away from television screens and back into seats at movie theatres. It was a losing battle.

The remarkable growth of the television industry, and the precipitous decline of the film industry in the 1950s are perhaps best captured by the story of television producer Desi Arnaz and RKO studios. In 1950, band leader Desi Arnaz and his wife, “B” level film star Lucille Ball, sold their idea for a sitcom, **I Love Lucy**, to the CBS television network. Shooting the show on film to protect middle-aged Lucy's beauty image allowed for the sale of the then un-appreciated syndication rights. Desi and Lucy formed a television production company, Desilu, and convinced CBS to allow them control over these syndication rights. The enormous profitability of **I Love Lucy** in syndication—it has shown every day in Los Angeles since 1951, and countless times and places around the world—put Desilu in the position of expanding its position in the industry.

In the meantime, RKO was being run into the ground by Howard Hughes, who was using the studio as a place to turn his girlfriend into a movie star. In 1956, Arnaz used the syndication profits of **I Love Lucy** to buy the production venues of RKO. These



became the Desilu Studios, where a large percentage of 1960s American television, as varied as **Star Trek** and **The Brady Bunch**, was produced. Over the years, the industrial distinction between film and television has gradually faded, such that Hollywood is now the location for the production of both theatrically-released films and major narrative television shows, both of which are produced interchangeably in what used to be the location of the classical Hollywood studio system. All major Hollywood studios now have wings devoted to the production of shows meant for airing on prime-time television, both network and basic cable.

The story of Desilu buying RKO is one example of how the late 1950s can be seen as the last days of the classical Hollywood studio system. However, there are other examples among which was Fritz Lang's last American film, **Beyond a Reasonable Doubt**. Made in the death throes of RKO in 1956, the film fundamentally altered the narrative terms of the classical Hollywood studio film. For most of its story, Hollywood had relied on Aristotelian principles of narrative construction, largely inherited from the 19th century well-made play. By 1917, popular American screenwriting manuals were codifying these narrative devices into what we now know as "Three-Act Structure."<sup>v</sup>

The effects of the Paramount Decree immediately seemed to do greater damage to the Hollywood system. Lang's **Beyond a Reasonable Doubt**, released by RKO in 1956, violated the basic principles of the three-act structure film. The film concerns a man, Tom Garrett (Dana Andrews), an author who begins the film in conversation with a powerful liberal newspaper publisher, Austin Spencer. The publisher recoils against the preening of the city's district attorney, jubilant that he has sent another man to his execution. Tom and Austin scheme to plant evidence in a murder case that seems to implicate Tom. Their

plan is to let Tom go to trial, and be convicted in the capital murder case. Then, at the last minute, Austin will arrive with the damning evidence against the death penalty.

All goes as planned until Austin, on his way to the courtroom to exonerate Tom, dies in a freak, melodramatic car crash. Tom is sentenced to death, but Austin's daughter, Susan (Joan Fontaine) fights desperately to clear her boyfriend. She works throughout the second act to secure a gubernatorial pardon. In the third act, just as she is about to succeed, Tom lets slip a key piece of evidence that actually implicates himself in the murder. Susan, realizing he is really guilty, informs the governor of this fact. The film ends with Tom being led off to the gas chamber.

**Beyond a Reasonable Doubt** thus offers a complete subversion of the three-act structure, classical Hollywood narrative. It encourages our investment in Tom's innocence, only to produce a second ending in which our belief in him turns out to be completely wrong. It is thus, in effect, a film with two second turning points, each one of which contradicts the other. **Beyond a Reasonable Doubt** thus serves to demonstrate the collapse of the narrative efficiency of the studio system of filmmaking. At a dying studio, the German modernist filmmaker, Fritz Lang, was able to import alternative narrative forms into the Hollywood system.<sup>vi</sup>

The first New Hollywood period (1960-1967) is partially characterized by these sorts of disruptions in the studio system. A good example of this sort of disruption lies in the production of gothic horror films in the early 1960s. While **Psycho** (1960) is typically positioned as an iconic marker for the shift between the "old" and New Hollywoods, Alfred Hitchcock was a major filmmaker in Hollywood during a huge portion of its history. A better example is the case of William Castle. An exploitation filmmaker during

the 1950s, Castle specialized in making films for the matinee audience, inventing gimmicks to make his horror films seem scarier than they actually were. Castle would take out insurance policies on the spectators, in case they died of fright while watching his film, for example. In 1964, Castle secured a deal with Columbia Pictures for a horror film, **Strait-Jacket**, starring Joan Crawford. The film begins with a young girl witnessing her mother (Crawford) murdering her father with an axe. This flashback scene is followed by the main plot of the film, in which the adult daughter is seemingly reconciled with her mother, newly released from a mental institution. New axe murders begin occurring in the small town where they live, and everyone looks toward Crawford's character as the obvious suspect. However, in the film's Act III climax, Crawford struggles with the axe murderer, who turns out to be her daughter wearing a Joan Crawford mask!

**Strait-Jacket** represents the shift in the New Hollywood from character dramas (1943's **Casablanca**) toward exploitation spectacle (axe murder horror films). In fact, one could suggest that what in the classical Hollywood period represented the fringes of Hollywood (low budget genre films at the exploitation level) would become the main "A" films of the New Hollywood (slasher films and gross-out comedies and the like). In addition, no films from the first New Hollywood period better illustrates the loss of studio prestige. The last image of the film features Lady Columbia with her head at her feet, the victim of William Castle's axe. Given how seriously corporations take their brand logo, this mutilation of Lady Columbia is remarkable.

More notable, however, is what the first New Hollywood period films did to the star system of classical Hollywood. The iconic films in this vein are those featuring aging

female “A” level stars from classical Hollywood melodramas. **Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?** (Robert Aldrich, 1962) is the key film here because it weaves its gothic horror around the two key women stars in this tradition, both John Crawford and Bette Davis. These stars’ last decades in the New Hollywood were filled with such low budget horror appearances, in which the female aged body came to signify horror, and not the beauty that their young bodies represented in such classical Hollywood films as **Dark Victory** (1939) or **Mildred Pierce** (1945).

Such is not the case, significantly, for male stars. A good example here is the case of MGM’s 1966 film, **Hot Rods to Hell**. A classical mainstream first New Hollywood exploitation film, this features Dana Andrews as a middle-aged salesman, who, because of a car accident, is forced to move across country with his family. During the road trip, the family is accosted by psychotic teenagers, juvenile delinquents intent on running them off the road. At the end of the film, Andrews’ character has had enough, and stages an Act III climax in which he places his car on the highway in the dead of the night. Thinking he is playing chicken with them, the teenagers attempt to ram his car. They discover the car is abandoned too late, and smash their own car on the desolate highway. Andrews stands over their wounded bodies, smashing their already destroyed car with a crow bar. Thus, he ends the film triumphantly, secure in his generically-formed Hollywood masculinity. While Davis and Crawford are forced to shift genres, from glamorous melodrama to exploitation horror, Andrews is allowed to age gracefully, secure in his ability to defeat the villains, just as he was able to do in his classical Hollywood films, as in the film noir, **Laura** (Otto Preminger, 1944).

While there are many films, like **Strait-Jacket** and **Beyond a Reasonable Doubt** which point to major shifts between the classical and New Hollywoods, in general Hollywood continued to produce films that would appeal to a mass audience and make large profits. As Tom Schatz points out in his essay, “The New Hollywood,” the film industry was intent on continuing the big budget, high profit mode of filmmaking into the 1960s.<sup>vii</sup> Thus, when **The Sound of Music** generated blockbuster profits on its release in 1965, all the other Hollywood studios followed suit, trying to replicate its success. Most of the studios almost went bankrupt in trying to do so, and the wave of late 1960s musicals proved disastrous. Films like **Doctor Doolittle** (1967) lost most of the money heaped into their super-spectacular productions. The most embarrassing story to come out of this experience was **Oliver!** (1968), a big budget musical based on the work of Charles Dickens. Its disastrous release was counterbalanced by Academy Award nominations: the Oscar voting reflecting not so much the quality of the films as at the amount of money invested. Thus the critically maligned musical won the best picture statuette, in the process beating **2001** (MGM, Stanley Kubrick, 1968), one of the most inventive of Hollywood films.

As a result of the collapsing finances of the Hollywood studios, they became easy targets for takeovers. The result was, that by the end of the 1960s, Hollywood studios were largely tax loss write-offs for larger conglomerates. Gulf and Western, an oil company, for example, bought Paramount Pictures in 1966. In this new business climate, where Hollywood film companies were run by people who made little distinction between the various commodities their different divisions made, and thus had little interest in the production of art, a more relaxed mode of production for Hollywood films

resulted. One result was that a number of film school graduates were allowed into the Hollywood system, the first time directors had not had to work their way up through the union craft system to helm Hollywood films. In addition, less money was available overall for film production, and so smaller budgets were assigned to each film. To address this, the films were niche marketed toward smaller potential audiences, the idea being that smaller budget films did not have to appeal to a mass audience in order to make a small profit.

This period, from 1967-1975, has been described as the “Hollywood Renaissance,” a second period of the New Hollywood in which a number of near experimental films were made within the studio system. The contrasting business and artistic environment of Hollywood during this period means that the films are largely conflicted, and need to be discussed as such. For example, Columbia Pictures released **Easy Rider** in 1968, a film directed by two young men, Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, who had been present in Hollywood as children in the 1950s, Fonda because of his famous actor father, Henry, and Hopper because he was a teenage actor appearing on numerous television shows throughout the 1950s.

On the one hand, **Easy Rider** is a remarkable film, importing modernist aesthetics into the Hollywood cinema. While modernism had appeared in the classical Hollywood studios films in fits and starts (Orson Welles’ **Citizen Kane** and numerous post-war films noirs, for example), the Hollywood Renaissance films repeatedly used an aggressive, non-classical style. The beginning of **Easy Rider** features non-continuity editing (scenes are begun in close-up without an establishing shot to identify the location and content of individual shots) and narrative events which reference the thematics of modernism. As

Captain America (Fonda) rides his motorcycle off into the American southwest to discover himself anew, he throws his watch into the sand, breaking it. This image of a broken watch signifying the end of traditional life was, of course, central to Quentin's narration in the second chapter of William Faulkner's **The Sound and the Fury** (1929), one of the iconic works of American modernist literature.

On the other hand, the economics of the Hollywood Renaissance films were driven by a niche marketing that was not necessarily tied to radical politics. Thus, **Easy Rider** could be marketed toward the counterculture without actually endorsing countercultural values. The first place the two motorcycle riders stop in their epic quest eastward (generically, against the grain of the American Western, traveling, as they do, on motor cycles rather than horses and going east rather than west) is at a countercultural commune. Hopper's character observes that the young men and women have no idea what they are doing, planting seeds in fallow sand, without water. As our heroes leave the commune, it is quite clear that their rebellion against mainstream America is doomed to failure. The end of the film reiterates this failure, when both of our heroes are murdered by rednecks after leaving New Orleans, their final destination. The Hollywood Renaissance films were thus aesthetically innovative but thematically similar to their 1950s and early 1960s classical counterparts, vilifying the idea of social protest while frejecting conventional lifestyles.

This is the point of Steve Neale's essay, "New Hollywood Cinema," which asks the provocative question, "What's 'new' about the New Hollywood?"<sup>viii</sup> Neale's answer is the one that my analysis of **Easy Rider** has led to: aesthetic newness tempered by ideological continuity with Hollywood conservatism. This formulation can be repeated

across many of the masterpieces of the Hollywood Renaissance. Formally, it is hard to find a more visually aggressive Hollywood film than **The Graduate** (Mike Nichols, 1967). A niche-marketed film attempting to appeal to the youth culture, the film features Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) who returns to his upper-middle-class parents in Los Angeles, having succeeded in a fine, East Coast university. He arrives completely alienated, uncertain what he wants to make of his life. With nothing else to do, he lashes out against his parents' generation by sleeping with his parents' friend, Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft).

The film's first act, devoted to this affair, is filled with formal innovations. Benjamin's alienation is represented by shooting him through the fish tank in his room, associating him with the imprisoned fish in the tank. At the first turning point of the film, Benjamin is forced to tell his new girlfriend, Elaine (Katherine Ross), of his now-ended affair with her mother. A beautiful focus pull allows Elaine's face gradually to come into focus as she realizes that the older woman with whom Ben confessed to having an affair was not just any woman, but in fact her own mother. As Elaine kicks Benjamin out of her bedroom, a zoom shot with a wide angle lens mounted on the camera, produces an exquisite shot of alienation. As Mrs. Robinson says goodbye to Benjamin, we are presented with one of the oddest over-the-shoulder two-shots in Hollywood history. The space between Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson is grossly exaggerated by the remarkable use of the wide angle lens.

However, for all of its stylistic aggressiveness, **The Graduate** remains a relatively conventional Hollywood melodrama. The application of three-act structure to the love story is as simple as it gets: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, and boy gets girl back.



This is the basic structure of **The Graduate**, and indeed any Hollywood romance. In these terms, the ending of the film, in which Ben rescues Elaine from marrying Carl, a fraternity boy chosen by her parents because he is not Ben, is remarkably conventional. Ben and Elaine run from the church and board a bus headed for parts unknown. As they sit in the back row, they are presented in two shot, staring directly ahead. The film presents this moment ironically, getting us to question the happy ending. The shot lasts too long, almost two minutes, and we gradually see the smiles on their faces drain away as they realize they have nothing to say to one another. Then, the soundtrack presents “The Sound of Silence,” the Simon and Garfunkel song that during the first act of the film was associated with the depravity and alienation of the Mrs. Robinson affair. The film thus suggests that there is no hope of Benjamin rebelling against his parents’ generation, that his choice of Elaine has in fact sealed his fate, doomed to live a life exactly like his parents’. Here, as in **Easy Rider**, the possibility of the radical reinvention of the American experience is teasingly presented, but then viciously and conservatively denied.

More importantly, the basic visual structure of **The Graduate** produces this moment as inevitable closure. The first shot of the film is a zoom out from Ben’s head resting against a white pillow on his airplane ride home to Los Angeles. In the next sequence, he crowds the right-hand side of the widescreen image as he rides the people mover at the airport on his way to collect his luggage. This leaves room for the credits on the left-hand side of the image, but also forms the thematic motif of the film: what will fill the other half of the space Ben inhabits? The last shot of the film answers this ideological and structural question: Elaine will. In no uncertain terms, **The Graduate**, for

all of its visual inventiveness, closes back upon itself with the most basic, conservative gesture: boy will be man when girl becomes woman, and they will live their lives together.

While one could focus on any number of niche market sectors of the Hollywood Renaissance, perhaps the most distinctive is the blaxploitation film of the early 1970s. With the release of **The Learning Tree** (Gordon Parks, Sr., 1969), Hollywood, after almost a century of direct discrimination against African-Americans, finally allowed a major studio film directed by a black man. In the wake of this, a cycle of films intended to appeal to urban audiences developed. The most interesting, **Shaft** (Gordon Parks, Sr., 1971) and **Superfly** (Gordon Parks, Jr., 1972), represented a re-investment in the thematics of the film noir, redirected toward black Americans. This was both a crass marketing ploy (**Shaft** could be interpreted as merely 1941's **The Maltese Falcon** with a black private detective), and a means of providing for a more radical critique of the Hollywood representational tradition. **Blacula** (William Crain, 1972), for example, begins with a wonderful scene sequence in which vampirism is associated with the traumatic global history of slavery: a white slave trader dines with an African prince, but then lusts after the prince's wife. As he is betrayed by the white slaver, and entombed and left to die, the black man vows to avenge the evils of slavery across time. He does so by coming back to 1970s America as a vampire. However, the rest of **Blacula** features a straight-forward and uninteresting telling of the Dracula mythology, ending with a standard exploitation scene in which Blacula's face is rotted by the rays of the sun, his eye sockets filled with maggots.

It would rest with filmmakers outside of the Hollywood system to make truly radical genre films. In contrast with *Blacula*, Bill Gunn's vampire film, **Ganja and Hess** (1973), is a radical critique of an upper-class black man whose vampirism requires him to prey upon the black underclass in Harlem. Gunn had secured the money from Kelly and Jordan, a fringe Hollywood production company, on the promise of delivering a blaxploitation film. In fact he delivered a radical, modernist critique of the vampire genre. Kelly and Jordan recut the film and released it as **Blood Couple** to the drive-in movie market. However, Gunn kept an unbutchered print of **Ganja and Hess**, and deposited it in the Museum of Modern Art's film library, assuring that the film would continue to be available in its original form.

No filmmaker's story better expresses the ideological shortcomings of the Hollywood Renaissance than that of Melvin Van Peebles. Trained in the theatre, van Peebles fled America in the 1960s, training as a filmmaker in France, releasing a highly regarded, French New Wave-influenced, character drama, **Story of a Three Day Pass** (1968). He was lured back to Hollywood by Columbia Pictures, to make a race comedy, **Watermelon Man** (1970). The film turned out to be too radical, and van Peebles was restrained from doing what he wanted with his film, about a white man played in whiteface by a black actor, Godfrey Cambridge, who, at the film's first turning point, is turned black by the comic malfunctioning of his tanning bed. In the first act of the film, Jeff is indifferent to the Civil Rights movement. However, after he turns black, he is confronted with the tangible effects of racism, finally losing his job as an insurance salesman because he discovers the company is bilking black people, and ending the film as a comic black militant, training as a revolutionary who uses a mop as a spear.

Discouraged by the Hollywood production process, Van Peebles decided to make his next film, a deconstruction of the Hollywood Western, **Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song** (1971), with independent financing. In this way, Van Peebles succeeded in producing the cinematic equivalent of such radical black literature as Ishmael Reed's **Yellow Back Radio Broke Down**. Despite the influx of African-American talent into Hollywood during the Hollywood Renaissance, the truly radical work continued to be made outside the confines of the mainstream American film industry located in Hollywood.

Whatever the failures of the Hollywood Renaissance, a new idiom in American cinema had developed in the last half of the 1960s and the early 1970s. A new generation of filmmakers were making films critical of the traditional Hollywood generic view of America. Revisionist films were produced across the genres: Sam Peckinpah's **The Wild Bunch** (1968) asked questions about the nature of violence by placing the gunfight at the beginning of the film while **Little Big Man** (Arthur Penn, 1970) questioned classical Hollywood's depictions of Native Americans. By 1973, the force of the Hollywood Renaissance began to shift. **The Exorcist** (1973) was partly a meditation on the nature of religion in America, and partly a spectacular horror film in which a little girl projectile vomited and twisted her head around in astonishing images. **The Godfather** (1974) also offered a conventional return to the gangster film, yet on an epic scale.

However, it was not until the summer 1975 release of **Jaws** that it became clear that the Hollywood Renaissance was dead. A film that came in frighteningly over-budget for minor studio Universal, **Jaws** made over \$100 million during its first release. This huge profit placed Universal among the most profitable of the Hollywood film studios,

and as a result of a long-term deal with blockbuster filmmaker Steven Spielberg, is now among the biggest and most financially stable studios in the New Hollywood.

*Jaws*, while wonderfully constructed, both narratively and aesthetically, represented a sea change in the films of the Hollywood Renaissance period. While a clear Watergate allegory—Chief Brody keeps the beaches open after the mayor claims that the island’s economy will collapse, resulting in the needless death of a little boy—the film’s pessimism is contained in its first act. The resulting two acts of the film are about Chief Brody recovering from his mistake and getting the job done. As Saigon was falling to the Viet Cong in the summer of 1975, Chief Brody caused millions of young people to return to the movie theatre and watch him eliminate the threat to the American ship of state.

The resulting films, the third period of the New Hollywood, would be taken over by filmmakers from the same generation as those of the Hollywood Renaissance, but Spielberg and George Lucas would rebel against the cultural critique of the earlier films. The summer success of Lucas’s *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) is the crucial example. While a film like **Annie Hall** (Woody Allen 1977) suggests the impossibility of intimate contact between two people, **Star Wars** builds an allegory about American values triumphing over the evil Empire. Lucas’s film skips back across the Hollywood Renaissance and the social turbulence of the 1960s to classical Hollywood itself. **Star Wars** is based on the films of Lucas’s youth, from an America which saw itself as morally just and able to believe in its heroes. Thus, simplistic movie serials (**Flash Gordon** and **Buck Rogers**, in particular) are emphasized, and the morally ambiguous Hollywood films (1956’s **The Searchers**) that it references are stripped of their content and used merely for plot points: the first turning point of **The Searchers**, when Martin

discovers his aunt massacred, is replicated when Luke discovers his aunt and uncle massacred.

The success of **Star Wars** fundamentally changed Hollywood filmmaking at the aesthetic and narrative level but, in terms of the industry, merely returned the business toward the production of big-budget, mass audience blockbusters. While minor political shifts—the difference between Reaganite conservatism and Clintonite centrism—are of some importance, what is more crucial is the basic return of the industry to a blockbuster mode. Spielberg and Lucas would collaborate on the Indiana Jones movies throughout the 1980s, producing another trilogy of blockbusters based on the simplistic movie serials of their youth. Their protégés would follow suit, one example being Robert Zemeckis’ successful trilogy at Universal, the **Back to the Future** series.

**Back to the Future** (1985) is an important film for establishing the clear Reaganite values of 1980s cinema as expressed in Hollywood’s return to mass-market blockbusters. The film concerns Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox), a teenager living in a lower-middle-class household in suburbia. His father is a wimp, bullied around by his boss. Marty enters a time machine, which takes him back to 1955, to witness his parents’ courtship. At the film’s first turning point, he accidentally prevents his parents meeting and thus endangers his future existence. He spends the rest of the film fixing this, finally succeeding at the “Enchantment Under the Sea” dance which forms the climax of Act III. There, he plays rock and roll music on his guitar while, out on the dance floor, his future mother and father kiss and fall in love. With Marty’s help, his father learns to stand up to his future boss. When Marty returns to 1985, his family now lives in Reaganite, yuppie opulence, far from the drudgery he left at the beginning of the film. The “there’s no place

like home” ideology of classical Hollywood, particularly **The Wizard of Oz**, is hereby given a remarkable, bootstraps Reaganite twist.

To add insult to injury, the music Marty plays is the classic rock from the 1950s. While out on stage, Chuck Berry’s cousin hears Marty playing, and calls his cousin on the phone, telling him that he has found the new sound they need. In an absurd redefinition of the racial history of American popular music, Marty the white kid teaches Chuck Berry how to make blues-influenced black rock and roll music! The story of Elvis making radical black music palatable for white America is thus turned on its ear in a white supremacist fantasy of creativity. In this way, contemporary Hollywood blockbusters provide ideological fantasy resolutions of real-world complex problems.

Contemporary Hollywood cinema is the heir to what Robin Wood calls, “the Lucas-Spielberg Syndrome.”<sup>ix</sup> While Spielberg has graduated into a more mature filmmaker interested in social trauma—**Schindler’s List** (1993) and **Amistad** (1997)—much of contemporary Hollywood cinema is released in the summer with the expectation that things blowing up will reassure a troubled nation. Every summer, films are released by each studio with the intention of making over \$100 million and thus keeping the studio in business for another year. A good number of these films succeed in this goal because they resonate with enough people: **Independence Day** (Roland Emmerich, 1996), **Spider-Man** (Sam Raimi, 2002), and the new **Star Wars** trilogy are three cases in point.

Some blockbusters vary the reductive formula in remarkable ways. When James Cameron needed the resources of not one major Hollywood studio but two to realize his epic retelling of the Titanic tragedy, his film’s \$200 million budget was ridiculed as

unreasonable. Yet Cameron's gamble paid off. **Titanic** (1997) is a remarkable blockbuster, reliant not on the male *bildungsroman* motif of almost all other blockbusters (**Star Wars**, 1988's **Batman**, etc.), but instead on the building of a young girl's adulthood. While films like **Rocky** (1977) and **Star Wars** were famous for their thousands of repeat male teenage viewers, **Titanic** was a sensation among teenage girls. No blockbuster has followed in this tradition, but the phenomenal success of **Titanic** indicates that the third New Hollywood formula is generic, but not completely predictable.

The other principle effect of Lucas's consolidation of the New Hollywood blockbuster period lies in the development of special effects research, innovation, and diffusion. When Lucas made **Star Wars** at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, special effects work had not appreciably advanced since the 1950s. Much of the work on the film was like George Pal movies in the 1950s and *2001* in the late 1960s, was based on miniature model work, Claymation, and other standard practices. In an astonishingly bad business deal, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox signed over the toy merchandizing rights for **Star Wars** to Lucas himself. The phenomenal, unprecedented success of **Star Wars** merchandizing made Lucas one of the major financial players in Hollywood, and indeed intensified Hollywood's overall financial interest in "franchise" movies, capable of supporting multi-industry advertising campaigns, ranging from book and music tie-ins, to toys, all the way to fast food meals, fabrics, and theme park rides.

With the toy profits, Lucas built a special effects house, Industrial Light and Magic (ILM), which became the state of the art facility for making special effects part of standard practice in the making of a high budget Hollywood films. While other such



houses have sprouted around the world over the past 20 years, many of them started and/or staffed by Lucas alumni, ILM continues to be a major player in special effects work in Hollywood.

The resulting technology, particularly CGI (computer generated images), has provided one of the most important technological shifts in the history of Hollywood since the coming of sound. Computers now allow for the quick and cheap production of epic crowd scenes (like those in 2000's **Gladiator**, for example) that in the days of classical Hollywood (for example, 1959's **Ben-Hur**) would have required thousands of extras. Hollywood films have become so reliant on computer technology that entire films can be produced without actors, as can be seen in a film like **Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within** (2001).

The most profitable effect of CGI technology has been in the field of animation. Walt Disney in the 1930s classical Hollywood studio system was an anomaly: he ran a production-only studio which released its animated features through RKO. The Disney Corporation re-emerged in the early 1990s as a major player in Hollywood because of its expertise in feature-length animation, largely as a result of the success of **Beauty and the Beast** (1991). Because these films blended a deft mix of material of interest to young children and their parents, Disney became among the most financially profitable studios in contemporary Hollywood. This is a long way from their classical Hollywood status as a production-only studio.

CGI, however, by the late 1990s, became a technology that effectively rendered obsolete the hand-drawn animated feature. Pioneered by a small California company, Pixar, computer animation is now the standard practice for the generation of these highly

profitable animated features. Most major studios have a feature animation unit, Fox, for example, producing the successful film, **Ice Age** (Chris Wedge, 2002). Disney, seeing the writing on the wall, bought up Pixar, and even though it has recently dissolved that merger, has also shifted exclusively to computer-generated animation.

Disney's ability to buy up Pixar leads to another observation about the long-term history of the Hollywood film industry. Under the weight of Reaganite deregulation, the major effect of the Paramount decree—the divorce of production-distribution from exhibition—has largely been eroded. Most major Hollywood studios today are both vertically and horizontally integrated, part of large international conglomerates that have synergistic control over many facets of the media business, ranging from video games and films to books and music. Disney is part of Capital Cities/ABC, thus having vertically-integrated control to produce, distribute, and exhibit media content.

The great success story regarding this facet of the industry is the conglomerate now called Time-Warner/AOL. This is the parent company of Home Box Office, a pay-cable television channel begun in 1971. Under the lax restrictions associated with Reaganite deregulation, HBO was able to become a major financier of Hollywood films, having a ready-made exhibition venue that is its base pay-cable service. For a while, Fox chair Rupert Murdoch worried that HBO would swallow Hollywood whole. Cameron needed \$200 million to produce **Titanic**, a burden that was too large for one studio to shoulder, but HBO generates about \$300 million in cash each month (30 million subscribers paying roughly \$10 per month). HBO now not only has its hands in much Hollywood film financing, it also produces financially successful and critically-acclaimed original television programming (shows like **The Sopranos** and **Sex and the City**).

In short, for all its historical variability over its almost 100 year history, Hollywood has proven remarkably receptive to change. Continuity editing and three-act structure narrative serves as the base of American media content, the prime producer of which is a small artists' colony in southern California. The global reach of Hollywood's distribution network is breathtaking. Action film blockbusters tend to earn even more in international markets than in North America. Thus, the future of Hollywood as America's premier export seems assured, which means that the ideological shortcomings of the system will be with us for quite some time.

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<sup>i</sup> Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell. **Film History: An Introduction**. 2nd Ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003, 42.

<sup>ii</sup> Cook, David A. **A History of Narrative Film**. 4th Ed. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2004, 78.

<sup>iii</sup> Staiger, Janet. "Standardization and Differentiation: The Reinforcement and Dispersion of Hollywood's Practices." David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. **The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960**. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. 96-112.

<sup>iv</sup> Gomery, Douglas. "Failed Opportunities: The Integration of the U.S. Motion Picture and Television Industries." **Quarterly Review of Film Studies**. [Summer 1984]. 219-228.

<sup>v</sup> Seger, Linda. **Making a Good Script Great**. Hollywood: Samuel French, 1987.

<sup>vi</sup> Russell, Catherine. **Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure, and New Wave Cinemas**. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1995.

<sup>vii</sup> Schatz, Thomas. "The New Hollywood." **Film Theory Goes to the Movies**. Ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins. New York: Routledge, 1993. 8-36.

<sup>viii</sup> Neale, Steve. "New Hollywood Cinema." **Screen**. 17.2 [Summer 1976]. 117-122.

<sup>ix</sup> Wood, Robin. "Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era." **Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan**. New York: Columbia, 1986, 162.

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