

New Narrative Depths?

Spectacle and Narrative in Blockbuster Cinema Revisited

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Abstract

The article aims to tease out an implicit, possibly even instinctive, assumption about why big-budget blockbuster storylines come up short compared to other kinds of culturally sanctioned narratives. Briefly, the assumption is that there is a distinct difference between stories that are simply a pretext for a series of isolated attractions and stories that are guided by some greater predefined purpose or guiding idea. If we look more closely at it, this presumption throws up some surprising and paradoxical findings. My hypothesis is that this line of reasoning has tended to seep into the debate about classical and postclassical Hollywood cinema. The article argues that we should not take this assumption for granted, and that it has confused the debate about historical changes in Hollywood films. However, by restating the opposition between blockbuster narratives and more prestigious story-types in different terms, we can study blockbuster cinema from a more productive perspective than has been the case so far.

Keywords: narrative, blockbuster cinema, spectacle, film history, postclassicism, Hollywood

Introduction

It is often claimed that Hollywood narratives have somehow changed since the classical period. It is clear that the story-*types* that lie at the heart of the American movie economy are rather different today than in the studio era. Several authors have noted how Hollywood has adopted not just marketing and distribution practices, like saturation booking, once mainly associated with exploitation cinema, but also content (Maltby 2003: 168-170; Cook 2000: 257; Neale 2003: 52-53). Previously marginal genres like science fiction, horror, and action-adventure have taken centre stage in place of westerns, war films, prestige biopics, and literary adaptations.

More controversial has been the question of whether the way the stories are told has undergone equally significant transformations. Potential transitions are most often thought of as in some sense regrettable; in particular, critics have been quick to complain that a perceived predominance of digital special effects has caused storytelling standards to plummet, especially in big-budget blockbusters. This is also considered a more deep-seated change. Whereas the first issue, the shift in the generic balance, is seen to involve surface alterations, this second matter has to do with a possibly fundamental historical break: have we witnessed a shift from a classical storytelling phase to a postclassical one?

This article consists of three parts. The first one provides a brief summary of the arguments over the status of narrative in contemporary blockbuster cinema, and also identifies some possible limitations in the debate so far. The second part is the focal point of the article. It makes the case that conventional distinctions between, on the one hand, shoddy blockbusters and, on the other, more prestigious story-types, are closely connected to certain implicit assumptions about the creative process, about how different kinds of narratives come into being. While these assumptions may seem self-evident, I contend that closer examination of them might lead us to question certain received wisdoms. Moreover, it seems to me that they also underpin, albeit indirectly, a historical argument that equates the shift from a classical to a postclassical era with a decline of narrative proficiency. Certainly, they inform widespread complaints over the quality of storytelling in American films today more generally.

However, I want to suggest that teasing out these taken-for-granted ideas throws up some interesting and surprising contradictions. My contention is that calling attention to these contradictions allows us to study blockbuster cinema from a more productive perspective than has been the case so far. I want to stress that the ideas that I examine about how stories originate are not taken from, and do not add up to, an actual or fully developed position or stance. They are more imprecise than that, more like a set of not fully thought-through suppositions. We might think of them collectively as a kind of reflex that kicks in when we talk about, think about, evaluate, and experience numerous cultural texts. I am not describing a coherent point of view that can be attributed to specific scholars, though we certainly find traces of these assumptions in much scholarly writing. We can think of it as a cultural discourse that we tend to fall back on more or less intuitively or unconsciously, and that has significantly shaped the debate about contemporary Hollywood cinema.

While I won't rule out that this discourse allows us to make useful distinctions between different kinds of films, these distinctions don't fit into an even moderately convenient *historical* narrative. In fact, instead of carrying on the pursuit of convincing arguments that storytelling conventions have undergone any fundamental and detrimental changes, it might be more interesting at this point to investigate the extraordinary persistence of the perception that narrative is on the verge of collapse. That is the subject of the third and final part of the article.

I

Summary of the Debate

Complaints that the ability to tell compelling stories is rapidly disappearing in contemporary Hollywood cinema is probably most noticeable in film criticism. Newspaper reviews of the latest blockbusters abound with statements to the effect that they contain impressive special effects but, unfortunately, no story or interesting characters. Many academic texts too frequently describe the disappearance or diminishment of narrative. However, they do not necessarily frame it as a "problem"; many celebrate the utopian or kinesthetic dimensions of spectacle. Thus Scott Bukatman makes reference to "the 'theme park movie' – a set of overdesigned, hermetically sealed, totalizing environments masquerading as movies" (1998: 266); Andrew Darley argues that it is the allure of the imagery that "is *the* primary element of reception, entailing a displacement away from concentration on

narratives (such as they are) and towards the allure and fascinations of the image itself” and that a film like *Toy Story* is “about realist and illusionary qualities, not character and plot” (2000: 84, 87); Viva Paci maintains that “high-tech special effects films [...] enthrall the viewer by means which owe very little to the principle of causality” (2006: 122); Angela Ndalanian maintains that *Star Wars* marked “a major turning point in spectator and screen relations [by introducing] new visual, audio, and kinesthetic experiences to the cinema that heightened the effect of immersion and sensorial engagement” (2004: 190); finally, for Larry Gross, the success of Spielberg and Lucas lies in their ability “to make the visual sensation answer all questions of meaning and value” (2000: 7).

Naturally, these quotes are detached from the context in which they appeared. The texts from which they were lifted do contain more nuanced descriptions as well. Still, I maintain that these citations are indicative of prevalent perceptions about the status of narrative in contemporary Hollywood films.

On the other hand there are those scholars who argue that these descriptions are severely exaggerated. Most prominently, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have argued in several books, articles and, more recently, blog entries, that not only is narrative *present* in modern Hollywood films, but a specific *type* of narrative, characterized by cause-and-effect chains of events with psychologically defined characters who act on clearly laid out goals in – prototypically – a double plotline of a main mission and a heterosexual romance. Other writers too, like Geoff King (2000, 2002) and Shilo T. McClean (2006), largely echo this view.

In general, it seems to me that proponents of the view that the classical narrative tradition is alive and well have laid out their arguments far more carefully and persuasively than their opponents. For example, Roger Warren Beebe’s proclamation that “The lack of a strong (human) star in *Jurassic Park* [...] results in a dispersal of the narrative and a multiplication of narrative centers” (2000: 171) appears somewhat rash and unfounded in light of Geoff King’s more detailed and empirically based discussion, which finds in the same film a thoroughly organized and linear narrative dynamic as well as consistent underlying themes (2000: 41-67). The same authors have also provided similarly conflicting accounts of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Beebe 2000; King 2003).

On the other hand, though, it is not certain that such differing accounts are strictly comparable, for it might be that we are dealing with two different epistemic ideals and writing styles. Very generally, it seems to me that those who emphasize historical continuities have relatively more in common with the tradition of analytic philosophy, while those who stress historical discontinuity have relatively more in common with the tradition of continental philosophy. Thus the former base their arguments on “common sense” and easily accessible language; the latter, by contrast, are more likely to draw on denser prose, puns, and more ambitious and ingenious leaps of imagination. Sometimes there is an oscillation between hyperbolic statements and disclaimers. So in Beebe’s account of the historical significance of the morphing technology in *Terminator 2* we find statements about “a transformation of the *structure* of Hollywood narrative film” mixed with qualifications that the morph is simply “a hyperbolic dramatization or staging” of a historic shift, and that it “represents only a momentary point of disruption and not a new form of effects-based narrative” (2000: 160, 161, 170-171).

Advocates of the persistence of the narrative tradition have perhaps tended to disregard the disclaimers and to focus on the hyperbole. At any rate, they have meticulously

examined a range of contemporary Hollywood films, patiently pointing out that there *is* a story, that protagonists act on the basis of certain recognizable objectives and desires, and that explosions and car chases do not appear at random throughout these movies, but that they emerge from particular narrative causes, and that they also have specific effects for impending developments. This may at times appear to be an exercise in stating the obvious, but such pedantry is quite understandable in view of overblown reports of narrative disintegration, fragmentation, and incoherence. I would suggest that it is an indication that we have yet to see a truly convincing and solidly empirically grounded account of how exactly narrative conventions have changed in any significant way.

Still, I don't think this issue can be settled simply by determining whether or not goal-driven, cause-and-effect narratives are present in contemporary Hollywood cinema. I'm just not sure that anyone actually believes that narrative is *literally* lacking in contemporary Hollywood films. To the extent that there *have* been any doubts on this point, surely the time has come to put them to rest once and for all: it has indeed been firmly established that modern Hollywood films meet all the basic technical/formal criteria of any definition of narrative.

The idea that narrative has ceased to exist might, in fact, be a view that is argued *against* by those who stress the continuities between old and new Hollywood more than it is argued *for* by those who want to stress the discontinuities. Consider, for example, this Vivian Sobchack quote:

The *raison d'être* of [many contemporary films] is to thrill, shock, stun, astonish, assault, or ravish an audience, now less interested in "developing situations" than in the "immediate" gratification offered by a series of momentous – and sensually experienced – "instants" to which narrative is subordinated (2006: 339).

Now, some might feel that this is still putting it too strongly, or take issue with the impressionistic nature of the passage (as evidenced by its abundance of inverted commas). But the argument is clearly not that narrative has ceased to exist, but rather that it's somehow not as fundamental to our appreciation of contemporary Hollywood cinema as it used to be.

Meanwhile, Peter Biskind may bemoan the ascendancy of the cinema of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, but it has nothing to do with the disappearance of narrative. On the contrary, he finds that George Lucas actually helped "reestablish the primacy of narrative" (2004: 122). What Biskind regrets the most about the new blockbuster cinema is clearly not their lack of narrative, but rather their lack of reflexivity.

In fact, some authors maintain that a significant historical shift has taken place while at the same time admitting that Hollywood films still adhere to classical norms. Angela Ndalanian, for example, agrees that Hollywood has essentially retained the narrative conventions that dominated in the studio era; she even makes the case that *Jurassic Park* is not just a classical narrative, but a "superclassical" one (2004: 3). This does not prevent her from arguing that we have witnessed important new developments in the late twentieth century, which she sums up in the concept of a "neo-baroque aesthetic".

These examples alert us to the limitations of the debate so far: pointing out that classical narrative is present in contemporary cinema simply does not settle all issues at hand. Now, it is occasionally recognized that something else than the mere absence or presence of narrative might be at stake. Geoff King, discussing Thomas Schatz's important 1993

article “The New Hollywood”, realizes this when he astutely comments that “The accusation [against Hollywood blockbusters] is of lack of narrative depth, rather than of narrative itself” (2003: 123). Typically, though, King doesn’t pursue this observation, but I think it’s a crucial point.¹

Now, while it’s not my ambition at all to provide a comprehensive account of narrative depth, I nevertheless want to open this concept up for discussion by looking at one key component of it, having to do with assumptions about the creative process. Specifically, it seems to me that notions about the status of narrative in contemporary Hollywood cinema are informed by the suspicion that filmmakers have somehow gotten careless with story because spectacular effects are taken to be the films’ real point, or that the requirement to connect a string of isolated “attractions” is a less than ideal starting point for fashioning high-quality narratives of the classical kind.

Let me stress at the outset that I don’t think attention to how stories are created allows us to make the case that we have entered a new era more persuasively. On the contrary, I think it strengthens the opposite view, because it brings to light historical continuities that have not showed up in discussions so far, because they have been primarily concerned with whether or not narrative is present in today’s US cinema.

II

Perhaps the most influential idea in recent debates about contemporary Hollywood cinema is that effects-laden blockbusters represent a return to, or a revitalization of, a “cinema of attractions”. Coined by Tom Gunning in a famous article first published in 1986, the term refers to the dominant filmmaking practice until around 1906-1907. For Gunning, films from this period were characterized by the direct display of novel and arresting views rather than narrative engagement.

The article also includes a telling quote from early film pioneer George Méliès: “As for the scenario, the ‘fable’, or ‘tale’, I only consider it at the end. I can state that the scenario constructed in this manner has *no importance*, since I use it merely as a pretext for the ‘stage effects’, the ‘tricks’, or for a nicely arranged tableau” (Gunning 1990: 57). This, of course, is very similar to the kind of claim frequently made about (or accusation made against) contemporary action spectacles. Vivian Sobchack, for example, claims that the “stories of most popular feature films today have become pretexts or alibis for a series of autonomous and spectacularly kinetic ‘monstrations’ of various kinds of thrilling sequences and apparatical special effects – elements that characterized the early cinema of attractions” (2006: 339). And Laura Kipnis notes that “new computer software, such as the infamous ‘morphing’ technique of *Terminator 2*, become the stars of the big new blockbusters, which now tend increasingly to be written around new special effects rather than special effects being used organically to help tell a compelling story” (1998: 603).

At first glance, the Méliès quote and the critical commentary on contemporary Hollywood cinema appear to make a useful distinction between films whose stories are mere excuses and films that “actually” have a story to tell. But although there is plenty of evidence to suggest that many blockbuster films have been structured around various kinds of attractions, I’m far from certain that this fact alone offers an adequate criterion for us to separate blockbuster storylines from more esteemed narratives. We might ask:

what is the alternative to this kind of story-creation? Do other kinds of stories come about in different ways? If so, does this manifest itself in differences at the level of narrative and narration? And if so, how?

The Story-first Ideal

It seems to me that what is thought to contrast with this practice is the production of stories that “have something to say”. According to this rather more imprecise ideal, the story ought to come first, so that the making of films should be guided by some preexisting notion about what it’s all *about*. No doubt some pictures originate in such a manner – certainly it has been crucial to the *promotion* of numerous films. However, while it seems intuitively right that the distinction between stories that are “mere excuses” for something else and stories informed by some premeditated “macro-idea” corresponds to a distinction between different kinds of films – between, say, critically despised action spectacles on the one hand and more serious, worthy, and artistic films on the other – I’m not at all sure that it holds up very well when we look at it more closely.²

For example, Charles Ramirez-Berg suggests that David Lynch – a critics’ darling and hardly a director-for-hire – works in much the same way, using exposition and narrative as a clothesline on which to hang images exploring more personal obsessions.³ Paul Thomas Anderson, meanwhile, is often considered one of the heirs to the 1970s Movie Brats in Hollywood that were displaced by the much-maligned blockbuster era;⁴ one would perhaps think, then, that his films are suitable candidates for a different approach. However, James Mottram notes that although Anderson has given conflicting statements as to how *Magnolia* came about, none of them fit the preexisting-story alternative:

Anderson claims [the] enigmatic smile [in the film’s final shot, of Claudia (Melora Walters)], which suggests there’s hope for us all, was the first image he had in his head for the film. Then again, he also claims that the film was built around the perverse line, “Now that I’ve met you, would you object to never seeing me again?” Lifted from Aimee Mann’s song “Deathly”, it is spoken by Claudia as she attempts to repel Jim’s (John C. Reilly) earlier advances on their first date (2006: 260).

Now, if there is such a thing as a preconceived-idea-approach a reasonable assumption would be that the obvious place to look for it would be in a less attractions-based medium than film, such as the book. But here is Raymond Carver’s thoughts on an essay by Flannery O’Connor called “Writing Short Stories”:

O’Connor says she most often did not know where she was going when she sat down to work on a short story. She says she doubts that many writers know where they are going when they begin something. She uses “Good Country People” as an example of how she put together a short story whose ending she could not even guess at until she was nearly there [...] When I read this some years ago it came as a shock that she, or anyone for that matter, wrote stories in this fashion. I thought this was my uncomfortable secret, and I was a little uneasy with it. For sure I thought this way of working on a short story somehow revealed my own shortcomings. I remember being tremendously heartened by reading what she had to say on the subject (1983: 25-26).

For Don DeLillo, too, “the scene comes first, an idea of a character in a place. It’s visual, it’s Technicolor – something I see in a vague way. Then sentence by sentence into the breach. No outlines – maybe a short list of items, chronological, that may represent the next twenty pages” (quoted in Begley 2005: 91).

Even a popular writer like Stephen King claims that his books tend to be based on situation rather than story. Thus when he sat down to write what was to become *Misery*, “I had the basic situation – crippled writer, psycho fan – firmly fixed in my mind. The actual *story* did not as then exist” (2000: 192-193).

King makes another observation of some relevance to the notion that what guides story construction is some idea of what it is all *about*. He remarks that he never used to think about theme, believing that “such things were for Better Minds and Bigger Thinkers” (ibid: 245). But having discovered its usefulness King opines that good fiction hardly ever begins with theme before progressing to story. The only possible exception to this rule that King can think of are allegories like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (ibid 247-248).⁵

The quotes by Carver and King are of particular interest because both authors admit to feelings of embarrassment or inadequacy due to a perceived failure to live up to some vaguely recognized ideal, namely the idea that story composition ought to be guided by a preconceived notion of what the writer wants to get across (what Stephen King (2000: 242) calls “the over-logic”). In other words, “what you have to say” ought to be in place before you say it.

As it turns out, though, it’s far from certain that this is a reasonable supposition.⁶ In fact, some of the most wonderful writing ever produced has originated in blatant disregard of this ideal. Don DeLillo, widely held to be one of the finest authors working today, has stated that:

The rhythm of a sentence will accommodate a certain number of syllables. One syllable too many, I look for another word. There’s always another word that means nearly the same thing, and if it doesn’t then I’ll consider altering the meaning of a sentence to keep the rhythm, the syllable beat. I’m completely willing to let language press meaning upon me” (Begley 2005: 91).

This is obviously a far cry from Hollywood blockbusters, but the point, of course, is that critically acclaimed writers, storytellers that are considered great *thinkers*, even – i.e. the ones one would expect to have fixed and fully formed ideas to communicate – are only too happy to let aesthetic considerations “press meaning upon” them. The point I’m trying to make, then, is that it’s far from evident that what separates effects-driven blockbusters from more prestigious films is that the former try to create links between stand-alone events or situations, while the others don’t. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that “serious” stories too – in both film and literature – regularly derive from discrete moments.

Alternative Distinctions

This is not to say that there are no significant differences. The isolated moments I have just given examples of are obviously very different in nature than in effects-driven blockbusters. For example, I’d suggest that it’s quite hard to think of Melora Walters’

smile or the line “Now that I’ve met you, would you object to never seeing me again?” as the “point” of *Magnolia*. It’s certainly less far-fetched to imagine the bullet time sequences in *The Matrix* or the ship sinking in *Titanic* as ends in themselves that it would make sense – commercially and aesthetically – to construct stories around. The smile and the quote from *Magnolia* are not autonomous attractions so much as, presumably, “interesting starting points” in the mind of its creator.

I think perhaps Stephen King’s distinction between “plotting and the creativity of real creation” (2000: 188) informs much of our thinking on the difference between serious and worthy films and so-called mindless blockbusters. King goes on to state that

[M]y basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to give them a place to grow [...] I believe stories are found things, like fossils in the ground [...] [T]he majority [of my ideas] start out with the stark simplicity of a department store window display or a waxwork tableau. I want to put a group of characters in some sort of predicament and then watch them try to work themselves free. My job isn’t to *help* them work their way free, or manipulate them to safety – those are jobs which require the noisy jackhammer of plot – but to watch what happens and then write it down (ibid 188-190).

I presume the endeavor to link a series of special effects sequences would require precisely the noisy jackhammer of plot, in a kind of connect-the-dots game resulting in a somewhat “mechanistic” plot. Conversely, the more small-scale moments of *Magnolia*, according to this line of thinking, are the seeds from which a story will grow “organically”. In fact, King states that he thinks of stories as “relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world” (ibid 188), in which case the story actually *does* antedate its transcription – just as the implicit ideal I have tried to shine some light on presupposes – it just doesn’t exist as such in its creator’s conscious mind.

Undoubtedly, seeing story as a kind of entity that simply awaits discovery might sound like mysticism, or like a position that it perhaps would be easier to make sense of in sociological rather than ontological terms. But then again, I would suggest that the debates over the status of narrative in contemporary Hollywood cinema, while often presented as an issue that can be resolved by theory, is in fact bound up with a number of discourses and criteria that are much closer to film criticism and interpretation.

The distinction I have suggested between mechanistic and organic story-creation is obviously far from new; it invites us to consider such familiar textual features as plausibility, and to ponder the differences between plot-driven and character-driven narratives, or round and flat characters. This shift in perspective takes us beyond the discussion about the existence or non-existence of narrative in blockbuster cinema. These criteria bring more nuance to the debate, but at the same time I do not believe it makes much sense to think of them as particularly objective or final. It is probably impossible to arrive at any reasonable level of intersubjective agreement on the roundness or flatness of Rick Blaine, Roger O. Thornhill, or Maximus Decimus Meridius. I am not sure we would even want to, for it could be argued that one of the central functions of film criticism is to come up with new evaluations of old texts, to discover new and interesting ways of seeing or thinking about old films, to keep the debate going, so to speak.

Another thing to notice about the Stephen King quote is that it draws on familiar notions of romantic authorship, of the spontaneous, solitary, and inspired nature of artistic

creation. The author’s mind is portrayed as a kind of flower-bed, while the small-scale situations are the seeds; what sort of plants shoot up seems more or less beyond his or her control. Moreover, since its emergence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the romantic conception of authorship defined itself against commerce. Contrast this to the job of connecting a series of large-scale action-attractions. Here the dots to be connected are not necessarily of the author’s own choosing. Blockbuster cinema is collaborative and plainly profit-driven, and key industry practices – the use of focus groups and multiple rewrites, for example – are very hard indeed to reconcile with romantic notions of artistic conception. Compromise lies at the heart of so-called “moviemaking-by-committee”. Therefore it’s commonly considered the opposite of organic creation. In this account, large-scale attractions are awkward stopovers around which it is the task of the screenwriter to construct *some* story; small-scale attractions, by contrast, are simply the visible parts of some hidden structure that allows the auteur to discover or reconstruct *the* story.

To sum up, the key differences I have pointed out would look something like this:

Large-scale attraction	Small-scale attraction
Mechanistic	Organic
Springboard for <i>a</i> story	Springboard for <i>the</i> story
The point of the narrative	Interesting starting point
Plotting	“Real creation”
Filmmaking-by-committee	Gifted individual
Lowest-common-denominator attraction	Mysterious/indefinable attraction
Commercial/compromised	Artistic/uncompromised

Obviously, we are dealing here with two caricatured positions. Moreover, some of the criteria are rather fuzzy, and sometimes they overlap; some tie into other large and unwieldy issues that I haven’t touched upon here, such as authorial intentionalism. Still, I’d maintain that we must turn to some version of this scheme if we are to make sense of claims that Hollywood’s current devotion to spectacle has somehow corrupted the art of storytelling.

I’m obviously not suggesting that there aren’t any significant differences between blockbusters like *Van Helsing* or *xXx* and films like *Magnolia* and *American Beauty*. However, what separates them, I want to submit, is probably not that the former resulted from an effort to tie together a series of isolated pieces or moments, while the latter did not. Rather, we must bring into play the above set of related binary oppositions. I would sum up the difference like this: it’s relatively easier to tell a story about films like *Van Helsing* and *xXx* by reference to the keywords in the left column, while it is relatively easier to talk about films like *Magnolia* and *American Beauty* using words and phrases from the column on the right hand side. The next question, then, becomes this: Is it possible – and reasonable – to construct an *historical* argument out of these differences?

An Historical Shift?

The first thing to notice about the binary oppositions in the table above, is that it makes no sense to relate them to the standard definition of classicism proposed by Bordwell and Thompson. Even the most prototypical left-column kind of film may easily meet the cri-

teria of cause-and-effect events, well-defined characters, deadlines, dialogue hooks etc. As Rick Altman has pointed out, all filmmakers have to do is to “decide which spectacles are needed, then make it seem that they are there for internally motivated reasons” (1992: 27). In other words, even if it’s true, as Sobchack claims, that many current scripts are mere “alibis for a series of autonomous and spectacularly kinetic ‘monstrations’”, the writers of such films are expected to come up with a narrative framework that comes as close as possible to the ideal of organicity in appearance.⁷ Hence any differences will not show up at the level that Bordwell and Thompson examine. Put simply, the table above does not consist of a set of distinctions that can be mapped onto the distinction between the existence or non-existence of classical narrative.

So, we might instead ask if there has been a general shift in Hollywood production away from right-column-type films towards left-column-type films and, if so, whether it makes sense to think of this as the dividing line between a classical and a post-classical era. This is a more productive question in the sense that the binary oppositions listed above bring into play more fine-grained distinctions. On the other hand, though, as I have indicated, they are quite subjective and evaluative, as well as being caught up in numerous complex, often contradictory (and emotionally charged!) cultural discourses. This makes it quite difficult to apply these criteria in historical accounts with any strong sense of authority.

However, it doesn’t seem feasible to me to make the case that such a shift has taken place. I agree with those who maintain that both spectacle and narrative have been at the heart of Hollywood cinema right from the start, one foot firmly placed in the classical narrative tradition of the well-made play, the other in the menu-driven, one-attraction-on-top-of-the-other conventions of popular theater. Thus the impulse to construct a story around large-scale attractions is nothing new.

For instance, it’s customary to treat the 1950s surge of lavish, expensive, and spectacular epics that showed off new technologies as precursors of the modern blockbuster era, and, indeed, in 1953 Darryl F. Zanuck wrote a memo informing all Twentieth Century-Fox producers and executives that from now on

[...] every picture that goes into production in CinemaScope should contain subject matter which utilizes to the fullest extent the full possibilities of this medium. This does not mean that every picture should have so-called epic proportions but it does mean that at least for the first eighteen months of CinemaScope production that we select subjects that contain elements which enable us to take full advantage of scope, size and physical action [...] For the time being intimate comedies or small scale, domestic stories should be put aside. (quoted in Silvester 1998: 430)

Singin’ in the Rain, meanwhile, was initiated by producer Arthur Freed “because he wanted to produce a film organized around songs he had co-written with Nacio Herb Brown for MGM musicals of the 1920s” (Cohan 2000: 67).

Finally, while Howard Hawks is often considered the consummate classicist, Todd McCarthy argues convincingly that he gradually lost interest in plotting, favoring “scenes” that were “massively entertaining on a moment-to-moment basis” (McCarthy 1997: 395). When he set out to make *Hatari!* Hawks only knew that he wanted to make a film about people who catch animals in Africa for zoos. His creative process is quite similar to the one described by Raymond Carver earlier: “[Hawks’s] willingness, even eagerness, to discover his film in the process of making it, meant that it turned out

quite differently than the motion picture he'd had in his mind at the outset" (ibid: 594). Furthermore, when the filmmakers returned from the shoot in Africa

the main challenge fell to [screenwriter] Leigh Bracken: laying out all the action scenes and looking for ways to connect them. Bracket and Hawks approached it like a puzzle, and for Bracket, the main satisfaction came from "doing a good job of putting all the pieces together, taking all the disparate parts and making it look as though it grew that way" (ibid 588).

These examples indicate that both mechanistic and organic stories have been integral to the classical system from the beginning. Hence, if we attempt to consider the entire output of Hollywood movies at once, I don't think it's possible to identify systematic *historical* patterns along the criteria I have identified. By that I mean to say that, while we can use the words in the table above to talk about different kinds of films in a variety of meaningful ways, I fail to see how we can arrange them into a large-scale narrative in which chronology is the organizing principle.

Certainly, we might say that, especially since the commercial breakthrough of digital visual effects in the early 1990s in films like *Terminator 2* and *Jurassic Park*, large-scale action-attractions have attained particular prominence, most likely playing a bigger part – aesthetically and financially – than at any prior time. Moreover, there seems to be a general feeling that many effects-driven films today contain a "something extra", a dimension having to do with the sensuous and physical gratifications of the image rather than the emotional and cognitive lure of narrative engagement.

However, I remain unconvinced that this makes it reasonable to speak of a new era, for several reasons. First of all, although we might agree that action-attractions in contemporary blockbusters appear more astounding to us than spectacles in older films, this does not in itself give grounds for proclaiming an epochal change. After all, astonishment tends to wear off with familiarity, so various kinds of magnifications of sensation are only to be expected. That some effect is unprecedented, then, should not automatically lead us to postulate an historical break, for the cyclic, spiral movement between novelty and habituation is perfectly in keeping with the inherent nature of spectacle.⁸ I have not come across any convincing arguments that the increased spectacularity of the current era has carried with it fundamental changes at the *narrative* level.

Second, as the previous quotes by Bukatman, Darley, Paci, Ndalians and Gross in part one indicate, there has probably been a tendency to overstate the degree and importance of sensory intensity in contemporary cinema. Third, the visceral attractions of cinema are obviously nothing new. In fact, while proponents of postclassicism have struggled to come up with a commonly agreed-upon vocabulary, the most popular candidate – a cinema of attractions – actually stresses sweeping historical continuities rather than discontinuity.

Fourth, as a number of writers have pointed out, spectacle and narrative are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In my opinion Patrick Keating has provided the most sophisticated account of their interrelation. He points out that, while cinematic spectacles often do hold some autonomous allure, they are likely to be incorporated into some emotional structure of anticipation and culmination that heightens their appeal. Discussing an extended fight scene in Fred Niblo's 1921 version of *The Three Musketeers* he observes that

it is not enough to say that the causal chain has led us to expect a display of D'Artagnan's skill. The narrative has also led us to *hope* for such a display. This scene is a culmination of those hopes. It is true that the gags and stunts have a value independent of the narrative. They would be enjoyable if we saw them performed in, say, a variety show. However, we are supposed to take an extra joy here because the stunts are performed by *this* character – D'Artagnan, a sympathetic character who has become a vehicle for our hopes and fears (2006: 9).

Keating proposes what he calls a "Cooperation model", since narrative and spectacle pursue a common goal, namely to create a concentrated emotional experience. I think this is a pretty convincing argument why we are highly unlikely ever to witness any sustained separation of narrative and spectacle in Hollywood cinema. Keating's observation – that the more skillfully the filmmakers maneuver our hopes and fears for D'Artagnan, the more pleasure we take in the scene's spectacular stunts and gags, while the more impressive his physical feats, the more we admire him and the more we invest emotionally in upcoming events – would be equally applicable to an examination of the Neo character in *The Matrix*, or any number of contemporary blockbusters.

Furthermore, there is every indication that audiences strongly *expect* blockbusters to conform to classical norms of unity and coherence, to integrate spectacle into a causal structure with identifiable stakes and motivations. Industry discourses, too, constantly stress the importance of subordinating everything from nudity to special effects to the so-called "demands of the story". In other words, unlike art cinema – which has explicitly defined itself in opposition to key classical conventions – Hollywood consistently holds up the norms of studio-era filmmaking as an ideal, thus inviting audiences and critics alike to watch and evaluate its output with the classical schema in mind, rather than some alternative model.

It seems to me, then, that a levelheaded characterization of storytelling in the current era in Hollywood – i.e. one that hooks up as well as possible with as many as possible *other* things we find it relevant, rational and interesting to talk about – is going to end up a pretty compromised version of the narrative-is-on-the-verge-of-collapse position. But this begs the question: how do we account for the fact that the *perception* that narrative has somehow degenerated is so widespread?

III

The argument that an obsession with speed and "effects" has led to changes in narrative and screen-audience relations has been put forth on a regular basis, also in periods that we tend to think of as tranquil by today's standards. In 1920 a German critic observed that "What is happening or rather racing by on the screen can no longer be called plot. It is a new dynamic, a breathless rhythm, action in an unliterary sense" (quoted in Bordwell 2006: 13). A 1914 article entitled "A New Epoch in the Movies", professed that "The eye and mind are both bewildered by the too sudden and too frequent shifts of scene. There is a terrible sense of rush and hurry and flying about, which is intensified by the twitching film and generally whang-bang music" (quoted in Shone 2004: 60). There seems to have been a tendency throughout film history to declare the here-and-now radically different from what went before. I'd imagine that most people will be somewhat puzz-

led by the quotes from 1914 and 1920, something that ought to discourage the kind of overconfident and overblown pronouncements that have, to a great extent, characterized the recent debate on narrative in blockbuster cinema.

There are probably various explanations for the tendency to overstate the novelty of the present. As we've seen, one notable form that this argument has taken is that there has been a dramatic decline in narrative proficiency. One possible reason for this sentiment might be that most people tend to watch a broader spectrum of contemporary films – good and bad – whereas they tend to see mostly masterpieces or near-masterpieces from the “good old days”.

Moreover, we should also remember that famous films come with critical histories that have attached themselves to their hosts as “encrustations”, or that set up certain “horizons of expectations” (Macheney, quoted in Staiger 1992: 46).⁹ Watched today, a film like *Casablanca* is both the same text as the one that premiered in 1942, but also something quite different. It's now pretty much impossible to experience it “innocently”, independent of the massive discourse around it. I'd venture that most people growing up today have probably come across a multitude of references, allusions, and reworkings before they encounter the actual film, conferring upon it, perhaps, a kind of aura that is lacking (or at least less pronounced) in the case of more recent releases.

It seems to me that the weight of critical discourse over time somehow situates popular classics beyond traditional evaluative criteria. It's a kind of appreciation that is reminiscent of camp, only the cherished objects are not vulgar, and the admiration of them is not infused with ironic posturing. Rather it appears to be related to a kind of “nostalgic elevation”, a longing for a form of cultural production and an aesthetic that, more than anything, has lost its innocence, that can be neither embraced nor recreated naively, and thereby has been promoted to the realm of the timeless and irreproachable.

Classics are not only met with a certain indulgence not generally afforded more up-to-the-minute pictures; in many cases, critics will have come up with some interpretation to neutralize features that might otherwise be thought of as flaws, or even turn them into virtues, especially in the case of auteur works. Thus Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues reasons that the wildly implausible and, frankly, ridiculous ending of Howard Hawks' *Red River* “suggest that the director made a deliberate decision to make fun of the conventions of narrative verisimilitude against which people would try to measure it” (2000: 13) (notice also, once again, the blurring of the distinctions between narrative theory and film criticism).

Now obviously, similar rationalizations are occasionally made for contemporary films as well,¹⁰ though we are probably more inclined to accept them in discussions of venerable classics that have proved their worth over time. More importantly, the likelihood that such assertions have been made on their behalf is greater for older films. After all, we might say that the primary task of film critics is to find interesting or worthwhile things to say about texts, and they are certainly more likely to have come up with something for a film that's been available for sixty or seventy years than for a film that appeared a decade ago. Just as importantly, a critical *consensus* – a kind of naturalization of contingency – is more liable to have formed around a film the longer it's been around.

These are some possible and tentative reasons for the common belief that storytelling skills have somehow degenerated in recent years. It seems to me that, when we write our

aesthetic histories, the study of formal criteria ought far more often to be supplemented by investigations into the conditions and criteria of value judgments, of taste formations, and institutional rules and practices.

Conclusion

It's commonly claimed that Hollywood filmmakers no longer produce stories that stand up to those of the good old days. Many blame it on the dominance of special effects, which are thought to be the films' *raison d'être*, while the plots are mere frameworks on which to hang a series of explosions, car chases, stunts, or fantastical sites and creatures. This is seen as a violation of an implicit ideal, according to which the "point" of the story should antedate the story's coming into being.

At first glance this seems a reasonable distinction to make. However, I have argued that, upon closer examination, it throws up some awkward results. For one thing, the difference between stories that are simply a ploy to pick up a series of attractions and stories that originated the "proper" way – i.e. as an upshot of a preexisting macro-idea – certainly doesn't translate into a difference between the absence or presence of narrative. More importantly, though, it also doesn't translate into a difference between, on the one hand, serious and artistically ambitious stories and, on the other, dumbed-down effects-extravaganzas. For one thing, I have made the case that the tendency to structure stories around isolated moments is not confined to blockbuster cinema. We come across it even in more prestigious films and in less attractions-based media, like the book. Moreover, it was a staple of Hollywood cinema long before George Lucas and Steven Spielberg appeared on the scene.

Now, it's obviously not my ambition to provide a thorough account of how stories *typically* come about, in Hollywood films or any other medium; my aim is simply to amass enough evidence to complicate an important assumption that seems to underlie many discussions about contemporary cinema. The point is not that there are no interesting and significant differences between, say, films like *Armageddon* and films such as *Magnolia*. However, I want to challenge the view that what separates them is that the former take as their point of departure certain attractions that their makers try to fit into some narrative pretext, while the latter take as their point of departure some preexisting macro-idea (and then, possibly, simply make the most of those attractions that "truly belong" there, i.e. that happen to be situated along a prearranged narrative path).

I have suggested that what sets them apart, rather, is that the isolated moments around which P.T. Anderson built his film are small-scale, while the others are large-scale and more autonomous. Small-scale attractions are relatively easier to think of as seeds to be cultivated in some inspired author-mind, while large-scale attractions are relatively easier to think of as predetermined lowest-common-multiples. Another way of putting it would be to say that they are inclined to fit different cultural discourses or stereotypes. Clearly, these ideal positions, which can be summed up as the difference between "organic" and "mechanistic" narratives, are deeply ingrained in our culture, and thus very hard to disregard.

The metaphorical distinction between organic and mechanistic stories enables us, I think, to discern more shades of difference, although the dissimilarities that emerge are more subjective and contestable. However, if we map this vocabulary onto the history

of American filmmaking – from the studio era up to the present day – it’s hard to see how the two could possibly add up to an even moderately clear-cut story about patterned change. Specifically, I do not think it would make much sense to think of the past thirty years or so as a separate era, characterized by more mechanistic plots than previous periods, for this has been a key component of Hollywood cinema all along. However, I should add that I am merely stating here that I fail to see how we might reasonably talk about a post-classical period by reference to what we might call the “formal-technical” aspects of narrative. There are other story-dimensions that are routinely brought up, such as pastiche, that I’ve not considered in this article.

I have also suggested that it might be just as interesting to study the persistence of the *perception* that narrative has been revolutionized in recent years. It might, for example, have to do with a tendency to forget the forgettable films of the past. It’s no wonder contemporary films come up short if we tend to compare the best of the past with the current average.

My position is that we should stop shying away from meta-investigations into our own analytical practices. While we academics have been eager to study the preferences of so-called “ordinary viewers” from a variety of perspectives, we have been less keen to turn the spotlight on ourselves. Perhaps the time has come to observe, as Clarice Sterling does of Hannibal Lecter, that “You see a lot, Doctor. But are you strong enough to point that high-powered perception at yourself?”. In other words, I think we ought to investigate, and encourage recognition of, the interplay between theoretical-ontological and sociological factors.

Notes

1. In fairness, though, King has written extensively and instructively on the recurrence of frontier mythology in contemporary blockbuster cinema. See in particular King (2000). However, as King himself points out, the thematic patterns that he identifies can be seen as part of the formal unity that has always characterized classical Hollywood cinema. So while King’s analyses can be said to helpfully specify the notion of classical narrative, they don’t necessarily take us beyond the criterion of its absence or presence.
2. It seems to me that Shilo T. McClean – in an attempt to determine what constitutes a (good) story – sums up this ideal quite well. She finds that narrative theorists, from Aristotle to Walter Benjamin to Robert McKee, pretty much agree that “The quality of classical narrative in its traditional form is related to its ability to convey some wisdom or ‘rich meaning’” (2006: 37).
3. “An introduction to David Lynch”, extra features on *Twin Peaks – The First Season*, Artisan Home Video.
4. For an outline of the development of the original movie brats – Coppola, Scorsese, DePalma etc. – see Myles and Pye (1979). For an account detailing the similarities between the movie brats and a new 90s generation of directors, like P.T. Anderson, Steven Soderbergh, David Fincher, and David O. Russell, see Waxman (2005). It has often been pointed out that Anderson is a kind of heir to Robert Altman, most obviously because both tend to use ensemble casts in intertwining stories.
5. There is evidence that some television shows are constructed in this manner too. Michael Z. Newman has written an interesting article on the poetics of television narratives that in part deals with how stories in prime-time serials originate. He notes that on *Nip/Tuck*, for example, coming up with a theme precedes what in television parlance is called “breaking the story”. However, this practice seems to be atypical. Generally, television writers “know in the most basic terms what the episode has to accomplish before they beat out the story, but the story only takes shape when they begin to think of it as a series of moments” (2006: 18). On the level of a whole season, some shows do plot out the most basic developments in advance. But again, this seems to be a minority practice, and Newman notes that even a show such as *24*, which has an exceptionally tight and focused plot, breaks the story in groups of six or eight episodes rather than the titular number.

6. Indeed, I am not at all sure that this ideal holds up very well even for academic writing. I am positive that Don DeLillo's observation that "Writing is a concentrated form of thinking. I don't know what I think about certain subjects, even today, until I sit down and try to write about them" will have many academics nodding in recognition (quote from Begley, 2005: 87). Of course, once we have found out what we think about something by writing about it, it is customary to construct an account that gives the impression that our conclusions – what we want to get across – preexisted the writing process.
7. As André Gaudreault puts it: "What is a James Bond and Star Wars if not, at bottom, a series of 'effects' without much to connect them? Doesn't the *tour de force* of the scriptwriter of such films consist precisely in tying these scenes together in not too slack a manner? Indeed this is one of the institution's principles: to dissolve the attractions scattered throughout the film's discourse into a narrative structure, to integrate them in the most organic manner possible" (2006: 96).
8. For more on the cyclical relationship between astonishment and familiarity, see Gunning (2003: 41). Two other articles that relate this issue specifically to contemporary films are Sobchack (2006) and Røssaak (2006).
9. For more on the notion of "horizon of expectations", see Jauss (1982).
10. For example, although he finds the ending of John Woo's *Face/Off* "positively bizarre in its reach for resolution" Eric Lichtenfeld ultimately deems it "another instance of Woo straying so far from the dramatic into the overly sentimental that the emotions of the scene are less likely to be felt than studied with confounded fascination – so much so, that there might be something subversive at work: one aspect of Woo's Hong Kong work that he had to leave behind in Hong Kong was the *noir*-ish fatalism with which he often ended his films. Here, he gives the viewer – and Paramount Pictures – a happy ending that borders on parody" (2004: 250).

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